

Experiencing God in the Bible: Bible Basics for Progressive Christians

A Discussion Class Led by The Rev. Keith Thompson - First UMC Boulder, Colorado

The nature of the Bible is so widely misunderstood today it's difficult for Progressive Christians to appreciate its crucial place in our lives. Understanding and practicing a few basics can make all the difference.

4. The Christian Norm of the Bible: (One "Reconstruction" of) the Historical Jesus

Opening Prayer

You were asked to make a list of your favorite stories about Jesus and bring them to this session. Also to think about which stories you consider to be historically true and--if not all--how you tell the difference. Share one-on-one your list and how you felt about making it.

Basic #6 - Gain enough knowledge about progressive scholarship concerning the historical Jesus to be able to start evaluating what's probably historical and what's not in what you read and hear about Jesus in the N.T. gospels. As you are doing so, practice being aware that there are many more kinds of truth than just historical truth. As was said at the end of the last handout, for progressive Christians the norm of the Bible is the historical Jesus as reconstructed by scholars. For Keith, the best historical Jesus scholar of our time is John Dominic Crossan. In this session we will consider a list of some of his major finding in his more than three-decade-long research. As you read the list, pause periodically to share your thoughts and feelings.

(The list is based on Keith's 23-page summary of John Dominic Crossan & Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Text* (2001, Revised and Updated 2003), which he prepared for an FUMC group preparing to travel to Israel/Palestine in 2013. If you want to go deeper into this subject, see the end of this handout for a way to access it on his website.)

- Everyone is aware that archeologists must dig down through physical layers to uncover ancient sites. In this book the authors argue that something similar must be done in **metaphorically digging down through later layers of literary creation in the gospels to discover the historical Jesus in the deepest independent layer.** Both are scholarly tasks, and both require reconstruction and interpretation. (page 1 of Keith's summary) (see p. 5 for Crossan's overview of the three relevant gospel layers.)
- Both the archeologist and biblical exegete discover that one tendency in later layers is **to decrease Jesus' Jewish identity and increase his social status** (e.g., "John has him speaking of 'the Jews' as if he's not one and also portrays him as a leisurely philosopher; and Luke portrays him as a literate interpreter of scrolls and an erudite partner at banquets"--both effacing his humble peasant beginnings.) (pp.3-4)
- Jesus must be seen within his historical matrix as **a 1st century Galilean Jew within the Roman Empire.** (p. 5)
- It's common to image Jesus' hometown Nazareth as totally rural and far from any Roman influences. In reality **Nazareth is only 4 miles from Sepphoris with its Roman architecture and culture.** (p. 6)
- In Jesus' time and place there were two different kinds of clashing kingdoms--commercial (Roman) and covenantal (Jewish); the former imposed their radically unjust imperial economy on the Jewish homeland, and the latter resisted violently and non-violently in the name of the Jewish God of distributive justice. (p. 7) (Note: this is very different from the common notion today that Christianity is fundamentally about believing things about Jesus so that you go to heaven after you die. **Progressives see the major concern of both the O.T and N.T. is social, political and economic justice in this life.**)

- **There's so much "fishy stuff" in the gospel stories about the Jesus movement**, because Herod Antipas moved his capital city to Tiberias on the so-called "Sea of Galilee" to preside over his new oppressive taxation of the Jewish industry. (pp. 9-10, 11)
- (See p. 11 for the very different understanding of John the Baptist in the progressive interpretation from the over-sanitized one presented in the gospels.)
- **The heart of the Jesus movement was its non-violently restoring justice and honor to Jewish villagers from the bottom up, in other words a "spiritual healing" for which the villagers reciprocated by providing material food for those who brought the good news.** In that way they were establishing "share" communities again which stood over against the "greed" communities created by the Roman Empire. **This was viewed as the Kingdom of God on earth in the here and now, already present.** (pp. 12-13)
(Note: as you read the first three gospels there is next to nothing about Jesus and his movement being concerned about an afterlife and how to get there. Yet that seems to be the main focus vast numbers of Christians today.)
- **The so-called "Cleansing of the Temple" has been severely misunderstood, and thus partially responsible for Christian anti-Judaism**, because it is focused on supposed cleansing the Temple of the evil "money changers" financial transactions and animal sacrifice rather than seeing it as "symbolically destroying it." (p. 18) This is also the result of Christians taking the stories about Pilate literally and as historically true. (p. 19)
- **The authors lament that as Christianity ceased to speak about corporate resurrection "something profoundly important was lost. The resurrection was no longer primarily about the justice of God, but about the survival of us."** (p. 22) It's important to note that Israel did not believe in an afterlife for about the first thousand years of their history--the dead simply went down to Sheol into a kind of shadowy non-existence. When Israel developed a theory of resurrection about 150 years before Jesus it was about a general raising up of bodies (not souls surviving the death of a body and going to a heaven--a Greek view). This was also the case for the early Jewish Christians; it never was about the resurrection of Jesus as a single individual. And as the authors point out, **the only fitting witness to the risen presence of Jesus and his Kingdom of God movement could never be a building (even the Church of the Holy Sepulcher). It could then, and can now, only be seen in "a world under transformation by Christian cooperation with divine justice and by Christian participation in it."** (p 22)

At stake--Having a much more accurate and meaningful idea of the nature of the Bible and the character of the God it reveals and makes powerfully present to us.

For Going Deeper:

Log on to the website: www.centristfaithandpolitics.com --

In the Search Box (top right) type in "Crossan Excavating" --

Click on "4.2 Crossan & Reed (2001, 2nd Edition 2003)" --

This will take you directly to the Quick Look page for Crossan & Reed's *Excavating Jesus* book --

Read it -- Then click the "Detailed Review" link at the bottom of the page -- Read it (23 pages).

How will this scholarly reconstruction of Jesus compare to the National Geographic Channel's film of Bill O'Reilly's book, *The Killing of Jesus*, March 29, 2015?

Closing Prayer