

## **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.

### **5. The Bible (as Understood by Progressives) and Science, Politics, Other Faiths**

#### Opening Prayer

How Christian progressives view the Bible has ramifications for how we think, act and feel about various important dimensions of life such as science, politics and other faiths (religious & secular). From our perspective, some other common viewpoints lead to very unhealthy consequences for our faith and the world. What responsibilities do we have--individually and communally--to be witnesses for what we see as the benefits of our view as well as against the dangers we perceive in other perspectives?

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**Basic #7 - Learn more about and practice the progressive pluralist Christian approach to other faiths as well as its view of science as intellectual discipline distinct from theology.** For Christians to see the historical Jesus as the decisive revelation of the character of God is perfectly compatible with honoring--and desiring to be in dialogue with--other major faiths. In fact, for progressives this is essential to the growth of one's own faith. Also, the progressive understanding of faith doesn't see science as a threat to a never-changing ancient biblical scientific view but rather complementary to theology as faith constantly renews itself in an ever-changing world.

For Christian progressives it's often easier to relate to liberals/progressives of the other major religious faiths than to Christians on the conservative far right.

At stake--what dangers for our Christian faith and the world do you see in the following examples of the Christian far right?

- Christian exclusivism--the only true faith, all others are false and the only way to heaven is to convert.
- Over 30% of Americans believe the Second Coming and the End of the World are coming very soon.
- The Christian-Israel lobby believes the Bible reveals that Christ's Second Coming will not happen until Israel rebuilds the Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (this would require the tearing down of the present Muslim Dome of the Rock which sits on that location today).
- Crossan has criticized the Left Behind series (13 novels)--which describes in precise detail the Rapture and the Second Coming--for its portrayal of humans joining Christ and his angels in the violent destruction of all evil people. He makes the same criticism of the popular C.S. Lewis children's book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in which the children participate in the bloody battle. Barbara Rossing's *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (2004) debunks the claim that the modern Rapture theory is grounded in the Bible.
- Before the Passover/Easter and Hanukkah/Christmas holidays each year there's a media flurry of superficial, conventional items which reinforces the cultural (religious & secular) assumptions about the Jewish and Christian faiths. One such on newsstands in the spring of 2015 is a Time/Life magazine, "The Life of Jesus: How His Lessons, Miracles, and Devotion Changed the World." Among other things, it presumes that by simply harmonizing the accounts in the four gospels one can arrive at an accurate portrayal of the historical Jesus.

With respect to progressives and science, the cover story for the current National Geographic magazine (March 2015) “The War on Science” is useful. Two of the most relevant subjects for our purposes are:

- Climate Change Does Not Exist (less than half of all Americans believe the Earth is warming because humans are burning fossil fuels)
- Evolution Never Happened (a third of Americans believe humans have existed in their present form since time began)

At stake--What dangers for our Christian faith and the world do you see those national trends?

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**Basic # 8 - When you’re reading the Bible, practice being aware of the constant connections (some healthy and some unhealthy) between faith and politics in both the O.T. and N.T. Also learn why progressive Christian scholars think it’s necessary both for communities of faith to be involved in healthy politics and politics to be grounded in healthy faith.** Scholars have shown that religion and politics were not thought to be distinct realms in the biblical world; they were always naturally intertwined. The idea that they should be seen as distinct realms that could be separated was not developed until the modern world.

Many Americans believe the phrase “The Wall of Separation Between Church and State” is in the U.S. Constitution. In fact, what the First Amendment says is: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This allows--one might say even encourages--influence in both directions. (Note: this position is in sharp contrast to the situation in France based on the anti-religious nature of the French Revolution.)

Quotes:

From Borg’s *The Heart of Christianity*... (see Handout 1 for reference) “The claim that the Bible is political and that the God of the Bible is passionate about justice is surprising, even startling, to many Christians. We have often overlooked it; and when it is pointed out, we often resist seeing it...(which) mutes the political voices of the Bible, thereby domesticating its political passion.” (p. 127) “Seeing the political passion of the Bible calls us to a politically engaged spirituality.” (p. 146)

From Crossan’s *How to Read the Bible*... (see Handout 3 for reference) “Justice is the flesh of love, and love is the spirit of justice...Justice without love may end in brutality, but love without justice must end in banality. Love empowers justice, and justice embodies love. Keep both, or get neither.” (p. 245)

At stake--the ability to make progressive Christianity much more publicly visible and more influential on politics, especially for the common good. Since the mid-1980s the voices of the Christian and secular far-right have, by default, dominated both media and politics.

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#### For Going Deeper:

See Keith’s review of Barack Obama’s 2006 keynote address to the Sojourners/Call to Renewal Conference

(Keith thinks this is one of the most thoughtful recent positions on faith and politics.)

On Keith’s website, type the words “Obama” “religion” “politics” in the search box, top right of the home page.

Closing Prayer