

## 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.

### 2. A Quick Tour of the Books of the Bible; and Getting Acquainted (Participants & the God we meet in the Bible)

In Session 1 we got better acquainted with each other. Now we're going to explore how and why the Bible can help us get better acquainted with God. For progressives, what is it about the nature of the Bible that makes it possible for it to be a powerful, foundational experience of the presence of God, ultimately leading to fullness of life in this world?

#### Opening Prayer

##### A. Reflection and Discussion: What are some of your favorite Bible stories or passages?

Pick one, find it in your Bible and share what it is with the total group.

Discuss in groups of two: Have you experienced the presence of God when you read or hear it?

##### B. Basic #2:

*(read all of B. and we'll discuss it in groups after clarifying questions)*

**Basic #2 - What makes it possible for every Christian to experience the life-transforming presence of God in the Bible is that it's a foundational "symbol" of our faith.** When you read or hear passages that strike you positively, practice thinking about them as instances of being a symbol and see if eventually you begin to have experiences of the presence of God. It is said that this is an experience of **"God accepting us just as we are and caring for us too much to leave us there."**

The following quotes provide insight into how a progressive Christian view of the nature of the Bible distinguishes itself from, and is critical of, the conservative Christian perspective.

Quotes: "By far the most serious effect of literalizing the metaphor 'word of God' is that it impoverishes and distorts the mystery of divine revelation. If the Bible is literally God's discourse, then revelation means primarily, if not exclusively, propositional communication by God, and faith means primarily intellectual assent to the content of these propositions...divine revelation is a far richer reality, a far more personal and engaging encounter between God and humanity." Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (1991), p. 33.

"Symbol can be defined as (1) a sensible reality (2) which renders present to and (3) involves a person subjectively in (4) a transforming experience (5) of transcendent mystery." Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe* (1999) p. 66.

At stake--Grounding the progressive understanding of the nature of the Bible in its symbolic identity, which is fundamentally different from the conservative understanding.

##### C. A Quick Tour of the Books of the Bible from a Progressive viewpoint:

The word "Bible" means "the books."

For conservatives there's a basic unity to the books ("What does the Bible say?").

For liberals/progressives the books contained fundamentally different, sometimes contradictory, theologies.

Here are some helpful things to know about the books:

- The number and order of the books is quite different in the Hebrew, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox Bibles
- Translations are based on the best manuscripts and fragments available
- Translations are closer to the original Hebrew and Greek; paraphrases are closer to modern languages - there's a whole range of options - the NRSV is the best for liberals/progressives - the NIV is the most popular conservative translation - The Message is a paraphrase
- The books of what Christians call the Old and New Testaments are grouped in certain ways
- The dates of the books are not in the order of the books - it's good to have a rough idea of the dating
- Marcus Borg's *The Evolution of the Word* (2012) orders the N.T. books by date written

It is recommended that you obtain a Study Bible (preferably an NRSV) that has notes and introductory information for sections as well as individual books. This is the quickest way to obtain needed essential information about all of the above topics and more. It's also good to know at least a little about the Jewish Scriptures and the Muslim Koran for comparison.

#### D. Basic #3:

*(read it and we'll discuss it in groups after clarifying questions)*

**Basic #3 - The two-hundred-year tradition of liberal historical biblical criticism (analysis) is vitally important for progressive Christians, but by itself is inadequate. It needs to be seen within the more foundational viewpoint of the symbolic nature of the Bible (as described in Basic #2).** This is one major reason why more recent progressive theologies see themselves as moving beyond the important but dated modern liberal theology. *(More about this in the next session, which should help you begin to put this into your practice of hearing, reading and studying the Bible.)*

The following quotes provide insight into how a progressive Christian view of the nature of the Bible distinguishes itself from, and is critical of, the liberal Christian perspective.

Quotes: "Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt...because it is incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation...We are declaring a bankruptcy, not holding a wake. It is because biblical criticism has so much of value which must be preserved that it is urgent that it come under new management." Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (1973, 2010) pp. 1-2, 13.

"Progressive Christians vigorously distinguish themselves from right-wing Christianity...which has managed to co-opt the name, language, and morals of the Christian faith...and then tried to impose their views on everyone else...liberals went wrong, from a progressive perspective, when reasoning based on (supposedly common) human experience became for them more than valued *tools and tests* to be utilized in shaping the inherited Christian materials; gradually it became also the *source* of liberal theology." Delwin Brown, *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe: A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious* (2008) pp. 1-2, 4-5.

At stake: A solid understanding of an important part of progressive Christianity's stance concerning the nature of the Bible that distinguishes it not only from the conservative view but also from the modern liberal understandings.

Closing Prayer