

Beyond Literalism

A Progressive Christianity for Our Times

November 4, 2007

Resetting the problem.

1. The gap that exists in the understanding of Christian faith based on *how* we read the Bible.
 - a. Reading the Bible literally ... as the absolute, inerrant word of God.
 - b. Reading the Bible contextually (historical context) and metaphorically (as symbolic language and metaphorical narrative).
 - c. What's at stake is the *believability* of the Bible, as well as the *size* of the world we choose to live in.
2. *Believability* relates to reading the Bible in ways that are adequate to our modern experience.
 - a. Many who have left the church see the Bible as an antiquated document. How sad! Marcus Borg says that more people have left the Church because of literalism than any other reason.
 - b. Which makes us wonder how many millions of people are out there, debunking the Bible simply because it has never been presented to them in ways that are believable.
 - c. All the time, people view the Bible as a document that is remote from the world they live in.
3. *Size* relates to *How big a world do we want to live in?* More on this later.
 - a. A literal reading of the Bible lends itself to all kinds of problems: it tends to be judgmental and therefore do *in-group/ out-group*, always a divisive thing to do.
 - b. A literal reading of the Bible tends towards all sorts of exclusivism ... with religion ... with women's issues ... with gay and lesbian rights ...
 - c. A literal reading of the Bible ends up not being loving. It therefore works against God's purposes. Love is always the over-arching value. And whenever it is not, that ought to be a red flag for any serious-minded person of faith.
4. We have to reclaim the language of our faith. Terms like sin, evangelism, salvation, *bible believing* etc. take on a negative connotation with many who have left the Church because of how those terms have been defined and understood.
5. Thus, we have before us the huge problem of *re-education* of our people, both biblically and theologically.

A progressive Christianity for our times is a Christianity that addresses these above-noted concerns. Still, it starts with the Bible and *how* we choose to read it.

The Bible revisited

1. How it was written ...
2. The Bible as poetry, metaphor and symbolic language ...
3. Letting the Bible breathe/ letting the Bible speak ... with Paul ...
4. How the gospels emerged out of developing traditions ... looking back into history.

Jesus

1. Not losing the *humanity* of Jesus. What's at stake?
 - a. Jesus as fully human
 - b. Jesus as God's Messiah
 - c. How do we see and understand Jesus?
 - d. Questions of Christology
2. The relationship of the *post-Easter Jesus* to the *pre-Easter Jesus*. The post-Easter Jesus is not false; it's simply been metaphorized as the respective traditions have unfolded.

A progressive Christianity

A couple of examples that reflect some of the above-voted concerns.

1. How the perception of the Church as *anti-gay* is repelling young people in large numbers. Our challenge: promote a progressive interpretation that lifts up love and inclusiveness.
2. Installation service I attended recently of a UCC Minister. The following words were printed in the bulletin as a response of the *people* to the words of greeting expressed by the Conference representative:

Let us look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was waiting endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

A progressive Christianity for our times must ...

1. Start with the best of the Bible ... this presumes a particular methodology:

- a. Ask the questions: when was it written, by whom, for what purpose; in what ways are God's purposes being served??
 - b. I.e., taking context seriously, what it all about?
2. The Sermon on the Mount ... the parables of Jesus ... the crucifixion and resurrection ... the larger Pauline themes ... the writings ... the prophets ... Torah ... the history books ...
 3. What are the big themes we see running through the Bible? What do they teach us about God's purposes?
 - God is about life. The life-giving God ... the 10 Commandments ...
 - God is about love ... grace, forgiveness, acting big ...

A progressive Christianity asks:

1. How would God want us to live? What are God's purposes with creation?
2. Having talked this through and arriving at some mutual levels of discernment, what is the meaning of salvation? Doesn't it have to be linked to love?
3. The challenge of *suffering love*. Power to save the world.
4. Enlarging the circle ... drawing more people in ... having a BIG spirit.

At the end of the day, it all about SIZE. It's about having a BIG spirit; a spirit that seeks to include as opposed to exclude. A spirit that is constantly building up rather than tearing down. A spirit that is forever looking at the BIG PICTURE, as it is defined by love.

The best of Christianity has within it the spiritual tools to save the world ... because it has the tools, the power, to invite repentance in the promise of a new day. Any religion, to have any power, must be able to give us the means to *live again*. Desperately, we need to be able to move beyond yesterday. While seeking the common good, we must be able to forgive and be forgiven.

Our nation, our church, and we as individuals must aim towards greater size in all that we do. Enlarging our spirit, opening our minds, seeking new and creative ways of enlarging the circle and drawing more people in. And again, all in light of love's purposes.

The best of the Bible, indeed, gives us this kind of faith. But we can't get there, even remotely, without first moving beyond biblical literalism. And so, this is our challenge. The stakes are high because we live in times of great tension and unrest. The challenges before us are manifold: war, global warming, religious fanaticism, and the usual greed and pride that have marked the human situation since the beginning of time.

A progressive Christianity looks at everything through the eyes of love, that God's purposes might be realized both in us and through us.

