

STUDY 3:

Easter Theology today

“scripture is filled with cultural attitudes that we have long ago abandoned and with behaviour that is today regarded as immoral. Concepts such as the virgin birth, the physical resurrection, and the second coming are today more often regarded as symbols to be understood theologically than as events that occurred in literal history. The substitutionary view of the atonement has become grotesque, both in its understanding of a God who requires the shed blood of a human sacrifice as a prerequisite for salvation and in its definition of humanity as fallen and depraved”

John Shelby Spong

A new Christianity for a new world. P.2.

Introduction:

We have seen how the Gospel stories grew out of each other and how the writers of each of the Gospels intended that their particular story had especial relevance to their readers. We then discovered that the earliest followers of Jesus viewed the Easter story in a number of different ways. Then, as the Church grew and became more organised and structured what had been just one of a number of beliefs hardened into ‘doctrine’ and ‘dogma’.

So, for more than a thousand years, what Christians believed was in many ways defined by the Church itself. The word of the Priest became absolute and to question what was accepted ‘truth’ was not only disapproved, but actively persecuted.

Then, during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, knowledge became more widely available beyond the Church and educated classes, until, by the late 19th. Century in many western nations, most people were at least able to read and write.

The Bible and church doctrine became open to scrutiny by more and more people and, by the turn of the 20th. Century, theological and biblical study was no longer the sole province of the church and an educated clergy.

TASK ONE. -

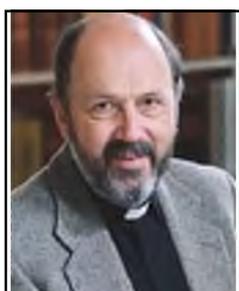
John Shelby Spong is probably the most well known clergyman in the world, particularly among people outside the life of the church. He is either loved or hated for his theological writings and attitudes.

The quote at the top of the page is from his best selling book—A New Christianity for a New World.

What is it he is communicating in this quote? How might the changes through the centuries in attitudes to biblical and theological study have led inevitably to attitudes like this? Do you find statements like these threatening or comforting?

Different 'Theologies' different 'Theologians'

Today we will look at three theologians from different theological perspectives and how they view the theology the death and resurrection of Jesus and how they present it to the wider world.



N.T. Wright.

Wright was born in [Morpeh](#), England. He was raised in the context of middle Anglicanism, and before the age of seven or eight he already felt called to go into Christian ministry. He is generally perceived as coming from a moderately [evangelical](#) perspective and is associated with the [Third Quest for the Historical Jesus](#) and the [New Perspective on Paul](#), a complex movement with many unique positions (originating from the works of [James Dunn](#) and [E. P. Sanders](#)) He argues that the current understanding of [Jesus](#) must be connected with what is known to be true about him from the historical perspective of first-century [Judaism](#) and [Christianity](#). In addition to his doctorate degrees from [Merton College, Oxford University](#), he also has been awarded several honorary doctorate degrees, most recently from [Durham University](#) in July 2007



Marcus Borg

([Marcus J. Borg](#) (born 1942) is a fellow of the [Jesus Seminar](#) and a [liberal religious](#) author. He holds a D.Phil. from [Oxford University](#) and is Hunderer Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture, an endowed chair at [Oregon State University](#). He is a columnist for [Beliefnet](#), lectures widely, and occasionally appears in the national news media. A best-selling writer whose works have been translated into nine languages, he has been national chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the [Society of Biblical Literature](#), co-chair of its International New Testament Program Committee, and president of the [Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars](#). Borg is among the most widely known and influential voices in [progressive Christianity](#).



J. Shelby Spong.

(born [16 June 1931](#) in [Charlotte, North Carolina, U.S.](#)) is the retired [Bishop](#) of the [Episcopal Diocese of Newark](#) (based in [Newark, New Jersey](#)). He is a [liberal theologian](#), biblical scholar, religion commentator and author. He promotes traditionally liberal causes, such as racial equality. He also calls for a fundamental rethinking of Christian belief, away from [theism](#) and from the afterlife as reward or punishment for human behaviour. Some Christians find Spong's radical interpretations of Christian belief unacceptable. Others see him as representative of a tradition of dissenting theologians like [John A.T. Robinson](#) and [Don Cupitt](#) which has been a component of Christianity and especially the Anglican tradition.

TASK TWO -

Each of these theologians is a well credentialed and accepted academic. They come from three different theological perspectives. Wright is 'conservative evangelical', Borg is a 'liberal' and Spong would be described as 'radical progressive'. How would you define these three perspectives? Would you, right at this moment, be willing to place yourself into one of these categories? Do you think it is helpful to use labels like these?

We will take each of these theologians in turn and spend some time looking at quotes from their publications to try and understand the essence of their 'Easter' theology.

Of course, we will only be able to scratch the surface of their thoughts and to really understand fully how they explain their faith, we should read more of their work. A short bibliography will be placed at the end of this study.

N.T. Wright

crucifixion

What is the relevance of Jesus' death to the church, the world, and the individual Christian today?

Traditionally this question has been answered in terms of the remission of sin and guilt., whereby the individual sinner finds peace for a troubled conscience, in the present, and the assurance of ultimate forgiveness from God, in life after death. This answer is, I believe, perfectly true and valid, biblically rooted and pastorally as vital as ever it was. It does not however, tell the whole story that the New Testament tells about the meaning of Jesus' death. To explore that fuller story in way detracts from this individual application but rather sets it in proper context.

The larger story concerns the victory over evil as a whole that was won, according to the New Testament on the cross.

TASK THREE

Note down what you see as the basic thrust of what Wright says about the crucifixion and the purpose of Jesus' death on the cross. Does anything surprise or disturb you?

The empty tomb

.....the meaning of the resurrection must begin with the validation of Jesus as Messiah, as Paul says in Romans 1:4. It means that Israel's God, the creator, has affirmed that Jesus really was, all along, his "son". It means, therefore, the acceptance and validation of him messianic achievement, supremely in his crucifixion: the resurrection declares that the cross was a victory, not a defeat. It is this perspective of course that underlies such passages as Collosians 2:14-15, and particularly 1 Corinthians 15:17; if the messiah is not risen, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. It is the resurrection that declares that sins have indeed been dealt with. Of course, the truth of Christianity is not just about past events. But take the past events away, and the other layers of truth begin to disintegrate.

The deepest meanings of the resurrection have to do with new creation.....when Jesus emerged, transformed form the tomb....it was the first day of God's new week, the moment of sunrise after the long night.....it was the beginning of the new creation

TASK FOUR

Note down what you see as the basic thrust of what Wright says about the Resurrection. Does anything surprise or disturb you?

Wright essentially takes the traditional understandings of the crucifixion and the resurrection and restates them in a refined and academic manner more fitted to the modern ear educated in a system where questions need to be dealt with seriously and answered in a logical and thoughtful manner.

Marcus Borg

crucifixion

Why was Jesus killed? Why did it happen? What's the relationship between Jesus life and his execution?I see the understanding of Jesus death as salvific as a post Easter interpretation generated within the early Christian Community, not as the intention of Jesus himself...

[according to Mark's account of Jesus' trial] Jesus was condemned to death for what looks like a Christian confession of faith; Jesus as messiah, Son of God, and soon to return Son of Man. Early Christian beliefs about Jesus and expectation of his second coming are combined. As a historical report it looks suspect to me, and it is more persuasively understood as a post Easter creation. Thus my historical judgement about the capital offence as 'blasphemy' is "probably not". But even if the judgement could be moved to a strong "maybe", one could not have much confidence.

.....Jesus was killed because he stood against the kingdoms of this world and for an alternative social vision grounded in the Kingdom of God. The dominant system killed Jesus as the prophet of the Kingdom of God.

TASK FIVE

Note down what you see as the basic thrust of what Borg says about the crucifixion and the purpose of Jesus' death on the cross. Does Borg see God's 'plan' at work in this? Does anything surprise or disturb you?

The empty tomb

The first of the central meanings of Easter [is] Jesus lives. He continued to be experienced after his death. But the meaning is not simply 'Jesus lives' as if Easter were primarily about the conquest of death and the promise of an afterlife.

There is a second equally important meaning in the New Testament: Jesus is Lord. A lord, of course, is a master, one to whom one gives one's allegiance. In the gospels and the Bible as a whole, it is sometimes used in this sense. But it can also have a further meaning. Namely *lord* is one of the words used for God, and thus it also sometimes is about divinity.....

Easter thus means "Jesus is Lord". The phrase has depths of meaning not always seen in a tradition in which the affirmation has become commonplace. Jesus is Lord. Rome is not. The domination system is not. The lord of conventional wisdom is not. If Jesus is Lord, then all of the would-be lords of our lives are not.

TASK SIX

Note down what you see as the basic thrust of what Borg says about the Resurrection. Is there a difference with that expressed by Wright? Does anything surprise or disturb you?

Borg clearly moves away from the sense of God at work in the Easter story through a 'spiritual' intervention in human affairs. Rather events unfold because of the nature of historical process. One event influences another, influences another.....and so on.

J Shelby Spong

crucifixion

When people are unfairly treated, when their lives are being taken away from them brutally and unjustly, the need to survive almost always overwhelms everything else. The typical human response in those circumstances is to plead, to beg, to fight, to weep, to whine, to curse—whatever response seems to offer some chance of survival. But look once again at the picture of Jesus that greets us in the gospel narratives. There is no clinging to life in that portrait. Instead we are presented with one whose being is so deeply affirmed that he can give it away freely. He can expend his energy in the act of affirming the being of others. To those who perpetrated this crime upon Jesus, he is said to have given the gift of forgiveness (Luke 23:24). To those who shared his fate, he is said to have given the gift of comfort (Luke 23:28-31). To his enemies, those who rejoiced in his demise he is said to have given the gift not of resistance, but of quiet resignation.

Does it matter whether these are literally accurate photographs of exactly what happened on those days between what we later named Palm Sunday and Good Friday? I do not think so.

TASK SEVEN

Note down what you see as the basic thrust of what Spong says about the crucifixion and the purpose of Jesus' death on the cross. What does Spong see as the essential picture of Jesus we are to take from the experience of the cross?

The empty tomb

The experience of Jesus as risen Lord, the breaker of the barrier of death, the living empowering presence in the life of the church underlies every verse of the Christian writing. There is no question about the reality of Easter as a source of power or the centrality of Easter in the life of the believer.

Obviously something happened after the death of Jesus that had startling and enormous power. Its power was sufficient to reconstitute a scattered and demoralised band of disciples. Its reality was profound enough to turn a denying Peter into a witnessing and martyred Peter, and to turn the disciples who fled for their lives into heroes willing to die for their Lord.[people] could no longer look at Jesus of Nazareth without seeing God. Whatever Easter was literally for the disciples, it meant that Jesus had been taken into God and vindicated by God. It also meant that Jesus had transcended death and was therefore ever present to the disciples as the animating spirit. That was what the word Easter came to stand for in this faith community.

The words that give rational form to that experience came later. These words varied widely and interpreted this reality quite differently. To treat these words literally is to hurl the believer in to an abyss of contradictions and irreconcilable assertions. To go beyond the literal words, indeed to use those words as the vehicle for entering the experience of the resurrection, is, however, the purpose for which we Christians today pore over the scriptures with such intensity and such seriousness.

TASK EIGHT

Note down what you see as the basic thrust of what Spong says about the Resurrection. Is there a difference with that expressed by Wright & Borg? Does anything surprise or disturb you?

Bringing it together.

The temptation for many people when reading the works of John Shelby Spong is to be repelled by the radical way in which he presents his work. If we read what is written on the previous page closely, we can see that he is essentially trying to challenge the church to rethink the doctrine and dogma of the past in the light of the realities of the modern world where much of the church's teaching conflicts with scientific method and practice.

It is also important that we recognise the unfairness of taking such short extracts of these theologians writings in order to interpret their meaning and intention. To understand fully where they come from we need to read their work more closely.

TASK NINE

How important do you think it is to follow the suggestion of Spong and others to reject the idea of biblical inerrancy, and to rather seek to identify the 'Jesus' of the 21st. Century according to the tools of the scientist and the scholar?

Next time we will make the effort to restate the Easter faith according to the way we understand it in our own lives today.

TASK TEN

If you get the chance during the next week—write your 'creed', your statement of faith about what Easter means to you as a Christian in the 21st. Century. Concentrate on what is in your heart. Do not refer to the Bible or 'theologians', simply use your understanding of the Easter STORY as it lives in your heart and soul.

For further study

- N.T Wright—
The New Testament and the People of God
Jesus and the victory of God
The crown and the fire
Bringing the church to the world
Following Jesus
For all God's worth.
- Marcus Borg-
Jesus.
Meeting Jesus again for the first time
Reading the bible again for the first time
The Heart of Christianity
The God we never knew.
- JS Spong-
rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism
A new Christianity for a new world
Here I stand
Resurrection—myth or reality?
Why Christianity must change or die