

An Examination of the Theology of Bishop John Shelby Spong

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Exposition

Biography

John Shelby Spong was born in North Carolina on June 16, 1931. His mother was a strict Presbyterian, so Spong grew up in the church, but from an aunt's insistence he started singing in choir at St. Peter's Episcopal Church and soon became deeply involved in the Episcopalian Church. Spong's father was an alcoholic and died after a heart attack in 1943. As a young child, Spong was deeply troubled by his father's displeasure, and after his father's death, Spong resented his mother's emotional dependency upon him in making him the leader of the family when he was not emotionally prepared for that role.¹ Spong married Joan Ketner in 1952, and received his Master of Divinity degree in 1955 from the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. In 1976 he was appointed Bishop of Newark where he served for 24 years, retiring in 2001. In 1988 his wife, Joan, died of cancer. Two years later he married Christine Barney. Bishop Spong is the author, or co-author, of twenty-one books. As a favored media personality, his greatest influence has been in popularizing liberal Christian viewpoints in a format that is easily comprehensible by the layperson.²

Influences

¹John Shelby Spong, *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love, and Equality* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 1-33.

²Bishop John Shelby Spong's Official Website, www.johnshelbyspong.com (accessed October 26, 2008)

Bishop Spong consistently ranks Bishop John A.T. Robinson and his book *Honest to God* as one of the most important influences on the development of his theological ideas. As Spong states, “There is no doubt that John Robinson was my ancestor in faith. He was also my spiritual father in whose pathway I have deliberately tried to walk.”³ Spong also lists Bultmann and Tillich as notable influences on his beliefs.⁴

Midrash

Before addressing Spong’s specific beliefs, it is necessary to explain the *midrash* technique, based on Michael Goulder’s work in Jewish traditions, that Spong uses for analyzing Scripture.⁵ Spong defines *midrash* as follows:

What is midrash? It is both a collection of the interpretations of sacred Scripture and a method for the continued expansion of the sacred Scripture.... Midrash is the Jewish way of saying that everything to be venerated in the present must somehow be connected with a sacred moment in the past. It is the ability to rework an ancient theme in a new context.⁶

Thus, everything that is recorded in the Gospels should be interpreted as *midrashic*, Jewish retellings of Old Testament stories. For example, Jesus’ forty days of fasting and the Sermon on the Mount retell the story of Moses. John’s account of Jesus’ resurrection of Lazarus is a *midrashic* retelling of Luke’s parable of Lazarus. The feeding of the five-thousand was meant as an image both of Elijah and Elisha’s miracles and the manna in the wilderness.⁷ This *midrash* technique allows Spong great scope for his interpretations of Scripture. As Spong states in a

³ John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), xiii.

⁴ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 122.

⁵ John Shelby Spong, *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes Born* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), xiii.

⁶ John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 8.

⁷ Spong, *Liberating the Gospels*, 322.

particularly revealing quote, “Once you enter the midrash tradition, the imagination is freed to roam and to speculate.”⁸

Subjectivity

One more preliminary issue that must be mentioned is Spong’s explicit claim that all truth is subjective. As he clearly states in his book, *Into the Whirlwind*, in the chapter aptly titled “The First Frontier: All Truth is Relative” Spong declares, “Every assertion that Christianity in any form possesses by divine revelation the ultimate and unchanging truth will have to be abandoned.”⁹ Spong concludes that “If no ultimate and unchanging authority exists in Christianity today, then all theology is relativized and fluid.”¹⁰

The Twelve Theses

From Spong’s *midrash* method and subjectivity he developed twelve theses, which he posted for debate on his website, and later published in his autobiography.

Thesis 1: No Theism

*1. Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. God can no longer be understood with credibility as a Being, supernatural in power, dwelling above the sky and prepared to invade human history periodically to enforce the divine will. So, most theological God-talk today is meaningless unless we find a new way to speak of God.*¹¹

Spong clarifies in his other writings, that he replaces the theistic conception of God with a Tillichian concept of God as Being. “When God could no longer be found up there or out there, theologians began to look for God within. In some ways theology was collapsed into

⁸ John Shelby Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 184

⁹ Spong, *Into the Whirlwind*, 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 453.

anthropology. Transcendence was collapsed into immanence. When Tillich defined God as the Ground of All Being, he was being responsive to this thought.”¹² Spong further argues, “God is Being, we say, and we worship this God by having the courage to be all that we can be.”¹³ In place of the former, theistic conception of God, Spong advocates that people participate in God as Being by living to their full potential as humans.

Thesis 2: No Incarnation

*2. Since God can no longer be conceived in theistic terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity. So the Christology of the ages is bankrupt.*¹⁴

To Spong, the Jesus of the New Testament was merely a demonstration of humanity full of God’s life, love, and being. “God is not some supernatural power over against the world or humanity....The first-century experience of Jesus was quite simply that people met God in him. ‘God was in Christ,’ they said—and we say with them—because life, love and being flowed through the fullness of his humanity.”¹⁵ This demonstration of God through Jesus was not limited to Jesus though. “To the extent that the Buddha, Moses, Elijah, Krishna, Mohammed, Confucious, Julian of Norwich.... or any other holy person brings life, love, and being to another, then to that degree that person is to me the word of God incarnate. No fence can be placed around the Being of God.”¹⁶ The story of Jesus is simply an example of a holy person

¹²John Shelby Spong, *Into the Whirlwind: The Future of the Church*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983), 57.

¹³ Spong, *A New Christianity*, 73.

¹⁴ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 453.

¹⁵ John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 289.

¹⁶Spong, *A New Christianity*, 145.

participating in the Being of God—an example that helps people to recognize the Being of God, but nothing more than an example.

Thesis 3: No Creation or Fall

3. The biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.¹⁷

As Spong emphatically declares, “Gone is the God up there or out there. Gone is the sense of human depravity, the literal fall from grace. Gone is the impossible command to be righteous even though fallen.”¹⁸ Spong claims there is no need for a God who created the universe, declaring, “Today molecular biology, biochemistry, and biophysics no long need the God hypothesis in those determinative turning points in the evolutionary process.”¹⁹

Thesis 4: No Virgin Birth

4. The virgin birth, understood as literal biology, makes Christ's divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible.²⁰

Spong argues that the Biblical accounts of the virgin birth “need to be seen as midrashic attempts to interpret the power and impact of the adult Jesus.”²¹ A defense of the historicity of the virgin birth, Spong declares is a feat that “no recognized New Testament scholar”²² would every attempt. Spong argues that Mary’s pregnancy was the result of rape,²³ and proposes that

¹⁷ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 453.

¹⁸ Spong, *Into the Whirlwind*, 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁰ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 453.

²¹ Spong, *Born of a Woman*, 21.

²² *Ibid.*, 44.

²³ *Ibid.*, 126.

the idea for the virgin birth may have arisen from other religious tradition's use of "the concept of a virgin birth to explain the divine origin of heroic figures."²⁴

Thesis 5: No Miracles

5. The miracle stories of the New Testament can no longer be interpreted in a post-Newtonian world as supernatural events performed by an incarnate deity²⁵.

Spong's argument here is simply that miracles are a primitive idea that modern, scientific scholars now recognize as impossible. This stance denies the possibility of any miraculous act in either the Bible or by God's interaction in the world today.

Thesis 6: No Substitutionary Atonement

6. The view of the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world is a barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God that must be dismissed.²⁶

Spong is emphatic on this point that the traditional Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement must be abandoned. "Gone is the doctrine of man (as we used to call it) which produced the concept of the substitutionary atonement of Christ, that strange vision of a God whose justice had to be served by punishing his son with crucifixion instead of giving us our due in hell or purgatory."²⁷ The concept of Christ paying the punishment for mankind's sins is abhorrent to Spong, and he sees it as completely incompatible with his image of God.

Thesis 7: No Resurrection

7. Resurrection is an action of God. Jesus was raised into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring inside human history.²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 56.

²⁵ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 453.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Spong, *Into the Whirlwind*, 52.

²⁸ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 453.

Spong argues that the *midrash* story of the resurrection in the Bible arose out of visions or highly emotional experiences by Jesus' followers after His death. Spong even recounts the story of Simon Peter's experience that led to Simon's understanding of the resurrection.

Suddenly it all came together for Simon. The crucifixion was not punitive, it was intentional. The cross was Jesus' ultimate parable, acted out on the stage of history to open the eyes of those whose eyes could be opened in no other way to the meaning of Jesus as the sign of God's love....It would be fair to say that in that moment Simon felt resurrected....and at that moment Simon saw Jesus alive.²⁹

Spong says that it is only once a person correctly understands and enters into this experience of God that, like the disciples, he can know Christ, not as "the way, the truth, and the life" but as "our way, our truth, and our life".³⁰

Thesis 8: No Ascension

8. The story of the ascension assumed a three-tiered universe and is therefore not capable of being translated into the concepts of a post-Copernican space age.³¹

The Ascension is a corollary of the resurrection, and if Jesus was not bodily resurrected, then of course he did not ascend into heaven. Also, Spong argues that our present scientific understanding precludes any idea of a physical ascension.

Thesis 9: No Moral Standards

9. There is no external, objective, revealed standard writ in Scripture or on tablets of stone that will govern our ethical behavior for all time.³²

Spong argues passionately against the idea of an inerrant Scripture, stating, "The most cursory understanding of the formation of the Bible, the most shallow reading of many parts of

²⁹ Spong, *Resurrection*, 255.

³⁰ Spong, *Resurrection Myth or Reality*, 21.

³¹ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 454.

³² *Ibid.*

the biblical text, the barest knowledge of biblical scholarship, the simple recognition of many of the internal biblical conflicts and contradictions—any of these would immediately render a view of an inerrant Holy Scripture impossible to defend.”³³ This view of Scripture leaves Spong without any objective standard, and this is exactly what Spong desires. “Subjectivity is not escapable; rather objectivity is itself a carefully cultivated human myth.”³⁴ In place of any objective truth in Scripture, Spong advocates a fluid subjectivity in matters of ethics.

Thesis 10: No Effectual Prayer

*10. Prayer cannot be a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way.*³⁵

Spong is adamant that God does not act in the world or respond to prayers in the traditional sense. “Gone is the God who plays favorites, answering some prayers and denying others”³⁶ Instead of the traditional understanding of prayer, Spong advocates a prayer of interconnectedness. “So prayer drives me into life, into myself, into the connectedness of all human experience. I do not implore God to intervene, but I do open myself and others to the Divine Energy that is a force for wholeness and healing.... Thus the traditional kinds of prayer find new expression for me when I move beyond the limiting personalistic concepts of another age.”³⁷ Thus, prayer is not a request to a God who hears and responds, but a communion with a “Divine Energy.”

³³ Spong, *Into the Whirlwind*, 25.

³⁴ Spong, *Resurrection Myth or Reality*, 99.

³⁵ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 454.

³⁶ Spong, *Into the Whirlwind*, 52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

Thesis 11: No Guilt

11. The hope for life after death must be separated forever from the behavior-control mentality of reward and punishment. The church must abandon, therefore, its reliance on guilt as a motivator of behavior.³⁸

Spong's argument here is simply that people's actions should not cause guilt because there are no moral standards. Therefore, the Church should stop manipulating people by scaring them with ideas of reward and punishment.

Thesis 12: No Discrimination

12. All human beings bear God's image and must be respected for what each person is. Therefore, no external description of one's being, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, can properly be used as the basis for either rejection or discrimination.³⁹

Spong has gained much of his notoriety from his radical claims in this area, for his advocacy of radical feminism, gay and lesbian rights, and the ordination of homosexuals. Spong's "A Statement of Koinonia", which was a statement of his support for these rights, was signed by eighty-eight other Episcopal bishops and presented to the Episcopal House of Bishops.⁴⁰

Critique

"The Parable of the Engineers"

In John Warwick Montgomery's work *The Suicide of Christian Theology*, he tells a parable, which he calls "The Parable of the Engineers". In this parable there is a group of engineers assigned to continue work on an ancient Cathedral, but they question the original

³⁸ Spong, *Here I Stand*, 454.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 453-454.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 447-452.

plans. Starting with the suggestion that the original plans have been misunderstood, they eventually arrive at the conclusion that the plans are simply symbolic of the architect and are not meant to be taken literally at all. Under this chaotic management the Cathedral collapses around them and kills everyone inside.⁴¹ This parable illustrates both the actions of Liberal Christian theologians and the effect of those actions on the Church. Leaders like Bishop Spong deny the truth of God's Word and use the words of symbolism to evade disliked truths. If their actions are unchecked, they will destroy the Church itself. The following rebuttal of Spong's specific claims will demonstrate both that Spong's theses incorrectly interpret the facts and the Bible, and that the Christian answer (the original plans) is the only possible solution.

Scholarship

An important point to note before proceeding with a specific rebuttal of Spong's individual theses is the widespread consensus regarding Spong's faulty scholarship, such as his belligerent rhetoric towards opponents, self-characterization as a heroic Galileo figure,⁴² and propensity for making confident speculations in scholarly fields where he is manifestly unqualified.⁴³ McGrath criticizes him for "a fierce and uncritical dogmatism and a lack of scholarly insight and responsibility."⁴⁴ N. T. Wright confirms this conclusion.

Spong has, in short, cut himself off from serious historical study. The world that he has opened up is a world which he himself calls midrash, however inaccurately. It is a world where the modern exegete can reconstruct a fantasy-

⁴¹ John Warwick Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Newburg, Indiana: Trinity Press, 1970), 26.

⁴² James M. Stanton, "The Essential Spong" in *Can a Bishop be Wrong* ed. Peter C. Moore (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 2-3.

⁴³ John Makujina, "Modern Era Marcionism: Critiquing *The Sins of Scripture* by John Shelby Spong" *Global Journal of Classical Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (December, 2007): 7, http://www.phc.edu/gj_the_ascension.php

⁴⁴ Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 65.

history in the interests of a current ideology.... This may be ingenious, but it is neither serious history nor serious theology.⁴⁵

What is midrash really?

Spong's use of midrash is completely incompatible with the findings of scholars who are experts in this field of study.⁴⁶ Wright explicates that "midrash proper consists of a commentary on an actual biblical text. It is not simply a fanciful retelling, but a careful discussion in which the original text itself remains clearly in focus. It is obvious that the gospels do not read in any way like this." In fact, Wright goes on to explain that the gospels clearly fit within the Jewish category of biography and would have appeared to any first-century readers as an account of actual history, not midrash.⁴⁷ Therefore, Spong's use of midrash to deny the historicity of the Biblical accounts is entirely unwarranted.

Response to Thesis 1: Theism

Theism cannot be divorced from Christianity without losing every characteristic that makes Christianity different from Pantheism or any other pluralistic religion. As Machen aptly states, "The very basis of the religion of Jesus was a triumphant belief in the real existence of a personal God. And without that belief no type of religion can rightly appeal to Jesus to-day. Jesus was a theist, and rational theism is at the basis of Christianity."⁴⁸ Thus, for Spong to deny theism, is contradictory to Christianity itself. Ephraim Radner adds, "[T]he kind of God Spong affirms is semantically *nonsensical* abstraction. Therefore, anything Spong has to say about

⁴⁵ N.T. Wright, *Who was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁸ Gresham J. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 57.

Scripture is, religiously speaking bound up with nonsense.”⁴⁹ Spong’s rejection of theism is contradictory to Christianity itself, and the God as Being he proposes to replace the traditional understanding of God is a meaningless, semantic generalization.

Response to Thesis 2: Incarnation

G.K. Chesterton shrewdly stated, “The man who denies original sin believes in the Immaculate conception of everybody.”⁵⁰ This is exactly what Spong does, and this is neither incarnation in the Biblical sense, nor is it compatible with the Bible’s portrayal of Jesus’ perfection and man’s fallen nature.

Response to Thesis 3: Creation and Fall

Spong argues that a biblical account of creation and the fall of mankind are incompatible with science. The first part of this statement relates to a scientific question, and as scientist Dr. Jonathan Sarfati and co-author Michael Bott state, evolution does not require the mythologization of Genesis, and there are many scientists that criticize evolutionary theory.

Spong says he regards the creation vs. evolution debate as an ‘irrelevant issue’. But the issue is relevant enough for him to use evolutionary theories to dismiss Genesis as ‘myth’. He does not acknowledge the criticisms of evolutionary theory even by secular scientists like Dr Michael Denton, Sir Fred Hoyle, Dr Chandra Wickramasinghe, H.S. Lipson, D. Heribert-Nilsson; secular science writers like Richard Milton, or the thousand-plus members of the Creation Research Society, all with advanced degrees in science.⁵¹

Spong’s desire to eliminate Genesis is tied to the fact that he denies man’s sinful nature and need for a savior, for “the jettisoning of sin results necessarily in the loss of any meaningful

⁴⁹ Ephraim Radner, “Rescuing the Bible from Bishop Spong” in *Can a Bishop be Wrong* ed. Peter C. Moore (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 59.

⁵⁰ John Warwick Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* (Bonn, Germany: Culture and Science Publ., 2005), 2.4901.

⁵¹ Jonathan Sarfati and Michael Bott, “What’s Wrong with Bishop Spong” *Apologia* Vol. 7 (2000), 10. http://www.christian-apologetics.org/html/Whats_wrong_Spong.htm

understanding of the need for Incarnation or for redemption.”⁵² Thus, when Spong rejects the fall of man, he rejects that mankind has any need for salvation. However, this leaves Spong with no answer to the problem of evil and suffering in the world, a problem that can only be addressed from the Christian understanding of man’s fall and God’s salvation.

Response to Thesis 4: Virgin Birth

An all powerful God is clearly not powerless to perform the miracle of a virgin birth. If He can create *ex-nihilo*, then a virgin birth is hardly impossible. Spong argues that the miracle of the virgin birth is biologically impossible, but this is completely unwarranted. As Lewis stated “If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any [scientific] laws. The laws at once take over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born.”⁵³ Also, Spong argues that the virgin birth story was just an imitation of similar pagan stories; however, as Wright incisively points out:

Why would Christians, increasingly conscious of hostility from the pagan world, have included a story like this, so likely to be misunderstood in a way that they clearly could not intend? Not certainly to try to curry favor. Neither Matthew nor Luke was writing to show pagan audience that Christianity was just like paganism! Why then would they do it? One of the best possible answers is that they very firmly believed it to be true. More than that, though: the Christian claim always was that the Jewish story in general, and the Christian climax to it in particular, was the truth, the reality, of which paganism was the parody.⁵⁴

Tolkien likewise masterfully argues that Christianity is the ultimate fairy-tale, the truth of which all the other myths and tales were simply a parody, the one about which he said, “There is no tale

⁵² Montgomery, *Tractatus*, 2.492.

⁵³ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 72.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Who was Jesus?*, 84.

ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits”⁵⁵

Response to Thesis 5: Miracles

C.S. Lewis once stated, “The popular ‘religion’ excludes miracles because it excludes the ‘living God’ of Christianity and believes instead in a kind of God who obviously would not do miracles, or indeed anything else.”⁵⁶ Spong’s argument is that miracles are no longer believable in the modern scientific age. However, quoting Lewis again, “A miracle is emphatically not an event without cause or without results. Its cause is the activity of God: its results follow according to Natural law.”⁵⁷ Following in the path of David Hume, modern science states that miracles cannot occur, but this statement cannot stand because as Lewis masterfully pointed out, Hume’s argument against miracles is circular, and it requires a belief in the uniformity of nature that is impossible given the inescapable uniqueness of each individual event in history.⁵⁸ Therefore, Spong cannot evade miracles from a scientific or philosophical viewpoint, so the historical accounts of miracles in the Bible cannot be denied.

Response to Thesis 6: Substitutionary Atonement

Spong’s criticism of substitutionary atonement is a claim that this doctrine is not aesthetically pleasing and therefore, cannot be true. Machen trenchantly refutes this claim, stating, “[T]he objection to the vicarious sacrifice of Christ disappears altogether before the tremendous Christian sense of the majesty of Jesus’ Person. It is perfectly true that the Christ of modern naturalistic reconstruction never could have suffered for the sins of other; but it is very

⁵⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 72.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Miracles*, 99-100.

⁵⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, 73.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

different in the case of the Lord of Glory.”⁵⁹ Spong rejects substitutionary atonement because he rejects mankind’s need for salvation and Christ’s Incarnation, but with these two vital pieces of Christian doctrine back in place, Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross becomes a beautiful and awe-inspiring act of His love for mankind.

Response to Thesis 7: Resurrection

In order to address Spong’s rejection of the resurrection, what the Bible actually says must be established. In almost seven-hundred pages of detailed exegesis, Wright marshals an immense amount of evidence that the Bible clearly states that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead. As Wright concludes,

The historical datum now before us is a widely held, consistently shaped and highly influential belief: that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead. This belief was held by virtually all the early Christians for whom we have evidence. It was at the centre of their characteristic praxis, narrative, symbol and belief; it was the basis of their recognition of Jesus as Messiah and lord, their insistence that the creator god had inaugurated the long awaited new age, and above all their hope for their own future bodily resurrection.⁶⁰

Having established that the Bible does indeed teach Jesus’ bodily resurrection, the next question is whether there is any reason to doubt the eyewitness’ account in the Gospels. Warfield masterfully addresses just that question:

1. There was no expectation of a resurrection, and hence no ground for visions....
 2. There was no time for belief in the Resurrection to mythically grow.... 3. These five hundred are too many visionaries to create.... What might be plausibly urged of Paul or Mary loses all plausibility when urged of all their contemporaries. And thus we cannot but conclude that all attempts to explain the belief of the early followers of Christ in his resurrection as a delusion, utterly fail. If it was not founded on fraud or delusion, then, was it not on fact? There seems no other

⁵⁹ Machen, 128.

⁶⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 685.

alternative: eyewitnesses in abundance witness to the fact; if they were neither deceivers nor deceived, then Christ did rise from the dead.⁶¹

With the resurrection firmly established as a historical fact, Spong no longer has any basis for claiming either that God cannot act inside the world or that Christ was not who He said.

Response to Thesis 8: Ascension

Spong rejects the ascension because he rejects Christ's bodily resurrection, so the response to the prior thesis applies equally to this thesis. In addition, as Canon William Norman said, "The Ascension is necessary for the gospel to be heard and received in all the world. As someone has said, the Ascension marks the end of the time of Jesus and begins the time of the church. Jesus departs from the here so that he may enter the everywhere."⁶² Spong has no valid reason for denying the ascension neither because it was a miracle nor because Jesus was not resurrected, so his rejection of the ascension cannot stand.

Response to Thesis 9: Moral Standards

Spong denies the very possibility of there being an absolute moral standard or indeed any objective truth in Scripture. This leaves moral standards to the discretion of each individual. "Obviously, if we can trust no revelation of God fully, then *we ourselves become the only remaining standard of judgment.*"⁶³ Montgomery's comment about Bishop Pike, who held very similar beliefs as Spong, applies equally to Bishop Spong. "Thus in reading the Bishop one is actually not reading theology at all; one is reading *autobiography*—the autobiography of a sinner

⁶¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, vol. 1, *The Resurrection of Christ a Historical Fact* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), 191.

⁶² Canon William Norman, "The Ascension" in *Global Journal of Classical Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 1 http://www.phc.edu/gj_the_ascension.php

⁶³ Montgomery, *Suicide*, 59.

who endeavored to restructure God's nature, revelation, and moral law in the image of his own preferences and those of his cultural epoch."⁶⁴ Spong can only give his personal preferences for moral standards, but his preferences have no bearing on anyone else's preferences, which creates major problems for Spong's philosophy, as will be addressed in the response to thesis twelve.

Also, in denying the inerrancy of the Scripture, Spong ignores the work of multitudes of scholars that affirms both that the Bible is a sound historical document and that Jesus' resurrection verifies his declaration of the Bible's inerrancy.⁶⁵

Response to Thesis 10: Effectual Prayer

Spong denies that prayer can have any effect because he denies the existence of a theistic God who can act inside the world today. The response to Spong's theses about theism and miracles equally rebuts Spong's objection to the efficacy of prayer.

Response to Thesis 11: Guilt

With the destruction of Spong's thesis on moral standards, his claim that people should not feel guilt because there are no moral standards, no longer has any foundation and must likewise be abandoned.

Response to Thesis 12: Discrimination

Spong does not believe in any absolute moral standard; therefore, he supports clearly unbiblical actions simply because society today accepts them, and he personally does not think them wrong. "It is no wonder, then, that liberalism is totally different from Christianity, for the foundation is different. Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁵ See Montgomery's *Tractatus*, Propositions 3 and 4.

sinful men.”⁶⁶ Spong’s reliance on preferences rather than absolutes is logically untenable. “The only ethic that could, even in principle, stand above such societal limits and establish ‘absolute human rights’ would be an ethic that derived, not from finite situations, but from the realm of the transcendent.”⁶⁷ This transcendent realm is just what Spong rejects, so he has no foundation for advocating that anything is right or wrong, not even the discrimination he so violently hates. Christian moral absolutes are the only standard that transcends human opinions, and it is only from a standard like this that a person can consistently condemn evil and praise good.

Conclusion

What solution is there for the destruction that Bishop Spong’s ideas bring to the Christian Church? Montgomery concludes his parable of the engineers with just such a solution.

The lines along which theological recovery can be made have been outlined in our Parable. While the cathedral was tottering on the brink of collapse, ‘there were a few engineers who, right up to the moment of final destruction, still pleaded that the only hope lay in following rigorously the original plans, that the engineers must bring their stylistic ideas into conformity with the architect’s, and that deviations from their notions of style did not constitute genuine errors or contradictions in the plans.’ Contemporary theologians have destroyed themselves by their unnecessary and unwarranted destruction of biblical revelation, on which all sound theology is based. The only hope for a resurrected theology lies in a recovery of confidence in the historical Christ and in the Scriptures He stamped with approval as God’s Word.⁶⁸

This, indeed, is exactly what must be done. When the foundation of the historical truth of Christ and the inerrancy of the Scripture is restored, the Liberal Christian scaffolding will crumble down, and the Church will return to following God’s Word, which is the only foundation upon which it can stand.

⁶⁶ Machen, 79.

⁶⁷ John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation Ethics* (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc., 1999), 44.

⁶⁸ Montgomery, *Suicide*, 37.