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Bishop Spong Goes to Stetson

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That fascinating little piece of advertising is found at the website of Stetson University, a private university located in DeLand, Florida.

Of course, that introduction of retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong is a bit understated, since the bishop is known throughout the world for having denied virtually every major doctrine of the Christian faith, and has become something of a parody of theological liberalism.

What makes the Stetson University announcement all the more interesting is the fact that Bishop Spong was invited to the university in order to deliver a lecture on human sexuality and then to serve as the major speaker for the university’s “Twentieth Annual Florida Winter Pastors’ School.” According to the on-line registration form for the conference, the event sold out.

The bishop’s visit to Florida caught the attention of the Orlando Sentinel. In an article written by reporter Loraine O’Connell, Spong is quoted as stating: “Sex without any sort of loving relationship is always wrong. It’s appropriate only inside commitment. What’s the level of commitment? For me, it’s marriage.” The reporter was fully aware that this might sound like Bishop Spong was abandoning his endorsement of pre-marital sex, so she quickly corrected any misunderstanding. “Spong’s fans needn’t fear that he’s backpedaling. Although marriage is his preferred level of commitment, he says, expecting young people to remain celibate until marriage isn’t realistic. Teaching them to treat sexuality with respect is.”

Over the last twenty years or so, the Right Reverend John Shelby Spong has served as a minstrel for postmodern Christianity. After serving from 1976 to 2000 as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, New Jersey, Spong hit the lecture circuit and has become a media personality and provocateur. His books garner immediate media attention, though his methodology of theological sensationalism is running out of steam. Now that he has denied virtually every imaginable doctrine revealed in the Bible, there must be very little room for further denial.

In successive books, Spong has denied the incarnation, the miracles as recorded in Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, a salvific purpose for the crucifixion, the bodily resurrection, and an entire series of truths long cherished by the church. He sees the Bible as an essentially human book that is filled with foibles and faults, and thus argues that it is not to be taken seriously as God’s authoritative message to the church.

“The God I know is not concrete or specific,” Spong has written. “This God is rather shrouded in mystery, wonder, and awe. The deeper I journey into this divine presence, the less any literalized phrases, including the phrases of the Christian creed, seem relevant. The God I know can only be pointed to; this God can never be enclosed by propositional statements.”

Thus, Spong denies the authority and truthfulness of the historic Christian creeds and has been about the task of revising, remodeling, and transforming Christianity into an entirely new system of faith and meaning.

Biblical Christianity simply makes no sense to Bishop Spong. “The biblical account of Jesus’ return to heaven was based upon the ancient idea that the sky was the abode of God and that it was ‘up.’ A literal ascension makes no sense to those of us who live on this side of Copernicus, Galileo, and the space age. Indeed, the very word up is a meaningless concept in our time.”

In Spong’s view, God is largely a human construct. He has abandoned theism—the basic belief in a personal God—and has moved “beyond theism” to embrace “new God images.” In *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, the bishop explained: “There is no God external to life. God, rather, is the inescapable depth and center of all that is. God is not a being superior to all other beings. God is the Ground of Being itself. And much flows from this starting place. The artifacts of the faith of the past must be understood in a new way if they are to accompany us beyond the exile, and those that cannot be understood differently will have to be laid aside. Time will inform us as to which is which.”

Just before the end of last year, I debated Bishop Spong on Lee Strobel’s program, “Faith Under Fire,” broadcast on PAX television. In that context, Bishop Spong presented his understanding clearly. “There is no human being that can know the reality of God. There is no inerrant Bible. There is no true Church. There is no corner on the market of salvation. There is no faith once delivered to the saints. Those are all human attempts to minister to the human security-need to believe that we possess the truth. It’s only those people who believe they possess the truth that want to have inquisitions or do heresy hunts or start religious wars or persecute people who disagree with them. I think that’s the dark and demonic side of religion, and I think we would do well to be rid of that.”

Most Americans are probably aware of Bishop Spong as an advocate for sexual revolution. His 1988 book, *Living in Sin?: A Bishop Rethinks Sexuality*, was a declaration of war upon the church’s historic understanding of human sexuality. Spong pulled no punches, rejecting the Bible as an adequate guide to human sexuality and insisting that the ancient Scriptures are simply too out of date to be relevant in today’s world. The bishop simply takes the sexual revolution as a fact and insists that Christianity must change its sexual ethic or be consigned to the dustbin of cultural history.

Furthermore, he insists that the church’s sole concern in this time of revolutionary sexuality is to “witness the expansion of that gray area bounded by promiscuity on the one side and sex only inside marriage on the other.” As he expanded, “Most people will live inside this area of relativity, of uncertainty, of various levels of commitment and various kinds of sexual practices. It will be in the gray area that new values will need to be formulated.”

Accordingly, the bishop argued for the full acceptance and normalization of homosexual behavior. “Contemporary research is today uncovering new facts that are producing a rising conviction that homosexuality, far from being a sickness, sin, perversion, or unnatural act, is a healthy, natural, and affirming form of human sexuality for some people.”

What about the Bible’s clear statements about the sinfulness of homosexuality? “Certainly there are biblical passages that seem quite specific in their condemnation of homosexual activity,” the bishop conceded. Nevertheless, he employed a postmodern relativizing of the text to get around that awkward reality. When Paul condemned homosexuality in Romans chapter one, “It was an unnatural act for a heterosexual person to engage in homosexual behavior, he [Paul] argued. He did not or perhaps could not imagine a life in which the affections of a male might be naturally directed to another male.”

Had the Apostle Paul been “enlightened” by modern notions of sexual orientation, Spong implies that he certainly would have changed his position. On the other hand, Spong elsewhere has argued that the Apostle Paul’s clear condemnation of homosexuality indicates that he may indeed have been a closeted homosexual himself.

Once Spong argued that the Bible’s condemnation of homosexuality could be overcome, it was a short jump to argue that homosexuals should be eagerly welcomed into the church and its ministry, and that liturgical rites for the blessing of same sex unions should be developed and embraced. “Once the naturalness of majority and minority orientations is established, and the expectation of celibacy for gay and lesbian people is removed, the question of the moment will then become,” Spong insists, “How does a gay or lesbian person lead a responsible sexual life?” Celibacy, he argues, is simply too much to ask.

Spong clearly revels in his role as provocateur and lightning rod for controversy. “I am not likely to be burned at the stake,” he has commented, insisting that he is confident the church will inevitably move in his direction.

Meanwhile, this directs even greater attention to the fact that Stetson University invited Spong to be a major speaker at an event that was presumably intended to equip and inspire Christian pastors. The school’s Continuing Education department acknowledged the fact that the bishop had both admirers and detractors. “His admirers acclaim his legacy as a teaching bishop who makes contemporary theology accessible to the ordinary layperson—he’s considered a champion of an inclusive faith by many both inside and outside the Christian church.” On the other hand, “His challenges to the church have also made Bishop Spong the most vilified of modern clergymen. The target of hostility, fear, and death threats, he has been called anti-Christ, hypocrite and the devil incarnate.”

Nevertheless, the university obviously thought that Bishop Spong would be an absolutely appropriate speaker for its Pastors’ School, along with Marcus J. Borg, a member of the infamous “Jesus Seminar,” who has denied the bodily resurrection, miracles, and the historicity of the New Testament.

According to the university’s website, “A bright mind is never happy on the sidelines. A bright mind is meant to be wide open to all the intellectual adventures and encounters.” Participants in Stetson University’s Pastors’ School are certain to encounter an intellectual adventure—but it will be an adventure in subverting and undermining the Christian faith.

The irony and tragedy in all this becomes apparent when it is realized that Stetson University was founded and nurtured by Baptists in the state of Florida, and championed at one time as “the state institution of the Florida Baptists.”

But, as they say, that was then and this is now. Now, Stetson is simply another private university that sells itself as “a comprehensive university committed to academic excellence and distinctive, values-centered programs.” Elsewhere at the same site, the school describes itself as “a non-sectarian, comprehensive, private university.”

That is light years away from the university’s motto, “Pro Deo et Veritate” [“For God and Truth”].

The bottom line in all this is that Stetson University—formerly related to the Florida Baptist Convention—has invited a retired Episcopal bishop—now known for his notorious denials of Christian truth—to be the speaker at an event intended to equip Christian pastors. This is all done in the name of academic inquiry, no doubt. But who speaks for orthodox Christianity?

Oddly enough, the best response to Bishop Spong’s visit came from a local Episcopal rector who declined to attend the lectures. Spong is “on the fringe of the tradition,” said the Reverend Don Lyon, rector of St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in DeLand. “He’s basically an eastern mystical pantheist.”

As Lyon told the Orlando Sentinel, “I’ve been a parish priest for 25 years, and for 25 years he has sought to deconstruct the historic faith in ways that have been profoundly damaging to the church.”

Reverend Lyon is right, of course. The most tragic aspect of this entire episode is the damage that is done to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The state of liberal Protestantism, of Stetson University and similar institutions, and the world of increasingly post-Christian spirituality, is made readily apparent once we recognize what it means that Bishop Spong, rather than Reverend Lyon, was asked to address the attending pastors. But then, Bishop Spong must have offered the kind of “intellectual adventure” those pastors would prefer. Let’s just leave it at that.

