

## Assessing the Spong Phenomenon

---

Nigel Watson

**Abstract:** This article attempts to account for the astonishing diversity of reactions to Bishop John Shelby Spong. It argues that, while Spong is undoubtedly reaching many people both inside and outside the churches, in his treatment of some of the central doctrines of the Christian Faith he poses some false either/ors.

THERE CAN BE FEW CHURCH LEADERS or theologians who have visited Australia in recent years who have aroused as much interest as Bishop John Shelby Spong. Spong has an enviable mastery of the means of communication. Through his books, lectures and media appearances he has certainly put religion on the public *agenda*. This article is an attempt to evaluate the "Spong phenomenon". We begin by noting the astonishing diversity of reactions to Bishop Spong.

The book of Spong's that contains the latest statement of his beliefs is entitled, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998). The dust cover of the book is full of appreciative comments from a range of church leaders and theologians, but many on the religious Right regard him as an enemy to the true faith. The heading of a review in *Christianity Today* reads: *Saving the Church by Killing God: John Shelby Spong is not only piloting a theological Titanic, he is aiming for the icebergs.* At the end of the review, the reviewer, Michael Maudlin, quotes Spong's acknowledgment that more conservative Christians will consider his own beliefs to amount to heresy and simply adds, "Amen and Amen".<sup>1</sup>

The diversity of reactions to Spong is vividly illustrated by his account of two encounters that he had at the funeral service for his first wife: on the one hand physical assault; on the other heartfelt thanks.<sup>2</sup>

Here in Australia Spong drew amazing crowds. Clearly many people feel that he understands their situation and speaks directly to them. Like him, they feel themselves to be "believers in exile". To be sure, some of

---

1. *Christianity Today* (June 15, 1998), p. 58.  
2. John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998) 215-16.

his hearers and readers are unimpressed. I recall a conversation among a group of New Testament scholars at a conference in Tel Aviv in August, 2000. All of the members of the group had heard Spong speak at their seminary or faculty and all of them were somewhat dismissive: "He didn't say anything new – nothing you could get your teeth into – a lot of "motherhood statements".

Such was the tenor of the conversation. But one may well argue that such criticisms are misplaced. Spong himself would not claim to be an original scholar or a profound thinker. He sees himself more as a communicator. And that he does very well. And he is certainly trying to face the challenges of modern knowledge and modern society.

In 1963, Denis Nineham wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Mark for Pelican Books. In the Introduction he gives a succinct account of scholarly research on the Gospels up to that time, and then acknowledges that, to many of his readers, a good deal of what he has been saying will probably come as something of a surprise. He then says this:

The reader is reminded that what may seem new, and somewhat startling, to him has been fully recognized by professional students of the New Testament for many years. Many of the Christian leaders of today are men who have long been well aware of these questions, and a lively debate about the theological implications of them has been in progress for some time.... That many readers will be as surprised as they probably will be is a sad reflection on the extent to which all denominations do so little to keep an increasingly educated laity informed about the progress of biblical study.<sup>3</sup>

Nineham's comment is surely as apposite now as it was in 1963. Spong is at least trying to bridge the gap between study and pew.

Spong also gives the impression of being an essentially good person, a person of integrity, courage and compassion. It is not difficult to think of prominent persons in church and state in recent years who have been found to have feet of clay. Spong seems to be free of all that. And anyone who is labelled by the Klu-Klux-Klan as "Public Enemy No. 1" must have something going for him. The title of Spong's latest book, *Here I Stand*, does sound a little pretentious, as if to say, "Here I am, the new Martin Luther", but publishers sometimes overrule authors in the choice of a title, and that could have happened in this instance.

Spong also says many things that are hard to fault. I cite, for example, chapter 8 of *Why Christianity Must Change*, entitled "What think ye of Christ?" His portrayal of the Jesus of the Gospels in this chapter is reverent, sensitive and quite moving. Take this sentence: "Here was a whole human being, who lived fully, who loved wastefully,

---

3. D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963) 49.

and who had the courage to be himself under every set of circumstances."<sup>4</sup>

There are other areas, however, where Spong's position calls for comment or criticism.

#### A BELIEVER IN GOD BUT NOT A THEIST?

Many people must be puzzled by the way Spong attacks "theism" and yet claims to still believe in God. One needs to realise that by "theism" he means a particular way of understanding the relationship of God to the world. On p. 46 of *Why Christianity Must Change* he defines theism as "belief in an external, personal, supernatural and potentially invasive being". This is surely a caricature of the actual beliefs of many contemporary theologians and many believers, not to mention the beliefs of the writers of the Bible.

In his telling critique of eccentric contemporary christologies, *Who Was Jesus?*, N. T. Wright remarks that the Greek New Testament does not actually have a word that means "miracle". He then says:

The eighteenth-century idea of a "miracle" envisaged a "God" who was a remote, detached Being, who normally kept his hands clean from involvement with the space-time universe, but just occasionally used to "intervene". That is a total travesty of the biblical picture.... But what if the God who made the world has remained active within the world? What if the word "God" itself might refer, not to this distant, remote, occasionally intervening Being, but to a God who breathed with the breath of the world?<sup>5</sup>

That passage invites comparison with two statements by Keith Ward in his critique of Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God* :

God is that mysterious depth which is mediated in certain symbols and events in our lives; which comes to us as moral challenge; and which can transform us with new vision and power.... Perhaps the best way to think of God's action is to think of it as his presence, drawing things towards himself, guiding or shaping or influencing by the inherent attraction of his own being. What we say then is not that God interferes, from time to time, in a self-contained, mechanistic universe, but that the universe, in its inner nature, is constantly being persuaded or guided to the realization of purposes of value.<sup>6</sup>

Spong himself would probably accept the statements by N. T. Wright and Keith Ward that have just been quoted. On p. 60 of *Why Christianity Must Change*, for example, he speaks of "a depth dimension to life that is

4. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change*, 128.

5. N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 1992) 80-81.

6. Keith Ward,  *Holding Fast to God* (London: SPCK, 1982) 21, 95-96.

ultimately spiritual". But both Wright and Ward would accept the label "theist". Interestingly, Spong claims Ward as a good friend.<sup>7</sup>

Spong fires a few more broadsides into theism in his chapter on prayer, "The Meaning of Prayer in a World with no External Deity". Here again there is an element of caricature, as, for example, when he objects to the petition, "Hallowed be your name", in the Lord's Prayer, on the grounds that it envisages "a God who enjoys the flattery of his subjects".<sup>8</sup>

For Spong himself, prayer means reaching into the depths of life and love, and thus becoming an agent of the creation of wholeness in another. He is willing to believe that, when life is lived in this way, an enormous amount of spiritual energy is loosed into the body politic of the whole society, but he does not trust anyone's effort to explain exactly how this energy works.<sup>9</sup> That position is not all that different from the position taken by Ward, an avowed theist. Ward, too, pillories ideas of prayer that he finds immature, and yet he too still believes that our prayers make a difference, but in ways that we cannot trace. He believes that

our prayers become positive influences on the way things go. They play a part in the creation of the future, because God weaves them, with all the other factors of natural causality and human free actions and his own purposes, into the pattern of the developing world. All our prayers are used. They influence the future for good. But we cannot say how they may be used, since we have no idea at all of what other constraints there are upon the determination of the future.<sup>10</sup>

#### WAS JESUS MARRIED?

In several books, Spong suggests that Jesus was married, quite probably to Mary Magdalene. Barbara Thiering holds the same view, even more confidently. What is the evidence for this view? It comes mainly from an apocryphal Gospel, the *Gospel of Philip*, dated by some reputable scholars in the second half of the third century C.E., that is, some 250 years after the events it purports to describe, though some date it earlier. It does not actually state that Jesus and Mary were married but speaks of an intimate relationship. But a gap of possibly 250 years is some gap.

In his talk at St Michael's Uniting Church in Melbourne, Spong claimed to find confirmation of his theory in various details of the gospel story, but the evidence he cited is hardly convincing. For

---

7. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change*, xxi.

8. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change*, 138.

9. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change*, 143-44.

10. Keith Ward, *The Living God* (London: SPCK, 1984) 81-82.

example, Jesus is sometimes addressed as "rabbi"; rabbis were normally married; therefore Jesus was probably married too. In reply, it can be argued that the response that the people of Nazareth make to Jesus in Mark 6: 2-3 and elsewhere makes no sense at all, if Jesus was, in fact, a trained rabbi.

Many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"

Set beside those verses John 3: 26: "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" As for Jesus being addressed as "rabbi", that can easily be explained as a recognition that he was a teacher. In John 3:26 and elsewhere, John the Baptist is addressed as "rabbi".

A further argument against Spong's theory: if Jesus was in fact married, it is very hard to believe that later Jewish polemic against Christianity would not have seized upon the fact. See John 8:41, which clearly reflects efforts by Jewish opponents of Christianity in the 80s to discredit the tradition of the Virgin Birth. See also Matt 28:11-15, which speaks of an alternative explanation of the empty tomb, current among Jews of Matthew's day.

#### BORN OF A VIRGIN?

Spong's dismissal of the historicity of the Virgin Birth has, predictably, upset some church people because of a widespread misunderstanding of the significance of the title, "Son of God". "If Jesus was not born of a virgin", they ask, "how could he be Son of God?" But this is to assume that the title, "Son of God", refers to Jesus's parentage. That is, he was the son of God, on the one side, and of Mary, on the other. To put it crudely, his birth was the result of the mating of God with Mary. But "Son of God" refers not to Jesus's parentage but rather to his vocation. To quote Wright, "Son of God in the first century was first and foremost a title for Israel, and then for the true Messiah."<sup>11</sup> This explains why the two authors in the New Testament who affirm Jesus's divine sonship most emphatically, namely Paul and John, never mention the tradition of the Virgin Birth.

#### JESUS AS RESCUER

Reading this chapter, one can understand better the rage of some of Spong's critics. Spong has a field day shooting down some traditional notions of original sin, particularly the notion that the stain of original

---

11. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, 79.

sin is transmitted by sexual intercourse. He then turns to the atonement and proceeds to shoot down the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement, according to which Christ, by his death, propitiated or averted the wrath of God the Father towards sinful humanity, thereby making it possible for God to forgive sinful human beings. The service of baptism, Spong adds, presupposes the rescue operation, and the eucharist re-enacts it liturgically.<sup>12</sup> But the theory has become untenable. "So we must free Jesus from the rescuer role".<sup>13</sup>

Both in what he says about original sin and in what he says about atonement, Spong is presenting us with a false either/or.

Sin first. It is not necessary to accept the Augustinian notion of sin being passed on through sexual intercourse to believe that human beings are sinners, estranged from God, and needing to be reconciled to God. But can the notion of *original* sin be restated? Here is an attempt by Michael Langford:

1. There is a universal or near universal fact of human moral failure.
2. This moral failure is due not only to our individual weaknesses, but also to a social pressure that invites and encourages our failure, a pressure that comes from a sort of collective force of human evil that is there before we are born.<sup>14</sup>

Reading Spong's writings, one might well question whether he takes this universal moral failure sufficiently seriously, though he does concede that "there is a sense in which all human beings are still caught in the struggle to become our deepest and truest selves".<sup>15</sup> In his talk at St. Michael's, however, he did assure his listeners that he was well aware of the dark side of human history.

So much for sin; what about atonement? At no point does Spong acknowledge that there are other ways of finding saving significance in the cross apart from seeing it as Christ bearing in our place, as our substitute, the penalty that rightly should have been borne by us. This is another false either/or. It is not necessary to accept the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement in order to believe that Christ died for our sins, in other words, to believe that the cross is central to God's purpose to reconcile humanity to Godself.

What might such an alternative view of the cross look like? In an unduly neglected book, *The Word of Reconciliation*, the late H. H. Farmer has set forth persuasively an understanding of atonement that can be summarised as follows:

1. For us human beings to be brought into right relationship with God, there is no necessity for God's wrath to be appeased. There is

12. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change*, 85.

13. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change*, 99.

14. Michael Langford, *Unblind Faith* (London: SCM, 1982) 27.

15. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change*, 97; see 197.

only one thing that needs to be done: we need to be brought into a state of deep and genuine penitence.

2. But genuine penitence is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Really to repent we need to see ourselves as we really are in God's sight, but, at the same time, we need to have taken from us all fear of seeing ourselves as we really are.

3. In the providence of God, this is brought about through the cross of Christ. Part of the significance of the cross is that it makes true penitence possible.<sup>16</sup>

As for baptism and the eucharist, these rites can be profoundly meaningful, without being burdened with notions of original sin or penal substitution.

#### CHRIST RISEN

Spong clearly does believe that Christ has been raised into the life of God and can still be known as a continuing presence in the world, but he repudiates the notion of a physical, bodily resurrection. The narratives that speak of a physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus were ninth decade additions to the Christian story.<sup>17</sup>

First of all, Mark can be located, with some confidence, in the seventh decade.

But there is much more to be said. In developing his argument, Spong places considerable emphasis on 1 Corinthians 15 and the parallelism that Paul draws out in that chapter between the resurrection of Jesus, which has already taken place, and the resurrection of believers, which belongs to the future. He also points out the sharp contrast that Paul draws between "the physical body", that is, the mode of our present existence, and "the spiritual body", that is, the mode of our future existence. "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Cor. 15: 42-44).

Spong then argues that the kind of spiritual resurrection that Paul talks about in this passage does not require the using up without remainder of dead bodies. He refers to the preceding passage, vv. 35-41, where Paul launches into a celebration of the creativity of God. The Creator, who gave us a body in the first place, has the power to give us a new body, to enable us to rise from the dead. But, if there is an essential parallelism between the general resurrection, which has yet to take place, and the resurrection of Jesus, which has already taken place, then the resurrection of Jesus cannot have required the using up without

16. H. H. Farmer, *The Word of Reconciliation* (London: Nisbet, 1966).

17. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change*, 73.

remainder of his physical body either. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus does not necessitate belief in the empty tomb. The stories of the finding of the empty tomb can safely be regarded as legends.

We may well agree that the kind of spiritual resurrection that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 15 does not *require* the using up of the old body without remainder. Nevertheless, Spong dismisses the tradition of the empty tomb far too quickly. On Spong's view, what are we to make of the stories of the appearances of the risen Lord? Presumably they are to be regarded as records of some sort of vision. Paul knew all about visions. In 2 Cor 12:1 he talks about "visions and revelations of the Lord", but in an unmistakably disparaging way. He seems to make a sharp distinction between such experiences and that "seeing" of the Lord to which he lays claim in 1 Cor 15: 8. John Knox makes the point forcefully:

The former [the visions] he hesitates to mention; the latter [his "seeing" of the Lord] he affirms in the most matter-of-fact way. The former he regards as private, the latter as a fact of importance to the church. To speak of the former may seem to be boasting; to speak of the latter is to bear testimony to the resurrection of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Knox draws the conclusion that Paul must have felt a difference in kind between visions and the appearance on the Damascus road. As to what it was, we cannot know. He suggests, however, that the difference may have lain in a feeling of complete matter-of-factness, in contrast to later visionary experiences.

These observations do not establish the historicity of the traditions of the empty tomb, but they should lead one to be more wary of dismissing them than Spong is. But there is also a more general objection that can be made to Spong's position. If all that the first disciples had to go on was a series of visions or experiences of Christ's presence, would they have used the language of "resurrection" at all? In Jewish literature more or less contemporary with the New Testament, one finds a variety of ways of expressing the hope that God will deal creatively towards the dead. Resurrection is but one of these and is at the more physical end of the spectrum.<sup>19</sup> The book of Wisdom, on the other hand, speaks in 1: 15 of the righteous being taken up into heaven immediately after death. Given the range of options at their disposal, one might well have expected the first followers of Jesus to come to the conclusion that God had the spirit of Jesus in his keeping and would in due time vindicate him by raising him from death, as he would vindicate other martyrs. It is questionable whether those first followers would have used the

---

18. John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (London: A & C Black, 1954) 121.

19. Nigel Watson, *Easter Faith and Witness* (Melbourne: Desbooks, 1990) 16.

language of resurrection at all for what had already occurred, unless something emphatically “physical” had taken place.<sup>20</sup>

Does all this prove that the tomb was empty? Certainly not. But here, surely, if anywhere, it behoves us to be reticent. A propos of reticence, there is a deeply impressive passage in an early book by Archbishop Rowan Williams, entitled *Resurrection*. Speaking of the Easter narratives, he observes that he finds it difficult to explain away entirely the impression of an encounter with a Jesus who was, as before, a partner in dialogue, still engaged in personal intercourse with others, still involved in the fabric of normal, human living, even while sovereignly free from its constraints. So he can only conclude that it made some kind of sense in the early community to speak of these encounters in terms of meeting an identifiable person, recognising a face.<sup>21</sup> There is in Williams’ statement a note of reverence before a mystery that is hardly to be found in the sweeping statements of Spong.

As an expression of lack of reverence before the mystery of the resurrection from the conservative side of scholarship, a statement by Stephen Davis may well be cited. Davis declares that, while Jesus was raised to a new manner of life, he was raised as a corporeal being, that is, “a being who could be seen, touched, weighed, located, measured”.<sup>22</sup> For my part, if someone were to put a pistol to my head and say to me, “Do you believe that the tomb was empty? Yes or no?” I would say, “Yes”. But, if they were then to say, “Do you *have* to believe in the empty tomb to be a Christian at all?” my reply would be, “Certainly not.”

#### CONCLUSION

In this article, I have concentrated on the points where I take issue with Spong, but I wish to re-emphasise that I agree with a lot of the things that he says. I welcome his plea for the use of new names for Jesus Christ and for new ways of speaking of salvation. I strongly support his advocacy of the rights of women and of gay and lesbian people. I am with him in his plea for a freeing up of worship and of our ecclesiastical structures. But at the points I have concentrated on, I find him somewhat superficial and prone to set up false either/or's. I admire him in many ways, but I consider that for myself there are other writers who are more worth reading.

---

20. For an elaboration of this argument, see Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, 61-63; also Watson, *Easter Faith and Witness*, 47.

21. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982) 107; see Watson, *Easter Faith and Witness*, 57, n. 7.

22. Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993) 23.