

Should We Redefine What the Bible Teaches about Morality?

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Walter Martin, Bishop John Shelby Spong

Dr. John Ankerberg: Welcome! We have three wonderful guests on the stage with us tonight—Dr. Walter Martin, and Roger Montgomery, and Bishop John Spong. And we're debating the topic of homosexuality. We are also discussing, "What does the Word of God teach? Is it relevant today?" And we're going to have questions from our audience that have been listening. What's our first question?

Audience: My first question is addressed to John Shelby Spong, Bishop of Newark. I want to know if the Bible is still relevant to you, and if it is, why has it been used in such a way to tear the Episcopal Church apart? I cannot believe that your convictions, which *have* torn our church apart, can be biblical. And you say that they are.

Ankerberg: Apparently you're Episcopalian.

Audience: Yes, I am. I'm of the Episcopal Synod of America.

Ankerberg: Thank you. John?

Bishop John Shelby Spong: I can only begin to answer that with a witness. I think I remember best Christmas of my seventh grade year. I remember that because my father had died in September, and I was a child of twelve. And at that Christmas my mother gave me the first Bible I've ever owned as my only Christmas present. It was a King James Bible. It was one of those great big fat leather-covered Bibles with a cross on the front and it was a red-letter edition.

And from that day to this, I bear witness that I have missed very few days reading the Scriptures, studying the Scriptures. I read the Bible in its entirety—including the Apocrypha—once every two years on a regular schedule of rotation as part of my own meditation and my own discipline.

I believe that I meet the Word of God in the words of Scripture. Sometimes I meet the Word of God in the words of Scripture when I am not looking for it. It's almost as if it comes roaring out of those words and confronts me with a new insight.

I offer the things I offer to the church not as the final truth. God knows that Jack Spong knows as well as anybody that I might be wrong. I state in the books that I write that I am writing these books to create debate in the fellowship of Christian people as we walk together toward our destination.

And why do I write the way I write? I write the way I write for one primary reason, and that is I have three daughters. They are rather modern; they are well educated; they're feminists. They're rather unusual daughters. One of them owns a Ph.D. from Stanford University in physics. I want that well-educated modern young woman to be able to call Jesus "Lord" and in *her*

opinion the God she has met in church has been too narrow; too fundamentalistic; too literal; to be the God for the universe of the world of physics that she lives in.

I write to try to *open* the Christian faith so it will be big enough to confront the generation of today—modern, well-educated young people who are abandoning the Church in droves because they do not believe the Church has any message for them. I would like to be a part of giving a message to my own daughter so that she might be a disciple.

Ankerberg: Quick comment, Walter?

Dr. Walter Martin: You can't communicate with this generation by tearing up the historic message of the Church in order to please what they think are the meaningful truths. After all, if Christ and the Apostles were right, then the Gospel has been given for all ages to meet people wherever they are. The Bishop keeps saying this in his writings. He says that he "reads" the Bible. He "loves" the Bible. He takes the Bible seriously. Now, this is how he reads it. He puts on the glasses of destructive higher criticism—Bultmann. He puts on the glasses of Niebuhr, Tillich. He puts on the glasses of the interpreters who are *his* intellectual popes. He puts them on, and *then* when he reads the Bible, "Matthew didn't write Matthew; Luke didn't write Luke; John didn't write John." Nothing is the way it seems. We are through the looking-glass with "Alice and the rabbit," and we are not in any way related to Christianity!

Spong: I do not think it is proper or appropriate to suggest that Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Rheinhold Niebuhr and others that you didn't quote like Hans Kung and Edward Schillebeeck and David Tracy, are somehow—because they have used their God-given gift of scholarship—are somehow outside your understanding of Christianity. I think that's simply inappropriate.

Martin: I think that if the Creeds of Christendom are true—and your church says they are—if the Scripture is to be taken in its plain intent, and if the history of the Church can be relied upon so far as historical theology is concerned and a body of doctrine which the Church has always believed—if that's true, then it doesn't make any difference, Bishop, whether it's Tillich, Bultmann, Ferre, or whoever it may be...Kung or anybody else, if they are "out," as the Pope once said, "of the mainstream of the Church and her teachings, they are *out* of Christianity."

Spong: The heroes of the Christian church in my opinion have always been outside the mainstream, and whether their ideas survive or not depends on whether truth is in them. Many people who were thought to be outside the mainstream in fact are representative today of classical orthodoxy. The Church moves through history.

Ankerberg: All right. Another question.

Audience: Dr. Spong, as you have mentioned several times, one of our problems here is a matter of definitions. And you have a number of times reiterated your Southern fundamental or Evangelical upbringing. A few moments ago you said that the substitutionary atonement was a dear belief of the Evangelical tradition, and then you said, "But I don't hold to that belief." Yet you object if someone says you're not an Evangelical. And so based on your definition of "substitutionary atonement" being an Evangelical tradition, would you not say you're *not* an Evangelical?

Spong: Again it would depend on what we mean by that word. We would have to define that word. You see, in the Anglican Communion, an "Evangelical" means someone who stands on the Protestant side of that tradition as opposed to the Catholic side. That's a very legitimate use. I am *in* the Evangelical tradition. Now, that's a legitimate use of that word in *my* tradition. I am *not* a biblical fundamentalist. I certainly do not represent myself as that. And the substitutionary

theory of the atonement is *one* theory of the atonement. What is important is not whether *your* theory of the atonement is right or *my* theory of the atonement is right, what is important is that God has brought us into being one with God in Jesus Christ. Because that “at-one-ment” is what atonement is all about.

Ankerberg: Walter?

Martin: I’ve sat here tonight and listened to the Bishop. My field of study is comparative religions and cults, and I heard the Bishop deny the bodily resurrection of Christ on the basis of the Jehovah’s Witnesses arguments—which I’m sure he didn’t even know he was using...

Spong: Yes, I did.

Martin: I heard him deny the doctrine of the atonement in the language of Mary Baker Eddy in Christian Science...

Spong: I have not denied the doctrine of the atonement.

Martin: You said “atonement is at-one-ment with God.” You said it was not vicarious. I would like you to explain...

Spong: I said it was not substitutionary...

Martin: All right...vicarious *is* substitutionary—you know that. Let you answer this one simple question for everybody here. What does this mean—“He Himself bore in His own body our sins on the cross?” Just exegete that passage for me.

Spong: Well, it’s a great passage and we’ve probably all preached upon it. I think that Jesus Christ, my Lord, came into this world to open you and me a pathway to God in a way that we had never had open to us before. I think God would have preferred that our response not be to kill His Son, but that *was* our response. And when that became our response, God had to take our response, our sin, and even redeem *that* in such a way as that God could still accomplish God’s primary purpose. That’s what cross and resurrection are all about for me.

Martin: Did he mean by that passage that Jesus bore our sins *vicariously* or did he not?

Spong: St. Paul is one of the fascinating people...

Martin: That’s Peter.

Spong: ...in the Christian tradition. So is Saint Peter. They are part of the *human* tradition. The human tradition is that *all* of us feel lost; all of us feel alienated. I don’t know a person in this world who feels at one with themselves.

Ankerberg: We “feel” that way. The question is, “Are we?”

Spong: Oh, yes. I would say that none of us is at one with ourselves.

Ankerberg: So that we need a Savior.

Spong: That’s correct. Every person I know yearns for the fulfillment of being at one with themselves...

Ankerberg: And the way to get that...

Spong: ...at one with one another, and at one with God.

Ankerberg: ...at-one-ment is to have the sin forgiven. And going back to the verse is...

Spong: That’s correct. But now in order to discuss that we’ve got to define “sin.”

Martin: It’s easy! “Sin is the transgression of the law and all unrighteousness is sin.” There’s your definition.

Spong: That would not be an adequate definition for me.

Ankerberg: All right, let's get another question here.

Audience: Dr. Martin, if I know that God has given me a law or a code of ethics to live by and I find I can't keep it or live up to those laws, what does that tell me about the law? What should I do with it?

Martin: The law is holy, righteous, just and good. It is the mirror of God's character and God's nature. It was given not for the purpose that God expected us to keep it, because He said we were imperfect. It was given for the reason of revealing sin. And when we saw the revelation of sin we would recognize that only God's grace could save us from those sins. That's the whole idea of New Testament theology. The purpose of the law is to lead you to Christ. And once you get to Christ, you have to interpret all law in the context of the Lord Jesus.

Ankerberg: Question.

Audience: My question is to the bishop: Do you believe that there are many pathways to God, Christianity being only *one* of them?

Spong: That's a good question and it's a complex question. The text that's almost always used by people who raise that particular question is the Johannine text, "No one comes to the Father but by me." I don't want to put limits on who God can draw to God. I will say only for *me*, the way to God for *me* is through Jesus Christ. If God in God's infinite wisdom can save a Buddhist or a Jew or a Muslim or a Hindu in God's way, then that's God's business and I rejoice in it. If that means that somehow what I understand Christ to be must be introduced to them in some way that I do not understand, then so be it. But I will not put limits on who God is capable of saving.

Martin: When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father but by me," He introduced an important concept, which is, God loved the world and sent Him to save it. If salvation were by Buddha, Muhammad, Zoroaster, Confucius or any code of ethics or morality that man could possibly construct, why in the world did God send His Son to save us?

Ankerberg: Comment?

Spong: Well, I would say that...see, once again he's quoting the fourth gospel. He's quoting...Brothers and sister, please listen. The fourth gospel is the *only* gospel that uses the "I Am" formula. Only in the fourth gospel does Jesus say "I am the bread of life." "I am the living water." "I am the way, the truth and the life." "I am the resurrection." "I am the good shepherd." Those are all Johannine phrases.

I think we need to ask why, if those phrases were *said* by Jesus, why only the fourth gospel has recorded them. I happen to think they're true. I think Jesus is the door, the way, the living bread, the living water. I think Jesus is all of those things. But I think those are assumptions about Jesus that were made in the early Christian community when they discovered His power in their lives. And to quote those words as if they are simple historic literal words that Jesus says, I think, misses the point of the fourth gospel.

Once again I would say that John is writing that gospel out of a conflict in the early Church where the Jewish people decided the Jewish Christians could no longer be members of the Church, and so they ex-communicated the Jewish Christians. The Jewish Christians were deeply hurt by that, and so they tried to cast their understanding of Jesus in terms of Jewish theology. That's why chapter 1 of John echoes chapter 1 of Genesis. And that's why the story of

the burning bush where God is revealed as the great “I Am” becomes the interpretive clue to opening up all of those “I Am” statements in the fourth gospel. And we need to read the Bible on a level beneath the *literal* to understand its infinite power.

Martin: Where would you find that kind of theology, Bishop, below, let’s say, the 19th century or perhaps the latter 18th century? What did the Church believe historically all those years? It believed that John wrote John. Polycarp said he was an eyewitness; he was his disciple. John wrote the fourth gospel. The Church testified to this through the Church Fathers. In fact, J. N. D. Kelly in his book on the Church Fathers—I believe an Anglican—pointed something very interesting out. He said that the Church Fathers were fundamentalists because they *affirmed* the fundamental structure of the creeds of the Christian church. He didn’t *like* it, but he said, “That’s the truth.” Your theology that you’re giving us now is probably less than 150 years old and that type of theology doesn’t square with New Testament theology.

Spong: Well, I guess the only thing we can do, Dr. Martin, is to live long enough to see whether it prevails. I’d like to suggest the Gamaliel test, if you will. “If it is of God, if it is a participant in the Truth of God, it will survive, whether you oppose it, or whether I advocate it.” That’s just the way it’s going to be. I would say, as I look at the early Fathers, I’m interested that a Protestant like you has such a high doctrine of the early Fathers. I mean, you seem to act as if infallibility of the Fathers is something that you want to accept. I think they were very fallible.

Martin: No, I just think they were good theologians.

Spong: Well, I don’t even think that I think that. When I read Jerome on women, I don’t think he’s a good theologian at all. And when I read Chrysostom on his anti-semitism...Chrysostom said “Jews are vermin who are not fit to live.” I do *not* agree with that. And I think Chrysostom is wrong.

Martin: Nobody said the Fathers were infallible. But you won’t even admit the text is.

Spong: You are quoting them as if they were ultimate authorities, and I submit to you that I do not hold them in that position. If you want to hold them in that position, fine. But if I were to quote some of the things the Fathers said at this point, you would have to defend some things that I don’t believe you’re capable of defending.

Martin: I’m not trying to defend the fallibility of the Fathers, I’m pointing out that the early Church witness is completely different than what you are giving us. Completely different!

Spong: I do not believe that you can document that. For example, the debate about who the authors of the gospels were was a debate that went on. You don’t even seem to realize that when these books of the New Testament were written, they were not “gospel” at that point. That is, they were not part of the canonical scriptures. The Church didn’t decide what would be in its canonical scriptures until in the middle of the second century. And there were some other gospels. There was the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of Peter; there were other Acts. There was another book called the Shepherd of Hermes, which was sort of like the Book of Revelation. And the Church sat down in its corporate wisdom and made some decisions in the second century as to which books were in Holy Scripture and which were not. And some of that debate...Luther, for example, thought we ought to throw James out of the New Testament.

Martin: Are you suggesting that there was no Gospel until the Church decided?

Spong: I did not say that.

Martin: Well, just a moment ago...that’s what you’re saying.

Spong: No, I did not. The Gospel was proclaimed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth....

Ankerberg: Let me just jump in here, because I've done graduate work in that area. And I found that the Church Fathers knew what Scripture was, and if you lost the entire New Testament, it could be completely reproduced in the writings of the Church Fathers by their own identification *except* for 8 verses. So the fact is, they knew what Scripture was right from day one. That's what J. N. D. Kelly says. He says by 140 they *knew* what Scripture was and they knew what it wasn't. We've got one more question here though. Hold on.

Audience: Bishop Spong, since you have taken, in these past few weeks, all objective reality out of definition of terms, you have made them symbols for whatever subjective reality you want to place on those symbols and those definitions, and you have taken all objective reality out of the traditional Church and the traditional Fathers of the Church, I want to ask you a question. Do you believe that we are evolving spiritually, and that only now are we coming because all of our advances to be able to understand, to have a special gnosis, as it were, of the Scriptures that you seem to be able to glean out of them?

Spong: I would say that we *are* evolving spiritually, but I don't know that it's ever in a straight line, and I don't know that today's spirituality is better or worse than yesterday's; but I would say that if you took 500 years you would see an evolving understanding of spirituality. I do not mean to suggest that I believe that whatever *my* point of view—I'm not what I'd call a "primary scholar," I'm what I call a "communicator."

But I think what has happened in the life of the Church is that for the last 150 years, there has been a dramatic increase in biblical scholarship. It has not yet filtered down to the people in the pews by and large. I think we need to ask ourselves why. I don't believe that the Christian church is in the business of *controlling* people's lives, but the Christian church gets its status and gets its power when it is effective in doing just that. I believe the purpose of the Christian church is to discern and proclaim the truth of God. Sometimes that truth is *incredibly* revolutionary. Sometimes it attacks the deepest prejudices of our hearts. I am delighted that my church has begun to ordain women to the priesthood and to the Episcopal office, because I think that is right. I can find documentation in the early Church to find that early Christians—some early Christians—also believed that.

Ankerberg: Not lesbian and homosexual, though.

Spong: I would say, John, that lesbians and homosexuals in our understanding of that phenomena is something that is only in this century beginning to be understood.

Ankerberg: I just wanted to make the comment that the Church at that time...

Spong: Well, I think the Church is living in this century.

Ankerberg: I see...

Spong: You see, when I asked earlier why people thought that homosexuality was being debated in every major body of Christendom—in every one of them—a hundred years ago it was not debated. It was not debated because there was a general consensus that it was self-evidently evil. All I'm saying is that it is being debated even in the Southern Baptist Church, in the Episcopal Church, in the Lutheran Church, United Methodist Church—it's being debated today because we are not quite so certain. When you're not *certain*, brothers and sisters, don't condemn.

Ankerberg: Quick comment, Walter.

Martin: I think I would say that your church has lost 28% of its membership in 10 years; the

Methodist Church has lost 25%; the United Church of Christ has lost almost 30%; and all of them have followed *exactly* the traditional talk that you are using right now, chapter and verse. In other words, the “voice” is the voice of Billy Graham, but the “hands” are Bishop Pike.

Spong: Well, Walter, I think we could debate for a long time why people are leaving the church, and I think there are various reasons for that. I think we’re in a critical time in history, and I think that bearing witness to Christ in the 20th century is one of the more difficult things that people have ever had to do because we are being challenged on levels that I believe we’ve never been challenged before. I do not do what I do because I *want* to do it. I do what I do because I feel “called” to do it as a way of opening the Church to a group of people that no longer are able to hear the Church’s voice.

Ankerberg: Okay. One last question.

Audience: Walter, I’d like to address this question to you and to Roger. You quoted a Scripture from the Old Testament where the penalty for homosexuality was stoning to death. There was no mercy there; the law said “they shall be stoned to death until dead.” Roger, you said that Jesus came to you as you were. Obviously, He didn’t come with stones to kill you; He came in love and mercy and has now become your light. Do you see a contradiction between these two positions in Scripture and perhaps the Bishop is right that we need to look at the evolution of Scripture in the light of Jesus Christ being the Living Word made flesh.

Martin: Perhaps before you depart, Sir, perhaps you might look at the *ceremonial* law versus the *moral* law. And God gave a moral law and a theocracy in which He said He wanted the Jews to live that way. There is no discrepancy between moral, ceremonial and judicial—they are called “the Law.” The New Testament *affirms* categorically the *moral* imperatives of the law, but it tells us in Jesus’ name that we now are under a *new* covenant and we are to reach out to bring people to Christ totally differently than before. It is not “black and white” the way you just stated it.

Ankerberg: Thank you, gentlemen. We’re out of time tonight, and I want to say “Thank you” to Bishop Spong for your courageousness in being here tonight, and also, Roger, for your courage in telling us your story, and Dr. Martin, for your willingness to be a part of this discussion. I think that our people that have been watching have learned a lot, and we thank you very much.