



A Tribute to Bishop John Shelby Spong by Rev. Roger Wolsey

"We stand on the shoulders of giants" - Jack Spong was one of my giants. Bishop Spong has been a tremendous influence on my life as a pastor and theologian. I first learned of him upon reading his book *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* while I attended the Iliff School of Theology in the early 1990s. I recall being notably struck by his obvious scholarly competence, his persuasive argumentation, and his clear passion for the well-being of Christianity and the Church. I read more of his books during those years and his writings helped embolden me as a firm liberal Christian. As the years passed, and as the movement that has come to be known as progressive Christianity developed and came onto the scene, at times I found myself frustrated that the good bishop seemed to be stuck in the modern era's liberal Christianity while so many of us were shifting into the progressive Christianity that was evolving from mainline liberal Christianity. He seemed to be rigid in his denial of any form of miracles and his Christology seemed to make no room for any sort of divinity of Jesus. He also seemed to be beholden to science as a way to explain away things and he didn't seem to leave much room for Christian mysticism and the allowance that contemporary Christians can experience and commune with the Divine. At times I found his writings to convey an absolutist stridentness ironically akin to the harsh rhetoric from the fundamentalists. And then... with the passing of just a few more years, Spong's more recent books not only came 'round to the progressive Christianity a la Borg, Crossan, Burklo, Plumer, etc., but I experienced them in some ways as surpassing it - perhaps as becoming something different - outside the Christian ballpark all together.

As I've aged and become a voice within progressive Christianity and an author myself, I've come to make more room for paradox, mystery, and increasingly feel less of a need to understand everything, let alone knowing all the answers. This includes a renewed welcoming of Spong's nuanced, independent, outside-the-box thinking and an increased valuing of how it furthers the very necessary process of Christianity to reconsider its tenets, truth-claims, and boundaries - in order that it may continue to adapt and evolve to be relevant to new generations of people endeared to the way, teachings, and example of that radically loving man from Nazareth.

May we honor Spong's legacy and may God bless our efforts to increase love and justice in a world that needs it.

~ Rev. Roger Wolsey



Rev. Roger Wolsey is a United Methodist pastor who resides in Grand Junction, CO. Roger is author of *Kissing Fish: Christianity for people who don't like Christianity* and blogs for Patheos as *The Holy Kiss* and serves on the Board of Directors of ProgressiveChristianity.Org. Roger became “a Christian on purpose” during his college years and he experienced a call to ordained ministry two years after college. He values the Wesleyan approach to the faith and, as a certified spiritual director, he seeks to help others grow and mature. Roger enjoys yoga; playing trumpet; motorcycling; and camping with his son. He served as the Director of the Wesley Foundation campus ministry at the University of Colorado in Boulder for 14 years, and has served as pastor of churches in Minnesota, Iowa, and currently serves as the pastor of Fruita UMC in Colorado, and also serves as the "CRM" (Congregational Resource Minister/Church Consultant) for the Utah/Western Colorado District of the Mountain Sky Conference.