



**Our Abraham: John Shelby Spong
June 16, 1931 – September 12, 2021**

“Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.” Genesis 25:8, NRSV

Our Abraham is now gathered to his people. Fully and finally gathered into blessed memory of us all in the global progressive Christian movement. And gathered to folks far beyond our circle. Because, to put it in his own words, John Shelby Spong “lived fully and loved wastefully”, spilling out his compassion beyond boundaries of creed and culture.

A good idea doesn’t catch fire among people on its own. It ignites in the popular imagination after being embodied and expressed by a charismatic individual in the right place and time. For progressive Christianity, that fire-starter was John Shelby Spong. When an erudite Episcopal bishop in a clerical collar, preaching in an elegant voice, declared that Jesus did not literally rise from the dead, the media amplified it and lit a conflagration of theological controversy. The only accomplishment of his detractors – and there were very many – was to amplify his voice even more.

Bishop Spong’s timing was perfect. In America, the unholy matrimony of fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity with right-wing politics was fully consummated. Christianity had become equated with opposition to science, common sense, and social progress. Mainline, moderate Christianity had been culturally sidelined, and was in rapid numerical decline. Along came a tall, kindly bishop with impeccable credentials, saying things that outraged conservative Christians. Things that other Christians, until he spoke, were afraid to say themselves. People were looking for a real alternative to the dominant evangelical paradigm of Christianity. He defined it.

His firm but genteel manner of responding to his critics added to his gravitas. His dues as a serious, practicing Christian were fully paid long before he entered the public spotlight. He made it very awkward for those who accused him of heresy to deny his faithfulness.

His timing was right in another way. Just as he became a media phenomenon, and partly because of it, a new movement was born. In the 1990's his Episcopal colleague, Rev. Jim Adams, founded what is now known as ProgressiveChristianity.org. It became the organizational vehicle to propel John Shelby Spong's understanding of the faith into expression and action worldwide. It gave a name, an identity, to what Jack Spong was preaching and teaching: progressive Christianity. And by making this identity public, churches were able to attract people who were seeking this form of the faith.

Jack Spong was a mentor to us all in the progressive Christian movement. His generosity of spirit – and that of his wife and partner, Christine – nurtured generations of progressive Christian leaders. I am grateful for their active encouragement in getting my books into print. And we're all grateful for the legacy they created in Progressing Spirit, the theological journal of ProgressiveChristianity.org. May we ever and always “gather him to his people” by carrying his commitments forward!

~ Rev. Jim Burklo



Rev. Jim Burklo is the Senior Associate Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of Southern California. An ordained pastor in the United Church of Christ, he is the author of seven published books on progressive Christianity, his latest book is [Tenderly Calling: An Invitation to the Way of Jesus](#) (St Johann Press, 2021). His weekly blog, “[Musings](#)”, has a global readership. He serves on the board of ProgressiveChristiansUniting.org and is an honorary advisor and frequent content contributor for ProgressiveChristianity.org