

WHY CHRISTIANITY MUST CHANGE OR DIE

John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998),

ONE: ON SAYING THE CHRISTIAN CREED WITH HONESTY

TWO: THE MEANING OF EXILE AND HOW WE GOT THERE

Exile is never a voluntary experience. It is always something forced upon a person or a people by things or circumstances over which the affected ones have no control. One does not leave one's values, one's way of life, or one's defining beliefs voluntarily.

Exile is not a wilderness through which one journey to arrive at promised land. Exile is an enforced dislocation into which one enters without any verifiable hope of either a return to the past or an arrival at some future desired place (Spong P. 22-23).

THE EXILE OF THE PAST (Babylonian Exile) (Spong P. 23)

Around the year 598 B.C.E. the little nation of **Judah** found itself **under attack** at the hands of a powerful enemy. Out of the north, the **Babylonian army**, commanded by a general named **Nebuchadnezzar**, swept down across the land, conquering everything in its path (Spong P. 23).

When the army of the Babylonians appeared on the Jewish horizon in those early years of the sixth century B.C.E., the city of Jerusalem had not been conquered by an external enemy for over four hundred years. Standing within its protective walls was the sacred Temple of Yahweh that Solomon had built. **The temple** was believed by the Jews, quite literally, to be the **earthly dwelling place of their God**. Israel people concluded that this was not only a "**golden city**," but also the very place where heaven and earth came together. It was called the **City of God**. The Jewish people came to assume that Jerusalem's centuries of freedom from conquest were neither accidental nor the result of its natural defenses alone. This city, they believed, was **protected by** nothing less than the **holy God** (Spong P. 24).

예루살렘 성전은 하나님이 계시는 곳이고, 하늘과 땅이 만나는 곳이고, 하나님의 도성이고, 4 백년간 하나님이 지키셔서 밖의 침략을 받은적이 없다고 믿었다.

The Babylonian army was immense, both in numbers and power. Jehoiachin, the King of Judah, finally decided to seek a negotiated settlement. He offered to surrender in the hope of gaining favorable terms. But this was a cruel enemy, and the price of surrender turned out to be the king's own capture and removal to Babylon along with his price s, his mighty men of valor, and substantial number of the craftsmen and artisans of Judah. The Babylonians would leave no one in the land except, as the Bible said, "the poor people" (Spong P. 25)

About ten years later, in 588 B.C.E., tiring of this vassal status, the people of Judah rebelled against their Babylonian conquerors and declared their independence. The

Babylonian army responded by moving down once more into siege positions. The Jews resisted as long as they could but finally in 586 B.C.E. THE end came. With the morale of the defenders at rock bottom, the desperate Jewish army tried to escape from the city by night in search of supplies. However, they were spotted, pursued, defeated, and captured by the Babylonians. Then without opposition, the enemy soldiers poured into Jerusalem. The few remaining Jewish resisters were massacred. The buildings of the city were razed to the ground, the houses were burned, and, most appalling of all to the Jews, the Temple of Solomon, God's dwelling place, was destroyed. The Babylonians next executed the sons of King Zedekiah (a vassal king under Babylon) in his sight and then proceeded to gouge out the king's eyes. The remaining living citizens of Jerusalem and Judea were ordered to prepare for the long march into Babylon. It was the second and final deportation. None of the Jews from either deportation would ever see their homeland again, nor would they ever worship in their holy city again. The Jewish nation had come to an end (2King 24, 25) (Spong P. 26)

Everything these people valued, everything that defined them to themselves, was gone. Their nation was no more. Jerusalem, God's special city, was a pile of stones. The Temple, God's earthly dwelling place, was laid waste. The priesthood, their sacred customs, their creedal statements, the social fabric that gave order to Jewish life – all were lost (Spong P. 26).

Now the Jewish population was to be totally transported to Babylon, and, according to the pacification program of the Babylonians, foreigners would be imported to resettle their land. These foreigners knew neither Yahweh nor the Torah. This land would no longer be known as "the land of the Jews." These descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and Joseph were once again to be aliens, homeless wanderers on the face of the earth. Since the Jews were convinced that the Torah could not be lived or obeyed in any other place as Judah, even the Torah lost its meaning. The festivals, which required a Jerusalem setting for their observance, could never be celebrated again. The very context out of which both their beliefs and their religious practices had emerged was now destroyed (Spong P. 27).

In the despair of meaninglessness, these Jewish people were forced to leave everything they knew and everything they valued to begin their journey into a Babylonian captivity. There was no hope of return. On one of these journeys into the exile, the book of Psalms recounted how the Babylonian soldiers taunted the defeated Jews. "Sing us one the songs of Zion," their conqueror urged. But Jews could not sing. They could weep and they could remember, but they could not sing. The God to whom their songs were directed was in Jerusalem. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" was their response (Ps. 137: 1-4). There appeared to be no hope for their return. They were in exile (Spong P. 27).

The Jews had once believed that God fought at their side against their enemies. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that God might punish them for their waywardness but that God would not destroy them. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that they were a specially chosen people.

The could believe that no longer. They once believed that God had instructed them on where to live and how to worship. The could believe that no longer. They once believed that God dwelled in Jerusalem and ruled over Judah. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that God could hear their prayers. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that they had a destiny and a future. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that God could and would care for them. They could believe that no longer. They could not sing the Lord's song again, for they were in a strange and devastating exile, and in that exile the God they had once served lost all meaning. This God could no longer be God for them. There are but two alternatives for such a displaced deity. This God must either grow or die. That is what being in a spiritual exile is all about (Spong P. 29). Israel was not only physical exile but also seemed to be in spiritual exile.

THE EXILE OF THE PRESENT (P. 29-)

THREE: IN SEARCH OF GOD: IS ATHEISM THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE TO THEISM?

FOUR: BEYOND THEISM ON NEW GOD IMAGES

FIVE: DISCOVERING ANEW THE JESUS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

SIX: JESUS AS RESCUER: AN IMAGE THAT HAS TO GO

SEVEN: THE CHRIST AS SPIRIT PERSON

EIGHT: WHAT THINK YE OF CHRIST? WHERE THE HUMAN ENTERS THE DIVINE

Samaritans: In Johannine material in the New Testament suggested that love was but another name for God (1 John 4:8). Jesus brought that name to a new level of realization. He was portrayed throughout the Gospel story as capable of reaching beyond the limits that have so frequently been placed on the meaning of love. The following account will explain as to how Gospel writers began to note that the barriers dividing one person from another seemed to fade.

In the world in which Jesus lived, a chasm of stereotypical prejudice separated the Jews from the Samaritans. They would not eat together, worship together, intermarry or even share the same physical space if it could be avoided. Yet, Jesus in the Gospel was said to have taught that the Samaritan was worthy of healing (Luke 17:11-19) and that a Samaritan who showed mercy was more deeply a child of Abraham than the Jewish priest or Levite (Luke 10:29-37).

These were radical statement of barrier-breaking inclusion, which expanded rather dramatically and in a new way the meaning of love (Spong P. 122).

Gentiles; Beyond the barrier dividing the Jew from the Samaritan, there was the separation of the Jews from the gentiles, which also carried with it the force of a long and painful history. This separation had been part of the Jewish technique of survival through centuries. It precluded any intermingling. In the service of survival mentality, gentiles were even declared unclean by the Jews. They were known as the uncircumcised, as those not bound by the kosher dietary laws, and as those who were ignorant of the holy demands of the Torah. Association with gentiles, therefore, would corrupt the Jew and make him or her unclean and therefore equally unacceptable to the Jewish community and presumably to the Jewish God. It must be noted that gentiles were equally negative in their characterization of Jews (Spong P. 122-123). John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998),

Yet Jesus was portrayed in Mark's Gospel as going to the **gentile** side of the lake to repeat the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness story (Mark 8:1-10) (Spong P. 123).

He also reached out the **Syro-Phoenician woman, another gentile**, and to have healed her daughter (Mark 7:24-30). The Gospels tell of Jesus **healing the slave of a Roman** centurion and even of commending his faith as greater than he had found in Israel (Matt. 8:5-10; Luke 7:1-10). Mark's Gospel concluded the **crucifixion story** with a **gentile soldier** standing before the cross and becoming the first one to understand the meaning of Jesus' death. "Truly this man was the Son of God," the centurion exclaimed (Mark 15:39) (Spong P. 123)

At Jesus' birth gentiles known as wise men or magi had come to bring this Jewish messiah gifts. After the death of Jesus Matthew reported that his risen Christ commissioned his disciples to go into all the world – to go, that is, far beyond the boundaries which at that time separated Jew from gentile (Matt. 28:16-20) (Spong P.123).

Luke told the story of Pentecost (Acts 2), in which the Holy Spirit fell on representatives of all the nations of the earth, "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and dwellers in Mesopotamia." In the same narrative, the Spirit was said to have removed the language barrier, which contributed greatly to divisions in the human family. In the presence of the Spirit, the human community was to be universal. That was a startling thesis in the first-century Judea. There was something about this Jesus that propelled his followers from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the world (Spong P.124).

Jesus also lived in a world where **cultural barriers** were drawn that defined **women** as subhuman and **children** as not worthy of God's concern. Yet Jesus had spoken with the **woman by the well**, answered her questions, engaged her in dialogue, challenged her presuppositions, and even **invited her into the worship of God** "in spirit and truth" (John 4:7-30). He also **welcomed women into discipleship** led by Mary Magdalene, who cared for the disciple band with their own resources (Luke 8:3). When the Church was born,

women were present in the upper room to become numbered among the original recipients of the Spirit (Acts 1: 14).

Even Paul declared that “in Christ there is neither male nor female”(Gal. 3:28). This major cultural revolution seems to have been identified with Jesus, and it is so powerful that religious elements even today scurry to repress it (Spong P. 124).

Jesus welcomed children when they were prohibited by disciples (Mark 10:13-14). Jesus’ source of love lay beyond every human boundary. He went so far as to say that unless we receive the kingdom like little children, we cannot enter it (Mark 10: 15) (Spong P. 124).

There were also **cultic barriers** in Jesus’ time that served to **exclude**. Some people were declared to be **ritualistically impure** and thus not worthy of human contact. **Menstruation** was one source of this impurity according to the Torah (Lev. 12:22, 18:19). Yet the Gospel record portrays Jesus as responding to such a person’s defiling touch with acceptance, love, and healing (Mark 5:24-34). We also note that he actually **touched the rotting flesh of the impure leper** and brought him once again into human community (Mark 1:40-41). **Even cultic impurities seemed to fade before him** (Spong P. 125).

In a world that viewed **mental illness** as demon possession, Jesus was said to have confronted a deranged man who could not be bound with ropes and chains and who lived ostracized **among the tombs of the dead**. Jesus then called even this life back into wholeness (Mark 5:1-13) (Spong P. 125).

Beneath the God claims made for this **Jesus was a person who lived a message announcing that there was no status defined by religion, by tribe, by cult, by ritual, or by illness that could separate any person from the love of God. If love is a part of what God is or who God is, then it can surely be said of this Jesus that he lived the meaning of God.** According to the Gospels, he lived it with a consistent intensity. It was as if his source of **love lay beyond every human boundary**. It was inexhaustible. It was life giving. Finally when it was noticed, it was thought to be so deeply the meaning of God that the assumption was made that the love present in the life of this Jesus was the result of an external deity who had somehow entered into him (Spong P. 125).

He was reported another aspect of Jesus’ humanity: He possessed an **unearthly capacity to be present, totally present, to another person**. People who entered his life experienced what Paul Tillich described many years later as “**the eternal now**.” It was as if time stood still inside the total attentiveness of this Jesus. He was able to give himself to others to a remarkable degree. This is what can be seen in his conversation with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-22; Matt. 19:16-22; Luke 18: 18-23) and with the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11). It was also present in the narrative of his conversation with Pontius Pilate after his arrest (Mark 15:1-5; Matt. 27:15-26; Luke 23: 1-25), with the soldiers who tortured him (Mark 15:16-20; Luke 23:32-38), and even with the penitent thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43). **One has to possess himself or herself very powerfully in order to give one’s being away to another so deeply and to totally**. People suggested

that perhaps this quality of his life revealed that he somehow possessed the infinite depths of the life of God (Spong P. 126).

Freedom (P. 126).

Freedom (P. 127): When life is threatened, when it is being taken away from us violently, when we are the victim of another's aggression, when the verbal abuse of the crowd is heaped upon us, the overwhelming tendency in human beings is to resist, to defend, to attack, to curse, to plead, to whine, or to weep. Self-preservation, we have already noted, is located on perhaps the deepest level of the human psyche. But once again the picture painted of Jesus in the Gospels was that of a remarkably free man. He was free to forgive, free to endure, free to be, and free to die. His being was not distorted by his external circumstances (Spong P. 127).

Loving Relationship with his disciples: He invested much of his life in this group of twelve. When these disciples failed him, as they constantly seemed to do, he did not cease to reach out to them in love. The story of his life was drawn in the Gospel as if its purpose was to proclaim that nothing one could do and nothing one could be separate any person from the love of God. When his disciples forsook him, he loved his forsakers. When one of them denied him and another betrayed him, he loved the denier and betrayer. When his enemies abused him, he loved his abusers. When they killed him, he loved his killers. What more can one do to live out the meaning of the God who is love? (Spong P. 128)

Death: As he died, the portrait painted in the Gospels was one of self-giving. He was the one condemned to die, but in the narratives he gave his life away even as they took it from him. He gave forgiveness to the soldiers (Luke 23:34). He gave comforts to those daughters of Jerusalem who were weeping for him (Luke 23:28). He gave assurance to the penitent thief (Luke 23:43), and he was even pictured from the cross as caring for his mother in her grief (John 19: 26,27). When the community of faith wrote their accounts of the life of this Jesus, these were the human qualities that they discovered residing underneath the theistic interpretation of the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth. Here was a whole human being who lived fully, who loved wastefully, and who had the courage to be himself under every set of circumstances. He was thus a human portrait of the meaning of God, understood as the source of life, the source of love, and the ground of being (Spong P. 128).

The church of Jesus Christ has constantly moved past the fences of prejudice in its drive to become a universal community. Gentiles did ultimately find welcome in the church. Slavery was finally ended. Segregation and apartheid had their backs broken. Women did achieve ecclesiastical power and position. Mentally ill people were finally understood and treated as sick people, not crazy people. People whose depression led them to suicide were finally buried within the wall of the church. Divorced people were finally not rejected but were offered a second chance at marriage and happiness. Gay and lesbian people are receiving the welcome of Christ into the Church without the barriers of either a willingness to "reform" or a guilt-ridden celibacy being imposed upon them as the price of their admission. Throughout the Christian history there have been

difficult times, rejecting times, setbacks, and dark chapters, but ultimately the Christ power present in this community of believers has prevailed and the doors of the Church have been opened to those against whom they once were locked shut.

Transcendence (P. 130).

Humanity and divinity flow together (P. 131).

Trinity (P. 131-132).

NINE: THE MEANING OF PRAYER IN A WORLD WITH NO EXTERNAL DEITY

TEN: A NEW BASIS FOR ETHICS IN A NEW AGE

ELEVEN: THE EMERGING CHURCH: READING THE SIGNS PRESENT TODAY

TWELVE: THE FUTUR CHURCH: A SPECULATIVE DREAM

THIRTEEN: ETERNAL LIFE APART FROM HEAVEN AND HELL

EPILOGUE: A FINAL WORD