LIVING THE QUESTIONS 2.0

I. Invitation to Journey
I. INVITATION TO JOURNEY

Disclaimer i
Foreword iii
Explanation of “Living it Out” v

1. An Invitation to Journey 1
2. Thinking Theologically 10
3. Taking the Bible Seriously 19
4. Stories of Creation 26
5. Lives of Jesus 34
6. A Passion for Christ: Paul 44
7. Out into the World: Challenges Facing Progressive Christians 53
Disclaimer

Living the Questions is a study for the countless people of faith who have suffered in silence as the voices of fear and certitude claim to profess the unchanging truth of Christianity. Its purpose is to provide a resource for the discussion of what is already believed and practiced by many faithful people still holding on within institutional religion, while harboring a conviction that what the church teaches isn’t the whole story. It may even be helpful for those whom Jack Spong calls “believers in exile” – those who have left the church because of its refusal to take their questions or life’s situation seriously. It is not intended to spell out new doctrine or create new dogma but to serve as a catalyst to perhaps crack open the door to the future.

To make the implicit explicit:

This study is not for:

- those whose personal faith requires them to believe that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God.
- those who believe that the doctrines set forth by the early church are sacrosanct and not to be questioned.
- those whose eternal salvation depends on their unswerving commitment to the above;
- those who believe the reason the mainline churches in Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand have been losing members and influence for generations is because they haven’t been teaching “orthodox” Christianity or preaching the true Gospel.

Please be aware that the issues and concepts discussed in the DVDs and written material will challenge many people’s worldview and understanding of the Divine. For some it will be radically new information. For others, it will be an affirmation of what they’ve known deep down for a long time. Facilitators will want to be prepared for anxiety, conflict, and the need to comfort those who are struggling. Everyone participating should resist the urge to try to provide answers for those troubled by the ambiguity of some of the conclusions.

Living the Questions seeks not to provide easy answers, but to be a resource for people who are in the midst of a life-long conversation about the mysteries of faith and life.

The producers of this series are not professional scholars but local church pastors responding to a need in their congregations. Living the Questions does not intend to offer a “systematic theology.” It is a thematic overview borne of day-to-day conversation and questions raised in the local church. The major themes
are presented as a “survey” of thoughts and ideas being discussed in theological circles.

It is hoped that exposure to these ideas and perspectives will generate continued dialogue among the participants and beyond into their circles of influence. Living the Questions is not intended to provide answers but to become a part of the ongoing reformation of Christianity in the 21st century. It is a tool to help open conversation, give progressively-minded Christians an opportunity to network and, perhaps most importantly, give them the assurance that they are not alone in their beliefs.
FOREWORD

It was early Fall and the class settled in for its first session of Bible study. In introducing the Genesis material for the first discussion, the facilitator referred to Adam and Eve as metaphors and not historic individuals. The reactions that resulted were swift – and representative of reactions that might occur in many churches:

1) Anger. “What? How dare you question the Bible? I just knew you were one of those damned liberals come to dismantle everything in order to further some questionable political agenda.”

2) Panic. Through the quiet weeping, “Why are you trying to destroy my faith? How can I trust God if His word isn’t true?”

3) Puzzlement. “Really? You mean there are two Creation stories in Genesis? How come I’ve never seen this before? Hmmm, I wonder what else I’ve missed by not reading this more carefully…”

4) Relief. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. I’ve known in my heart that there was more to these stories than just a literal recounting of what happened – but I was afraid to say anything for fear of being thought of as a heretic.”

And these are just the people who are interested enough to commit to a Bible study. Many people just don’t care anymore. They have long since stopped going to church at all. Despite claims by church-growth gurus, the fields are not “ripe for harvest.” Far from it. As one Christian pollster noted, the large numbers of people not involved in faith communities are not just waiting to be invited but are “passionately disinterested” in the church.

The “graying” and abandonment of “oldline” churches is but one symptom of this disinterest and dissatisfaction with the way churches do religion. Many speak of being “spiritual” rather than “religious,” honest rather than hypocritical. The atrophy of the oldline church’s influence in society and its ever-decreasing numbers is explained by evangelical and fundamentalist leaders as a result of their having not proclaimed the “true” Gospel. Meanwhile, superficial arguments over the preference of music styles and levels of formality in worship continue to serve as a distraction from what people are truly dissatisfied with: the core message, dogma, and practice of the Christian faith in today’s world.

Many people of deep spiritual integrity simply cannot suffer the shallow message of the churches of their birth any longer. They have an intuitive sense that there is more to Christianity than the rigid rules and theological constructs of the past. Sam Keen has written, “History is littered with the remains of civilizations that chose to die rather than change their organizing myth.” Without a re-evaluation
of the organizing myths of Christianity, the church, too, seems poised to pass into
the irrelevance to which so many religions of the past have been relegated.

*Living the Questions* hopes to expose people to the ideas and concepts that
have been taught and discussed for generations in our seminaries that don’t get
taught or discussed in our churches. *Living the Questions* is for those who are
yearning for something more than the shallow platitudes that pass for theology in
many churches – for the folks in the “puzzled” and “relieved” categories above.
It’s for those who are looking for a resource within the institution that encourages
questions and sparks open dialogue. It’s also for those who have stopped taking
the church seriously at all.

There is a revolutionary re-visioning of Christianity already emerging in the world.
It is our hope that *Living the Questions* will play a part in your discovering the
relevance of Christianity in the 21st Century and what a meaningful faith can look
like today.

– Rev. David Felten & Rev. Jeff Procter-Murphy
Phoenix, Arizona
INTRODUCTION TO
“LIVING IT OUT” SPIRITUAL
PRACTICES/DIsciplines

At the conclusion of each session, there is devotional “homework.” These
devotionals have been developed and written by Rev. Cynthia Langston Kirk to
expand on the theme of the particular session just completed.

Spiritual practices, devotionals, and disciplines, found in many forms and
expressions, nurture souls, enlarge hearts, help people manifest Love and be still
and know God. A heart that is filled overflows naturally in tangible ways in the
world.

So often we want to be spiritually mature and deep without training or
experience. We would never consider that a possibility for a marathon runner,
musician or computer whiz, but somehow we think it should be different with our
spiritual lives. One difference is the spiritual journey is not a competition. It is a
journey and no matter where you are on that journey, you have something just as
valuable as anyone else to offer.

One of the practices offered in several of the Living the Questions’ sessions is
spiritual journaling or writing. You may already have a spiral bound notebook or
blank book that you would like to use for spiritual journaling. Use whatever feels
most comfortable.

A spiritual journal belongs to you. It is always your decision how much and if any
you will share with another person. The writing is not for a grade in grammar or
composition. Your spiritual journal may be written in sentence fragments only. In
fact, when people are first starting, it is sometimes helpful to start with words or
phrases and develop the habit of reflection on the day.

Other spiritual discipline opportunities will be given as well. We invite you to try
them... more than the one time they may be suggested here. See what is a good
fit for you. The more you participate in a particular practice, the less you will
focus on the mechanics of the practice and the more you can focus on God.

Open yourself in these times of reflection and response. Open yourself to
learning how to be part of a community. And may you drink the joy, know God’s
love, experience transformation and be empowered to be the difference in a
world hungry for hope.

– Rev. Cynthia Langston Kirk
Tucson, Arizona
1. An Invitation to Journey

FOCUS: Faith is not a destination, but a journey.

A Spiritual Journey

“To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”
– Robert Louis Stevenson

People know that at its core, Christianity has something good to offer the human race. At the same time, many have a sense that they are alone in being a “thinking” Christian and that "salvaging" Christianity is a hopeless task.

What many have longed for is a safe environment where they have permission to ask the questions they’ve always wanted to ask but have been afraid to voice for fear of being thought a heretic. Living the Questions provides a context where people can be liberated from stagnant clichés and pursue their questions and seek to inform their understanding as part of a life-long spiritual journey.

Through exposure to provocative theological and spiritual insights and the engagement of small group conversation, participants in Living the Questions will experience how profoundly important the journey itself is.

Loving the Questions

“…have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language…”
– Ranier Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Someone once asked their rabbi, “Why is it that rabbis always answer a question with another question?” The rabbi answers, “So what’s wrong with a question?”

Jesus was typical of the rabbis of his day. According to the canonical gospels, he rarely gave a straight answer to a question. Instead he responded with another question or told a story. For the most part, Jesus was not offering simple answers. Instead, he put his questioners in a position of having to think for themselves. Rather than offer his disciples answers to life’s most perplexing problems, Jesus introduced them to deeper and deeper levels of ambiguity.
Perhaps Jesus knew what Mystics and the wisest of spiritual guides have known all along: that answers can provide a false sense of security and confidence that can become barriers to an awareness of the Divine.

**A PREFERENCE FOR THE QUICK & EASY**  
21st century Western culture revels in instant gratification – the easy fix. We want our stuff, our answers, our entertainment, and our deep sense of personal fulfillment NOW. The idea that something worthwhile might take a long time to develop or be complex to comprehend is not only resisted by some, but condemned as suspicious or morally questionable.

This consumer mentality bleeds over into religion and spirituality – we want salvation or wholeness simple, easy and NOW. Rooted in our primal fascination with all things magic (“just say this prayer/incantation and you’re all set!”), many churches have warped Jesus’ life-transforming call to “follow me” into a smorgasbord of methods for achieving wealth, health, and victory all in a couple of painless and mindlessly easy steps.

One of the more popular ways of identifying oneself as a Christian is to affirm that one has been “born again.” And although a whole religious culture has risen up around the phrase, the concept of being “born again” is essentially based on a mistranslation.

The phrase in Jesus’ mouth in John 3:3 (translated correctly in the New Revised Standard Version) actually tells Nicodemus that he must be born “from above” (anothen in Greek). Whereupon the literalist Nicodemus misunderstands and asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

And therein lies the core difference between the two approaches to the spiritual life: Being “born again” has come to mean a once-and-for-all experience of God’s grace and love. Insofar as it can be the first step in a life’s journey of faith, being “born again” can be a helpful experience and concept. But Jesus never said you have to be born again, but born “from above.” Being born “from above” implies a journey, a process, an orientation – a way of life.

**EVOLUTIONARY, NOT REVOLUTIONARY**

“The yearning we feel is an echo of our future.”  
– Sam Keen

Methodist piety is just one expression of the same model seen in denominations of all stripes: the moment of realizing God’s love is called “justification” – a revolutionary experience for many. But then the evolutionary work of “sanctification” begins, essentially where one becomes more “holy” as life goes on. A person doesn’t get there by simply reciting the Jesus prayer or claiming Jesus as Lord and savior. Ironically, many in our 21st century Western culture levitate towards faith traditions that say, “Believe this and you’re covered.”
When Maya Angelou was asked if she was a Christian, she turned the question back on the one inquiring of her: “Are you a Christian?” The person replied, “Why, yes, of course!” Angelou exclaimed, “Already?” Being there already is unlikely for most of us. Besides making us totally insufferable to be around, it would also prevent us from examining ourselves critically, learning from other faith traditions, or even opening up the Bible and looking at it again with the openness, thoughtfulness, and critical thought necessary to help us along the way.

The difference of opinion between Christians on whether a life of faith is primarily revolutionary or evolutionary is just one facet of the much broader controversy between moderate or “mainline” churches and the fundamentalist or evangelical churches. Be it a question of the inspiration of the Bible, the status of women and minorities, or the literal “second coming,” the revolutionary vs. evolutionary mindset affects almost every aspect of our institutional churches. Because literalists can be found in mainline churches and those suspicious of a literal “second coming” can be found in evangelical churches, this is obviously a broad generalization. However, one characteristic that separates these two worldviews is not just another obscure theological dispute – it is ignored to our peril. Many of the more “liberal” churches foster a “live and let live” attitude, making social change for the better where possible. But those who slip into fundamentalism can develop what Dom Crossan calls a “genocidal germ” that can manifest itself in violent oppression of anyone who disagrees with their perspective. Those who see the spiritual life as a journey continue to draw the circle wider. Those who believe that they alone possess the once-and-for-all truth are much more likely to oppose differences of opinion and seek the ouster of their opponents – by legislative or other, more violent, means.

“Every religion today must take responsibility for its own fundamentalism – because religious fundamentalism is probably the most dangerous thing in the world at the moment. Christians or Muslim. I am not making any distinction.”

– John Dominic Crossan in Living the Questions

THE VICE OF CERTAINTY
Beware of the person who says: I’ve got God all figured out. Not even Jesus was that bold. Instead he opted for stories that demanded thought, raised questions, and often went counter to conventional wisdom.

“I think certainty is a vice in religion. I really think that we ought to rid ourselves of it. So, I would constantly want to hold this wrestling, this uncomfortableness, I do not have it together, we are struggling in this together, as the proper image of the Christian faith. We walk into the mystery of God. We never arrive. And if we think we arrive we become an idolater.”

– Jack Spong in Living the Questions
Absolute certainty keeps us separated from God and our neighbors by claiming that what we know is the whole truth and that there’s no room for others’ experience or input. When we’re not open to ambiguity and different ways of looking at things, we risk becoming stagnant, stuck in a cul-de-sac rather than being out on the adventure and open to the mystery of the divine. To say you ascribe, without question, to a dogmatic set of beliefs and clichés that were developed and set in stone by someone else is easy. Perhaps real “faith” is to possess a deep enough sense of trust that ambiguity is seen not as an enemy, but as a vital part of the journey.

When Billie Holiday sang: “Thems that got shall get, thems that not shall lose…God Bless the child that’s got his own, that’s got his own,” she was tapping into a profound truth about life – and spirituality. Relying solely on doctrines and dogma passed on from others has seldom been a satisfying exercise for those longing for something deeper spiritually or thought-provoking theologically. To not ask questions is tantamount to forfeiting one’s own spiritual birthright and allowing other people’s experience of the divine to define your experience.

Wrestling with life’s injustices, resisting the urge to be satisfied with the way the world is, and asking difficult questions are all at the heart of theological integrity and spiritual growth. Excessive certitude can become a substitute for God and cripple an otherwise dynamic relationship with the Spirit. In short, being satisfied with easy answers is a “cop out.”

Boston University professor Harrell Beck said,

“I’ve been put with my back to the wall when I don’t have any cutesy little answers and I cannot reduce truth to the span of the human mind. I have to resort to a relationship which is my security. I think it’s only when you get shoved back to the point where you don’t have any neat little philosophical or theological answers that the relationship becomes central.” (from an unpublished lecture, “Asking the Big Question”)

Every question we ask without receiving a satisfactory “answer” makes us more adept at honing our questions. Every ambiguity with which we wrestle strengthens us for dealing with life’s ever-increasing complexities. The Center for Progressive Christianity’s “8 Points of Progressive Christianity” puts it this way: “There’s more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, in the questions than in the answers.” It’s in living the questions that we find direction in life.

Dr. Bill Nelson remembers being in conversation with Paul Tillich when Tillich pointed out that:

“Everyone seeks answers, mostly to questions that are not very important. The great concern in life should be to discover which are the right
On any authentic spiritual journey, asking the hard questions is not only permitted, but necessary! What we learn along the way through difficulties and disequilibrium, mistakes and challenges, discoveries and unlearnings, is that the process is what’s important. The unanswerable questions asked in the company of fellow seekers along the way become a central part of the process of the deepening quest, the broadening understanding, and the journey beyond our otherwise limited horizons.

“Asking the questions for which there are no answers is the beginning of wisdom.”

– Harrell Beck

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story.)

DVD Chapter 2:
How does Mel White define “fundamentalism?”

What evidence do you see of fundamentalists of various faiths organizing themselves into political blocs? Be specific.

How have “killing certainties” crippled the church’s faithfulness to the Gospel?

DVD Chapter 3:
Describe the advantages of being on a spiritual journey over “arriving” at the truth.
Spong describes the journey into Mystery as going beyond the literalization of scripture, creed, dogma, doctrine, and words. Explain.

Do you agree with McClaren regarding the importance of not being preoccupied in one’s eternal outcome but by participating in reconciling work? In your own community, what might be some opportunities to do reconciling work?

What does Flunder mean by the “either/or” God?

**DVD Chapter 4:**
Meyers mentions a Tao saying “When you think you know, that is when you do not know. But when you know that you do not know, that is when you know.” What does this mean to you?

According to Fox, how is “not knowing” one of the important dimensions of living in today’s world?

What part does risk-taking play in the spiritual journey?

Virtually all of the DVD contributors admit to having grown increasingly comfortable with uncertainty and suspicious of those who claim to have all the answers. Describe your personal experience of this phenomenon.
SPIRITPRACTICE:
How does walking a labyrinth embody the notion of spiritual journey? Of pilgrimage?

Share among your fellow participants the location(s) of any labyrinths in your area. Schedule a time to walk the labyrinth and discuss your experience.

Questions for Personal Reflection:
What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:
What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?
Stripped by God

What would happen if I pursued God --
If I filled my pockets with openness,
Grabbed a thermos half full of fortitude,
And crawled into the cave of the Almighty
Nose first, eyes peeled, heart hesitantly following
Until I was face to face
With the raw, pulsing beat of Mystery?

What if I entered and it looked different
Than anyone ever described?
What if the cave was too large to be fully known,
Far too extensive to be comprehended by one person or group,
Too vast for one dogma or doctrine?

Would I shatter at such a thought?
Perish from paradox or puzzle?
Shrink and shrivel before the power?
Would God be diminished if I lived a question
Rather than a statement?
Would I lose my faith
As I discovered the magnitude of Grace?

O, for the willingness to explore
To leave my tiny vocabulary at the entrance
And stand before you naked
Stripped of pretenses and rigidity,
Disrobed of self righteousness and tidy packages,
Stripped of all that holds me at a distance from you
And your world.

Strip me, O God,
Then clothe me in curiosity and courage.
To you, what is the most frightening or unsettling aspect of exploring new terrains about God?

Prayerfully, consider the teachings/models of Jesus that are central to your faith. (i.e. relationship, compassion, prayer, social justice, knowledge of scripture, healing, forgiveness, etc.) Write a list of ten teachings or examples that are important to you. Even though you may hold that each of them is dear, weigh each against the other in careful consideration. Mark a line through them one by one until you end up with the one teaching or example that you believe is most crucial for you today. (If you do the same exercise in three months, the list might be a bit different and the final choice might not be the same.) Consider why this is central for you.

**Prayer**

*Traveling God, when I want a road map, tour guide, and reservations made in advance for accommodations on my spiritual journey, whisper your invitation to me anew. Invite me to follow; to leave my preconceptions and certainties and follow. Remind me that Christ is my compass. Remind me that, while the journey may be difficult at times, it will also be filled with joy overflowing. Keep me mindful that the invitation of this journey is to Love. I pray with deep gratitude that you go with me. Amen.*

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk
2. Taking the Bible Seriously

**FOCUS:** The authority one places in the Bible plays a critical role in one’s worldview and understanding of the Christian life.

Its influence has been recognized for centuries. It has been quoted and misquoted, used and abused, appealed to and discredited. While American Presidents quote “a house divided against itself cannot stand” and “from those to whom much is given, much is required,” Biblical texts have also been used to oppress women, support slavery, justify wars, and today, bolster White Supremacy and other discriminatory movements.

Preachers try to bring the text alive, classes and small groups provide vital places of discovery. Personal study allows the Bible to speak to an individual’s situation. But what is it exactly that we’re looking for? The Bible is so big, so intimidating, it’s difficult to know where to start. It’s hard to know what to believe or what not to believe…

**The Book “by” Jesus?**

Before leaving for seminary, a young theological student was taken aside by an evangelical pastor and was told in the hushed tone reserved for the imparting of great wisdom, “You’re going to read a lot of books ABOUT Jesus – don’t forget to read the book BY Jesus!”

And therein lies what is perhaps the greatest divide among Christians: the authority one places in the text of the Bible. It’s important because how you understand the Christian life depends on how you read the Bible.

How much “authority” do you give scripture? How do you determine the level of trust you place in any written material, for that matter? As perhaps the best-selling, least read book of all time, the Bible needs to be re-examined by most of us. It is not something to be "believed" in, as though it has some magical powers, but to be in relationship with, as one would be with any person or cause or issue to which we give allegiance in this life.

In his bestseller, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg writes, “the Christian life is not primarily about believing the right things or even being good. The Christian life is about being in *relationship* with God which transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, ‘into the likeness of Christ.’” Likewise, having a “relationship” with the Biblical text that grows and changes has more spiritual and intellectual integrity than performing the mental gymnastics necessary to cling to the notions of the Bible one learned in Sunday School. The degree to which a person venerates or critiques what has come
down to us in the form of the Bible has wide-ranging implications for the way one interacts with others, the world, and the idea of the divine.

As a record of various peoples' experience of God's faithfulness and human infidelities, the Bible is full of colorful characters, lying, cheating, sex, hate, war, sex, betrayal, murder, sex, letters, poetry, history, sex, great ideas, lousy ideas, and more sex. Read closely, a variety of theological voices is revealed — sometimes harmonious, other times a cacophony of contradiction. For example, most people don't realize that there are two flood stories in Genesis: the familiar one where God has Noah collect the animals two by two, and the other where they are collected seven by seven. We only hear about the first story because seven by seven would clutter up the simplicity of the illustrations in children's books and murals.

Yet many people are afraid that if they admit that there are contradictions in the Bible then the whole thing has to be dismissed as a worthless lie. So, a simple defense was concocted as a bulwark against letting the evidence sway people once their minds were made up.

“SHALL THE FUNDAMENTALISTS Win?”
In the early part of the 20th Century, a pamphlet circulated about the "Fundamentals" of Christianity. It spawned a whole movement committed to the inerrancy of scripture and other supposedly bedrock doctrines. Defenders of the infallibility of scripture pointed to one verse in 2nd Timothy (chapter 3, verse 16):

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

Literalists then adopted a kind of circular argument, saying that because the Bible is without error or inconsistency, it must be the work of God, and because it is the work of God, it must be without error or inconsistency. It doesn’t matter which proposition comes first, the other is argued to follow.

In the 1920s, a highly publicized battle flared up between the mainstream church and what had become known as the Fundamentalists. It was front-page news in national newspapers. The Scopes “monkey trial” was just one skirmish in this national “battle for the soul of America.” In an effort to stir people to action, one of America’s great preachers, Harry Emerson Fosdick, preached the sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” He was worried that if the mainline church didn’t do more to educate its people about the metaphorical and mythological origins of scripture, that we would lose our “brightest and best” young people. He was right.

“SIX IMPOSSIBLE THINGS BEFORE BREAKFAST”
For lots of reasons, many people are dissatisfied with the church today – and they’re voting with their feet. One of the biggest reasons is, folks are not stupid. They look at the Bible and ask themselves, why is it that of all the things in my life, I have to have a whole different category for the Bible? Why am I expected to
suspend disbelief and not think through what I'm reading the way I would with any other object, issue, or situation in my life?

People run out of patience with bumper sticker platitudes like, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” One might get the impression that in order to be a Christian they have to emulate Alice in Wonderland’s Queen of Hearts in believing “six impossible things before breakfast.”

Hebrew Scripture Professor, Dr. Harrell Beck, used to stir up a lot of people with the exclamation: “The Bible is NOT the word of God – but the word of God is in the Bible.” It’s in there, but don’t get caught falling prey to worshipping the Bible the way many faith communities seem to have done. Many people cling to the unspoken cultural belief that the origin of “Holy” scripture is somehow the result of a series of some sort of supernatural events. Tongue firmly planted in cheek, Dr. Beck used to imagine the scene: long ago, a shepherd boy in Palestine was startled by an ungodly clap of thunder and the King James Version of the Bible floated out of a cloud and settled at his feet. Having an uncanny appreciation for the value of an ancient text in Elizabethan English, the boy immediately took it to the religious authorities for distribution. Voila!

**Thinking Critically**

In reality, the sixty-six separate books crammed together in a not-always-logical arrangement came together in very human ways. With all the haggling and bickering you’d expect from a committee, the Catholic Council of Carthage pulled together one of the first official collections in 397 C.E. – more than three hundred years after the time of Jesus. What we call our “Old Testament” consists of thirty-nine books, many of which had multiple authors. The New Testament has twenty-seven books, many of which also have multiple authors or uncertain authorship. Catholic Bibles include an additional twelve books known as the Apocrypha. The Old Testament is concerned with the Hebrew God, Yahweh, and a history of the early Israelites. The New Testament is the work of early Christians and reflects their beliefs about Jesus.

The composition of the various books began before 1000 B.C.E. and continued for more than a thousand years. Also included was oral material that was repeated from generation to generation, revised over and over again, and then put into written form by various editors. These editors often worked in different locales and in different time periods and with very different socio-economic, philosophical, theological, and spiritual worldviews. They were most certainly unaware of each other and it is unlikely that any of them foresaw their work being included in a "Bible." Their work was intended for local use.

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are examples of books which did not carry the names of their actual authors – their present names were assigned long after the books were written and circulated anonymously. Despite the witness of the Gospels themselves, biblical scholars are now almost
unanimously agreed – based on evidence within the books themselves – that none of the Gospel authors was a disciple of Jesus or an eyewitness to his ministry.

There are no original manuscripts of these ancient texts. Not one book that survives is probably in anything like its original form. Moreover, there are countless differences between the oldest surviving copies and the most recent manuscripts of any one book. These differences indicate that additions and alterations were made to the originals by various copyists and editors. Priority is placed on the oldest texts as the ones likely to have been changed the least.

Many of the ethical teachings and laws from Leviticus, for example, (don’t plant two kinds of seed in the same field, or use two fibers in one cloth, or talk back to your parents – the penalty for which is death) are relegated to obsolescence while others are lifted up as definitive rules of life.

Then there are all the stories that don’t “sync”: two creation stories (Genesis 1 & 2), two flood stories, (and imagine the surprise of Victorian scholars who discovered the same story elements in the Genesis flood story lifted from The Epic of Gilgamesh!), and some speculate that there are no less than four authors’ versions of the exodus lurking in the book we call Exodus! While there are four canonical gospels, the narratives of Jesus’ birth appear in only Matthew and Luke (and they don’t have the same characters, timeline, or story emphasis).

It’s exactly these kinds of inconsistencies in scripture that have led careful readers of the Bible to be curious about what was going on. These people weren’t folks who were looking to discredit the Bible, either. Far from it! They were people who had dedicated their lives to understanding scripture through-and-through. What these biblical scholars do is called Historical and Literary Criticism – and it doesn’t mean being critical of scripture. It means thinking critically about scripture.

“Well, if the Bible is just the product of humans, then what sets it apart from all the other ancient texts and holy books?” In short, thousands of years of people’s experiencing its contents as a means of grace and as a life-changing window onto the divine.

The window metaphor is author Frederick Buechner’s way of talking about scripture. We don’t worship the window. We simply look through it to get a glimpse of the divine on the other side. Just because there are smudges, swatted flies, and hairline cracks obstructing our view, we don’t throw the window out. We learn to distinguish between what is part of the window and what is beyond. Even though one can point to countless examples of political and theological “spin” that are anything but holy, the Bible has nonetheless established itself in our culture as a source of inspired (not dictated) guidance and observations. Although a
flawed and imperfect window, it was fashioned by people of faith who have helped generations of seekers catch a glimpse of the mystery beyond.

The Bible is many things to many people. It’s both what people make it and what they let it make of them over the course of time. Even if we read the same translation of the Bible — and there are many different translations, each with its own interpretative slant — we all bring to the reading our own assumptions, presuppositions, prejudices, and experience to bear on the text.

It has been said that there are as many Bibles as there are readers of the Bible. As William Blake wrote:

"Both read the Bible day and night
but thou readest black where I read white."

Acknowledging that the history of interpreting scripture is itself “in process” is one of the first steps in establishing a personal, life-long journey with the Biblical text — a sometimes frustrating, often rewarding, and always surprising relationship.

As people are given permission to think critically about the Bible and are resourced with a broad understanding of the history, culture, and political intrigues that originally drove the content, story lines, and theologies of the canon, the text can become less of a stuffy rulebook and more of a lens through which one’s spiritual seeking and life journey comes into focus.

The re-visioning of Christianity that is already emerging in the world is motivated in part by taking the Bible seriously and not literally. The core message, dogma, and practices of the Christian faith in today’s world are being re-evaluated with a love for and relationship with scripture at its center.

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**DVD Discussion Questions**

*(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story.)*

**DVD Chapter 2:**

Biblical inerrancy is the idea that the Bible is without error in its original form, while infallibility holds that the Bible is inerrant on issues of faith and practice but not history or science. How might unquestioning belief in these ideas affect a person’s day-to-day living?

Borg suggests that a more historical and metaphorical approach to the Bible provides a way for non-literalists to be Christian. How does this sync with your experience?
DVD Chapter 3:
Name some of the “discrepancies” that Levine mentions.

Rossing, Brueggemann, & McKenna speak of the Bible as “inspired,” as an “act of faithful imagination,” and as “sacred.” Describe their understandings.

Borg describes the Bible as a “lens through which we see God.” What implications does this metaphor have for the Bible’s “authority”?

DVD Chapter 4:
How might looking at the Bible as the “fourth member of the Trinity” be bordering on idolatry?

According to White, what are some of the negative ramifications of “going literal” with the Bible?

Geering suggests that literalists are the “enemies of the Christian tradition.” Elaborate.

DVD Chapter 5:
Describe what Borg means when he says, “The Bible is a human product and a response to the experience of the Sacred.”

DVD Chapter 6:
What are some of the “triggers” that move people from a literal reading of scripture to a more metaphorical approach?
SPIRITPRACTICE: LECTIO DIVINA

Questions for Personal Reflection:
What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:
What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:
In an effort to help recalibrate people’s understanding of the origin of scripture, replace the clichéd affirmation after scripture used by most churches. Instead of reinforcing conventional wisdom with “This is the word of the Lord,” try the less misleading, more persuasive, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.” Now with a clear conscience, the progressively minded congregation can respond with “Thanks be to God.”
The Bible was a high priority for the denomination in which I was nurtured as a child. By that, I am not referring to their emphasis on scripture being important to a person’s faith journey or even the emphasis on memorizing scripture. I mean that the leather and rice paper (or whatever materials used to construct a particular canon) was held in high regard. How a person treated the book seemed almost as important as what was inside.

We learned early on that the Bible was to be treated with reverence, honored with careful placement. Nothing was put on top of any Bible and certainly no one would ever think of placing a Bible on the floor. A large Bible was always on the altar in the church of my childhood. It was given honor by its elevated placement.

What happened for me, and perhaps others, is the Bible seemed to get a better place than God. Most Sunday sermons reinforced that God was someone who was ever watchful of our words and actions, a fact that should have people shaking in the boots. The Bible was to be revered; God to be feared.

Then, in Sunday school, we opened the binding and learned about how the canon (the Bible from Genesis through Revelation) came to be. Most often we learned that the words and stories were dictated from God.

Many years have past since that childhood education. Since then, I have been introduced to a God of grace and come to view the Bible in a vastly different manner. Has it lost its power or authority for me? No, but its value rests in the One to whom it points and its authority rests in the love and grace of God of whom it teaches.

People can place Bibles on altars so much that the Bible becomes what is worshiped or we can know the Bible as a lens that points us to Mystery, hope, and redemption.

How liberating the journey has been for me! Having a different view of the Bible does not diminish my faith or belief. For me, it became richer. For me, the one of the most important things is who I can and do become because of these stories.

Spirituality is not a solo venture. We only have to look at the scriptures or to our ancestors to know that. We benefit enormously from scripture, books, faith stories not included in the Bible, and others who teach us about God and encourage us on the journey. In turn, our spiritual companions benefit from being in relationship with us.
This week’s Living it Out is two-part: reflection and sharing.

**For Reflection:**
Early in the week remember the earliest teachings about the Bible you received. Spend time with your journal capturing some of these remembrances. Think about your current view of the Bible and write about that. How, if any at all, have your views changed?

**For Sharing:**
Set a date for later in the week to meet with two or three other people in your LtQ group. Meet some place comfortable where you can freely share with each other. Take turns sharing from your journals your remembrances and views about the Bible. You may share verbatim or in a condensed form.

**Purposes and Guidelines for Sharing**

The purposes of this exercise are:

- Learning to build safe places to share
- Learning from others’ faith experiences
- Practicing the sacred art of listening

This is not a time to persuade someone of a different view.

Allow each person 10 – 15 minutes to share.
While one person is sharing, the responsibility of the others is to listen. If you do not understand something, ask for clarification.
When the person is finished, thank them for sharing.
Spend one to two minutes in silent gratitude for the opportunity to share and listen. Repeat the sharing and the time of silence until each person has participated.


**Prayer**
O God, thank you for people who nurture childhood faith and teach, in loving ways, that your word is a light unto our path. Thank you for all the people who open our hearts and minds to learn and grow. Thank you for friends in the faith, people with whom we can share our struggles, hunches, and joys. Give us the courage to not only study the scriptures, but also live your grace. In Christ’s name. Amen.

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk
Focus: While family, education, social class, and geography all contribute to how we think about God, our experiences and perceptions along life’s journey also shape our thinking. Being comfortable with ambiguity, metaphor, and uncertainty help us get the Divine “out of the box” and rethink theological ideas that have become barriers to our further spiritual growth.

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is an account of a journey of faith. The sojourner, named Celie, discovers new ways of understanding religion and of imaging the Divine. In one of her letters to a friend, Celie writes, "She say, ‘My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.’"

To ask the questions of how the divine is intertwined with the world is to think theologically: How do we understand the unfathomable mystery that we’ve come to call God? Is there a God whose character and ways of relating to the world can be explained in ways that make sense? As Bill Nelson has suggested, even the word “God” itself is a “very slender word that simply covers our shivering ignorance.” Exploring these and other questions and concepts are at the heart of thinking theologically – a practice in which we all engage, whether we know it or not.

**RE-THINKING SOME LONG-HELD IDEAS**

Reading the Bible closely, it becomes clear that there’s no one way of understanding who God is and how God relates to the world. The Bible is the witness of generations of faithful people recording their own understandings of the divine in their particular time, place, and culture. This theological pluralism reveals changing, developing, and sometimes conflicting ideas about God.

The Bible itself represents a variety of perspectives, each reflecting different understandings of God. The challenge of thinking theologically is about maintaining a creative tension between ideas that generate dialogue, not absolute certainty. At its best, thinking theologically is not about facts, but about wrestling with often abstract ideas and concepts.

Traditional understandings of Christology, Atonement, and the Incarnation are all in flux. In fact, many people find these concepts to be quite irrelevant to contemporary spirituality. Two of the major ideas that continue to cause conflict among people of faith are the language we use for the Divine and the notion of “omnipotence.”
Many of us get in a rut with our language about or image of God that is narrow and constricting. As our life experience broadens our understanding, some of us become conflicted over whether we can believe at all. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the celebrated preacher at New York’s Riverside Church, was fond of telling of the day a distraught student exclaimed, "I don't believe in God!" Fosdick replied, "Tell me about this God you don't believe in; chances are I don't believe in that God either." In the 1920s, Fosdick predicted that we would continue to lose generation after generation of the brightest and best young people because they have the impression that they are expected to believe “just so” in order to be a true Christian.

Yet images and ideas used to express the Divine by Christian mystics, theological thinkers, and in scripture are as many and varied as there are experiences of God. The Biblical writers use a rich pallet of metaphors and poetic language to point toward what is ultimately a mystery. The Divine is described as a potter, a cup (of cool water), a path, a safe place, a rock, a burning bush, an eagle, and a whirlwind – all wonderful metaphors that help us assign a variety of attributes to the Divine without being the exclusive last word.

One of the most common images of God is as a father. Listening to many prayers and liturgies, one might think it was the only image of God in scripture. However, God is also imaged as a mother in Deuteronomy 32:18; "You forgot the God who gave you birth," as "a woman in labor" in Isaiah 42:14, and as a comforting mother in Isaiah 66:13. Is God a mother? Yes. A father? Yes. A rock? Yes. A wind? Yes. Everything we use to refer to God is simply a limited, human effort to explain the unexplainable. To be aware of our language and its implications is a great exercise in thinking theologically – remembering that the language we use to describe the Divine will directly influence how we relate to the Divine.

A SQUARE CIRCLE?
When remembering the old elementary school riddles (If God is all-powerful, can God create a rock too heavy for God to lift? Can God create a square circle?), one is reminded of the ridiculous and shallow levels to which people will reduce arguments about the Divine and think they’re being profound. Just one of the theological concepts that, despite its questionable origins, has had remarkable staying power, is “omnipotence.” It’s not unusual for people to think of Cecil B. DeMille’s Red Sea parting or an otherwise unexplainable recovery from illness as expressions of the “Almighty” power of God. However, Thomas Aquinas actually created the idea of omnipotence in the 13th century. He reckoned that in order for God to "be" God, God must excel all others in power, essentially having all the power. The highest conceivable form of power must be the divine power. So, the Biblical “All – mighty” became “omni = all, potent = power.” What exactly is the highest conceivable form of power? He wasn't as clear on this.

However, many people operate with the understanding that the highest conceivable form of power is the power to determine every detail of what
happens in the world. But there’s the rub: when unexplainable catastrophe strikes, God is left wide open for people to ask: "Why did God do this to me?" or "What mysterious Divine reason is behind this?"

If God has all the power, shouldn't everything be good? What about evil and our deciding to do the lesser good? Does God "underwrite" evil for the sake of letting us have free will? Does God "permit" sin in order for us to be deluded into thinking we have the final decision? To go down that road gets muddy quickly and gets God mixed up with some pretty shady business – up to and including bad things that can't be attributed to human freedom – what insurance companies call "acts of God." What does it say about a Deity who has all the power and still allows horrible diseases, accidents, and natural disasters to occur?

Some might object to questioning anything but the pure and complete "sovereignty of God," but there are lots of other ways to think of God than one who "rules" over everything; the Biblical witness makes it clear that this "royal" model is just one feeble attempt to grasp a concept that is impossible for our minds to comprehend. What is clear is that the idea that God is in possession of "all" the power makes of life and all of creation a really bad puppet show.

The Bible offers a multitude of images and ideas about the Divine. On their own, not one of them is right. Taken all together, they testify to the liveliness of theological thinking over the ages and the wisdom of the Biblical compilers in including them all. If all we ever do is ask questions of these images and ideas, then we’ve gone a long way toward the practice of thinking theologically that will see us through to another level of understanding the Divine Mystery.

The practice of Christianity is rife with a variety of theological problems and concepts that cripple its relevance in the minds of many 21st century people. But one of the most notable characteristics of the Judeo-Christian tradition has been its amazing flexibility in withstanding the changes and adaptations brought to them by cultures they encounter. The Bible itself is witness to the same event or idea being represented in a variety of theological interpretations, each of which was included in the canon of scripture despite obvious differences. Wrestling with those differences has always played a significant role in the history of both Jewish and Christian concepts of the Divine – and can again play a part in rethinking many of the staid theological ideas that have become stagnant and unhelpful in the 21st century.
**DVD Discussion Questions**
*(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

**DVD Chapter 2:**
Crossan asks four questions of 21st century Christians: What is the character of your God? What is the content of your faith? What is the function of your church? What is the purpose of your worship? Describe how you might have answered these questions as a child or young person compared to your understanding today.

Cobb discusses Omnipotence as an unbiblical concept that misrepresents the nature of the Divine. Describe the advantages of seeing God as a persuasive, relational power over the unbiblical notion of omnipotent, coercive power.

What are some of the alternatives to using even the word “God” to describe the Divine?

**DVD Chapter 3:**
Describe Borg’s stages of pre-critical naïveté, critical thinking, and post-critical naïveté.

According to Varghese, what are some of the characteristics of “thinking theologically”?

How does the hope gained from thinking theologically different from simply thinking optimistically?
**SPIRITPRACTICE: LOCATION**

Ufford-Chase says, “We’ve got plenty of thinking going on out there and far too little acting.” Describe an action that you might take that has potential for changing your theological thinking.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

**PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

Try expanding your “Divine vocabulary” by using alternative names for God. Below are some examples of the multitude of images for the Divine offered in Hebrew and Christian scripture. Take note of how using different imagery alters your understanding or experience of what Marcus Borg calls “the More.”

- The Name [HaShem]: (Leviticus 24:16)
- Holy One: (Habakkuk 1:12)
- The Spirit Of Wisdom And Understanding: (Isaiah 11:2)
- Light and Salvation: (Psalm 27:1)
- Our Dwelling Place: (Psalm 90:1)
- Fortress: (Psalm 91:2)
- Refuge and Strength: (Psalm 46:1)
- Hiding Place: (Psalm 32:7)
- Shield: (Psalm 18:30)
- Rock: (Habakkuk 1:12)
- Cornerstone: (Psalm 118:22)
- My Cup: (Psalm 16:5)

- Star: (Numbers 24:17)
- Potter: (Isaiah 64:8)
- Creator: (Ecclesiastes 12:1)
- Shepherd: (Genesis 49:24)
- Redeemer: (Psalm 19:14)
- Deliverer: (Psalm 144:2)
- Power: (Mark 14:62)
- A Consuming Fire: (Hebrews 12:29)
- Promised Holy Spirit: (Ephesians 1:13)
- The Spirit of the Living God: (2 Corinthians 3:3)
- The Spirit Of Truth: (John 15:26)
- Helper or Comforter: (John 14:26)
Beyond the Sixth Grade

Graduated from theology
In the sixth grade
No need for Sunday School again
Too much struggle for mom and dad
To plead that young soul into a classroom
One more Sabbath.

Others finished with biblical studies
Just after clergy words and hands
Confirmed the journey.

For few remaining
Or handful brought later by a party
Simple answers served.
Just when spicy foods and rich meals
Could be appreciated,
Peanut butter and jelly fare, crust off,
Served cut in half
As to a preschooler.
As school encouraged wrestling with Plato and heavy weights
Church promoted "simply believe."

No one would conceive of youth departing
Chemistry, government, orchestra and basketball
Because knowledge and skills sufficient.
No memo to sit this one out
Concerning race relations and global affairs.
No teacher would convey the theory
That the universe would crack,
All knowledge shatter
If questioned, tugged, and manipulated
This way and that.

Monday-through-Friday learner she became
So did he.
Absorbing the mysteries of the galaxies,
Reveling in literature,
Practicing cello and backstroke,
Pondering ancient philosophies of the wise ones.
Delighted by discoveries within and beyond self,
Thrilled in the land of accomplishments
And meaningful living.

All the while religious education-
Perfect attendance awards
With Bible school art
Tucked in a scrapbook on a top shelf.
Journey with the Creator deemed complete
In an "all I need to know I learned by sixth grade" approach.

Is it any wonder that it is both stunning and refreshing
To consider divine study-
The kind where head and heart muscle grow
As we grapple with God?
Areas atrophied and places newly discovered
Surprised that Holy Mystery can withstand
Questions, fears, disillusionment, prods, and amazement-
As can our faith.

**For Your Spiritual Journal:**
An affirmation of faith is a statement about your beliefs in God. For Christians, it is often expressed in a Trinitarian manner, indicating belief in God, Christ and Spirit.

If you have access to a hymnal or several different hymnals, you might want to read the affirmations of faith, usually found near the back of these resources.

Spend some time in meditation. What is it you believe about God, Christ, and Spirit at this juncture of your life?

Write an affirmation of faith.
(Are there names or terms for God, different from those you frequently use, which expand your understanding and enlarge your vision of God? You might want to incorporate those names in your affirmation.)

Save your affirmation of faith in your journal or Bible.

**Prayer**
_Holy One, even as I wrestle with meaning and stories, I thank you for the gift of faith. Thank you for the ability to trust when early paradigms change and all which is comfortable shifts under my feet. Even as I affirm my beliefs in you, show me that there is more, always more, to who you are, what our relationship can be, and who I can become because of you. In the name of Christ who leads us in the way of faith. Amen._

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk
4. STORIES OF CREATION

Focus: How one perceives the creation stories is not only critical to the way one looks at the Bible, but how one understands the purpose of creation, the essence of human nature, and the attitude one takes toward the environment in which we live.

The ancient Hebrews who composed what we now know as Genesis were brilliant storytellers – and although their writings have for generations been thought to explain the “how” of what happened historically, their stories are much deeper and richer when they are properly understood metaphorically as wrestling with the “whys” of human life.

When we delve into these ancient stories, we catch a glimpse of the answer to the eternal question, “What’s the meaning of life?” We are reminded that we are made in the image of the Divine – the one who brings order out of chaos and finds joy in the act of creating.

Creation as Story
In the beginning, God may have created the heavens and the earth, but not even the Bible is daring enough to claim exactly how it happened. In fact, Genesis begins with two distinctive creation stories that are impossible to synthesize or string together into consecutive events with any integrity. Neither one was ever meant to give a scientific account of how creation happened. Instead, they offer theological claims about the characteristics of the creator and poetic explanations as to why human beings are the way we are.

Each story grew out of different eras and reflects the purposes of two different “schools” or authors. Genesis 1 is the product of authors that scholars have dubbed the “Priestly” writers. Their rhythmic liturgical order of creation grew out of their experience in Babylonian exile sometime after 586 BCE. As a product of the exile and the apparent defeat of Yahweh by the Babylonian Marduk, it has even been suggested that Genesis 1 is a kind of “resistance literature” created to claim Yahweh’s superiority over all of creation. The second story, beginning with Genesis 2:4, is believed to have its roots in much older folk-stories of creation. The editors of this story refer to the creator with the name “Yahweh,” the distinctive Hebrew name for the Divine. As such they have since come to be known collectively as the “Yahwist.” The two sources present the story in totally different styles. Where the Priestly author is interested in how things are organized and presents the origin of all things with a structured list, the Yahwist is a wonderful storyteller, often emphasizing humor and relationships as a vehicle for making theological points. Overall, the authors never intended to answer the
analytical Greco-Roman question of “how?” but instead, in typical rabbinic fashion, set out to address the much more important question of “why?”

**Genesis 1**

Far from everything being created out of “nothing” (*ex nihilo*), creation begins with a torrential midnight hurricane at sea. The “formless void,” *tohu wabohu*, in Hebrew, literally means an unordered chaos, here described as an unending storm of violent wind on dark waters. When reading Genesis 1, keep in mind that ancient Jews perceived the sea as a symbol of chaos and distance from God. The sea in Genesis 1 is a metaphor for the chaos out of which God brings order. You might recall that Jonah was so determined to get away from God, he actually went to sea and eventually jumped in – clear acts of desperation to hearers who understood the sea as separation from the Divine. This cosmology is picked up at the end of the Biblical canon in Revelation 21:1. One of the characteristics of God’s “new heaven and new earth” is that the sea – chaos – will be no more.

The Priestly authors’ rhythmic unfolding of creation is not without its theological digs. In a world where the surrounding cultures worshipped the sun, moon, and stars as gods, to claim that your God had created the sun, moon, and stars was not-so-veiled theological one-upmanship. Growing out of the experience of exile and intending to offer hope to a despairing people, this “propaganda” piece had as its essence the message that our God is better than your god. Not only were these other gods cast as the creations of the God of the Hebrews, but they were also gutted of their basic functions. The sun, for instance, doesn’t actually provide light. Light has already been around for three days before the sun comes on the scene. This, of course, also throws a wrench into the literal interpretation of 24-hour days. We’ve already had three “days” pass and the sun hasn't even been created yet.

One of the clearest conflicts between the two stories is in the creation of human beings. In Genesis 1, human beings are created male and female at the same time. The story of woman being created from man with all of its patriarchal implications is a story element used in Genesis 2.

Genesis 2:2ff reserves the highest order of creation being left for last. Shabbat, to rest, is the crowning glory of creation, a day of holiness separating humans from their animal roots – a tradition unique to Jewish culture in the ancient world. It’s not surprising that the “Priestly” authors would make the Sabbath, the event that would keep them in business, the pinnacle of creation.

**Genesis 2**

Where Genesis 1 presents the maritime nightmare of too much water, Genesis 2 begins with the agricultural nightmare of drought. From the very beginning, the feel and style of Genesis 2 is different than that of Genesis 1. The Yahwist is a consummate storyteller who portrays Yahweh anthropomorphically – like a human being – in relationship with his creation: interacting with it, in conversation...
with the man and the woman, and taking a walk in the garden. One of the most obvious differences is that while Genesis 1 moves from wet to dry, Genesis 2 moves from dry to wet.

One of the Yahwist’s many wordplays that is lost in the translation from Hebrew is in the creation of the first human being. In order for the ground to be tilled, God formed the farmer, “ha adam,” which means “the earth creature” in Hebrew. “Earth” or ground in Hebrew is “adamah.” So, ha adam was formed from the adamah – words that take on a poetic flair when chanted in Hebrew. The character we call “Adam” is unnamed. English translators dropped “ha” (the definite article) and capitalized “adam” (a plural noun) and gave us Adam.

THE TWO STORIES IN BRIEF OUTLINE:
As you can see below, one of the most obvious differences between the two creation stories in Genesis is the order of events. The differing order excludes the possibilities of their a) describing the same events from different perspectives or b) their being sequential. They are simply different stories from different sources that were both important enough to the Jewish sense of identity to be included in the canon.

Creation 1 (Priestly Source)
(from wet to dry)
Stage 1: light
Stage 2: firmament separated from water
Stage 3: land
Stage 4: inhabitants of firmament
Stage 5: inhabitants of sea & air
Stage 6: inhabitants of earth
Stage 7: God rests

Creation 2 (Yahwist)
(from dry to wet)
Stage 1: a mist goes up
Stage 2: farmer “ha adam” created
Stage 3: garden created
Stage 4: the one commandment
Stage 5: critters all created
Stage 6: woman created
Stage 7: everybody out!
It is a disservice to the richness of the individual stories to try to synthesize them or make their two divergent story lines consecutive. For many, not seeing the two separate stories is simply a matter of having not read the stories since childhood Sunday School. But many Christians, bent on maintaining an inerrant Bible, manage to do the mental gymnastics necessary to ignore the blatantly obvious. In some circles, belief in a literal seven-day Creation has become a litmus test for being a “true” Christian. Those who claim the Bible as inerrant and interpret everything they can in a literal fashion are even now promoting the newest form of creation science, “intelligent design,” to be taught in public schools across the United States.

What one thinks of the creation stories is not only critical to the way one look at the Bible, but to one’s worldview. What is at issue is no less than the way people think, who controls our schools, and who controls our culture. Reading the Bible metaphorically opens one to meanings that go deeper than literal interpretations allow. Unbending readings of the text have led to the alleged Biblical endorsement of all kinds of social ills from slavery to the subjugation of women. But reading the text in a way that is alert to meanings that transcend the literal paves the way for deeper understandings – including advancement in scientific understanding.

The Church has often been slow to embrace advances in science. Galileo was condemned in 1633 because his teaching that the earth revolved around the sun contradicted the Biblical evidence. It only took the Vatican until 1992 (359 years later) to admit Galileo might have been right.

Although the seminary-trained Charles Darwin died a professed agnostic, he didn’t completely divorce his religious understanding from his passion for science. In letters edited by his son, Francis, it is related that Darwin considered the theory of evolution to be “quite compatible with the belief in a God; but that you must remember that different persons have different definitions of what they mean by God.”

The time is long past when a literal interpretation of the creation stories has any scientific, intellectual, or spiritual integrity. They remain, however, a tribute to the wisdom of the compilers who saw in the inclusion of two different creation stories an assurance that there would be “wiggle room” for people with “different definitions of what they mean by God” and the purposes of creation.
DVD Discussion Questions
(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:
According to McKenna & Fox, what are some of the purposes of creation stories in general?

Rossing suggests that the false conflict between creation and evolution is distracting us from what we should really be spending our energies on. Explain.

DVD Chapter 3:
The Bible’s stories of creation can’t possibly be God’s stories of creation. Explain.

DVD Chapter 4:
Levine points out that Genesis 1 is “clean” and orderly, while Genesis 2 is more “messy.” What are some of the defining characteristics of the two stories?

What do the stories say about “partnerships” between creation, human beings, the Creator, etc.?

DVD Chapter 5:
One of the major themes of the second Genesis creation story is “the Fall.” How has that concept been helpful or detrimental to the spiritual enterprise of Christianity?
A more traditional, dogmatic Christianity makes sin and redemption the focus of the Eden saga. Describe how Nelson’s suggestion that failure to accept responsibility for one’s own actions is an equally persuasive thematic emphasis.

Questions for Personal Reflection:
What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:
What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

S P I R I T P R A C T I C E :
“Tending a Garden” is just one way to be in touch with a deeper appreciation of creation. What are some other ways you’ve found to be helpful?
BONUS READING FOR POTENTIAL “JEOPARDY” CONTESTANTS:
Jewish folklore suggests that God created a woman who was brought before
Adam like the other creatures. However, there was conflict between Adam and
his “first wife.” In some stories, Adam didn’t even acknowledge her with a name,
let alone calling her “mate.” In others (Alphabet of Ben Sira, 23a-b), she was
created from the dirt as Adam’s equal and refused to be dominated by him.
Either way, she was cast out of the garden. The tradition gave her the name Lilith
and she eventually became the manifestation of the expression of "Hell hath no
fury like a woman scorned..." She was portrayed as a she-demon, as the jealous
queen of the underworld, and was said to be responsible for S.I.D.S., men
straying from their wives, and any other circumstance that brought grief to
families. In some traditions, she became identified as Satan’s lover and mother to
demons.

Lilith fans: As Lilith was created independently from man and had to make her
own way in the world, she became the heroine of choice not only of the feminist
movement of the 1960s but as the namesake of the music tour of women rockers
in the 1990s, “The Lilith Fair.” An independent Jewish women’s magazine,
“Lilith,” has been published since 1976. See www.lilithmag.com

TV Trivia: Keeping in mind that no self-respecting Jewish family would name
their daughter Lilith (it would be like Christians naming their son “Lucifer”), the
writers of “Cheers” had character Frasier Crane married to a Jewish woman
named Lilith. Frasier being married to the queen of the underworld is an inside
joke to those familiar with Jewish folklore that is totally lost on most Goyim
(Gentiles).
Living it Out

SESSION 4

CREATION’S DANCE

Creation's Dance  [can be sung to: Terra Beata: This is My Father’s World]

Lakes, rivers clap and sing, the rocks shout out their praise
All nature joins creation’s song, eternal gratitude
From Eden’s paradise, the Tree burst forth as spring
Wisdom, the flow’r, can teach and guide, the way to live rev’rently

In relationship we’re formed, for relationship we’re made
Dancing together creation’s tune, within the circle of love
In holy image made, shaped and blessed as God’s belov’d
Precious the ties that bind us all, the Breath of Life divine.

These questions come your way about living Genesis
Do you believe that each soul’s depraved or witness all life as bless’d?
Do you perpetuate hierarchy’s use of power
Or do you welcome each one, each gift, the bold expressions of God?

For Your Spiritual Practices:
Choose one or more of the following this week:

- Spend time in a garden with someone who can rarely get outside.
- Help someone begin composting or recycling.
- Contemplate how you perpetuate a hierarchical approach to life and work?
  How does that alter your view of each part of creation?
  How might a collaborative approach change your view?

Prayer
Help us, God of Love, to realize we are co-creators with you. Help us understand that the same power that was unleashed in the beginning is available to us today. Teach us to be engaged with that power for the good of the world. Teach us that any time we misuse, diminish, disregard, over use or abuse any part of creation, we impact the whole web of life. Slow our pace that we may be awestruck by creation every day. Show us the way to keep Sabbath time each week so we may rest in your care and be refreshed for your work. In Christ’s name we pray.
Amen.

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk
5. Lives of Jesus

**FOCUS:** From divergent opinions on Jesus’ “program” to the reasons for his having been killed, the many portrayals of Jesus in the gospels, in various traditions, theologies, and the arts, amount to a Jesus who lived many different lives – each of which helps us in teasing out what it means to be a disciple of this mysterious and profoundly significant phenomenon called Jesus of Nazareth.

**Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?**

Truth be told, there are as many Jesuses as there are disciples of this remarkable first-century figure. Regardless of how faithful one is to the portrayals of Jesus by any particular denomination or tradition, no two people understand or relate to Jesus in exactly the same way. This is one of the reasons the Bible includes four different versions of the story of Jesus’ life and why 2nd and 3rd Baptist churches have spun off from the 1st Baptist Church.

From apocalyptic firebrand to mystical faith healer to political insurrectionist, the various images of Jesus are celebrated and defended by true believers of every theological and political stripe. Walk into the narthex of any number of Protestant churches and you’re likely to find the sentimental blue-eyed, pink-skinned Jesus of artist Warner Sallman gazing beatifically upon your comings and goings. Enter the neighboring Catholic church and you’ll probably find the image of a beaten, bleeding, emaciated man suffering on a cross.

From the Gospels to illustrated Bible storybooks to portrayals in film, Jesus has been the subject of considerable “spin” over the ages. Each tradition and each individual puts their own emphasis on this remarkable figure. For many middle-class Americans, the ideal Jesus is the gentle, upstanding, right-thinking (and often somewhat androgynous) suburbanite with good posture. The notion that Jesus might have been a short, dark, Middle-Eastern peasant rabble-rouser is so far from many people’s capacity to comprehend, that all reason is rejected in favor of the gauzy Aryan visions of early childhood. A blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, meek and mild, is such a stalwart icon of Western culture, that to suggest anything contrary or corrective to that image is tantamount to heresy.

A Discovery Channel special utilizing the latest in forensic technology reconstructed what Jesus might have looked like, based on mosaic representations and the actual skull of a first-century Jew. The result fomented an outcry from commentators far and wide with accusations of “revisionism” and “political-correctness” run amuck. Columnist Kathleen Parker was so distraught that she fretted that the Jesus she knew as a child was being replaced by “the kind of guy who wouldn’t make it through airport security.” She goes on to say,
“Given the tendency of academic research to steer conclusions away from anything that might be construed as Aryan or, heaven forbid, Falwellian, it's easy to imagine that biblical revisionists won't be satisfied until they discover that Jesus was really a bisexual, cross-dressing, whale-saving, tobacco-hating vegetarian African Queen who actually went to the temple to lobby for women's rights.”

April 1, 2001 Orlando Sentinel

Non-Caucasian Christians have long been dissatisfied with the Aryan Jesus. Be it Asian, African, South American, or Native American, cultures all over the world have represented Jesus metaphorically as “one-of-them.” Douglas Andelin’s rendering of Jesus on the cover of Bishop John Shelby Spong’s “Liberating the Gospels” appears as a disheveled Jewish peasant. The National Catholic Reporter awarded Janet MacKenzie’s Jesus of the People, an image of Jesus modeled on an African American woman the winner of the "Jesus 2000" international art competition.

The portrayal of Jesus as some sort of sweet guy-next-door is a sentimental misreading of the Bible. Jesus didn’t attract everyone far-and-near. He was a peasant who likely attracted peasants. As represented in the gospels, he was radical enough to make even many of the liberals of his day, the Pharisees, uncomfortable.

Dom Crossan explains that there’s really only one Gospel in the Bible and four “according to's,” – this because the life of Jesus has too much meaning to be limited to only one telling that followers would be tempted to literalize and venerate. The four “according to's” give us a glimpse of four very different understandings of who Jesus was; despite efforts to the contrary, they defy synthesis and harmonizing.

Gospel Text Detectives
While they may be the first books of the New Testament, the gospels are far from being the earliest written material in the Christian scriptures. That distinction is held by the authentic letters of Paul, who was writing in the late 50s, some twenty years after Jesus’ crucifixion. The earliest source material of the Biblical gospels was probably written twenty or so years after that.

Most scholars agree that the gospels do not appear in the New Testament in the order in which they were written. Even the most cursory reading of the four Biblical gospels soon reveals a number of chronological inconsistencies – not to mention stylistic and content differences.

The literary genre of “gospel” is anything but objective biography. The best that can be expected from these sources is a subjective representation of Jesus aimed at a particular community of believers. Gospels are not divine dictation of what happened or even “history” as we understand it today. The gospels are a
record of the developing traditions about Jesus from different communities. They are “layered” stories consisting of many elements – some going back to the historical figure of Jesus and others developed out of the experience of the early Christian community. As one becomes acquainted with the style, vocabulary, and theological emphasis of each evangelist, instances where they deviate from their own “agenda” jump out as being either out of place or obviously taken from another source.

The similarities and differences between Matthew, Mark, and Luke have given rise to what scholars call the “Synoptic Problem.” The synoptic or “common view” of these three texts leads to further questions not only about how similar they are in some places, but how different they are from one another and from John. The most obvious difference between the first three gospels and the Gospel according to John is the order of events:

### The Synoptic Gospels

- **Begins with John the Baptist**  
  - OR birth and childhood stories
- **Jesus is baptized by John**
- **Jesus speaks in parables and aphorisms**
- **Jesus is a sage**
- **Jesus is an exorcist**
- **The “Kingdom of God” is the theme of Jesus’ teaching**
- **Jesus has little to say about himself**
- **Jesus takes up the cause of the poor and oppressed**
- **Jesus’ public ministry: 1 year**
- **Temple incident: late in the story**
- **Jesus eats a last supper with his disciples**

### The Gospel of John

- **Begins with creation – no birth or childhood stories**
- **Baptism of Jesus assumed but not mentioned**
- **Jesus speaks in long, involved discourses**
- **Jesus is a philosopher and a mystic**
- **Jesus performs no exorcisms**
- **Jesus himself is the theme of his own teaching**
- **Jesus reflects at length on his own mission and person**
- **Jesus has little or nothing to say about the poor and oppressed**
- **Jesus’ public ministry: 3 years**
- **Temple incident: early in the story**
- **Foot washing instead of the last supper**

As one explores the chronological differences of the gospels, it also becomes clear that there is a completely different cast of characters in some places, different styles and vocabularies, and different political and theological agendas.
GENERAL GOSPEL CHARACTERISTICS

Mark:
The Storyteller. Jesus gives few speeches. The “mystery” of Jesus, the “hidden” Jesus is emphasized: “don’t tell anyone” is often on Jesus’ lips. Due to the story’s multiple geographical impossibilities, it seems probable that the author was never in Palestine.

Matthew:
The Teacher. Jesus gives five big speeches. The most “Jewish” of the gospels, Jesus is portrayed as a second Moses, mirroring the life experiences of the first Moses: exile in Egypt, killing of infants, mountaintop experiences, etc. Matthew’s telling is centered on the concept of the kingdom of heaven.

Luke:
The Historian. The author of Acts is, like Mark, also poor at geography. Luke’s Jesus emphasizes the poor, the outcast (like the shepherds) and the plight of women.

John:
The Greek. Contrasts “that which is above” and “that which is below” to the point of being almost Platonic. Jesus offers ethereal discourses about water, bread, birth, lambs, light, and himself. The split between Jews and Christians (not as evident in the Synoptics) rises to the point of anti-Semitism in some places in John.

THE TWO-SOURCE HYPOTHESIS
For years, careful readers have noted that wherever Matthew and Luke agree, they match Mark nearly word for word. In fact, Matthew reproduces nearly 90% of Mark and Luke copies about 50%. They often reproduce Mark in the same order. It became clear that Mark was written first and was creatively plagiarized by Matthew and Luke. However, each writer’s political and theological agenda influenced the telling of even stories copied from another source. Stories like the baptism of Jesus and the portrayal of Pilate change radically from Mark, to Matthew and Luke, to John. This becomes clear when comparing the gospels in a printed “parallel gospels” (or an interactive internet parallel like John Marshall’s: http://www.utoronto.ca/religion/synopsis/).

In addition to using Mark as a source, scholars have hypothesized a second source used by Matthew and Luke. Identified as “Q” (from the German for “source,” quelle), Matthew and Luke have approximately 200 “sayings” in common that are not taken from Mark. At first a “sayings” only gospel was denied as unlikely. Then, in 1947, the text of the Gospel of Thomas was discovered in Nag Hammadi – a gospel consisting only of sayings. That, along with other evidence, confirmed the possibility of “Q’s” existence as a “sayings gospel” and
furthered the notion of a “two-source” hypothesis, wherein Matthew and Luke drew from both Mark and “Q” in composing their gospels.

**The Synoptics and John**

The differences between the Gospel of John and the synoptic gospels have been recognized for centuries. Even Clement of Alexandria explained that the author of John was “urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit” to compose “a spiritual Gospel” (Eusebius, Hist. Eccl 4.14.7) as a complement to the “less spiritual” synoptics.

Although in her book, *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels makes an interesting case for John having been written as propaganda opposing the Gospel of Thomas, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that John was written to either complement or correct the synoptics. What remains clear is that the topography, order of events, location of events, the teaching style and themes of Jesus – as well as the very self-understanding of Jesus – are radically different in John.

**So Who Was Jesus?**

In the years after Easter a number of ways surfaced for understanding this remarkable individual called Jesus. Birth narratives were developed to express the disciples’ understanding of Jesus’ special origins. Sayings and events were elaborated upon that the evangelists knew Jesus would’ve said and done had he had the time or inclination. Much of what we know about Jesus and his life are not facts of history but images and metaphors – not historical but powerfully true nonetheless.
When Dom Crossan tells the story of Lincoln High School, he paints a picture of an idyllic tree-lined street at the end of which looms the marble-colonnaded entrance to the school. At the foot of the stairs is a large statue of the school’s namesake, Abraham Lincoln. In front of him is a large tree stump. Kneeling on the other side of the stump from Lincoln, eyes looking up in hope and expectation, is an African American slave. The slave’s arms are stretched wide so that the chains linking his wrists rest on the top of the stump. Feet planted firmly, lumberjack Lincoln stands poised with an axe above his head ready to come down and shatter the chains of the slave. The question he then asks is, “Did this happen?” Well, no, not literally. But is it true? Absolutely. The language of metaphor, parable, and artistic representations often express profound truths better than the raw historical data – a reality that the evangelist authors of the gospels knew well.

Messiah, Christ, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, true God of true God – verily, verily, I say unto you, the names for Jesus seem without number. And yet from the multitude of possibilities, “Son of God” language became one of the dominant metaphors for describing who Jesus was. Throughout the history of Israel all sorts of persons were referred to as “sons of God” in order to speak of their intimacy of relationship with the Divine. But with the birth stories of Jesus, the relational metaphor became biological and proceeded to become claims of divinity in John and the creeds of the early church. Taking such metaphors literally has a “trickle-down” effect, making theologians scramble to come up with concepts like the Trinity – a conceptual stretch that attempts to explain how both the claimed divinity of Christ and monotheism can co-exist.

The synoptics portray Jesus going to those who were hated and despised and declaring God’s love for the outcast and the negatively stereotyped. John attests to God having “so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son.” And while theologians have long debated Jesus’ true mission, that of apocalyptic prophet, sage teacher of wisdom, or sacrificial lamb, the variety of images and stories of Jesus seems to point to one reality: an experience of someone who is beyond all description while at the same time being the embodiment of that for which the deepest human yearnings strive.

All of this is to say that the evidence we have as to the identity, actions, mission, and vision of Jesus varies widely and wildly depending on the source and theological filter. At best, one can speak of the “lives” of Jesus rather than the life of Jesus. Our awareness of the origins of the gospels, the traditions which have formed our image of Jesus, and the continuing struggle of faithful people to understand the complexity and radical nature of Jesus’ message for the world are critical in understanding how we might live a Christian life today.
**DVD Discussion Questions**

*(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

**DVD Chapter 2:**
Levine describes some of the likely characteristics of Jesus. Make a list.

Borg suggests several generalizations about Jesus that have a “fairly high degree of probability.” List them.

What are some of the subversive & marginal characteristics of Jesus’ life and ministry described by Flunder, Scott, & Prejean?

What borders did Jesus cross in the gospel of Mark? To what purpose?

**DVD Chapter 3:**
What are some of the characteristics of the “Kingdom of God?”

Why would the alternative vision of Jesus’ Kingdom be so treasonous or threatening?

**DVD Chapter 4:**
Describe the differences between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus and their implications for Christian belief.

Why does Borg consider the empty tomb a “distraction” from a relationship with Jesus as a figure in the present?
Nakashima-Brock suggests that the early church was much more preoccupied with Jesus’ Divine-Human nature than it was with the “atonement.” Why?

**DVD Chapter 5:**
Describe some of the layers Flunder bemoans as obscuring the real Jesus.

**SPIRIT PRACTICE:**
“The Gospel according to...” with John Dominic Crossan
What message does Crossan get from the “four-fold” gospel?

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**
What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

**Consider the following questions as a group:**
What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

**PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**
Sit down and read the Gospel according to Mark straight through. Read slowly and soak in the images and stories. From your own experience and knowledge of the gospel story, note what you think is missing from Mark’s telling. What is different? Keep track of the places that made you stop and wonder or where you were certain it happened in a different way. Using a parallel gospel (all four gospels – or five including Thomas – lined up in columns) compare the other gospels with your notes in hand. What do the individual evangelists change? What stories have you internalized that are fleshed out by another gospel? How does this exercise change your understanding of the genre of “gospel?”
When I was sixteen, I went through training to become a senior lifeguard. The teacher and the three other students were 21 year-old male friends of my brother. My being paired with the largest one of them who was always extremely resistant to being “saved” during rescue exercises brought them all great glee and made me even more determined to do as good or better than everyone of them.

Toward the end of a grueling class one day, we each were to retrieve weights from the bottom of the pool and carry them back and forth across the pool three times. When I was almost back for the third time, the weights became too much and I went under momentarily.

The instructor yelled from the side, Drop the weights!” There was no way I was going to give them this satisfaction. Down I went again. “Drop the weights!” There was no way I was going to lose face with these men; no way I was going to fail. Close enough to almost touch the edge of the pool if I didn’t have the weights in my hand, I started the decent for the third time. For an instant, it seemed easier to hold on to something that could bring my death than face the threats, real or perceived, in life. In the midst of practicing to save others’ lives, I had a decision to make about my own. Would I cling to pieces of metal in order to make a point? Would I hold on to something worthless so I would not be deemed inadequate or less than?

I dropped those weights; made it to the side of the pool; and this event has been a metaphor I have revisited throughout my life. Often we are faced with life and death and for a time we choose death. We cling to weights that are worthless believing they allow us to “save face” or “fit in.” We cling to that which is familiar, but is not life giving.

Wisdom threatens us with life and whispers such questions and invitations to us as that subversive Galilean rabbi uttered: “Do you want to be made well?” “Sell all you have, give it to the poor, come and follow me.”

For Your Spiritual Journal:

How does Christ threaten your life or threaten you with life?

When is it easier to cling to that which is not life giving instead of reach out to that which is?
When do you hold fast to that which seems to bring you comfort, security, and/or status and are not willing to open your life, heart, resources to those who are struggling?

You may also want to read Threatened by Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan by Julia Esquivel.

Prayer
God of the manger and the marginalized, you have given us a precious gift in the life of Jesus. May we get into the Stories and discover the raw, nourishing and challenging truths. May we experience them in such a way that they become real to us and expressed in our lives. Hesitantly and hopefully we pray. Amen.

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk
6. A PASSION FOR CHRIST: PAUL THE APOSTLE

FOCUS: Little of what most people think of as Christianity has been untouched by the legacy of Paul’s writing and influence. The many understandings of his interpretation of Christianity continue to be re-examined in the 21st century.

Perhaps no single person is more responsible for the existence of Christianity as we know it today than that balding preacher from Tarsus whom we know as Paul.

Idolized by some as the conduit through which God dictated an eternal and unchanging moral code and discredited by others as a misogynist crank, Paul is without question one of the most controversial figures in the history of Christianity. But one thing can’t be questioned: his passion for Christ and his apparent willingness to risk life and limb in propagating his interpretation of Christ’s message and purpose. As very little, if any, of what most people think of as Christianity has been untouched by the influence of this itinerant tentmaker, a thorough examination of the changing understandings and significance of Paul’s writings and ideas is critical to a faithful expression of Christianity today.

THE LEGACY OF PAUL
From “opposing Cephas to his face” (Galatians 2:11) to stick-waving threats (1 Corinthians 4:21), it is abundantly clear from his own writings that Paul was never a stranger to controversy. His writings continue to spark controversy and debate to this day. Very little is known about this prolific writer of nearly a quarter of what has come to be known as the New Testament. What most people think we know about his life actually comes from Luke’s Acts of the Apostles. Acts conflicts in chronology and theological content in so many ways with the authentic writings of Paul as to be profoundly suspect in offering an accurate account of his life. According to Luke, his name was Saul when he was born in Tarsus of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). He may have been born to a Roman family who was committed to his Jewish education and upbringing. According to Luke, the young Saul studied in Jerusalem with Rabbi Gamaliel and persecuted those on “The Way” as heretics before experiencing a profound life-changing encounter with the Christ on the road to Damascus. As uncertain as these Lukan story elements are, they nonetheless express the conviction that Paul straddled two very different worlds and was uniquely situated to translate the universal message of a local Jewish sect into language that the whole world could embrace.

But his biography is by no means the most controversial aspect of Paul’s life. Reviled and discredited for writings attributed to him, he has the dubious honor of being one of the most admired and hated proponents of Christianity. Women, slaves, Jews, and homosexuals are just some of the many groups who can point
to Paul’s writings as having provided fodder for those who would defend an unjust and cruel status quo.

Much of what Paul is held negatively accountable for is, in fact, the work of others. Letters attributed to Paul have introduced the idea of Jesus as the divine savior from sin and set the foundation for a church that administers sacraments and ordains clergy. Likewise, Paul’s writings have been the springboard from which theologians have woven complex theories of blood atonement and recast the faith we now call Christianity into a religion “about” Jesus rather than the religion “of” Jesus. The first step in sorting out Paul’s social, theological and ecclesiastical legacy is to establish exactly what can be attributed to him and what cannot.

Genuine Paul
Paul’s authentic letters are the earliest writings in the New Testament. It is often a challenging leap for people conditioned by assumption and tradition to realize that the Gospels were written some twenty to forty (and perhaps fifty?) years after Paul’s letters.

The evidence that the Gospels were written later is clear in that the genuine Paul never quotes from the Gospels, seldom quotes Jesus (and then nothing from the Gospels), and never refers to the dramatic conversion experience testified to by Luke in Acts – an event one would think Paul would use as an example of conversion possibilities. Yet it also seems clear that Luke (and probably the other Gospel writers) were unaware of much of Paul’s life and ministry. None of Paul’s letters are mentioned in Acts. The language and theology of Paul’s speeches portrayed by Luke are so different in vocabulary and theology from the Paul of the authentic letters that it seems much of Luke’s Paul can be chalked up to “dramatic license.” Although the authentic Paul’s emphasis is on Justification and Reconciliation, Luke’s “Paul” preaches on Righteousness and Forgiveness. In other words, Luke’s Paul preaches in the theological language of Luke, not Paul.

Without Acts, the letters become our primary source of understanding the real Paul. However, many of the books attributed to Paul are either anonymous or pseudonymous. Analysis of the vocabulary, style, and theological focus of the letters attributed to Paul has led scholars to agree on seven letters as genuine “Paul.” All probably written in the 50s of the first century, they are: 1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans. 1 Thessalonians is probably the earliest and Romans the latest, most mature statement of Paul’s theological views.

While the superscription, “The letter of Paul to the…”, appears on many other letters, the use of the superscription can only be traced back to the second century CE and was most certainly used to lend credibility to an otherwise anonymous work. In Hebrews, Paul is mentioned only in the superscription and nowhere in the body of the letter. In Ephesians, both the superscription and the
interior mention Paul, but the content is so wildly different from the authentic letters, scholars agree that it is "pseudo" Paul.

You can still find theologians who will argue about the authenticity of Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, but most agree that Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus are later creations.

The two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus are good examples of “pseudo-Pauline” literature. Having come to be known as the Pastoral Epistles, many Bibles will still print the heading as “The Letter of Paul to Timothy or Titus.” But even the most cursory reading will reveal the profound differences between these Pastoral and the undisputed letters of Paul. The vocabulary, theology, and style of the Pastoral are closer to that of the second century’s early church fathers. The matter-of-fact discussion of church “order” (bishops, elders, deacons, etc) had not been established when Paul was writing in the 50s and perhaps 60s of the first century. In Paul’s day, Christians were still what might be called a Jewish reform movement, not a “church.” Reflecting a transition time from Paul’s loose community structure to the hierarchy of the second century church, these letters are best read keeping in mind their context and setting as post-Pauline works of the early Christian community.

**Someone Else’s Mail**

Although Paul’s letters are often read as if they are somehow letters to “us,” they are actually glimpses into the everyday circumstances of Paul’s efforts to oversee a fledgling movement 2000 years ago. Each of the authentic letters reveals a slice of Paul’s life never intended to be collected and venerated as they have in their role anchoring what has become the New Testament. Paul would undoubtedly be apoplectic if he knew that some of his letters, dashed off in impulsive outbursts at disobedient and wavering little faith communities were now held up as “holy” and as the “word of God.” The Peanuts comic strip character, Linus, was wise to express discomfort at reading Paul’s letters, saying, “I feel like I’m reading someone else’s mail.”

All the authentic letters of Paul were “occasional,” having been written in response to a particular situation, with the content of the letters were generated by the circumstances and actions of a particular set of folks in each community. In many cases it is clear that someone like “Chloe’s people” (1 Corinthians 1:11) have snitched or written a letter to Paul, the contents of which compel him to respond in writing. Romans, the only letter written to a church Paul didn’t start, was a letter of introduction to a church he intended to visit and wanted to “butter up” before he arrived. As such, Romans stands out as the most comprehensive statement of Paul’s theology, independent of particular crises.

While never intended to be universal manuals for Christian behavior, Paul’s letters are nonetheless invaluable in guiding and shaping the lives of Christian individuals and communities. For instance, the only reason we have the written
details of celebrating the “Lord’s Supper” as a community is because the Corinthians weren’t doing it right. Paul sets them straight in 1 Corinthians 11 and casts the model for the practice of communion in the institutionalized church.

**THEOLOGICAL SHENANIGANS**

Paul’s major themes of grace, faith, freedom, and Christ crucified are interwoven through his letters. However, much of Paul’s writing remains cryptically dense or repetitive to many. Theological projections from later developments or outright mistranslations often obscure Paul’s original meaning. A case in point is Paul’s concept of faith. Translators, often influenced by theological developments in the later church, are also restricted by the limits of language. The English word translated as “faith” is *pistis* in Greek. For Paul, *pistis* was less something to “possess” than it was a concept that included a whole way of living. “Having” faith in the way it is spoken of today would have been foreign to Paul. However, no English word exists to translate the breadth of meaning suggested by Paul. Professor J. Paul Sampley has suggested “faithing” as a better translation of *pistis* while others have suggested “faithfulness” as a better word. Far from simply indulging in esoteric theological shenanigans, such a distinction can have profound implications.

In the grammatically confusing context of Romans 3:22, *pistis* can be interpreted in two very different ways. Overall, Paul was interested in the “faithfulness (or faithing) of Jesus” and his obedience to death. However, instead of being translated as the faith “of” Jesus, Romans 3:22 is translated as faith “in” Jesus, essentially suggesting “right belief” as the priority. Believing “in” Jesus and faithing the way Jesus did are amazingly different translations of the same passage. Such choices in translation can and have contributed to Christianity’s emphasizing an aspect of discipleship Paul may never have intended.

**HARD TO UNDERSTAND**

“So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.”

– 2 Peter 3:15-16

Paul’s writings remain a mystery to many Christians today. Full of seemingly contradictory concepts, Paul preached a radical grace as God’s law-opposing work in the world. He advocated a freedom that doesn’t equal the absence of restraints, but responsibility in love. Some readers are frustrated by Paul the polemicist, who often squares off when cornered and overstates his argument in triplicate twelve times over until his opponent’s case is beaten down or neutered. In addition, Paul’s efforts to translate Hebrew concepts into a Greco-Roman cosmology can sometime leave the reader wondering where he is going.
Even the pre-eminent Pauline bumper sticker, “Christ crucified,” meant to be a shocking oxymoron in Paul’s day, seems pedestrian and old hat today. In part because its importance has been commandeered by literal interpreters of scripture and in part because of our distance culturally from Jesus’ and Paul’s world, such phrases have lost their edge and become simple litmus tests of right belief. The idea of Christ crucified for today’s progressive Christian can be lost in light of gross literal overstatements like Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ.” Yet Christ crucified and the resurrection still hold power for the likes of Marcus Borg, who claims them as “the metaphorical embodiment of the path of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new identity.”

Human beings have a capacity for self-destruction that Paul saw as being altered only by the grace of God.

For Paul, due to the grace of God and not merit of our own earning, we are

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<td>Sinners</td>
<td>reconciled</td>
<td>perfect (complete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungodly</td>
<td>“in Christ”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the midst of all this, Paul speaks of our solidarity with Jesus, having died with Christ to sin (as opposed to Christ having died for our sins). Freed from the “no longer,” we are unfinished creatures living in the “now” that the Divine will complete in the “not yet.” Those who have died in Christ will be finished as they press on, “faithing” and participating in the faithfulness of Jesus.

All of this leads to one of the most important aspects of Paul’s teaching, namely, that as a by-product of grace, there is hope. In both the courtroom language of “justification” and the familial language of “reconciliation,” Paul expresses a belief in a God who is up to something in the world. It’s not about people believing in extraordinary things, but about people being in a renewed relationship with the Divine and with their fellow human beings. As one unpacks Paul’s “Christ in me” and “Christ in us” language, we get a glimpse of the almost mystical sense in which Paul felt God “participates” in our lives and we “participate” in God. As such, we are profoundly interconnected as the body of Christ and called to participate in God’s program of making the reign of God real in the world.

Try as one might, it’s hard to pin down a real center or core truth to Paul’s message. However, if one embraces the many different facets tugging and pulling at one another in creative tension, a student of Paul can begin to sense his passion for Christ and his grace-drenched hope for the human enterprise.

Paul’s confidence in the future was based solidly on his perception of what God had done in the past and had promised for the future. Paul lived believing that
what God had begun would be completed sometime in the “not yet.” In the meantime, the form in which one’s faith is best expressed is in a love that cuts across social orders and barriers, a grace that heals all divisions, and a hope that can overcome all the violence, injustice, and grief the world can muster.

DVD Discussion Questions
(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story and opening sequence)

DVD Chapter 2:
Flunder points out that Paul was a man in transition. Explain.

What are some of the benefits Levine describes Paul using in promoting his message to the people of his day and age?

DVD Chapter 3:
According to Varghese, what was Paul’s passion?

According to Cobb, what is so crucial about Paul’s message?

DVD Chapter 4:
What are the seven authentic letters of Paul?

The role of women is just one example of a teaching that is confused by later authors claiming Paul’s authority. Explain.

Describe the attributes and purpose of what Crossan calls the “three different Pauls.”
**DVD Chapter 5:**
According to Nelson, what did Paul warn against when considering “the letter of the Law?”
Describe some of the characteristics of Paul’s message and its similarity to the “alternative wisdom” taught by Jesus.

Name two ways in which the notion of “Christ crucified” challenges conventional wisdom.

**DVD Chapter 6:**
Elaborate on how the concept of “pistis” being mistranslated as “faith in Jesus” (as opposed to the “faith of Jesus”) has shaped Christianity as a whole.

**SPIRITPRACTICE:**
“Risk Taking” with Potter Roger Strom.

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**
What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

**Consider the following questions as a group:**
What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?
One of the most beautiful, helpful and challenging metaphors for understanding the family of God is the body.


For your daily prayer time this week, create a body of Christ candle grouping.

You will need:
- Thirteen candles – each a different color or set on different color stands or saucers
- A platter or cookie sheet that will hold all the candles and stands (the platter reminds us that all the members of the body are united into one body).
- A lighter.
- Body of Christ Prayer Sheet.

Fill out the prayer sheet included on the next page. When you have created your candle grouping and completed your prayer sheet, place them where you will have your prayer time. During your prayer time, light each candle and hold each person or group in your prayers.

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk
Body of Christ Prayer

List a person or group who would fit each category for you.

A person or group

Who speaks their mind: _________________________________

With whom you disagree: _________________________________

Who is in need: _________________________________

Who lives peacefully: _________________________________

Who brings great joy: _________________________________

Who is an encourager: _________________________________

Who needs encouragement: _________________________________

Who gives sacrificially: _________________________________

Who is unwelcome someplace: _________________________________

Who is the bearer of hope: _________________________________

Who is a leader in your faith community: _________________________________

Whose life is a sermon: _________________________________

Yourself: _________________________________
7. Out into the World: Challenges Facing Progressive Christians

**FOCUS:** There is a reformation afoot in Christianity – a re-visioning of the traditional understandings of Jesus, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and the Christian life as a whole. Long held ideas of divinity and of faith are changing and evolving to reflect 21st century thought and spirituality. Inspired by these fresh insights, progressive Christians can claim a distinctive voice by being in solidarity with the poor, countering the idolatry of wealth, practicing non-violence, and by seeking justice and inclusivity in a culture dominated by fear.

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**A Progressive World**

“Stagnation in thought or enterprise means death for Christianity as certainly as it does for any other vital movement. Stagnation, not change, is Christianity’s most deadly enemy, for this is a progressive world.”

– Harry Emerson Fosdick (1922)

For medieval Europeans, it was understood that famines and plagues were sent by God as punishment for sin. Wars were divine earthly retribution. Feudalism, absolute monarchy, and slavery were ordained by God. In the not too distant past those seeking medical help submitted themselves to physicians who slit the skin to “bleed” patients and let the bad “humours” escape. The Bible was cited in turning women away from the polls and relegating African Americans to church balconies. The invention of the lightning rod was vehemently denounced by clergy as unwarranted interference with God’s use of lightning.

How the world has changed! Today, we take for granted wireless phones, ease of travel, education for our children, and miracles of medicine. Daily work and life are inconceivable without our computers, cars, comfortable homes, and instant communication. We’ve long-since left the idea of a flat earth and a three-tiered cosmos behind – and we wouldn’t dream of going back a thousand years. And yet many Christians today make it proof of their faith and a litmus test of their relationship with God that they embrace thousand-year-old religious ideas – and are proud of it.

In virtually every field of human endeavor, new discoveries are praised. Not so with religion. In no area of life other than religion is the denial of progress held up as a virtue. Somehow, the way it was in days-gone-by holds a mysterious authority over people. 21st century believers faithfully recite creeds reflecting arcane fourth century questions with little thought given to the political and theological terrain that spawned the creeds in the first place.
When the Bible is held up as a final authority trumping all other arguments, it is good to remember that the early church didn’t have any Bible beyond Hebrew Scripture. It was a small gathering of people who sought a deeper understanding of and relationship with the divine. Across the Mediterranean, they gathered in small communities around the teachings and person of Jesus and thus developed the foundations of what we know as Christianity out of their own experience and insight.

What most people “know” about the Bible or understand about religion today has been cobbled together out of assumptions, insecurity, and long-held half-memories that have little basis in rational thought. That being the case, the resistance some people have to expanding their religious horizons can be fiercely irrational. New understandings are feared and discredited: “don’t mess with what I’ve believed since I was a child!”

But even the Bible is full of examples of changing perceptions and descriptions of the divine/human relationship. Not only does the character of Jesus change from one Gospel to the next – sometimes profoundly – but the very nature of the Divine changes over the course of the Biblical story. While wandering in the desert, the Hebrews carried God around in a box. When that proved vulnerable to enemy attack, God was promoted to a throne in the sky above. The God known as Yahweh evolves from a tribal mountain God beating up on Pharaohs and passing down culture-bound rules into a universal God who shows grace to all – a God that Paul had difficulty convincing James, the brother of Jesus, and Peter himself to accept.

The whole of scripture is awash with change, change, and more change. Yet the fallacy that Christianity is a static belief system offering absolute truths for the true believer remains the overwhelmingly predominant message preached and believed by many in the West today.

**FROM LITERAL TO METAPHORICAL**

"By doubting, we come to inquire and by inquiry we arrive at truth."

— Peter Abelard

Over the centuries, much of our perception of the Divine has been driven by fear, tribalism, and our own prejudices. The God many of us grew up worshipping simply does not exist. When theologian Paul Tillich popularized the phrase “the Ground of Being” to describe the Divine, he, too, was wrestling with a reality we all have to face: using clumsy human terms and metaphors to describe the indescribable. While many Christians continue to cling to an image of God as a coercive and wrathful Middle Eastern potentate, others are progressing toward a more metaphorical understanding of divinity.

Many people may be surprised that a non-literal and metaphorical understanding of scripture has been the norm in academic and mainline Protestant clergy.
circles for over a hundred years. But out of fear or ease of maintaining the status quo, many clergy are apologetic and simply not honest with their people about what they learned in seminary. Meanwhile, mainline Protestant churches have, as a whole, not fared well in the last forty years membership-wise. It can be argued that many of those who have left the church altogether are thinking people who can no longer weather the shallow and watered-down theology being preached so as to avoid controversy. One of the fastest growing segments of American demographics seems to be what Bishop Jack Spong calls “the church alumni/ae association.”

Meanwhile, conservative churches spoon-feed people rigid doctrines and unchanging “truths” and grow by leaps and bounds – mainly because people are desperately looking for just one place in this crazy life where things don’t change. Ironically, many of the primary doctrines of modern fundamentalist Christians, including the rapture, pre and post-millennial dispensationalism, and other apocalyptic schemes have their primary source in the relatively recent Scofield Reference Bible of 1909. A vast amount of intellectual energy is spent combing the scriptures for passages that support the notion that the Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself were in on this secret knowledge from the beginning of time.

To insist upon the unchanging nature of Christian doctrines and “the way we’ve always done it” will continue to drive thinking people – young and old alike – out of the church. They who refuse to put their minds and personal experience on hold will not be long for church as it exists today. Those who are not allowed to utilize the same faculties on their spiritual journey that they would use in every other part of life have too much integrity to be part of an institution that isn’t honest.

Yet there’s no denying that while we express it in many different ways, most people are “wired” to be spiritual. We long to find others who are wired in similar ways that we might advance our mutual understanding to the next level, perchance to change the world for the better.

But if we take seriously the words of Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” most people are living spiritually worthless lives – unexamined, unquestioned, and uninspired. Out of sheer laziness, they let themselves be led down the primrose path of this religious idea or that, all in the quest for the faith that will prop up their previously held prejudices and justify their own narrow-minded and parochial perspective on the world. At best, they find a group that in the finest of self-help traditions gets them off drugs, drinking, or a penchant for infidelity. But acceptance is more often than not gained by submitting to the influence of some ultra-personalized God who can only be accessed through one particular incantation, prayer, or belief-system. Gathered together in cultural and theological ghettos, many are satisfied with congratulating one another on how right they are while discrediting and damning the beliefs of the rest of the world.
Many of these popular approaches to being Christian focus on following the rules and on being "good." Yet a focus on being good is often misdirected into a legalism that makes one’s acceptability conditional – God’s willingness to be in relationship with us is reduced to a measure of how well we adhere to a set of rules.

BELIEVING VS. RELATIONSHIP
When John Paton tried to translate the New Testament into the indigenous language of the people to whom he was sent as a missionary, he ran into a snag: there was no word for "believe" in the people’s language. When one of the natives came in and draped himself over a chair, he stretched out and rested his legs on another chair. Relaxed, he commented on how good it felt to "lean his whole weight on" those chairs. Immediately, Paton knew he had the word he would use for “believe”: to “lean one’s whole weight on.”

Similarly, the Greek and Latin roots of the word "believe" mean “to give one’s heart to.” Believing doesn’t necessarily mean giving one’s mental assent, but something deeper – giving one’s self at its deepest level. In our friendships and relationships with significant others, we don’t “believe” in the other person (at least the way we talk about “believing” in God) – we are in a dynamic, fluid relationship. We learn more all the time, depend on one another, learn to give and take, and spend time with one another out of sheer enjoyment.

Believing does NOT mean putting your allegiance in with a set of doctrines or teachings: it means moving from a secondhand religion of following rules to a firsthand religion of relationship, from having heard about Jesus to being in a dynamic and fluid relationship with the Spirit of Christ. The day of Christians living in fear, intimidated by some vague sense of guilt that our Creator is waiting to punish us somehow, is obsolete. We have something other than fear to "lean our whole weight on."

But what is Christianity without "right belief" and the fear of punishment for doing wrong? A criticism often leveled at Jesus and other "liberal" thinkers has been, “You tolerate everything but intolerance!” In fact, progressive Christians cannot tolerate injustice, abuse or exploitation, and are actively committed to eradicating evil in all its forms — including hatred, discrimination and violence. The heart of this “way” is compassion, hospitality, and the embracing of diversity – not for their own sake, but because such behavior was modeled by Jesus putting people before the rules. He was about moving beyond belief to relationship.

WHAT WOULD JUSTICE DEMAND?
When the prophet Micah observed that ritual had become an end in itself in Israel, he determined that the people had lost the essence of their faith. Without justice, human beings cannot live together as God intended. Without kindness and mercy, life is unbearable. And unless one walks humbly in the presence of
the mystery we call God, we are likely to be humbled in ways we least expect. And so, Micah poses the question that stands at the heart of Jesus’ ministry:

“And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

– Micah 6:8

Jesus’ life was about living out Micah's call. We don’t prove our faith in God by blind and unquestioning duty to rules. Blind obedience to rules, in fact, gets in the way of faith – because the temptation is to mistake the rules for God.

Perhaps a less saccharine alternative to the popular “What Would Jesus Do?” campaign would be the Micah-inspired “What Would Justice Demand?” It’s good to be good – but not because it’s the rules to be good. Doing right is what is best for us and for others.

It’s in determining what that “best” is that we see the wisdom of understanding the religious life as a journey. Jesus’ early followers were called those who were on “the way,” suggesting that our spiritual lives are not about following rules or being “saved” so much as they are about life-long journeys of transformation.

VITAL FAITH
In the early 20th century, Harry Emerson Fosdick was an eloquent spokesperson for progressive Christianity. He preached sermons that even eighty years later would prove scandalous in many of our churches. Fosdick tells the story of meeting a young man for a walk in Central Park. “I’m jealous of your faith,” said the young man. “I’m afraid to ask questions, because I was raised in a faith that provided all the answers and to ask questions is to show unfaithfulness.” Coming upon a reflecting pool, Fosdick mused, “Son, your faith is like this pool: calm, bordered, shallow – you always know what it’s going to look like and what the boundaries are. But it’s not a “living” faith. It’s not going anywhere. Vital faith is like a stream bubbling up from a well deep within the earth. As it makes its way, it twists and turns, sometimes changes course, is shallow and slow in some places and fast and turbulent in others, responding to the geographical reality. It’s joined by the waters of other streams and together they make their way back to their source.”

Stagnation, not change, is Christianity’s deadliest enemy. Vital faith has always been dynamic, flowing, and moving. So, one of the biggest challenges for thinking Christians today is facing those who conceive of “true” Christianity as something that never changes. While many faith communities have invested untold energy arguing over changing the style of liturgy and music used in worship, what really needs to be addressed are many of the basic theological tenets espoused by that liturgy and music.
To change those theological underpinnings and recast Christianity as something fluid in nature is going to require a readjustment in thinking for many religious people. Many will not be able to do it out of fear alone. People keep trying, desperately, to hold on to old conceptions as if their eternal life depended on it. But there are alternatives.

**Living the Questions**

“Don't search for the answers...live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

– Ranier Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Despite the tirades of legalistic preachers, the Christian life is not about believing the right stuff or even about being “good.” It's about a relationship with the Divine and with one another. It’s a relationship that does not leave us unchanged, but transforms us into more and more compassionate beings – as Paul writes, into “the likeness of Christ” (2 Corinthians 3:18). It’s not about having all the answers, but about wrestling with and living the great questions of life. When our experience of God becomes limited to memorizing creeds and quoting beliefs, we fail to experience the depth that Christianity has to offer.

While media-savvy fundamentalists preach absolute certainty and would have people believe that theirs is the one "true" faith, Christianity remains an amazingly diverse enterprise as we enter into the 21st century. In contrast to those who preach absolute certainty, there are those who are convinced that there’s something more to Christianity than what they’ve experienced in the past. They are a group of seekers who have a “hunch” about this Jesus. They are not pre-occupied with their own eternal well-being so much as they long to change the world to reflect this Jesus’ vision of the reign of God.

These seekers are comfortable with ambiguity and understand that through difficulties, mistakes, and challenges, it’s finally the journey that is important and what we learn along the way in relationship to the Divine and to one another. It takes work as we go down the road, sharing our experiences, our questions, and our uncertainties with one another and with God. And grace comes in the midst of the search, as we journey down the road together. As Bishop Fulton Sheen observed so many years ago, “The questions of God may ultimately be more satisfying than the answers of [men and women].”

As a corollary to what Bishop Jack Spong calls the “killing certainties” of fundamentalist Christianity, it is good to remember the words of the great mystic pastor and poet, Howard Thurman: “Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”
The challenge of progressive Christianity in the 21st century will be to “come alive,” mustering the courage, wisdom, and resources to be a beacon of faithful thoughtfulness for those who have otherwise given up, been hurt by slavish adherence to church doctrine, or otherwise become members of the Church alumni/ae association.

When UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in his journal, Markings, he often expressed the core sentiments held by many exploring progressive Christianity:

“I don’t know Who - or what - put the question, I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone - or Something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.”

To “live the questions” is to live into that same sense of ambiguity and certainty, of faith and doubt -- that is at the heart of progressive Christianity. Inspired by insights that are at once fresh and ancient, progressive Christians can claim a distinctive voice in the 21st century by being in solidarity with the poor, countering the idolatry of wealth, practicing non-violence, and by seeking justice and inclusivity in a culture dominated by suspicion and fear. In so doing, we may discover that the path of true wisdom is not just asking the questions for which there are no answers, but in living the questions which shape our faith, our lives, and our world.

DVD Discussion Questions
(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:
According to Varghese, what are the characteristics of being “authentically” Christian?

If progressive Christians need to “get a message” and be intentional about sharing the faith that we have, what are some of the core points of that message?

What are some of the “dimensions of emerging progressive Christianity” Butler Bass talks about?
Meyers talks about the attributes of the Early Church and how people were “animated by the Spirit.” Discuss some of the ways you are “animated by the Spirit.”

**DVD Chapter 3:**
Describe some of the ways Townes suggests that we can “live our faith.”

According to Mel White, what do we need to “let go” of?

Why might claiming “what we’re not” be a bad strategy for progressive Christians?

Elaborate on how being centered in “Spirit and Wisdom” and “Compassion and Justice” express the core values of the Christian Life.

**DVD Chapter 4:**
According to Brueggemann, what are the three definitive marks of the church which have been kept “secret” and for which so many have been hungering?

Why is “being in solidarity with the poor” often a characteristic of vital faith communities?

Describe what Flunder calls “the last real blind spot on the Body of Christ.”
Levine suggests that we “try to see through each other’s eyes” and still reach an agreement that leads to wholeness for real people. Discuss.

**SPIRIT PRACTICE:**
“Grassroots organizing” with No Longer Silent (www.nolongersilent.org)

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**
What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

**Consider the following questions as a group:**
What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS:**
**In your community (faith or otherwise)**
Plant a Peace Pole. Over 200,000 poles proclaiming “May Peace Prevail on Earth” in multiple languages have been planted the world over. Information on ordering a peace pole can be found at [http://www.peacepoles.com/](http://www.peacepoles.com/). Ideas for locations and other elements of planting a peace pole can be found at [http://www.worldpeace.org/peacepoles.html](http://www.worldpeace.org/peacepoles.html).
Personally:
Socially responsible investments. Assuming that some participants of “Living the Questions” have personal investments, mutual funds, and pension plans administered by others, take time to review what your investments are supporting. There are a number of mutual funds and other services that put a priority on the environment, corporate ethics, and human rights while avoiding investments that support the military industrial complex and unsustainable energies.


BONUS READING

“Your thought is a tree rooted deep in the soil of tradition and whose branches grow in the power of continuity.
My thought is a cloud moving in the space.
It turns into drops which, as they fall,
    form a brook that sings its way into the sea.
    Then it rises as vapor into the sky.

Your thought is a fortress that neither gale nor the lightning can shake.
My thought is a tender leaf that sways in every direction
    and finds pleasure in its swaying.

Your thought is an ancient dogma that cannot change you
    nor can you change it.
My thought is new, and it tests me and I test it morn and eve.
    You have your thought and I have mine.”

– Kahlil Gibran
Read Matthew 3:13 – 4:11

Take a piece of paper (you may want to use a large piece of paper or two pieces that fit in your journal) and create ten columns, numbering them 1 – 10. Under each heading, list as many responses as you can under the following headings:

List the positive aspects/qualities of:

1. Your relationship with Christ.
2. The name of “Christian.”

List:

3. Stories/people who you know as part of your Christian heritage – the person may have lived in the 14th century and you know their writings or that person may be your grandmother.
4. Meaningful/transforming/healing stories of Christ

List the names of people or groups who:

5. Need an invitation to something meaningful
6. Need to hear of/experience hope
7. Need an advocate

List:

8. Ways you can and do show God’s grace
9. Ways you are or could be involved in peacemaking in your home, church, city, country and world
10. Ways you can and do show the joy of being loved by God

After you have made your lists, please continue reading.

After Jesus was baptized by John, he was declared “God’s beloved.” This was not just a name or expression of endearment. In this time of being named and
claimed, he was empowered by God to withstand temptation and rely upon God. Jesus could speak the truth even when that was not the easiest path.

A Christian is one who places their trust in Christ/who follows Christ’s teachings and manifests those teachings with the choices of their lives. Our journeys as Christians begin in the waters of baptism where we are also named and claimed as God’s beloved. It is good to revisit those baptismal waters and claim our belovedness, but as soon as the watermark dries, we began to forget. Constantly, we need to remember.

It is also beneficial to revisit why we are Christians and what we have to offer the world. The most visible and vocal expressions of Christianity may be far different from your beliefs, but what you have discovered and experienced about God through Christ needs to be shared with the world.

You have just revisited your heritage, what being a Christian is for you, what you have to offer/do offer, and have listed some of the people who need to experience the good news.

CLAIM the name and heritage
ARTICULATE stories that transform and heal
WELCOME everyone
ADVOCATE for those in need
LIVE hope, joy, compassion and peace

Prayer

Bold and Loving God, so often we rush in remembering and are stingy in sharing stories. We fail to realize the raw, transforming power in the sharing and in the hearing. So often we want to distance ourselves from Christians whose beliefs are far different from ours. In that distancing, we often distance ourselves from Christ and the opportunities to be a witness to his life and love. Give us words and courage. Give us a heart for others. And help us, O God to share your love with wild abandon. In the name of Christ who lived fully and cared deeply. Amen.

– Cynthia Langston Kirk