

The Emerging Christian Way

Session 3

Welcome! In this session we will reflect on chapter 7, "Paying Homage: Being Christian in a World of Many Faiths" by Bruce Sanguin, and chapter 9, "Social Justice and a Spirituality of Transformation" by Bill Phipps.

Lenten Book Study Guide prepared by Norm Hennig-Pereira
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Group or Individual Reflection

Reading

(To be read aloud by a member of the group)

As part of his sermon on the mount, Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

(Matthew 6:25-34 New Revised Standard Version)

Meditation

In the above passage, Jesus uses images of nature to reflect on anxiety, more particularly the fear of want. Reflect on those images again, think about their relationship to their environment and the things that surround them, think about their lives, their needs and resources, their life-cycles; focus your open-hearted attention on their world, what other insights do these images have to offer? When you think about the challenges and questions you face, could you imagine going to a great living thing like a tree, a stream, an eagle, or a mountain, and seeking guidance from them, their living example? (Adapted from Tim Scorer p. 44)

Hymn to Matter (adapted from Teilhard de Chardin)

Blessed are you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock: you who force us to work if we would eat.

Blessed are you, perilous matter, restless sea, untameable passion: you who unless we work with you will devour us.

Blessed are you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution, reality ever new-born; you who, by constantly challenging our mental categories, cause us to go ever further and further in our pursuit of truth.

Blessed are you universal matter, immeasurable time, boundless ether, triple abyss of stars and atoms and generations: you who by overflowing and stretching our narrow mindsets reveal to us the fathomless dimensions of God.

"The God we know through our open hearts and through this emerging paradigm calls us into a loving and ever-deepening relationship with creation, which still holds us and sustains us in spite of our not be-friending it."

- Tim Scorer, p. 44



Bruce Sanguin

"I believe that the deeper we go into our own faith system, the closer we get to God, and the closer we get to God, the more we are informed by values of diversity, inclusivity, and respect for the inherent dignity of other people and faiths."

p. 140

Time of Sharing

Look at the creeds on page 3 of this guide. If you were asked to write a creed, based on these two creeds and your experience, what would you want to include in your own creed? What ideas in the creeds challenge you?

Questions for Reflection

Chapter 7, Bruce Sanguin

1. What are or were your first impressions of this chapter? What did you like about the chapter? What did you find that was reassuring? What was disturbing? Why?
2. Sanguin focuses on the Magi and Herod, how do you feel about the contrast that he sets up on page 140 between the apparently open worldview of the Magi and the paranoid worldview of Herod?
3. What would we have to gain if we "enjoyed the security of [our] own faith system sufficiently that [we] could pay homage to another"? What might we lose? How do we gain that security, what would it take?
4. How could Sanguin's approach to other faiths be used in living in Fox's post-denominational ideal?
5. Is Sanguin postulating the step after Fox's post-denominational ideal, to a post-religion or perhaps a kind of meta-religion ideal?

Chapter 9, Bill Phipps

1. What are or were your first impressions of Bill Phipp's chapter? What did you like about the chapter? What did you find that was reassuring? What was disturbing? Why?
2. Lord Baden Powell founded the scouting movement in the early 1900s on the belief that "The religion of a man is not the creed he professes but his life - what he acts upon, and knows of life, and his duty in it. A bad man who believes in a creed is no more religious than the good man who does not." How does this compare to what Phipps advocates in terms of acting into belief, "how we live what we say we believe" is more important than what we say? What are the benefits and pitfalls of such an approach to faith? *

Notes

***More to think about** ... even within the emerging Christian way there are divergent elements. Attached to this week's guide is an article from the Vancouver Sun describing two different interpretations of what it means to be Christian today on the emerging way, that of Bruce Sanguin and that of Greta Vosper.

3. How do you respond to Phipps' statement, "... our 'spiritual' and 'faith' heroes are more often known and respected for their compassion, openness, questioning, and listening to new truths than they are for correct belief, perfect practice, or elegant statements of faith" (p. 162)? As you reflect on your spiritual/faith heroes how true is the statement in your experience?
4. How do you relate to Phipps' view on perfection (p. 163)?
5. On page 166, Phipps quotes Reinhold Niebuhr, an American theologian from the previous century:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime, therefore, we must be saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love."

What are your reactions to the Niebuhr quote? What do you think he means by the word saved? How does Niebuhr's perspective make you feel about the path to transforming the world around us for the better?"

5. With humility and a spirituality of letting go of our inflated, arrogant view of ourselves, and by accepting ourselves as but a part of creation, there is a greater possibility for genuine social transformation toward peace with justice." Is there tension between what Phipps says here, and Sanguin's idea of being better grounded in the faith, or will Phipps perspective aid in being able to pay homage to other faiths?



Bill Phipps

"Out of the crucible of seeking the truth in love, of working for a more just and peaceful world, our beliefs are refined by the realities of our earthly condition."

p. 164

Creeds to Ponder

We believe, and put our trust in God, Creator and Sustainer of all things, from the farthest-flung galaxies to the most microscopic forms of life; God is above and around and within every one of us, and yet so far beyond us in transcendence that our minds cannot fathom the mystery and our only response is wonder and worship.

And we believe God sent Jesus, anointing him in the power of the Spirit, to declare by word and deed the gospel of personal and social liberation from the power of fear and all injustice and oppression. Though he was truly and unjustly murdered, God raised him from death and God's seal is set forever on Jesus' message and ministry. In him we know that God is love, and that forgiveness and acceptance are ours always. In him we are called to realize God's kingdom in our own lives and in the lives of others. In him we are called to join with God in making all things new. We believe God has granted to us and to all humanity the same Spirit that was in Jesus, creating community and empowering us to be like him.

We believe in a dimension of existence yet to come. We seek to build God's kingdom here, but we also look beyond to a day when wars will end and God's New Jerusalem will be revealed. We believe. God help our unbelief.

"I challenge readers to take the time to create a creed for themselves. Discuss it and improve upon it with others. Simplify!"

- Tom Harpur, p. 63-4

A New Creed

(United Church of Canada)

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.

We believe in God:

who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

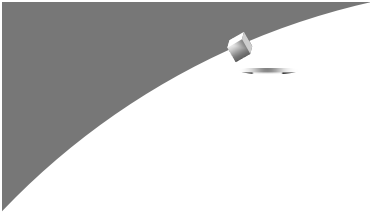
We are called to be the Church:

to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.



“We accomplish in our lifetimes only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete ... But it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God’s grace to enter ... We are prophets of a future not our own ...”

- Oscar Romero, p 165

Gleanings

What have you learned? How do you feel in general and about what you have discussed? Have you noticed a change in the way you feel from the beginning of this discussion to the end? If yes, describe the change. What are some of the insights that you will be taking home from this discussion?

Notes



Closing Prayer

One: May the Lord bless what we have shared this day to our enlightenment and growth.

All: May the Lord grant our hearts’ desires for those we love, the human family and the whole of Creation.

One: We pray for

(The prayer continues with members sharing a concern or name. After each concern is expressed, the group responds with ...)

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

(After all the prayers have been shared, the leader closes with ...)

One: Lord, hear our prayers, keep our desire for wisdom alive, help us to listen, act and grow, that all our days would be blessed with shalom—wholeness and peace.

All: Amen.

Lily of the Valley By Trisha Shears

Next Week: Chapters 14 and the Conclusion

In a discussion of modern technology and the young I was once asked “what is an important skill that ought to be taught in our schools?”, at the time I replied the ability to evaluate information critically. If I were to be asked the same question for the spiritual realm, it would be similar, though here it is called “discernment”. When the answers are not clear, when there are no directives from the keepers of “the truth”, it is important for people to be able to discern appropriate actions and directions. In Chapter 14, “Spiritual Discernment”, Nancy Greeves begins to flesh out that skill for us. :: Norm

'Progressive Christians' duke it out in print

An in-your-face Torontonionian wants to debunk divinity and focus on ethics; a Vancouverite urges a more sacred path

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Douglas Todd

Vancouver Sun

There's nothing like a good dust-up between friends -- especially when they're Christians. A theological battle is springing up among Canada's "progressive Christians" after the splashy publication of the best-selling new book by Toronto United Church Rev. Gretta Vosper.

Published with media fanfare by HarperCollins, Vosper's book aims, as she says, to provoke "a confrontation." Her wish to disturb is captured by her title: **With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe.**

In a nutshell, *With or Without God* argues the Christian church should stop using the word "God" and put "Jesus Christ" on the shelf -- because both have so many terrible connotations of myth and patriarchy as to not only be useless, but dangerous.

Instead of exploring Christian "belief" in the transcendent possibilities associated with "God" and a cosmic Christ, Vosper argues at length her church should debunk divinity and focus on ethics; on community, justice and truth.

In increasingly secularized Canada, especially British Columbia, it turns out another United Church thinker, Bruce Sanguin of Vancouver, has also just published a book addressing similar challenges. But Sanguin sets out a dramatically different, more openly sacred, path for progressive Christians.

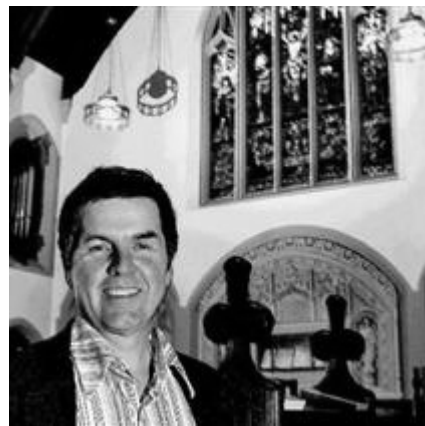
In a country where almost three out of four claim to be Christian but far fewer attend church, both of these bright and passionate United Church ministers are trying to revive the liberal Christian option.

Both boldly distinguish themselves from Biblically literalistic conservative Christians, from George W. Bush to James Dobson, who maintain the saving power of Christ is the only route to forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Even though Vosper and Sanguin equally criticize the church's heavy-handed methods over 2,000 years, Sanguin's goal in **The Emerging Church: A Model for Change & a Map for Renewal** (CopperHouse) is to

challenge readers not to abandon talk of God, but to pursue an evolutionary Christian theology.

Intriguingly, Sanguin, pastor at Canadian Memorial United Church and the Centre for Peace at 15th and Burrard, was once the pastor at West Hill United Church in Toronto,



CREDIT: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun, Files
Vancouver's Bruce Sanguin pursues intellectually defensible ways to redeem God and Jesus from the conservatives.

where Vosper has for years been preaching the church as it is has outlived its viability.

Vosper is also the founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, which provides resources and support to those exploring the boundaries of Christian thought both within and outside of their traditions.

Famous in Ontario for her in-your-face bluntness, Vosper frequently says her views could lead her into a "heresy" trial, even in the doctrinally open-minded 700,000-member United Church of Canada.

"I'm going to try to stop using the word god altogether. For now I'm going to use some other word -- maybe breath or love," she writes with characteristic aplomb, rejecting the all-powerful God of monotheistic traditionalism.

Sanguin is among the many progressive Christians who agree with Vosper's critique of authoritarian, dogmatic Christianity, which they argue holds up God as a kind of benign monarch.

But Sanguin worries that the manner in which Vosper sidelines God and demythologizes Jesus Christ reflects a "dismal conversation" of "desperation" he's long heard among some liberal Christians.

As Sanguin puts it, Vosper is suggesting the "only way forward is for congregations to jettison religious language about God and Christ altogether and teach the universal values of love and compassion."

Sanguin, instead, pursues intellectually defensible ways to redeem God and Jesus from the conservative Protestants and Catholics who tend to dominate the news. He does so with creative panache.

Sanguin argues Jesus Christ, embodying the divine, was essentially a creative, unsettling, forward-looking figure bent on increasing beauty, transcendence and divine love on Earth.

In a chapter titled "What Colour is Your Christ?", Sanguin stresses how the world's two billion Christians often mean completely different things when they talk about Jesus Christ, and that it's not entirely bad.

Relying on the developmental studies of scholar Don Beck, who colour-coded entire value systems as reflective of human stages of growth, Sanguin says, for instance, that "Blue" Christians talk about Christ from an absolutistic perspective, seeing him as a "divine scapegoat" whom God sacrificed to save believers.

Within Sanguin's framework, Vosper would seem to illustrate an "Orange" Christ, who is thoroughly human and demythologized.

The trouble with over-stressing the Orange Christ, Sanguin writes, is that it can lead to throwing out the mystical baby with the bathwater.

Instead, Sanguin appreciates the "Yellow Christ," which leans on the insights of science to celebrate the divine interconnectedness of all things -- as Sanguin did in his 2007 book, *Darwin, Divinity and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Ecological Christianity*.

Sanguin also values the turquoise "Mystical Christ." In this worldview, followers of the model of Jesus realize their own Christ-like natures, recognizing they are manifestations of the "Holy One."

I know Sanguin, and though we don't see eye to eye on everything, I definitely prefer his option of exploring different ways of understanding God, not defaulting to only ethics.

Given all the expansive, multidisciplinary thinking going in progressive Christian circles these days, it's hard to understand why Vosper ignores so much of it.

Vosper doesn't cite any of the cosmology advanced by scientist-theologians, many of whom are Christians, such as

Michael Heller, Charles Birch or Ian Barbour. Nor does she engage so-called "open" theologians, such as Canada's Clark Pinnock.

It's also odd she doesn't deal with progressive theologians who base their "constructive post-modern" thought on the work of Harvard philosophers William James and Alfred North Whitehead. They include feminists such as Catherine Keller and Marjorie Suchoki, as well as evolutionary thinkers such as John Cobb and Jay McDaniels.

Maybe Vosper is just not that interested in metaphysics, or philosophy or constructing an intellectually viable concept of God.

Instead of divinity, she simply confirms her book's subtitle: "The way we live is more important than what we believe."

There is truth to that claim, as Unitarian Universalists emphasize.

But it's also true that what we believe deeply shapes how we live.

So it's best when our ultimate convictions, including about the transcendent, fuel our actions. It makes for more integrated human beings.

More than a few liberal Christians are suggesting that Vosper makes some valid points and may be justified in self-identifying as a Christian. The Christian tent, they say, is supposed to be wide.

So I don't suspect many liberal Christians would want to place Vosper on trial for heresy. After all, how do you convict someone of having a limited metaphysical imagination?

To reach Douglas Todd, go to his blog at www.vancouver.sun.com/blogs

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