

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Unbelievable

Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today

by

John Shelby Spong

1. John Shelby Spong writes, “I vote for a radical rethinking of our religious symbols. I vote for a reformation that will be so total that many people will think that Christianity has already died. . . . I know of no other word that can bear the weight of what I believe is necessary” (p. 13). Why does Spong make this call for reformation? Do you believe that a reformation of Christianity is needed?

2. How does Spong describe the “First” Reformation in chapter two? Did you learn anything new from his portrayal?
3. Spong calls attention to “the difference between an experience and the way that experience is explained” (p. 23). Why does he do this?
4. Spong briefly summarizes his twelve theses in chapter three. What do you make of them as a whole? Do any seem especially accurate? Do any seem especially dangerous?
5. “If the Bible was wrong on [the position of the Earth within the universe], about what else might it also be wrong? In the centuries since Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, people would have to answer that question again and again” (p. 38). How would you answer the question, “about what else might the Bible be wrong”?
6. According to Spong, how, exactly, did the discoveries of Newton and Darwin impact the Western world’s understanding of “God” (pp. 43–47)?
7. “Under the power of Freud’s insights, our theistic understanding of God seemed less and less real” (p. 52). What “insights” is Spong referring to here? How did they make a “theistic understanding of God . . . less and less real”?
8. Spong claims, “God is not a being separate from the beings who are human. God is not a being to whom beings can relate; God is rather ‘Being itself.’ God is not a noun that needs to be defined. God is a verb that needs

- to be lived” (p. 60). What would it look like for Christianity to adopt such an understanding of God? What would have to change? What could stay the same?
9. Do you think Spong’s distinction between “an experience and an explanation” (p. 62) opens up a new approach to understanding God? Why or why not?
 10. “I do not understand Christianity as a religious system with fixed points of revealed truth, however. I see it rather as an evolving home in which I dwell happily” (p. 71). Is this how you understand Christianity? Why or why not?
 11. “Literalized inside human language, [the incarnation] makes no sense to modern ears. Must we Christians then still confront the world with this claim as if we were people endowed with the inarticulate sounds of unknown tongues?” (p. 80). In your opinion, to what extent should Christianity adjust its language to make sense to “modern ears”? Fully? Partially? Not at all?
 12. “The idea that Jesus on the cross paid the price of our fall in order to save us from sin thus becomes an idea that no longer makes any sense to anyone. This ancient form of telling the Christ story has collapsed before our eyes. It has become unbelievable” (p. 86). According to Spong, how is the story of salvation now “unbelievable”? Do you agree with him?
 13. Spong points to early Jewish readers of Genesis 1–3 as seeing in that passage “the story of human beings growing into self-awareness, learning to discern

between good and evil, ceasing to be children dependent upon the heavenly parent for all things and finally having to enter their maturity and to assume self-responsibility” (p. 97). How does this interpretation of Genesis 1–3 compare to how you were first taught to understand this important passage?

14. “No reference to the birth of Jesus occurs anywhere else in the entire Bible. This is all there is. Two deeply contradictory narratives, related in two separate books of the New Testament, form the totality of the Bible’s story of Jesus’ birth” (p. 108). According to Spong, what makes the Matthew and Luke narratives deeply contradictory? Why does this matter?
15. “In the virgin birth story Matthew claims a holy origin for Jesus, but then he seems to add that God can raise up a holy life even through incest, prostitution, seduction and adultery” (p. 115). What do you make of Spong’s claim here? Is this how you personally read Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth?
16. “In almost every religious tradition there are tales about the supernatural power that God somehow makes available to human beings. The forces of the world are said to have been changed or manipulated by an invasive divine power for human benefit” (p. 121). How does your faith community interpret miracles in the Bible?
17. What is Spong suggesting about the miracles in the Moses/Joshua story (p. 133)?

18. What similarities and differences does Spong note between the Moses/Joshua cycle of miracle stories and the Elijah/Elisha cycle of miracle stories (pp. 135–140)?
19. “Paul [the earliest writer of any part of what became the New Testament] never mentions a miracle being connected with Jesus in the entire body of his authentic epistles” (p. 143). How does Spong make sense of this? How do you personally make sense of this?
20. “We do not have to twist our brains into first-century pretzels in an effort to believe the unbelievable. We can read the miracle stories as the symbols they originally were and still read the gospels in a post-Matthew, post-Luke, and indeed post-Newtonian world” (p. 152). What does Spong mean when he states that the miracle stories associated with Jesus are symbols?
21. How do you personally understand the meaning of the atonement and the role that it currently plays—or should play—in the Christian faith? How does your understanding complement or contradict Spong’s interpretation?
22. “We now know that the entire theological superstructure of Christianity is built on a false premise. We are not fallen sinners, indelibly infected with original sin. Rather, we are incomplete people yearning to be made whole” (p. 166). This is a significant claim—do you agree with Spong here? Why or why not?
23. Spong suggests, “One cannot harmonize the contradictory content of the Bible’s Easter narratives no matter

how hard one tries” (p. 171). Before reading this chapter, were you aware of these contradictions? If so, which ones? If not, why not?

24. Spong writes that “a new ‘seeing’ of both God and life was born” (p. 182) in Christ’s resurrection. What does he mean by this?
25. About chapter 24, Spong writes, “Be warned in advance. There will be surprises that await us even here” (p. 183). To what surprises is he referring? Were you surprised by these? Why or why not?
26. Spong claims, “The ascension story is both powerful and real, but it is not, and was never intended to be, literally true” (p. 196). In your own opinion, what is the relationship between “real” and “literally true”?
27. According to Spong, what should be the basis for ethics (chapter 26)? Do you agree with him?
28. How does learning more about the history and context of the Ten Commandments from Spong in chapter 27 change how you view and use them?
29. Why does Spong focus on Jethro in chapter 28? What point is he trying to make here?
30. In chapter 29, Spong offers criticisms of each of the Ten Commandments. Which of these criticisms seems the strongest to you? Why?
31. “How will love be practiced in the circumstances of our very modern world? The burden of freedom, with its relentless call to maturity, is found in the juxtaposition

between life-affirming principles and our existential situations. It is there that modern ethical principles are born” (pp. 232–233). What do you make of Spong’s take on modern ethics here?

32. Spong suggests that “the death of the theistic God causes nothing less than the death of that activity known as prayer, at least as prayer has been practised through the ages” (p. 240). According to Spong, how did prayer “die”?
33. On pages 243 to 248, Spong tells a story that “does not define the nature of prayer, but . . . serves to illustrate its meaning” (p. 243). What did you learn about prayer from this story?
34. Spong asks, “Is prayer, as we have traditionally defined it, a holy activity, or is prayer the preparation for a time of engaging in a holy activity?” (p. 253). How would you answer this question?
35. When you think of the words “heaven” and “hell,” what comes to mind? Why?
36. “I am not a product of divine planning,” claims Spong. “I am rather a product of absolute randomness” (p. 264). Is this how you see yourself? Why or why not? What is at stake in these two positions?
37. Spong writes, “If [Christianity] is to live into the future, it must recover its original meaning and identity” (p. 274). According to Spong, what is Christianity’s “original meaning and identity”? How might they inform a Christianity of the future?

38. For Spong, “the mission to which my mantra calls me is the task of building or transforming the world so that every person living will have a better opportunity to live fully, love wastefully and be all that each of them was created to be in the infinite variety of our humanity” (p. 286). How does this mission compare to how you personally understand the current mission of Christianity?
39. How has reading this book impacted your understanding of Christianity?
40. Where do you agree with Spong about the need for a new reformation? Where do you disagree? Why?