

Falwell Did Not Speak for Us: How the Loudest Christian Voices have Misrepresented the Christian Message

By Stephen Robinson

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Good morning! My name is Stephen Robinson, brother to Stacey Gardner. I'm currently attending Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and graduated from UT with majors in Plan II and Religious Studies. And I'm going to do a magic trick for you.

Okay, ready? I'm a Christian. See! When I was up here you just a moment ago you thought, "What a nice, extremely handsome, young man there. What does he have to say, I wonder?" Then I said the magic words. And now you're thinking, "Oh man this is going to be lame." I wouldn't blame you. A lot of popular Christianity is super lame. Sadly, Christianity in the public eye is typified by anti-intellectualism, patriarchy, hierarchy, fundamentalism, right-wing politics, and virulent antagonism toward new ideas, all wrapped up in an American flag. You'd think Jesus would sooner picket an abortion clinic than serve in a soup kitchen. He's been called on to bless our wars and condemn our rock and roll music. An average thoughtful, progressive person can only assume Christianity is lame at best and dangerous at worst.

Let me tell you a rough version of the Christian story that you're probably familiar with: God created man in a week. We had everything we needed, until some woman didn't do what she was told. Over time, God loved only one group of people and blessed them when they followed his rules and lifted his protection when they did not. God guided them in military conquest over other people because, well, mostly because those other people were in the way. Ultimately, God gave his only begotten son so that he may suffer and die for us, and we should feel totally terrible about this, or alternatively, blame the Jews. The Christian promise and hope is that if we accept Jesus as our personal lord and savior we get to go to heaven and with him, and everyone else will hopefully go to an eternal pit of fire and damnation because they asked questions.

I've always liked that image of God, something I think we can all relate to—a doting father who would tuck you in at night, tell you "I love you. And if you love me back, promise you presents. And if you do not, I will fetch a baseball bat, set it aflame, and threaten to beat you with it for all eternity." As we know, at the heart of any loving relationship are threats of violence and abandonment.

Given this story, peers frequently ask me, "Stephen, what made you decide to go to a Christian seminary?" Well at some point I stopped and asked myself, "Stephen, what are your gifts? What gets you excited?" Then I realized, "Well, I'm naturally pretty judgmental, two of my favorite things are magic and guilt, and I'm overwhelmingly concerned what consenting adults are doing with their private parts." That's when I realized I was called to Christian ministry.

In truth, I decided to become a Christian again when I realized that religion, Christianity included, is a powerful series of rich symbols teaching us more about forming loving community rather than a enforcing a list of ancient commands or creeds. It's about seeking justice in this

world instead of simply enduring oppression waiting for justice in the next. It's about actively achieving our highest potential as individuals and society, and not simply asking a divine daddy to give it to us. It's not about affirming a record of supernatural events as historical as much as seeing the wisdom of past generations and continuing the human endeavor to attempt to love and forgive each other in a world fraught with pain suffering. I happen to believe the symbols and truth of Christianity and of Christian scripture have been woefully misused, but not fatally so.

I struggled for many years trying to figure out whether to fully consider myself a secular humanist. As a reasonable and intelligent and thoughtful person, the stories of the Bible seemed clearly like fables meant for an ancient society. While I valued and tried to follow the teachings of Jesus, whose ethics and sacrifice I admired, every time I went to church it was just frankly boring. "Yes, love each other and love Jesus and we get to go to be in the clouds with him. Eat this nasty chicklet of bread so we may honor and remember him." I just couldn't see the point of it all. Just reaffirming the same old stories without really asking any hard questions.

Then I attended a church called St. Andrews Presbyterian in north Austin and heard their pastor Jim Rigby speak about the power of symbols. And that symbols are not just signs. Symbols speak to the truth where plain speech cannot. Paul Tillich, one of the greatest 20th century theologians, explains that symbols participate in the reality in which they point, and that taking them literally actually robs them of their value and true meaning. Jim talked about finding the truth in scripture when you read it more like poetry. When we understand the symbol of God not as a divine Santa Claus or Puppetmaster, but that which is beyond our comprehension or that of the power of creative love. Scripture and tradition and reason and philosophy are filled with many ideas and names and voices when we boil them all down to one streamlined idea, we're missing the whole point. The Bible is a source of great wisdom, but is not the "answer key" to the riddle of life or the universe. But based on Christian buffoons that dominate the airwaves, you'd think that Christianity has one voice and God one name.

I guess my main message today is that there is no one story of Christianity, nor one name for God, nor one way to understand love. And when we think, we've figured it all out we've become fundamentalists, whether of a religion or of a philosophy, and then we know we've got it wrong. Our brains and hearts and words are too small.

But in our lives, it is our instinct to congregate with people who are like us. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our places of worship. Traditionally, religion has been defined by who is in and who is out, who has taken the pledge and assimilated with us in one voice, and who thinks different and is therefore a heathen. It's not a bad thing to distinguish between different people's viewpoints, nor are all viewpoints equally valid. However, we all benefit when we listen to many voices and not have to choose one as right and all others as wrong. Our fenced community of ideas seems very pleasant and orderly, but then we're living in a reality of our choosing, not of the actual one around us.

Falwell does not speak for me or the thousands of other progressive and mainline Christians. The Christians on the airwaves seem to be driving an intellectual horse and buggy and simply refusing the combustion engine of modern thought ever existed. This is small religion—it is the

religion of the macaroni shell Noah's Ark and the "don't ask questions just have faith" answers. It is the opiate of the people. Religion should open your eyes to the truths of the universe, guide us to loving community full of rich diversity of ideas and people. It cannot do that with one voice, one creed, one denomination, or one book.

I am a Christian, but I believe that the Bible is best understood as people throughout history experiencing God and doing their best to put that experience to words. To do that, people have used multiple of words for God, varying stories about love, justice, and community, and varying ways of understanding the human condition. When I hold them all together, I believe there is a wisdom and truth we can all benefit from.

I ascribe to Christianity because I believe that the story of Jesus the Christ is about a life demonstrating radical love and solidarity with the outcast, downtrodden, and abused. Jesus did not just like the least among us, but *was* the least among us. The illegal immigrant, the long-term unemployed, the homeless, those infected with HIV, the sexual molested—the people our society would prefer to just go away. These are the people that Jesus would break bread with today. This is who God's message was for. Somehow Jesus's wisdom and message has been usurped to protect tax breaks for the wealthy, vilifying same-sex couples, and revoking health care for the needy. And I ascribe to Christianity, because by God I want to take it back.

Truth, beauty, love, humanity, divinity, individual, and community—the things that make life important and worth living are best when we hear many voices and hold them up together. With multiple understandings, even when they seem contradictory. I think that's why I like Unitarian Universalists so much, is that they realize that no one religion or philosophy has a monopoly on the truth. Truths and beauty are revealed through many different names and different experiences.

So always double-knotting your shoes and using hand signals and cutting your sandwiches diagonally are perfectly good ways to live your life. But when Lilly moves into the neighborhood, if you are able to listen to multiple ideas, even if they seem weird, you may find life to be far richer than before.*

*Refers to the book *Chester's Way* by Kevin Henkes read during the Words for All Ages.