

Theology

Q&A with Pastor Durrell (a progressive, non-binding catechism)

The following questions were asked of and answered by Dr. Durrell Watkins in Sunshine Cathedral's newsletter, *The Sun Burst* or in email correspondence. This can also be found in Dr. Watkins' book, *A Different Kind of Church*

Afterlife

Am I "Saved"?

Question: *My mother is a fundamentalist Christian. She's afraid I'm not saved. How can I persuade her that I am?*

Answer: Unless someone had told you that you weren't "saved," you probably would have never considered that you weren't safe in the Universe. Most creatures seem to trust that their lives are good enough. And even in Christianity (and I would argue, within our scriptures), there are strong traditions of Universalism – the belief that no soul is ultimately beyond the reach of God's love.

Remember, a belief is basically a habitual thought. If you start considering that a loving God would never reject anyone for eternity for any reason, then that thought will eventually become a belief. When you believe you are a person of sacred value, you will feel safe with and in God. You may never persuade your mother, but it is probably more important to persuade yourself. When she sees that you are comfortable with who you are and with God as you understand God, she may work out for herself that you are indeed what she calls "saved." But ultimately, she is responsible for her beliefs just as you are responsible for yours. She'll believe what she chooses to believe. The question for you is what will *you* choose to believe?

Is There a Heaven?

Question: *Is there really a heaven after we die?*

Answer: Zen Master Seung Sahn once wrote, "You [don't] get enlightenment in some 'other' life; our next life is actually not the next life... There is actually nowhere else for us to become [enlightened] but right now, in this place..."

You see, religion isn't fire insurance. Our faith isn't something to keep us out of after-life prison or to get us into the after-life Country Club. Healthy spirituality helps us discover the presence of God *within* us, and to live in the joy of that presence here and now. Heaven is a state of being that is available to us now, and we can certainly enjoy it for all eternity, but let's start right now in *this* experience of life.

Is There a Hell?

Question: *I don't want to believe in Hell, but I'm still afraid of it. How can I be sure there is no Hell?*

Answer: If you are living in fear of something, then Hell is real for you. It isn't a future threat, it is a present reality. It sounds like the fear of Hell is your Hell. Overcoming that fear will eliminate that Hell.

Mostly, when people are afraid of Hell they are really afraid of God. They are afraid that God won't love them as they are. They are afraid that God will abandon them or punish them or that God has created a game that we all must play and the losers wind up being eternally tormented. Again, fear is the issue. When you stop imagining God as an intimidating judge, then the fear of Hell will probably vanish, too.

My guess is that the divine Love is so abundant and everlasting that it excludes no one and that ultimately all people find their way "home" to the heart of God. If we can allow ourselves to believe this, then we will be free to make the most of our lives and actually enjoy the experience of living. I once read something by an Episcopal priest who said, "In the ocean of life, God is not a shark." Believe that, and any fear of God (or any fear that God would ever abandon you) will probably just fade away.

Is There Social Stratification in Heaven?

Question: *Will there be social stratification in heaven?*

Answer: There are many visions of heaven in scripture and sacred tradition. These visions are the human imagination's way of expressing hope that our lives have meaning beyond the brief span of years we experience from birth to death.

Heaven symbolizes our hope that we are more than this physical experience. Beyond affirming that Life is all-inclusive and eternal, I really can't say how the "after-life" will look. I hesitate to guess how (or if) a heavenly society would be stratified.

However, the best heaven I can imagine would be a world where we would enjoy power with one another rather than power over one another. In "my" heaven, no one would be excluded and everyone would have an equal share in the joy, abundance, and vitality of life. So, my best guess is that in the highest and best of all possible heavenly realities, there would be no social stratification as we experience in "this" world.

Soldiers & the Afterlife

Question: *It says in the bible "thou shalt not kill." But a soldier's job is to kill enemies. Will soldiers be held accountable for their killing after they die?*

Answer: The truth is the commandment you mention actually forbids "murder," not killing per se. The commandment is against members of a particular community killing other members of that community. However, the bible is full of capital offenses in that same culture that could cost one his or her life. And, war is a pretty common theme in the bible, too.

I doubt that anyone "goes to hell" in any literal sense. Hell as an afterlife place of torment is unknown in the earliest parts of our bible; and even in the New Testament where it does get some attention, no one is ever said to really be there! The only person ever named as being "in hell" is a character in a parable.

I think hell is a state of being and one need not die to experience it. Many people who have been forced to take a life may have hellish memories, guilt, regret, etc. But I don't believe that they will be eternally punished for the decisions made by their political leaders. Still, as people of conscience and goodwill, we want to build a society and a world where violence isn't how we attempt to solve our problems. When we learn to live in peace, then questions about the "hell" of war will no longer be necessary.

Underworld Battle

Question: *I have heard that Jesus descended into hell after the crucifixion to battle the devil. After defeating the devil, he then was resurrected. Is that true?*

Answer: I don't believe in a literal after-life hell, so I doubt if Jesus or anyone else ever went to such a place. Hell would be the absence of God, but since "there's not a spot where God is not," hell in a real sense can't exist. Also, images of heaven "up there" somewhere and hell being "down there" somewhere come from a time when the earth was thought to be flat. Those images don't make much sense in our time.

Now, as far as the story of Jesus descending to "hell" to battle the forces of evil and liberate souls that were trapped there...that is a belief held by the Eastern church and is important to their understanding of Easter. However, in the west, contemporary versions of the creeds now say Jesus, "descended to the dead." "Hell" was often used to translate Hades, but Hades in Greek mythology was the deity of the underworld and came to be viewed by other cultures as the name of the underworld. In antiquity, the underworld was the place of the dead (called Sheol in our Old Testament). It wasn't necessarily a place of torment; it was just the realm of shadows, the place (usually thought to be somewhere deep in the earth) where departed souls went to rest. So, originally the idea that Jesus descended to hell, or hades, probably just meant that he died. The resurrection story is powerful because it insists that somehow he didn't stay dead. But to not stay dead, he had to die...he descended to the dead and was raised again in our sacred story.

Sadly, as I look around, I see that the experience of evil still occurs; so I can't tell that it was ever once and for all defeated. Resisting and challenging evil (and knowing that it is not ultimately real) is our job. So, the story as you have heard it does not ring true for me.

What About Reincarnation?

Question: *My friend and I are arguing about reincarnation. How can I persuade her that reincarnation doesn't really happen?*

Answer: I, for one, wouldn't bother trying to dissuade your friend from her belief in reincarnation. Reincarnation is one of many symbols that suggest the energy of life is on-going and that life's significance doesn't end with physical death.

Some people believe in a spirit world or paradise. Some people believe in an eternal, restful oblivion. Some people have only questions and no certainties about what comes after death. Jesus said, "In God's house, there are many rooms" (John 14.2). Maybe we each choose a different room. One person may choose the restful sleeping chamber; another, the cosmic party room; still another, the room with a revolving door so they can return and do it all again.

Some people thought Jesus was the reincarnation of Elijah; he didn't seem too offended by their belief, even if he didn't share it (Luke 9.18-20).

If one's beliefs about the after-life add hope, quality, or comfort in this life, then why not let them have those beliefs, whatever shape they take. You believe one thing about the after-life, your friend believes something else. You both agree that life is good and meaningful and its purpose isn't limited by time or space. Maybe you're both right, at least about what is most important. And the truth is: none of us knows the details of the next world until we experience it for ourselves. For now, I'm busy enough trying to make the most of this life.

We can believe that life is eternally significant without knowing the details of what the next experience will be. If we experience the sacredness of the now, the “next” life will probably be wonderful enough, however it manifests.

Where Do We Go After Death?

Question: *What is your understanding of where we go after death? When someone dies, invariably people will say that he or she is now in heaven, but then what is the reference to the second coming of Christ when the dead will rise?*

Answer: I know that energy can't be destroyed, it only changes form; so, I assume the energy of consciousness is also never-ending. As a person of faith, I trust that life is somehow never-ending. Beyond that, I probably don't know any more than you do.

During Jesus' execution, a fellow “rebel” who was being tortured next to him reportedly said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Realm,” and Jesus responds, “...today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23.42-43). Luke also has Jesus telling a parable about a poor man who suffered in life but who, after death, was “carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham” (Luke 16.22).

Luke is writing at least 50 years (and some scholars think as many as 90 years) after the crucifixion of Jesus. The Apostle Paul, only about 25 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, writes, “...we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep; for the Lord...will come down from the heavens, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are...left, will be caught up together in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4.15-17).

Luke's idea seems to be that consciousness survives death immediately, while Paul, at least in his early writings, suggests that those who die are simply resting and will be raised back to life later.

Paul believed that Jesus would return to earthly life in his lifetime. So, the resting period, in Paul's mind, wouldn't have been a long one. Decades later, when Luke is writing, no such “second coming” had occurred, and so Luke might have been rethinking the issue. In any case, Paul and Luke had different ideas of how consciousness survives death; what they both believed is that consciousness does survive death.

Paul and Luke are each making their best guess, but what happens beyond this life is a mystery to us until we experience it. What the writers are saying is that the value of our lives is not limited to our earthly years, but as far as what is next, we may just have to “live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5.7). What we can trust is that life is good and sacred and that its importance is not limited to the years we spend on this earth; and that's pretty “heavenly”.

Will my Agnostic Husband Go to Heaven?

Question: *I'm so glad I found you on your You Tube channel. Your program has been inspirational to me.*

I have been a Christian my whole life and I do believe in Heaven. My husband doesn't really believe in God. He believes that there may be a God but he isn't sure. It honestly worries me that he doesn't have full faith in God and that he may not make it into Heaven. I'm not really sure how that works, or what it will take to show him that God really does exist. Do you have any advice on this?

Answer: My first response to people of faith who want to convert their loved ones to a life of faith is: Would you appreciate your agnostic or atheist friends trying to take your faith away from you?

People who don't share our religious vocabulary still have values, and they cherish their values. They probably don't appreciate having their values insulted anymore than we religious types do. So, in the spirit of the Golden Rule, if we wouldn't want people to take our religion from us, then we might not want to take their contentment with a lack of religion from them.

Now, that being said, we certainly want to make our religious communities as relevant, as empowering, as optimistic, as loving, and as welcoming as possible. As we do that, people from all kinds of religious and philosophical backgrounds will find themselves attracted to us. And then if and when they embrace our kind of faith, it is a personal decision that was in no way coerced, and one that they can feel good about having made for themselves.

Finally, I have to admit my bias in all of this. I am a humanist and a universalist. By that I mean I have a high anthropology (I do not believe that people are innately depraved or need to be "saved" from their depravity by religious means) and I believe that the divine Spirit ("in which we live and move and have our being") rejects no one for any reason. I can't believe that anyone is eternally damned, especially for what their opinions in life happened to be!

My faith is in the universal power of divine Love which seeks to heal our loneliness, despair, and degradation (in this life) and which excludes none of us (in this life or beyond) for any reason.

I'm sure your husband believes in beauty, in love, in hope, in compassion, in kindness, in justice, in joy...in all the Goodness that I believe God is. He may not call that Goodness God, but "what's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet" (Shakespeare). Whether or not your husband believes in God, I am certain that the infinite Love that I call God believes in your husband. And isn't that enough?

Ecclesiology (Church)

A Different Kind of Church

Question: *What kind of church is Sunshine Cathedral?*

Answer: Sunshine Cathedral is a progressive, inclusive church open to all people. At Sunshine Cathedral, everyone is welcome regardless of theological background, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, or ability.

A Gay Church?

Question: *Sunshine Cathedral is a Metropolitan Community Church (MCC); isn't MCC the gay denomination?*

Answer: MCC was founded by Troy Perry (a gay man) on October 6, 1968. MCC's original mission was to provide a spiritual home for same-gender loving people who were not welcome in other churches. But in the last four decades MCC has continued to evolve...we've been the "gay church," the "AIDS church," the "feminist church," and the "human rights church." What we really are is an inclusive church that celebrates the sacred value of all people. We have gay and non-gay members and we continue to be an open, affirming, inclusive, and progressive church for anyone who chooses to call MCC home. Sunshine Cathedral is proud to be part of this radically inclusive tradition.

Are Christian Rituals Based on Astrology?

Question: *Are all the Christian rituals based on astrology? Many pagan celebrations coincided with ours.*

Answer: The truth is that ancient cultures often felt a divine presence in Nature and looked to the skies for guidance. Matthew's gospel suggests that astrologers followed a sign in the heavens in order to find Jesus. Easter is calculated by observing lunar cycles in conjunction with the Spring Equinox. Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon falling upon or after the first day of Spring.

Some of our rituals (like our Easter celebration and our Epiphany story) have an astrological element to them. But I don't think that astrology motivated all of our observances.

Pentecost, for example, is an ancient Jewish festival that we adopted and Christianized. Christmas is celebrated on December 25th (the day of the Winter Solstice before the calendar was changed), but that is a natural time of year for a community to remind itself that the light of spring will in due course return.

I don't know of any obvious astrological connection for Advent or Lent. Numerology (the idea that numbers can be spiritually significant) plays a role in some of our celebrations: Advent is always four Sunday before Christmas; Christmas is always 12 days leading up to Epiphany; Lent is always 40 days (out of 46 because Sundays are not counted in Lent) leading up to Easter; Ascension is always 40 days after Easter and Pentecost is always 50 days after Easter.

The first "followers of the Way" (later to be known as Christians) were Jewish, and within a century the movement had reached out substantially to Gentiles in a pagan culture. So, Christianity has borrowed from Jewish and pagan traditions, and has initiated some of its own. I wouldn't say that "all" Christian rituals are based on astrology, but it would be naïve to suggest that astrology and other esoteric traditions didn't have some influence at times on the development of Christianity.

Gospel of Thomas

Question: *Last week in church there was a reading from the "Gospel of Thomas." I've never heard of that gospel and can't find it in my bible. What is the Gospel of Thomas?*

Answer: The Gospel of Thomas is a "sayings" gospel. It isn't a narrative gospel like the four we have in our bible; it is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus (many of which are also found in our bible).

The Gospel of Thomas did not make it into our canon of scripture but many scholars today regard it very highly and think it should be included in some way in our study, reflection, and liturgies.

There are many texts not in our bible that may have been used by early Christian communities, and while they didn't make the "final cut" to be included in our canon, they do show how various groups understood Jesus' role and how they related to him; of all such "extra-canonical" literature, the Gospel of Thomas may be the most highly regarded.

At Sunshine Cathedral we are aware that God speaks through many channels, including scripture, art, poetry, nature, human wisdom, acts of kindness, ritual, experience, and music (just to name a few). So, while we have scripture readings in every service, we also often hear wisdom from contemporary sources, from religions other than our own, and even from ancient Christian

writings that didn't make it into the canon of scripture. We are open to many ways that Life may communicate a word of hope or empowerment to us.

Happiness or Heresy?

Question: *How did bunnies and eggs come to be associated with Easter? Is it a plot to de-spiritualize a religious holy day?*

Answer: I doubt if there is any great conspiracy behind the Easter Bunny and the colorful eggs associated with the holiday. In fact, bunnies and eggs have been viewed as religious symbols in a variety of cultures!

The egg is a springtime symbol that represents new birth or new life. The ancient Persians are said to have painted eggs for their New Year/Spring Equinox celebrations. Jewish Passover Seders still include a hard-boiled egg dipped in salt-water. And the pre-Christian Saxons had a spring goddess called Eostre whose feast was held at the Spring Equinox and eggs may have been used at that festival to symbolize the rebirth of the land that happens in the Spring. Hares (bunnies, rabbits), known for their procreative prowess, also symbolized new life and are thought to have been associated with the deity Eostre.

Pope Gregory the Great had missionaries adopt religious festivals of the people they were seeking to convert and recast them in Christian terms. The Christian story of Resurrection fit easily enough with Springtime renewal rites, and so the festival of Eostre became the Christian festival of Easter. The egg then became symbolic of the grave from which the living Christ was said to have emerged. Just as a chicken will break free from the egg, Jesus in the Easter narratives escaped from his dark, enclosed burial place. The egg also symbolizes breaking the Lenten fast. In Eastern churches, Easter eggs are blessed during a worship service. One Christian myth says that Mary Magdalene brought cooked eggs to share with the other women at the tomb of Jesus, so eggs were present when the women experienced the Resurrection for themselves.

Easter may have become overly commercial, but as far as I can tell, Easter eggs (and the bunny that supposedly delivers them) pose no threat to our religious tradition; in fact, they may be very much a part of it!

Is Baptism Necessary?

Question: *I pastor a new church and a theological issue has raised its head. We have a couple who want to join but who don't want to be baptized (for reasons that are very important to them). Traditionally, baptism has been required for church membership, but I don't want to use it as a barrier to full inclusion. Sunshine Cathedral is an older, more established church. How do you deal with such issues?*

Answer: Is baptism about how much water we use (or if we use water at all), or is it about being immersed in the power of hope, submerged in the experience of community, washed with opportunities to love and grow and share?

My sacramental theology says that a sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace. It is a sign of the grace that is already present...it is not a requirement for the grace (if grace is unmerited favor, then why would we ask people to "earn" it by getting wet).

I encourage baptism because community rituals can be empowering; but the true baptism, in my mind, is the baptism of the Spirit and that doesn't depend on any humanly constructed ritual. If people want to be part of our church but for reasons that are important to them do not want to be

baptized, I always respect their wishes. They are being immersed in the Spirit of Community, and that is surely baptism enough.

For me, relationships are more important than rituals; people are more important than procedures. Just as John baptized with water, Jesus baptized with spirit. Those who choose to be part of the faith community have immersed themselves into the life of the church, and I see that as baptism, regardless of how dry their hair remains.

My short answer is, in matters of potential theological controversy, I tend to err on the side of grace. When the rebel on the cross next to Jesus asked Jesus to remember him, the response was immediate, heartfelt, and unconditional. The words placed in Jesus' mouth are simply, "today you will be with me in paradise." His inclusion was immediate and unconditional. No water was required.

Is Sexuality an Appropriate Topic for Church?

Question: *Is church the proper place to talk about sexuality?*

Answer: The issue is complex, and whether or not one feels comfortable having it mentioned in church largely depends on one's social location. That having been said, I must confess that I do feel that such discussions are both appropriate and necessary.

Sunshine Cathedral is part of the Metropolitan Community Church movement, and MCC's gift to the larger church is our willingness to integrate spirituality and sexuality. We have experienced our bodies and our consensual adult relationships to be among Life's great blessings.

Secondly, I love the bible and I want people to read it with boldness and gladness and to be willing to discuss any part of it at any time. To honestly discuss the bible will include grappling with some very "earthy" material. I sometimes feel the need to "clean it up" when I present it in church, but I refuse to ignore it. Whether we are discussing the highly erotic Song of Songs (aka Song of Solomon), or King Solomon's *hundreds* of wives and concubines, or the three-way marriage between Jacob and Leah and Rachel (and the two other women with whom Jacob had children), or the very provocative imagery that is included in the book of Revelation, or the seemingly homo-erotic relationship between Jonathon and David, or the woman at the well who had been married multiple times... (I won't take up the space to mention every erotic story in the bible), you can easily see that if we avoided them all there wouldn't be much bible left to discuss!

To be true to the history of MCC and to the contents of the bible, we will often bring up human sexuality, and we may even dare to do so in playful ways that demonstrate how joyful that part of our lives can be.

The story of Job tells us that "in my flesh I shall see God" (19.26). Once we believe that our bodies are holy temples we will insist on being our whole selves all the time. Perhaps that is the mystery of the Incarnation (God expressing in humanness), and perhaps we are the ones to understand it properly.

Tradition

Question: *Is Sunshine Cathedral Catholic or Anglican?*

Answer: Sunshine Cathedral is a cathedral in a psychological sense...we are a place where people gather, where travelers visit, where the community comes for empowerment and fun and

education, a place that the larger community takes pride in no matter where they worship most frequently, a church that shares resources with other churches. We do not have bishops, so unlike an Anglican or Catholic cathedral, we aren't a church that houses a bishop's chair ("cathedra").

Sunshine Cathedral is ecumenical. Some of our members have Roman Catholic backgrounds. Some of our members are from an Anglican tradition. Other members come out of Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox, Unity, Quaker, Pentecostal, and Jewish traditions. Our primary affiliation is with Metropolitan Community Churches, but we have secondary affiliations and working relationships with liberal, New Thought, Interfaith, and secular organizations beyond MCC as well.

The individuals who make up our cathedral hold a variety of theological viewpoints and value a wide range of religious traditions. You will find Catholic and Anglican elements at Sunshine Cathedral, but you will also find New Thought, Universalist, and Humanist elements. We have even borrowed from evangelical traditions (with some adaptation). Our diversity is part of what makes us special and it's something we enthusiastically celebrate at Sunshine Cathedral.

What's Up with the 'Strange' Readings?

Question: *Why do we sometimes have strange readings in church?*

Answer: I don't recall any strange readings (well, no stranger than what we find in the bible anyway). But I'm guessing you're wondering why we include extra-biblical literature in some of our worship services. The reason is fairly simple – Wisdom didn't just speak to the ancient Hebrews, and Wisdom didn't dry up at the end of the first century. Wisdom continues to speak through art, music, poetry, imagination, acts of kindness, nature, and the sacred writings of the world's religious traditions.

Truth has always been communicated in many ways and we try to be open to it wherever it might be found.

Eschatology (End Times Speculation)

Will the World End in a Few Years?

Question: *I've been terrified first by Y2K predictions and then by Mayan Doomsday prophecies. In both cases, the dreaded dates that were supposed to lead to chaos and global destruction came and went without leaving the world devastated. Still, do you believe the world will end soon?*

Answer: I'm a bit of a skeptic when it comes to prophecies of doom. St. Paul suggested that we "live by faith, not by sight." We don't need the future mapped out for us; we can have faith that we will be able to navigate the future and make the most of it. I also don't believe that the future is predetermined.

We are free to make choices now, and choice have consequences. The future depends on what we do, think, and say today, not what someone predicted centuries ago. And, predictions are often vague and ambiguous, saying not a lot of anything in particular but open to be interpreted to mean any number of things. They can strike fear in one's heart or be dismissed utterly as they only say what the hearer chooses to believe they say.

What we think about, we often bring about. When we focus on failure, we usually fail. When we focus on fear, something scary may pop up. So, I have no interest in focusing on predictions of

gloom and doom, because if we focus on gloom and doom, we are more likely to feel as if despair is inevitable. I would much rather focus on hope, possibility, happiness, and achievement, because those are the experiences that I want to have in life.

The Mayan world has ended. The world of the Roman Empire has ended. The world of the Soviet Union has ended. The world of the British Empire has ended. The world that was thought to be flat has ended. The world where there was no Internet has ended. The world as it was known has ended many times, always to give way to a new experience of the world. So, who knows? Maybe the way we have experienced the world will change several more times in our lifetimes and far beyond. Change is the one constant in the universe. But that doesn't have to be terrifying.

I don't give too much power to superstitions about "end times" (regardless of what source they are attributed to) because I'm much more interested in making the most of the time we have now. If we do what is good in this moment, I bet future moments will be full of opportunity and possibility.

God

How Can I Believe in God?

Question: *I'm not sure I believe in God. I want to, but somehow I can't completely accept the idea of God. Do you have any words of guidance for me?*

Answer: Which God can't you believe in? The God that people once said instituted the evil practice of slavery? I can't believe in that God either.

The God that men said wouldn't call women into professional ministry? I can't believe in that God either.

The God in whose name people discriminate against same-gender loving people? I can't believe in that God either.

The God that some Christians claim can only be in relationship with people who share their religious doctrines and interpretations of scripture?

I can't believe in that God either.

Maybe we don't believe in the same God!

The spiritual journey is one where we constantly destroy the false idols we inherited. As we grow, smaller images of God are dismantled. This is actually very healthy. You may not believe in a God of vengeance, or a homophobic God, or a sexist God, or a God of war, or a God who can somehow be contained by a single religion, but I bet you believe in all the best things that the word "God" represents.

Do you believe in love? Do you believe in the beauty of life? Do you believe in human potential, and in flashes of wisdom that come from seemingly nowhere? Do you believe in compassion and kindness? Have you ever experienced moments of profound insight and grace? Aren't these the qualities that collectively represent "God"? Are those qualities any less sacred or powerful if you don't assign the name "God" to them?

Finally, let me make this point. If by "belief" you mean that you can't accept certain opinions about God, then maybe you don't believe. But let's distinguish between belief and faith. Belief is the opinion one holds (and beliefs can change). Faith is trust.

Belief tries to give the answers. Faith doesn't need the answers.

St. Paul said we ought to live by faith, not by sight...by trust in the unknown rather than by *beliefs* we can see, name, recite.

Your beliefs may be in question, but it seems to me that you have plenty of faith, because you trusted that the Mystery of Life would not be unraveled by your honest question. So, even when you can't believe in God, I would say that you do have faith in the universal power that some of us call "God." And faith is probably better than belief anyway.

How Can I Know God is Available to Me?

Question: *I struggle with believing God is really available to me. How can I develop faith in God's nearness?*

Answer: When I quiet my mind and relax my body and simply commune with the active Silence that I imagine to be divine, I usually experience the deep peace and assurance you seem to be seeking. The mystics of all ages who came to sense a divine presence in their lives often got to that point by studying and meditating and praying. Over time, they developed a consciousness of union with the Universe. If we don't feel we're there yet, that just means we have more practicing to do. Study, prayer, and meditation will help us progress on our spiritual path as well.

I suggest taking a few moments each day to get still and simply sit in the Silence. Your meditation can be in a chair or in a bath tub or on a park bench. Just relax and notice your breathing and focus on the ultimate goodness that we call "God." You will find yourself sensing a union with Something good, loving, "available."

Some people have trouble getting still or quiet. If you are one of these people, Roy Eugene Davis (a student of Paramahansa Yogananda) tells us we can "pray our way into the Silence." He suggests using a word or short phrase as a mantra to get us past our frenetic thoughts, and after a time of repeating our mantra, simply relaxing into the Silence. We might use words from the 27th Psalm, "God is my light and my salvation..." We could use the first words of the 63rd Psalm, "O God, you are my God, eagerly I seek you." There is that famous line from the 46th Psalm, "Be still and know that I am God." Just a simple line to usher us into a quiet and relaxed state, and then a few minutes of stillness and easy breathing is a wonderful way to pray. After a while, you may find yourself affirming with Jesus, "I and the Infinite are one" (John 10.30).

How Do We Know There is a God?

Question: *I am...a scientific person (civil engineer)...[To me] everything has an equation, an answer that can be proven...My question is: How does one know that God really exists if we cannot physically (visually) see God?*

Answer: If God is a person on a throne in the sky, then God will always feel distant and perhaps even unreal to us. But there are other ways of understanding God. Theologian Paul Tillich described God as the "Ground of Being." Jesus said that God is "spirit," and the word he used for spirit is the same word that can be used for *wind* or *air* or *breath*. St. Paul, quoting an ancient Greek poet, said that God is *That* in which we live and move and have our being. The writer of the New Testament book of 1st John said, "God is love..."

If we think of God as just a bigger person with magical powers who answers some prayers and punishes misdeeds, then obviously the scientific mind (or any critical thinker) will have trouble embracing that image. But if as the mystics have always said (including Jesus and Paul), God is the Source of life, then we can see God in ourselves, in nature, in our loving relationships, in our creativity, in beauty or peace or joy.

I think of God as All-that-is (and I know that the Whole must be more than the sum of Its' parts), or as the spark of life in all life, or as the field of all possibilities in which all life exists. I call this Whole, this Field, this Life, "God", but that is my choice. I could call It Spirit, or the Inward Light, or That in which we live and move and have our being, or the Ground of Being, or Love, or a thousand other things. God is simply my word for ultimate reality, and I believe in reality because I experience it.

My guess is that you see God (or Love or the Energy of life or the Web of existence...what's in a name?) everyday. Reason tells me that there is a Source, and faith tells me that that the Source is good. My choice is to call it God, but whatever you call it, I bet you already experience it in profound ways.

Is God Listening?

Question: *I've been praying for something for a long time and my prayers remain unanswered. Do you think God is saying "no" to me, or is it possible that God doesn't even hear me?*

Answer: It is very disappointing to want something badly only to have it remain beyond our grasp. I think everyone has had that experience. Remember, Jesus prayed, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me..." He was facing a difficult situation, and, we know that in spite of that prayer he was soon arrested, tried, beaten, and executed. We also know that his influence remains very strong in our lives and that he remains alive in our hearts; so, even though the problem at hand didn't go away, perhaps he received a powerful answer to his prayer anyway.

Remember also that St. Paul prayed repeatedly for some difficulty (a "thorn in the flesh") to go away, and apparently it didn't. But he did go on to say, "when I am weak, then I am strong." Maybe his prayers helped him to discover strength he would have otherwise overlooked. I don't know why your prayers aren't leading to the answers you'd like, but on the other side of the situation, you may look back and see that your prayers sustained you through the difficulty and made a significant difference after all.

Is God Really Everywhere?

Question: *I sometimes hear at Sunshine Cathedral, "There is not a spot where God is not." I'm not sure I agree with that. What makes you think that God is everywhere and with everyone?*

Answer: The quote actually comes from the New Thought movement.

I believe "There is not a spot where God is not" is a paraphrase of the 139th Psalm, that says, "Where can I hide from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in the depths of the earth, you are there also. If I fly with the wings of dawn and alight beyond the sea, even there your hand will guide me..."

St. Paul borrows from a Greek poet when he states, "It is in God that you live and move and have your being." So, those two contributors to the bible would agree that there is no spot where God is not!

I believe the Creative Spirit must be present with Its creation. In fact, I believe the Creative Spirit creates out of Itself and that all life is within the Spirit of Life, and the Spirit is within all life. This view is sometimes called Panentheism (not to be confused with pantheism). Pan-theism is the belief that everything is divine. Pan-en-theism is the belief that everything is within That Which is Divine. This view allows for a symbiotic relationship with the Divine.

Why do I believe this? Experience, reason, imagination, sacred writings, various disciplines all seem to agree that this is true. This is, at least for me at this time, true. The wonderful thing about a progressive church, however, is that you don't have to agree with me (or anyone else). I'll present my views as a way of helping you form your own, but the questions are always more important than the answers. Keep asking questions.

What is Love?

Question: *We talk about "love," but what is love exactly?*

Answer: One biblical writer says that God is love...that may give us a clue. Some will say that love is unconditional positive regard, and I have no trouble accepting that. Others will define it as euphoria, but that definition seems less satisfactory to me. The best definition I can find comes from the Sermon on the Mount. It isn't about a warm feeling. It isn't about a philosophical concept. It's about how we choose to relate to others, which makes it (for me) practical and believable.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." When I treat someone with the dignity, compassion, respect, or courtesy I would like to receive, that's love. Regardless of my emotional state or my philosophical opinions, when I treat others the way I want to be treated, I'm offering love. And if the Golden Rule is in fact the best definition of love and love is the best definition of God, then we can know that our God is all-embracing compassion. So far now, I'll stick with Jesus' answer. I haven't yet found a better one.

What's Up With God's Anger Management Issues?

Question: *Why does God forbid human sacrifice in one place, then turn around and demand human sacrifice to appease his [sic] rage? Similarly, God forbids drinking blood, then Jesus demands the drinking of his blood (how gruesome!). I think God is a hypocrite.*

Answer: God did not sit down at a typewriter and hammer out our sacred texts. They were written, compiled, edited, translated, interpreted, and taught by humans. So, inconsistencies aren't that surprising. In the writings of our spiritual ancestors we discover a divine message of hope and healing, but that does not mean that "God said" some of the more unenlightened things in our bible.

The idea that God required Jesus' execution is not one held by all Christians. I, for one, agree with Progressive writer Gary Wilburn, that Jesus' death was the *consequence* of how he lived his life, not the purpose of it. His political enemies killed him for standing up to imperial oppression; God didn't require such violence but somehow raised Jesus above it in the power of Resurrection so that the evil of crucifixion wouldn't have the last word in Jesus' life.

The Last Supper narratives attempt to make meaning of Jesus' tragic death and to suggest that he is still known in the communal act of sharing bread. At Sunshine Cathedral, we don't use "blood" language in our communion liturgy, but we do celebrate Communion as a reminder of Jesus' life and love and as a symbol of our unity with all life and with the Source of life.

I appreciate your challenging some troubling views, but I disagree that those views make God look bad. I think they make those who sometimes speak for God look bad. We are free, however, to offer a more progressive view. Some of us are trying to do just that.

Why Did Jesus Call God "Father"?

Question: *You frequently say that “God” is not a boy’s name; so why did Jesus call God “Father”?*

Answer: We need to remember several things:

(1) Our time, place, and culture are all very different from Jesus’. What was appropriate to Jesus’ social location may not be as appropriate to ours.

(2) Jesus never wrote anything that wound up in our bible. So, the Gospel writers who are placing certain words and phrases in Jesus’ mouth are doing so decades after Jesus’ life and ministry. It’s hard to psychoanalyze Jesus (in the way we can St. Paul) because we don’t have any of Jesus’ thoughts that don’t come to us (at best) second hand. So, I not only don’t know “why” Jesus called God “Father,” I can’t even be certain that he did (though, I suspect that he did and my guess would be that the image isn’t meant to suggest God is male but rather to suggest that God is accessible, caring, and can be known in intimate relationship).

(3) Finally, there are many names and images for the divine Reality in scripture. “Father” is one such name and image, but only one.

One of the biblical names of God means “Almighty Breasted One.” God is said to be “Spirit” and our “Rock” and a “Fortress.” God appears to Job as a stormy presence and to Ezekiel as a Rainbow in the sky (that’s my fave!).

In Deuteronomy and Isaiah, God is pictured as a mother eagle. God is the “still, small voice” within, and Paul (according to Luke) is comfortable quoting a Greek, pagan poet to describe God as the invisible presence in which we “live and move and have our being.” So there are many images and names for God in the bible. Some of those names/images are masculine, others are feminine, and others are gender-neutral. All of those symbols point away from themselves and toward the God that is beyond any particular image or understanding.

When we remember that image is not essence, then we are free to play with a number of images. Whichever image we prefer is about our comfort more than it is about the divine nature. The images are for us; they cannot limit, contain, or even adequately explain the ultimate reality we call “God.”

Why Does God Allow Evil?

Question: *Why doesn’t God stop evil and (the so called devil) in the world?*

Answer: The problem of evil has puzzled thinking people in every age. If God is all-powerful, but doesn’t end suffering and evil, then one wonders if God is good. If God is good and doesn’t end suffering and evil, then one wonders if God is all-powerful. If it is true that what God does for us, God does through us, then perhaps God is doing all God can and is simply waiting for us to do more to solve the problem of evil.

Some people believe that evil is an illusion, like a nightmare: terrifyingly real when we are experiencing it, but lacking substance. These people believe that the appearance of evil is like a dark room...the darkness isn’t real in and of itself; it’s only the absence of light. If I’m stumbling around in the dark room, the darkness is scary, but it isn’t real since a flashlight or candle would instantly dispel it. According to this view, evil is not a cause, but an effect. Evil would merely be the result of ignorance, poor choices, disordered thinking - terrible in its experience but lacking real substance. Evil then is stopped by us when we embrace the light of truth.

I once heard a minister give a very good answer to the problem of evil (and its mythic personification, “Satan”). The minister was asked why he didn’t preach about “the devil.” He

answered, "Because I don't know much about him; that's not who my relationship is with." I thought that was brilliant! Rather than trying to figure out evil, the minister decided to focus on Good.

When asked what kind of God would allow the Holocaust, one philosopher answered, "I'm more concerned with what kind of people would allow it."

I'm also reminded of that wonderful scene from the play *Jeffrey* where a priest is asked about evil, and the priest says, "Who cares? Evil bores me; it doesn't sing!"

So, either: (1) God could defeat evil, but chooses not to, or (2) God detests evil and stands with us as we fight it, but is unable to destroy it without our help, or (3) Evil isn't ultimately real and the illusion of evil is destroyed by our individual enlightenment, or (4) Rather than focusing on Evil we should focus on goodness, and as we do that, we may find evil disappearing anyway. I personally reject option #1. Options 2, 3, and 4 all seem plausible to me, but I don't have a final, authoritative answer for you (no one does).

Why "God" Instead of "Goddess"?

Question: *I have grown increasingly uncomfortable whenever I hear or read references to God. The term immediately evokes an image of a superman with all the accoutrements of a male. Why not: "In Goddess we trust," "Goddess bless America," "So help me Goddess," "Oh, my Goddess"? Who knows, she might actually do a better job of things. Or instead of He or She, why not It when referring to the Mystery of Mysteries, the Unexplainable?*

Answer: In the 38th chapter of Job, the writer has God ask this question, "Out of whose womb comes the ice, and who gives the hoarfrost its birth in the skies?" The implied answer is that such weather conditions come from God's womb. That's a fairly obvious feminine image for the Divine.

God is compared to a mother in Isaiah 66: "Like a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you..."(v.13).

The divine names are varied in scripture, and while many of them are masculine, others are feminine, and some are both and others are neither. God is pictured as a Rock, a Castle, and a Rainbow among other things. God shows up in or as Fire, a Whirlwind, and even a Cloud.

We tend to remember the warrior image and the fatherly image and the monarchical image for the Source of life, but the bible also gives us images of a nurturing, nursing, birthing God. Jesus called the divine Source "Abba" which was a personal image, but Jesus also said that God was "Spirit" (which can also be translated as Breath, Wind, Energy, Power, Active Force, etc.). In some languages, "spirit" is a feminine noun.

I think it is important to remember that "God" is just one name we can use for what Paul Tillich called the "ground of being." I can't believe that Ultimate Reality cares what we call It.

He is our provider.

She is our healer.

It is our companion.

The One with which we are one has been called many names, and has always been more than all of them.

The name, the image and the pronoun we apply to the Mystery of life is really up to us. So, if "God" doesn't appeal to you, pick another name (or a few) for the Un-nameable. What we call Pure Being has more to do with us than with It. God/dess is big enough (and good enough) to

answer to any name, so use the one that helps you feel closer to Her. Others will continue to call the Holy One “God,” but some will use other names and images. We are each free to think about the Divine in broad, expansive, and non-traditional ways and we may call our Higher Power by whatever name rings true for us; and like a loving mother (or father), She (or He) will hear us when we call.

Jesus

How Should We Interact With People of Different Religions?

Question: *I was always taught that Christians should try to convert non-Christians to our faith. But I recently dated someone who was Jewish (and very committed to the worship of God) and now one of my best friends has converted from Christianity (Methodist) to Buddhism! She says she has found more peace and encouragement on this new path. I can't make myself “evangelize” them, especially since they seem so happy with their religious understandings. How should we interact with non-Christians?*

Answer: How did Jesus interact with people of different traditions? He engaged the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4...Samaritans had different traditions and rituals from Jesus' community). He healed the Roman centurion's servant (Matthew 8...a member of the Roman imperial establishment would have been a pagan). When people were doing great things “in his name” (that is, like he did) even though they weren't part of Jesus' group, his disciples wanted him to tell them to stop. But instead, Jesus said, “If they aren't against us, they are for us” (Mark 9). One of his ancestors, Naomi, told her daughters-in-law to return to their country (Moab) and their religion after they were widowed. One of the daughters-in-law followed that advice without any condemnation (Ruth 1).

Being Christian shouldn't be an excuse to vilify others. We can follow Jesus' example and teachings without being prejudiced against people who worship differently. In fact, we can learn from other traditions and blend the best of all wisdom into our devotional life.

I wouldn't worry about evangelizing your friends. If you treat them with kindness and respect, the power you identify with/as God will shine through you to bless them, and you can trust that they are being led in the paths that are right for them. Divine Love is broad enough to include us all; so we can follow Jesus' example and simply interact with people who worship differently with goodwill and open minds.

Why Did Jesus Have to Die Such a Horrible Death?

Question: *I don't see why Jesus had to die such a horrible death? Did God require it? If so, why couldn't God come up with a less violent way to redeem us? I just don't understand how brutality can be redemptive.*

Answer: The earliest Christians seemed to have some idea that Jesus' death had meaning and purpose. They celebrated that belief more than they explained it.

A couple of centuries after Jesus' death, a man named **Origen** thought he had figured it all out. He hypothesized that the world was in the grip of Evil, and God wanted to win the world back. This "Ransom Theory" suggests that God made a bargain with the forces of evil (personified as "Satan") whereby God would give up an ideal person (Jesus) as a ransom to win back the world; but God cheats Satan out of his winnings by raising Jesus back to life in the Resurrection.

About nine centuries after Origen, a theologian named **Anselm** came up with what he believed was a better understanding of Jesus' death. Anselm hypothesized that God was a cosmic monarch, and in Anselm's world, a monarch's authority was absolute. Anselm figured that God wanted to redeem humanity, but the integrity of God's monarchical office wouldn't allow God just to forgive and forget. Someone had to be punished for the sins of the world. So, Anselm imagined that God sacrificed Jesus to satisfy God's own wrath. Anselm's proposal is called the "Satisfaction Theory."

A few years after Anselm, someone named Peter **Abelard** came along with a much less violent understanding of things. Abelard believed that God's love would outweigh God's wrath. He understood Jesus' life and death to be an example for us to follow. Jesus lived a life of courageous love and he wouldn't back down from what he believed was his life's mission, even if others wanted to kill him for it. His was a moral example, and our admiration of him causes us to follow his example. We serve God by serving others, and if we don't back down even when the cost is high, we are following Jesus and are thereby assured of right relationship with God. The Abelardian view doesn't blame God for Jesus' violent end, nor does it let us off the hook for taking responsibility for our own lives. Abelard's view is called the "Moral Theory of Atonement."

About three centuries after Abelard, the Reformation theologians such as **Calvin** and **Luther** weighed in. The Reformers modified the Satisfaction model and came up with the vicarious sacrifice model, also called the "Penal Theory." The Reformers decided that there was a real cost for sin, and so the sins of humanity resulted in a debt owed to God. In their view, Jesus died to pay the debt.

Of course, each of these views has a biblical proof-text or two to support it and each depends on the assumption that God and humanity were somehow separated and needed to be reconciled. However, perhaps it is possible that God has never been apart from the creation that is called in scripture, "very good." Maybe God, the source and substance of our being, could never be separated from us; we are expressions of the Life that God is!

My personal belief is that Jesus was killed as so many others were, to terrorize the community into being compliant with imperial rule. I don't believe God required, desired, or sanctioned his brutal execution, or anyone else's. The miracle for me isn't how he died but that his followers dared to claim they experienced him beyond his execution. I don't need to find meaning in his death, because I find meaning in his life. The witness of his earliest followers is that the significance of his life could not be killed! I don't need to glorify Jesus' execution in order to celebrate Resurrection possibilities.

Why Do We Call Jesus "Teacher"?

Question: *Why do some people call Jesus the "Master Teacher"? I was raised to believe Jesus was my savior, not a "Master Teacher".*

Answer: I think "teacher" is a great title for Jesus. I don't often use the word "master" because of its hierarchical and abusive connotations in our culture; but for me, Jesus is certainly a great teacher!

Remember this story from the synoptic gospels – "...a man ran up, knelt down before Jesus, and asked him, 'Good **teacher**, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' And Jesus answered, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.'" He then went on to **teach** the man an important lesson. He **taught** him that generosity was more important than legalism, but notice

what else happened. He asked “why do you call me good?” He didn’t ask “why do you call me ‘teacher?’”

There is a wonderful saying in the South, “You can’t teach what you don’t know and you can’t lead where you won’t go.” Jesus knew that he was one with God, and so he teaches us that we, too, are one with God. Jesus stepped out in faith to heal and help others, and so he teaches us that we, too, can be channels for miracle working power in our world.

We can think of Jesus as “Lord” (over against forces of oppression in our world) or as “savior” (rescuing us from loneliness and despair) or even as “redeemer” (showing us our innate dignity and sacred value), but Jesus is also a great teacher pointing us in the direction of hope, healing and happiness by his words and example.

Thinking of Jesus as a teacher doesn’t diminish his importance; in fact, because he knew his oneness with God, he can show us ours.

If you don’t like the other titles people have used for Jesus, e.g. “savior,” then “teacher” is a great alternative. If you are satisfied with the other titles for Jesus, “teacher” is just one more appropriate and biblical word to add to the list. Whatever else Jesus is for us, he is undoubtedly a wonderful teacher.

Why Focus on Jesus?

Question: *I tend to see Jesus more as a human teacher than as God in human-form. But the more I come to this conclusion, the more I wonder if Jesus still needs to be central to my faith. What are your thoughts?*

Answer: The official Christian doctrine of Christ is that Jesus was fully human *and* fully divine. This Both/And reality doesn’t sit well with our Either/Or habits of thinking, and so the church has tended to down-play, ignore, or even deny Jesus’ humanity. I commend you for trying to reclaim it. But let’s play with the word “divine.”

Systematic Theologian Paul Tillich referred to God as the “ground of being.” Whatever is must be part of the Source of life (whether that source is mental, spiritual, material, or unknown is the subject of robust debate). I don’t tend to think of the material world as “this” and the divine realm as “that.” I don’t think of “here” versus “there.” I think of Reality, and I assume that you and I are part of Reality. What is ultimately real is what I think of as divine, and whatever is “really” real is the source of our lives. So, if Jesus was really human, then he had to be part of what is really real; that is to say, for Jesus to be fully human means that his nature is also divine. And the same is true of you and of me.

My guess is that the usefulness of contemplating Jesus’ divine/human wholeness is that we will eventually come to realize our own. Jesus becomes our archetype, our model showing us the truth about ourselves. Jesus says in scripture, “I and the Infinite are one,” and we read that and think, “yes, *I* and the Infinite are one, also!”

Jesus is the way that shows us our potential.

Jesus is the truth that reflects our truth.

Jesus is the life that reminds us of our participation in divine life.

I, too, find myself focusing on Jesus’ humanness. But, I have come to understand that Jesus was fully human which is how he could be fully divine. To live life fully is to express the Spark of life more abundantly; to be fully human is to express divinity, or reality by any other name.

As you and I embrace our full humanity, we are becoming more divine. So, for me, Jesus remains very useful to my faith development because the more I learn about Jesus, the more I learn about my own sacred value. Jesus, even the highly mythologized version we have inherited, represents to me that we are more than we have previously thought and we can grow into our potential greatness. I think that's definitely worth the effort.

Marriage Equality

Marriage Equality

Question: *My co-worker told me that I shouldn't be upset about states and countries that, through referendum, ban same-sex marriage. He said that when "the people have spoken" we should just accept the will of the majority. Can you tell me how to respond?*

Answer: I have heard the rationale your colleague uses. The idea is that in a democracy, the majority rules; but what about when the majority oppresses a minority? Democracy isn't just a mob mentality; it not only allows for debate and open participation, but it also protects those who will never be in the majority.

Democracy isn't just votes; its equal opportunity and equal protection as well. Denying same-gender loving people full and equal status in society isn't democratic, no matter how many people approve of such an unjust practice.

Many justify their discomfort with (or even hatred of) gay and lesbian people on religious grounds. They suggest that God is as homophobic as they are, and they even insist that a few isolated verses of ancient scripture prove that point. Obviously, I disagree.

You can of course remain in dialogue with your co-worker. Of equal importance is that you support political candidates, businesses, and worshipping communities (such as Sunshine Cathedral) that stand for "liberty and justice for ALL." It is also important that you never give up hope that one day all loving, mutual partnerships will be celebrated in our society.

Prayer & Miracles

Affirmations

Question: *At Sunshine Cathedral, we come together at the altar for prayer after the sermon. Why do we always conclude those prayers with affirmations?*

Answer: The reasoning behind affirmations goes something like this: Most of us have learned to believe negative things about ourselves or to expect hardship more often than blessings. We learned these lessons because of what we heard over and over (usually in our formative years). How, then, can we develop a more positive self-image and a more optimistic outlook on life? By using our conscious mind to say and think positive statements!

Once we develop the habit of saying positive things and thinking positive thoughts, optimism begins to sink down into our deeper (subconscious) mind and we start to expect (and allow) more good to manifest in our experience of life.

We find affirmations in scripture: "I thank you God for hearing me; I know that you always hear me," "The Lord is my shepherd; I want for nothing," "It is in God that we live and move and have our being," "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," etc. Affirmations help

us build faith, confidence, joyful expectation, healthy self-image, and a positive outlook. I actually try to include affirmations in every spoken prayer. I invite you to try it too.

Healing Faith

Question: *I just received a very frightening diagnosis. I've always believed that if a person had enough faith, they could be healed of anything. But now that I'm in the hot seat, I find myself being very afraid. Do you think divine healing still takes place, and if so, how can I have enough faith to receive it?*

Answer: Healing is always possible. Healing, however, is more than a cure. For instance, someone who is in recovery has experienced healing even though their addiction hasn't been "cured." The addiction no longer controls their life and they have learned to live one day at a time with hope, joy, and empowerment. They have found the wherewithal to live free of the addictive substance or behavior that had earlier caused them so much trouble. So, they have experienced healing even without a cure.

Never think that you aren't a person of faith if a disease doesn't go away. Even with the disease you might experience a lot of healing, and that is something to celebrate.

Now, having distinguished between healing and cure, let me hasten to add that it is normal to hope for a cure or a remission of a serious illness. Of course one wants to be as healthy as possible! We should always see a doctor we trust, get a second opinion if the news is challenging, undergo appropriate treatments, get plenty of rest, eat properly, manage stress, allow others to support us, and if we are religious, then we can add prayer to the mix. We do everything we can, hoping for the best, and often the results are dramatic. Other times, the results are more gradual. Still other times, the results are disappointing. But we need never make ourselves feel worse by blaming ourselves when things go awry. We do what we can; we remain as optimistic as possible, and we know that there is always a chance that things will improve.

You might try a prayer similar to this one for hope and comfort:

Spirit of Life, I confess that I am frightened and overwhelmed by the information I've received. May my fears be relieved and may my hope be restored. May I see and seize the opportunities that exist for me. May I embrace all the ways that healing might take place in my mind and body. May I do all that I can to improve my condition. May I live abundantly and joyously for as long as I live, and may I remember that whatever happens, I am a person of sacred value; I am part of Eternity Itself. Bless me now and enfold me in your grace which is sufficient for my every need. Amen.

How to Pray

Question: *I've been reading that we shouldn't ask God for help. I've spent my whole life asking God to bless me. Sometimes the answer seems to be yes, and sometimes the answer seems to be no; but in times of crisis, it just seems natural to call out to God for help. How do you think we ought to pray?*

Answer: Psalm 46.10, says "Be still and know that I am God." That may be the best prayer advice ever given. Prayer isn't about trying to persuade God to do what God otherwise would not have done. Prayer is communion with the God of our understanding, not an interview where we try to get God to give us a job or lend us some money. Of course, once our fears are out of the way and we can think positively and feel good and expect blessings, often life will seem

smoother for us; but that is because prayer changed our minds, not God's. Prayer enriches and expands our consciousness, and our expanded consciousness will seem to attract more blessings.

Take a moment every day just to sit quietly. Focus on your breathing, and quiet your discursive thinking. Allow divine love to wash over you and flow through you; imagine it as light or waves of energy coursing through your body. Enjoy the Silence and feel the Presence. After a few minutes, you may simply want to say "Amen," or you may want to do some affirmations (e.g., "I am happy, wise, and serene"; "The answer I need comes to me"; "The healing energy of life is flowing through me now"; "I live in an abundant universe and my needs are being supplied"; "My friends are safe and well"; "Blessings are flowing into my friend's life now", etc.).

Now that you've acknowledged the divine presence and felt your connection to it and have affirmed that Good is possible for you and others, you can express gratitude and release the prayer with "Amen" or "And so it is!" The most essential part, however, is to get still and sense the divine presence within and around you. Once you get there, everything else seems to fall into place.

Liberal Prayer?

Question: *Why don't liberals believe in the power of prayer?*

Answer: I certainly believe in prayer. It is part of my daily life.

Liberal theologian and retired Episcopal bishop John S. Spong wrote,

"Prayer is being present, sharing love, opening life to transcendence. It is not necessarily words addressed heavenward...Perhaps we human beings are more psychically connected than we have ever imagined. Perhaps positive thoughts and the release of the energy of concern [do] flow on networks we do not understand, affecting the life of another...All I know is that it is natural to reach out, to love, and to care for others, and inevitably we feel compelled to give verbal expressions to those aspects of our lives."

Sounds like a ringing endorsement of prayer from a well-known progressive Christian!

Spong has also said that for him learning to live fully is indistinguishable from prayer.

A life filled with hope, love, compassion, and kindness is a life of prayer. Those deep (and perhaps divine) emotions can be expressed in verbal poetry, in actions, in rituals, or in silent visualizations but the life of love is a prayerful life and such a life is bound to make a difference in our world.

In my own experience, prayer has proven to focus my consciousness, calm my anxieties, and increase my awareness of opportunities. In prayer I recognize my unity with the spirit of life, I affirm Good (for myself or others), I express gratitude for the joys of life, and I release the prayer to the perfection of divine right action. The results are often amazing. I am a liberal Christian who does believe in prayer. That is the only witness I can give.

Prayer Failure

Question: *None of my prayers seem to work anymore. I've prayed for people to get well, and they've gotten worse! I've prayed for financial blessings but I still struggle. I've even prayed for my love life but I'm still alone. Why aren't my prayers doing any good?*

Answer: Abraham Heschel wrote, "Prayer cannot bring water to parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will."

If we think of prayer as a magic bottle that will release a wish granting genie, then we may find ourselves disappointed when the wishes don't come true. But if prayer is the change of attitude that helps us change for the better, then the better "us" can create a better life for ourselves.

Begging creates desperation, and a desperate spirit is not a receptive spirit. Prayer, rather than begging, is more of a release. Try sitting in the Silence. Just breathe. Feel gratitude for the solitude of the moment. Know that at least for that moment, all is well. Just relax and experience the peace of quiet breathing. That is centering prayer, and I find such prayer to be effective.

Another formula you might try is affirming your good rather than begging for it. Affirm that Good is at hand, and then allow it to come however it may. It may not look exactly like your desire, but sometimes it will, and sometimes it will even be better. Such a prayer can be very simple: "Dear God, I relax in your presence and know that your grace is enfolding me and my dear ones now. I trust your grace to provide for every need and to bring wonderful blessings into manifestation at the perfect time and in the perfect way. Thank you, God. Amen."

When I was in college, I complained to a wise older friend that my prayers weren't working. She could tell I was quite anxious. Her answer to me was brilliant. She said, "Never pray hard. Always pray easy."

If your prayer helps you experience a moment of peace, then it is a perfect prayer. And once you achieve a peaceful state, you may find that specific blessings find their way to you as well.

Prayer Without Belief

Question: *I'm having trouble believing in God and I feel like a hypocrite when I pray. Should I give up praying until I can be certain about God again?*

Answer: I don't think we need to have all the answers...in fact, I rarely trust the answers that others claim to be so certain about. In my opinion, your questions and doubts are part of a healthy spiritual exploration; I might even go so far as to say your questions *are* prayer!

Prayer isn't about flattering a Cosmic Egomaniac, nor is it about persuading a Celestial Santa Claus that we've been good enough to be awarded goodies, nor is it a bargaining chip to get us out of trouble in this or some future life. Prayer is communion with the Energy of Life (which we may or may not choose to call "God") that seeks to express through and as us. Such communion can certainly transform suffering into hope and it can help us access the inner reserves of wisdom and compassion that we all have. None of that is dependent on being certain about much of anything.

Prayer doesn't need to beg a distant deity for favors; it can be more of an experience of the divine qualities within you. Don't let your questions about God keep you from praying; let your honest search energize your prayers. While you're sorting out your beliefs, prayer can be a practice that offers you comfort and peace along the way. You're not a hypocrite...you're a "seeker" and I believe your search is a holy one. Keep praying.

Praying to Saints

Question: *Are we in MCC allowed to pray to Mary and other saints?*

Answer: MCC, compared to other denominations, is largely non-dogmatic. You are free to explore any number of methods of prayer and discover for yourself what brings you closer to the God of your understanding. My prayers tend to be affirmations, long periods of Silence, immersing myself in study, and reading or reciting prayerful poetry or prose. At other times, I

use mantras (saying a word or phrase repeatedly to plant a positive idea or image deep in my subconscious mind, or to get beyond my discursive thinking all together). By the way, saying a prayer such as the "Hail Mary" repeatedly (as one does praying the Rosary) seems to have a mantra like effect!

There are other ways of praying including visualization, singing or chanting, and yes, asking spiritual heroes and ancestors (saints) to "intercede" for us. Any method that helps you experience communion with your Higher Power will prove to be right for you.

A priest once told me, "To try to pray is to pray." I have found that to be true. The prayer of your heart is the prayer that will be most meaningful to you.

Spiritual Healing

Question: *I've been praying for a healing but I haven't had any results yet. I'm starting to think God doesn't heal. Do you?*

Answer: I believe that thought patterns, attitudes, emotional states, and lifestyle all contribute to our experience of health. Of course, heredity and environment are also factors, as is the quality of medical care we receive. It's hard to blame any one thing for health challenges, just as it's difficult to expect any one thing to correct all health challenges.

However, praying can reduce our anxiety, and once we are calm we are much more likely to see and seize the opportunities that exist for us. Prayer, I believe, can lead to "right action" which can lead to a healing experience. Of course, one can experience healing without experiencing a cure; for example, one may be an addict but experience sobriety in spite of the addiction. The addiction isn't cured, but one experiences the healing needed to live sober.

St. Paul said he had a "thorn" in his flesh about which he prayed. The problem remained, but he felt his prayer was answered. He said that he learned "Divine grace is sufficient...divine power is made perfect in weakness." His problem wasn't cured, but he experienced some kind of healing whereby he was able to cope with the problem with much less anxiety.

Some teachers of spiritual healing suggest that prayer is better at preventing dis-ease than removing it because once we have a problem we are already emotionally invested in it. Once our fear or anger or identity is tied to a problem, it becomes much more difficult to overcome.

Sometimes the problem goes away; and sometimes we just discover we can handle the problem. In either case, divine grace seems to be present. Pray and then try to detach from the outcome. You may find that your prayers are effective, even when they don't produce the result you first desired.

To Whom Should We Pray?

Question: *Some people pray to saints. Some people pray to angels. Some people pray only to God, but there are many different understandings of and names for God. Some people even pray to their ancestors. There are so many different ways to pray, and people who pray must think their form of prayer is best; how can we know which is the right way to pray?*

Answer: Honestly, I don't think you can get it wrong. For you, there may be a method that seems more effective, in which case, that is the method that you should use. But I can't imagine that God cares what we call Her, how many images we use for Him, or what formula we use to communicate with It.

God is the All-in-all. When you reach out to God, God responds, just as if you tossed a pebble in a pond there would immediately be ripples. So, if asking ancestors, saints, or friends on other planes to join you in prayer helps you have more confidence in divine possibilities, then why not do it?

My prayers tend to be time spent in Silence, followed by affirmations and expressions of gratitude. Sometimes, I like to use scripture verses as mantras. Sometimes I like to immerse myself in study and call that prayer. The prayer of your heart is the truest kind of prayer; the way you choose to voice that prayer is entirely up to you.

Unanswered Prayer

Question: *I keep praying for a friend, but her situation doesn't seem to improve. Why do you think that is?*

Answer: When we are praying for ourselves, we can make the conscious decision to cooperate with natural and divine laws, to become the answer to our own prayers. We can look for whatever positive gift prayer might bring out of even the most difficult situation. We can learn that our Good takes many forms and might appear in ways beyond our original plan.

But when we pray for others, we can't decide for them. We can't understand for them. We can simply send our love and best wishes, and trust that our prayers are offering something positive and good, even if we don't know what that something might be. So, part of the challenge of praying for others is also being detached from the outcome. We pray. We send our best energy. We let go. We get out of the way.

Here is a prayer we can offer our loved ones:

"May God's perfect Good be done for you, in you, through you, by you, and as you. I give thanks for this Good and I trust that all is well. Amen."

Maybe we pray once, and a miracle occurs! Maybe we pray for years with seemingly slow progress. Maybe we pray and things seem to get worse, but we aren't responsible for the outcome. We're responsible for the love that motivated the prayer, and love is never wasted. How it all unfolds may be a mystery to us, but we have given the gift of love and that gift is in some way a very real blessing.

Where Are the Miracles Today?

Question: *If Jesus healed people miraculously and even raised people from the dead, why do such miracles happen so seldom now?*

Answer: Biblical stories are often presented as if they are historical. But "history" is understood differently now than in antiquity. "History" was more of a literary genre than a social science in Jesus' time. To tell the history of someone was to tell of that person's significance, not to accurately relate facts.

A "history" was meant to suggest that someone impacted the *course of history*. Such history affirms that it was important that the person being remembered lived. Historical literature could include hyperbole, myth, imagined details, fictive elements, rumors, etc. The "details" were simply a way of filling out the story to show that the person being remembered was important *to history*. So, did every healing we read about in the bible happen? Or, are the stories meant to suggest that Jesus' life was very important in the history of the world?

I have no doubt that Jesus' love helped people feel more integrated and whole. I have no doubt that Jesus' teaching offered hope and empowerment to people who needed such help. And I believe that miracles still happen.

Life expectancy is more than double what it was in Jesus' day. Isn't that a miracle? Jesus himself could hardly imagine the comforts we enjoy today. Isn't that a miracle? And we've all had the experience of prayer adding comfort to our lives. So, I wouldn't discount miracles, and at the same time, I try to remember that miracle stories in scripture may be more about Jesus' significance to the people he touched than about the miracles themselves.

Why Ask God for Help?

Question: *Doesn't God know what we need? Why doesn't God just do good things for us without our having to ask?*

Answer: Unfortunately, many of us have grown up with the idea that God is living in the sky just above us (an idea that made more sense when people thought we lived in a three tiered universe and on a flat earth) and that God is in control of everything that happens (good and bad), and that in order to get God to give us good things we must somehow persuade God. I think that's not only bad theology, it's also not very empowering. No wonder prayer in that framework so often leaves us disappointed!

But what if rather than being the Grand Puppeteer in the sky pulling all the strings, God is the power of Love within and around us (1 John 4.16), the energy of Life in which we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17.28), the All-in-all (Colossians 3.11). This understanding of God means we don't have to beg a far away deity to help us, but rather we are free to work with a divine Presence that is the very fabric of our lives!

New Thought teachers have long said that what God does for us, God must do through us. So, our prayers, rather than begging, become joyous visualizations, positive affirmations, expressions of gratitude, declarations of hope, and a commitment to participate in our own well-being.

Rather than thinking of prayer changing things, think of prayer as changing us; and changed people are equipped to change things. Sometimes the change need only be a more positive outlook, a little more patience, or a refusal to give up. Prayer can certainly facilitate those positive changes.

Why Does Prayer Seem to Make Things Worse Sometimes?

Question: *Why is it that praying for a thing seems to make it worse sometimes?*

Answer: I don't know what you are praying for, but prayer is focus. Focusing on what you want may actually stir up all the old thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that stood in the way of your achievement. By praying for something good, you may be discovering some of the chaotic thoughts and emotions that were hindering your good. As those unpleasant thoughts and feelings pop up (and express as experience), there may actually be an opportunity to see what's blocking your blessing from unfolding.

Your prayer work may be showing you what's in the way of your having more joyous experiences and once you see the obstacles you can make some changes in your thoughts and attitudes which might lead to better days. In this way, you are becoming the answer to your own prayer.

Solutions aren't always instant, and they sometimes require effort and patience. Keep praying, keep hoping, and keep working on your goals. Try to not be discouraged. If things are going to improve, optimism and persistence will be useful tools in turning things around.

Why Doesn't God Answer Every Prayer for Healing?

Question: *Why does God not answer every prayer for healing? Some people get miracles, and others don't. It doesn't seem fair.*

Answer: In his book, *The Magic of Believing*, Claude Bristol wrote, "anyone who knows anything about the power of mind knows of the effects that emotionalized thinking has upon the condition of the body...In some faith healing movements, cures are affected by denying that the disease exists...Followers of other schools of healing make no attempt to deny the existence of disease, but instead ignore it, affirming that they are well and happy and getting better every day. Members of the various schools of thought are the best judges of the methods that work best for them..."

I believe Bristol makes an excellent point. Rather than hoping that God will fix all our problems, we can be empowered to work with Life, using the power of mind to take responsibility for our own lives.

I can't say why chemotherapy makes one person's cancer go into remission and not another's. I can't say why one person shakes a cold in three days that another person suffers with for three weeks. But I do know that prayer, modern medicine, complementary therapies, positive thinking, diet, exercise, meditation, and hope can all work together to bring improvements in our lives. Prayer is one tool we have, but attitude, doctors, habits, and environment all matter too.

When we need healing, let's use every available resource. I can't promise what the outcome will be, but doing all we can do will feel better than waiting for our problems to be magically taken away. If our efforts fail, at least we know we did all we could; and often, our efforts will succeed.

Reproductive Rights

What to Believe About Abortion?

Question: *What is MCC's position on the issue of abortion? Is it a personal decision or is it the...killing of an unborn child... What do you believe?*

Answer: Metropolitan Community Churches as a denomination didn't take an official stand on the issue for a long time. However, there were always people (like me) who were openly pro-choice.

Because I will never be faced with the decision to have an abortion, I am personally uncomfortable telling women what they must or mustn't do with their bodies. It is too easy for me to form an opinion about an issue I'll never face, and so I have compassion for those who have to make such a difficult decision (regardless of the choice they make).

In recent years, the leadership of MCC did form an official statement on the issue. The MCC Statement of Faith on Women's Reproductive Health, Rights, & Justice includes the following verbiage:

"[MCC] affirms that all people are entitled to the rights and resources that equip them to make their own decisions about their bodies, their sexuality, and their well-being, including the

inalienable right of women to control their bodies. We call on all levels of government and civil society to honor and respect those rights.”

Exodus 21.22-23 says that if two men are fighting and accidentally hit a pregnant woman causing her to miscarry, the man who hit her should be fined. But if the woman herself is injured, then the penalty is “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” To cause a miscarriage would cost a man some money, but to harm the mother would result in the man suffering harm in kind. That biblical author clearly valued the life of the mother over the life of her fetus. We may or may not agree with that evaluation, but one cannot simply assume the bible is against pregnancy termination.

For people who are pro-choice, abortion is usually a last resort but they want it to be an option. In the words of a former president, the ideal would be for abortions to be “safe, legal, and rare.”

The issue is complex, and because it is complex and it impacts women exponentially more than it does men, I remain pro-choice, trusting women to exercise sovereignty over their own bodies.

If we as a community, a nation, a world do better at making sure that all people have adequate health care, safety, educational and financial resources, my guess is that abortions will happen less frequently, and that is something I think everyone would appreciate.

Scripture

Does the Bible Condemn Me?

Question: *My mother believes I will go to hell for being gay and she quotes the bible at me to make her case. How can I persuade her that isn't true? When I talk to her about it, I feel like I'm five years old again.*

Answer: First of all, I don't believe you or anyone else will go to “hell” for any reason. The terror tactics to make people comply with various doctrines need to stay in the distant past; they have no place among thinking people in the 21st century.

Secondly, you don't say which bible verses your mother “quotes at” you, but I bet I know what they are. Of the six or seven bible verses that are often used to promote homophobia, none of them condemn genuine love or mutual attraction. And my read on Jesus is that he wasn't in the condemnation business anyway!

Thirdly, the bible doesn't offer the last word on human sexuality (in fact, by contemporary standards, the biblical view of biology is rather naïve). The bible is a collection of sacred writings that shows us what certain people believed at a certain time. They wrestled with the issues of their day and came to conclusions that seemed reasonable to them. They weren't putting an end to every issue for all time. Our job isn't to accept their conclusions, but to follow their example of wrestling with the issues for ourselves and coming to conclusions that seem right for us. Sometimes we will agree with our forbears; other times, we will not. But like them, we can trust that our search for truth will lead us where we need to be, even if that isn't where they ended up.

You may never persuade your mother that her homophobia isn't shared by God. What is important is that you never allow yourself to believe that you are anything less than a person of sacred value. We can't control what others believe about us, but we can decide what we will believe about ourselves.

How Did Judas Die?

Question: *A friend and I are having a disagreement. He says Judas Iscariot hanged himself. I remember from childhood hearing that he was running and fell so hard that he was disemboweled. Can you please settle this for us?*

Answer: Well, don't let this one ruin your friendship, because as it turns out, you're both right.

In Matthew's gospel, we read, "Flinging the money into the temple, Judas departed and went off and hanged himself" (27.5). But in the Book of Acts we read, "Judas bought a parcel of land with the wages of his iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out" (1.18). Obviously, at least one of the accounts is mistaken, or embellished, and possibly they are both literary traditions rather than historical facts. This does show us why biblical literalism isn't really possible, and also why it isn't necessary.

Both writers seem to want to paint Judas as either a villain or at least as an anti-hero (one of the "good guys" who is tragically flawed). They each make their point, but obviously differ on the details. The bible is so much richer and more interesting when we liberate it from needless literalism. But for now, you and your friend can both be pleased that you each remembered correctly one of the biblical traditions about Judas' unfortunate end.

How is Homosexuality not Sinful?

Question: *Why is homosexuality okay when the bible specifically states that it is sinful? I am still confused and trying to find answers and to understand the scriptures related to this subject.*

Answer: This is one of the most frequently asked questions in my ministry. It shows how abusively some churches have used the bible against same-gender loving people.

I don't say that homosexuality is okay...I say that homosexuality is GOOD, as is heterosexuality and bisexuality.

The bible has been used to justify all kinds of prejudices, and that simply isn't the best use of a sacred text. The bible does not "specifically state that [homosexuality] is sinful." The few times that "homosexual acts" seem to be questioned in scripture are always in the context of exploitation. Love or mutual adult affection and attraction are never condemned.

It's alright to be who we are because we are exactly who we are supposed to be. Our love is life-giving, our mutual attractions are healthy and normal, and any God worthy of our worship could never condemn us for simply being who we are. God is love, so dare to trust that your love is as divine as any other.

How to Respond to the Claim that the Bible Condemns Same-gender Coupling?

Question: *I'm tired of hearing "The bible says, 'Man shall not sleep with man.'" What do you say when you hear this from someone?*

Answer: The bible says lots of things. If we were to take any given verse of scripture and not consider the culture, the language, or the time from which the quote comes, we might conclude that the bible was merely a book meant to defend various forms of bigotry.

People have used the bible to silence women, abuse children, condone slavery and later segregation, and even to defend brutal wars and environmental destruction. I can't imagine this is the proper way to use a sacred text!

The Apostle Paul, however, said that whenever we show love we have fulfilled the intent of scripture (Romans 13.8). And Jesus said that the greatest commandment was love (Mark 12.28-31) and that all of scripture amounts to what we call the Golden Rule (“do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” Matthew 7.12). It isn’t very loving to use religion as a weapon against people (especially for who they love!), nor would people who use scripture to demonize others want scripture used against them in that way. So, I think when people use the bible to wound or exclude others, they are misusing it.

In any case, the verse that you say you hear so often actually comes from Leviticus. It is a bit disingenuous for most people to use Leviticus as their crutch to support homophobia. For instance, Leviticus condemns eating pork (11.6), demands circumcision for male children (12.3), forbids the eating of rare meat (17.14; 19.26), condemns tattoos (19.28) and wearing clothes of mixed fabric (19.19), forbids the mix-breeding of animals (19.19), demands abstinence from fortune-telling (19.31), frowns on trimming beards (19.27), and insists that everyone pay a full tithe (27.30). Leviticus also says to love your neighbor as yourself (19.18, a passage Jesus quoted). It’s not very loving to use the bible as a club to beat up your gay neighbor!

Now, people using Leviticus as their excuse to condemn gay and lesbian people (though Leviticus is silent on women loving women) usually haven’t read it carefully. If they read their horoscopes, have tattoos, eat bacon, have ever worn a poly-cotton blend, owned a mule (the result of a horse and a donkey breeding), trimmed their facial hair, forgot to have their sons circumcised, enjoyed a rare steak, or given less than 10% of their income to their house of worship, then they have not embraced the teachings of Leviticus for their own lives; and if they haven’t embraced all the Levitical prohibitions, then we certainly don’t have to accept the one they wish to take literally. One can’t dismiss the prohibitions for one’s own life and then use them to condemn someone else’s.

The ancient Levitical Codes are complex, and are fascinating to discuss in small classes, but a verse from Leviticus cannot stand alone to condemn same-gender love or same-sex attraction.

If God Isn’t the Author of the Bible, How Can It Still Be Important to Me?

Question: *I grew up believing that God actually wrote the bible and that it was literally true from the first page to the last. I now doubt those assumptions, but I wonder what importance the bible has. I don’t want to throw it out, but I can’t believe what I once did about it. Can you help?*

Answer: The bible has many authors covering more than a millennium and touching at least three continents. The writers spoke a variety of languages and none of them knew our continent even existed. The bible writers were clearly influenced by their own cultures and experiences and we’ve learned some things since their time. However, they honestly struggled to find meaning in life and to embrace hope in difficult times. They faithfully and creatively recorded their ideas and as we read the songs, poems, sermons, letters, legal documents, and stories they created we find inspiration to ask our own questions and to pursue truth and meaning as courageously as they did. We may come to different conclusions and we may express our findings differently, but that doesn’t mean their journeys can’t have a positive impact on our own.

The bible writers (none of whom knew they were writing anything that would eventually be included in a “bible”) were trying to know, serve, and share God. We are inspired, comforted, challenged, and encouraged by their efforts, even as we recognize God has much more to say to our hearts than we may find in any collection of writings.

Illegitimate Children

Question: *I recently came across Deuteronomy 23.2 which says, "An illegitimate child shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD." Why were children singled out?*

Answer: Ancient cultures were very concerned with inheritance rights and unity. When our world was less global and more tribal, it was considered a matter of importance for a community to share the same religion, the same ethnicity, the same worldview and to protect financial resources. Outsiders were considered a threat to unity and safety. Children of questionable paternity were considered not “really” part of the community in some societies.

Of course, that was a cruel way to treat children; no one should be ostracized simply for being who or what one is. I, for one, believe there is no such thing as an illegitimate child. I don’t consider the ancient prejudice reflected in Deut. 23.2 to be relevant for us today.

Is the Bible the Word of God?

Question: *A few weeks ago, I heard a preacher say that the bible isn’t the word of God. What did he mean by that?*

Answer: I don’t know who said that or in what context so I don’t know what she or he might have intended to convey; however, I do agree with the statement at first blush, so let me share my perspective.

Some people call the bible the “word of God.” If that means it is a collection of stories about a people’s understanding of God, then that phrase is perfectly fine. But if we understand “word of God” to mean that God dictated every word that is in the bible, then many of us can’t agree with that.

In the Old Testament, the “word of God” is the spoken word of the prophets. The Psalms are prayers and hymns *to* God, not from God. And in the New Testament, the writer of John’s Gospel considers Jesus to be the word of God, the “word made flesh.” So calling the bible the “word of God” isn’t necessarily “biblical.”

A shorter way explaining it would be to say the “word of God” does not mean the “words of God.” To suggest that God possessed a human writer’s body and made the writer compose something without any of his or her own personality or culture contributing to the work suggests that the bible is a channeled work, and most Christians do not embrace the occult practice of channeling.

Moreover, there are too many internal contradictions (for instance two very different creation accounts) for the bible to have been written by a single entity.

Another way to explain it is to say that the bible may be the word of God, but we must discern the difference between the descriptive word and the prescriptive word. When the bible seems to condone the evil practice of slavery, that is the *descriptive* word...describing how things were, not how things ought to be. On the other hand, when the bible tells us to love our neighbor and to refrain from judging one another, that is the *prescriptive* word...prescribing how we ought to live!

We never want to make an idol of the bible. We are certainly free to call the bible the “word of God” if we choose, but let us remember it isn’t the *final* word. There is more wisdom to discover and embrace in the world.

Isn't the Command to be Fruitful & Multiply an Anti-Gay Statement?

Question: *The bible says, "Be fruitful and multiply." Isn't that an argument against gay and lesbian couples?*

Answer: (1) I know many gay and lesbian parents. Some of them are foster parents. Some of them have children from previous marriages. Some of them have adopted. Some of them have had alternative insemination. In any case, same-gender loving people can "multiply."

(2) The passage you are quoting comes from Genesis (1.28). That is a story that describes the creation of a flat earth that is covered by an invisible dome (v.6) which keeps a cosmic ocean at bay. The story tells us our world was created in a week, and the world it describes is very different from the one we experience in the 21st century (we don't think the blue sky is water above an invisible dome, for example). If we aren't taking the rest of the story literally, we needn't take the line from verse 28 literally.

(3) The final point I want to raise is that in the story you reference, God tells a couple to be fertile and multiply and populate the earth. As the earth now has several billion occupants, one might assume the primordial couple did its job...mission accomplished! In the story, God isn't telling "us" to populate the earth; God is telling the first couple to get busy. Since the earth is populated, we can assume the people who received the directive followed it satisfactorily enough (if we were to take the story literally to begin with, which I do not).

Gay people often have children, and not all straight couples do. The directive to be fruitful and multiply comes from an ancient parable that we can't take literally today. And the directive isn't given to the reader, but to the characters in the story (who apparently followed it more than adequately). So, a line from an ancient creation myth cannot be fairly used as a proof-text to condemn lesbian and gay people.

Why Would God Attack People With Snakes?

Question: *My aunt heard a reading in her parish recently that disturbed her. The story was about God sending serpents to bite people. Afterward, the people who were dying from the snake bites could look at a bronze serpent and they would recover. The story didn't make sense to her and she didn't feel that she could ask her priest for clarification. Isn't the serpent a symbol of evil? What does this story mean?*

Answer: That story comes from the book of Numbers (the fourth book in the bible). The book of Wisdom (chapter 6) interprets that story as the serpents being used as a warning to shock people into better behavior. The bronze serpent was used as a healing agent to remind people there is always hope.

The writer of the gospel of John interprets the story in an archetypal way. The gospel writer says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will live." John is recalling Jesus' crucifixion, a painful and sad event; but crucifixion didn't end the Jesus story or the Jesus movement. The experience we call Resurrection follows, and so the cross is a painful event that is followed by renewed hope, empowerment, and life.

In the story, Moses' community has experienced battles, uncertainty, and other hardships. They are living on *manna* which, though edible, does not provide a well balanced diet. So, the community, tired and frustrated and afraid, starts to complain bitterly. In response, "fiery" serpents appear. When the people repent of their negative attitudes, then the bronze serpent is introduced as a healing modality.

People may have wandered into a pit of poisonous (“fiery”) snakes, but I can’t believe God caused it. They may have relied on some kind of superstitious remedy (looking at the bronze serpent), and those who survived may have attributed their survival to the remedy. If they really believed that the bronze serpent had curative powers, their bodies may have responded to their belief (we know there is a mind-body connection). But I believe the story is probably allegorical more than historical.

The community is experiencing hardships, but they are free. They have escaped from Egyptian slavery, and so surely the difficulties of liberty are preferable to the “security” of slavery. And, manna may not be the diet of choice, but it is keeping them alive. Rather than being grateful for what they have, they are complaining about what isn’t going their way. Such bitter or toxic (“poisonous”) attitudes can make us emotionally/spiritually sick. So, when we look boldly at our challenges (the bronze serpent), and dare to face them, we discover we can overcome them. When we choose to be grateful for our blessings and hopeful about our challenges, we experience healing. The story may not be so much about what did happen, but about what does happen in our own lives.

In some ancient cultures, the serpent was a symbol of mischief. In other cultures, the serpent was a symbol of wisdom and life. In this story, the serpent is both. The serpents aren’t really the problem; they are the result of the problem (negative attitudes). Facing the problem and repenting (choosing new, better attitudes) lead the people to healing. The story shows us that negative attitudes lead to suffering, while changing our attitudes in a more optimistic and positive direction brings strength and renewal to us. It’s actually a pretty good lesson after all.

Spirituality

Are Angels Real?

Question: *Do you believe in angels?*

Answer: If by “believe in” you mean do I believe that angels exist, the short answer is “yes.” Angels are messengers of God, that is, they are helpers who remind us of what is good. An idea, a memory, a friend, a kindly stranger, an inspired work of art, or a burst of creativity could all be understood as angels as they may communicate a hopeful and helpful message to us.

Are there spiritual beings in an invisible realm who watch over us? *Possibly*. But even if such beings don’t exist in a literal sense, Love and kindness still get communicated to us in a variety of ways and I am willing to see any messenger of infinite goodness as an angel of God’s presence. Are angels incorporeal energy-beings, or are they imaginative, archetypal symbols? In either case, they seem to get the message of divine love across, and as I depend on the message I definitely appreciate the messengers.

Are Channeled Works For Real?

Question: *Do you think people who claim to channel Ascended Teachers or Angel Energies are sincere or are they really just con-artists?*

Answer: I’ve read some “channeled” teachings that seemed a little vapid. But I’ve known people who found them quite uplifting. Who am I to deny their empowering experience?

There are two “channeled” works that I have appreciated. The first is *A Course in Miracles*. Psychiatrist Helen Schucman claimed to experience something she called “inner dictation.” She

had been raised in a secular Jewish family and, as a scientist, considered herself agnostic. But she claimed to take her "inner dictation" experience seriously and she attributed the inner "Voice" to Jesus!

ACIM seems to be a blend of Buddhist philosophy, Gnosticism, Positive Psychology, and Christian terminology. It is presented as a self-help curriculum and many people believe they have been helped by studying and applying the teachings of *A Course in Miracles*. Was it channeled? It is my nature to be a bit skeptical about such claims, but its' positive message has proven useful to many people, and that's what is important to me. Even if it is nothing more than the work of a skilled mental health practitioner who blended spirituality with psychology to come up with a useful self-help tool, it is nevertheless something that is important to people all over the world. Whatever its' origin, it has benefited many people.

The second "channeled" work that I'm thinking of is the teaching of "Abraham." Esther Hicks claims to channel a group of energy-beings who collectively are called "Abraham." The teachings of "Abraham" seem to be empowering, positive, and there is a definite audience for them. Is the teaching really just the wisdom of an insightful individual (Esther Hicks), or is it coming from some other plane of existence? I don't much care. For me, if the teachings are positive and helpful and are being used constructively to help people, then they are good enough regardless of their myth of origin.

I don't know if every person who claims to channel wisdom from beyond is sincere (my assumption is that some are and some aren't), but I do know there are examples of so-called channeled works being at least harmless and perhaps beneficial.

If you have found yourself attracted to some of this literature and are finding it positive and helpful, then that may be good enough. If you do not find yourself being drawn to such literature, then simply ignore it. Different strokes, as it were. In either case, there is probably no need to rush to judgment. If such literature speaks to you, explore it; if not, leave it alone. The myths about what inspires such literature are much less important to me than what the literature actually says.

Faith and Finances

Question: *We keep hearing how terrible the economy is, and I know more and more people who are hurting financially. How can faith get us through this difficult time?*

Answer: In Exodus, Moses encounters a Voice in a thorn bush that is on fire. Moses is a former prince who is now a shepherd having an unsettling experience. He is no longer part of the royal court, and in his exile, Moses discovers the divine presence in a burning thorn bush (a very uncomfortable place to be!). The Voice from the bush is telling him to confront the world's only super-power. The story suggests that difficulties happen, but Hope is there, right in the midst of the discomfort (in the desert, in the flame, in the brambles, in the call to confront oppression).

I have no easy answers, no pithy quip that will make all your worries and concerns go away. But I am sure that the economy will one day improve, that most of us will prove resilient through the difficult days, and that some will even manage to prosper. The spirit of life is flowing through us in good times and in challenging times, and through it all we have one another for encouragement and companionship. Things will one day look better, and until they do, we have hope and loving community and inner reserves of strength to sustain us.

My plan is to be grateful for the blessings I have and to try to see and seize opportunities as they arise. I hope to fully participate in the joy of life and in the circulation of divine supply. I will support my church and other causes dear to me as faithfully as I can, knowing that every gift is needed right now; and I will be mindful that I am very fortunate to have something to share.

We may have to cross deserts, seas, and the occasional thorn bush, but it's all leading to a land of promise. Let's try to focus on the promise and not give up until it is made manifest in our experience.

Hoping for a Less Violent Christianity

Question: *Why do Christians so often advocate such violent acts as war, capital punishment, and harsh treatment of children?*

Answer: The Dalai Lama has said, "Through violence, you may 'solve' one problem, but you sow the seeds for another."

I am continually disturbed by the violence I find in theology. Not all theologies are violent, of course, but some are; and the violent theologies contribute to the experience of violence in the world.

If our theology states that punishment for not holding the "right" beliefs is an eternity of violent suffering, and if glorifying an act of violence against Jesus is somehow the way of being "saved" from the torment of such after-life violence, then as Christians is it even possible for us to be true advocates of peace?

Presbyterian Womanist-Theologian Delores Williams has written, "There is nothing of God in the blood of the cross." I agree.

For almost the first 400 years of Christianity, the cross was not a significant universal symbol. And even after the cross became a popular Christian symbol, the crucifix (a cross that includes the image of a wounded body) did not become a popular image until the Middle Ages.

The theologies we have that glorify suffering, torment, and violence have developed over time in patriarchal (often violent) cultures. We can certainly rethink them and choose less violent imagery for our faith development.

My Christology doesn't glorify Jesus' death, but it does celebrate his life. I prefer the "living Jesus," that is, the Jesus we find in the gospels (not only those that made it into our canon but also some that didn't) who teaches and heals, includes the marginalized, touches the untouchables and resists oppression.

This living Jesus models a God-filled life and this is the Jesus that I try to follow. This Jesus could have died peacefully in his sleep at a ripe, old age and still be worthy of my adoration. I do not believe that the brutality of crucifixion was in any way part of a divine plan.

Jesus' execution happened, and we can celebrate that Golgotha wasn't the end of his story. We don't have to deny the crucifixion, but neither must we glorify it; the earliest generations of Christians didn't! In fact, as Christians, couldn't we use the story of the enlightened Sage that we follow not to celebrate the unjust way in which he was killed but as motivation to resist such violent injustice from now on? Can't we love and follow Jesus without loving and perpetuating violence?

A less violent Christianity may require changing some of our liturgies, abandoning some of our hymns, reinterpreting some of our sacred texts, and moving our crosses to less prominent places,

but in a world that is so wounded by perpetual violence, it may prove to be worth the work.

If violent imagery dominates our worship, it is bound to dominate how we live. Once our theologies become less violent, I'm guessing our world will look less violent, too. That is, at least, my hope and my prayer.

How Can I Get My Faith Back?

Question: *I've been struggling with a lot of difficulties. I don't even think I have faith any more. How can you get faith back once you've lost it?*

Answer: I wouldn't worry about your "lack" of faith. You probably have more faith than you realize. Faith is just the willingness to imagine new possibilities. There is probably something in your life that you can imagine being different, in which case you are not totally without faith.

The other day I was feeling a little annoyed about something when suddenly, out of the blue, I remembered a very funny story and I immediately laughed out loud. I went from irritable to joyous in the blink of an eye! Why? Because I stopped thinking for a moment about something that made me miserable and started thinking about something that made me happy...it was that simple and I physically felt better after I changed my thoughts to something happy. We can choose our thoughts, and we can choose the ones that feel good. We really do have that power.

Psychologist Robert Holden says "happiness is only ever one thought away at most. One fresh perception, one new belief, one innovative thought, one powerful decision, one moment of surrender, one instant of complete openness is all it takes to experience a world of difference."

Can you imagine anything in your life being different? If so, then you have faith. Use that faith to consider something that brings you joy. Even if the joy only lasts for a moment, then you have a wonderful moment to remember and that may bring more joy.

Inter-religious Dating

Question: *I've just started dating a Christian Scientist. I don't know much about Christian Science, but I've heard they are kind of weird. I like this guy, but I'm nervous about talking about religion with him. Do you know much about Christian Scientists?*

Answer: The important question is what do you know about this guy? Is he kind? Is he generous? Is he affectionate? Is he honest? If the answer to these questions is *yes*, then isn't he the sort of person with whom you would want to build a friendship or even a romance?

The Christian Science Church was founded by Mary Baker Eddy in the U.S. in the 19th century. It is very concerned with healing physical and emotional maladies by prayer. Christian Scientists read the bible, which they interpret allegorically using Eddy's text *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. They are a lay led organization, and their "sermons" are readings from the bible and *Science and Health*. You may not agree with every doctrine of their church, but you aren't dating the church. Consider this: the guy you find so likable was influenced by Christian Science. Christian Science probably contributed to the personality you find so appealing.

If you want to know more about his church, attend a service with him once. Invite him to a service at your church. Read *Science and Health*. Give him some of your church's literature. You can share your faith experiences without converting each other, and learning more about what makes him tick may just make you like him even more. I wouldn't worry about the religious differences...if you treat them with respect, they can add to the fun of your relationship.

Is Forgiveness Always Appropriate?

Question: *Sometimes in church we hear about the need to forgive people in our past; but shouldn't we hold people accountable for wrong-doing?*

Answer: Forgiveness is not approval. Forgiveness is releasing the past to the past. The action that hurt us is in the past and can never hurt us again. It is only our memories of the hurtful event that continue to plague us. Forgiveness is saying, "I'm going to let this go. I wish it didn't happen, but it did. I can't undo it, but I don't have to hurt myself by keeping the feelings of resentment fresh in my mind."

Even if we feel the need to hold someone accountable (and that may be exactly the right thing to do), once we have confronted our offender or reported the wrong-doing, we can then know we have done what we needed to do and still release that person to her or his own karma. We can stand up for ourselves and still forgive.

If a memory is so painful that you can't possibly imagine forgiving the person who wronged you, then try this prayer: "God, I want to be free from this pain, but I don't know how to let it go. I am willing, at least in this moment, to forgive. I'm ready to be healed from this. I want to release the past to the past and embrace the possibilities that exist for me now. Please help me. Amen." That little bit of willingness may prove to be just enough to get the healing process started.

Progressive Christianity

Question: *What is "Progressive Christianity"?*

Answer: At Sunshine Cathedral, we believe that the Christian message is progressive, positive, and practical! More specifically, we are a member of Metropolitan Community Churches, a social-justice denomination that stands for peace, gender equality, gay and lesbian rights, and the fair treatment of all people. The Christian gospel, in our view at Sunshine Cathedral, is a progressive gospel, so Progressive Christianity is simply Christianity committed to the progressive values that we believe can bring hope and healing to people's lives. Progressive Christianity doesn't worship texts, traditions, symbols or sacraments, but uses them as tools to explore the Mystery of life and to unite people into a community of hope and goodwill.

Sinful Movies?

Question: *I like Sci-Fi and Horror movies. I was taught as a child that such films were evil. As an adult, I watch them, but I always have some guilt about it. Do you think it's wrong to watch such movies?*

Answer: There are movies that I won't watch, e.g., "slasher" films. I also don't like many war movies, or movies that feature violence simply for the thrill of violence. However, I do appreciate a good Sci-Fi or Horror film!

For me, the fantasy element of Sci-Fi and Horror films allow them to be allegorical. Two television series that I have loved are *True Blood* and *Buffy the Vampy Slayer*. Some "humans" in the shows are kind and generous and fair; others are not. Some "vampires" (and other supernatural creatures) in the shows seem to aspire to high ideals and moral codes; others do not; so, it is never a matter of "we" are good and "they" are bad. We get to see the good and the bad in both "us" and the "Other."

Good, then, isn't about our social location (religion, region, ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc.), but about the choices we make and how we treat our fellow travelers on the journey of life.

These fantasy shows, then, become allegories for the moral struggles we all must engage. I find that to be not only entertaining, but also relevant for our lives.

I could make similar observations about the Harry Potter movies, the *Star Trek* films and series, *Batman*, *The Mummy*, and others. You may notice that the book of Revelation reads like a Sci-Fi novel. The writer of Revelation used fantasy, imagination, and bizarre imagery to make social and moral points. I see no reason why we should avoid such creative works in our contemporary settings.

If you like Sci-Fi, then watch it intentionally. Let it be something that helps you become your best self. If you don't like it, don't watch it. Good art can always serve a good purpose. If it speaks positively to you, then why not let it?

What is New Thought?

Question: *What is meant by the term "New Thought"?*

Answer: New Thought took shape as a healing movement in the 19th century. Some key elements in New Thought are:

the idea that God is omnipresent (everywhere fully, evenly present, embracing everything, part of every life),

that Jesus is a way-shower (an example rather than an exception),

that prayer is more powerful when it is affirmative rather than beseeching,

and that a change in attitude leads to changes in experience.

New Thought includes the insights of psychology, science, philosophy, and religion. It encourages us to think for ourselves and to take responsibility for our thoughts and attitudes. So, when we find a belief is no longer serving us well, we are free to change our thoughts which will change our feelings which will change our experience (or at least it will change how we interpret our experience).

New Thought basically tells us we have the power in any moment to choose a "new thought," which can then lead to a new experience. Principles of New Thought are echoed in Transpersonal Psychology, Quantum Physics, and Process Theology. Basically, New Thought tries to teach us *how* to think rather than *what* to think.

Norman Vincent Peale reinterpreted New Thought principles as "The Power of Positive Thinking." Ernest Holmes called New Thought principles the "Science of Mind." I like to use the term *progressive, positive, and practical spirituality*. We are all on a shared journey; what you call the journey is entirely up to you.