

CROSSING THE LINE

UMW Reading Program Book Steps Over the Line

By Dawn Marks

Materials for Presentation

Picture copy of *Affirmations of a Dissenter* book cover

Biblical Prints (or copies) with Biblical reference (2 copies of each print)

1. Mary and baby Jesus
2. Jesus performing a miracle, such as the healing a blind man or raising the dead
3. Jesus walking on the water
4. Jesus portrait
5. Jesus on the cross
6. Jesus leaving the empty tomb

Transparent sleeves for prints, second copy of each print will be put into a transparent sleeve- then marked with **LARGE BLACK X** on sleeve. This will keep from marking directly on the copy of the print.

Presentation Board

Place biblical prints (or copies) in order of number on the board with supportive biblical scripture underneath the event that is depicted in the picture.



Talking Points: Ask these three Questions—

1. Let's say that you have joined a Book Club Reading Circle. After joining you are given what they call their "New and Improved Reading List." On this list you find a book that would be classified as Hard-Core Pornography. Knowing that this sort of vile material is not what you signed up for, would you still participate in this particular Book Club Reading Circle?
2. So you decide to join another, Book Club Reading Circle. You have been assured that this "Book Club" will not offer any pornographic material. However, when you receive their new reading list, you see a book on Witchcraft. You read the book's synopsis and realize that this book glorifies worshiping Satan. Knowing that this repulsive material is not what you signed up for, would you still participate and buy this book club's books?
3. You decide to check out one more Book Club Reading Circle. They have just come out with their new reading list; you ask to see it before joining. You find on this list a book known to blaspheme Jesus Christ by advocating false doctrines that strike at the heart of Christianity. The author's doctrines are a repudiation of Jesus Christ himself, and such teachings are therefore properly termed heresies. After coming to the realization about their appalling material selection; would you even want to join, let alone participate in this Book Club Reading Circle?

*By answering **No** to these questions, you have set a standard for material that you deem acceptable or unacceptable. You have drawn the line (so to speak) and would refuse to participate in a Book Club's Reading Circle that would offer you these inexcusable materials for your reading consideration!!!

Take the *Affirmation of a Dissenter* book cover (copy) and place at the top of the Presentation Board.

The UMW Reading Program, prepared by the Women's Division, has given us many new books for the 2005 year. One book under the category of *Spiritual Growth* is none other than the book *Affirmations of a Dissenter* by Bishop Joseph C. Sprague. Bishop Sprague wrote this book while he was serving as Bishop of the United Methodist Church, Illinois Conference. It has generated a lot of criticism across the UMC.

I would like to read to you several *direct quotes* from the book *Affirmations of a Dissenter*.



Place Picture #1, Mary and the baby Jesus, with support Scripture on board.

Quote from *Affirmations of a Dissenter*: "I believe that Jesus the Messiah, the Christ of God, was fully human. The myth of the Virgin Birth (a theological myth is not a false presentation but a valid and quite persuasive literary device employed to point to ultimate Truth that can only be insinuated symbolically and never depicted exhaustively) is found neither in Mark, the earliest gospel account, nor in John, the latest. This powerful myth was not intended as historical fact, but was employed by Matthew and Luke in different ways to point poetically to the Truth about Jesus as experienced in the emerging Church."

"The theological myth of the Virgin Birth points to this wondrous mystery and ultimate Truth. To treat this myth as an historical fact is to do an injustice to its intended purpose and to run the risk of idolatry, namely, treating a means as an end itself."

Talking Point: *According to Bishop Sprague not only did the virgin birth not take place, but to believe in the actual virgin birth of Jesus Christ is to commit idolatry.*



[Take second picture of Mary and Baby Jesus with LARGE BLACK X and place over the same print.]

Place Picture #2, Jesus performing a miracle, with support Scripture on Presentation Board.

Quote from *Affirmations of a Dissenter*: "Thus, if the Virgin Birth did not occur in a physical historical sense, if Jesus were born of human parents, as I affirm he was, and if Jesus did not possess trans-human supernatural powers, as I do not believe he did, what sense can we make of the miraculous stories about him in the gospel accounts?"

"To state it unequivocally: Jesus was in toto fully human. His life was no masquerade. He was the child of human parents, complete with belly button and genetic code. Otherwise, he could not be Liberator, let alone Savior.

"Jesus was not born the Christ. Rather, by the confluence of grace with faith he became the Christ, God's beloved in whom God was well pleased."

Talking Point: *According to Bishop Sprague Jesus was totally human and could not perform supernatural miracles. [Take second picture of Jesus performing a miracle with LARGE BLACK X and place over same print]*

Place Picture #3, Jesus walking on the water, with support Scripture on board.

Quote from *Affirmations of a Dissenter*: "...a fully human Jesus does not square with the supernatural power to cavort across a sea, especially during a turbulent storm." **[Take third picture of Jesus Walking on the Water with LARGE BLACK X and place over same print]**

Place Picture #4, Jesus a portrait, with support Scripture on Presentation Board.

Quote from *Affirmations of a Dissenter*: “Having so affirmed Jesus as God’s unique and normative revelation, I must dissent from Christo-centric exclusivism which holds that Jesus is the only way to God’s gift of salvation. Such an arrogant claim stands over and against the inclusive Jesus of the synoptics and limits God in ways that humans cannot. God is God, and all human knowledge of that One is limited at best. The Jesus revelation is primary for Christians, and, while I affirm the Christ event as normative, I cannot honestly limit God’s ability to be God through revelatory offerings of the Spirit as found in other religions. After all, God’s life-giving Spirit found expression in Israel, and the Jews continue to be people of the Covenant. They too are pilgrims on the way. So, too is this the case with God’s grace for the faithful followers of Islam. Frankly, I am much more concerned with living out of Jesus’ revelation in my life and that of the Church than with castigating other religions as being inferior and outside God’s eternal plan for salvation.”

Talking Point: *According to Sprague; Jesus Christ is NOT THE ONLY WAY of salvation, and gods of other religions are just as equal. [Take fourth picture of Jesus with LARGE BLACK X and place over same print]*

Place Picture #5, Jesus on the cross, with support Scripture on board.

Quote from *Affirmations of a Dissenter*: “How much more blood sacrifice is needed in a world saturated with blood and famished for a different understanding of salvation? While sacrifice as an act of discipleship is essential for all of us as it was for Jesus, the concept of blood sacrifice *to appease God is superstition at best* and an *idolatrous* allegiance to a non-Jesus methodology of God-human relationship at worst.”[Emphasis mine]

Talking Point: *According to Sprague there was not any atoning blood shed during the crucifixion. [Take Fifth picture of Jesus on the cross with LARGE BLACK X and place over same print]*

Place Picture #6, Jesus and the empty tomb, with support Scripture on Presentation Board.

Quote from *Affirmations of a Dissenter*: “I cannot affirm that his resurrection involved the resuscitation of his physical body. The inconsistent reports in the New Testament of his several and initially unrecognized resurrection appearances add support to this point of view.”

“...resurrection, including that of Jesus, does not occur through bodily resuscitation. God does not work this way.”

“The linking of resurrection with bodily resuscitation is to make a literal religious proposition of a metaphorical, symbolic expression of Truth itself. This is the kind of idolatry from which I dissent.” **[Take fourth picture of Jesus and the empty tomb, with LARGE BLACK X and place over same print]**

Talking Point: *According to Bishop Sprague, there was not a physical bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, This view means that the risen Christ did not appear to, speak to or eat with his followers. This also does not take into account that the risen Christ appeared to more than five hundred people at one time, as Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul said, "...if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ...If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." (1 Corinthians 15:14-17).*

The following is excerpted from **Modern Heresy** by Bradley C. Knepp

“Bishop Sprague denies the apostolic, orthodox and ecumenical Trinitarian understanding of Jesus as God in favor of a form of Unitarianism or Adoptionism. He denies the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. He maintains that Jesus Christ is not the only way to salvation and he denies the substitutionary atonement of Christ through his shedding of blood

and sacrificial death on the cross. Bishop Sprague denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are not insignificant denials. These views are false doctrines that strike at the heart of Christianity. Bishop Sprague's doctrines are effectively a repudiation of Jesus Christ himself. Such teachings are therefore properly termed heresies."

Conclusion: To accept this book that so blasphemes our Lord and Savior—Jesus Christ—would put one in the category of accepting heresy. This book clearly says His Virgin Birth is just a myth, the miracles He performed didn't occur, He did not physically resurrect from the dead and His blood was not Atoning Blood. To accept this book is to say the UMW READING PROGRAM has not crossed the line.

Bishop Sprague has espoused these heretical views. The (Women's Division) Reading Program is promoting these heretical views by including this book on the UMW Reading Program list. We are being asked to consider as valid these heretical views by the acceptance and reading of this material.

United Methodist Women should have a Reading Program, which uplifts Christ, points each one of us toward growth in our faith in and devotion toward Christ. Christian book stores are readily convenient, offering a plethora of Christ-centered themes. We could start reading them now and not get finished before our lifetime would end. We should have a Reading Program that points us to the risen Christ, His salvation and mercy. **We should not have a Reading Program with books advocating heretical teaching, or promoting a liberal agenda!**

Over the years many books have appeared on the UMW Reading Program list advocating a liberal theological, political and social agenda. While there may be a few good books in the program, the continual practice of including books that support a theological and social worldview contrary to that of the majority of United Methodist Women in the pew should give us substantial pause.

Here are some things we can do to let the Women's Division know our displeasure at the selection of books on the Reading Program:

- 1. Write a letter to the Women's Division about specific books that cause us concern. We have only considered one today, but there are many others that do not pass the litmus test of basic Christian orthodoxy and that have partisan political and social bias. While letters about books on the reading program have not produced much change over the years, it is important to continue to let concerns about unacceptable books be known. Contact the Women's Division Reading Program Specialist, Brenda A. Thompson, 212/870-3733, bathomps@gbgm-umc.org.**
- 2. Recommend books to be included in the Reading Program in the four categories: Education for Mission; Nurturing for Community; Social Action; Spiritual Growth. You may also want to recommend books for children, youth, older adults and for Hispanic and Korean readers. Contact Brenda Thompson (information above) and ask what procedures are necessary for submitting recommendations for the UMW Reading Program.**
- 3. Start your own supplemental or alternative reading program. If you are convinced the current UMW Reading Program promotes books that are biased or liberal in perspective on issues and theology, supplement your books with books from a local Christian bookstore, or from Cokesbury and Upper Room. You may prefer to discontinue participation in the UMW Reading Program and start a program of your own, selecting books for the four categories of mission that are challenging in their content, but more in line with your own theological, political and social worldview.**

While we sometimes need to read books and articles from a perspective other than our own in order to understand the non-Christian or liberal Christian mindset, we should have an intentional reading focus that builds our faith and strengthens us for discipleship in the world. A sound historic Christian worldview and a Biblical foundation will provide us something to build upon—and a place from which to engage liberal theologies and secular social agendas.