

“Progressive Religious Voices” Podcast Transcript

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Interview with Rev. James A. Forbes (March 17, 2007)

Former Senior Minister, The Riverside Church, New York; Founder, For the Healing of the Nations Foundation

Part I: For the Healing of the Nations

My name is James Forbes. I am ending 18 years of pastoral leadership at The Riverside Church here in the City of New York.

Our church congregation has usually been a national and international and interracial gathering. Maybe one-third of the members who are in a congregation on any Sunday would be from beyond the borders of the New York or tri-state area. So in a real sense, I feel that whereas I have been a pastor to a local congregation, I am now available for pastoral approach to the nation; that is, to take the nation to heart, and see how I can bring prophetic critique as well as priestly and pastoral concern with integrity and with an openness that I think the country needs coming from a progressive perspective, but insisting on addressing the totality of the citizenship of this nation, right and left, blue states, red states, evangelicals, as well as liberals.

My new organization is going to be called For the Healing of the Nations Foundation. Why? Just because I'm a biblical Christian, and what I'm going to be doing is to say that there's a tree in the middle of the streets of the city, and it is the tree of life. On either side of the river are fruit for each month. So, a no more hunger social agenda. And the leaves of the tree are good for the healing of the nation.

America is a thorough-going capitalist society. So once again, we're back to Dr. King who talked about poverty from the materialistic perspective, militarism, and also racism, because he considered those triplets to be at the heart of the malaise of the nation. So market values in dominance. Remembering Luke that says, "You cannot serve God and mammon." We are exceedingly materialistic in terms of how we look at the worth of people, the way we look at power, at prestige, etc. But we are also a caring nation. We live in the tension. So we now are in a pluralistic age, but we have not been tutored in how to honor alternative or different religious perspectives, and we don't really know how to receive the critique of religion to at least moderate our materialistic "addictions," I think I prefer to use. I started to say "obsession," but it seems a deeper dynamic than that. Pluralism confronts us with multiple loyalties, and yet we've got to live together.

Part II: A Peek Through the Window of Truth

I'm a preacher. From Genesis to Revelation, I think I discover a perspective that informs my progressive stands. Any Sunday I'm preaching, it's a progressive sermon.

I would say that to be a progressive means that truth from a human perspective is much more a reflection of our standpoint. Now God knows the truth, but we human beings, because of the nature of our perception as well as our thought processing, we get angles of things so that we cannot make the presumption that heartfelt convictions about something means that we finally got it. So we

do not presume a basic commonality between what *we* think is truth and what *God*, if we would use that language, knows to be true. There's a humility that more truth can break out, but also that all the different people who are in the world are accessing [truth] as their limited perceiving makes possible. So that if God says, "So you want to know the truth? Let me give you the truth," it will blow our minds. So what we get is a peek through the window of truth. We are not the receivers of the truth because we hold a Bible in our hands.

Part III: Getting to Know God a Little Better

So then for me, a good liberal, a good progressive says, "Jesus walks on the earth and provides for us the best window into the truth that can be perceived within the context of human consciousness and human community." And that truth is not at the end of the day propositional or dogmatic as much as existential.

So the issue is what is that process by which Jesus sorts out what the truth of his faithfulness has to be. Jesus goes into the wilderness to do some sorting out, and the issue for me as a Pentecostal is that thank God, the spirit led him, which then means the spirit guides him. He experiences the dove on his shoulders, he experiences the tradition from early on, and my assumption is that's continuous, "as his custom was." He tests it in the wilderness of conflictual perspectives of truth.

My belief is that the progressive should be a person for whom the third member of the Trinity operationalizes a process within which we discern the truth, and in the discerning of truth, we human beings always have to really wonder, "Does my following this spirit provide deliverance?" Yes. "Does it enable me to contribute to community?" Yes. "Does it identify the enduring aspects of my tradition unencumbered by self-serving dynamics?" All that kind of thing. Anybody who thinks that serving God allows them the gift of simplicity need to get to know God a little bit better. And I think a liberal believes that to be invited into the mechanisms of relativity is God's inviting us into the complexity of the way God sees the world.

Part IV: Pentecost

During 9/11, they first started searching, a rescue operation in case there's life beneath the rubble, and they did find some early on, as you recall. Then they decided there could be no life here. So they stopped rescue and simply started digging out the rubble. Long after they had determined there could be no more life down there, on a Sunday morning a white pigeon flew out of the rubble. My Pentecostal response was, "God has been hearing America at prayer," because all of this "God bless America," that was a solemn prayer, brother. (Singing) "As we lift our voices in a solemn prayer, God bless America." That was more praying and it was genuine prayer, desperation prayer.

And I thought God heard it and God answered it in this way. That when I saw this white pigeon, or heard of this white pigeon, I determined that God said, "I have heard your prayer, America, and I am going to answer your prayer. However, the prayer that I'm answering is this. That just as this white pigeon flew up out of the rubble, I'm saying that only through a serious spiritual awakening will America recover its own confidence and also its commitment to its values and continue to make the kind of contribution to the world appropriate to the sole super power," if indeed we're going to continue to be one. So that was my interpretation—a spiritual renewal is essential; that is, something that counteracts the triumphalist spirit of market values, of pride, racism, tribalism of various sorts, that spiritual renewal is the way. And of course people teased me about the fact that it was a white

pigeon because clearly in the Bible, the dove stands for truth and spirit. And I say. “But in a crisis, if you don’t have the dove, a pigeon will have to do.” Even God has limitations, right?

God has heard our prayer, I think, and will give us opportunity. I think that progressives are absolutely a part of that formula because we have to counterbalance some of the excesses of the right, and it is not because the right is devoid of meaningful input. But it’s got to be counterbalanced. The triumph of the right in media and in the government, I think is going to push us back to recovery. So I think this is an ideal time for progressives to bring some elements to the national conversation. I think that if we could get that balance going, we’d be a much better nation. So I’m counting on it, because I’m a Romans 8:28 Christian. So that makes me hopeful that God in mercy will provide for us a chance to be a part of God’s unfolding drama.

Concluding Tag:

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