



Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power - And How They Can Be Restored

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Modern Christians are steeped in a language so distorted that it has become a stumbling block to the religion, says internationally renowned Bible scholar Marcus J. Borg. Borg argues that Christianity's important words, and the sacred texts and stories in which those words are embedded, have been narrowed by a modern framework for the faith that emphasizes sin, forgiveness, Jesus dying for our sins, and the afterlife. Here, Borg employs the "historical-metaphorical" method for understanding Christian language that can restore for us these words of power and transformation. For example,

Redemption: now narrowly understood as Jesus saving us from sins so we can go to heaven, but in the Bible it refers to being set free from slavery.

Savior: now refers to Jesus as the one who saves us from our sins, but in the Bible it has a rich and wonderful variety of meanings having nothing to do with the afterlife.

Sacrifice: now refers to Jesus's death on the cross as payment for our sins, but in the Bible it is never about substitutionary payment for sin.

In *Speaking Christian*, Borg delivers a language for twenty-first-century Christians that grounds the faith in its deep and rich original roots and allows it once again to transform our lives.

Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power - And How They Can Be Restored Details

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Joe Iovino says

Marcus Borg makes me uncomfortable, in a good way. His writing always challenges me, stretches me, and sometimes makes me want to throw my iPad across the room. Through that interaction with his writing, I solidify where I am on issues of faith, Jesus, theology, Church, and the like.

The core issue in *Speaking Christian* is a reclamation of Christian language from what Borg calls the "heaven-and-hell Christian framework." Borg contends that Christianity is about so much more than what you go to when you die, and there is where I agree with him. From his broadening of the word *salvation* to include Israel's salvation from slavery and many people's hopes of salvation from poverty, to his conversation about The Lord's Prayer being about God's kingdom coming "on earth as it is in heaven" are refreshing, although nothing one wouldn't get from reading N. T. Wright, one of my favorite authors. My biggest problem with *Speaking Christian* is Borg's utter dismissal of the resurrection - not only of Jesus's resurrection, but of a general resurrection of the dead. For example, his discussions of Heaven and the Rapture never give even a nodding reference to the notion of a final resurrection. Also, while dismissing a "literal Easter" he never goes on to explain the then rise of Christianity or the early followers' profession of Jesus having been raised from the dead.

At times, I believe Borg allows his faith affect his scholarship. For example, in his conversation about God he defends a version of panentheism using Acts 17:28, "the one in whom we live and move and have our being" (68). That verse is Paul quoting a Greek poet. Thus Borg uses a Greek poet to support a Greek idea about who God is - not a Hebrew-based view that is more historically where the early Christians would have been.

Borg's conclusion though is wonderful. He concludes the book with this summary of Christianity: "The Christian message reduced to its essentials is: love God (as known in Jesus) and change the world" (237). I'm not sure I could agree more. We need to make Christianity more about changing the world than escaping it. I would not recommend this book to those without a fairly firm understanding of their faith. Borg's reasoning is confusing, his assertions need to be checked out, and he rejects resurrection - a major tenet of Christian faith. For those who have a good background and want to get a little more, that is all you are going to get. There is nothing earth-shaking or ground-breaking here. At times it is even a bit pedantic - at one point even talking about the pre- and post-Easter Jesus. I would much more strongly recommend someone looking for similar conversation to see N. T. Wright's *Simply Christian*, *Simply Jesus*, or *Surprised By Hope*.

Darin Stewart says

This is a very nice exposition of the Progressive Christian worldview to which I am finding myself increasingly drawn. Borg argues for a Christianity that moves away from the Heaven/Hell Punishment/Reward structure that dominates most Christian Theology. This approach has always resonated with me (I blogged about it several months ago <http://www.faithwithinreason.com/?p=32>). Borg's approach equates salvation with transformation of the individual and society in the here and now rather than deferring to the afterlife. He advocates an Historical / Metaphorical approach to interpreting the New Testament and in fact all scripture. The idea is to look at the context in which the text under consideration was written and ask what it would have meant to its original audience and then build on that to determine what it can mean for us

today in our social context. Beyond this the metaphorical nature of the text should be given due consideration. A literalist reading is flatly rejected. Borg views the Bible unequivocally as a human product, but no less sacred, valuable or valid for being so. He sees Jesus as the "decisive revelation of God" meaning "in him we see what can be seen of God in a human life."

While I agree with nearly everything Borg puts forward in this book, he does undermine himself a bit when he attributes his theology to the primitive Church. He draws his argument from the New Testament texts themselves and in many cases builds a persuasive argument, but just as often he asserts an interpretation as THE original intent and interpretation with little evidence or argument to back it up.

Ultimately, this is a book well worth reading if for no other reason than it gives another way to look at Christianity other than the fear of punishment / hope for reward interpretation of the Gospels.

Erika RS says

In this book, Borg goes through a number of key Christian concepts and explains what they mean from a perspective that is not the heaven-and-hell Christianity that is so common today (especially in the US). The approach he takes to reading is to create a historical-metaphorical understanding of these key concepts. It's important to understand what this does and does not entail. This approach does not entail applying modern ideas or morals on top of Christian ideas. It does not entail watering down the Bible or reading it selectively.

Rather, what it entails is two-fold: first, Borg takes a historical perspective on these concepts. He asks the question, "What did these words mean in and for the ancient communities that used them? What did they mean for their 'then'?" and from this, he asks "Given what their words meant for *their then*, what might their meaning be for *our now*?" Key in this method of understanding the Bible is that what something means for "their then" need not be the same thing it means to "our now". However, we should not project the understanding of "our now" onto "their then".

Second, it is a metaphorical understanding. This is the fairly straightforward idea that much -- probably most -- of the language of the Bible was meant to be read metaphorically, not literally. Biblical literalism -- and the idea that most texts should be taken as bare factual "newspaper" writing -- is a modern invention which can interfere with our ability to read older texts such as the Bible.

From this foundation, Borg discusses many different concepts. He uses an almost formulaic 1 chapter per 1-2 concept organization. My one criticism of the book is that there are some obvious thematic elements throughout which Borg pulls together occasionally (including at the end) but which could be woven more strongly into a biblically sound progressive Christianity.

Instead of going through the many concepts discussed, I'll focus on that theme. The common theme throughout is that the language of the Bible, both Old Testament and New points toward societal transformation, not individual salvation. However one conceives of God, the message of the Christian language is that God's vision is for a world where there are distributional justice and peace.

If you're used to a heaven-and-hell Christianity, this may sound like a stretch. For example, didn't Jesus die

for our sins? How is that not about individual salvation and the afterlife? One of the things that pleasantly surprised me about this book is that Borg was able to make the argument that the broad message of biblical Christianity and many of the specifics that seem to point toward individual salvation are all focused on societal concerns. While it's true that his job was made easier because he sees the Bible as the record of the one tradition's understanding of God rather than as a literal divine revelation, he still takes the Bible as the foundation of his definitions.

This book is an engaging read for anyone, Christian or not, who cares about the monopoly that literalistic Christianity has over moral discourse in the US.

James says

Reading this book confirms for me that Marcus Borg is possibly my favorite heretic. Don't get me wrong, I don't think he says anything particularly new; his theology is a blend of Schleiermacher subjectivity and Bultmann's de-mythologizing. He denies that Jesus was God pre-Easter (though there is a certain vagueness which makes me unsure if he is an Adoptionist), any substitutionary understanding of Christ's death, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Second Coming, the Trinity. And yet, he feels that his theological home is Christianity. You may be wondering, if he doesn't believe any of these things can he be called a Christian? Well to answer that question, he wrote a book where he redefines and appropriates Christian language.

Actually he makes some good points. Borg has two axes to grind here. One is the way in which he tries to redeem Christian language from two errors. First, there is the Heaven-and-Hell framework which construes Christianity to be about what happens to you when you die. The other is an overly literal interpretation of the Bible.

I think he is right that Christians have, quite often made the faith about believing the right stuff so that you go to heaven when you die, without enough emphasis on how you live now, so I appreciate the critique.

I disagree with his critique on the literal interpretation, precisely because what he means is that the supernatural elements of Jesus life (i.e. miracles, resurrection, ascension) didn't happen, but that we must probe these events for what they mean. I agree with some of his evocative readings, but do not share his historical literal suspicion.

Where I think Borg is golden is in his description of lived faith. He appropriately probes the meaning of belief in the Christian sense as not merely assent to doctrine, but something more akin to 'I give my heart to.' He explores a full orbbed meaning of salvation which includes wholeness, health and liberation and rescue. He examines the human condition and has some good words to say on the Lord's prayer.

So while I can't really endorse this book or offer my hearty recommendation, I enjoyed it and found it edifying (in pieces).

Ellie says

Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power - And How They Can Be Restored by Marcus J. Borg is a thoughtful and thought-provoking work. It addresses two of my biggest

passions: language and faith.

As a Catholic, I found myself feeling extremely nervous at some of Borg's positions. At the same time, I resonated with what he holds up as the "essentials" of faith and the metaphorical meanings of Christian language and tenets. Many of the dilemmas I sometimes confront as a Catholic melt away when looked at through the Borg's lens. The more literally I try to take texts of faith, the more contorted I feel inside.

Borg starts from the premise that any group needs a common language to self-identify and to embody belief. Therefore, it is important that the words identified with Christian faith remain a common vocabulary to allow fruit interaction among members of the group as well as with those outside the group. However, language changes over time. The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, was created in a particular time and place (or times and places), it has a context, the words we use today were used then in often radically different ways. It is With this in mind that Borg examines a number of the "big" Christian words, such as sin, heaven, hell, redemption, salvation, and institutions such as the Eucharist.

Some of Borg's descriptions of the original meaning of words used commonly today were familiar to me, many were not. He positions two major perspectives on Christian faith: the Heaven and Hell framework and the historical-metaphorical. I was raised very much within the first and thought I lived now more in the second. However, this turns out to be only partially true. In fact, I often live in an uneasy combination of both.

Some of Borg's positions are (or seemed to me) radical to the point of shocking and I would be nervous to hear what Church hierarchy thought of him. At the same time, I found his theology to be both incredibly freeing and superbly focused: Christianity is belief in the possibility of transformation and centering our selves in God, as "decisively represented by Jesus."

This is a book that is worth reading and thinking about for anyone interested in language and faith (as well as the language *of* faith). I strongly recommend it. It is a work of passion of faith. It could be exhilarating or possibly enraging but it is always intelligent and alive. As I hope my faith life is.

Gary says

Borg makes some good points, but clearly is outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity, e.g., no bodily resurrection, Jesus not God etc etc (I confess I just skimmed the book, not something worth spending more than 1/2 hour on...

Lee Harmon says

What is meant by our Christian language? How do we understand words like "redemption"? Borg reflects on the difference in meaning between liberal and conservative Christian thinking, even though the language is identical. Borg is quite liberal, and he refuses to turn the meaning of words that are special and meaningful to him over to a Christianity that he feels has strayed from the original, radical, this-worldly message of the first Christians.

Early Christianity was not focused on heaven or hell. An emphasis on the afterlife has turned Christianity away from its roots, and consequently, many of the concepts of the Bible have been modernized. A lot of the meanings of words we use as Christians differ so severely from person to person that it renders some of us speechless. We simply don't know how to say what we mean. At least in America, when liberal Christians speak of faith, resurrection, even God, the conservative interpretation is so popular that we often can't be understood.

The problem words are numerous. Saved. Born again. Mercy. Sin. Belief. (Borg suggests that a proper synonym for "believing" is "believing.") I've struggled mightily with this problem on various online forums, to the point where it's tempting to simply give up on "speaking Christian." This makes Borg's book especially timely for me. So serious is the problem that some have concluded that Christian language is beyond redemption and needs to be replaced by language that actually communicates what we want to communicate. But Borg encourages us to hang in there. If we avoid the language of our faith because of uncertainty about what it means, we grant a monopoly on it to those who are most certain about its meaning. That would be unfortunate, for the language is extraordinarily rich, wise, and transformative. Moreover, if we neglect or reject biblical and Christian language because of its common current-day meanings, a serious question arises: Can we be Christian without using the language of Christianity?

Borg says no. To abandon the language of Christianity would mean leaving behind something that has been profoundly nourishing. Religions are like language. Ceasing to speak French would mean no longer being French. Being Christian means "speaking Christian."

Heidi Archer says

A must-read for Christians who claim to be "bible-believing." This book talked about how important context is for religions (THANK YOU), how dualism makes us dumb (my words), how salvation is seldom about an afterlife and how the author is agnostic about hell (LOUDER FOR THE PEOPLE IN THE BACK), the reiteration that substitutionary atonement theory (God killed Jesus b/c of people's personal sin) is really something humans made up, and a whole bunch of other topics that delighted me - since much of the reason I cannot abide the Western church right now is based in the heaven-hell framework (a hell in and of itself) and biblical literalism, not actual historical and biblical literacy (biiiig difference). (If you didn't guess, this is a book about theology.)

Five stars. Refreshing, honest, and made me think and even hope one day I won't have anxiety triggers in church.

Laurel Starkey says

Marcus Borg may be a Biblical scholar but he is not a believer in the divinity of Christ. If you keep this in mind, you can see that this book is not a scholarly attempt to "reclaim" Christianity but rather it is Borg preaching his own ideology.

From the beginning Borg makes a lot of claims of what the Bible actually says yet no Biblical citation to

back up that claim. He says that Christianity got it wrong. He says what he is writing is correct. But why? He cites nothing to back up his case. He forces the reader to trust him on all of his assumptions.

For me, the final straw came when he insisted that Jesus believed in education because he was clearly better educated than St Paul. Jesus, Borg claims, was better educated than Paul because he was more impressively able to argue the scriptures with the sages of the day. REALLY! That knowledge came from his local rabbinical upbringing????? Christ knew the scriptures because he is the Word of God. HE WROTE THE SCRIPTURES. Of course he knows them. Borg betrays with this one anecdote (among many) he does not believe that Christ was divine. He was just another itinerant 1st century Rabbi who hit the publicity lottery and founded a religion.

In my opinion, Marcus Borg's book is intellectually dishonest and not worth reading.

Jon says

I'm pretty much the same sort of Christian as the author--post-enlightenment, humanistic liberal, who nevertheless thinks spirituality is essential and the Christian message, properly understood (!) is a key to the future of our species. So I pretty much agree with where Marcus Borg comes out on most of the words he analyzes here--scary words like repentance, sin, belief, grace, salvation. I gradually became somewhat irritated, though, at how he gets there, as he depends on what I consider to be anachronistic historical inferences. It seems to me that he lets his liberal American politics determine his reading of the Bible. Sometimes he flat-out makes mistakes in his excitement over a nugget that seems to support his narrative, as when he misspelled the Old English word *leof*, combined it with the particle *be*, claimed it is the source of our word *believe* (it isn't) and since it is similar to *belove* the two words must have been synonyms (they weren't and still aren't). My degree is in medieval English lit, so I write with some authority, and just to be sure I checked my memory against my Anglo Saxon dictionary (it hadn't seen the light of day in 30 years). I have no idea where he got this nonsense. It's like saying that bell, ball, bull, bowl, and bale are all similar and therefore they must be synonyms and come from the same etymological source. I agree with other Goodreads readers who think some of Borg's other books are better, particularly *The Meaning of Jesus* in which he wrote alternate chapters with N.T. Wright, each covering similar ground and each keeping the other from getting too carried away.

Naomi says

Borg's text is required and appealing reading for religious teachers moderate to progressive, and anyone concerned with Biblical theology interpreted without context. The christianity explained in this volume isn't the religion of empire, but a religion of compassion, equity and justice. It isn't an introductory theological text - but it is a splendid one for launching faith exploration discussions based on certain key theological terms, how they're used in public discourse, what they mean to us, and what they meant to the people who first wrote them down.

For Unitarian Universalists, if you care about words and how people use them, or want to understand the disparity in meanings of terms that are rooted in Protestantism in common American political and cultural usage, you'll want to read *_Speaking Christian_*

Tracy says

As a person who has not read many Christian or theology books, I found this book very engaging and readable, even if there are parts which I struggle with and I did not agree with all Marcus Borg says. Being a "cradle Catholic" I am like many who recite prayers and go through the motions of Mass and liturgy very often without thinking about real meanings of the words I am reciting, but recently have yearned for a deeper understanding of what it is I am doing/saying. This book is a good place to start. There is much that is challenging especially the way he seemed to skim over the resurrection, but overall reading this has helped me toward a more fulfilling understanding of the Bible and the readings I listen to each week at Mass. The book is split into several short chapters focussing on different key Christian words. Borg explains how these words were first understood and used at the times they were written and show that for some words we have drifted away from the true meanings as our language has developed and changed over the millennia. There is much I got from this book and I am sure it will be one I will dip in and out of, but 2 things in particular stand out.

The chapter on Believing and faith: Believe prior to about 1600 also meant "belove" (to hold dear) what a wonderful statement to make during the creed; I didn't know that the word creed means "I give my heart to". We are encouraged to stop worrying about the "rules of faith", that is the anxieties of believing the "right" things in the "right" way, but instead to focus on "beloving" God.

The final chapter "What's at stake" where he encourages us to continue to speak the language of our faith (biblical and Christian language) because "being Christian includes speaking Christian". By not speaking it we could allow others to hijack the true and rich meaning.

Finally the book sums it all up for me by this

"The Christian message reduced to its essentials is: love God (as known in Jesus) and change the world"

Matt Hill says

knowing who borg was before reading, i had certain expectations . . and they were pretty much confirmed .. honestly, i don't see how he can be considered a "christian" in any nominal sense of the word . . sure, he'd argue that our understanding of "christian," nominally, is informed by what he's calling "heaven-and-hell christianity" . . the framework of that language . . and he'd be right . . the problem is, despite what he says, i think an honest reading of the NT gets you something *way* closer to that framework than he's admitting . . i'm giving 2 stars because i very much like and agree with how he's trying to expand our understandings of specific christian language, and with his doing so (generally) by giving cultural/historical context, or by arguing for meanings other than strictly literal ones . . right: heaven is more than just a future location . . right: salvation is more than just going to heaven . . right: Christ's resurrection is more than just a literal physical raised body . . but sorry: it's still a literal, physical raised body . . heaven is still, in some sense, a place where people go or not . . salvation is still only given through "one name under heaven," etc. . . i'm not a fundamentalist/strict literalist/whatever label he'd want to give, but i really think that--when allowed to speak for itself--the Bible does come down somewhere closer to both/and on these issues, not either/or, and certainly not *just* his take and *not* the more traditional/conservative . .

marcus miller says

In what many will think is a provocative book, Borg examines and explains words commonly used by Christians. He does this against the backdrop of what he calls "heaven and hell Christians" who read the Bible literally (or at least claim they do.) Borg writes for those who struggle with the way much of American Christianity uses terminology, or as he suggests, he free's the words from the restrictive, or even wrong, meanings and power they have come to have in American culture.

One of the things I appreciated was his examination of how the meaning of the words we use in the English language have changed. I'm not qualified to comment about Greek or Hebrew, and perhaps maybe not even English, but I've lived long enough to know the meanings of common words have changed significantly in my life time. I found the chapter on "Believing and Faith" to be helpful as he explains the old word, "beloved." Focusing on "loving" God rather than "believing" God, frees one to focus on God, rather than on wondering if I am getting all my beliefs correct, or if the guy sitting next to me has his beliefs correct.

Borg also examines words which in earlier centuries were not part of orthodox Christian teaching but have become important parts of the faith for many contemporary Christians. The example here is the word "rapture." According to Borg, "the rapture" as most people understand it was something introduced to American Christians in the 19th century. It wasn't long before groups predicting the return of Jesus, or the end of the world sprung up in the United States. Borg points out that many peoples views of heaven, end times and prophecy have been shaped more by recent best sellers on the fiction lists than on anything found in Scripture.

I picked up this book in the local town library which usually specializes in westerns, romances, mysteries and the occasional book from the best seller lists. I'm not sure how many others will pick it up. Those who have read Borg before may read it and find nothing really surprising. Those who fit his definition of "heaven and hell" Christians will likely think he has gone off the deep end and write him off as a guy who has spent too much time in his ivory tower.

I found the book to be thoughtful and helpful. He upheld orthodox beliefs, admitted when he wasn't sure about something, and was willing to explore a variety of meanings while being true to the language, the creeds, the church and scripture. At the same time I can understand why some would find his ideas or examination of Christian words to be scary, but I wish they would at least give this book a chance. It might just deepen everyone's faith.

Teri Peterson says

As one who works hard to reclaim language, I liked this book a lot.

As one who teaches in a church and is constantly working against the cultural understandings of many of our important church words, I liked this book a lot.

As one who's read plenty of Marcus Borg before, this book was fine. There's not a lot new here--it's just organized differently and is more concise.

I appreciate the format--with a big word or concept per chapter. I appreciate the short chapters. I appreciate the simple language that will make this accessible for congregational study group use.

I didn't always appreciate the characterization of everyone-believes-this, though I recognize the

characterizations from popular culture/media/politics/religious-right.

Part of me always wants to say to Marcus Borg, "you know, there are plenty of progressive mainline churches out there. We may not be the most vocal or the majority, but we do exist--just a little recognition once in a while would be nice..."

A humongous part of me wants to say, "please stop with the resurrection-isn't-real thing." go right ahead with it's-not-about-heaven and what Easter means, but denial of bodily resurrection isn't going to fly in most of our churches. And honestly, some of us super liberals still believe in it, but we aren't stupid or pre-modern or whatever. We like a little mystery and a little power-of-god every now and then.

I'm disappointed he didn't tackle the word "Evangelical." That word could use some serious redeeming!

Overall, a worthwhile read, if for nothing else than to brush up on some theology and to enjoy some ways we can explain things we believe. I do think it will be good for a small group or a class at church--people are often asking me about these concepts and now I have a resource to point toward (other than, you know, the Bible...LOL).
