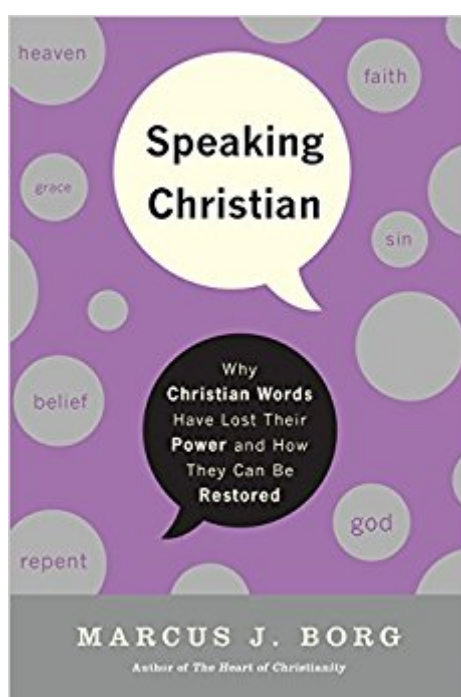


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Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning And Power—And How They Can Be Restored



Synopsis

In *Speaking Christian*, acclaimed Bible scholar Marcus Borg, author of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, argues that the very language Christians use has become dangerously distilled, distorted, and disconnected from the beliefs which once underpinned it. Stating a case that will resonate with readers of N. T. Wright's *Simply Christian*, Borg calls for a radical change to the language we use to invoke our beliefs—the only remedy that will allow the Church's words to once again ring with truth, power, and hope.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: HarperOne; Reprint edition (September 30, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 006197658X

ISBN-13: 978-0061976582

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 183 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #123,692 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #28 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Meditations > New Testament](#) #359 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Worship & Devotion > Meditations](#) #750 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > New Testament](#)

Customer Reviews

“This book could start a revolution. Borg cracks open the encrusted words of faith and pops them into fresh language that people can understand and trust. The last time this happened, we got the Reformation.” (Anne Sutherland Howard, Executive Director of The Beatitudes Society) *Speaking Christian* correctly may seem like it's just a fuss over semantics, but it's ultimately about something bigger: defining Christianity. When Christians forget what their words mean, they forget what their faith means. (CNN) “Ranks with his earlier volumes as efforts to renew and rebuild Christianity by healing long-standing wounds and welcoming millions of alienated men and women. (Read the Spirit) “A primer to help correct misunderstandings and help those unfamiliar with Christian language become fluent. . . . An important figure on topics from the historical Jesus to religion and culture, he challenges Christians to live for God's justice in the world and not just focus on the next world.”

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.

Borg's writing is masterful and holds the interest of our reading group's readers. His aim is to deconstruct Christianity, word by word, layer upon layer. I can see why very conservative, fundamentalist groups might find this approach disturbing because Borg reexamines the meanings of words (such as "faith" and "believe"), seeking out their ancient meanings and applying them to a new understanding of biblical truth. His aim is to examine potential metaphorical meaning in ancient texts, adding another layer of comprehension and not (I do believe) detracting from ancient stories. I think that the questions he raises are fascinating and provocative to many mature readers. Christ's presence on earth and our understanding of Him can lead to greater knowledge of ourselves and our sense of morality. I know of many adults who have lost "faith" in an effort to reconcile their childhood beliefs and a mature understanding of science. Borg, I think, is aiming at a wider audience than those simply wanting a Sunday sermon. Those who question authority and biblical truth need to read this book to gain a more mature grasp of what it really means to be a Christian.

The writing style and organization of the material is excellent. Easy to read and follow. I found his approach refreshing and memorable. My only minor criticism is his interpretation of 'righteousness' as 'justice.' I didn't feel he made his case with this one, but I cannot disagree that 'justice' is

certainly a component of 'righteousness', when understood as doing the right thing or being in right relationship with God. His 'heaven-and-hell' framework to describe the most conservative/fundamental corners of Christianity is brilliant -- a twin sibling of legalism. I plan to use this whenever I have the opportunity, however I will modify it as 'heaven-or-hell' Christianity. I consider this a must-have book for anyone serious about the faith and understanding what you believe and why you believe it.

Being Christian involves knowing, using and being shaped by Christian language. Speaking Christian considers the current language concerns in a North American context while inviting readers to reconsider and even redeem the meaning of key words and phrases in the Christian vocabulary including born again, God, heaven, Jesus, mercy, rapture and second coming, righteousness and salvation. Borg argues that current misunderstandings of and shortcomings in Christian vocabulary are a result of the literalization of language during the modern era and the interpretation of Christian language within the context of what he terms "heaven and hell Christianity," which is the popular framework that focuses on the afterlife, sin and forgiveness, Jesus's dying for our sins, and believing (p.2, 10-14). Each word or phrase considered receives its own chapter (ranging from 4 to 20 pages), which considers its usage in the early church and development over the centuries. In arguing for the restoration of earlier meanings of key words and phrases in the Christian language, Borg does not invite people to recreate an idealized version of the early church. Instead, he pictures a postmodern faith that is more closely aligned with the premodern than the modern, focused on this life rather than any life beyond this life, and communal rather than individualistic. Writing in a postmodern style, Borg shares both the views of others as well as his own experiences of and preference for certain perspectives. Speaking Christian is a must read for any progressive who is wondering if Christian language can be restored and/or who is seeking to better understand the historical richness of their Christian vocabulary.

Marcus Borg has written an extremely readable book about the dialect used in the Christian world to define itself. Salvation, grace, atonement, faith, belief and sin are a small sampling of the words that have shaped most Christian's understanding of their tradition. Borg's discussion of these words can bring "new life" into the meaning of what we refer to as faith. The movement Borg encourages is not to demand that we see things differently but rather that by perceiving them in a different light, (and in a historically accurate light) we might grow in our devotion to the lifestyle that Jesus lived and the kingdom to which he pointed. Scholars like Marcus Borg and his colleagues in the Jesus Seminar

have done and continue to do the church great service by expanding the concepts and shedding new meaning on our understanding of the traditions we have inherited. Far from "destroying faith" as they have been recklessly accused, they nurture a belief that yearns for the original message of Jesus and his early followers. That is the message they seek to uncover for us and that is the message Borg promotes by his diligent research into the words we use to shape our Christian culture.

I wanted more depth but am grateful that I read this book after his death. While my conservative friends joked about it I found the freedom of the faith he was so adamantly describing. Glad I read and would recommend it to those beginning to mistrust the traditional answers from the American religious institution. For minor theologians like myself, it was a refreshing reminder.

Mr. Borg's book gives you pause to consider a broader approach to accepted Christian dogma. I found this book refreshing.

The author in general does a good job of outlining the historical development of key Christian concepts. But it seemed to me what started out as a descriptive review of Christian "language", ends up taking sides. There also is a definite forced duality, or either-or attitude that develops. Rather than unifying Christian thought, it becomes divisive.

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