

4.6 Marcus Borg (2011) *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power--And How They Can Be Restored*

Highlights Review

The main impetus behind this book is Borg's concern that Christian language is astumbling block today for both Christians and non-Christians. He argues that most of its key words have acquired meanings that are serious distortions of both their biblical and traditional meanings. This is a radical challenge to the shared understanding of about half (or more) of the Christians in the U.S., who very much believe this view taught to them by their churches is fully in accordance with the Bible and earliest tradition. In his first two chapters, the author addresses his main concerns and how he plans to deal with them.

Chapters

Preface to the Paperback Edition

Introduction

1. The Education of Barack Obama
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- The rapidly increasing illiteracy regarding Christian language in the U.S. (It's increasing even more rapidly in other parts of the developed world.)
- Even more serious for him is that the Christian faith has been misunderstood and distorted by many Christians who are very familiar with it. For him, there are two major reasons for this.

(1) the development of the particular kind of "heaven-and-hell Christianity," which most Protestants and Catholics came to take for granted not very long ago. The key ideas of this understanding is that Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven after we die, if we believe in him.

(2) the coming of what he calls the "literalization" of biblical and Christian language (in harder and softer forms) that has taken place relatively recently in Christian history in the modern world.

- He concludes these introductory chapters with a brief explanation of what he calls an alternative to literalization: his "historical-metaphorical" method for recovering the authentic meaning of biblical and traditional Christian language, which is the key to renewing Christianity in our time.

For the next 22 chapters (most of the book) Borg examines many of the key words that are at the heart of "speaking Christian," constantly contrasting how they're understood in "heaven-and-hell" Christianity and a much more authentically biblical and traditional Christianity. Here are just a few of the highlights:

- Salvation in the Bible is rarely about life after death; it's profoundly this-worldly. It's "political as well as personal," with the primary political issue being economic justice.
- The Bible is "a human product, not a divine one."
- Substitutionary atonement (that God needed Jesus to suffer and die in order for our sins to be forgiven) is "not ancient, it is not in the Bible, and was not present during the first thousand years of Christianity." The meaning of biblical sacrifices was never about substitution.
- It is a distraction to see the meaning of Easter to be about something spectacular happening to Jesus' corpse.
- Faith is not about believing certain statements to be true; it's about trust in and faithfulness to God.
- The primary focus on biblical justice is not punitive, but distributive--"the fair distribution of the material necessities of life."
- John 3:16 and the central concept of being "born again" do not mean anything close to how they are commonly understood in "heaven-and-hell" Christianity.
- The understanding of the rapture held by millions of Christians is not in the Bible; it was created quite recently.

In his conclusion Borg summarizes what's at stake in the two versions of Christianity that so divide American Christians today with their radically different understandings of Christian language. He contrasts their major emphases on (1) either the afterlife or the transformation of this world, (2) their support for or challenge to the American empire, (3) their

domestication of (to the point of virtual elimination) or essential commitment to the political passion of the Bible and (4) their exclusivism or non-exclusivism with respect to the ethical passion of Christianity.

He admits that, indeed, the authentically biblical and traditional Christianity he strives to promote is “utopian,” as is often charged. While he grants the dangers of utopianism, he also sees it as a necessary and positive ideal. For him, the “Christian message reduced to its essentials is: love God (as known in Jesus) and change the world.”

(coming soon: a more detailed review - look for it at the bottom of this book's Quick Look page)

Obama

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The

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Quote
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My Take
(and some coming reviews)