

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Speaking Christian

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

by

Marcus J. Borg

1. Consider the words *salvation*, *sacrifice*, *redemption*, *righteousness*, *repentance* and *mercy*? How would you define each? How do you think Christians usually define these words? Is there a difference? Borg says, “We need to ask afresh: What does this language mean? What does it mean to use these words?” (p.19) How do you think reclaiming these words will help?

2. How does the framework of “heaven-and-hell” Christianity affect the way that people interpret the Bible? Why do think the church focuses so much on the after-life when the Bible mostly focuses on life here on earth?
3. Borg writes: “A historical approach is greatly illuminating. Language comes alive in its context. Moreover, a historical approach prevents us from projecting modern and often misleading meanings back into the past. It is a way of escaping the provinciality of the present. It recognizes that the Bible was not written to us or for us, but within and for ancient communities” (p. 28). How does a historical approach act as an accountability structure for reading the Bible? What does it mean when Borg says that the Bible was not written to us or for us? Borg also argues that the best way to interpret the Bible is through the “historical-metaphorical” approach. Do you agree with his model? Why or why not?
4. Has a literal interpretation of biblical and Christian language been part of your experience? Has literalism affected you? If so, in what ways? Do you think the movement towards literalization has distorted the meaning of the Bible? If so, how? Can you think of examples of when you have encountered overliteralization?
5. Borg talks about the Bible not being the work of the divine, but a human product. How does this shape your understanding of what’s written in the Bible?

6. Borg writes: “The Bible includes [early Christian] experiences of God, stories about God, understandings of life with God, and how we should live. But it is their story—not God’s infallible, inerrant, and absolute story. . . . Did God ever command that all the men, women and children of our enemies be killed? Did God ever say that slavery was okay? Did God ever forbid remarriage after divorce? Did God ever command that adulterers be stoned? That children who dishonor their parents should be killed? Or that women should be silent in church? That same-sex relationships are an abomination? That God is violent? That Jesus is coming soon, and that his second coming will involve incredible suffering and death for most of humanity –indeed, the destruction of the world itself?” (pp. 58–59). How do you react when you encounter these kinds of teachings in the Bible? How do you determine what teachings to pay attention to?
7. What are your earliest memories associated with Jesus? By the end of your childhood, how did you think of him? Who did you think he was? Why did he matter? How would you describe who he is now? What caused your views to change?
8. What memories do you have of the death of Jesus from earlier in your life? If you grew up in a church that observed Lent and Holy Week, what impression did you have of their meaning? Has your perception of the death of Jesus changed?

9. When you were young, what did you think Easter was about—what happened and why it mattered? What do you understand it to mean now? What do you think it means to most Christians?
10. In ordinary English, what do you think of when you hear the word “believe”? When do you hear it being used? When do you use it yourself? What are its immediate associations? What changes when you think of it primarily as trust and “belove”?
11. When you hear the words “mercy” and “merciful,” what do you think of? What are the associations, meanings, resonances, of these words? In a church context? In secular usage?
12. What are your associations with the word “righteous”? When somebody says about a person, “He’s very righteous,” what do you think is being said? When you hear, “God is a righteous God,” what do you think is meant? How would you describe what we should mean by the word today?
13. What are your associations with the word “sin”? If you grew up Christian, was “sin” emphasized in your church? Your family? Your mind? If so, what did you think it meant? What does it mean to you now? What changes if we expand our understanding of the human problem from just sin so it includes the other biblical categories: bondage, exile, infirmity, blindness, etc.?
14. What role has the word “forgiveness” played in your life? Share the most profound story of forgiveness you have ever heard. What does forgiveness mean to you? What

does it imply? When you think of being “forgiven by God,” what do you think of? When you think of forgiveness as something we should practice in our lives, what do you think it means? How often have you felt the need to forgive somebody or to be forgiven by them?

15. Was the phrase “born again” part of your childhood experience? If so, what did you think it meant? What are your associations with the phrase now? What do you think it means in common usage? Ideally, what might it look like for you to be born again in a historical-metaphorical sense?
16. In John 14:6, Jesus declares: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father [God] except through me.” What has this verse meant to you? What does it mean to you now? Do you think Christianity should exclude anyone who does not declare themselves Christian? If Christianity sees itself as one faith among many, what do we say is distinctive or true about Christianity?
17. That Jesus “ascended into heaven” is in the New Testament and in two ancient creeds commonly used in Christian worship services. What have you thought or wondered about the ascension of Jesus? What has it meant to you? What might it mean when we think of it as the rule of the spiritual Jesus who sits at the right hand of God?
18. At “Pentecost” the Holy Spirit comes upon the new Christian movement and they speak in a language understood by people from multiple cultures and

nations. What might it mean today for us to experience Pentecost?

19. Have you heard of “the rapture” or read stories or watched movies where Jesus comes like “a thief in the night” to take the saved to heaven and leaves the rest to face tribulation? What do you think of such stories? What might a more hopeful and powerful understanding of the return of Jesus mean for us?
20. What are your associations with “heaven”? When you hear the word, what do you think of? How important is “heaven” to your understanding of Christianity? Borg describes himself as an “agnostic” about the afterlife; he thinks we cannot know what will happen upon death. What happens to your view of Christianity if you discover heaven to be a vague and ambiguous concept in the Bible that may not promise an afterlife?
21. What memories do you have of the Eucharist, or mass, or communion, or the Lord’s Supper, as it is variously called? What did you think it was about? How does its practice change for you if you see it primarily as a celebration of inclusion and as sustenance for our journey on earth?
22. Has your interpretation of the Bible changed after reading this book? In what ways? Are you now more likely or less likely to use classic Christian terms and phrases?