

In these times, when the carpet is pulled from under authorities and certainties, the church must broaden the discussion, and humbly hear from all who are willing to engage with it at many different levels. We talk today of the need for ‘fresh expressions’, casting church and faith in different shapes to capture the attention of those who do not recognise themselves in the traditional structures. This book is in itself a fresh expression, in old-fashioned terms an act of missionary outreach, but different in that it approaches the centre from the periphery and includes all comers.

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*Speaking Christian: Recovering the Lost Meaning of Christian Words*, Marcus J. Borg, London: SPCK Publishing, 2011, pp. 248, ISBN 978-0281065080. £9.99

If one accepts first of all a Christian theological spectrum that ranges from ultra-conservative through to ultra-liberal positions, then the American Episcopalian theologian Marcus Borg has long occupied an honoured place as theologian to the liberals.

Of course, such a simplistic idea of a spectrum does not do Borg’s theology justice. As this book demonstrates, he is deeply rooted in Christian tradition and speaks very much to the mainstream churches. Nevertheless, anyone picking up Borg should be aware of the themes which have characterised his more academic work, among them the humanity, and not divinity, of ‘the pre-Easter Jesus’ (90); the metaphorical, and not literal, nature of the resurrection; and a vision of salvation that rejects hope for an afterlife and posits instead the transformation of lives on earth. This book contains all the above, and more.

The liberally-inclined Christian will therefore embrace this book, and rightly so. In a world where Christian bookshops are replete with popular theology of a conservative bent, Borg offers here a rare liberal version of the same. *Speaking Christian* is highly suitable for

church study groups (it contains a rather dense section of Discussion Questions at the end), or as an easy introduction to Borg's theology in general. It is written in an accessible, chatty style, with anecdotes used sparingly but effectively to illustrate points. Moreover, there is a deep pastoral concern in evidence throughout, alongside a genuine love for the Church. And lastly, while this is not referenced as with a more academic text, Borg's fine biblical scholarship underpins the whole enterprise.

In his first chapter, Borg explains how *Speaking Christian* arose out of his encounters with the 'Christian illiteracy' (5) of modern secular society. He references the bewilderment of his own students when confronted with the language of the Lord's Prayer, for example. (One wrote that 'I don't know much about Christianity, but I think that Christians are really against trespassing' [8].) One of the aims of this book is therefore to demystify Christian vocabulary and make its concepts more accessible to a modern secular thinker.

The flip side of this aim is Borg's concern to rescue Christian language from the clutches of what he terms 'The Heaven-and-Hell Framework' (10). This phrase is a not-very-successful attempt at a non-pejorative description of the dominant Christian outlook: that Jesus died for our sins, so that, if we believe in him, our sins are forgiven, and we will go to heaven and not hell. This binary framework, Borg contends, has distorted the language of the Bible and the Church, and itself displays a profound misunderstanding of such key biblical concepts as 'Salvation' and 'Born again'. In turn, such misunderstandings have fed through into the secular world, so that the conventional modern meanings of such vocabulary are themselves distortions of the Church's own usage, but without the balancing effect of wider Church teaching. Thus, even more crucially than his secular concern, Borg's aim is to help the traditional Christian rethink these concepts, and moreover, rethink the whole framework within which their thinking operates. This is no small ambition.

Rather than abandoning altogether the specialist vocabulary of Christianity, Borg advocates instead a process of 'redemption', in which Christian language is 'set free, released, reclaimed from its captivity to conventional modern meanings' (19). Accordingly, he focuses on one specialist word or phrase at a time and devotes a short

chapter to each. In total, he deals with twenty-two items. The project starts with “Salvation”, then goes on to cover topics such “The Bible”, “God”, and “Easter”. In no particularly discernable order, it then considers concepts such as “Mercy”, “Sin”, and “John 3:16”, before returning to Gospel events, such as “The Ascension” and “Pentecost”. The book finishes with a brief look at such church vocabulary as “The Creeds and the Trinity” and “The Lord’s Supper”. The effect is something like a systematic theology: semi-creedal in order, and all shaped by Borg’s prolegomena, which is his rejection of the ‘Heaven-and-Hell framework’.

While it is only to be expected, in some ways it is a shame that Borg chooses here to emphasise once again his non-literalistic interpretations of the Gospel stories. This emphasis is not, strictly-speaking, necessary to the project of the book, for it is at such points that *Speaking Christian* departs from its discussion of ‘the lost meaning of Christian words’, and moves into something more of a theological treatise. We may indeed have ‘lost’ the biblical meaning of ‘Salvation’, for example, and that chapter is particularly helpful. However, when it comes to topics such as ‘Easter’, Borg is not so much recovering ‘lost’ meanings as proposing ‘new’ ones.

(Interestingly, the subtitle in the American edition was *Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored*. Clumsier though this is, it is a more accurate description of Borg’s intent than the British version.)

The result may well be a narrowing of potential readership. As stated above, those who are inclined to like Borg anyway will like this book, while those who maintain a more literal understanding of the Gospel events will find his highly metaphorical interpretations off-putting. This is a great pity, for there is much here that is very useful indeed, regardless of one’s position on the theological spectrum. For example, the chapter on “Salvation” works hard to recover a biblical understanding of salvation as ‘liberation from bondage’ (39) and as ‘return from exile’ (42), rooting each firmly in solid biblical exegesis. The chapter on “Sin” similarly widens out the concept, considering corporate as well as individual sin, and attempting to define sin (not exhaustively, but usefully) in terms of hubris, sloth, and idolatry. The short chapter on “The Lord’s Supper” offers an inclusive understanding

of Holy Communion as modelled on Jesus eating with the impure and the outcasts. Throughout *Speaking Christian*, there is much to challenge easy theological assumptions and narrow definitions.

Taken individually, many of these chapters could profitably be used in churches as catalysts for serious discussion about what we do and why we do it. Taken as a whole, *Speaking Christian* will challenge all who preach and teach to consider more deeply the language we use as Christians, and what precisely we mean by it.

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***Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition***, edited by Andrew Davison, London: SCM Press, 2011, pp. xxviii, 169, ISBN 978-0334043522. £19.99

*My starting point was that God is being increasingly pushed out of a world come of age, from the realm of our knowledge and life and, since Kant, has only occupied the ground beyond the world of experience. On the one hand, theology has resisted this development with apologetics and taken up arms – in vain – against Darwinism and so on; on the other hand, it has resigned itself to the way things have gone and allowed God to function only as deus ex machina in the so-called ultimate questions, that is, God becomes the answer to life’s questions, a solution to life’s needs and conflicts.*

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*  
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, volume 8, 2010), p. 450.

So writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1944. As *Imaginative Apologetics* affirms, the task of apologetics has been around for a long time, and never did run smoothly. In the earliest Christian incarnations, apologetics were part of a battle for recognition in a world where