

The Heart of Christianity in a Time of Change

Premise Tonight (and tomorrow): Adult theological re-education is a crucial need in Christian congregations today – why. It is also a source of revitalization.

Why: to say the obvious, we are living in a time of Christian change. From “the common” Christianity of not long ago to an emerging form of Christianity.

*What I mean by “common Christianity”: what most Christians took for granted and shared in common a half century ago. It is still affirmed (with degrees of confidence) by many American Christians. Also a major reason that millions have left the church and that many who remain are uncertain or perplexed.

I. Part One. “Common Christianity.” What Is Its Heart?

A memory exercise. Suppose you had been asked at the end of childhood, at age twelve or so, to state the heart of the Christian message, “the gospel,” in a sentence, what would you have said? Why did Christianity matter?

*My answer at the end of childhood: *Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven, if we believe in him.* Note what it emphasizes:

*The afterlife

*Our sinfulness

*Jesus’ death as the basis for our forgiveness

*Believing in him – and, commonly, that he is *the only way*

*Not peculiar to my upbringing, but was/is central to “common Christianity”

II. Its Effects on the Meaning of Christian Language: Salvation, Saved and Savior as a Case Study

*Salvation as one of the “big” Christian words – as central to Christianity as *nirvana* is to Hinduism, *satori* is to Buddhism, and so forth.

*For many today, a “loaded” word; it carries a lot of baggage. Its largely negative associations in an intergenerational discussion group...

*Associated with an afterlife – and the threat (explicit or implicit) of hell

*So also “saved”: to be saved from our sins so we can go to heaven

* And “savior”: Jesus as the one who saves us from our sins by dying in our place

III. Redeeming the Word “Salvation” (and Its Siblings “Saved,” “Savior”) as the Heart of Christianity

*Advance summary: in the Bible, salvation is primarily about *transformation in this life*, this side of death. The transformation of persons, circumstances, and the world.

1. In the Old Testament: Salvation, saved and savior are used:

*In the story of the exodus from Egypt

*In the context of Israel’s deliverance from exile in Babylon

*In the Psalms, where they often refer to deliverance from enemies or illness.

*They are not about an afterlife; and the issue is most often not sin, but liberation from bondage, return from exile, healing of disease, deliverance from enemies....

2. In the New Testament, these uses continue, even as the words are sometimes associated with life after death and with the forgiveness of sins. But that is not their primary meaning.

3. Their Primary Biblical Meanings: "salvation" is about *transformation* in this life, this side of death - the transformation of ourselves and of the world. It's both personal and political, concerns both individuals and the transformation of societies.

4. Multiple Biblical Images for Salvation as Transformation:

Liberation from bondage

Return from exile

Healing of sickness/woundedness (The etymological root of the English word "salvation" also gives us the word "salve")

Wholeness

Sight to the blind. Light, enlightenment

Life to the dead

From anxiety and self-preoccupation to presence and compassion

From a world of injustice to a world of justice

From a world of violence and war to a world of non-violence and peace

All of this is what salvation is about

*Story about "What's our product?"

*Our "product": transformation.

It corresponds to two of the deepest human yearnings:

The heart of Christianity is about transformation through a deepening relationship with God as known/revealed/disclosed especially in Jesus.

SeeingBibleAgainOct2010

Denver, CO

Marcus Borg

**Being Christian in the 21st Century:
Reading the Bible Again for the First Time**
[see my book with the same title]

A memory exercise: if somebody had asked you at the end of childhood (age 12 or so), "What's the Bible? Why should I take it seriously?" In a sentence or two, what would your answer have been?

[could continue into the present: how would you answer now?]

Premise and Prologue: *American Christianity is deeply divided by two different ways of seeing the Bible - its origin, authority, and interpretation.*

I. An Earlier (but not ancient or traditional) Way of Seeing the Bible

***Its Origin:** *a divine product.* It comes from God as no other book does. This is what it means to call it "the Word of God" and "inspired by God"

The "hard" form affirms *biblical infallibility/inerrancy*

There is also a "softer" form: no *important* errors...

***Its Authority:** grounded in its *origin*; *because* it comes from God, it has authority

***Its Interpretation:** *literal, factual, and absolute.* If the Bible says something happened, it happened; if it says something is wrong, it's wrong (always selectively).

*48% of American Christians think the earth is less than 10,000 years old – why?

*Quoting the Bible in the current conflict about same-sex relationships

*There is a softer form that is also quite common

Important Comment: **This way of seeing the Bible is modern, neither ancient nor traditional.** Modern, meaning the product of the last few centuries: "biblical inerrancy/infallibility" first mentioned in second half of 1600s. Insistent literalism even more recent – late 1800s onward. Both are reactions to the Enlightenment that began in the 17th century; they are modern innovations.

II. Seeing/Reading the Bible Again. *An emerging way of seeing the Bible – emerging for a few centuries and becoming increasingly common among mainline Protestant denominations and among Catholics.* The product of biblical scholarship in the modern period – and also a recovery of much that is ancient and traditional. "Neo-traditional"? Has much in common with pre-modern ways of seeing the Bible

***Its Origin:** *a human product.* The product of two ancient communities. It tells us about our spiritual ancestors in these communities: about their experiences of God and stories about God, about how they saw God and life with God.

*Calling it "the Word of God" does not mean it is the words of God..

*"Inspired by God" does not mean *dictated* by God.

***Its Authority:** grounded in its *canonization.* Our spiritual ancestors *declared* these documents to be *sacred scripture.* And being Christian involves accepting these documents *as constitutive of Christian identity and understanding.*

***Its Interpretation.** A *historical-metaphorical approach* (rather than a literal-factual-absolute way of interpreting the Bible)

***Historical:** not primarily a concern with “what happened,” but with *setting ancient texts in ancient contexts*. Biblical texts “come alive” in their historical context.

*Illustration: Isaiah 40

***Metaphorical:** the *more-than-literal* meaning of texts

*Metaphorical meaning is not dependent on factuality. *Analogy to parables:* They are *truth-filled, truthful*, independently of factuality; *they are about meaning*

*A Catholic priest in his homily: *The Bible is true – and some of it happened*

*Thomas Mann: a myth is *a story about the way things never were but always are*

*Swedish proverb, adapted: *The Bible is poetry plus, not science minus.*

III. It's Important to Realize that the Bible is Sometimes Wrong. Examples:

*I Sam 15: God commands King Saul to kill all the men, women and children of one of Israel's enemies. Really? Was this ever the will of God?

*Both the OT and NT recognize slavery and even urge slaves to be obedient to their masters. Was slavery ever consistent with the will of God?

*Several texts in the NT clearly expect the second coming of Jesus *in their time*. It didn't happen.

IV. Recovering the Bible's Radicality. Desmond Tutu: *“If you want to keep people subjugated, the last thing you place in their hands is a Bible. There's nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary, nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible.”*

The truth of Tutu's statement depends, of course, on how the Bible is read.

1. The Bible is often seen/read through a lens that emphasizes the afterlife, with a corresponding indifference to or even negation of the world.

2. Has often been used to reinforce convention – to legitimate “the way things are”

*Examples: slavery, patriarchy, heterosexism, obedience to authority, and so forth

Tutu's point: Much of the Bible is about speaking truth to power, challenging and subverting, in the name of God, the powers that rule this world

*From Israel's beginning (exodus) through the prophets to Jesus, Paul and Revelation: a pervasively political (and of course, religious) collection of documents .

***The Bible is about “God's dream,” “God's passion” for a different kind of world**

Concluding comment about literalism: If a congregation isn't explicit about not understanding biblical and Christian language literally, most newcomers will assume that it is. How to deal with this? PERHAPS a statement in the bulletin like the following: *Being Christian involves being shaped by the language of the Christian tradition, including the Bible as the foundation of the tradition. Some in this church understand Christian language quite literally and factually. Others understand it symbolically and metaphorically. What we share is a common passion for the more-than-literal meaning of the stories and teachings that shape us.*

Telling the Story of Jesus Today

Prologue: Based on my book: *Jesus* (with the subtitle *Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*)

***Memories from childhood:** "Tell Me the Story of Jesus" and "I Love to Tell the Story ...of Jesus and his glory; of Jesus and his love."

***It matters greatly how we tell the story** – for more than one reason

*It can make the story of Jesus difficult to believe, or persuasive and compelling

*Because of Jesus' significance for Christians: he is for Christians *the decisive disclosure or revelation-or epiphany* of the *character and passion* of God.

I. Ways of Telling His Story in Contemporary Christianity

1. Jesus as the Dying Savior: As Substitutionary Sacrifice for Sin. Jesus paid for our sins by dying in our place.

*The Jesus many of us grew up with – and still hear about

*Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ"

2. Jesus the Divine-Human and Thus a "Superhuman." Usually goes with the first one. The earthly Jesus was more than human – he was also divine, super-human. Familiar and widespread.

*Jesus as "*Superman*": quote from Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, p. 90

3. Jesus as Judge at the Second Coming

*A contemporary manifestation: the Jesus of *The Left Behind* novels by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. The Jesus of "the rapture" and "the second coming."

*The "*killer Jesus*" who will destroy most people and condemn them to eternal torment.

4. Jesus as a Great Teacher. Example: "The Jefferson Bible."

*Yes – but inadequate and often banal

II. A Fifth Way: A *Historical-Metaphorical* Way of Telling his Story.

Affirmed by mainstream historical scholarship. **Its three foundations:**

(1) The gospels are a *developing tradition*, written in the last third of the first century. As such, they combine *memory and testimony*

(2) Much of their language is metaphorical: *memory and metaphor*

*Metaphor refers to the more-than-literal, more-than factual, meaning of language

(3) Distinction between *the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus*

*Pre-Easter: What Jesus was like before his death:

*Post-Easter: What Jesus became after his death:

***Two seemingly negative results:**

(1) Language referring to the exalted status of Jesus – as Messiah, Son of God, Lord, etc., is post-Easter testimony and does not go back to the pre-Easter Jesus

(2) So also language referring to the saving significance of his death is post-Easter

So: What was the pre-Easter Jesus like? His message, activity, intention?

III. My Sketch of the Pre-Easter Jesus

1. The Shaping of Jesus: The Importance of Context/Matrix

- *Grew up in a Jewish peasant village in the Roman Empire
- *A pre-modern domination system: politically, ruled by a few; economically, half to 2/3 of wealth went to the elites; religiously, legitimated by “royal” theology; and chronically violent (systemic violence and warfare)

2. The Shaping of Jesus: His Experience of the Sacred/God

- *Jesus as a Jewish mystic. Mystics are people who have vivid and typically frequent experiences of God/the sacred, and who are deeply shaped by such experiences

3. A “Profile” of Jesus: Mystic, Healer, Wisdom Teacher, and Prophet

4. His Message/Activity: Proclaimer of “the Way” and “the Kingdom”

- *His audience: primarily the peasant class, “the people”

- (1) **“The Way”**: the path of centering deeply in God. A path/way that was egalitarian in a twofold sense: open to everybody, apart from status and institution; and producing an egalitarian community. *NT metaphors for “the way”*: “dying and rising with Christ” (Paul); “born again”(John)
- (2) **“The Kingdom of God”**: its centrality (Mark 1.15 – and “Ask any one hundred...”)
 - *It’s *for the earth*: the Lord’s Prayer
 - *It’s a *theo-political* metaphor, both religious and political. It’s both religious and political. “Kingdom” as a political term/image in his world.
 - *It’s about what life would be like on earth under God’s kingship/lordship, instead of under the lordship of the powers that rule this world
 - : *God’s kingdom is about *justice* (economic justice) and *peace* (non-violence as both means and goal)
 - *The Kingdom of God is “the dream of God” for the earth, God’s passion for the earth

5. Execution and Resurrection. Jesus’ passion for the kingdom of God – his challenge to the powers that ruled his world and his advocacy of an alternative vision of how life in this world should be – led to his last week, execution, and vindication by God.

Concluding Comments:

1. The Christian Life: “Believing in Jesus”? Or “Following Jesus”?

- *The *modern* (post 1600) meaning of “believing in Jesus” – to believe statements about him, biblical and doctrinal
- **“Following Jesus” – discipleship – is quite different. To follow his way, his path, to follow him and his vision. And this is the pre-modern meaning of *believing* in Jesus: it meant “to belove” Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to belove him and follow him.

2. What Would His Message Be to Us?

- *Center in God – the God of the Torah and Prophets
- *Participate in God’s passion for the world. Change the world.

Love God, and love what God loves – the world

The Christian Life in a Post-Modern World: In a Post-Christendom World

Prologue: "Christendom" refers specifically to the marriage between Christianity and dominant culture, a process that began with Constantine in the 4th century and that lasted until recently in Europe and even more recently in this country

*Our time: the end of Christendom (but not of Christianity)

During the Age of Christendom, Christianity and cultural convention were much the same

*A cultural expectation that everybody would be Christian (in most parts of the U.S., until recently – began to decline in the mid 1960s)

*Christianity tended to accept/endorse cultural conventions. Examples: slavery, segregation, patriarchy, heterosexism, economic injustice, war....

I. Beyond Convention to Intention and Transformation

***A negative prologue:** *being Christian is not primarily about believing a set of statements (teachings, beliefs, doctrines) to be true.* To suppose that it is about beliefs is to imagine that Jesus purpose was to bring a set of "true doctrines" – "Believe these and you'll be saved."

***Rather, the Christian life is about "a way"** (the earliest name of the movement, Acts 9.1), *a path of transformation.* Major images for "the way" as transformation in the New Testament

The gospels: *Taking up the cross:* the path of death and resurrection

Paul: *Dying and rising with Christ*

John: *Being born again*

*Transformation is the purpose of religions (plural): at their best, they are "means of ultimate transformation" (Fredrick Streng)

*When Christianity is grounded in its biblical base, Christianity is about a twofold transformation - of ourselves and of the world.

*Paul in Rom.12.1-2: "Present yourselves as a living sacrifice....Do not be conformed to *this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*" (Rom. 12.1-2)

II. Educating about the Transformation of Ourselves. Christianity is about *personal transformation* in the context of Christian community. Transformation occurs **through a deeper and deeper centering in God.** This is what the Great Commandment means.

*Transformation involves *practices, spiritual practices.* They are *how we pay attention to our relationship with God, center more deeply in God, and allow for the transformational work of the Spirit in our lives.* Like a human relationship, our relationship with God deepens by paying attention to it.

*The most important Christian practices are worship and prayer. The first is most often communal, the second is often individual.

1. The purposes of worship, the most important collective practice. Its purpose: *it's for us.* Worship is directed *to God, of course.* But *it's for us.*

*Draws us out of ourselves, opens us up, forms and in-forms us, and it's subversive(Walter Brueggemann)

2. The purposes of prayer, the most important individual practice

*What prayer meant to me as a child: asking for something

*What it means to me now: *it is about paying attention to our relationship with God.* Our relationship to God in some ways is like a human relationship...

***Two primary kinds of prayer: verbal and non-verbal**

*Verbal: talking to God, whether silently or aloud

*Non-verbal: prayer of internal silence, contemplative prayer

*Prayer is about reminding ourselves in the dailiness of our lives of the reality and presence of God. .

*Petitionary and intercessory prayer in a non-interventionist context: a natural expression of caring and dependence

3. The most important individual ethical practice: compassion.

*Its centrality and meaning in the Bible. "Be compassionate as God is compassionate" (Luke 6.36). To be "like a womb"; to feel for others as a mother feels for the children of her womb. Not just a feeling, but a doing: "be compassionate."

Transition: Compassion in the Bible also has a social form: justice (economic justice) and peace (not war)

III. Beyond Convention to Advocacy of Justice and Peace. The Ambiguity of American Christianity Today. Statistically, we are the most Christian country in the world – in percentage (80%) and absolute numbers. **And yet:**

1. The church is the only large institution in which "hate speech" is "okay" - about gays and lesbians, and about other religions, especially Islam

2. We are the most Christian country in the world, and yet we are committed to being more powerful militarily than the rest of the world combined

*With 5% of the world's population, we account for half of the world's military spending.

*Our navy is as powerful as the next 13 navies of the world combined

*The U.S. Air Force is the largest in the world. What's the next largest?

*We have declared the right and policy of pre-emptive war

*All of this is virtually unquestioned – taken for granted

*"In God we trust"

3. We are the most Christian country in the world, and yet we have the greatest income inequality/inequity (iniquity?) of any developed nation.

*See book *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

*Median household income (\$50K) and taxpayer income (\$28K)

*22.5% of American children live with "low food security"

*Our country is the most difficult in the developed world to be in the bottom 30 to 40% of income level....

*As Christians and Americans, the need to reflect about this...

Being Christian means participating in God's passion, God's dream, for a different kind of world. God loves the world – but not the world as it is, but as it can and should be. God has a lover's quarrel with the world as it is – and we are to participate in changing it. Love God – and change the world.

The Leona and Ed Bock Foundation of
Messiah Community Church, ELCA presents:

Dr. Marcus Borg

Oct. 29, 30, 31, 2010

"Being a Christian in the 21st Century"

Marcus J. Borg is Canon Theologian at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon. Internationally known in both academic and church circles as a Bible and Jesus scholar, he was Hundere Chair of Religion and Culture in the Philosophy Department at Oregon State University until his retirement in 2007.

Described by the New York Times as "a leading figure in his generation of Jesus scholars," he has appeared on NBC, ABC, PBS and National Geographic. He is a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar and has lectured widely in North America and overseas.

Dr. Borg is the author of many books on the historical Jesus, the Bible and Christianity. His latest book (2010) is a novel titled "Putting Away Childish Things."

Many of Dr. Borg's books will be available for sale and he will be happy to autograph them for you!

Dr. Borg will preach
at our Reformation Day service, Oct. 31 at 9:30 a.m.

Lecture 1,
Fri., 7:00-9:00 pm:
"The Heart of Christianity
in a Time of Change"

Lecture 2,
Sat. 9:00-10:30 am:
"Reading the Bible Again
for the First Time"

Coffee Break

Lecture 3,
11:00am-12:30 pm:
"Jesus - the Life, Teachings

and Relevance of a Religious
Revolutionary"

Lunch 12:30-1:30 pm

Lecture 4,
1:30 pm-3:00 pm:
"Christian Life and
Language in a
Post-Modern World"

Adult Forum

Sunday 10:45 a.m.
"What Does it Mean to be a
"Progressive" Christian"

Any one lecture is \$15.00. All four lectures
(Friday-Saturday) including lunch Saturday \$60.

Students with I.D. \$5 single lecture,
all four lectures plus lunch \$20.

Messiah Community Church

A Welcoming Lutheran Congregation

1750 Colorado Blvd.
Denver, CO 80220
303.355.4471
www.messiahdenver.org
info@messiahdenver.org

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Community
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