

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

The most divisive issue

“Conflict about the Bible,” says Christian author Marcus Borg, “is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today.” In his book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), Borg explains that the conflict is between two very different ways of reading the Bible—a literal-factual way, and a historical-metaphorical way.



The first of these ways, Borg points out, is central for Christian fundamentalists and many conservative evangelical Christians. The second way has been taught in mainline Christian seminaries for nearly a century, so most clergy have known about it for a long time. In the last few decades, however, the second way has become increasingly common among lay members of mainline churches. The conflict is most publicly visible, Borg observes, in discussions of three issues—creation versus evolution, homosexuality, and contemporary scholarship that seeks the historical Jesus.

A way that is no longer persuasive

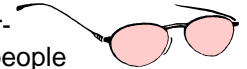
Borg, who was Lutheran until he was thirty, was in a Presbyterian church for a few years, and now is an Episcopalian. He calls himself “a nonliteralistic and nonexclusivistic Christian, committed to living my life with God within the Christian tradition, even as I affirm the validity of *all* the enduring religious traditions.”



The key word in his book’s title, says Borg, is “again.” “Over the past century,” he observes, “an older way of reading the Bible has ceased to be persuasive for millions of people, and thus one of the

Old lenses can hide God

Like an old set of lenses, Marcus Borg finds, for millions of people the older way of seeing the Bible no longer works. It has made the Bible unbelievable and irrelevant not only for the many people who have left the church, but also for many who are still active in it.



For these Christians, the old way has become a set of lenses they can’t see through. They aren’t yet clear about how they see the Bible, Borg observes, but they know how they don’t see it, and they’re looking for a way that will make compelling sense to them.

Borg identifies four factors that he believes have led most people in modern Western culture to need new lenses that will let them see the Bible, Christianity, and religion more broadly now than before.



- **Religious pluralism.** As part of our increasingly global awareness in general, we are now aware of the world’s religions in a way that most people haven’t been for most of human history. Thus, says Borg, many of us can’t believe that Christianity is the only true religion.

- **Historical and cultural relativity.** We have become aware that how people think is shaped to a great extent by the time and place in which they live, and by social and economic class. Thus we’re suspicious of claims that the Bible and our tradition’s religious teachings are exempt from this cultural conditioning.

- **Modernity.** This cultural mind-set is characterized by scientific ways of knowing and a worldview based on them. Despite its many worthwhile achievements, however, this mind-set has had destructive effects on religion in general and on Christianity and the Bible in particular. It has made us skeptical about spiritual reality and has led us to identify truth only with scientifically verifiable and historically reliable facts.



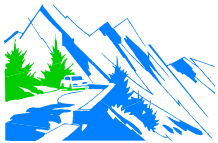
- **Postmodernity.** We’ve now turned to experience as the basis for trust, and we’ve realized that stories can be true without being literally and factually true.

Do your Bible-seeing lenses need changing?

most imperative needs in our time is a way of reading the Bible anew.”

“Old time religion” isn’t very old

Many Christians vigorously defend the older way, however. “For them,” observes Borg, “what seems to be at stake is nothing less than the truth of the Bible and Christianity itself.” These Christians often call themselves “Bible-believing Christians.”



For them, the Bible is to be interpreted literally unless the language of a particular passage is clearly metaphorical (like “mountains clapping their hands for joy”). These Christians affirm what they see as “the old-time religion”—Christianity as it was before the modern period. However, Borg finds, their approach actually comes mostly from a particular form of 19th and 20th-century Protestant theology, not from the early church.

It’s important to recognize, Borg tells us, that the older view of the Bible is often seen as traditional Christianity by both Christians and non-Christians, and by both conservatives (who defend it) and liberals (who reject it), but it is really not “the Christian tradition.” Instead, says Borg, it is a historically conditioned way of seeing the tradition, including the Bible. This older way has been shaped by the circumstances of only the past few centuries.

Two kinds of literalism

The older way of seeing the Bible, explains Borg, has been called “natural literalism.” In it, the reader reads and accepts the Bible literally without having to make any effort to do so.



“Conscious literalism” is a modern form in which readers have become aware of problems posed by a literal reading, but they insist on it anyway. Conscious literalism takes effort. It requires “faith,” understood as believing things that are hard to believe.

Fundamentalists and many evangelicals, says Borg, are conscious literalists, but their way of seeing the Bible is similar to the natural literalism of past centuries. Seeing the Bible through the lenses

of this kind of literalism, Borg tells us, leads to the following conclusions.



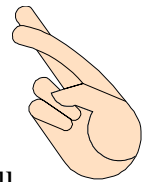
■ **Origin.** The Bible is a divine product, the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is sacred scripture. It comes from God in a way no other book does.

■ **Authority.** The Bible is thus guaranteed by God to be true and authoritative. Because the Bible comes from God as no other book does, it is God’s truth and thus has unique authority. It is the ultimate authority about what to believe and how to live.

■ **Interpretation.** The Bible is historically and factually true. What it says happened really happened, and there is no reason to believe otherwise.

Still the understanding of many

Because the Bible has been the foundation of Christianity for centuries, Borg notes, this older way of seeing the Bible goes with an older way of seeing Christianity. It was conventional Christianity as recently as a century ago, and it is still the common understanding of fundamentalists and many conservative Christians. Borg describes it with the following adjectives.



■ **Doctrinal.** In this older view, being a Christian means believing Christianity’s central doctrinal teachings. You are a “real” Christian if you can say the Apostles’ Creed or Nicene Creed without crossing your fingers or becoming silent during any of the phrases.

■ **Moralistic.** Being a Christian means, first, trying to be good, which means trying to live in accord with the Bible’s ethical teachings. These are understood narrowly as a very specific code of righteousness, or more broadly as general principles such as



the Golden Rule or loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Second, moralism is centered on the dynamic of sin, guilt, and forgiveness. Borg finds that even liberal churches still put an unusually big emphasis on sin and forgiveness.

■ **Patriarchal.** Older Christianity not only uses predominantly masculine language for God and people, Borg reminds us, but it also legitimates male-dominated hierarchies in church, society, and family.

■ **Exclusivistic.** Older Christianity insists that Jesus is the only way to salvation, and that Christianity is the only true religion.

■ **Afterlife-oriented.** The main meaning of salvation, in the older view, is “going to heaven.” No other reason for being a Christian is presented.



Borg summarizes the older understanding as “Be a Christian now for the sake of heaven later.” Its emphasis is on “believing”—believing all of the Bible’s statements to be literally true.

It’s time for a clearer view

Borg observes that natural literalism has come undone for the majority of people in Western culture. Conscious literalism, however, still is the method many Christians use.

Because of the religious pluralism, historical and cultural relativity, and the mindsets of modernity and now postmodernity, however, which characterize the period we’re now in, Marcus Borg believes it is essential for us to see the Bible and Christianity again, but in a new way. He believes we urgently need to see them now, not through the old lenses of literalism that disguise much of the Bible’s



meaning, but in a way that takes seriously the ways in which we differ from our ancestors.

If we do this, Borg believes, we will reach a way of being Christian that has very little to do with believing. It will focus instead on a deepening relationship with the God to whom the Bible points. Still within the Christian tradition, we will live that relationship in ways that let our tradition be a lens through which we can see what is sacred.

What lenses are you using?

As I read the conclusions to which Marcus Borg says Biblical literalism leads, and the adjectives he sees as describing the older way of seeing the Bible and Christianity, here’s what struck me very strongly.

- Almost all of my fellow church members and other friends and acquaintances seem to hold these literalistic views and to believe no others are even worth considering.



- Nearly all of the worship services that I attend reflect these views, in hymns, anthems, sermons, creeds, and prayers. This also seems to be the experience of many other Christians I’m hearing from, who feel like misfits in the church because to them this older understanding makes no sense. They realize they can’t fit into a church that’s based on it, even if they’re not yet fully aware of why they don’t fit.

- Church members with the older views seem the most aggressive and the best organized and funded in my denomination and other mainline denominations. They insist that their views are the only right ones and they’re trying to get them made official policy.



- Churches that advocate a newer understanding seem to be declining, while those that promote the older understanding seem to be growing. Those therefore claim this pattern of growth and decline as evidence of the older understanding’s validity.

Are they right? I hope not, because only a newer understanding makes Christianity believable for me. It’s the only one that lets me make sense of the Bible. I know a lot of other Christians, too, for whom a newer understanding is the only believable one.

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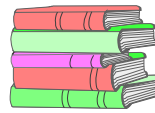
I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

Also, I doubt that church membership and attendance numbers prove what is right. The traditional religious institutions of Jesus' day had a lot more adherents than his message did, yet his message turned out to be from God. The same was true of the Old Testament prophets and other God-inspired people throughout history. Some new understandings come from God.



Glasses that aren't rose-colored

The rest of Borg's book discusses specifically how the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament look when seen through new lenses. I've only touched on some



key points here, but I strongly recommend that you read the whole book. I'm hearing from many *Connections* readers who are in church study groups that are studying Borg's book and others that give a similar view of Christianity and the Bible.

Like most of Borg's earlier books, for me this one is like welcome new glasses. They're not the rose-colored ones that so many Christians seem to use but that hide God from me. Getting new lenses has given me a newly credible view. It has been a real Godsend.



Barbara

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