

“Beloving” vs. Believing?

Monday, April 9, 2007



Marcus Borg, soon to retire from his teaching post at [Oregon State University](#), is described by Portland's leading newspaper as "Oregon's leading theologian." Here is how *The Oregonian* introduces a profile on Borg:

Oregon's leading theologian walks his dog up and down the trendy streets of the Pearl District. His neighbors know Henry, the shaggy gray Glen of Imaal terrier, whose short legs set the pace. But few recognize Marcus J. Borg, the graying guy in the wool cap, as the spokesman for a different approach to Jesus Christ.

At 64, Borg is a public theologian and a private mystic. He writes theological books, several of which have made best-seller lists, and he reads murder mysteries. He was trained at Oxford University, and he teaches at Oregon State. He lives in a neighborhood overflowing with espresso, and he drinks Taster's Choice instant decaf.

Marcus Borg certainly is a "spokesman for a different approach to Jesus Christ. His approach, shared with other members of the "[Jesus Seminar](#)," is to treat the New Testament writings, especially the Gospels, as multi-sourced, highly-edited, somewhat fictionalized renderings of Jesus. Borg's Jesus is a decidedly non-supernatural figure who, though stripped of such supernatural trappings as miracles and bodily resurrection, remains a figure of compelling spiritual power.

From the article:

Borg talks, primarily, to three decidedly different groups: his students, who are mostly undergraduates; his readers, who are mostly Christians who question long-held beliefs about Jesus; and his critics, who are mostly evangelical or orthodox Christians, who confess their beliefs in familiar terms. Jesus was, the last say, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, suffered for human sins, died, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and will come again.

Borg sees Jesus differently. As a historian and a biblical scholar, Borg was a member of the Jesus Seminar, a scholarly group that spent years evaluating the historical evidence of Jesus' life and sayings. Borg emerged from the process with deeper faith in Jesus and a different understanding of Scripture.

Borg interprets the Bible and its descriptions of Jesus as a mixture of memory and metaphor, better suited to preserving meaning than as a list of beliefs fashioned by Jesus' followers into a list that Christians must believe.

So, Borg explains that he has a "deeper faith in Jesus" after rejecting the testimony about Jesus in the New Testament. His "different understanding of Scripture" meshes perfectly with his "different approach to Jesus Christ."

All that is old news with regard to Professor Borg, but the Oregon paper also included this:

"For me, to believe a set of statements is impossible," Borg says. What is possible, he argues, is to "belove" Jesus and walk in his path.

"For the past 300 years," Borg says, "faith was a matter of believing a list of beliefs about Jesus. The list varied among Christians — that Jesus was the son of God, that he was born of a virgin, that the tomb was empty on Easter morning.

“But in the pre-modern world, before about 1600, the object of belief was never a statement,” he says. “It was always a person. To believe meant to love a person.

“To love Jesus means more than simply loving Jesus. It means to love what Jesus loved. That is at the heart of Christianity.

This is a fascinating argument. Professor Borg argues that the church had, until about 300 years ago, understood that believing specific claims about Jesus was no big deal. It was only with the advent of modernity that, according to Borg, Christians began to associate Christianity with a set of necessary beliefs. Borg’s ideal is “beloving” rather than believing. As he explains, “For me, to believe a set of statements is impossible.”

That is a revealing statement, and it must explain Borg’s rather creative attempt to remake Christianity into something he can accept.

The problem, of course, is that Professor Borg’s argument falls flat on its face. The claim that the church has given central attention to specific truth claims and the priority of belief only in the last 300 years is so baseless that it can only be met with a mixture of intellectual embarrassment and wonder. Why would he make a claim that is so easily refuted by the facts?

The New Testament contains first century evidence that the church was incredibly concerned about specific beliefs — down to theological details. Of course, those theological details are among the claims Professor Borg rejects, which is surely inconvenient for him. Just consider Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 10. The Apostle is insistent that the historical truthfulness of the claims concerning Christ, and the individual’s personal belief in those claims, are essential to our salvation. Beyond this, the New Testament includes several summary statements of belief, presented as the very foundation of the faith.

Furthermore, the early church struggled with which beliefs to take as central and essential. The church quickly understood the scriptural claims concerning Christ to be of utmost significance. Thus, the Council of Nicaea, held in A.D. 325, was called to settle a question of essential belief that came down to a single *syllable*. A question of *belief* threatened to tear the Empire apart.

The most venerable creed of the church, the Apostles Creed, begins with *Credo* — I believe. There can be no question that Christianity requires the believer to follow Christ. But the believer is a believer because the believer *believes* certain truths concerning Jesus Christ.

Professor Borg wants to redefine the Christian faith so that it meets his expectations and preferences for the postmodern age. That has been tried before. What should cause him deep embarrassment is the claim that the church has been concerned with belief for only the last 300 years. That’s only about seventeen centuries off the mark.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

