

Review: JAB130

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE
THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO BORG

a book review of
The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith
by Marcus J. Borg
(HarperSanFrancisco, 2003)

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In his book *The Heart of Christianity* Marcus Borg, once a member of the Jesus Seminar, proposes a new form of Christianity that he calls the “emerging paradigm.” He contrasts this with the “earlier paradigm,” which is essentially conservative, evangelical Christianity. If, however, we examine Borg’s view of just four essential doctrines—the Bible, God, Jesus, and salvation—it is apparent that Borg’s “emerging paradigm” is really not Christianity at all.

The Bible. The most serious issues regarding Borg’s view of the Bible have to do with its origin and interpretation. According to Borg’s “emerging paradigm,” the Bible “is a human product, not a divine product” (p. 45). Borg also argues that the Bible should be interpreted metaphorically and understood sacramentally.

Borg’s view of the Bible’s origin is not consistent with early Christian beliefs. As early as the first century AD, Paul said that all Scripture is “inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16 NASB). The Greek word for “inspired” here literally means “God-breathed”; and it should be noted that, contrary to Borg, the text indicates that it is the Scriptures themselves that are “God-breathed,” not just the authors. Peter called Paul’s writings “Scripture” (2 Pet. 3:15–16) and said that holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (1:21). According to Matthew, Jesus called Moses’ writings “the word of God” (15:6). These passages are evidence, even for those who don’t believe they are inspired, that first century Christians believed that the Scriptures were from God. By the second century AD the church leader Irenaeus quoted extensively from both the Old and New Testaments and clearly believed them to be inspired by God. The fact is that since New Testament times Christians have believed the Bible to be of both human and divine origin. Borg’s denial of the divine origin places him at odds with historic Christian teaching.

Second, Borg insists that “the Bible is a sacrament.” That is, the Bible is not to be read “for information, but space is [to be] left around it in the hope that a phrase or sentence will become the means for the Spirit to speak to us” (58). Borg is not suggesting that God speaks to us audibly, but in other ways, including “internal ‘proddings’ or ‘leadings’” (73). Unfortunately, many Christians approach the Bible the same way. They read a Bible passage waiting for some kind of feeling or impression, and then naively assume that this is God speaking to them, regardless of what the biblical text actually says or means in its historical-grammatical context. This practice is really more of a Gnostic or occult superstition than a sound interpretive method.

Finally, since Borg believes that many of the Bible stories never happened, he uses what he calls “historical-metaphorical interpretation,” which emphasizes metaphorical and “more-than-literal” meanings. All Bible scholars acknowledge that the Bible contains metaphors, but for Borg metaphor is not

just a figure of speech; rather, it is a thoroughgoing method of interpretation by which he can dismiss anything that he doesn't believe, or that is politically incorrect.

For example, Borg argues that although the events in the Genesis creation story never happened, understood metaphorically the story expresses the truth that (1) God is the Creator, (2) creation is good, (3) people are created in God's image, (4) something has gone wrong, and (5) we want to return. Borg doesn't acknowledge, however, that even if the creation story is understood metaphorically, it is still a story about human rebellion against God that ends with God's judgment, a doctrine that is incompatible with Borg's theology.

This is true of many biblical stories. The Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Israel's exile are also stories of judgment. In fact, even if the Gospels are understood as one big metaphor, the theme of the story would have to be that people rebelled against God's Son, whom God vindicated in resurrection, and whom God will one day send to judge the world. In other words, even if we play Borg's metaphorical game, we still come up with a theology that is quite different from the new religion that Borg is proposing.

Borg makes an important point, however. He says that although evangelical pastors believe the Bible is literally true, many of them treat it no differently than the "emerging paradigm" treats it. Borg recounts hearing an evangelical pastor preach on the topic of the empty tomb of Jesus by continually referring to people who had suffered betrayal, grief, and shattered hopes. After each example the pastor would exclaim, "But the tomb was empty!" (56). Borg's point was that this pastor was not preaching what the passage actually said, but was treating the resurrection of Jesus as a metaphor in order to make a point about hope in the midst of suffering. One problem with this approach is that if the Bible as a whole can be interpreted metaphorically, it can be twisted to teach anything the preacher wants it to teach.

God. Borg says that when his students tell him they don't believe in God, he often asks them to describe the God they don't believe in. He says they usually describe the God of the "earlier paradigm" (59) and Borg tells them "I don't believe in that God either" (69). In Borg's view, God is the ultimate reality, an all-encompassing spirit in whom everything has its existence: "The universe is not separate from God, but *in* God" (66, emphasis in original). Borg sees God more as a "presence" than a force. He doesn't go so far as to call God personal, but he says, "I have no problem...addressing God *as if* God were a person" (71, emphasis added).

It is clear, however, that the God of the Bible is much more than just a "presence" — whatever that is. Jesus called God His Father, and Moses spoke to God as to a friend, face-to-face. God is described as a personal being with a mind and a will, one who communicates to the prophets and responds to the prayers of His people. Borg would, no doubt, say that these descriptions are just metaphors; but even if they are metaphors, they describe a God who is much more than some vague "presence."

The practical implication of Borg's view of God is seen most clearly in his discussion of prayer. He argues that God never responds by intervening in human affairs. In the Bible, however, God is everywhere described as intervening in human events. God created the world, sent the flood, delivered His people from Egypt, and did miraculous signs through the prophets and apostles. Even if these stories are only metaphors, they still point to a God who intervenes in human events. Far from being the personal God of the Bible, Borg's god actually seems to be closer to the impersonal god of Buddhism or Hinduism.

Jesus. According to Borg, the historical Jesus was a Jewish mystic, a wisdom teacher, a social prophet, a healer (though not a supernatural healer), and a movement founder (89–91). He was "killed because of his politics" (92). The Gospels, of course, paint a very different picture. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) present Jesus as one who thought He could forgive sins and who thought He had authority over the Law of Moses. In a Jewish context (and context is everything!) only God can forgive sins and only God is above the Law. The Synoptic Gospels also present Jesus as the Savior and the world's judge, but in a Jewish context only God is the Savior and only God will judge the world. The Synoptic Gospels indicate that the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 was fulfilled as John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, but Isaiah said the messenger would prepare the way for God. In other words, the Synoptic Gospels place Jesus in a role that Isaiah assigned to God.

The “big picture” of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, therefore, is the same as that of John’s gospel, which emphasizes Jesus’ deity. It is also thoroughly consistent with the writings of Paul and other first-century New Testament writers who present Jesus as Lord, Christ (Messiah), Savior, and Son of God. All of this is also supported by second-century Christian writers, including Ignatius, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus.

The existence of independent sources is important, because in Borg’s opinion something cannot be understood as historical simply because a Gospel writer says so. Borg instead relies heavily on the historical criteria of “multiple independent attestation,” which means that people have better reason to believe that a story is reliable if it is *attested* (testified to) in more than one independent source. The idea that Jesus thought of Himself, and was thought of by others, as much more than a Jewish mystic is, however, very clear from multiple independent sources, both in the Bible and outside the Bible. Borg’s convenient dismissal of all this evidence as metaphorical sounds suspiciously like someone who just doesn’t want to go where the evidence leads.

Salvation. According to Borg, “The Bible is not about the saving of individuals for heaven, but about a new social and personal reality in the midst of this life” (179). “Salvation is about life with God, life in the presence of God, now and forever” (184). Borg acknowledges that “prolonged injustice has consequences” (76), but he sees God as a God of love, in contrast to the “earlier paradigm,” which is “a religion of threat, anxiety, and self-preservation” (77).

There is an element of truth in Borg’s view here. The new life is not just about the hereafter but begins as soon as we are saved. Borg is also right that “prolonged injustice has consequences,” but he fails to acknowledge that *all* injustice may have consequences—eternal consequences, unless forgiven in Christ. Borg apparently wants to believe that it is only the *really bad* people who are in danger of serious consequences. This, of course, misses the whole point of the gospel message. Paul, for example, spends the first three chapters of Romans demonstrating that *all* people fall under God’s condemnation apart from Christ.

According to Borg our new life with God begins with faith, but he criticizes the “earlier paradigm” for making faith entirely about mental agreement with certain facts.

Borg insists that faith is not very much about believing facts at all, but about “loving God and all that God loves” (41). Borg says that faith is not a condition of salvation, but is rather “about seeing what is already true—that God loves us already” (77).

Borg is certainly right that our new life with God begins with faith, and he rightly criticizes those who make faith entirely a matter of the head. He commits the opposite error, however, by making faith almost entirely a matter of the heart and by denying that saving faith involves the truth of certain facts, such as the deity of Jesus, that Jesus died for our sins, or that Jesus physically rose from the dead. He does this, no doubt, because he doesn’t believe these facts.

It is possible to overemphasize the intellectual part of faith, but if these facts are not true, our faith is useless no matter how it is defined. After all, it is not faith itself that saves us, it is Jesus who saves us. Borg is right that biblical saving faith is a matter of the heart, but as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15, faith that is not founded on facts is useless. If Jesus is not who the Bible says He is and did not rise from the dead as the Bible says He did, we might as well have faith in the Easter Bunny for all the good it will do!

Finally, Borg insists that the earlier paradigm’s “exclusivism, its rejection of other religions...is unacceptable” (16). He is adamantly against the idea that Jesus is the only way to God. Borg believes that we have misunderstood passages such as John 14:6, in which Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.” According to Borg, “‘the way’ embodied in Jesus is the path of death and resurrection” (111), which, he says, is an idea common to all religions. In context, however, John 14:6 is not discussing some abstract philosophy of “the way” as the path of metaphorical death and resurrection. The passage asserts, rather, that Jesus *Himself* is the way. The text says that no one comes to the Father “but through me,” a phrase Borg conveniently avoids.

Borg says that Christians can worship Jesus without taking away from the value of other religions because “Jesus is, for us as Christians, the decisive revelation of what a life full of God looks like” (88). If this is true, however, then for Muslims, Muhammad must be the revelation of what a life full of God looks like. But wait! Muhammad was a warrior who sent raids on enemy caravans to steal their goods. Muhammad forced people to convert to Islam at the point of the sword and was responsible for many deaths. Jesus, on the other hand, was not a warrior, and during His earthly ministry He resisted people’s efforts to make Him an earthly ruler. He taught people to love their enemies, and He never tried to convert anyone by force. The point is that Muhammad and Jesus took paths that went in opposite directions. Are both paths a revelation of what a life full of God looks like? How can both be valid?

Another problem with Borg’s inclusive view goes deeper than just the contrast between Muhammad and Jesus. Borg says Judaism, Islam, and Christianity affirm that God is a “personlike being” (65). Hinduism, Buddhism, and Borg, on the other hand, affirm that God is not a “personlike being” (72-73). Which is it? Both views of God cannot be right. Contrary to Borg, blindly affirming that all religions are valid is simply absurd.

The “emerging paradigm” believes in a non-Jewish, non-Christian view of God. It denies that the Bible is a revelation from God. It denies that Jesus is the Son of God, that He died for our sins and rose again, and that He is the only way of salvation. Imagine a professor who claimed to be teaching Islam but denied that the Qur’an is the revelation of God, denied that Muhammad is God’s prophet, and taught that people can be saved apart from Allah. Muslims would rightly protest that such teaching is not Islam; yet Borg and mainline ministers of the “emerging paradigm” have denied or redefined virtually every fundamental doctrine of Christianity and nonetheless continue to call this view “Christian.” They have a right to believe what they want—they can call their religion “Borgism” if they like—but to attempt to persuade others that this “emerging paradigm” is Christianity is both deceptive and dishonest.

— reviewed by Dennis Ingolfsland