

Books that have changed Jonathan Merritt

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

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In our "Books Change" series, historians of religion consider books that have changed us or have themselves been changed.

[Jonathan Merritt](#) writes books and articles that change people. He's a senior writer for the Religion News Service and just last week, he won the 2014 Religion Commentary of the Year from the [Religion Newswriters Association](#).

His most recent book, [Jesus Is Better than You Imagined](#), has had a robust Twitter following with readers regularly quoting from it. In it, Merritt offers spiritual suggestions from his personal adventures, on topics such as death and sex. At the center is Jesus, this mystical presence who is above and below, to this side and that.

I had the pleasure of asking Merritt a few questions about books that have influenced him.

What books have changed you?

I am a voracious reader, so let me just give you four that come to mind: Stephen Shoemaker's [Godstories](#) would definitely be at the top. It taught me how to retell dusty biblical stories and make them alluring and exciting even for familiar readers. Barbara Brown Taylor's [Bread of Angels](#) was the first of her sermon compilations I picked up. It came at a critical time in my life and taught me much about how to speak of spiritual things with both power and brevity. C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* would make the list as a beautiful primer to the Christian faith and also N.T. Wright's [Surprised by Hope](#) as a challenge to my thinking on the afterlife.

What books have changed, in your estimation, as you have changed?

I don't know if any books have changed more than the four Gospels. One thing that makes them so magical—and imbues them with endurance—is the way the Gospels draw us into a lifelong, mutualistic relationship. They change us with their radical ideas. And then when we reread them with a new lens, they change before our eyes.

We see things we never saw before and notice things we somehow missed. This keeps the Gospels always relevant, moving, and new.

In *Jesus is Better*, you mention taking a course in Civil War literature as an undergraduate student. Do you recall any works there changing you?

I read [*Cold Mountain*](#) by Charles Frazier, which was a beautiful and heart-wrenching book. It puts on display the difficult realities of the war and also humanized those who fought it by reminding us of the love and life that animated them off the battlefield.

What books do you think we should consider changing our minds about or reconsidering?

I'll give you two. The first is Barbara Brown Taylor's *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. This is a paradigm shifting book that prepares us to embrace life's darkness and be open to growing in those shadowy seasons. As Taylor says, God can teach us lessons in the dark that we could never learn in the light.

Second, John Stott's *The Cross of Christ* would be one for sure. It's a beautiful book that solidified the centrality of the cross in my own theology. Even if you don't agree with Stott's view of atonement, it is guaranteed to help you think deeply about what many consider to be the pinnacle of the Christian story.

Our weekly feature *Then and Now* harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [Kate Bowler](#).