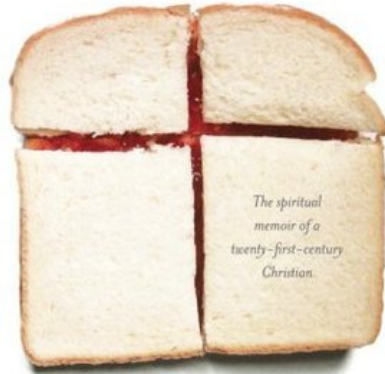


"The most amazing book."
—ANNE LAMOTT

take this bread

SARA MILES



Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion

Sara Miles

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Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion

Sara Miles

Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion Sara Miles

Early one morning, for no earthly reason, Sara Miles, raised an atheist, wandered into a church, received communion, and found herself transformed—embracing a faith she’d once scorned. A lesbian left-wing journalist who’d covered revolutions around the world, Miles didn’t discover a religion that was about angels or good behavior or piety; her faith centered on real hunger, real food, and real bodies. Before long, she turned the bread she ate at communion into tons of groceries, piled on the church’s altar to be given away. Within a few years, she and the people she served had started nearly a dozen food pantries in the poorest parts of their city.

Take This Bread is rich with real-life Dickensian characters—church ladies, millionaires, schizophrenics, bishops, and thieves—all blown into Miles’s life by the relentless force of her newfound calling. Here, in this achingly beautiful, passionate book, is the living communion of Christ.

“The most amazing book.”

—Anne Lamott

“Engaging, funny, and highly entertaining . . . Miles comments, often with great insight, on the ugliness that many people associate with a particular brand of Christianity. Why would any thinking person become a Christian? is one of the questions she addresses, and her answer is also compelling reading.”

—*Booklist*

“Powerful . . . This book is a gem [and] will remain with you forever.”

—*The Decatur Daily*

“What Miles learns about faith, about herself and about the gift of giving and receiving graciously are wonderful gifts for thereader.”

—National Public Radio

“[A] joyful memoir . . . advocates big-tent Christianity in the truest sense . . . a story of finding sustenance and passing it on.”

—*National Catholic Reporter*

“Rigorously honest, *Take This Bread* demonstrates how hard—and how necessary—it is to welcome everyone to the table, without exception.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Moving, delightful and significant.”

—*The Christian Century*

Don’t miss the reading group guide in the back of the book.

Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion Details

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From Reader Review Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion for online ebook

Jenny says

Take This Bread is a memoir of Sara Miles, an atheist and a lesbian who has a sudden conversion to Christianity. As she discovers the grace of God that is unending and free, so she mirrors that to her community by beginning a food pantry at her church in San Francisco. Throughout her life she has been drawn to food and discovers through her religious practice that food is what connects us to God and one another.

I really enjoyed reading this book, and have discovered that I really enjoy reading the memoir genre -- in hearing the thoughts and seeing the actions of others, there is so much to be learned. I resonate with Miles' sense of justice and am in awe of her unequivocal desire to open not a food pantry, but give outsiders a sense of the Eucharist, or thanksgiving, that we receive from God. I found her passion and devotion inspiring. What I did not like about this book was that in some places it is, frankly, exhausting. To think about all of the work that she and her community have done, and yet there is still scads of work to continue to be done...in her community and throughout the whole world.

Rebecca says

It's so hard to put into a few short words how much this book affected me and resonated with me; I could write a paper, not just a blurb. But, I start winter quarter in two days, so after thinking about it for several days, I am finally putting pen to paper, so to speak, however imperfectly. I will just describe a few things that affected me the most and hope that you will read the book for yourself. (I apologize, in advance, for the length.)

Sara Miles conversion experience begins when she, as a left-wing liberal lesbian, walks into an Episcopal church in San Francisco, takes communion and suddenly and radically experiences Jesus. She admits she can't explain what happened, she felt knocked over, she was dazed. "That impossible word, Jesus, lodged in me like a crumb . . . indisputably in my body now, as if I'd swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive my own flesh." Miles slowly starts to navigate her feelings and try to understand communion. I have never felt too comfortable myself with the idea of consubstantiation, and maybe not even transubstantiation; I think I was always more comfortable with the symbolism of the Eucharist. But Miles makes a great point that we all "eat another person" when we are fed by our mothers in the womb. I had never thought of the interesting connection between this and "eating Jesus" before. What a gripping idea.

Miles continue to cling to the idea of communion as central to the Christianity she is experiencing. She couldn't stop thinking about the story where Jesus continually tells Paul to "feed my sheep." This eventually leads her to open a food pantry at her church. The pantry brings her into contact with all kinds of homeless, psychotic, and marginalized people. By feeding and touching these folks, Miles realizes that she could not be a Christian by herself, and states "You can't hope to see God without opening yourself to all God's creation." In a time when much of the main-stream media focuses on Christians that promote exclusion, it was so moving for me to connect with this author and focus on the inclusivity of Christianity. After all, Jesus ate with the outcasts of society. If we could only do this today, Christianity would truly be a force to be reckoned with.

I also deeply appreciated how Miles did not chastise and belittle extreme right-wing Christians. This impressed and inspired me. She held a liturgy at her church shortly after the Iraq war broke out in 2003 where members of her church just stood and spoke their testimonies about the war. As everyone felt very strongly and very differently, Miles stated, "Being a Christian in wartime, for me was turning out to be the opposite of having 'God on our side.' It meant expanding not just a personal capacity to suffer but the personal and institutional capacity to dwell in ambiguity and unsettledness. It occurred to me that the church was a place, maybe the only place, where that could happen." Miles writes that early in her conversion experience, she sometimes felt superior to some right-wing Christians. However, she finally came to realize Christianity meant how alike we all are, and that she could experience Christ through all kinds of Christians, even those very different from her. I have many right and left-wing Christian friends, and Miles' realization struck home with me. After reading *American Wife*, this book again renewed my commitment not to judge others, but to just receive the wonderful things we all have to offer.

As she works with the food pantry, Miles begins to experience not just the receiving, but also the giving away of food as a sacrament. She comes to believe that the point of church is not to encourage people to attend, but "to feed them, so they can go out and, you know, be Jesus." This realization touched me. Of course, as a Southerner, I have always thought of food as pretty close to religion (right after football). But, I don't think I realized how hungry I was for the sacrament of communion too. It's the sharing of the bread with everyone without exception, not just with others like us in a church building, (Miles fervently states and I agree) that brings us close to the divine. Most of my religious experience has been through contemplative worship in a church, which I believe is very important, but Miles has truly inspired me to find the time to volunteer at a food pantry locally and share this communion of Christ.

Cheryl says

Many parts of this book were profoundly disturbing to me as I read them in light of the painful transitions at my church and some long-brewing thoughts I've had about the potential of the emergent church movement. I gave it 5 stars because it hit its mark with me. As I was sitting in the adult educational class of my most definitely not-emerging, not-radical suburban white professional-class church, I was listening to the pastor's presentation about the nature of the church in Lutheranism through a different lens because I had just finished this book. The Church is distinguished from secular social service agencies because of the Word and the Sacraments. And that is exactly the central passion that Miles develops in the creation of the food pantry at St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco. As she describes her work with the pantry, she begins to see that feeding people and developing relationships with them is a sacramental practice. This is the strongest takeaway lesson: as you go deeper and deeper into the book, you begin to accept her experience that not putting limits on giving can lead to "seeing Christ" in others in very powerful ways.

St. Gregory of Nyssa is a church that is the epitome of a reawakening to the power of liturgy and the centrality of the Eucharist. Their mission is to make the sacraments relevant and inclusive for everyone who might come in off the street, with a particular welcome for the LGBT community that lives in San Francisco. But the "outsiders" they attract are mostly educated, liberal, reasonably well-off people, like Sara Miles, who were attracted by the beauty and meaning the worship gave to them. When relative newcomer Sara felt called to give away groceries in the sanctuary every Friday, her expanded understanding of welcoming strangers and outsiders bred conflict with the long-time members who were finding refuge in the status quo of their own "inclusion." Here is where the book is a cautionary tale for any church looking for renewal through the "emerging church" movement or formulas for attracting new demographics: people still end up

creating a comfortable status quo and establishing boundaries and rules and hurdles to inclusion just like old-fashioned mainstream churches. Miles's attempts to remain in fellowship with those who resist her proposals and with enemies are painful and honest, but of course she can't provide a universal answer for such a basic question.

Some parts of the book were boring because she was going over well-worn information about the politics of the Episcopal church in the 1990s/2000s, but of course that was necessary for many readers. More importantly, I felt she glossed over the effect on her family of her deepening involvement with the pantry--it was a very late chapter and her conclusion was a blithe "of course I won't abandon my family," rather than an honest confrontation about another Gospel tenet: that Jesus asks his followers to leave their families behind for total commitment to him. That is something that I was disturbed about in *Three Cups of Tea* as well: the disjuncture between the relationships in the cause and the relationships at home. Does taking up a cross and following it wherever it leads inevitably demand this? Is this the only path to true Christian commitment? Or is it just the unbalanced charging ahead of the true believer who gets a rush out of the exotic and the dangerous and the crusade?

This is the tension I'll be pondering: While Miles is persuasive about the power of the Meal, I'm not sure that I could participate in such a "Martha" ministry without a lot of beautiful and reflective worship in a more limited community and family to balance the turmoil of such an all-consuming set of relationships with whoever crosses the threshold. I don't condemn the St. Gregory members who loved the "Mary" peace and contemplation of their Sundays and worried about losing that time of healing and refuge in the Word and Sacrament. Not everyone has a spiritual adviser, as Miles does, to meet with every morning, and sometimes the hardest relationships to practice Christianity in are those of everyday life with family and friends and at work and in business--the ordinary sort of Christianity C.S. Lewis speaks of.

Christy says

Sara Miles was a single mother, a left-wing atheist lesbian activist when she walked into St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church and spontaneously participated in communion. Finding herself suddenly and embarrassingly moved by her experience, she decided to return.

Miles writes about the difficulties of conversion when nothing about her newfound religion made any sense to her – not the evangelists, the dogmatisms, the theological concepts, or the inner ecclesiastical rifts. For her, religion was simple: feed others. Being so moved by the sacrament of the Eucharist when all who are called respond and come to the table to share the bread and the wine, she put this into practice by opening a food pantry and extending the warmth, community and responsibility to those who are without food or occupy the social interstices: illegal immigrants, drug pushers, transvestites, transsexuals, gays, divorcees, the homeless, those that have been to prison.

Even the church that initially sanctions her food pantry and who gave her the impetus to feed people eventually betrays that while the church's ideology is welcoming and inclusive, they are protective of their quiet, their "high-art Sundays". This spiritual memoir is one of contrasts, contrasts Miles herself feels. Those who aren't religious may find it difficult to understand why she decides to throw in her lot with this uncomfortable group of people; those who are may find it difficult to reconcile themselves with Miles' sexuality, her open theology, and her imperative to leave her comfort zone and to identify with the estranged. A thought-provoking read.

John Beeler says

In her introduction, Miles claims to have bridged the chasm between liberal Christianity and right-wing/fundamentalist Christianity.

But what that amounts to, basically, is saying "hi" to a guy with a KJV in the front seat of his pickup. Otherwise, fundies play the one-dimensional role they usually do.

Aspires to nuance but never gets there.

Angie says

I didn't necessarily "enjoy" reading this book while I was actually reading it. I felt uncomfortable and challenged, not by the language but by some of the opinions and views. This author and I couldn't be more different, and I'm sure she'd strongly disapprove of my LDS religion (even the liberal wing of the Episcopal church was far too conservative for her). Nonetheless, as Sara Miles took me along on her journey from atheist to Christian, unflinchingly laying out her biases and weaknesses, I had to examine my own biases and weaknesses. I found myself identifying with her and agreeing with her on certain fundamental principles, or finding strength in my own different approach to worship. I feel God's presence in my life, and I could clearly see that God is very present in Miles' life as well. Common ground. I also loved Miles' realization that no one can be a Christian alone. We must learn to love and forgive everyone, whether or not they agree with us on the nature of God. Whether or not they're addicted to drugs. Or homeless. Or middle-class hypocrites and snobs. And if the measure of a good book is whether you keep thinking about it long after you've put it down, then this one measures up.

Katie M. says

A recommendation from my favorite seminarian. At first Miles drove me bonkers - she spends the first half of the book describing all the ways in which brown people like her (they fed her their last bowl of soup in war-torn Nicaragua! they took her under their wing in working-class New York!), glossing over some sorely-needed class analyses, badmouthing conservative Christians, and just generally being sort of judgey and unlikeable. But then the second part of the book, when the food pantry really gets rolling, gets better. She continues to do all that same stuff, but at least it's mixed in with enough thoughtful anecdotes and Big Questions and calling-herself-and-other-people-on-their-shit to keep it interesting - occasionally fascinating, and sometimes lovely. And I happened to grab this book as plane reading on a recent trip to the Bay Area, which also helped - it gave it all some more meaning and context and a better sense of place.

Jessica says

I was so excited to read this book after I read reviews of it, but I ended up being disappointed. The basic storyline is that the author Sara Miles, a lesbian atheist, converts to Christianity and starts a food bank at her

church because she believes that really fulfills Jesus' commands to the Church. And I will say that her work to start a food bank and her beliefs about how that fulfills Jesus' work today I totally agree with. But, as a liberal Christian I find her church and her other beliefs too liberal for me. I am all about welcoming anyone and everyone to church and to God, but I also believe that if you chose to accept that faith it needs to translate into changes in your own life as well. Overall the book was pretty good and it's definitely nice to read about someone doing as much for their community as Miles did in hers.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

This is certain to be one of my favorite reads of the year. Sara Miles is a woman who has never visited a church in her life, whose parents are acknowledged atheists. Yet, suddenly and unexpectedly, Miles eats a bite of the Lord's Supper and becomes a Christian. Her life completely changes and she becomes the founder of a food bank at her church. The food bank brings in the poor, the desolate, the sick, the crazed, and these, in turn, become changed and, in addition, act to change those in the church. Delightful.

Cathy says

I found this book to be stimulating and thought-provoking. There are places where the writing is tiresome, but mostly I appreciated the author's struggles with making sense of this faith that had grasped her. Her theology is incarnational, seeking and seeing God in the day-to-day and in the face-to-face. I love her emphasis on the sacredness of food and eating, and how communion is not confined to Sunday mornings around an ornately adorned Table but emerges in unlikely places, with unlikely people, over the craziest conversations. And I appreciate her honesty, in the final analysis, that she is as messed up and wrong as all the people that she disagrees with and doesn't want to be like...but God has brought her into community with them all the same, recognizing that she is more like them than she wants to believe. While I resonate with many of her issues with the church - how it gets stuck in institutional mode, how it can become a haven for people who want to play it safe with their faith - I have also been challenged by her expansive view of what church can and perhaps should be.

But with her I pray: "O God of abundance, you feed us every day. Rise in us now, make us into your bread, that we may share your gifts with a hungry world, and join love with all people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Laura Engelken says

It's true. I'm a sucker for cover art. Tell me, how could I turn down book that uses Gothic typeface and an image of a cross made with a jelly sandwich on Wonder Bread?

I was actually checking the library stacks for another memoir when this book caught my eye. It was a serendipitous discovery, as I'd just had an email exchange with a colleague regarding her frustration that students had "politicized" the Eucharist (a.k.a communion). Specifically, students wearing rainbow pins during mass on their Catholic college campus were denied communion by the local Archbishop - a man who had recently sent DVDs condemning same-sex marriage to every Catholic family registered with a parish in

his entire state.

I shared with my colleague that serving/receiving the Eucharist is both a political and theological issue - especially in the situation she described. Placing restrictions on who can come to the table to partake in this shared ritual raises profound questions of what bodies (e.g., sexual orientation, race, physical/mental ability) are seen as worthy and/or allowed to be members of the Body of Christ and partake in Christ's body (i.e., Eucharist).

This is very much the theme explored by Sara Miles in her book. I enjoyed her stories and resonate deeply with her theology around the table - however I found her writing very repetitive. Also, some of her attempts to make connections between her relationship with food, her work and theology felt like add-ons at the end of each chapter. Her book would be stronger if she could have better weaved those reflections within her story.

Kristjan Wager says

Boring, and not particularly well written.

Apparently atheists are supposed to be impressed by the spirituality of this book, but speaking personally I found it uninteresting and unfathomable. Perhaps if I had grown up in a culture soaked in Christianity it would have made more sense, or might have interested me.

G (galen) says

We are going to discuss this book Aug 13 at the Exponent. See [here](#) for more info.

This book made me hungry, both physically and spiritual.

Which is totally fitting, as it is a book about being fed, physically and spiritually.

Sara Miles writing is superb and rich and beautiful and satisfying as she describes her life (including intriguing passages about both her parents spiritual journeys.) She is Chef, writer, political activist, and of course, Atheist.

Then she has a chance encounter with the Eucharist, with 'eating God' and her life is changed forever.

Although she writes profoundly about her personal spiritual insights, the overall theme of the book is that she could not be spiritual in isolation. "You can't be Christian by your self" she reiterates again and again. For her, conversion was a call to work fervently to do Christ's work of feeding the hungry, setting up food pantries all over her community. "God [is] about feeding and being feed... the sharing of food [is] an actual sacrament." -pg 196-7

This book made me hungry... then turned around and fed me too And it was delicious.

Jill says

This is where I find God - in searching for connection to others and finding our common humanity. I saw myself in both Miles and the church members who resisted her efforts. Fear is not larger than God, but it can feel that way. I loved how passionate and fearless she is. I also loved how she was unafraid to pray, baptize, bless, and share communion, despite not being ordained. My favorite was chapter 21, "Rites" where she goes through the everyday incarnation of these sacred rites.

I can't say how non-Christians will feel about this book, but I think most people can appreciate her zest for finding connection and community.

Dave says

Sara Miles' conversion memoir is a great change from many books about Christianity and spiritual life, whose main selling points are their emphasis on religion as opposed to form or readability. I've found it hard to gut out many contemporary Christian books, too fat tracts of abused English. Miles' spare writing unflinchingly examines her route from an upbringing with atheist parents, to reporting on insurgent conflicts around the world to wandering into a church in San Francisco and finding a second vocation and a religion. She is as critical of herself and her conversion as she is of religious stricture, dogma and orthodoxy. Her connection with archetypes of hunger, food, community, struggle, quest for meaning, simple, elemental living is closely aligned with ideas I have lately been considering.

As a mangy Christian, rather, a Christian with only a partially formed understanding of religion I found great comfort in reading Miles' path to Christianity, specifically the refrain of using the red-letter gospel as her guiding document for Christian faith. This book is an inspiration in faith and service. A quick read, but not slight. I'll be thinking about this book.
