

Brian McLaren

By Jason Barker

Publications: Fifteen books, including *A New Kind of Christian*, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, *Everything Must Change*, *A New Kind of Christianity*, and *Naked Spirituality*. McLaren has also published many articles and essays.

HISTORY

Brian McLaren was born in 1956 into what he describes as “a full-dose, hard-core, shaken-together-and-my-cup-runneeth-over, conservative, Bible-believing, Evangelical, fundamentalist Christian home.”¹ He experienced “distaste” for the sermons and behavioral expectations of his childhood church,² but at the same time was attracted to the images of Jesus lovingly smiling at children.³ As an adolescent he began to lose his childhood faith, but an emotional prayer experience when he was fifteen gave him a transforming sensation of God’s love.⁴ McLaren participated in the Jesus Movement of the 1970s, but soon left because he believed the Movement had been co-opted by the “Religious Right” and church marketing.⁵

McLaren earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English from the University of Maryland, and later received honorary doctorates from Carey Theological Seminary and Virginia Theological Seminary.⁶ He taught college English from 1978-1986, leaving to become the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Burtonsville, MD (which he helped start in 1982).⁷ He resigned his position at Cedar Ridge in 2006 to engage in full-time writing and speaking.⁸

In 2001, McLaren—along with Doug Pagitt, Tim Keel, Chris Seay, Tim Conder, and Brad Cecil—formed Emergent Village,⁹ an interdenominational group dedicated to merging Christianity with social activism;¹⁰ McLaren served as chair of the board of Emergent Village, and continues to serve on the organization’s board.¹¹ He has also served on the board of directors of Sojourners, International Teams and the Seattle School, and currently serves on the board of the Claremont School of Theology.¹²

McLaren was named one of the twenty-five most influential Evangelicals in America by *Time* magazine in 2005.¹³

DOCTRINE

God: The God of traditional Christianity who saves sinners and punishes the unrepentant, McLaren says, is “ugly” and a “tribal and violent God.” Even more, the traditional understanding of God is of a “dread cosmic dictator...that deity, we must conclude, is an idol, a damnable idol.”¹⁴

McLaren names the God of traditional Christianity *Theos*,¹⁵ who is a mishmash of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical concepts derived from what he calls the “Greco-Roman narrative” (see below) who “loves spirit, state, and being and hates matter, story, and becoming.” In contrast to *Theos*, McLaren claims the true biblical deity is *Elohim*,¹⁶ who “loves stories and seems to have little taste for states.”¹⁷ The problem for modern Christians is that the concept of “*Theos* is so deeply embedded and enthroned in our minds, that it is agonizingly difficult for us to recapture the wild, dynamic, story-unleashing goodness of *Elohim*, a goodness that differs so starkly, so radically, from the domesticated, static, controlled perfection of *Theos*.”¹⁸

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While McLaren's *Elohim* does not itself evolve, our understanding of *Elohim*—and communication of this understanding—evolves over time. Therefore, “as human capacity grows to conceive of a higher and wiser view of God, each new vision is faithfully preserved in Scripture like fossils in layers of sediment.”¹⁹ McLaren's goal is to develop “something far richer, far subtler, and—to me at least—far more beautiful: divine generosity, divine provision, divine resourcing, divine empowerment. That gives us not only a different image of God, but also of ourselves.”²⁰

Salvation: McLaren rejects the traditional understanding of the fall, salvation, heaven and hell. He claims that these beliefs come from the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.²¹ These doctrines of traditional Christianity, according to McLaren, are responsible for “slavery, anti-Semitism, colonialism, genocide, chauvinism, homophobia, environmental plunder, the Inquisition, witch burning, (and) apartheid.”²² In light of this alleged impact of the traditional Christian message of salvation, McLaren believes it is appropriate to refer to Christians as the “lost.”²³

McLaren replaces the Greco-Roman narrative—and particularly the belief in penal substitutionary theory—with what he calls “powerful weakness theory,” in which Jesus' accepting suffering from everyone on the Cross models the self-sacrifice and vulnerability with which Christians should act in the world.²⁴ The human story then becomes “the story of goodness being created and re-created.”²⁵ Salvation then, rather than meaning solely saving people from damnation to eternal life in heaven, instead “means ‘get out of trouble.’ The trouble could be sickness, war, political intrigue, oppression, poverty, imprisonment, or any kind of danger or evil.”²⁶

With this progressive view of salvation, God's judgment becomes a process of approving “the parts of a person's life that will be deemed worthy of being saved,” while “all the unloving, unjust, non-Christlike parts of our lives...will be burned away...in the end God will be all in all, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”²⁷

The Kingdom of God: Salvation is ultimately the process of developing and nurturing “God's sacred ecosystem,” the kingdom of God on earth.²⁸ Christianity has failed the Gospel, McLaren says, because “it has specialized in dealing with ‘spiritual needs’ to the exclusion of physical and social needs. It has specialized in people's destination in the afterlife but has failed to address significant social injustices in this life.”²⁹ He explains,

Like many people, I formerly understood kingdom of God to refer to heaven after this life, with a kind of backlight cast on this life. Now, I see the kingdom as primarily being about God's will being done on earth, in history, with a forward light cast beyond this life. I see the church as a community that teaches people to live in and for the kingdom, spiritually forming disciples who are agents of the kingdom in their daily lives, in their jobs, among their neighbors and even their enemies.³⁰

Bible: McLaren says the Bible “has a unique role in the life of the community of faith, resourcing, challenging, and guiding the community of faith in ways that no other texts can.”³¹ The Bible is not, however, authoritative and inerrant.³² Instead, it is “messy and full of internal tension,” and therefore inspires “ongoing vigorous conversation” rather than enforcing doctrinal agreement.³³

When seen in this light, the Bible is not God's revelation to humanity. Instead, “if we enter the text together and feel the flow of its arguments...God's revelation can happen to us.”³⁴ The point of this conversation is neither to put the interpreter under the authority of the text (the conservative position), or over the text (the liberal position), but instead to immerse the reader in the flow of conversation within the text.³⁵ McLaren encourages Christians “to loosen up and approach the Bible on less defined terms...Maybe postmodern is postanalytical and postcritical.”³⁶

Postmodernism³⁷ and Truth: As the previous quotation indicates, McLaren's view of Scripture—and indeed, of truth itself—is avowedly postmodern. He claims, “certainty can be dangerous”—what is needed is the confidence to always *seek* the truth while

simultaneously acknowledging that what you believe might not be true.³⁸ McLaren repeatedly indicates that we are unable to directly access truth; what we consider to be truth is largely a linguistic construction in which we use the language of our faith and/or cultural community to express our experience of reality, and this language in turn shapes our experience.³⁹

Therefore, instead of being objective or propositional, truth is relational. This means one does not know *about* God, but simply enjoys a relationship *with* Him. McLaren elaborates:

We must admit that our quest for ultimate and absolute truth is impossible, if not for the reasons postmodern philosophers raise, then for this reason: the ultimate truth is not an objective concept, not an objective principle, but rather a Person, the Subject of such splendor, dignity, wonder, winsomeness, and glory that to know him is to love him, worship him, enjoy him, and seek to please him with one's very existence. When God comes to us, God doesn't say, 'Seek for absolute objective, propositional truth,' but rather, 'I am the way, the truth, the life.'⁴⁰

As McLaren says elsewhere, while traditional Christians hold to an orthodoxy which "means finally 'getting it right' or 'getting it straight,' mine is a pretty disappointing, curvy orthodoxy."⁴¹ His orthodoxy, rather than being "a list of correct doctrines," is instead a thoughtful, lifelong process of formulating—and re-formulating—opinions.⁴²

The problem, D.A. Carson says, is that "McLaren is remarkably averse to trading in the coinage of truth."⁴³

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

God: McLaren's use of the term *Theos* as a name for the ostensibly false God of traditional Christianity is unusual, given that the term itself appears in various forms over 1,200 times in the Greek New Testament in reference to God. Contrary to McLaren's assertion that *Theos* hates matter and becoming, the *Theos* of the New Testament and of traditional Christianity is the Creator and sustainer of all matter (John 1:1, 3; Col. 1:15-16). While McLaren formulates his view of *Elohim* based on the modern understanding of the attitudes and behaviors which should be consistent with a loving God, the Bible tells us that God's ways and thoughts are beyond human comprehension (Isa. 55:8).⁴⁴

The traditional understanding of God as judge is not the result of Platonic and Aristotelian speculation—the Bible is clear that He is the judge of all people (Ps. 7:8; 96:10, 13; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 9:27; Rev. 16:5). Furthermore, His judgment is not ugly or dictatorial, but an act of righteousness which benefits humanity (Isa. 26:9) because it is rooted in and expresses His holiness (Exod. 15:11; Ps. 47:8; Heb. 12:10) and mercy (Num. 14:18; 1 Chron. 16:34; Ps. 107:1; 119:64; Hosea 10:12; 2 John 1:3; Jude 21). This can be seen most clearly in Christ's bearing our sins upon the Cross (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6; 1 Peter 2:4; 1 John 2:2).

Salvation: The traditional Christian understanding of the human condition is biblical: sin entered the world with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12), resulting in humanity's separation from God and condemnation (Isa. 59:1-2; Rom. 5:15-18), but Jesus' death and resurrection saves His people (John 8:24; 1 Tim. 2:5; 1 John 5:11).

McLaren is correct when he asserts that God is deeply concerned with the suffering of the poor and oppressed (Prov. 19:17; Jer. 22:16; Zech. 7:8-10). This, however, is not the biblical teaching regarding salvation: salvation is found only in relationship with God (John 17:1-5); it is a gift of God's grace (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:1-9) that is obtained through Jesus' blood (1 Peter 1:18-19). This message of salvation is contained in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15), and is proclaimed by God's people (Eph. 1:13).

Kingdom of God: As we see in the above verses on God's concern for the poor, mercy and charity are decidedly acts of God's kingdom (cf. Isa. 11:6-9; 65:17-25; Hosea 2:18). The kingdom of God is not limited to charitable and political activity, however, because

Christ himself says his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). The Christian life in the kingdom of God is one of righteousness, peace and joy (Rom. 14:17), but it is also one with restrictions: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom (1 Cor. 15:42-54), and unrighteousness—including sexual perversions—are excluded from it (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

The Bible: The Bible is the Word of God. Jesus emphasizes that the Old Testament is God’s Word (Mark 7:13), and the Word was preached by Jesus (Luke 5:1), Paul (Acts 13:5; 16:32; 19:10), Peter (Acts 11:1) and the other apostles (Acts 8:25). The Bible is a reliable guide in explaining salvation and the Christian life (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Ps. 119:105), and therefore is also useful in determining true and false religious teaching (Acts 17:11; cf. 1 Thess. 5:21).

Contrary to McLaren’s postmodern assertion that absolute, objective, propositional truth cannot be fully known, the Bible is clear that the Word of God is truth (Ps. 119:160; John 17:17). This is why Scripture says of Christ, “In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:13-14).

Notes

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- 3 Brian D. McLaren. *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 49-50.
- 4 *Naked Spirituality*, 7-9.
- 5 *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 51.
- 6 “Biography.” <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/about-brian/biography/> (accessed April 19, 2012).
- 7 “Cathedral Guest: Brian McLaren.” <http://www.nationalcathedral.org/staff/PE-47DGN-14001Q.shtml> (accessed April 14, 2012).
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- 9 Tony Jones. *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2008), xvii-xviii.
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- 13 “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.” *Time*, February 7, 2005. http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235_1993243_1993300,00.html.
- 14 Brian D. McLaren. *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 65, 102, 161.
- 15 The word “Theos” is the Greek word used throughout the New Testament usually translated “God.”
- 16 “Elohim” is one of the Hebrew words used throughout the Old Testament usually translated “God.”
- 17 *Ibid.* 42, 48.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.* 103.
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- 21 *A New Kind of Christianity*, 33-34, 41.
- 22 *Ibid.* 85.
- 23 Leonard I. Sweet, Brian D. McLaren and Jerry Hasselmayer. *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 186.
- 24 Brian D. McLaren. *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2003) 105-06.
- 25 *A New Kind of Christianity*, 54.
- 26 *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 101.
- 27 *A New Kind of Christianity*, 204, 205.
- 28 Brian D. McLaren. *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 142.
- 29 *Ibid.* 33.
- 30 R. Allan Streett and Brian D. McLaren. “An Interview with Brian McLaren.” *Criswell Theological Review*, 3.2 (2006), 7.
- 31 *A New Kind of Christianity*, 83.
- 32 *Ibid.* 82, 52 and *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 148.
- 33 *A New Kind of Christianity*, 83.
- 34 *Ibid.* 91.
- 35 *Ibid.* 96-97.
- 36 Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2001), 56.
- 37 Postmodernism is the period following the modern era which is characterized by a general mistrust of the ability of human reason and science to arrive at truth. Truth itself is often viewed as a social construct that relative and individual rather than absolute and universal.
- 38 “Interview: Brian McLaren.” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, July 15, 2005. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week846/interview.html>.
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- 41 *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 334.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 128.
- 44 Interestingly, a writer questioned McLaren about this verse, but he did not address the passage in his response. See Brian D. McLaren. “Do You Believe the Bible is the Inerrant Word of God?” <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/faq/do-you-believe.html> (accessed April 24, 2012).



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