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CHRISTIANITY AND MCLARENISM: QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

by Kevin DeYoung

A review of
*A New Kind of Christianity:
Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith*
by Brian D. McLaren (HarperCollins, 2010)

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Brian McLaren's latest book, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith*, is two steps forward in terms of clarity and ten steps backward in terms of orthodoxy. *A New Kind of Christianity*, more than any previous McLaren project, provides a forceful account of what the emergent leader believes and why.

Before I get further into this review, however, I need to say a word about charity. Without a doubt the biggest critique Ted Kluck and I received for our book *Why We're Not Emergent* (Moody, 2009) was that we were not charitable. We were, some said, unfair, mean, and ungenerous. I don't doubt that the same will be said of this review. So let me attempt a preemptive explanation.

I want to be fair to McLaren, to understand his ideas and evaluate them based on their merits. If I misunderstand a point or misconstrue what McLaren teaches, I want to be corrected. Further, I will not assume the worst about McLaren. I will not say anything in the cozy confines of this review that I would not say sitting across from him over a beverage of his choice.

It's not wrong to ask a reviewer to be charitable, so long as the love does not have to be devoid of the truth. So what I will not do is pretend that the issues McLaren raises are nonessential issues. I will not refrain from serious critique because this is only a "quest" or merely an attempt to raise questions. I am not ashamed for having convictions, and I am not afraid to write as if I understand (truly though not exhaustively) what the Bible teaches and understand that what it teaches is incompatible with *A New Kind of Christianity*. No one deserves to be reviled. Some books, however, deserve to be pilloried.

THE QUEST AND THE QUESTIONS

Brian McLaren is on a quest—“a quest for new ways to believe and new ways to live and serve faithfully in the way of Jesus, a quest for a new kind of Christian faith” (p. 18). On this quest, McLaren raises and responds to ten questions.

The narrative question: What is the overarching story line of the Bible? For McLaren, the familiar storyline of creation, fall, redemption, consummation (with heaven and hell as a result) is a grotesque Greco-Roman distortion of the biblical narrative. God the creator, liberator, and reconciler is the real storyline.

The authority question: How should the Bible be understood? Not as a constitution, argues McLaren, with laws and rules and arguments about who’s right and wrong. Rather, we go to the Bible as a community library, where internal consistency is not presumed and we learn by conversation.

The God question: Is God violent? Believers used to think so, but we ought to grow in maturity from fearing a violent tribal God to partnering with a Christlike God.

The Jesus question: Who is Jesus and why is He important? Jesus is never violent and does not condemn. He did not come to save people from hell. Jesus, says McLaren, is peace-loving and identifies with the weak and oppressed.

The gospel question: What is the gospel? It is not a message about how to get saved. The gospel is the announcement of a “new kingdom, a new way of life, and a new way of peace that carried good news to all people of every religion” (139).

The church question: What do we do about the church? Churches—in whatever form and whatever we call them— exist to form people of Christlike love. This is the church’s primary calling, to form people who live in the way of love, the way of peacemaking.

The sex question: Can we find a way to address human sexuality without fighting about it? We need to stop hating gay people and welcome them fully into the life of the church. The “sexually other” may be defective in traditional religion, but they are loved and included in a new kind of Christianity.

The future question: Can we find a better way of viewing the future? No more “soul-sort” universe where our team goes to heaven and the bad guys go to hell. The future is open, inviting our participation. In the end, God’s mercy will triumph and all shall be well.

The pluralism question: How should followers of Jesus relate to people of other religions? “Christianity has a nauseating, infuriating, depressing record when it comes to encountering people of other religions” (208). There is not us/them, insider/outsider. Jesus accepted everyone and so should we.

The what-do-we-do-now question: How can we translate our quest into action? The human quest for God has known many stages. Those in the more mature stages of the quest should gently invite others to grow into fuller maturity, but without being divisive.

Some may be thinking, "What's wrong with this new kind of Christianity?" Well, as it turns out, pretty much everything.

A Stifling Approach and Sweeping Caricatures

For all the rhetoric about desiring an honest dialogue and inviting criticism as "a gift" (13, 25), McLaren's actual approach to argumentation makes probing conversation more difficult. When he positions himself as a martyr (243) and equates attacks on him with attacks on the abolitionists (87), it hardly encourages disagreement.

McLaren's writing frequently displays emotional badgering and intellectual bankruptcy. Consider his description of exclusivists who believe conscious faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for a saving relationship with God. These sort of people use John 14:6 like a "revolver" (212). They are "inherently anxious," "vulnerable to paranoia," and intent on ridding the world of everyone they disagree with (212–13). "Ultimately, then, your group is normative and belongs here; others are anomalies and don't belong. They don't really have the same right to exist that you do." Has anyone ever used John 14:6 to argue that non-Christians don't have a right to exist?

McLaren's not finished. He says that in this exclusivist mindset the only options are: (a) convert and eliminate otherness, (b) colonize and dominate, (c) ignore and exclude, (d) persecute and shame, or (e) cleanse the world through mass murder. I'm not making this up. You can find the breakdown on page 213. Why not say, "Offer the bread of life that they might experience forgiveness of sin and enjoy God forever"?

I can't tell if McLaren thinks he is describing actual people and positions or if the "them" for him are so heinous that he can't imagine describing them in any other way. Either way, the demonizing hardly invites ongoing dialogue.

Internal Inconsistencies

As the book unfolded, I felt like I was watching the inner struggle between good cop McLaren and bad cop McLaren. He starts out by saying he only wants to ask questions, not make statements (18). But then he often makes statements like, "This much is unmistakably clear...." (54). So is he on a quest or has he arrived? Is he asking questions or making declarations?

Similarly, McLaren starts and ends the book with a conciliatory tone, urging his followers to be respectful and avoid controversy. Even though McLaren sees himself as farther along on the quest, he argues that every rung on the ladder is good because they all lead upward (237). He is careful not to portray himself as having it all figured out and everyone before him as benighted fools (27). This is good cop McLaren.

But then in the middle of the book there is a whole lot of bad cop, so much so that it is hard to really believe he thinks evangelical theology is anything other than oppressive barbarism. People who read Genesis in the traditional way have been "brainwashed." The God of evangelicalism is the "dread cosmic dictator of the six-line

Greco-Roman framework” (48). This deity—the one that saves sinners from the fall and punishes unbelievers in hell—“is an idol, a damnable idol” (65). We have a “tribal and violent God, a rather flattened view of Jesus, and a domesticated understanding of the gospel” (161). We worship an “ugly” God (102), McLaren explains, and our exclusivism makes him “want to cry, groan, or scream” (223).

Insistence on a Borrowed Storyline

Almost everything in the book depends on the assertion that the traditional biblical storyline is a Greco-Roman perversion. And almost no argument in the book is less well founded. McLaren asserts that the six-line Greco-Roman narrative (Eden, fall, condemnation, salvation, heaven, hell) is to blame for just about everything that’s ever gone wrong in the church and in the Western world in general. Thankfully, McLaren says, this isn’t the biblical storyline at all. This is merely a parody of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. They too had a six-line story: platonic ideal/being, fall into cave of illusion, Aristotelian real/becoming, salvation, Platonic ideal, Greek *hades*. So, as you can see, the story we’ve been telling is nothing but an unwitting copycat of the Greeks.

I don’t know where to begin with such a tangled mess of assumptions. Would any Plato or Aristotle scholar sum up their thought like this, much less mash the two philosophers together? And would anyone in the Greco-Roman world have articulated their worldview in this way? McLaren never proves this. Nor does he ever demonstrate, even if this was the story, how the Christians stole it, other than saying baldly that we did. McLaren’s six-line Greco-Roman story looks like something you come up with after one semester of Western Philosophy.

It gets worse. McLaren goes on to pit the Jewish *Elohim* versus the Greek *Theos*. Bad *Theos*, unlike the good *Elohim*, is the Platonic god who “loves spirit, state, and being and hates matter, story, and becoming” (42). So, argues McLaren, when we talk about the Fall, we are on an unconscious level using the Greco-Roman story and reliving its fears of becoming (43). This is so bizarre as to make a response nearly impossible. How do we argue against something we are all doing unconsciously even though no one in our churches has ever heard of this, can make sense of it, or has any inclination for it? Not to mention that you’ll find no responsible theologian in the evangelical world who thinks in the dualistic categories McLaren supposes.

What you can find, however, is a lot of process theologians from the last century thinking in the categories McLaren does. For all the deconstruction of the supposed Greco-Roman myth, McLaren is the one, in the end, who fails to escape his own intellectual biases.

An Evolutionary Lens

Refuting the alleged Greco-Roman narrative is the first step in McLaren’s attempt to bury old Christianity. The second step is seeing religion through an evolutionary lens. This happens in a number of ways. For example, McLaren appropriates liberal theologian Harvey Cox’s story of progression, which goes from the Age of Faith (marked by vitality and fruitfulness) to the Age of Belief (marked by control and the

persecution of heretics) to the Age of the Spirit (where a new faith for the twenty-first century is born). I'll give you one guess where McLaren thinks we are and where we need to go.

In the book's conclusion, McLaren employs another evolutionary model. This time our religious quest moves through seven stages: survival, security, power, independence, individuality, honesty, and *ubuntu* (an African word for peace). McLaren and his followers are traveling in the honesty stage (because they question current systems), while the rest of us are stuck somewhere back down the road. To be fair, McLaren bends over backward so as not to sound haughty about this. But the fact remains: he considers our emphasis on personal salvation, systematic theology, and divine sovereignty to be less enlightened and less evolved (233).

Most troubling, McLaren uses the evolutionary model to discount parts of the Bible he doesn't like. Though God Himself has not changed, he argues, our ancestors' understandings of God have matured. In particular, we see in Scripture the evolution of God's uniqueness, ethics, universality, agency, and character. This approach to Scripture allows McLaren to dismiss a story like the flood, which he finds "profoundly disturbing." He cannot "defend the view of God in the Noah story as morally acceptable, ethically satisfying, and theologically mature" (110). But he doesn't have to defend it because in our stage of maturity, McLaren claims, we now know God is not bloodthirsty, capricious, and vengeful. In fact, the story of baby Moses floating helplessly down the Nile suggests that people were beginning to understand that God identified with the weak and is no longer to be thought of as a mighty potentate (110).

There are too many problems here even to mention: (1) God kills all firstborn sons of the Egyptians a few chapters later, so how is He no longer a mighty potentate? (2) Come to think of it, God pours out His wrath in almost every book of the Bible after this, including the very last one. (3) Jesus and the apostles quote from the Old Testament indiscriminately, without any hint that they considered some parts of God's revelation more evolved than others. (4) How does the evolutionary hypothesis account for repeated references to God's longsuffering love and mercy in the Old Testament? The "good" God is in the Bible from start to finish, right alongside the "bad" God. (5) No first-century Jew, including Jesus Himself—Jesus of the "don't erase a jot or tittle"—would have tolerated such an approach to Holy Scripture. When McLaren can say with a straight face that the Jews did not tolerate idols because "idols freeze one's understanding of God in stone" (111), the shark officially has been jumped. This is not even an attempt to understand the Bible on its own terms. With the evolutionary lens, McLaren has simply created a one-sided cartoon God who looks and behaves as he wants Him to.

Baffled by the Bible

I haven't said much about McLaren's doctrine of Scripture because he doesn't say much he hasn't said before. He thinks the Bible is very special and has a unique role, but he does not think it is internally consistent nor the word of God (81). It is inspired in the sense that it inspires (83). It is not to be read as a legal constitution, but as a community

library. God's revelation happens as we enter the text together (91). We've heard these sorts of arguments before and tried to address them in *Why We're Not Emergent*. D. A. Carson and Michael Wittmer did so as well.¹

But one new idea deserves brief mention. McLaren employs the book of Job in defense of his community library metaphor. The book of Job, you'll recall, has long speeches by Job, his "friends," and finally God. So, McLaren asks, how can all of these speeches be the very words of God? They don't even agree with each other, so how do we make sense of Job? If we read the Bible as a constitution, McLaren posits, there's no easy answer to this dilemma. Actually there is. We simply understand the book as a whole. Does McLaren, the former English teacher, really think he's got traditionalists on the ropes here? It is not hard to understand that in a book like Job with competing speeches, the point of the story is not necessarily found in what each character offers as advice. Every word is the word of God. But the applicability of these words is determined by the context and their role in the larger narrative. Or does McLaren really get confused and wonder if he should listen to Herod and Pilate just because the gospel writers quote them?

A Barn Full of Straw Men

McLaren excels at knocking down arguments no one holds. So again we learn that the Bible is not a divinely dictated science textbook (68) and that God is not a puppet master or divine chess master or a machine operator pulling levers (196). One can't help but wonder if McLaren has ever read an evangelical treatment on the inspiration of Scripture or a Reformed work on divine sovereignty. These caricatures have been put to rest numerous times and for hundreds of years.

The best/worst straw men are found in the field of history. Although the footnotes occasionally provide a little nuance, McLaren's general approach to history is to move from *hyperbole* to *generality* to *indictment*. So the history of the Western world is: slavery, anti-Semitism, colonialism, genocide, chauvinism, homophobia, environmental plunder, the Inquisition, witch burning, and apartheid. To make matters worse, this list is the product of a constitutional understanding of the Bible and/or the Greco-Roman storyline (85). The age of Christendom is never told as the story of sacrifice, cultural advancement, scientific breakthrough, artistic excellence, and moral uplift. It is, for McLaren, always about the extinction of native peoples, the subordination of women, sending six million Jews to the ovens, and dropping atomic bombs (231).

McLaren's straw man view of history is essential to his theology and ethics. The past, as he sees it, has been a huge disaster of hate and oppression. This past is due in large part to the wrong kind of Christianity. We will keep repeating these mistakes unless we get a new kind of Christianity (19). Hyperbole to generality to indictment.

Missing the Trees for the Forest. To his credit, McLaren includes a lot of Scripture in his argument. He even deals with specific passages and walks through different books of the Bible. This is good. The problem is that McLaren hovers above the text with one eye closed and with blinders on.

Genesis, for McLaren, is about how blessing triumphs. It's about human foolishness and divine faithfulness. It's not about what he calls the six-line Greco-Roman storyline (54). But McLaren does not deal with the flood, the curses of the Abrahamic promise, God's sovereignty in choosing the patriarchs, or even mention the covenants. He's after a general theme and doesn't want to be bothered by the particulars that could upset his thesis.

McLaren will talk at length about 1 Corinthians and how the aim of the church is love. But you don't hear him deal with church discipline in chapter 5, or the centrality of the Resurrection in chapter 15, or Christ as a stumbling block in chapter 1, or the command to flee sexual immorality in chapter 6, or the warnings against idolatry in chapter 10.

When McLaren takes apart John 14:6 bit by bit, trying to prove that this text has "absolutely nothing" to say about the pluralism question, he never considers that the purpose of John's gospel is to get people to believe in Jesus (John 20:31) and that Jesus Himself often warns of the consequences of not believing in Him (3:18, 36; 6:29, 53; 8:24).

The strangest bit of exegesis, however, is back in Genesis. I knew *A New Kind of Christianity* would be tough sledding for me when I heard the Fall described as "a classic coming-of-age story, filled with ambivalence—a childhood lost, an adulthood gained" (51). Never mind the descent into sin that unfolds in Genesis 4–11, never mind Romans 5:12–21, never mind Ephesians 2:1–3, never mind the curses and banishment from the garden, the Fall is really "the first stage of ascent as human beings progress from the life of hunter-gatherers to the life of agriculturalists and beyond" (50). To be fair, McLaren acknowledges the presence of sin in the world, but in his theology there is no Fall, no original sin, no inherited guilt. Genesis 3 is about a loss of innocence and a journey into maturity. With this interpretation as the first building block, it's no wonder McLaren's theology is optimistic about human potential for doing the right thing and devoid of any notion of substitutionary atonement. When sin is "ultimately a refusal to grow" and not ultimately an offense against God, you're going to wind up with a new kind of Christianity (238).

No End in Sight

McLaren rejects a linear view of history. He does not believe in a single fixed end point (194). He does not hold to a "soul-sort" theology where some people go to heaven and some people go to hell (195). He does not believe "eternal life" refers to life that is eternal. He does not believe in future condemnation. At the final "evaluation" we can be sure God will not open our brains to look for certain beliefs. What He will do is look for signs of Christlikeness. Lest this sound like a frightening ordeal, McLaren assures us the part of a person's life worth remembering will be saved and raised to a new beginning, while all that is unloving will be burned away and forgotten (204). Although we can refuse to participate in the kingdom now, says McLaren, we trust that God's grace will prove more durable than our stupidity (201). In the end those opposed to

God in this life will not be condemned, but gently converted until God will be all in all, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well (205).

At this point, the old kind of Christian realizes he and the new kind of Christian do not share the same Christianity. We can quote verses such as John 5:29 where Jesus says those who have done evil will go to the resurrection of judgment. We can remind folks that Paul talked of a “fixed day” of judgment in Acts 17 and that Jesus will come again in the same way He went into heaven (Acts 1:11). We can point out that McLaren’s view on “eternal life” and a tame final “evaluation” would have been bizarre to early church fathers, even those untainted by Augustine’s supposed corruption. We can reference verse after verse about wrath or judgment or the lake of fire and point out that the Jewish God was a jealous God who demanded universal worship and obedience. We can do all this and more and we’ll still be talking past each other. Call it Greco-Roman, blame Constantine or the Enlightenment, or resort to an evolutionary approach—if you want to rid the Bible of the uncomfortable parts of wrath and judgment, you’ll find a way.

WE’VE SEEN THIS BEFORE

For all the talk of being new (xi) and at the same time ancient (255), McLarenism is neither. It is old-fashioned liberalism. McLaren, despite his historical plundering, has no right to claim he is in the tradition of Martin Luther because he finds “sustaining inner strength,” or in the tradition of the Wesleys because “our hearts can be ‘strangely warmed’” (227). This is like saying I’m in the tradition of Ignatius because I have strong convictions. It doesn’t work. McLaren stands in the tradition of Ritschl, Harnack, Rauschenbush, and Whitehead, plain and simple.

In their book *20th-Century Theology*, Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, no rabid fundamentalists they, describe classic liberalism in five points:²

1. Liberals believe doctrine needs to develop to meet the needs of contemporary thought.
2. Liberals emphasize the need to reconstruct traditional beliefs and reject the authority of tradition and church hierarchy.
3. Liberals focus on the practical and ethical dimensions of Christianity.
4. Liberals seek to base theology on something other than the absolute authority of the Bible.
5. Liberals drift toward divine immanence at the expense of transcendence.

McLaren fits each of these points like a glove. H. Richard Niebuhr’s famous description of liberalism has not lost its relevance: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of Christ without a cross.”

The message of McLarenism is pretty simple: God is love and wants everyone to be kind and inclusive and care for the poor and the environment. This is what Jesus was like, and we should be like Jesus. This is, of course, not wrong so far as it goes. The

liberal/McLaren emphasis on the kingdom is right, their concern for the “other” is right, much of their ethics is right. But McLarenism, like liberalism, cannot be right. It has its emphases all out of proportion, its right statements thrown out of whack by all that is missing. In McLarenism there is no original sin, no wrath, no hell, no creation-fall-redemption, no definite future, no Second Coming that I can see, no clear statement on the deity of Christ, no mention of vicarious substitution or God’s holiness or divine sovereignty, no ethical demands except as they relate to being kind to others, no God-offendedness, no doctrine of justification, no unchanging apostolic deposit of truth, no absolute submission to the word of God, nary a mention of faith and worship, no doctrine of regeneration, no evangelistic impulse to save the lost, and nothing about God’s passion for His glory. This is surely a lot to leave out.

McLaren’s Christianity is not new and certainly not improved. I don’t believe you can even call it Christianity. It is liberalism dressed up for the twenty-first century. We can only hope this wave of liberalism fades as dramatically as did the last.

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NOTES

- 1 See D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); Michael E. Wittmer, *Don’t Stop Believing: Why Living Like Jesus Is Not Enough* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
- 2 Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 1992).