

BOOK REVIEW
A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIAN
by Brian McLaren

In 1994, Brian was ready to quit the ministry. He was *sick of being a pastor* and *almost sick of being a Christian* (ix). *I began to doubt that any of us Christians are actually Christians...* (xvi) Now he is re-ignited with a passion to become a new kind of Christian, to create a new kind of church, and to spread the good news of the adventure, the exodus “out of Egypt,” into the wilderness and on to our new “home” in postmodern Christianity.

The book is a piece of fiction about a deeply frustrated pastor, Dan, and his new friend and confidant, Neo, a local high school science teacher and one-time pastor. Neo is the guru, the wise old owl, the spiritual guide on Dan’s journey to become a new kind of Christian. The book is almost entirely a running conversation between Dan and Neo. Because of the fictional nature of the book, it is a bit difficult to say, “McLaren” believes, because he could challenge that one must more accurately state “Neo believes.” However, McLaren is openly employing the story to advance his concepts (despite his caveats¹) just as surely as Jesus did with the parables. Therefore, I will sometimes quote McLaren directly in reviewing the tenets of his book. Incidentally, in the sequel, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, he prefaces the novel with an appeal to critics to not even read the book (xii). He is weary of hearing from his detractors. But no writer has the luxury of being read solely by his cheering section. I assume that McLaren has by now achieved a sufficiently large following that he can now arrogantly dismiss those who disagree with him. I assume that he no longer wants to waste his time discussing/debating with the pastors and theologians who believe he is leading his followers into apostasy. This assumption is validated by the preface of his early-December reply to Charles Colson’s December 9, 2003 article entitled, “The Postmodern Crackup,” (published at *ChristianityToday.com*).

Now a sampling of what this new kind of Christian looks and thinks like: The new kind of Christian believes in evolution,² dislikes fundamentalists as a group (one-on-one they are sometimes OK),³ espouses an anti-propositional theology,⁴ is moving toward pluralism,⁵ repudiates almost everything that existing American Christianity stands for,⁶

¹ I the preface to *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, he writes on page xii, *Please do not assume that their [i.e., Neo and his friends] answers are always mine; you may, however, safely assume that I think that all their questions and answers deserve consideration.* However, in his early December, 2003 “An Open letter to Chuck Colson,” he openly embraces many of the beliefs expressed by Neo.

² Pages 6 and 155, *I think evolution is one of God’s coolest creations* (Neo)

³ Pages 8-9

⁴ *[T]he Bible...preoccupies itself with earthy stories rather than airy abstractions, wild poetry rather than tidy systems, personal and contextual letters rather than timeless, absolute pronouncements or propositions.* (Dan, 24)

⁵ Page 26

⁶ *I believe that the modern version of Christianity that you have learned from your parents, your Sunday School teachers, and even your campus ministries is destined to be a medieval cathedral. It’s over or*

embraces thorough-going ecumenism,⁷ holds to a soft form of universalistic salvation,⁸ and rejects the literalness of Hell.⁹

Underneath all of these “new” beliefs is a postmodern hermeneutic and a resulting postmodern epistemology, and those are the issues that most needs to be assessed. McLaren’s hermeneutic works like this:

- 1) Evangelicals throw out everything in the Bible that doesn’t fit their preconceived, traditional grid, which is exactly what they accuse the liberals of doing. *So when evangelicals say they’re arguing about the Bible’s absolute authority, too often they are arguing about the superiority of the traditional grid.* (Neo, 49) *So the authoritative text is never what I say about the text or even what I understand the text to say but rather what God means the text to say, right? So the real authority does not reside in the text itself, in the ink on paper, which is always open to misinterpretation—sometimes, history tells us, horrific and dangerous interpretation. Instead, the real authority lies in God, who is there behind the text or beyond it or above it, right? [NOTE: This is very barthian.] In other words, the authority is not in what I say the text says but in what God says the text says.... Our interpretations reveal less about God or the Bible that they do about ourselves.* (Neo, 50) NOTE: If we grant McLaren this point, then we have rendered God functionally unknowable. If the meaning of the Bible is so obscure that our interpretations reveal more about our own grid than they do about God, then how can I know God and similarly how can McLaren know God? If the fundamentalist hermeneutic has missed and distorted God, by what alchemy has McLaren’s hermeneutic been preserved from similar error? If a future generation deconstructs McLaren’s doctrines, and substitutes its

almost over.... I want you to invest your lives not in keeping the old ship afloat but in designed and building and sailing a new ship for new adventures in a new time of history, as intrepid followers of Jesus Christ. (Neo, 38)

⁷ *[L]iberal...evangelical.” Well, if I’m right, those distinctions are about to become inconsequential.* (Neo, 41) *[M]ost Protestant seminaries fight with vigor the battles of yesterday.... They still preoccupy themselves with fighting the Protestant Reformation and the liberal-fundamentalist debates. (Somebody tell them those wars are over. OK?)* (Neo, 145)

⁸ *The question isn’t so much whether we’re right but whether we’re good.... [T]he old notions of truth and knowledge are being...’deconstructed.... Truth means more than factual accuracy. It means being in sync with God.* (Neo, 61) *I wonder if these other religions might have a role much like Paul described for the Old Testament law back in Galatians—they serve as tutors or caretakers that preserve a culture until Christ can come to it with his good news. They aren’t the enemy of the gospel, in my mind, any more than Christianity is the enemy—though of course, sometimes it is.* (Neo, 63) *It’s none of your business who does and does not go to hell. It is your business to be warned by it and to run, not walk, in the opposite direction!.... This position ...refuses to let anyone speculate about other people’s eternal fate but instead focuses you on your own.* (Neo, 126) *[W]e find followers of other stories interested in ours because our story, rightly understood, has plenty of room for them and their stories too.* (Neo, 159)

⁹ *Sometimes I wonder if we have it all wrong. Maybe it’s not that there are two places beyond the door of death, heaven and hell. Sometimes I wonder if hell is just what heaven feels like for those who haven’t learned in this life what this life is intended to teach.... What we will have become on this side of the door, that we will be on the other.* (Neo, 91)

enlightened doctrines, what is the point of even trying to interpret the Bible? We are all hopelessly lost in our “grids.” McLaren unknowingly advocates an epistemology of despair. Dan’s wife, Carol, asks the inevitable question, *How do we know that we are getting the gospel at all, instead of a tossed salad form of it?...* Neo’s answer is woefully inadequate. He explains that the safeguard for getting the Bible right is two-fold: 1) We must listen to the historic, universal community of Christian voices about what the Bible means, especially the non-western voices of the church, and 2) We must *trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us.* (Neo, 78-79) (I assume that this means that the Holy Spirit is doing a much better job guiding McLaren than He is the conservatives.)

- 2) Both liberals and conservatives approach the Bible wrongly. *What if faith isn’t best compared to a building, but rather to a spiderweb? Instead of one foundation, it has several anchor points. Those points might be spiritual experiences, exemplary people and institutions whom one has come to trust, that sort of thing.... [The Bible]...could be seen as one of the anchor points. Or perhaps every passage in the Bible that has affected your life could be seen as an anchor point. Or perhaps the Bible isn’t only in the anchor points. Perhaps it is part of every thread of the web.* (Neo, 54) *Instead of approaching [the Bible] with our modern assumptions and expectations and our aggressive analysis, maybe we need to read it less like scholars and more like humble seekers trying to learn whatever we can from it, in the context of our sincere desire to live for God and do what he wants.... What if instead of reading the Bible, you let the Bible read you?* (Neo, 56) *[W]hat would happen if we approached the text less aggressively but even more energetically and passionately? I wonder what would happen if we honestly listened to the story and put ourselves under its spell, so to speak, not using it to get all our questions about God answered but instead trusting God to use it to pose questions to us about us.* (Neo, 57-58). NOTE: But how do I test the validity of the questions, or, for that matter, the answers I come up with? Does McLaren have some unique pipeline to God that the fundamentalists don’t?

[T]here is more than one way to “kill” the Bible. You can dissect it, analyze it, abstract it. You can read its ragged stories and ragamuffin poetry, and from them you can derive neat abstractions, sterile propositions, and sharp-edged principles.... You can sanitize the text of all evocative language, paradox, multiple perspectives, and interesting, three-dimensional people to end up with cute little morals, simple two-dimensional systems, and flat, boring prose that reads like a legal code or assembly instructions for a bicycle. As a result, the Bible itself begins to vaporize, to disappear, leaving the desired residue of systematic theology, which is all you really wanted anyway. [NOTE: That last phrase is a hard hit below the belt! There is no charity here toward conservative theologians!]

Or if you prefer, you can also kill the Bible by demythologizing it [the liberal approach].... What a relief to have a third alternative—to read the Bible as a pre-modern text, emerging from a people who believed that truth is best embodied in story and art and human flesh rather than abstraction or outline or moralism. (Neo, 158-159)

- 3) Don't take everything Jesus said too literally. *[D]on't you think that all of the language about heaven and hell is evocative language, not technical description?.... Jesus was scandalously risky with his language. He compared God to an unjust judge and an unfair boss. He held up a crooked steward as an example of the kingdom.... Spiritual realities require risky language, unless you think they can be reduced to little formulas and formulations. (Neo, 95) [NOTE: His citations of Jesus' parables are trite and superficial. Note also the dismissively condescending phrase, "little formulas and formulations."]*
- 4) Embrace mystery. *Our...little three-pound brains can't hope to contain the wonder of one grain of wheat or sand, much less the Creator of the universe! (Neo, 159) [NOTE: The obvious question is, can I know anything for sure about God? How mysterious is "mystery"?)]*

Is the Bible really as non-propositional as McLaren claims? Certainly no conservative Christian scholar would deny that the Bible uses a variety of literary forms. The classic conservative hermeneutical rubric of "literal, historical, critical" has always acknowledged that the Bible contains poetry, stories, and figurative, parabolic, and metaphorical language, and that every portion of the Bible must be appropriately interpreted in accordance with its literary genre. Is McLaren fair in his persistent and strident dismissal of propositionalism?

Jesus told many stories, but He also taught propositionally. Most of the content of the Sermon on the Mount is in the form of propositional statements (Matthew 5-7). His asides to the Twelve about the meaning of some of the parables were very propositional (cf. Jesus' interpretation of the Sower and the Seed, Matthew 13). Note also how carefully Jesus argued from the Old Testament text (*How could David call the coming Messiah both his son and his lord?*) (Matthew 23:41-46, Psalm 110:1).

Paul was a master of propositional teaching and argument. Romans 1-8 is heavily propositional and employs theological formulation: *a man is justified before God not on the basis of human works but of faith in the finished work of Christ* (Romans 3-4). The first half of each of the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians is heavily propositional. The Pastoral Epistles are dominantly propositional. Paul was a missionary theologian and he knew how to use his highly trained rabbinic mind to argue close points of theology.

McLaren's non-propositional bias expresses itself in a biblically unsustainable non-judgmentalism: *I don't think it's our business to prognosticate the eternal destinies of anyone else. (Neo, 92) But Jesus did (Matthew 23:15), Paul did (Acts 20:25-31;*

Galatians 1:9; 2:4; 5:4; Colossians 2:18-19; II Thessalonians 2:10-12; 3:2; I Timothy 1:18-20; 4:1-5; 6:3-5; II Timothy 3:1-9), Peter did (II Peter 2), John did (I John 2:19); and Jude did (Jude 1:4-16).

Finally, the gloves come off in the closing pages of the book. Here Neo is sending e-mails to an embattled postmodern young female youth pastor. Here is his disturbing and unethical advice to her: *Maybe you could work with youth but consider your youth work part of a fifteen-or twenty-year **subversive** [bold mine] plan to locate and train a new generation of church planters and pastors. On the surface you would look like a typical wild and crazy youth worker, but underneath you're an agent of radical change in the church. Not a bad way to spend a decade or two!* (Neo, 154)

Is there anything good in this book? There certainly is: 1) The emphasis that we must become missionaries to an increasingly different culture that speaks a different “language.” 2) The sad reminder that Christian leaders and preachers can come across pretty “stupid” at times and harm the cause of Christ. 3) The caution that our cultural prejudices can deform our understanding of the meaning of the Bible. 4) That we need to love unsaved people as people, and not just evangelistic projects. 5) That God is to be known and loved, and that the Bible is not just a theological textbook but a manual for transformed living. 6) That God’s people are to be an attractive, transformed community.

But, having said that, let the reader beware. McLaren’s hermeneutic and epistemology are toxic.

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