

Northern Landmark Missionary Baptist

News and Views of Interest to the BMA Movement

December, 2010

BOOK REVIEW

“New Kind of Christianity” or Old Unbelief? The Emergent Church Theology of Brian McLaren

By Thomas Williamson
3131 S. Archer Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60608

The Emergent Church is one of the most significant theological trends and movements in modern day America, and Brian McLaren is the leading spokesman and theologian for this movement.

Time Magazine has identified McLaren as one of the America's top 25 evangelicals. He is a prolific author of many books. His latest book, “A New Kind of Christianity - 10 Questions That Are Transforming the Faith” was just published this year (2010).

This book calls for a house-cleaning of Christian traditions and a re-interpretation of the Christian faith, on a level with the massive improvements over medieval Catholicism accomplished by Martin Luther during the Reformation of the 16th Century.

McLaren is a brilliant and innovative thinker who has succeeded in restating and recasting the Christian message in a manner that many will find more appealing than the traditional fundamentalist orthodoxy of today. He has prepared a stew of savory meat, such as modern folk love. But there is “death in the pot,” and this will be shown by quoting McLaren's own words.

Reliance on Liberal Theologians

On page 46 McLaren gives a long list of Catholic and Protestant theologians from which he has learned his different approach to the Bible. I do not recognize some of the names, but those that I do recognize are hardly reassuring. **Gustavo Gutierrez** is a Roman Catholic Marxist “Liberation theologian” on the faculty of Notre Dame University.

Marcus Borg and **John Dominic Crossan** are associated with the infamous “Jesus Seminar” which claims to have determined that most of the recorded sayings of Jesus in the Gospels are not authentic. Crossan is especially notorious for saying that the dead body of Jesus may have been torn to pieces by wild dogs.

James Cone, spiritual mentor to President Obama's former pastor Jeremiah Wright, has written, “Black theology refuses to accept a God who is not identified totally with the goals of the black community. If God is not for us and against white people, then he is a murderer, and we had better kill him. The task of black theology is to kill Gods who do not belong to the black community.”

Elsewhere in the book, McLaren refers favorably to **Hans Kung**, a liberal Catholic theologian who rejects the basic fundamentals of the faith as defined by Protestants and Catholics. Can reliance on such questionable sources produce sound, scriptural theology?

Book of Genesis is Myth, Not to be Taken Literally

McLaren rejects the Biblical teaching concerning the Fall of Man and original sin. To McLaren, the story of the Fall is merely a metaphor for the transition of primitive man from hunter-gatherers to a society of farmers.

On page 48, McLaren in his discussion of Genesis says, “**It is patently obvious to me that these stories aren't intended to be taken literally, although it didn't used to be so obvious, and I know it won't be so now for some of my readers. It is also powerfully clear to me that these nonliteral stories are still to be taken seriously and mined for their rich meaning, because they**

distill time-tested, multilayered for their rich meaning, because they distill time-tested, multilayered wisdom - through deep mythic language - about how our world came to be what it has become.” It is not clear to this reviewer whether McLaren here is rejecting the literal truth of Genesis 1-11, or the entire book of Genesis, or perhaps also the Exodus account.

It is clear, however, that McLaren believes in evolution. On page 47, describing the creation, he says, “**Gradually, plant life emerges, then animal life, then human life. And none of it is perfect in the Greco-Roman sense. Instead, all of it is good and wonderful, constantly evolving into something even better and more wonderful.**”

On page 267 he says, “**Evolution fits beautifully in the good world of Elohim,**” and on page 273 he affirms that “**If we believe that the same God who created an evolving universe is revealed in an evolving Bible, we can derive some fascinating insights from contemporary studies of genetics. Today's chickens, it turns out, still have the genetic information in their DNA that was used to produce long tails, scales, and teeth in their ancestors the dinosaurs. During embryonic development, some of these primitive dinosaur characteristics still manifest themselves in chickens. (Human embryos similarly have stages where they sport gills and tails, so it is said that our ontogeny recapitulates our phylogeny.)**” (It is the understanding of this reviewer that this unscientific principle of “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” is based on falsified drawings of human embryos by an evolutionist named Haeckel).

Historicity of Noah's Flood Rejected

McLaren is concerned by the possibility that the account of Noah's Flood, which describes God's judgment of the human race, might be used by fundamentalists to justify genocide today (although he does not document any such use of the Noah account by anyone). Just in case anyone should ever misuse the Noah story at any point in the future, McLaren, seeking to be on the safe side, rejects the story as non-historical:

"A god who mandates an intentional supernatural disaster leading to unparalleled genocide is hardly worthy of belief, much less worship. How can you ask your children - or nonchurch colleagues or neighbors - to honor a deity so uncreative, overreactive, and utterly capricious regarding life? To make matters worse, the global holocaust strategy didn't even work. Soon the 'good guy' Noah gets drunk, and soon after that his sons are up to no good, and soon after that we're right back to antediluvian violence and crime levels. Genocide, it turns out, doesn't really solve anything in Genesis, even if a character named 'God' does it." (Page 109)

McLaren makes no attempt to harmonize his rejection of the Noah account with Jesus' acceptance of the historicity of that account (Luke 17:27).

Historicity of Book of Job Rejected

McLaren states that we should not use the Bible as a divinely inspired constitution, but as a library that presents various, differing views about God. In defense of this proposition, he states, correctly, that the book of Job is a dialogue of different thinkers who present varying and contradictory views about the basic nature of God.

According to McLaren, we should read the entire Bible the way we read the book of Job. Like any public library today, the Bible contains different and contrary views about what God is like. All these views cannot be correct, so it is up to us to sort it all out and figure out which

portions of the Bible have represented God correctly.

McLaren is wrong about this. Job 42:7-8 gives us the key for understanding the book of Job. We are told here that Job has represented God faithfully and correctly, while the other speakers (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu) are a bunch of knuckleheads who are guilty of making God look bad by the way they have misrepresented Him.

There is no such principle of interpretation given for the Bible as a whole. Everything in the Bible (with the exception of accurately-recorded speeches by bad guys like the Devil, Pharaoh, Goliath, etc.) is represented to be the word of the Lord and is to be taken as such.

After proposing the book of Job as the authority that will inform our revolutionary new understanding of the entire Bible, McLaren weakens his own case on pages 94-95 by rejecting the authority and historicity of the book of Job: **"We've mentioned the many human voices in the text of Job. One more question needs to be asked. What about God's voice, which we encounter in the introduction, striking rather strange bargains with the Satan, and at the end, flinging questions as a machine gun spits out shells? Can we trust God's voice to be God's voice? Or is even 'God' a character in the story too, not the actual God necessarily, but the imagined God, the author's best sense of God, the fictional character playing God for the sake of this dramatic work of art? This is a powerful and perhaps terrifying question. . . ."**

"The real Job (if there was one - my sense is that the Job story is a kind of archetypal theological opera and has no intention of portraying what we would call a historical event) is represented in the text by a word, a name - that's not the real Job."

Book of Revelation Does Not Predict the Future

McLaren sees the book of Revelation as presenting Jesus not as a vengeful conqueror, but as a

messenger of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Here again, McLaren (p. 123) calls into the question the divine authority of Revelation, stating that it has no predictive value about the future (contrary to John's statement in Revelation 1:1 that this book is about things *"which must shortly come to pass."*)

"Clearly, this is a book of Jewish apocalyptic literature, which in turn is part of a larger genre known as the literature of the oppressed. These kinds of literature worked in the First Century in ways similar to the way some science fiction works for us today. For example, when we read or watch 'Planet of the Apes,' 'Star Trek,' 'The Matrix,' or 'Wall-E,' we don't think the writers and filmmakers are trying to predict the future. No, we understand they are really talking about the present, and they are doing so in hopes of changing the future."

What difference does it make whether or not McLaren's understanding of the message of Revelation is correct, when he has demoted that book to the level of a "Star Trek" episode, as far as its divine authority is concerned?

We and God Create the Future Together

As it turns out, God cannot predict the future because He does not yet know how things will turn out, according to McLaren: **"We could borrow from Hans Kung and call it an 'improvisational theology.' We could also call it participatory. In a participatory eschatology, when we ask, 'What does the future hold?' the answer begins, 'That depends. It depends on you and me. God holds out to us at every moment a brighter future; the issue is whether we are willing to receive it and work with God to help create it. We are participating in the creation of what the future will be.'" (p. 196)**

Other Religions Included in the Kingdom of God

McLaren is a really inclusive guy, and he cringes at the thought that

anyone would be excluded from the Kingdom of God. Carefully avoiding mention of the many New Testament references to unbelievers being cast into outer darkness or tossed out of a wedding feast, McLaren generously proposes that all religionists, of every brand, be included in the Kingdom.

“Evangelism would cease to be a matter of saving souls from a bad ending . . . It would cease to be a proclamation of the superiority of the Christian religion. . . . It would mean recruiting people to defect from destructive ways and join God in the *missio dei* (‘mission of God’), a decentralized, grassroots, spiritual-social movement dedicated to plotting goodness and saving the world from human evil - both personal and systemic. It would invite people into lifelong spiritual formation as disciples of Jesus, in a community dedicated (as we’ve seen) to teaching the most excellent way of love, whatever the new disciple’s religious affiliation or lack thereof.

“This kind of evangelism would celebrate the good in the Christian religion and lament the bad, just as it would in every other religion, calling people to a way of life in a kingdom (or beautiful whole) that transcends and includes all religions.

...
“But what of ‘No one comes to the Father except through me?’ Clearly, taken in context, these words are not intended as an insult to followers of Mohammed, the Buddha, Lao-Tzu, Enlightenment rationalism, or anybody or anything else. Rather, the ‘no one’ here refers to Jesus’ own disciples.” (Pages 216, 222)

On page 255 McLaren states, “I don’t believe Jesus came to start a new religion, nor do I believe Christianity (or any religion) is the answer in itself. Of course, I believe it can be part of the answer, but only if it doesn’t see itself as the answer.”

Homosexuals Should Be Accepted

McLaren condemns “homophobia,” calling for acceptance of homosexuals in God’s Kingdom: “From this vantage point,

homosexuals and heterosexuals stand equally in need of liberation. Both groups look to God as their creator. And both groups are called to repentance and reconciliation with God and one another in God’s kingdom. The question is complexified from ‘Is homosexuality right or wrong?’ to ‘How should gay and straight people understand and treat one another in God’s kingdom?’” (p. 180)

McLaren’s main theological justification for acceptance of homosexuality is the example of how the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8, who, being different sexually, was accepted into the Christian church. This muddled reasoning, by which acceptance of a man for whom no deviant sexual conduct is recorded is used to urge the acceptance of sexually deviant conduct, is typical of the illogical and unscriptural reasoning that pervades McLaren’s entire book.

For instance, he dwells on the acceptance of slavery in the 19th Century American South as an example of the baleful effects of traditional fundamentalist-style orthodoxy, which he derides as “Platonic” and “Greco-Roman.”

McLaren’s noble desire is to prevent and forestall such perversions of the Christian faith in our own time. His proposed solution is to overthrow the entire system of orthodox Christian belief, including Creation, the Fall, original sin, Christ’s substitutionary atonement, Christ’s literal Second Coming, future bliss in heaven and future torment in hell. All of this is to be junked.

What will McLaren replace it with? He doesn’t know yet - he invites us to join him in an ongoing dialogue as to the shape of things to come in his nifty new kind of Christianity.

McLaren ignores the fact that the evil system of American slavery was completely overthrown, without overthrowing or repudiating the fundamentalist system of Christian belief that he blames for slavery (and for almost every other evil in the world today, including global

warming, meat-eating and use of internal-combustion engines). McLaren does not seem to admit that slavery was abolished, in part, due to the dedicated campaigning and lobbying of deeply religious Christians who believed in the old-style Christianity that McLaren rejects.

Among the modern evils that McLaren wants to stamp out, are the fundamentalist obsessions on supporting torture, pre-emptive war and Israeli persecution of the Palestinians. There are many proponents of the old-time religion that McLaren hates so much, including this reviewer, who actually agree with McLaren on these issues and who have spoken out against these abuses, without in any way rejecting the basic fundamentals of the faith that McLaren wants us to reject, as a prerequisite for his world-saving crusade.

This fact alone disproves McLaren’s thesis that it is necessary to trash the authority of the Bible and completely rewrite the basic principles of Christianity according to McLaren’s trendy vision, before we can correct our blind spots and have a more positive impact on our society.

“A New Kind of Christianity” is a bad book, and the Emergent Church movement that this book promotes must be rejected as totally outside the bounds of even the most “generous” definition of orthodoxy (to borrow an expression from the title of another of McLaren’s books).

We need to be aware of this new and dangerous teaching, and we need to warn our people not to be taken in by the lure of the Emergent churches and its theologians such as Brian McLaren, Rob Bell and Donald Miller.

What Other Reviewers Say About “A New Kind of Christianity”

Scot McKnight, Professor of Religion, North Park University, Chicago, in Christianity Today, March, 2010: “In particular, [McLaren’s] evolutionary theory of God contains another fatal flaw. . . . The flow of the Bible is not neat. It doesn’t fit into an evolutionary scheme. There are as many mercy

passages in the Old Testament as there are grace-and-love passages in the New. What's more, passages about God's grace stand side-by-side with passages about God's wrath (e.g., Hosea 1-3, Matthew 23-25). The evolutionary approach doesn't work because that's not how Scripture's narration works. There is wrath in Revelation and there is covenant love in Genesis. And Jesus talks more about Abba and hell than does the rest of the Bible combined. . .

"A New Kind of Christianity" shows us that Brian, though he is now thinking more systematically, has fallen for an old school of thought. I read this book carefully, and I found nothing new. It may be new for Brian, but it's a rehash of ideas that grew into fruition with Adolf von Harnack and now find iterations in folks like Harvey Cox and Marcus Borg. For me, Brian's new kind of Christianity is quite old. And the problem is that it's not old enough."

Pastor Gary Gilley, Southern View Chapel, Springfield, Illinois: "This book is filled with McLaren's trademarks, extreme and bizarre straw men, distorting Scripture beyond recognition, advancing a liberal social/political agenda, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is the gospel and justification by faith is a misunderstanding of Scripture, stating that Scripture is not the final authority but a springboard to conversation and a higher ethic in the future, accepting homosexuality, setting forth an eschatology that denies the Second Coming and places the future in our hands, redefining inclusivism so that it borders on universalism, and recommending missional living that amounts to saving the planet."

Pastor Kevin DeYoung, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan, on "The Gospel Coalition" web site: "He [McLaren] 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. It is inspired in the sense that it inspires. . . .

"There are a lot of details McLaren misses. He argues that Revelation 21-22 gives a beautiful picture of God's openness. There's no

condemnation, he says, because the doors to the city are still open and the Spirit and the bride say 'Come.' Has McLaren not read Revelation 21:8 where the wicked are assigned their portion in the lake that burns with fire? . . .

"Homosexuality provides another example of McLaren's canon within a canon. [He argues] that homosexuality is acceptable because the Ethiopian eunuch, the 'sexually other,' was baptized - a strange argument that presumes homoerotic behavior is not more a choice than physical castration. . . .

"Similarly, who doesn't think Jesus is Lord over Paul? But that's not the issue. The gospels do not matter more than other books. All of Scripture is breathed out by God, 2 Timothy 3:16. More to the point, if McLaren wants to pit the apostolic teaching against the life of Jesus, he won't have anything left in the second column. Virtually everything we know about Jesus comes from the inspired apostolic testimony about him. Besides, the promise of John 16:12-15 is that the Holy Spirit will come and lead the disciples into all truth. Jesus doesn't promise new kinds of Christianities 2000 years later. He promises that the Spirit will speak only what he hears and reveal the fullness of who Jesus was and what he accomplished. . . .

"McLaren rejects a linear view of history. He does not believe in a single fixed-end point. He does not hold to a 'soul-sort' theology where some people go to heaven and some people go to hell. He does not believe 'eternal life' refers to life that is eternal. He does not believe in future condemnation."

Do You Celebrate Christmas, or X-Mas?

By Narita Roady Pryor, Oklahoma

Christmas is coming! We hear this proclaimed earlier and earlier each year. When I was a child the stores started putting out their Christmas wares the day after Thanksgiving (I'm showing my age here!).

Now, Satan's holiday, "Halloween" hasn't even come and gone, and the aisles are already stocked with Christmas items.

Christians are understandably appalled and offended at the move toward saying "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" and writing "X-mas" instead of spelling out "Christmas." It is interesting to note that the latter has been in print for hundreds of years in religious writings.

The exact date is not certain, but it was widely used as a symbol for

Christians by the 15th Century. With the invention of Gutenberg's printing press in 1436, the tediousness and high cost of hand setting the type resulted in abbreviations to cut down on the cost of the books and pamphlets. One such abbreviation was to use the letter "C" for Christ.

The Greek letter "chi" is the first letter of the Greek word for Christ. So "X-mas" is legitimate, but because Christ is so omitted from today's Christmas celebration, for me it is not appropriate.

Further investigation reveals that the origin of our December 25th commemoration of Christ's birth also has pagan beginnings. In the 4th Century AD, Pope Julius I set this date for the Roman Catholic Church for "Christ Mass" in observance of His birth, because it corresponded with the Roman Winter Festivals.

Desiring to convert the pagans of Europe to Christianity they created a Christian meaning to the popular festivities of winter solstice. Christ's birth was chosen unknowingly as a pun because the pagans designated this as a feast day for their sun god so Catholics chose the "birth of the Son." Get it?

Looking at our 21st Century Christmas it seems that it is once again pagan. None can disagree that it has become commercialized and secularized and as Christians, the true meaning for us has been lost.

Atheists and agnostics celebrate it just as we do. Nativities are being outlawed across the country. Throughout the year Christ is forgotten, abandoned and disregarded. Yes, the world and Satan have misused and distorted what is so precious to us but that I expect.