

Book Review

A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith

Brian D. McLaren

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Brian McLaren is one of the most popular “emergent” thinkers in today’s world. He enjoys provoking the complacent and curious with new ideas on what Christianity should be about. Over the past decade, his perspective has shifted from an evangelical engaging the postmodern world (a necessary part of Christian mission) to an agenda of redefining Christianity and rescuing it from historical corruptions.

McLaren asks important questions and values knowing the concerns of Western “post-church” spiritual seekers who are questioning established traditions. Pentecostal Christians often resonate with McLaren’s critiques of traditional structures that stifle vitality.

These qualifiers aside, *A New Kind of Christianity* is an unhelpful book that reflects McLaren’s arrogance and lack of serious biblical-theological training (of which he is proud). He generalizes about the mistakes of the institutional church while offering solutions without sufficient substance. The entire book is characterized by logical fallacies. The most egregious is the “either/or” fallacy. The reader either sides with outdated fundamentalism or with McLaren’s enlightened view. For example, when discussing the church and sexuality, he gives the reader no third alternative between “fundasexuality” (p. 174)—his term for a repressive way of seeing sexual

issues—and his vague notions of something new. He glibly compares current church thinking with pre-Copernican views of the cosmos. He ignores the excellent popular and scholarly reflection on biblical sexual norms and Christian compassion. He fails to reference the differences between attraction and behavior, public and private domains and other issues.

Another sweeping generalization is his contention that Christianity bought into the “Greco-Roman” narrative rather than the biblical narrative about God and the world. He is partly correct here. The biblical framework that provides the context for the coming of Christ was greatly subverted by unhealthy dualisms in the third century A.D. McLaren correctly decries the influence of neo-platonic thinking that dichotomized body and spirit, history and truth. Then he overreaches and suggests that the exclusive claims of Jesus are part of this problem. His re-interpretation of John 14:6 (“I am the way, the truth and the life”) is an example of simplistic thinking and willfully ignoring the reality that the Lord God of Scripture and our Lord Jesus Christ do make absolute claims.

Each of his questions involves a sweeping rejection of tradition in contrast to a new way forward. He creates false choices rather than opening serious dialogue. Here are

some of McLaren's questions and his conclusions:

- *What is the overarching story line of the Bible? How should the Bible be understood?* These great questions are answered by biblical Christians with a hearty focus on the Mission of God and His desire for relationship with humankind. McLaren agrees, but thinks we have to dispense with the historicity of much of Genesis and reject the "violent" God of the Pentateuch in favor of a kinder Jesus. He is actually reviving the second-century Marcionite heresy of two gods, with the New Testament one being superior. McLaren argues that the church must adopt a "Community Library" approach to Scripture rather than a "Constitutional" perspective. There are better ways forward that retain biblical infallibility and authority than what is found here.
- *Is God Violent?* McLaren equates serious belief in the God of Deuteronomy with current militarism—a false combination that many biblical pacifists would reject. There is no gap between the One who revealed himself to Moses (Exod. 3:14) and Jesus, the "I am," who existed before Abraham (John 8:58).
- *Who is Jesus?* McLaren does exalt Jesus as Lord, and rightly calls Christians to worship the Lord, not the Bible. He wisely reminds believers that the Jesus coming in glory in the future is the same Jesus who died for humankind's sins and rose again and calls believers to love their enemies. At the same time, there is

an undercurrent of qualification as McLaren wants people to know that Revelation must be "rightly interpreted"—i.e., his way.

- Combining two of his questions, "*What is the Gospel?*" and "*How should Followers of Jesus relate to people of other religions?*" helps the reader see the best and worst of the author. He correctly concludes that there is only one gospel shared by all New Testament witnesses and that one should be respectful of other people and believe that God is working in hearts outside of organized Christianity. He claims belief in the Spirit's leading, yet emphasizes the *ad hoc* nature of the Apostle Paul's dictation to his scribe, Tertius. He also stops short of insisting there is no other Name that brings salvation (Acts 4:12).
- Three more questions regarding the Church, eschatology, and the road of reform ahead unveil a tension in McLaren. He laments institutionalism and calls for community. He decries dispensational views of the future and calls people to care for the earth and encourages dialogue and learning. All of these are commendable, but he also makes it clear that openness to the future means rejection of what many people regard as "the faith once entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

This book is important reading for spiritual leaders called to lead wisely and help their church communities discern truth from error. It is not a profound book pointing the way to a new kind of Christianity.