

## Is Brian McLaren Changing Everything?

**L. L. (Don) Veinot, Jr. President,  
Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.**

To begin with it might be beneficial to view McLaren's worship video, "I am an Atheist."<sup>1</sup>

McLaren raises some important social issues in *Everything Must Change*<sup>2</sup> but in the process he makes false assumptions and builds on them to get to his next point. He misunderstands or misrepresents or misstates (we cannot always tell which it is) what many Evangelicals believe. Oftentimes the things of which states that he cannot believe them, we don't believe either. The recurring theme in his video is:

I can't believe what they believe, but I believe in you.

Who is the "they" which he refers to in the video? "They believe in the "God of jihad" and this god "converts by the sword." It sounds as though he may be protesting Islamic extremists but in actuality it is pre-tribulational, pre-millennial Christians that are the "they" McLaren refers to, which comes through very clear in his book *Everything Must Change*.

Why has McLaren become so popular? There are at least two reasons, I think. First, he has tapped into that youthful idealism and the energy that goes with it that wants to change the world. It begins with the idea that the world ought to be perfect, as it was in the Garden perhaps. As we look around we can see the world isn't perfect and we are looking for whom to blame in order to get them out of the way or at the very least to marginalize them and move on to fixing the world which brings us to the second reason. It is a spiritual AIDS epidemic.

AIDS for the physical body is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Because the immune system is compromised it cannot fight off even simple sicknesses like colds. Spiritual AIDS is the Aquired Ignorance of the Doctrines of Scripture. Like the immune system of the body in the physical

disease, many churches today lack good sound biblical grounding along with the ability to think clearly and logically, thereby leaving it defenseless against attacks of false teachings.

George Barna claims that 91% of Evangelicals are deficient in one or more areas of essential orthodoxy and that this is true for 49% of Evangelical pastors as well.<sup>3</sup> I would suggest that this void accounts for the growing acceptance of much of what McLaren is advocating. Some of McLaren's background may be helpful:

- Brian McLaren grew up in the Christian (Plymouth) Brethren Church;
- He was a church planter and pastor for 24 years;
- He claims he didn't have satisfactory answers to some questions that were put to him.

For instance, when I was a pastor, people often asked my opinion on hot-button issues like evolution, abortion, and homosexuality. The problem was that after discussing those issues in all their importance and intensity, I couldn't help asking other questions: Why do we need to have singular and firm opinions of the protection of the unborn, but not about how to help the poor people and how to avoid killing people labeled *enemies* who are already born?

(4)

Here we can see that his answers are based on an emotional response rather than a thoughtful reflection on the issues raised, or he has engaged in a bit of bait and switch. By that I mean that his statement has placed the value of an innocent human life on the same level as the mechanics of how to address poverty. If I state this another way it might be helpful to see what he has done here.

Evangelicals are concerned about the protection of innocent, unborn human life. Some Evangelicals believe picketing abortion clinics is the best way to change public opinion on this issue and to protect the innocent unborn. Some Evangelicals believe electing government officials and the appointment of judges is the way to change the practice of abortion. There is a "singular and firm" opinion "of the protection of the unborn" but there is not a "singular and firm" opinion on the mechanics of how that is to be done.

In a similar way, I think we can safely say that most of the Christian church is concerned about poverty or to use his terms there is a "singular

and firm" opinion that the church is to help the sick, infirmed and needy. This concern has birthed many great missions such as World Vision, to pick just one example. It has worked itself out in many ways through various missions of the church, none of which are acknowledged by McLaren. Just as with abortion, there is a McLaren has used the "singular and firm" opinion "of the protection of the unborn" and juxtaposed it with the lack of a "singular and firm" opinion on the mechanics of addressing poverty. By utilizing category confusion and drawing on emotion to validate his case he moves on.

Secondly, he proposes a moral equivalence between protecting the innocent unborn with the guilty who have killed or are attempting to kill non-Muslims in the name of Allah. Although this is an emotionally powerful charge, McLaren misstates or misrepresents the truth of the case. Although Evangelical Christians are evangelistic in religious commitment, in terms of civic commitment, they are in favor of peaceful co-existence with those of other faiths, including Muslims, and Christians view them as people for whom Christ died and was resurrected. With the exception of a few miniscule fringe groups, I don't know of any Christians calling for the death of those who have not committed crimes. Again, there are missions and missionaries who are providing—or attempting to provide—food, water, clothing, and medical treatment as well as a proclaiming the gospel. The United States, as a nation, has declared war on terrorism and although many Christians are glad for the protection, not all are united or have a "singular and firm" opinion on the "Christian" position on war. Nevertheless, the Federal government did not seek the churches' advice or blessing on this endeavor. Is it right to protect non-aggressors from aggressors? That is perhaps a question for another paper. Is the Federal Government Christian? No. The government is charged with the protection of its citizenry and deemed its current course as the most correct way to proceed (the mechanics of protection) at the time. Christian citizens, just as non-Christian citizens, are free to disagree. As we have seen, having a "singular and firm" opinion on any of the mechanics of endeavor the church embarks upon, is hard to come by, but that does not prove that Christians view Muslims as "enemies," except perhaps in the sense in which Paul called the Jews "enemies of the gospel" (Romans 11:28).

We see examples of another question, which he puts forth in his 2002 book *More Ready Than You Realize*. Someone named "George" who attended his church asked why Jesus had to die on the cross.<sup>4</sup> Brian said he didn't know how to answer and asked for two weeks to think about it. He talked with his brother Peter and shared his dilemma: ... a couple of weeks ago I realized that I don't know why

Jesus had to die.<sup>5</sup>

McLaren's brother, Peter, didn't have to hesitate for a second and responded:

Well, neither did Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

This episode did not receive many critical reactions except by a few apologetic ministries, and they were generally disregarded. After all, it was published by a main line, "capital—C," Christian publisher and must therefore fall within orthodox theology. The next year he came out with *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, where McLaren floated the idea that Jesus Christ dying on the cross:

...sounds like divine child abuse.<sup>7</sup>

McLaren put this statement into the mouth of a fictional unbeliever named "Kerry," but he never refuted the idea in the book. This assertion has also not received much of a response. This idea stems from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, and this background leads us to the persons who helped shape McLaren's book *Everything Must Change*. The list includes:

- John Dominic Crossan,
- Walter Rauschenbusch,
- Karl Marx,
- Al Gore,
- Cornel West,
- George Soros.

Like John Dominic Crossan, John Shelby Spong, and many others, McLaren intentionally or unintentionally misdefines what Evangelicals and Fundamentalists believe and teach. The idea of a "Jihad Jesus" who "converts by the sword" is a bad representation of the teaching that Jesus will be coming in a future judgment. His "fake me out Jesus" and other questions surrounding the return of Jesus are rendered irrelevant in his thinking, because he says that he is agnostic as to the question of the return of Jesus. Further, he is opposed to the idea that the Bible teaches a heavenly hope and draws on N.T. Wright and his book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. Instead, he is promoting an earthly transformation of society where all will live the way of Jesus, whether they are Christians or not. McLaren

presupposes that the current lack of success in solving the problems of poverty, hunger, sickness, illiteracy, discrimination, and what he sees as a lopsided distribution of wealth, as evidence that the church has failed in what he contends is its primary mission of Christianizing the world in behavior. Once we understand this then:

We can rediscover what it can mean to call Jesus Savior and Lord when we raise the question of what exactly he intended to save us from. (His angry Father? The logical consequences of our actions? Our tendency to act in ways that produce undesirable consequences? Global self-destruction?) The popular and domesticated Jesus, who has become little more than a chrome-plated hood ornament on the guzzling Hummer of Western Civilization, can thus be replaced with a more radical, saving, and, I believe, *real* Jesus (6).

He lists his big questions which gave birth to this book as:

- 1) "What are the biggest problems in the world?" (11)
- 2) "What does Jesus have to say about these global problems?" (12)

A third question surfaced, "Why hasn't the Christian religion made a difference commensurate with its message, size, and resources? What would need to happen for followers of Jesus to become a greater force for good in relation to the world's top problems? How could we make a difference?" (12)

He goes on to list how important Jesus is to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and even nonreligious people; however, he ignores the fact that each group has a false view of Jesus or as Paul put it "another Jesus." (2 Corinthians 11:4) He then spends time in claiming that the church has missed the essential message of Jesus, and he calls people to the true message:

The time had come, we said, to center our lives on the essential message of Jesus, the message of the kingdom of God – not just a message *about* Jesus that focused on the afterlife, but rather the core message *of* Jesus that focused on personal, social and global transformation in this life. (22) Justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is labeled as irrelevant and perhaps even as a false gospel on McLaren's view. Salvation, for him, is a financial question:

With no apologies to Martin Luther, John Calvin, or modern evangelicalism, Jesus (in Luke 16:19) does not prescribe hell to those who refuse to accept the message of justification by grace through faith, or to those who are predestined to perdition, or to those who don't express faith in a favored atonement theory by accepting Jesus as their "personal Savior." Rather, hell – literal or figurative – is for the rich and comfortable who proceed on their way without concern for their poor neighbor day after day (208).

Like John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg and John Shelby Spong, McLaren want to hold on to something he can call "Christianity" while rejecting the core of what the orthodox faith has historically held to be true:

In this way, I found freedom to articulate dissatisfaction and concern about a version of the Christian religion – the modern Western version, or the modern colonial version –without rejecting Jesus and the Christian faith as a whole (35).

"Western version" and "colonial version" are for McLaren, synonyms for what he calls an "empire-framing" story or a grab for power by Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christian in order to build an empire. This is done by them according to McLaren, by proclaiming something called personal redemption, a guarantee of life with God after death, which consequently makes them one of the chosen or elect, who then qualify for partnership with the returning "Jihad Jesus" who will wage war on infidels.

McLaren spends a great deal of time developing what he calls a new framing story. This term describes how the various groups in the gospels are trying to be liberated from the empire builders represented by Rome. As he moves through the book and develops his ideas, which would appeal to the compassionate among us, he leads the reader to understand that virtually everything we believed about the Bible is wrong. This publication is one of the first of McLaren's books in which he discloses his views of Scripture, and he does so in connection with Genesis, chapters 1-6. Most of us probably had thought that these chapters were about man's rebellion with its resultant death or separation from God, and about His provision to bring redemption and peace, thereby reuniting us with Him. He sets up this hermeneutic by disabusing Christians of thinking that the Bible is God's communication to us in any meaningful way for today:

Fundamentalist religious movements typically try to do just the sort of thing I'm proposing, and they generally do so in the worst

possible way: they take words that were spoken five hundred or fourteen hundred or two thousand years ago and apply them, sharia-style, as if they were intended to serve as today's annotated legal code, today's constitution, today's how to manual. They underestimate how the original words and teachings were situated – how deeply their sacred texts were rooted in gritty contemporary problems and human social contexts; instead, they see their sacred texts as timeless, placeless utterances coming from an arid, Platonic plane of universal abstractions. (119)

It is his contention that conservative Evangelicals are attempting to install a Christian Sharia law. Those who do not convert will be slain by the return of the Jihad Jesus. With McLaren's new framing story in place he introduces the reader to his view of what is actually going on in Genesis. In this new "framing story" the problems are overeating, class warfare, and empire building

It's interesting to note the importance of consumption in the biblical narrative. When the crisis of human evil is introduced in a passage beginning in Genesis 1:29 and ending in 2:20, forms of the words "eat" and "food" are used about twenty times. Consumption is closely linked with human evil. Adam and Eve live in harmony with creation in a garden, surrounded by food-bearing trees. But to be a human is to live within creaturely limits in God's creation – reflected in self-restraint in regard to eating the fruit of "the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17). If they break the limits represented by the fruit hanging on that tree, they will taste death (or as we said earlier, they will decompose).

Eve exceeds the limit, drawn to consume a fruit that "was good for food and was pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom" (3:6). Adam joins her. As a result, an avalanche of alienation crashes into the human story – alienation from God, alienation from one another, alienation from oneself, and alienation from creation (209-10).

A few paragraphs later he continues on to talk about obesity, anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders in China and around the world. Now that he has established that over-eating was the original sin, and that it continues today he progresses to the true meaning of the story of Cain and Abel:

In the following chapters, brother is alienated from brother and a form of class violence enters the story, as the class of pastoralists

(symbolized by Abel) are exterminated by the class of agriculturalists (symbolized by Cain). (210)

A normal reading of this passage would leave one with the idea that Cain was angry that God rejected his offering and that he killed his brother in a fit of rage. In McLaren's telling of it there is class warfare is going on here between the "haves" and the "have-nots," and the "have-nots" committed genocide on the "haves."

Soon new forms of institutionalized violence arise in great cities, so horrible that they are swept away by a flood of judgment. Eventually empires emerge, reflecting the imperial dream of unifying people under one dominating language and culture in Babel. Genesis provides a genealogy for all the pain and evil in the whole social structure of humans on planet Earth; it all can be traced back to a problem of consumption beyond limits. (210)

Gwen Shamblin and Weigh Down Workshop would be proud. Does this bear any resemblance to Holy Writ? When we read the account in Genesis we see that God invited Adam and Eve to consume as much as that wanted, from anything around them as far and wide in the garden as they desired to go, except the fruit of one tree.

Abel obeyed God and offered the prescribed sacrifice, while Cain did not. He offered a sacrifice of his own choosing. The passage demonstrates Cain's rebellion against God but it does more. It demonstrates God's grace in sparing him and protecting him in spite of having killed his brother and lying about it. McLaren wrote earlier:

If we resituate ourselves in this new story, if we find identity, meaning, and purpose in this good news, we find ourselves beginning again, born again, facing a new start. As recomposed, resituated, *de*-deranged people, we can begin rebuilding our societal system, not as a suicide machine, but as a beloved This is nothing new. It is old-time liberalism told from within the ranks of Evangelicalism. Around 1825 theology shifted from Christocentrism to anthropocentrism. McLaren's views are man-centered and are built on the idea that, by a simple act of the will, man can fix everything and rebuild Eden on the earth. In a recent conference, during a question and answer period he let the audience know that the book of Revelation was fulfilled in 70 A.D. (a position called preterism or semipreterism).

I believe all predictive prophecies were fulfilled in the destruction of



the Jewish Temple in AD 70 under the Roman Empire.

He went on to claim that we are . . .

. . . co-creators of the future with God, and that it wasn't a movie that had already been shot

This assertion has at least the ring of panentheism to it. I would suggest that McLaren has lost, if he ever had it, the absolute holiness of God, the reality of the lostness of man, and the provision for individual and corporate salvation through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He further develops this theme in his newest book *Finding Our Way Again* – (2008, Nelson Pub)

Pastor Jeffrey Whittaker attended a conference at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana. Part of this event was surprisingly similar to the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions where I and several others met with the Wiccans and discussed their worship practices. Whittaker describes McLaren's conference:

The conclusion of the Friday evening "session" was an amazing demonstration of this philosophy. The audience was directed to many different "sacred spaces"<sup>8</sup> set up to aid them in getting in touch with themselves and "the divine". One station was a table covered with votive candles which could be lit and meditated upon. Another held a large bowl of water where one could get in touch with the "flow" of nature and spirit, and yet another featured a bowl of dirt where one could literally touch "Mother Earth"<sup>9</sup> and contemplate all the evils<sup>10</sup> done to her.

These procedures would all be very comfortable for Wiccans and other non-Christian occultists and New Agers. I would suggest that for Brian McLaren, everything has changed. There is very little that resembles the faith once delivered for all to the saints (Jude 3). With churches such as Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL, embracing him and promoting his views by hosting him in their conferences to train youth workers around the world, McLaren may be able to pull off what Walter Rauschenbusch and later the Jesus Seminar have not be able to do, namely to turn the church from the Scriptures to adopt a socialist view of the world.

<sup>1</sup> URL: "<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSm0VyHGH40>"

<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a*

*Revolution of Hope*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007). Since this book is the main topic of this paper, I will indicate any quotations or specific references simply with its page number in parentheses.

<sup>3</sup> For similar data, see "Evangelical beliefs on decline, pollster says - Barna Research Group." *Christian Century*, Dec. 14, 1994. URL: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_n36\\_v111/ai\\_16003301?tag=artBody;col1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n36_v111/ai_16003301?tag=artBody;col1)

<sup>4</sup> Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), p 80.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 81.

<sup>7</sup> Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, ( San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass), p 102. <sup>8</sup> See the URL: <http://herescope.blogspot.com/2006/02/geographicalheresies-of-new-apostolic.html> <sup>9</sup> This world view is summarized at the URL: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaia\\_hypothesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaia_hypothesis) <sup>10</sup> URL: <http://herescope.blogspot.com/2006/12/collectively-bearingsins-of-world.html>