

# CHRISTIANITY AND McLARENISM

*Ten Questions and Ten Problems*

by Kevin DeYoung



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—and it will be on the long side, so buckle up—I need to say a word about charity. Without a doubt the biggest critique Ted and I received for *Why We're Not Emergent* was that Ted and I 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 with McLaren. I want 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 have no desire to engage in *ad hominem* attacks. I want to discuss McLaren's theology without vitriol or sophomoric putdowns. I will not assume the worst about Brian McLaren. I will try not to say anything in the cozy confines of the blogosphere that I would not say sitting across from McLaren 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 non-essential issues or that his mistakes are little mistakes. I will not refrain from serious critique because this is only a "quest" or merely an attempt to raise questions. Moreover, I will not attempt to find a middle ground with teaching that I believe to be heterodox. I will not look for a third way when I see Christianity going down one path and McLarenism going down another. I will state my disagreements with this book strongly and warn other Christians strenuously. 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. But some books 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" (18). On this quest, McLaren raises and responds to ten questions.

1. *The narrative question: What is the overarching story line of the Bible?* For McLaren, the familiar story line 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, reconciler is the real story line.

2. *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.

3. *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.

4. *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.

5. *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).

6. *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.

7. *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.

8. *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.

9. *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.

10. *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.

## Problem 1: 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. In fact, he ends the book by referencing the first-century Jewish rabbi Gamaliel who famously advocated a “wait and see” approach to the new Christian movement (242ff.). The idea being: let’s give McLaren a break and just see how things turn out. That’s one approach, and appropriate in some situations (though Luke never actually commends Gamaliel). But the apostles never advocated a “wait and see” approach with false teachers in their midst. There’s a time to wait and a time to correct, reprove, and rebuke, (2 Tim. 2:25; 4:2; Titus 1:9).

It’s also hard to engage in conversation when McLaren paints such an unflattering picture of those he imagines will oppose him. Traditionalists, he argues, approach Scripture the way they do so they won’t get fired from their jobs and so the “love gifts” will keep flowing in. Insiders “who depend on the constitutional system [of reading the Bible] for their salary and social status will be unlikely to question it and equally likely to defend it passionately” (80). This is grossly unfair. If you are serious about receiving critique, it doesn’t help to position yourself as a martyr all the while slashing and burning the opposition to whom you have indiscriminately imputed the worst possible motives.

No group can exist without a devil, McLaren says at one point (175). This is probably true. In which case I suggest the best devil is the devil. But for McLaren, the devil appears to be fundamentalist conservatives. Case in point, this description of the Christian community in the 1980s and 1990s:

A large number of both Protestant and Catholic leaders aligned with a neoconservative political ideology, trumpeting what they called “conservative family values,” but minimizing biblical community values. They supported wars of choice, defended torture, opposed environmental protection, and seemed to care more about protecting the rich from taxes than liberating the poor from poverty or minorities from racism. They spoke against big government as if big was bad, yet they seemed to see big military and big business as inherently good. They wanted to protect unborn human life inside the womb, but didn’t seem to care about born human life in slums or prisons or nations they considered enemies. They loved to paint gay people as a threat to marriage, seeming to miss the irony that heterosexual people were damaging marriage at a furious pace without any help from gay couples. They consistently relegated females to second-class status, often while covering up for their fellow males when they fell into scandal or committed criminal abuse. They interpreted the Bible to favor the government of Israel and to marginalize Palestinians, and even before September 11, 2001, I feared that through their influence Muslims were being cast as the new scapegoats, targets of a scary kind of religious inspired bigotry. (7)

I have no problem critiquing the uneasy marriage of evangelicals and the Republican Party, but no conservative Christian would recognize himself in McLaren’s caricature. This description displays

the same emotional badgering and intellectual bankruptcy that we find today in those on the right who think Obama is the anti-Christ and every liberal is a clandestine Bolshevik.

But McLaren writes like this all the time. For example, he describes those who haven't entered the "postmodern transition" as "institutional children of the era of Sir Isaac Newton, the conquistadors, colonialism, the Enlightenment, nationalism and capitalism" (8). Really? Are we that bad? I don't think most people even know about the conquistadors, except maybe that they got trounced for a while on the tag-team circuit in the WWF.

And we haven't even gotten to 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.

## **Problem 2: Internal Inconsistencies**

As the book unfolded, I felt like I was watching the inner struggle between good cop McLaren and bad cop. 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 he is on a quest or has he arrived? He is 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).

At times, McLaren talks like all he wants is a chance to explore his theology in peace. He doesn’t mind us doing our thing, so let him do his. But 200 pages of the book tell a different story. Our view of God is, in his mind, dreadfully, tragically wrong. Of course, he is free to form his own opinions, whether I like them or not. I just wish he didn’t try to claim the high “I’m not judging you” ground. Mild-mannered McLaren knows how to go for the jugular.

### **Problem 3: Insistence on a Borrowed Story Line**

Almost everything in the book depends on the assertion that the traditional biblical story line 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 story line 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 even 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.

## **Problem 4: 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 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 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 blood-thirsty, 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 might potentate (110).

There are too many problems here to even 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 has been officially 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. The spirit of Marcion lives on.

## **Problem 5: 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.

But one new idea deserves brief mention. McLaren employs the book of Job in defense of his community library metaphor. 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?

## **Problem 6: The Liberal Lens**

Sincere evangelical Christians can disagree on politics. A few issues are clear matters of right and wrong. But most political issues call for prudential judgments. So the fact that McLaren is a political liberal does not make him un-Christian in any way. But when his liberal political beliefs equal Christianity (at least the new kind), that's a problem.

For McLaren the peaceable kingdom is all about left-wing causes: nuclear weapons engineers being redeployed into green energy, health care coverage for all, attention to the growing ecological crisis (63, 68). In one section, McLaren envisions a more enlightened world in the future, a kind of shalom-utopia, where all conflicts are negotiated peacefully, people no longer eat meat, and we don't use fossil fuels (106). The real important issues for God's people include: global climate change, peak oil prices, endangered species, sustainable economies, Muslim claims to the Temple Mount, and justice for non-Jews in Israel.

McLaren's politics are nothing if not apoplectic. Describing from the future what transpired through our use of fossil fuels, McLaren writes "They felt their personal comfort, convenience, and transportation needs justified toxifying the planet and throwing the climate into imbalance, which as we all know resulted in billions of deaths and millions of extinctions" (107). Elsewhere he laments that we've burned the rainforest, covered the earth with cement, and created enclaves of prosperity while leaving most of the world behind in deprivation (231-32). The kingdom is a left-wing political kingdom. Pacifists, vegans, and apocalyptic climatologists are almost certainly walking in the way of Jesus. Meat-eating, pro-Israel, just war, petroleum engineers probably aren't.

McLaren is not a moral relativist who thinks anything goes. He does not believe every belief about God is fine as long as it's sincere (208). He very definitely believes there are right ways and wrong ways to live. The right way just happens always to be on the left.

## **Problem 7: A Barn Full of Strawmen**

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. If McLaren doesn't know better, he should.

The best/worst strawmen 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 strawman 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.

## **Problem 8: 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: McLaren hovers above the text with one eye closed and 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 story line (54). But McLaren does not deal with the flood, the curses of the Abrahamic promise, God's sovereignty in choosing the patriarchs, or even mentioned the covenants. He's after a general theme and doesn't want to be bothered by the particulars that could upset his thesis.

Similarly, McLaren concludes Exodus is about God getting involved with and siding with the oppressed, the vulnerable, the downtrodden, working for their liberation (57). All that is true, but McLaren admits to skipping over "a hundred fascinating—and at times troubling—details" (57). He doesn't mention the Israelites are liberated so they can worship the one true God, or that God reveals himself as a jealous God, or that God's hardens Pharaoh's heart for his own glory. For McLaren, Exodus is about liberation. That's all.

Time after time, McLaren gives the illusion of dealing scrupulously with the text, but in actuality he is skating across the surface. So you don't hear McLaren talk about the essential role faith, even propositional faith, plays in the gospels (Mark 1:15; John 8:24; 20:31). You don't hear him talk

about the keys that open or close access to the kingdom (Matt. 16:19), or the curses Jesus utters (Matt. 23; 11:21-24), or the parables of judgment (Matt. 25), or the fact that Jesus explicitly mentions outsiders (Mark 4:11) and teaches repeatedly that some get in and some don't (Matt. 7:12-27).

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.

McLaren can give a passable synopsis of Romans, but then when you dig into the text you realize he's putting Paul's letters into McLaren Categories. Thus, the new life in Christ is not about personal holiness but living as agents of God's restorative justice (150). Romans 14-16 means don't judge on another because love is the only universal policy (155). Paul's anguish over his hell-bound kinsmen becomes a sadness that they are "not *experiencing* the 'no condemnation and no separation' of the kingdom of God (152, emphasis mine). Divine predestination and reprobation in chapter 9 tails off by suggesting Paul wasn't completely comfortable with his own solution.

The devil's in the details, and 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" (286). Has McLaren not read 21:8 where the wicked are assigned their portion in the lake that burns with fire?

He uses Acts 17 and the sermon on Mars Hill to show that we are all God's children, with no "us" and "them" anymore. But he fails to mention that Paul was provoked in his spirit to see the city full of idols, commanded the people to repent, and warned of a fixed day of coming judgment. And 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).

## Problem 9: Canon Within a Canon

McLaren believes strongly that Jesus Christ is the center of biblical revelation, the hinge on which all else turns. This is obviously true, but not in the way McLaren understands it. It's true that all Scripture points to Christ and that God reveals himself to us fully and finally in Christ, but this does not mean the gospels trump other parts of the Bible. But this is what the centrality of Christ means in McLaren's interpretive grid. Therefore, exclusivism and hell, even if they pop up in parts of Revelation, can't be accepted because that's not the type of God McLaren thinks we see in Christ in the gospels (115, 118).

McLaren spends the better part of one chapter countering Mark Driscoll's line about not wanting a Jesus he can beat up (he also takes on John MacArthur in a different chapter). Driscoll argues that in Revelation "Jesus is a prize fighter" who makes people bleed. Granted, this may not be the most felicitous turn of a phrase, but Driscoll is right: the Jesus of Revelation is a conquering warrior. According to McLaren, though, Revelation is "literature of the oppressed" and only means to remind the suffering church that the way of Jesus is the right way and will triumph (123-24). True, Revelation was an encouragement to the oppressed not to give up. But the encouragement was found in the assurance that faithful martyrs would be avenged (6:10). There's simply no way to make Revelation into a non-violent book with a non-violent Jesus. The wicked don't flee from the wrath of the Lamb because he wants to hug them (6:16).

Homosexuality provides another example of McLaren's canon within a canon. In addition to arguing that homosexuality is acceptable because the Ethiopian eunuch, the "sexually other," was baptized—a strange argument that presumes homoerotic behavior is no more a choice than physical castration—McLaren suggests: "If Jesus's life and example are simply textual data on equal par with Leviticus, and if Jesus can make no claim to be Lord and teach over Paul, then perhaps the conventional approach wins" (179). What a masterfully confounding sentence. Who wants to reduce Jesus' life and example to textual data? No one. And yet, all we know about Jesus' life and example comes from textual data. McLaren's choice is no choice at all. In both instances—with Leviticus and with the life of Jesus—we are dealing with divine self-disclosure in the pages of Scripture. To be sure, Christ shows us God more clearly than Leviticus, but the life of Jesus does not erase other books of the Bible.

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 Tim. 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 two thousand 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.

One last comment on this business about a canon within the canon. McLaren's theology depends on cherrypicking the books and themes he likes best. Why develop your narrative of the Bible based on Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah? Why not Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus? Is it because Leviticus is about laws and holiness? Why not Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, and Jeremiah? At the very least, don't

skip the second half of Exodus when it doesn't fit the paradigm, or the parts in Isaiah that speak of God's judgment and Christ's atonement for sins. And why is 1 Corinthians the model for the purpose of the church? 1 Corinthians a fine book, but why not Ephesians or something from the Pastoral Epistles or Hebrews? It's hard not to conclude that although McLaren makes an effort to find chapters to prove his points, he's not terribly concerned to take the whole counsel of Scripture into account.

## **Problem 10: 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, 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 like 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, find a canon within a canon, or resort to an evolutionary approach—if you want to rid the Bible of the uncomfortable parts about wrath and judgment, you'll find a way.

## **Conclusion: We've Seen This Before**

Well, 6000 words later, what is possibly left to say? Hopefully not much. It would not sadden me in the least if I never talked or wrote about the emergent movement again. I don't think any of us will be talking about the "great emergence" twenty years hence, let alone a hundred. All that remains is to highlight one final irony.

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 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 *20<sup>th</sup>-Century Theology*, Grenz and Olson, no rabid fundamentalists they, describe classic liberalism in five points:

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 in 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 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can only hope this wave of liberalism fades as dramatically as did the last.