

A sloppy kind of Christianity

A review of
*A New Kind of Christianity:
Ten Questions That Are
Transforming the Faith*
by Brian McLaren
HarperOne, New York, 2010

James Patrick Holding

For those yet to be introduced to the phenomenon of the ‘emergent church’, here are a few of its premises and practices:

- Don’t look for or act like you have answers—you’ll ruin the dialogue!
- Keep yourself so busy doing good works that you never bother to critically examine anything you believe—unless it is something out of a conservative Christian tradition.
- Be so afraid to offend others (except conservative Christians) that you are unwilling to even say to them, ‘You’re wrong’.

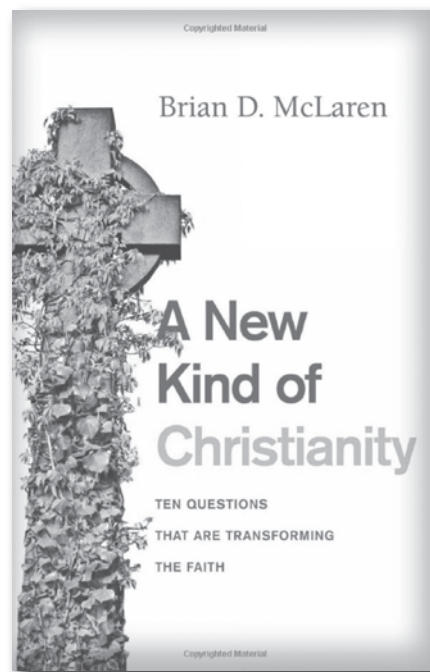
Our subject here is Brian McLaren’s book *A New Kind of Christianity*, but these descriptors just as aptly fit any of his other books, or any work by any ‘emergent’ author. McLaren does happen to be a leading figure in this movement, and this latest book of his has the tenor of a manifesto on behalf of himself and his emergent cohorts, so to that extent, it warrants a bit more attention than it might otherwise be given.

McLaren is not a pleasant read, even from a narrative perspective. His prose rambles constantly, and he seems to take one or more eternities to get to a point, only to reveal to the reader at the end that he didn’t actually have one. He freely admits that his writings can be frustrating, but it is not for the reasons that he thinks: Not because his ideas are challenging or disturbing, but because he handles Scriptural texts and issues with the same facility that one

might handle needle-threading with the disadvantage of a boxing glove.

I plan my own series on this book in the near future,¹ but for the present, I will offer a few of the more startling examples of why McLaren has earned the above evaluation.

- He is exceptionally uncritical in his acceptance of sources and points of view. McLaren takes for granted highly debatable stances such as that homosexuality is genetic, global warming is occurring, evolution is true, and that the war in Iraq was unjust. He makes no effort to discern the quality of his source material with respect to these issues. This is manifest in the fact that on the issue of reputed ‘crimes of the church’, McLaren refers the readers to (among other sources) James Carroll’s unprofessional work in *Constantine’s Sword*, and to the even more execrable work of Helen Ellerbe.²
- McLaren, like many in the emergent class, are hopelessly indifferent to the quality or rigour of their argumentation. In another volume, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, he suggested that “clarity is sometimes overrated”. Here, in this volume, he indicates that his thought in reply to someone who says that his ideas don’t make sense is, “Good for you, because some of them don’t make that much sense to me either” (p. 6). Perhaps this is quite intelligible, however, in light of the constant emphasis emergents offer on ‘dialogue’ and ‘conversation’ and their refusal to deal in answers—to the point that McLaren refers to his time after lectures as “Question and Response” times. One is generally tempted, after reading emergent material, to ascribe this hesitation to deal in ‘answers’ with a marked inability to provide them. True to the results of the Dunning Effect,³ McLaren confesses that



he “wasn’t formally trained in theology” (p. 55) but considers this to be an “accidental advantage” when he addresses theological issues.

- One of the chief themes of *A New Kind of Christianity* is that modern Christianity has been distorted by ‘Greco-Roman’ ideas, having left behind ‘Hebrew’ thought forms. Now there are two sides to this: One is that easy appeals to ‘Greek’ or ‘Roman’ thinking is a staple as well of certain cults (particularly the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses) who claim that Christianity was distorted by pagan thinking. It was also an appeal of certain earlier orthodox writers (e.g. Edwin Hatch). The other side is that modern scholarship, exemplified by academics like Martin Hengel, rejects a too-sharp distinction (in the New Testament) between ‘Greek’ and ‘Hebrew’ thinking. McLaren’s own commentary pays no attention whatsoever to the relevant scholarship on this subject, and the result is a pastiche of undocumented, non-credible assertions about the alleged influence of ‘Greco-Roman’ thinking on modern Christianity,

one that relies heavily on oversimplified caricatures of both Hebrew and Greco-Roman thinking. Indeed, McLaren unwittingly admits as much in an endnote where he allows that he is vulnerable to the same kind of “dualistic reductionism” (p. 263) he accuses Greco-Romanism of having. His own commentary is as anachronistic as that of the Greco-Roman strawman he erects.⁴

- McLaren’s effort to redefine the Bible knows few bounds. For example, attempting to reconcile his pacifist readings of the text with the obvious interests of war expressed in the Old Testament, McLaren resorts to such absurdities as defining the plague of the Nile turning to blood as a “firm but gentle consequence” and refers to the other plagues as “unpleasantries” (p. 57). We shall next be told that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were ‘inconveniences’ to the Empire of Japan.
- Another chief theme of McLaren’s is his premise that the Bible has been misread and misused as a ‘constitutional’ document by conservatives. He never quite defines what he means by this, but indicates that he prefers to read the Bible as a “library of a culture and community” (p. 81). To be sure, the Bible can so be regarded generally, but that classification is far from mutually exclusive of categories within the text: Deuteronomy is indeed a ‘constitution’ (it has the typical form of a suzerain–vassal treaty of the Ancient Near East) for example, while the Gospels are ancient biography. That said, McLaren’s more specific objection is to abuses that he supposes derived from a ‘constitutional’ reading—that, e.g. pre-Civil War slave-owners, because they read the Bible ‘constitutionally’, came up with false justifications for slavery. But this is simply false. The error of the slaveowners was to transfer biblical instructions from their

proper social and cultural contexts.⁵ They did not err in their method of extrapolating principles from the biblical text; that is certainly admissible, for it is an attempt to apply biblical teachings to our own current situations. Furthermore, the abolitionists, following the earlier example of Britain’s William Wilberforce, likewise defended their view from a ‘constitutional’ reading of the Bible—i.e. those whom McLaren would dismiss as “the religious right” if they were alive today.⁶ As is frequently the case, McLaren has the right problem but the wrong solution.

- Perhaps the most telling chapter in the book is McLaren’s treatise on how we are to react to members of other religions. McLaren counsels respect in our exchanges, which is certainly good and proper advice, but goes to exceptional lengths to avoid saying plainly that religions other than Christianity contain error in what they teach. The closest he can bring himself to say this is where he indicates that one purpose of evangelism is “recruiting people to defect from destructive ways” (p. 216).⁷ But he wouldn’t apply that to those in a destructive lifestyle that’s politically correct, such as homosexuality.⁸

McLaren does well, it must be allowed, to point out various problems facing the church at large today: Loss of attendance and interest (p. 4), for example, we may agree is a serious difficulty for the church at large. However, McLaren’s message of compromise and misplaced sentiment is hardly a resolution that will make things better.

References

1. I will begin a more thorough examination in my online magazine, the E-Block, in March 2010, www.tektonics.org/eblocksub.html.
2. For a review of Carroll’s work, see www.catholicleague.org/research/constantine.htm. For a review of Ellerbe’s work, see www.tektonics.org/af/elbee.html.

3. The ‘Dunning Effect’ is that unskilled people often overestimate their own ability and draw erroneous conclusions, but their incompetence makes them unaware of their errors. This comes from Kruger, J. and Dunning, D., Unskilled and unaware of it: how difficulties in recognizing one’s own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments, *J. Personality and Social Psychology* 77(6):1121–1134, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1121, 1999. For discussion of the Dunning Effect see my article, Dealing with Dunning’s Syndrome, *Christian Research Journal* 31(6), 2008.
4. Particularly, McLaren is completely insensate to the cultural values of honour and shame that govern interpretation of the biblical text and particularly events like the Fall (p. 49), which he turns into a story of God “mercifully shielding [Adam and Eve] from their shame” by providing them with animal skins. On the contrary, the skins provide an object lesson in the necessity for sin to be paid for with blood; and the exclusion from the Garden is a sentence of exclusion and shame. McLaren also errs in part because, like atheist critics, he takes the pronouncement of a death sentence with pathological literalism. On that matter please see my commentary at www.tektonics.org/tsr/jerry722.html#fig.
5. On this matter see Glenn Miller’s excellent article, “Does God condone slavery in the Bible?” www.christian-thinktank.com/qnoslave.html. One can only wonder why it would not occur to McLaren to do the sort of research Miller did rather than simply blame slaveowners for misusing the Bible.
6. Hochschild, A., *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005. See also Sarfati, J., Anti-slavery activist William Wilberforce: Christian hero, *J. Creation* 21(2):121–127, 2007; creation.com/wilberforce.
7. McLaren’s refusal to refer to other religions as in error, after a full chapter of dancing around the subject, brings to mind a mental picture of the character Arthur Fonzarelli (“the Fonz”) from the television series *Happy Days*, who was so unable to admit his own errors that he could never say, “I was wrong”, and when he tried, came out instead with, “I was wra... wra... wo...nn.”
8. The Gay-Lesbian Medical Association admits the far greater physical and emotional health problems with the lifestyle in *Top 10 Things Gay Men Should Discuss with their Healthcare Provider*, www.glma.org/. But if Christians pointed out the same things, McLaren would probably regard it as a ‘hate crime’.