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A Theological Conversation Worth Having: A Response to Brian McLaren

We are talking about two rival understandings of the Gospel here — two very different understandings of theology, Gospel, Bible, doctrine, and the totality of the Christian faith. Both sides in this controversy understand what is at stake.

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Some theological disputes amount to very little and serve mostly as exercises in missing the point, if indeed there is a point. Other doctrinal exchanges are quite different and deal with matters of central and essential concern to the Christian faith. The first sort of dispute is a waste of precious time and energy and should be avoided at all costs. The second sort of debate is a matter of both urgency and importance. The church cannot avoid and should not seek to evade this kind of theological conversation.

That is why a recent essay by Brian McLaren helps us all to understand what is at stake in the controversy over Rob Bell's new book, *Love Wins*. Beyond this, his argument reveals a great deal about the actual beliefs and trajectories of what has become known as the emerging church. As such, his essay is a welcome addition to this important conversation.

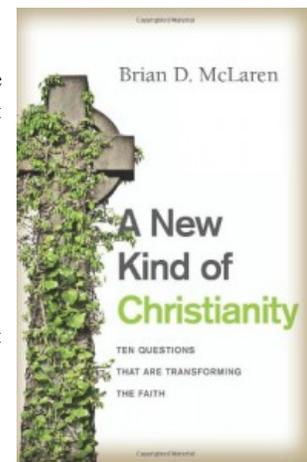
McLaren, perhaps the best known of the leaders in the emerging church, seeks to defend Rob Bell and to act as his friend. He says that he had been waiting for an opportunity to speak in Bell's defense, and, evidently my essay, "We Have Seen All This Before: Rob Bell and the (Re)Emergence of Liberal Theology," afforded McLaren the opportunity he was seeking.

In his own essay, "Will *Love Wins* Win? We're Early in the First Inning," McLaren uses a baseball metaphor to reject my critique of Rob Bell's arguments. He asserts that I "rounded first base" by affirming a clear understanding of the Gospel as found in the Scriptures and then suggesting that Rob Bell's proposals fall short of the Gospel. My problem, according to McLaren, is that I assume that a clear understanding of the Gospel is even *possible*. According to McLaren, the complexities of interpretation render this claim implausible.

In his words:

Now communication is nearly always tricky, as any of us who are married or are parents know. The speaker has a meaning which is encoded in symbols (words) which then must be decoded by the receiver. That decoding process is subject to all kinds of static - for example, interference from the biases, fears, hopes, politics, vocabulary, and other characteristics of the receiver or the receiver's community. If the receiver then tries to pass the meaning - as he has decoded it - on to others, there is more encoding and decoding, and more static. That's why, with so much encoding and decoding and re-encoding going on, the challenge of communication across many cultural time zones is downright monumental.

Communication is indeed "nearly always tricky," but McLaren's argument leads to interpretive nihilism. Can we really not know what the Gospel is? If this is true, the church is left with no coherent message at all. All of our attempts to define the right form of the Gospel are just human interpretations, he insists, and we must avoid "excessive confidence" in any



telling of the Gospel story. McLaren warns that we must avoid “a naive and excessive confidence,” but that we can retain a “humble confidence.” But his argument leaves us with very little idea of how this “humble confidence” is to be found, since “no articulation of the gospel today can presume to be exactly identical to the original meaning Christ and the apostles proclaimed.”

That statement leaves us with only approximations of the Gospel — some presumably better, some worse. And we would in fact be left with nothing more precise or authoritative than that but for one thing — we have the Bible. We are absolutely dependent upon the New Testament way of telling the Gospel of Christ, and the apostles were determined to pass along the Gospel as a clear and understandable message to others. This is why Paul instructed Timothy to “follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” and to “guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” [2 Timothy 1:13-14]

If we cannot know what the Gospel is, then there is no such thing as the faith “once for all delivered to the saints.” [Jude 3] If so, we have nothing definitive to say.

The issues of communication are real, and we should never seek to minimize the challenge of interpretation. But the clarity, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture are precisely the means whereby the Lord preserves his church in the Spirit and in truth. It is one thing to cite the challenge of interpretation. It is another thing altogether to suggest that we are left with an insurmountable problem and an indefinite message. This flies directly in the face of biblical claims and commands.

McLaren also accuses me of misreading Rob Bell’s motivation for writing the book. He rejects my assertion that Bell is driven by a desire to present Christianity in a new way to those who find the traditional form of the Gospel impossible to believe — especially in terms of hell and everlasting torment. Instead, McLaren argues that Bell “started questioning the interpretation of the Gospel he received.”

Later, McLaren argues that I misunderstand Bell by suggesting that he wrote the book out of concern for people who are “put off by the doctrine of hell.” But where did I get this idea? Rob Bell plainly states this concern and motivation in the opening pages of *Love Wins*. My argument is not an inference — it is just a citation of what Rob Bell himself asserted.

With explicit reference to hell in the very next paragraph, Bell wrote this:

I’ve written this book for all those, everywhere, who have heard some version of the Jesus story that caused their pulse rate to rise, their stomach to churn, and their heart to utter these resolute words, “I would never be a part of that.”

I am just taking Rob Bell at his word, and his words are clear.

McLaren rejects what he then calls my way of rounding second base. He cites my argument that Bell separates God’s love from his holiness and presents a sentimental idea of love in place of the biblical theology of God’s love. McLaren argues that the traditional understanding of hell presents a God who is not loving, even by human standards.

In his words:

If a human father decided to throw his child in a fireplace for just ten seconds as punishment for disobedience, we wouldn’t fault the father simply for being unsentimental: we would say such behavior was unholy, an act of torture in violation of our most fundamental sense of justice. Any definition of justice and holiness that involves being unsatisfied unless the imperfect are suffering eternal agony seems to many of us as unworthy of a human being and if so, how much more unworthy of God whose justice must be better than our own.

That argument is straightforward enough, and we need to look at it closely. The central problem with McLaren’s formulation is that such logic destroys any faithfulness to the totality of God’s self-revelation about himself. It presumes to judge God by human conceptions of love — and this is precisely what God himself rejects. He will not allow himself to be judged by humans. We simply do not have an adequate moral vantage point from which to make judgments about the character of God. We are, as in all things, utterly dependent upon God’s self-revelation and self-definition.

We do not know who God is by knowing what love is. We understand love by knowing who God is. But Brian

McLaren seems quite ready to judge God by human standards of love and justice. In his most important book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, he rejects the Genesis account of God's actions in the story of Noah, describing the story as "profoundly disturbing." As he concluded, "In this light, a god who mandates an intentional supernatural disaster leading to unparalleled genocide is hardly worthy of belief, much less worship." He responds to other texts in a similar way.

But God explicitly rejects such a human determination of his character. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah declared. [Isaiah 55:8] Instead, God defines his loving character like this: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." [Romans 5:8]

McLaren's rejection of the Noah account is based on his own view of the Bible — a truly radical view that, taken in full force, explains McLaren's theological method and positions. He rejects the Bible as a "legal constitution" and proposes that it be seen as a "community library" that reveals an evolving human understanding of God — one in which some texts effectively nullify other texts.

He asserts that there can "be no new kind of Christian faith without a new approach to the Bible." That statement is profoundly true, and it points to a central problem. McLaren's new approach to the Bible is a straightforward and amazingly honest call to relativize passages that are deemed to be inferior or unacceptable. We should not wonder that he, like Bell, argues against the traditional doctrine of hell.

We should also not wonder, then, that McLaren likes Rob Bell's arguments for finding what he considers to be better ways of telling the Jesus story.

McLaren then moves to another major point in his essay:

Next Dr. Mohler races around third base with the popular epithet 'liberal.' He accuses those of us who differ with the prevailing view on hell as "pushing Protestant Liberalism –just about a century late.... This is just a reissue of the powerless message of theological liberalism... This is the traditional liberal line."

Well, I do not use liberal as an epithet, though such usage is regrettably common. I teach systematic and historical theology, and in the theological world, the term "liberal" has a very clear meaning, especially when associated with the movement known, clearly enough, as Protestant Liberalism.

My argument that the emerging church in general, and Rob Bell's new book in particular, is a new presentation of Protestant Liberalism is simply true, and has been noted by other readers of Bell's book, including some congenial to him. He practically repeats arguments put forth by leading liberal figures such as Rudolf Bultmann — including his argument that modern men and women simply do not believe in heaven and hell. Bultmann called for a method of "demythologizing" the New Testament in order to remove what he then called its mythological elements. Rob Bell's proposals in *Love Wins* are really just a form of Bultmannianism Lite.

Finally, McLaren agrees with me at "home plate," though with a very different application:

Finally Dr. Mohler strides across home plate with a point I actually agree with: "At the end of the day, a secular society feels no need to attend or support secularized churches with a secularized theology."

True enough (if by "secular" you mean "without any reference to God"), but the rub for many who identify as conservatives, I think, is that for them, secularism only comes in one flavor: liberal.

To more and more of us these days, conservative Evangelical/fundamentalist theology looks and sounds more and more like secular conservatism - economic and political - simply dressed up in religious language. If that's the case, even if Dr. Mohler is right in every detail of his critique, he'd still be wise to apply the flip side of his warning to his own beloved community.

And, in return, I must say that McLaren lands a firm punch with this statement. He is profoundly right in seeing much of presumably conservative Christianity as a sell-out to the idols of the day and a new form of Culture Christianity. He is right to challenge us to call this what it is and to root it out.

But, if we follow his own methodology and program, how could we do this? If we cannot know what the Gospel really is — if we cannot know the Gospel on any definite terms — how can we know a false gospel when we see one?

Thankfully, we can know. We do know. We are not left in the dark, and we do not have only a “community library” to consult. We have the Bible and all of the Bible. We are accountable to it all, and it is all true, trustworthy, authoritative, sufficient, and, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, clear in its message.

This is why a response to *Love Wins* was necessary, and why a response to Brian McLaren is now in order. He is to be credited with taking theology seriously, with making clear arguments, and with a willingness to engage the conversation. I return his candor with my own, and I am ever more convinced of why this controversy is both inevitable and clarifying.

We are talking about two rival understandings of the Gospel here — two very different understandings of theology, Gospel, Bible, doctrine, and the totality of the Christian faith. Both sides in this controversy understand what is at stake.

And that, dear reader, is why this conversation must continue.

Brian McLaren, “[Will Love Wins Win? We’re Early in the First Inning.](#)” BrianMcLaren.net, Monday, March 21, 2011.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “[We Have Seen All This Before: Rob Bell and the \(Re\)Emergence of Liberal Theology.](#)” Wednesday, March 16, 2011.

Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (HarperOne, 2010).

Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (HarperOne, 2011).

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