



Brian McLaren, the Emerging Church, and the Issue of Foundationalism

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The more I read Brian McLaren, the more I am convinced that he has put his finger on some crucial issues facing evangelicals. I resonate with several of his concerns with the contemporary evangelical church in the United States. I also feel I can relate in many ways to the journey he has undergone, as well as to the one his character Dan Poole has experienced. However, I also do not agree with McLaren in several key ways. As committed followers of Christ, what should we learn from him? To what extent should we accept his diagnosis and suggestions for the contemporary church?



R. Scott Smith

I want to survey some of the most important strengths of McLaren's ideas and proposals. To do that, first I will summarize his account of modernity and its influences upon the church. After examining some strengths of his proposals, I will question the extent of the accuracy of his description of modernity in regard to foundationalism, an epistemological view which he blames significantly for disastrous effects upon the church. The cogency of his solutions (which involve embracing a new way of being a Christian in postmodern times) depends upon how accurate his description and related criticisms of modernity are. If he is mistaken here, then I think his solutions simply will not follow. Moreover, I will survey and assess briefly his description of the philosophy of postmodernity.¹

McLaren on Modernity

In the introduction to *A New Kind of Christian*, McLaren reveals some insights into his own journey through a crisis.² First, McLaren discusses a high expectation he had of himself as a pastor, that he had to have "bombproof" answers to tough questions. He expected that Christians should have absolute certainty in

their beliefs. Second, he thought that the gospel and the Christian life could be "reduced" to a set of simple steps. If Christians would just follow those steps, they should experience the fruit of the Spirit. But he started to realize that nothing in life is that simple, and when we treat the Christian life as a simple set of steps to follow programmatically, we are left without new insights into life's demands and needs beyond those stock formulas. Furthermore, when people hit very hard realities, these formulas tend to make these situations worse. Third, McLaren noticed how many Christians were proud and arrogant, and not humble servants. They were not living authentically as Christ's followers, and so the gospel was not making much difference in their lives.

It seems therefore that McLaren's crisis was a product of his own expectations of the Christian life, and these in turn were reinforced by a particular way he had learned to approach and understand the faith. But he found hope to continue as a Christian by some believers who modeled for him a "new way" of being a Christian. He also could identify with suggestions some made that our "Industrial Age" faith would change too, since changes are at work in the Industrial Age itself.

McLaren uses the characters Dan Poole and Neil Edward Oliver ("Neo") to narrate the impact of modernity upon our broader culture, and even upon the church.³ In terms of affecting culture, I will highlight a few of his main observations. For one, modernity has fostered a desire to control and conquer, which has manifested itself in a variety of ways. Philosophically, we have sought to build grand systems that would explain everything, which take away the mystery and wonder of life and our faith. We have sought to master our world through continued scientific and technological development. And we have sought to extend our economic and political influence abroad by trying to dominate markets.

For another, modernity can be characterized as the age of the machine, in which we tend to treat the world and even people as mechanisms that can be controlled and reduced to their smallest constituent parts. The goal of this craving to control manifests itself in efforts to completely explain (and thereby master) all of life scientifically. But it is not just any form of science that will do in this era; the modern era legitimizes only secular science.

Furthermore, modernity has given rise to analysis as the ultimate form of thought. We have tried to systematize all knowledge into neat categories. Indeed, this penchant goes even further to a quest for totalizing, utterly certain knowledge, which is based upon indubitable foundations. McLaren thinks that the epistemological theory known as foundationalism is a view that has perpetuated the search for absolutely certain beliefs, upon which the whole “edifice” of knowledge can rest. However, if you know truth with absolute certainty, then you must debunk any contrary views. Finally, McLaren observes that modernity stresses the priority of the individual. Whether that emphasis is in ethics upon the “autonomous” individual, or in marketing ads, McLaren points out the great emphasis upon the individual as one of the ways modernity has shaped our culture.

If these are some of the ways modernity has influenced our culture, how has modernity shaped the church? McLaren details several parallel effects. Starting with the desire to conquer and control, he observes that we may call our evangelistic efforts “crusades,” which implies the notion of an invasion and conquest. In evangelism, we have tried to reduce the gospel truths to simple formulas expressed in tracts, which contain absolute, spiritual truths. But with that mindset, where is there any room for people to discuss them with us? There is only room for people to accept or reject them, but not discuss them. He also thinks this approach tends to encourage simple answers to peoples’ questions, which may be rooted in deep, life struggles.

Furthermore, we tend to treat evangelism as “winning” people to Christ, but if that is so, then this implies that someone “loses.” So, for McLaren, this approach encourages us to use evangelistic encounters to convert the person through winning a rational argument, as though that were all that is involved in someone becoming a follower of Jesus. However, McLaren explains that this attitude ends up being coercive, and not loving people, nor valuing a genuine friendship with them. In addition, this attitude helps foster a view of our faith as acceptance of a rigid belief system, rather than a joyful relationship with Jesus.

According to McLaren, these kinds of approaches tend to turn off postmoderns, who value authenticity in their relationships and thus want to see that our lives match our message. However, if we think we must “defend” the faith against attacks, to give airtight, irrefutable, bombproof answers to questions, then postmoderns will tend to see our desire to “win” an argument, rather than to love them, and this will turn them off. Postmoderns also do not want a God shrunken down to modern tastes.⁴ McLaren observes that Christians have tended to succumb to the same kind of deterministic, mechanistic views of modernity, by trying to reduce the gospel and the Christian life to simple laws to be rightly followed and applied. But this kind of approach tends to take away the awe and mystery of who God is, for it tends to treat God and His ways as being things we can master and neatly package.

In sum, McLaren sees the church as highly influenced by modernity, such that even the faith itself has become a belief system into which we neatly classify all truths. Furthermore, we should hold these truths with absolute, bombproof certainty, and if we struggle in the Christian life, it is due to our own fault of misapplying them. In these ways, Christians become rigid, controlling, arrogant, and legalistic, tending to try to coerce people into the kingdom and exert political control, rather than genuinely loving people. We also have mirrored the culture in our rampant individualism, which also manifests itself in the church’s own peculiar extension of the broader culture’s consumerism. That is, in McLaren’s view, the church has become a purveyor of religious goods and services, in which we are competing for our “market share.”⁵

What therefore should Christians do? In short, we need to learn, as McLaren did, to become a “new kind” of Christian, one who is learning how to live faithfully to Christ in the emerging postmodern culture. The modern mindset, with its values, is fading away, he claims, and in its place, several new values are emerging. We already have seen one, the desire for authentic relationships, in which postmoderns can see that we truly live out our faith, and not just preach it.

For another, they highly value community, in part as a response to the radical individualism of our culture. McLaren claims that postmoderns want to find in a church a place where they can belong before they have to believe.⁶ Rather than trying to pin people down into neat, simple “in” or “out” categories, which McLaren thinks is a modern penchant, instead we should learn to witness more like Jesus did, who was long on stories but short on sermons.

Postmoderns also want to see if God is just and compassionate, or rigid and pharisaical like many

Christians. They “are concerned about God’s attitude toward contemporary women, minorities, and homosexuals,” and so they want to see what kinds of attitudes God’s people have.⁷

A Few Reasons Why We Need To Listen To Brian McLaren

From this brief overview of McLaren’s description of modernity, its influences upon our culture and Christians, and the attitudes and values of postmoderns, what are some of the strengths of McLaren’s writings? While I do not intend to be exhaustive, I will briefly mention a few of what I think are the important observations he has made of them.

First, McLaren is right to call Christians to live authentically. Clearly, we are living in a time of a widespread, appalling lack of integrity, with great distrust of our governmental and business leaders, and perhaps anyone in a position of authority. Unfortunately, too often Christians have fallen into these same kinds of disgraceful behaviors. Postmoderns are right to expect integrity and authenticity of Christians, and people should see the truth of our faith by how we live.

Second, McLaren is on target to call believers to live in community. This is a good reminder to Christians in the United States today, for we have been highly influenced by the rampant individualism of our culture. Third, I think McLaren is appealing to good missiological principles when he asks us to consider how to contextualize the gospel in ways to reach postmoderns. Fourth, he rightly calls our attention to how we use our language, including the use of terms like “defending” the faith for apologetics, or “winning” people to Christ. These words can have an effect on postmodern people that they may not have had on others in recent times. Without intending to, we can close peoples’ minds to the gospel (or at least, our presentation of it) by our choice of terms.

Let me highlight a fifth kind of strength, which I take to be highly significant. McLaren is very concerned with how we should live as Christians, and he has often described “modern” Christians as being arrogant, legalistic, and so on. He says that we have tended to conceive of our discipleship (and even salvation) as the transmission of information and our proper application of simple formulas. But what happens when Christians encounter problematic situations that seem to defy simple explanations? For instance, what should we think about the case of a Christian woman who had been molested as a child by a man? What may happen is that she sincerely wants to please God, but, due to her childhood trauma, has great difficulties in believing that God the Father really loves and cares for her. In cases like this, where there has been deep

emotional woundedness, if she has been taught to expect that Christians should have absolute certainty in their Christian beliefs, she may very well fall into doubt, which leads to guilt. Any struggles we face must be the result of a misapplication of a formula, and that places the blame squarely on us—that is, *there is something wrong with us*. Furthermore, if we struggle emotionally, or with doubts, or in some other way, McLaren observes that there are few “safe” Christians with whom we can open up and admit our struggles and hurts. If we struggle when the going gets tough, then mainly (apart from spiritual warfare) it is due to our own sin and our lack of repenting of it.

I call this understanding of being spiritual an “input-output” approach. If we just follow all the right “inputs” (e.g., read and memorize Scripture, witness, pray, fellowship with other believers, etc.), then the right “outputs” (e.g., the fruit of the Spirit) *definitely* will follow. If not, then it is our fault, due to our sin.

McLaren has identified this formulaic approach to living the Christian life, which, if coupled with the belief that we must not ever have any doubts, will lead to a legalistic way of trying to live as a Christian, one that almost surely will lead to perhaps lengthy periods of defeat. McLaren has identified a mindset within conservative Christian circles that resonates with many people. They are tired of living legalistically, with defeat, and they long for a joyful, grace-filled walk with Jesus, which will involve a rich communion with Him in all His awesomeness.

Now, however, let us turn to assess his views, in particular his treatment of foundationalism as a mistaken, modern view that has led to disastrous consequences.

This article will continue in the Spring 2007 issue of Knowing & Doing. Dr. Smith will go on to discuss “How Accurate Is McLaren’s Description of Foundationalism?”

Notes

¹ I will not be able to address in detail what I think are the constructivist implications of his views. I do discuss them in *Truth and the New Kind of Christian*, from 134-140, and I also discuss other concerns I have with constructivist thought when used by Christians, especially in chapters five and seven.

² Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), ix – xviii.

³ *Ibid.*, 16-18.

⁴ Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 52.

⁵ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, 156.

⁶ McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 9, 84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

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