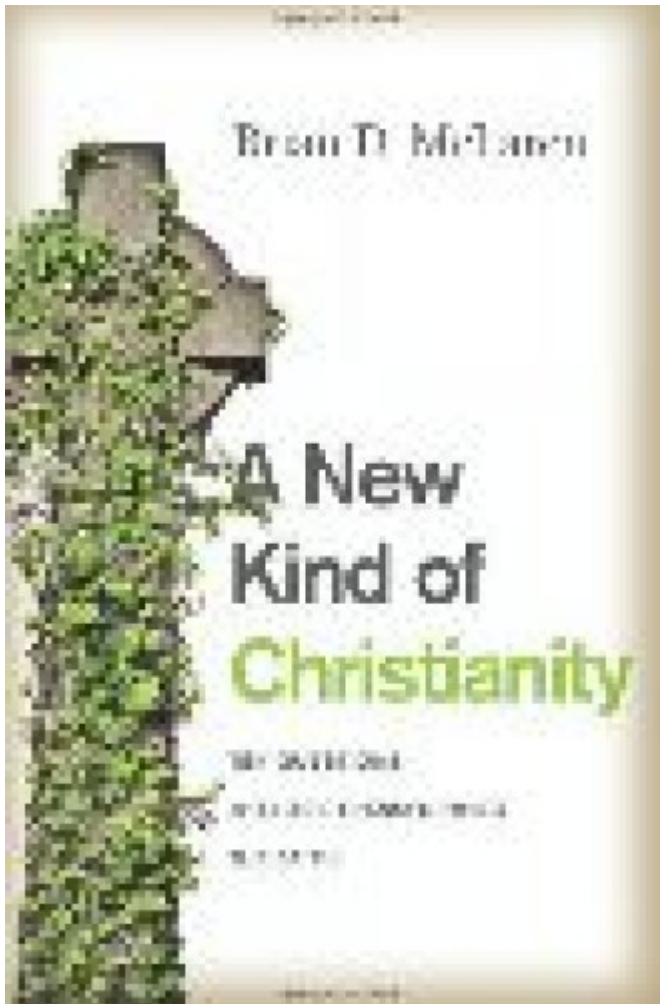


A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith

reviewed by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

In Review



A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith

Brian D. McLaren

I've been an appreciative reader, even a fan, of Brian McLaren since reading his 1998 book, *The Church on the Other Side*. McLaren helped me understand the emerging postmodern world and its implications for the church. Subsequently, I found his novelistic series *A New Kind of Christian* to be both inviting and engaging.

Four years ago McLaren moved from full-time congregational leadership at Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., a church he founded, to pursue a vocation as an author and speaker. Since then he has continued to produce books steadily and has gone on a two-year "Everything Must Change" speaking tour. He has been hailed widely as one of the most significant religious leaders of our time, compared by some to the leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

Among the attractive qualities of McLaren's thinking and writing, two stand out for me. One is his longing for a new way of doing and being church. In articulating this longing and his disquiet with the status quo, McLaren strikes a chord with many. As he writes in this latest book, "Something isn't working in the way we're doing Christianity anymore." Many church leaders with whom I talk and work share a similar sense of disquiet and longing. But is this new? Though particular challenges are uniquely ours, the longing itself is not. It is an expression of the way the church has always been and should always be reformed and reforming, as it's put in Protestant tradition. McLaren is willing not only to say "This isn't working," but to find what might work better.

Another attractive quality is McLaren's irenic spirit. He is consistent in endeavoring to include and appreciate rather than exclude or dismiss. He follows the advice of one of his mentors, "Don't ever reject anybody. But if they reject you, be gracious and don't stay where you're not wanted." Clearly, McLaren has incited rejection and real anger in some quarters, particularly among some evangelicals, who see him as a traitor to the faith and worldview they once shared.

A New Kind of Christianity is framed by ten questions, some of which will seem immediately urgent to general readers while others are less so. In the more obviously urgent category, McLaren asks, "Is God violent?" "Can't we find a way of talking about sexuality without fighting about it?" and "How should followers of Jesus relate to people of other religions?" Questions that are not so hot but are at the core

of McLaren's argument include, "What is the overarching story line of the Bible?" "How should the Bible be understood?" "Who is Jesus and why is he important?" and "What is the gospel?"

The central thesis, to which McLaren returns frequently to indicate its wide implications, is that Christian faith was terminally skewed when it was distilled through the Greco-Roman (imperial) worldview. This worldview resulted in a version of Christianity that was at once triumphalistic and reductive—a Christianity that was mainly about what happens after death. McLaren argues that the central message of Jesus, the kingdom of God and the life it entails, was lost or overlooked. There is important truth in this argument, perhaps especially for the world of American evangelicals, among whom it does sometimes seem that a version of Paul has eclipsed Jesus. I am less sure that it is helpful for the Protestant mainline and liberal Christianity.

I can imagine that some of the young evangelical students I have taught as an adjunct professor at Seattle Pacific University (a Free Methodist school) would experience McLaren as enormously helpful and freeing. He would enable many to disentangle their faith from a limited Republican political agenda and rethink theology and scripture in ways that might feel like water for a parched soul. McLaren offers some fine biblical interpretation in relation to his ten questions.

But when the audience is, as I suspect it often will be, mainline or self-described progressive Christians, I'm less sure that McLaren's message is the thing that's needed. The tendency in mainline or progressive circles has long been to say that the problem is outdated, outmoded Christianity. The project has been to redo theology, revise language and creed, update imagery and practice, all with the idea that if we can just make Christianity fit into our present world, all will be well. In a fair number of churches this revisionist project has gone on for so long that there simply isn't much left to revise—or to sustain the dwindling numbers of the faithful. Where this updating project has so long prevailed, a slightly altered version of Shakespeare's line from *Julius Caesar* may be apt: the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our paradigms, it is in ourselves, that we are sinners.

To be sure, there is always a need to engage and question received faith and tradition, to sort out the precious from the expendable, but as McLaren develops his quest for a new kind of Christianity, I worry that it is too much about our quest and not enough about God's.

Near the conclusion of *A New Kind of Christianity*, McLaren quotes the first of Luther's 95 theses: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when he said *Poenitentiam agite*, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance." McLaren revises the thesis as follows: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when he said *Poenitentiam agite*, willed that the whole history of the Christian faith should be repentance, rethinking and quest."

There is an important and telling shift in a move from the language of repentance to the language of quest. To repent is to acknowledge that we have made too much of ourselves and to turn to God. It is to confess our sin and the dominion of sin and death in a fallen world. Quest, as McLaren develops it, sounds less like a fresh turning to God and more like another effort to update the faith in light of our own new enlightenment. Perhaps for McLaren it is a matter of doing both rather than choosing one or the other, but I suspect that many of his readers will miss that subtlety.

The result may be yet another movement that promises that if only we jettison old ways of thinking and believing, which are the source of all our problems, we shall enter into a new time of liberation and meaning. I tend to think that the challenge is not so much to distance ourselves from the past as it is to discover what in our past and inheritance remains of enduring value and has the capacity to transform and renew the church for the world in our time. Yes, we do desperately need to find new ways of being and doing church, ways that are less about church as an institution existing for its own sake and more about church as community, relationship, spiritual practice and service. This may entail less emphasis on our quest and more on God's quest for us.