

McLAREN'S EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE TOUR

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We've all heard it said: "The more things change, the more they remain the same". The Bible says it another way in Ecclesiastes 1:9-10:

9 The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. 10 Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us.

I found that the essence of these statements are still proving to be axiomatic after my experience at the "Everything Must Change" conference held at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana with emergent church leader Brian McLaren. I sat through session after session listening to the emergent "gospel"; complete with medieval chants and choruses of despair, apologies to the Native American Indians of the St. Joseph River Valley, as well as to "Mother Earth" for scarring her through our mining and oil drilling operations.

The sarcasm with which traditional Scriptural positions were discussed, coupled with repeated swipes at Christians who were (in McLaren's opinion) waiting to be "snatched away", "evacuated", or "beamed up", brought one particular Scripture passage constantly to my heart and mind. 2 Peter 3:3-13 captures the essence of the conference:

"3 Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers (a derider, (by implication) a false teacher: - mocker. Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionary.), walking after their own lusts, 4 And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. 5 For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: 6 Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished. 7 But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. 8 But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. 11 Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, 12 Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? 13 Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."

Upon arriving at Goshen College on Friday night (5/9/08), I immediately went to the registration table to pick up my name tag along with all the other conference materials. I was handed a plain cloth tote bag containing sample publications from organizations such as The Sierra Club, the One Campaign, Emergent Village, etc. As I came to the end of the table, I was also given a complimentary "green", low-energy light bulb. I knew at that moment, that I was about to begin a very unique experience to say the least.

The first session of the evening was entitled, "Focusing on the Wounds of our Planet". We sang a song based upon St. Francis of Assisi's poem "Brother Sun, Sister Moon", and were then led in an opening prayer of "location and repentance" by an attractive young African-American woman who approached the microphone and began the invocation.

"O Great God, we gather here where the Elkhart and St. Joseph rivers meet and then flow into Lake Michigan. From Lake Michigan to Lake Ontario, on through Niagara and ultimately into the Atlantic, one of Your great oceans that cover the face of the earth." She then went on, "We repent for the violence and injustice done to the Illini, Miami, and other native tribes of the St. Joseph River Valley"; to which the audience responded, "Ancient One, Forgive us."

When she spoke of the native tribes, she was overcome with emotion and had to step back from the microphone until she could collect herself and continue; only after being comforted by an associate on the platform. Allow me to say right here and now that I was touched by the young woman's sincerity, and in no way want to mock or denigrate her feelings and convictions; I merely desire to express my serious disagreement with both the philosophy and logic behind them. Following that "liturgy", we viewed a DVD prepared by the Sierra Club exposing the immoral mining techniques used by energy companies in West Virginia. We were then asked to break up into small groups of two or three to discuss our thoughts and feelings, until being called back together by a gently ringing chime; a sound which became very familiar during the entire weekend.

The music was all original and was performed by a very gifted young woman. The tonality was "modal" and a-rhythmic; reminiscent of the "coffee house" styles of the 1960s; a sort of "Hillsong meets Joan Biaz" blend. Very prosaic in nature, with quickly spoken recitations over guitar and violin, seven or eight words to every two or three beats; all crying out about our rape of "Mother Earth" and other human rights violations. The thing that stuck out to me was that there was no worship poetry extolling the Glory of God or the beauty of Christ in creation. Everything was directed towards an inward, subjective, and very mystical experience, coupled with a worldview which represented more of the Gospel of "Marx" than of "Mark". Reflecting back to the opening "worship chorus" inspired by Francis of Assisi; Mr. McLaren stated that in one particular city a man rose from his seat and walked out because the

song sounded “New Age”. He then scoffed, “Not New Age, but Middle Age”... a comment that drew delighted laughter from his admiring congregation. The emergent community’s fixation with non-Biblical practices rooted in the middle-ages has been responsible for leading many sincere pilgrims to explore the “ancient-modern” church through candles, incense, adoration of icons and relics, etc. The audience was repeatedly encouraged to cast off their old “framing story” (the way they see the world) including such bad things as doctrinal and systematic Bible study, since (according to emergent thought) nothing can be definitely known. Therefore, any positive statements that sounded like confidence in the existence of absolute truth were scoffed at as being “narrow minded and proud”. The conclusion of the Friday evening “session” was an amazing demonstration of this philosophy. The audience was directed to many different “sacred spaces” set up to aid them in getting in touch with themselves and “the divine”. One station was a table covered with votive candles which could be lit and meditated upon. Another held a large bowl of water where one could get in touch with the “flow” of nature and spirit, and yet another featured a bowl of dirt where one could literally touch “Mother Earth” and contemplate all the evils done to her. I got in touch with my car, drove home (burning precious fossil fuel) and finally, got in touch with my bed.

NEW AGE... OLD PROBLEM

Saturday morning (5/10/08) began with “Waking Up From a Bad Dream” where it was our task to determine and discuss the world’s top problems. Beginning with another “worship song” inspired by medieval piety, we were reminded that God once had a dream for this planet, and that our mining is a “scar cut across the face of Mother Earth”. We were also encouraged that...

“As God’s dream works in us, it then flows through our bodies via expressions such as art, poetry, shopping, voting, etc.”

Once again The Gospel was represented as no longer being an issue of personal redemption from sin, but rather “The Message of Jesus” which addresses population control, energy consumption, political justice, and the non-violent resistance of authoritarian regimes. I was stirred by the thought that my wife Doreen and I would probably be looked upon as being globally irresponsible for having five beautiful children. Under many global population guidelines we would be required (or at least urged) to have aborted four of them in the name of saving the planet. Isn’t it tragic that as a result of the recent devastating earthquake in China, thousands of couples are now grieving the loss of their only child; many of them having been sterilized to prevent any future pregnancies (man’s wisdom at work)? The conference audience was constantly reminded that “catastrophic consequences due to global warming are upon us”, and asked to consider that “fact” when we stood under a warm shower, we “probably felt better than the King of France did during the middle ages”. To this I mused, “Does this now mean that I am to feel guilty for the blessing of hot water as well?”

Illegal immigration found its way into this ancient/new “Teaching of Jesus” when Mr. McLaren stated,

“If only an invisible border separated your baby from 40 extra years of life, only a really bad person would pass a law making immigration illegal”.

I thought to myself, “If America is so bad; perhaps we need more “emergent evangelists” stationed at the borders telling these misguided seekers that they are better off in their simpler, more earth-friendly villages than in this land of irresponsible consumption! Ask yourself the obvious question... “Why do our babies live longer?” “Why do these precious people desire to live in the developed West anyway? You see, Mr. McLaren’s illogical diatribe against everything American suffers a fatal self-inflicted blow when he is forced to come to grips with our level of health care and welfare programs, public safety and education, and all the other benefits which prove so irresistible to the rest of the world’s “huddled masses yearning to breathe free”. He also could not resist venturing into the arena of foreign relations as well.

“When the prosperous, rich minority (“McLaren speak” for White, European, Evangelical, Heterosexuals) feels afraid of the angry majority, they decrease foreign aid and increase military spending”. Also, the prosperous (American) says, “Let’s sell arms to many different poor nations. That way they will fight each other and leave us alone.”

And what workshop on social, political, and economic injustice would be complete without a few words on behalf of yet another of McLaren’s favorite victimized “minority groups”... the homosexual and lesbian community. He stated:

“Homosexuals have been perfect scapegoats for the powerful throughout history. There are enough of them (7% at his estimate) to be present, but too few to do you any real harm in return”.

This proclamation scored even more points with his small but approving audience.

BLESSED HOPE OR BLUNDERING DOPE?

Earlier that same morning I was awakened before my alarm went off, and found that I was already praying. There were two principle issues rolling around in my mind: One was the Laws of Thermodynamics, and the other... homosexuality. When McLaren be-

moaned the horrible injustices done to the homosexual community during his first session, I knew that something was afoot from the Lord. I had no idea how, when, or even if I would get an opportunity to share what had been placed upon my heart; but I was prayerfully watching and waiting. Near the end of the current session a time for questions was opened up, and an intelligent sounding man across the aisle from me put forth his thoughts concerning sustainable growth and job creation in light of environmental responsibility. I knew at that moment that my early morning impressions received during prayer were indeed from the Lord, and that the time had come to insert thermodynamics into the discussion. When the other gentleman finished, I raised my hand and heard Mr. McLaren say in my direction, “One more question... Yes, this man over here”. When the moderator handed the microphone to me I said, “Yes, Brian; in light of this gentleman’s question, coupled with your remarks about the environment and global crisis, I was reminded of the writings of Jeremy Rifkin dealing with the three Laws of Thermodynamics”. Brian nodded in recognition.

(The three laws basically state that the earth is a closed system that contains a limited supply of energy, expressed in basic units of “heat”. Also, the laws state that this energy flows in one direction; from heat to “heat death” or homeostasis. In simple terms this means that if you have a hot cup of coffee and you leave it on your kitchen counter for a period of time, the cup will eventually reach room temperature, or homeostasis. If you desire to re-heat your coffee, you must place it in a microwave oven, on a stove, campfire, etc. Unfortunately, to re-heat your beverage you must use more heat energy through electricity, coal, firewood, etc. thereby creating the loss of even more energy. This is where the Law of Entropy comes into play. Entropy says that over time, all things go from a state of use to disuse, from order to chaos; this is not a theory like evolution, but is a proven scientific Law! Now that I’ve covered that, let’s get back to the conference where I am holding the microphone and addressing Mr. McLaren).

“Brian, with these Laws clearly before us, don’t they lend themselves to a more Scripturally orthodox eschatology (the doctrine of the end of the age)?”

He laughed and said,

“If you don’t know what the word eschatology means, you’re blessed!”

Again he received a chorus of healthy laughter, scoffing at the foolish irrelevance of my question. Brian stated that in his view, scientists will figure out what is to come at the end of the world; whether galaxies will collide, or perhaps another cataclysmic ice age or something else; all possibilities which are millions of years in the future. Theologically though (he added glibly),

“I believe all predictive prophecies were fulfilled in the destruction of the Jewish Temple in AD 70 under the Roman Empire (author’s note: This is known as Preterism).”

He also stated that he believed that we were...

co-creators of the future with God, and that it wasn’t a movie that had already been shot (author’s note: This is known as Open Theism).

A tremendous book dealing with the dynamics of post-modern thought (which also encompasses the emergent camp) has been written by David F. Wells which captures the essence of McLaren’s belief system. Listen to Wells’s brilliant analytical rebuttal of another “open theist”, Clark Pinnock.

Pinnock began a full-scale revision of all that he had believed. He came to reject election and, instead, to think that God’s sovereignty in life is exercised in such a way that he voluntarily limits his power and invites people to “share in the divine creativity.” He then says that “God invites humans to share in deciding what the future will be. God does not take it all onto his own shoulders,” which, one has to say, is quite an astonishing thought. He went on to reject the doctrine of total depravity and to endorse the view of universal atonement.... Finally, it is necessary that God not know the future if, in fact, he is to be involved in its ongoing unfolding as it arrives in the present. This is what Pinnock had in mind when he speaks of God’s having dynamic involvement with the world rather than a static relationship to it. God improvises. As each new situation arises, he assesses the options and possibilities, the pros and cons, and like the conductor of an extended orchestra tries to get all the players to play together and harmoniously.... The thought is that God is constantly rethinking his actions, reassessing life as he sees it unfold, and repositioning himself in order to become more deeply involved with his people (Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, pp.243-246.).

Do you see the theological similarities between Pinnock and McLaren’s worldviews, as well as the conclusions they both demand? When a man or a movement is built on the premise that all Biblical prophecy has already been fulfilled, coupled with an evolutionary view of an uncertain future that even God doesn’t know about; we are left with an unthinkable cosmic anarchy that has an evolving biological environment, an evolving societal environment, all of which is being overseen by an evolving “god” who is anxiously awaiting his next cue from the random actions of his creatures! This telling quote reveals perhaps the most disturbing (yet most logical) conclusion of Mr. McLaren’s worldview:

The genius of Marxism is that it offers hope within history, when the church only offers hope outside of history.

The church of Jesus Christ then, if living within the sort of scenario represented by McClaren, is left only with the hope provided by environmental activism, recycling, and restructuring of the globe's wealth, while striving for planetary evolution until we all arrive in the "new heaven's and the new earth".

"WHICH JESUS?"

As this session began, the gathering was again led in an opening song to set the mood for the discussion which would follow. The "Hymn of Remorse" went something like this:

We repent for covering your colorful earth with grey cement... for cutting down trees... for scarring your earth... Lord, have mercy, can we be restored? What of the lands of tribes and nations who lived here first... the noise of traffic is drowning out the songbird's song... etc?

Syndicated columnist, Jonah Goldberg, in a recent piece found in the May 23rd edition of the South Bend Tribune, made this insightful observation.

At its core, environmentalism is a kind of nature worship. It's a holistic ideology, shot through with religious sentiment... Environmentalism's most renewable resources are fear, guilt and moral bullying.

When I read these words, I couldn't help but wonder if Mr. Goldberg hadn't been in the same conference audience with me in Goshen!

Brain began his presentation by sharing subtle yet needed "adjustments" to the confession of Peter in Matthew 16, telling us that "Christos" should be read as "Liberating King", instead of the "old view" of Jesus as merely an "anointed (Greek: chrio) Savior" from sin. Instead of Peter's insight coming as the direct result of a divine revelation from "My Father which is in Heaven", as Jesus put it in verse 17, McLaren corrected this fallacious view, demonstrating rather, that Peter utilizing existing terminology that was applied to Caesar:

"Divine Augustus, Son of Apollo—Do you see what language Peter tapped into?"

Once again the Word of God's divine quality was "deconstructed" in favor of a "cultural and historical contextualization" based upon the prevailing political milieu of the time. I knew that it was going to be a long day indeed. I mentioned earlier that I had been awakened very early on this Saturday morning with two distinct burdens on my heart and mind. The first issue of Thermodynamics and eschatology I have already dealt with. The other, homosexuality, had not yet presented itself... this however, was about to change. During one of the regular "break outs" into small groups, I was paired with a very pleasant man in his fifties, who turned to me and said, "Hello, my name is Bill". I discovered that Bill is a pastor in a major "high church" denomination, who wanted to discuss something that Brian had touched on in an earlier session. McLaren's remark that "homosexuals have been perfect scapegoats for the powerful throughout history..." seemed to be a burning issue that Bill wanted to discuss with me. He went on to tell me that he agreed with Brian that Bible passages usually quoted by "fundamentalists" on this subject were only meant for one particular audience and time in history. Therefore, since we no longer deal with those same issues in today's church, we therefore do not need to pay heed to the Scriptures which address them. He then made a non-specific and passing reference to "Romans 1" (as a generally accepted example of such an outdated text). For our purposes, I quote verses 18-27:

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; 19 Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. 20 For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: 21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, 23 And changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. 24 Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves: 25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. 26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: 27 And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.

After reading this aloud with Bill I simply said,

"Don't you believe that we still have people today who 'worship and serve the creature more than the Creator..?' Do you really think that there is no one in our world today that is of a "reprobate mind"?"

He never answered that question, but instead went on to tell me how he had dealt with his current church when the issue of homosexuality had arisen. He told me that he confronted the church council with the charge that...

“You tolerated a previous pastor that was greedy and a gossip, but now you won’t tolerate me”.

Pleadingly he said,

“Now I ask you Jeff, is that right?”

I looked directly into his searching eyes and replied,

“No Bill, it is not right. The church council should not have tolerated the previous pastor’s greed and gossip anymore than they would any other sin.”

At that moment the sound of the gentle chime rang out over the top of the discussion, calling us back into general session. As I turned to say something else to my new friend Bill, I discovered that as I had reached for the Bible, he had reached for the door; moving to the other side of the auditorium. I sadly exited the auditorium, serenaded by the Chapel’s sound system softly playing Bob Dylan singing, “The times they are a changin’”... Oh, how I wish they truly were.

“GUIDED EXPERIENCE FOR REFLECTION USING ART”

During this afternoon session, the participants were encouraged to simply look at a collection of abstract paintings projected on the dimly lit chapel’s viewing screens, while listening to instrumental jazz (composed in honor of Hurricane Katrina survivors). This exercise was meant to help us break out of our “Framing Story”, while simultaneously receiving an “epiphany” from the spirit within. The workshop leader urged the audience deeper through hushed, comforting tones:

Listen to your mind, body, and emotions. Think in a non-linear fashion, write down impressionistic stream of consciousness poetry without judging anything flowing through you.

Here is a sample of some quotes from the “Nude Truths” art presentation:

“I am, we are, everything is! In this mystery we live.

And...

Plucking truth from the vast, surrounding nowhere....”

For the disciple of Jesus Christ and His Word, the question of our existence is answered in Acts 17:28 where Paul proclaims, “In Him we live, and move, and have our being.” And why should we have to “pluck truth” from anywhere except God’s Word which our Lord declares as “Truth” in John 17:17?

The fruit of this exercise in introspective exploration and “stream of consciousness” writing can be seen in the poetry written by an anonymous young woman. Listen to the words of this poor wandering exile as she cries out for some sort of meaning and direction:

“Child covers her eyes, eyes close them to soothe, soothe my broken heart, broken record of anger fight, fight self because the man, man won’t get up, offa me, me hate--me fight--me angry, angry at raped mountains, mountains—can you believe it—raped, raped me I raped others, others haunt me with guilt, guilt a carcass shadow thick, a thick memory of tears, tears redden eyes, eyes closed, rest child”

This tortured, Christless plea was typical of the offerings which were praised by the facilitator during the session on Saturday afternoon. For the Biblical Christian, even though all pass through an individual “valley of the shadow of death” at times, ultimately knows that the Lord is with them, and that His conquest over sin, death and temporal suffering is the rock one can cling to and stand upon; even when hot tears stream down and questions fill one’s mind. For the emergent pilgrim however, this life is only a cycle of evolutionary activism which holds out hope that somehow we can bring the world to true economic and political harmony, even if it takes millions of years. The Gospel of personal salvation, a coming day of reckoning, and a restored heavens and earth is still scoffed at as irrelevant and out of touch.

SAVED OR DEPRAVED?

In light of the preceding observations, one can understand why the preponderance of Scripture quoted by McLaren comes from those places which deal with the ethical and humane treatment of one’s fellow man, and those dealing with social justice and caring for the poor. These passages then, are synthesized and represented then, as prerequisites for salvation. On page 208 of Everything Must

Change he writes,

The way of the kingdom of God calls people to a higher concern than self- or national interest: namely, concern for the common good.

And for Jesus, achieving the bottom line of profit and financial success without concern for the common good qualifies one uniquely—not for the heaven of the Fortune 500—but for hell.

With no apologies to Martin Luther, John Calvin, or modern evangelicalism, Jesus (in Luke 16:19) does not prescribe hell to those who refuse to accept the message of justification by grace through faith, or to those who are predestined for perdition, or to those who don't express faith in a favored atonement theory by accepting Jesus as their "personal Savior." Rather, hell—literal or figurative—is for the rich and comfortable who proceed on their way without concern for their poor neighbor day after day. As Jesus also makes clear in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)....

Even more revealing statements which help us understand where McLaren is coming from on this vital issue are contained in an interview with Leif Hansen; the transcript of which is available at www.understandthetimes.org/mclarentrans.shtml. Listen to this disturbing exchange.

Hansen: They (traditional Christians) want to know that there's going to be some kind of, so to speak, hell to pay. Some sort of judgment. I think part of the problem that you and I both react to is that an infinite amount of punishment for a finite being and a finite amount of sin, there's something that seems to question God's just and loving nature.

McLaren: Yeah, it's very true. And I think that creates a rational problem. And is that rationally sensible? Would it be—Does it make sense for a good being to create creatures who will experience infinite torture, infinite time, infinite—you know, never be numbed in their consciousness? I mean, how would you even create a universe where that sort of thing could happen? It just sounds—It really raises some questions about the goodness of God. And that, to me, is the deepest issue. You know, John said in First John, God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. And I- what I have to believe is that very few of us actually believe that. We all have the suspicion that there is a dark side to God. And that God isn't truly, truly good. And I'm sure there's all kinds of psycho pathology in that and everything else for all of us. But I think this is, in large part, why, what is so wonderful and magnetic about Jesus, is that Jesus, I think, reveals to us a God who is all light and there is no darkness at all there.

(Author's note: Do you see here how the very fact that God is holy, just, and perfect is turned into an accusation against Him? Also, note that the problem is now with an unjust God instead of a sinful human race.)

Hansen: I see that, too, Brian. But I can't remember if I've mentioned this in the letter that I sent you. But there are some places where either I need that hermeneutic of love as I'm reading him (John). Or His editors screwed up what he said. Or something. But there is a few places. The one that always comes to my mind as an example is where he uses imagery that feels and sounds sort of violent and dark. And to me, sort of threatening. Even though it's a parable, the example would be the servants that get cut up into tiny pieces. I'm like, what the hell is with that Jesus? Why? If you want me to have a sense that you and that God can be trusted and ultimately care for me, I know it can hurt following you also. But why would you use an image like that?

(Author's note: Hansen's subtle turn of phrase does away with Biblical inerrancy and Divine inspiration when making his scoffing reference to the Apostle John's "editors screwing up". Instead of bowing before God's Holy Word with humility and repentance, he, as well as the majority of emergent advocates, simply changes the rules.)

McLaren: Let's use that example. Can we talk about that for a couple minutes? Because, first of all, wouldn't that be great for a biblical literalist to be as literal about that as they want to be about some of the other parables Jesus told. So that we have the picture now, not only are you in literal flame, but you are cut up into pieces. So there's however many pieces of you. I guess it's sort of a, yeah, it's a shish-kabob, exactly. So I think and we're laughing. These things shouldn't be laughed about. But, you know, I just think that's a great example of how we have this selective literalism that's just so stunning.

(Author's note: There's the scoffing again)

Later on in the interview we hear:

Hansen: But again, I don't mean to be a pain in the ass. But does the explosion come from God or does it come from God knowing how humanity, how we will reap what we sow?

McLaren: This is, one of the huge problems is the traditional understanding of hell. Because if the cross is in line with Jesus' teaching then—I won't say, the only, and I certainly won't say even the primary—but a primary meaning of the cross is that the kingdom of God doesn't come like the kingdoms of the this world, by inflicting violence and coercing people. But that the kingdom of God comes through suffering and willing, voluntary sacrifice. But in an ironic way, the doctrine of hell basically says, no, that that's not really true. That in the end, God gets His way through coercion and violence and intimidation and domination, just like every other kingdom does. The cross isn't the center then. The cross is almost a distraction and false advertising for God.

Hansen: Oh, Brian, that was just so beautifully said. I was tempted to get on my soap box there and you know—Because as you and I know there are so many illustrations and examples that you could give that show why the traditional view of hell completely falls in the face of—It's just antithetical to the cross. But the way you put it there, I love that. It's false advertising. And here, Jesus is saying, turn the other cheek. Love your enemy. Forgive seven times seventy. Return violence with self-sacrificial love. But if we believe the traditional view of hell, it's like, well, do that for a short amount of time. Because eventually, God's going to get them.

McLaren: Yeah. And I heard one well-known Christian leader, who—I won't mention his name, just to protect his reputation. Cause some people would use this against him. But I heard him say it like this: The traditional understanding says that God asks of us something that God is incapable of Himself. God asks us to forgive people. But God is incapable of forgiving. God can't forgive unless He punishes somebody in place of the person He was going to forgive. God doesn't say things to you—Forgive your wife, and then go kick the dog to vent your anger. God asks you to actually forgive.... And there's a certain sense that, a common understanding of the atonement presents a God who is incapable of forgiving. Unless He kicks somebody else.

Here is the literal “crux” of the matter indeed! According to Ephesians 1:7:

“In whom (Jesus Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;”

God “so loved the world” through Christ’s substitutionary and sacrificial death on Calvary’s Cross, because His Holy Character and Law could not co-exist with sin and rebellion. However, McLaren has now redefined the cross to be only an example of political non-violence and self sacrifice, instead of the legal and cosmic act of justification for the entire human race that it was. This is why for McLaren there indeed is a hell, but not for those who refuse God’s gracious offer of personal salvation (a petty theological issue to be sure); but rather for the rich and comfortable who proceed on their way without concern for their poor neighbor day after day.

This entire line of reasoning is reminiscent of a geometry proof gone bad. If one begins with an incorrect statement, then the entire proof is corrupted and the conclusion will be skewed. For instance; if $A = B$ (hell is not for those who reject Christ as Lord and Savior but for those who do not work for social and economic justice), and if $B = C$; (those who do spend their lives in this most noble enterprise will be in heaven, not because of personal faith in Christ’s finished work at Calvary, but by virtue of their humanistic compassion for their fellow man’s struggle with injustice). Therefore (according to the “transitory property” of geometric proofs) $A = C$ (Heaven is for all who care for their fellow man’s economic and political condition regardless of whether or not they profess faith in Christ, or are the member of any other particular religion or belief system (Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.)!

Allow me to say at this point, that I completely agree with the premise that we who claim a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus need to be regularly challenged to stay in the active ministry of giving of one’s time and resources, showing compassion to those in need. I would even go so far as to say that to neglect this duty is to sin against God and man. However, this “new atonement” goes beyond this, and completely does away with a significant portion of the New Testament which deals with personal faith in Christ Jesus as being the only door of true salvation and relationship with a Holy God!

Humanitarian outreach has always been an integral part of genuine Christian missions for centuries. Schools, hospitals, and orphanages have been built all over the world in the name of Jesus Christ and His glorious Gospel. Why are we now expected to believe that these “emergents” are doing something never before done in the history of the church? How incredibly vain! What of Robert Rakes and his Sunday Schools for the poor children of London? What of General William Booth and the Salvation Army with its twin mottos of “blood and fire”, and “soap and salvation”? In fact, Catherine Booth, the General’s dedicated partner in life and ministry proclaimed:

Many do not recognize the fact as they ought, that Satan has got men fast asleep in sin and that it is his great device to keep them so. He does not care what we do if he can do that. We may sing songs about the sweet by and by, preach sermons and say prayers until doomsday, and he will never concern himself about us, if we don’t wake anybody up. But if we awake the sleeping sinner he will gnash on us with his teeth. This is our work—to wake people up.

What a fiery call to true compassionate Gospel ministry indeed! You will notice though, that McLaren (as well as most emergent authors) omits any honorable references to these historic examples of Christ-centered compassion ministries, while at the same time deriding the “irrelevance” of Biblical and historical orthodoxy. Why? Because this argument has nothing to do with simply motivating Christians to compassionate service, but rather using social issues as a cover for deconstructing Biblical Christianity!

As an example of this dynamic, let us examine one of McLaren’s favorite theme passages of his tour. Matthew 25:31-46 specifically deals with the judgment of the sheep and the goats; which is meant to clearly demonstrate his “salvation through economic justice” argument. As I was meditating on this position though, I picked up my Bible (something I hadn’t been encouraged to do at this conference) and began to re-read the entire chapter. Beginning with Brian’s favorite section I read...

31 When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: 32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: 33 And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: 36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. 37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? 38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? 39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? 40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. 41 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: 43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. 44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? 45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. 46 And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

I paused and then returned to the beginning of the 25th chapter where I found the parable of the talents, a topic I've never seen mentioned in any of McLaren's writings nor heard him teach on. Jesus makes these troubling remarks at the parable's conclusion:

24 Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strewed: 25 And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. 26 His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strewed: 27 Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. 28 Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. 29 For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. 30 And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

According to these verses, it would appear that the small-minded, wicked and slothful servant was being judged for not applying the basic principles of market economics and a strong work ethic. What was the Lord's judgment in this case? Did He take the excessive profits of the servant with ten talents and lovingly redistribute his wealth to the unfortunate servant who buried his one talent in the ground (no doubt due to fear caused by years of abusive exploitation and colonialization)? Surprisingly, he instead took the one talent from the poor "have not" and gave it to the greedy, oppressive, capitalistic "have"! If a serious Bible student would read these successive passages in their proper context (a principle of hermeneutics that is rare if not absent from the emergent discussion), one would easily perceive that the Lord was building a comprehensive ethic of hard work and faithfulness coupled with genuine compassion for the unfortunate poor, sick, and oppressed. However, neither passage was ever meant to be taken in isolation, thereby being abused in order to create a doctrine of justification that is totally foreign to the comprehensive teachings of the New Testament! If one accepts the premise that all earnest and sincere humans will ultimately find their place in God's eternal Kingdom, the logical conclusion will be nothing short of humanistic universalism.

"WE'RE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT"

Later that day, a young man rose and asked a question after Brian shared a "parable" involving people who occupied one boat, with one group drilling a hole in the hull out of despair; thereby dooming all on board. The young man asked,

"What is the difference between being in the same boat and being in the right boat with Jesus?"

McLaren flattered the youth, congratulating him for his insightful question, and then promptly jumped categories again by referring back to the earlier topic of irresponsible strip mining and how the world must be compared to the Titanic. Proceeding along on this dead-end track of logic, he lamented that only a small minority was actually "helping organize the life boats" (obviously referring to the emergent village). He never answered the young man's question as to whether or not people needed to be brought to the "right boat" of Christ, nor did he address the urgency of getting as many souls into those life boats as possible. After all, once McClaren eliminated the doctrine of hell from the equation, along with any sense of urgency created by a future judgment, his "Titanic" that he calls the human existence on planet earth won't sink for millions of years... so what's the hurry? This position places "Captain McClaren" squarely on the bridge of the SS Emergent, congratulating himself on speeding at a record-setting pace across a sea of icebergs, secure in the delusion that his philosophic vessel is "unsinkable". The truly ironic and tragic thing about this comparison is; that just as the prideful builders of the original Titanic deliberately failed to see the need of equipping their doomed ship with enough lifeboats, the SS Emergent is refusing to do the same thing.

McLaren's life boats are constructed of recycled aluminum cans and paper, "green" light bulbs, cooperatively grown coffees and a universalistic gospel, while still refusing to acknowledge that the entire ship has been prophetically doomed to sink! Remember that 2 Peter 3 refers back to the destruction of the young earth in the days of another "lifeboat". Noah built the ark to the saving of his own house, while also extending a universal invitation to his generation for any who would have believed and gotten on board. Tragically there were only a few saved then, and if this generation follows scoffing leaders like McLaren, they too will succumb to either natural death followed by judgment (Hebrews 9:22), or the flood of fire promised by the Holy Spirit through Peter's pen (2 Peter 3)! Some generation is going to have to pay the check and turn out the lights. What hope does the emergent church offer them?

READING ADULT BOOKS

After failing to answer the direct, honest question of the seeking youth in the earlier session, Mr. McLaren demonstrated more of his characteristic word play in a later gathering that was meant only to confuse what had been previously considered as obvious (i.e. "no man cometh to the Father but by Me" John 14:6). When asked for concrete definitions and straight forward Scriptural answers, he simply turns the SS Emergent into a fog bank of allegory and symbolism. When speaking of figurative vs. literal interpretation of Scripture, Mr. McLaren didn't allow an opportunity for a good joke to escape as he stated, "Those who can't read adult books..."

shouldn't". This was an allusion to Revelation 19:15 which he quoted:

"out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations:"

The Captain then reached down and drew out a pen, as though it was a sword. He then mockingly placed it in his mouth and began to swish his head from side to side, scoffing at those (literalists) who should henceforth refrain from reading "adult books". The audience howled in approving, condescending laughter once again. The only problem was that in characteristic fashion, he failed to finish the rest of the passage, thereby failing to bless his disciples with the "correct emergent/apocalyptic interpretation".

...and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS. 17 And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; 18 That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great. 19 And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army. 20 And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshiped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. 21 And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.

Why didn't our glib professor have any comments on these verses or those of chapter 20? Oh well, maybe in his next book.

CONCLUSION

As the conference was drawing to a close, Brian offered a few suggestions on how to begin the process of global transformation. One offering was that everyone be sure to vote only for "green candidates", to champion endangered species, or to join an organization like the Sierra Club. Other strategic ideas were to "find a friend who is poor", practice "everyday democracy" through fair trading (that's emergent language for buying from ecologically and politically correct businesses), or to "visit a place of extreme poverty as a learner and friend". In light of these suggestions given by Mr. McClaren, please allow me (just one last time) to return to the passage that has served as the theme of this article. Notice if you will, that there is definitely an ethical mandate attached to the orthodox view of the end of the age, which calls every true Christian to action and not just words.

11 Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, 12 Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? 13 Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. 14 Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless (2 Peter 3:11-14).

Far from encouraging the church to be a mindless clan of cloud watchers, this passage calls us to search our own ethics in light of the earth's demise and God's eventual judgment, while being diligent in our quest for peace and reconciliation as we pass our time of pilgrimage in this present age. Whether it be by leading someone to faith in Jesus Christ through deliberate evangelism, raising a family, teaching in a school, or even doing medical research to defeat cancer or AIDS; we must do all in the name of our Lord and Savior, knowing that each human life is precious, and that each human life is short in the light of eternity!

Maranatha!