An Assortment of Study Slides for Discussing

Brian D. McLaren's

A New Kind of Christianity

Part IV: The Jesus Question

(Comprising Chapters 12-13)

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The lead-up to Chapters 12 and 13:

- **Ch. 10: Some writers of scripture who were accustomed to violence in their own cultures and personal development "would naturally see God through the lens of their own experience" (106) and represent God as similarly moved to violence.**

  The Bible shows God's progressive revelation of God's self to the Hebrews, initially, and later to non-Hebrews. (See pp. 99-100). Eventually, that revelation shows that God is . . . love.

- **Ch. 11: Reading *forward*, we find that "the character of the living God is like the character of Jesus" (118).**

  "[F]or Christians, the Bible's highest value is in revealing Jesus, who gives us the highest, deepest, and most mature view of the character of the living God" (115).

On Chapter 12: "Who Is Jesus and Why Is He Important?"

Four provisos or provocations:

1. **"When I celebrate Jesus as the Word of God as I did in the previous chapter, some folks get upset –and for opposite reasons" (119).**

   R_1: That characterization is too weak, or soft. It doesn't account for the victoriously militaristic conqueror portrayed in the Book of Revelation.

   R_2: That characterization elevates Jesus above the Bible for instruction in righteousness. (Cf. 116 in Ch. 11.)

2. **"[J]ust saying the name 'Jesus' doesn't mean much until we make clear which Jesus we are talking about" (119).**

3. **"Jesus can be a victim of identity theft, and people can say and do things with and in his name that he would never ever do" (119).**

4. **"By holding a presumptive hostility to new views of Jesus, which may indeed reflect contemporary biases, we may unwittingly preserve old views of Jesus, which also reflect dangerous and compromising biases—just biases of the past rather than the present" (121-22).**

On Chapter 12: "Who Is Jesus and Why Is He Important?"

R_1: The characterization of Jesus as merely the Word of God is too weak, or soft. It doesn't account for the victoriously militaristic conqueror portrayed in the Book of Revelation.

McLaren explains that "one of [his] most loyal and dedicated critics" (famously Mark Driscoll) has charged him and other "emergent types" with intention "to recast Jesus as a limp-wrist hippie in a dress with a lot of product in His hair, who drank decaf and made pithy Zen statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes" (119-20).

"In Revelation," says Driscoll in contrast, "Jesus is a prize-fighter with a tattoo down His leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is the guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up" (120).

Source-passage in Rev. 19:11-16 (NRSV):

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and wages war. 12 His eyes are like[a] a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in[b] blood, and his name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule[c] them with a scepter of iron; he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

On Chapter 12: "Who Is Jesus and Why Is He Important?"

R_1, continued: McLaren's list of alternative Jesus-figures that could be imagined and upheld against the spectre of the "hippie, diaper, halo Christ":

- the white supremacist Jesus
- the colonial Jesus
- the Eurocentric Jesus
- the Republican or Democrat Jesus
- the capitalist or communist Jesus
- the slave-owning Jesus
- the nuclear bomb-dropping America-first Jesus
- the organ-music stained-glass nostalgic-sentimental Jesus
- the antiscience know-nothing simpleton Jesus
- the prosperity-gospel get-rich-quick Jesus
- the institutional white-shirt-and-tie Jesus
- the Native American-slaying genocidal Jesus
- the cuddly omnipotent Christmas Jesus
- the male-chauvinist Jesus
- the homophobic "God hates fags" Jesus
- the South African pro-apartheid Jesus
- the Joe-Six-Pack Jesus
- the anti-Semitic Nazi Jesus
- the anti-Muslim Crusader Jesus
- Etc.
- [Cf. Ricky Bobby's prayer in *Talladega Nights*.]

McLaren's warning: "Those who think they stand had better take heed lest they fall, and those who think they know may have some more learning to do" (122).

On Chapter 12: "Who Is Jesus and Why Is He Important?"

R_2: The characterization of Jesus as (!) the Word of God elevates him above the Bible for instruction in righteousness. (Cf. p. 116 back in Ch. 11.)

McLaren seems to consider this objection as part of a "slippery-slope argument—that we'd better not budge on or rethink anything for fear we'll slip down into liberalism, apostasy, or some other hell" (122). Apparently he's thinking of people who engage in bibliolatry to the extent that Jesus and his simple gospel practically become footnotes.

"[T]he slippery-slope argument [. . .] proves itself dangerous and naïve even as it tries to protect us from danger and naiveté" (122):

- "**First**, it assumes we're already at the top of the slope, when it's just as likely that we're already at the bottom or somewhere in the middle."

- "**Second**, it assumes that, even if we're at the peak, there's only one side we might be in danger of sliding down, as if the mountain had only a northern liberal slope without an equally dangerous southern conservative slope, or an Eastern 'new age' slope without an equally dangerous Western 'old age' slope. You can back away from one danger smack over the cliff of another" (122).

On Chapter 12: "Who Is Jesus and Why Is He Important?"

McLaren: "Revelation is not portraying Jesus returning to earth in the future, having repented of his naïve gospel ways and having converted to Caesar's 'realistic' Greco-Roman methods instead" (125).

Jesus has not

- "concluded that it's best to live by the sword after all"
- "abandoned the way of peace"
- "had second thoughts about all that talk about forgiveness"
- "given up on that 'love your enemies' stuff"
- concluded "that God's strength is manifest not in weakness but in crushing domination"
- decided "that the weapons he needs are physical after all"
- admitted "that the enemies of the kingdom are flesh and blood after all"
- shown after all "that the way to glory isn't actually by dying on the cross [. . .] but rather by nailing others on it"
- "sold the humble donkey [. . .] and purchased chariots, warhorses, tanks, land mines, and B-1s"
- "climbed back to the top of the temple and decided he made a mistake the first time"
- "decided that the message of the cross is a little too foolish after all"
- "decided that [. . .] nobody can be expected to worship a king they can beat up"
- "decided that a tattoo down his leg would look a whole lot tougher [. . .] than scars in his hands, feet and side"
- "defect[ed] to the Greco-Roman narrative," though most of his followers prefer it to his "good news of the kingdom"

On Chapter 12: "Who Is Jesus and Why Is He Important?"

- One interpretation of Revelation 19:11-16 "**subverts** the reconciling messages of Jesus's gospel and life [. . .]."
- Another interpretation "**reinforces** them" (124).

"For me," says McLaren, "the latter approach is the only acceptable one."

McLaren suggests that the "sharp sword" coming out of Jesus's mouth is "his message of forgiveness and reconciliation" (124). ***What do you think of that interpretation?*** Here is the immediate context:

> 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a scepter of iron; he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

On Chapter 12: “Who Is Jesus and Why Is He Important?”

Several concluding statements from page 126:

- “That’s what Revelation actually tells us, that the humble man of peace is Lord.”
- “It invites us to pledge allegiance to the one who rules by his own example of service and suffering rather than by making examples of others.”
- “Revelation celebrates not the love of power, but the power of love.”
- “It denies, with all due audacity, that God’s anointed liberator is the Divine Terminator, threatening revenge for all who refuse to honor him, growling ‘I’ll be back!’”
- “The suffering, serving one who bled on a cross—not the one with a commitment to make others suffer and bleed—is the King of kings and Lord of lords.”

On Chapter 13: “Jesus Outside the Lines”

A challenge from another “loyal critic”:

“The only reason Jesus came was to save people from hell. . . . Jesus had no social agenda. . . . [He didn’t come to eliminate poverty or slavery or] . . . fix something in somebody’s life for the little moment they live on this earth.”

- John MacArthur, ca. 2008

A declaration from Jesus himself:

18 ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.’

20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

- Luke 4:18-19, 21 (cf. Isaiah 61) NRSV, ca. 60-90 AD

On Chapter 13: “Jesus Outside the Lines”

McLaren in response:

- “I think you’ll agree, my faithful critic’s statement can only make sense, first, if we interpret Jesus within the confines of the Greco-Roman six-line narrative; second, if we predetermine to read the Bible as a constitution; and third, if we construct and solidify our understanding of God before seeking to understand Jesus, rather than letting Jesus serve as the Word-made-flesh revelation of God’s character” (128).
- “In contrast, our quest [. . .] invites us to understand Jesus in terms of the three-dimensional biblical narrative we introduced earlier—to see him in terms of **the Genesis story** of creation and reconciliation, **the Exodus story** of liberation and formation, and **the Isaiah story** of new creation and the peace-making kingdom” (128; emphasis added).

On Chapter 13: “Jesus Outside the Lines”

McLaren tests his theory on the gospel of John, which, he says, “is the one most often used to buttress the Greco-Roman story” (128).

In the Book of John, he finds allusions to and echoes of important elements within what he calls the three forward-looking “primary narratives of the Bible” (Ch. 5, p. 54):

- **in the Genesis story and John’s:** creation, light, new life, gardens
- **in the Exodus story and John’s:** emancipation, guided journeying, old and new commandments
- **in the Isaiah story and John’s:** justice, shalom, light, healing, sociocultural transformation

McLaren provides many intertextual examples that, in his estimation, “make it clear that Jesus, contrary to [MacArthur’s] assertion, did not come merely to ‘save souls from hell.’ No [says McLaren], he came to launch a new Genesis, to lead a new Exodus, and to announce, embody, and inaugurate a new kingdom as the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). Seen in this light, Jesus and his message have everything to do with poverty, slavery, and a ‘social agenda’” (135).

On Chapter 13: "Jesus Outside the Lines"

Video: "Questioning 'Emergent' Churches"

An Interview with Pastor Kevin DeYoung and writer Ted Kluck on *Inner Compass*, a TV production of Calvin University, 2013

Main argument: What emergent theology tends to leave out, or to minimize, is the basic Gospel—that Christ died a violent death to save us from our sins and to restore us into God's good graces by appeasing His anger. We get that understanding from the writings of Paul, and it needs to be the primary message in every church.

Link to interview segment 18:42-22:34

On Chapter 13: “Jesus Outside the Lines”

Here’s a helpful review of McLaren’s Part IV, “The Jesus Question”:

- Perriman, Andrew. “Brian McLaren, A New Kind of Christianity: the fourth question about Jesus,” *P.OST* (blog), https://www.postost.net/, 11 Mar. 2010.

About the writer, in his own words: “I’ve combined theological studies and writing with pastoral and missional work in a wide range of contexts. I have a degree in English Language and Literature from Oxford and an MPhil and PhD from the London School of Theology, of which I am an Associate Research Fellow. I teach New Testament occasionally, and I am an extension studies tutor and examiner for LST’s MA in Biblical Studies.”

Another item of pertinent interest:

- Mohler, Albert. "A Theological Conversation Worth Having: A Response to Brian McLaren," *Albert Mohler* (website), 23 Mar. 2011. Essay mainly about (and critical of) McLaren's support for Rob Bell's *Love Wins* (2011) but with McLaren's *A New Kind of Christianity* in the background (and cited in the bibliography). Mohler has been president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1993.