

## **Becoming Convergent**

By Brian McLaren

In recent months, I've been seeing things in print, on radio/TV, and in the blogosphere that confidently say, "McLaren says ..." or "McLaren believes ..." Frequently, dyspeptic evaluations of my work are then generalized to discredit emergent or the emerging church (or whatever), and that's a shame. Meanwhile, when I read these confident statements of propositional truth about me and my work, I keep wondering, "Is there someone out there posing as an imposter, pretending to represent me?"

I've been able to do a good bit of research, using primary sources, to determine whether the person being described by a number of critics bears any resemblance to the man I've known all my life. But not wanting to trust my judgment alone on a matter of this importance – knowing that I might be biased – I've also asked other people who know me and have read my books whether I am the same person described by these critics. I even went back to my books themselves, just to be sure I wasn't confused. Based on this research, assuming that I am who I think I am, I've come to this conclusion: Many things that are being confidently asserted as objective, absolute, propositional truth about "Brian McLaren" are actually the truth about a fictional character, not about me.

Now having written some fiction myself, and being a former English teacher, I know something about fictional characters. They are often based on real characters. The author uses his craft to suppress some things about the real character and exaggerate other things to create someone completely original, useful for his purposes. In this regard, some of my critics should be congratulated for creating a fascinating, scary, dangerous, highly original, and useful character who bears my name, but who is very different from me.

I continue to assume that the fictional dimensions of their analyses are simple misinterpretations and honest mistakes, perhaps reflecting my weakness as a writer more than any lack of objectivity, charity, or fairness on their part. I have been unsure of how to respond. On the one hand, I want to remain lighthearted and openhearted and avoid any kind of defensive reaction. On the other hand, the impact of some of the mischaracterizations and false allegations could be serious. So when my friend Tony Jones suggested I simply tell my story and let that story correct misrepresentations that are spreading, that struck me as a good way to begin. Perhaps a more detailed point-by-point response will be necessary in the future, but I hope this will suffice.

I was brought up in a sincere Christian home. My parents are sweet and wonderful people, and any native kindness I have is due to their genes and example. My paternal grandfather was a courageous pioneer missionary with the Plymouth Brethren in Angola, where my dad spent part of his life growing up. My maternal grandfather – of Irish Catholic stock, educated through the eighth grade – served faithfully in a Brethren assembly in Rochester, NY, through his adult life. He remains in my memory one of the most beautiful, cheerful, and wise examples of a true Christian I have ever met. My parents raised my brother and me in the vibrant context of active church life, summer camps, missionary visits, daily devotions, frequent hospitality, generous stewardship, and a lived faith. Like many kids raised in those contexts, I "got saved" at a young

age, and frequently “recommitted my life” for fear that I wasn’t sincere enough the previous times.

Also like many kids raised in the church, I needed to self-differentiate so that my faith, if I was to keep it, would be my own. I spent a few years in mild adolescent rebellion and growing skepticism about the existence of God. During this time, I was befriended by a few committed Christian men – including one from Young Life and one from the Jesus Movement - who challenged me, believed in me, let me ask my troubling questions, and helped me come to a point of sincere, personal Christian commitment. They continued as my friends, disciplers, and mentors through the years. I was exposed to the charismatic movement as well, and although I never fully accepted traditional Pentecostal theology, I learned first-hand about the reality and power of the Holy Spirit.

My concern for evangelism began early. While in high school, I started a Bible study but never thought of inviting Christian friends to it: my primal Christian impulses were evangelistic and I invited some non-Christian friends. Meanwhile, another fellow in my high school started a Jesus People group for which I played the guitar. When he “fell away” and got involved in drugs again, I became the de-facto leader of the group. It was a completely student-led enterprise and soon grew to involve nearly a hundred kids. Eventually, while I was in college, this group became a local church, supported by my parents and some of their friends. God graciously sent me some additional older brothers in Christ to mentor me and encourage me at that time, a young man with a lot of responsibility for his age. They set an example of older leaders coming around a younger leader with encouragement and support – an example I have tried to follow now that I am the age they were back then.

I remember praying almost every morning of my four years in college for at least one opportunity to share my faith – or identify myself with Jesus in some way; that prayer was answered nearly every day through my undergraduate and graduate education. During those years, I wrote songs and traveled quite extensively performing evangelistic concerts. From time to time, I am still contacted by people who met me in my early twenties and either then or some time later came to faith in Christ.

So, my introduction to Christian leadership began early – and was primarily focused on evangelism, disciple-making and church-planting. I have been boringly consistent in these emphases to this very day.

The little church that grew out of the high school Bible study, like many well-intentioned endeavors of the Jesus Movement, started well and ended badly. During its demise, I remember thinking, “I’ll never do that again!” Around that time I got married, and Grace and I began attending a wonderful Episcopal church which the rector described as being “Anglican at the altar, evangelical in the pulpit, and charismatic in the pew.” I learned much about “a generous orthodoxy” from that experience. I even considered entering the Episcopal priesthood, but eventually decided against it, realizing that my primary calling was to those outside the institutional church, and the priesthood would put me in a more ecclesiastic role.

In graduate school, I wrote my thesis on then-living novelist Walker Percy. He struck me then, and even more now, as an American C. S. Lewis – earthier, funnier, less restrained, no less thoughtful, equally rooted in Christian faith. Between 1954 and 1974, he published wide-ranging articles that were collected in *The Message in the Bottle* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux). The first time I came across the word “postmodern” must have been in his essay of the same title. As I re-read the essay thirty years later, I realize afresh how formative Percy’s thought has been in my thinking. I believe these lines from the 1970’s capture my essential ambiguity about the idea of postmodernity – not (as some critics seem to read into my work) a naïve desire to blindly accommodate to it, but a sense of both its danger and opportunity.

What does [the Christian novelist] see in the world which arouses in him the deepest forebodings and at the same time kindles excitement and hope? ... What he sees in the Western world is the massive failure of Christendom itself.... [W]hat the novelist sees, or rather senses, is a certain quality of the postmodern consciousness as he finds it and as he incarnates it in his own characters. What he finds – in himself and in other people – is a new breed of person in whom the potential for catastrophe – and hope – has suddenly escalated... The psychical forces presently released in the postmodern consciousness open unlimited possibilities for both destruction and liberation, for an absolute loneliness or a rediscovery of community and reconciliation.

... The wrong questions are being asked. The proper question is not whether God has died or been superseded by the urban-political complex. The question is not whether the Good News is no longer relevant, but rather whether it is possible that man is presently undergoing a tempestuous restructuring of his consciousness which does not presently allow him to take account of the Good News.... It is possible that a different kind of communication-event occurs in the door of the church than occurred fifty years earlier. (112-116)

Studying literary criticism in graduate school, I encountered other dimensions of what is now called postmodern thought but then was known as post-structuralism, the new criticism, and deconstruction. I remember my head spinning; I wasn’t sure of what to make of it all.

Meanwhile, Grace and I opened our home for a Bible study which consisted of a mix of Christians and nonChristians. What I said I’d never do again (plant another church) started happening. The group grew to twenty, forty, seventy ... and soon a house church had been born, a joint venture with our good friends Shobha and Bill Duncan. (Bill had been active in Church of the Savior in Washington, DC – a church which anticipated and exemplifies many good qualities now associated with “the emerging church.”) Our little church had two distinguishing characteristics. First, it was concerned about evangelism – about reaching and discipling unchurched people. My experience in higher education – an inhospitable place for faith in those days – reinforced my belief that it would take new kinds of churches to connect with highly educated unchurched people. Second, we were trying to bring a wide diversity of Christians together – notably, both noncharismatics and charismatics. Some people will remember how bitterly divided the church was in those days over “the charismatic issue.”

Around this time (1985), I had heard Rick Warren speak. He wasn't as famous back then – but his message was the same solid message it has always been. What inspired me most was the simple realization that leading a church could be a good way of reaching and discipling unchurched people. Shortly thereafter, I heard Bill Hybels speak, and again, I sensed that church-based ministry and evangelism could be synergistic. (The fact that this synergy now seems obvious is a testament to how successful Rick and Bill have been, and how the church has been blessed by their ministries. Although some people have tried to pit me against them, I have always had the highest gratitude and respect for these men and their churches, because I never would have left teaching to become a pastor if it weren't for their example.)

I completed my Master's degree and began working as a teacher at several local colleges. I was spending ten to twenty hours a week doing church-related work as a layperson. Several nights a week, Grace and I would have people over – often seekers, sometimes new believers, leading Bible studies, answering questions, dealing with struggles, seeking to help them in their spiritual growth. As well, I'd be up early one or two mornings a week to meet with people for breakfast before work hours. Grace pointed out to me that now I was a husband, a father as well, a full-time college teacher, and a volunteer staff member at the church. I could do any three out of those four well, she wisely said, but not all four. So, when our leadership team offered to match my teacher's salary if I would become the church's pastor – first part-time, then full-time – it seemed like the right thing to do.

A few years later, our church leaders became frustrated because we were committed to evangelism, but were seeing too little evangelistic fruit. We went through a radical rethinking of our church – becoming even more deeply influenced by Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and others, while also trying to contextualize to our own unique setting: East Coast, demographically diverse, highly educated, liberal politically, etc. The rethinking resulted in a lot of new folk coming to the church – most of them unchurched, and they all came with questions and frustrations with standard, conservative-Evangelical-religious-right Christianity.

In 1990, I realized that the questions they were asking were resonant with those issues I had confronted in graduate school relating to epistemology and hermeneutics. I realized that my best answers didn't answer their questions because they were asking questions on a deeper level: they weren't just asking, "What's the answer to my question?" They were asking, "How can you be sure any question can receive a definitive answer?" I had been an avid reader all my life, and I was as familiar with the writings of C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer as anyone I knew. But as much as their lines of thought had helped me, they didn't always help my seeking friends. I was seeing what Walker Percy had called *a certain quality of the postmodern consciousness* in these sincere spiritual seekers who sat across the desk from me in my office.

So I faced a choice. I either rejected these friends and turned their questions away, or I sought to better understand them so that I could better help them in their search for God, faith, freedom, forgiveness, hope, and meaning in life. What I did was what any missionary would do in a new or unreached or unresponsive people group. That search set the course for the last fifteen years of my life.

Since then, I have continued to lead Cedar Ridge Community Church as a place where people can “be and make disciples in authentic community for the good of the world.” I have preached hundreds of Biblically-based sermons and done all the other things a pastor does – day in, day out, for over twenty years. In addition, I have invested large amounts of time meeting with young church planters and other young leaders, and many would call me one of their mentors. I have served on several boards, including the board of a wonderful, innovative global mission agency (as board chair), a seminary, and an evangelistic organization. As well, I’ve been able to participate in and serve the relational network known as emergent (emergentvillage.com) – which for the last few years has been bringing together church planters and youth workers and others involved in missional ministry for friendship and conversation about ministry and mission.

I continue to walk with Christ, practicing spiritual disciplines, reaching out to others with the good news, and staying rooted in Scripture. At heart, I am today what I’ve always been: a guy who loves Jesus and believes Jesus is the Savior of the world and absolutely right about everything, and who wants to help everyone I can follow him, experiencing and spreading transformation through the Holy Spirit in the context of authentic Christian community. (I’ve also always been a guy whose sentences are too long and who overuses parentheses.) In recent years, the church has released me part-time so I can devote more time to writing and speaking, and soon, we hope to bring in a new senior pastor so I can serve in the church as a volunteer again.

Since reading Percy in the 1970’s, dozens of writers have been of special help to me, but several stand out as extraordinary. First, British missiologist (and missionary to India) Lesslie Newbigin’s work has been absolutely essential to my development. Next, Leonard Sweet and Alan Roxburgh have been not only thought leaders for me, but also personal friends and mentors. Nancey Murphy, Stanley Grenz (who died earlier this year), and John Franke (who will carry on important facets of Stan’s unfinished work) have also taught me much both in writing and in person. Dallas Willard has played an important role, in terms of theology, philosophy, and spiritual formation. N. T. Wright’s books have been catalytic in more ways than I can count, as have those of Walter Brueggemann. And Wendell Berry’s essays, novels, and poetry have continued the integration of theology, philosophy, and art which I needed and grew to love in Walker Percy thirty years ago. I should hasten to add that I have also learned much from my critics, and will continue to do so.

My books in many ways chronicle the story of my own grappling with the challenges of making disciples in the changing context which for me was originally described by novelist Walker Percy back in the 1970’s. The titles of my books suggest the kind of path I have been exploring.

I wrote *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix*. I did not write *The Church Postmodernized: Accommodating Uncritically to Postmodern Philosophy*, nor did I write *The Church in the Box: Doing Ministry as It Was Done in the 1950’s*. This was a book about leading missional churches – churches committed to reaching people in the mission field of the emerging global (as opposed to colonial) culture.

I then wrote *Finding Faith*, not *Confining Faith to Those Who Already Have It* or *Giving Up on Faith and Surrendering to Postmodern Nihilism*. This was a book written for seekers – showing my commitment to evangelism.

Then I began a trilogy. The first title was *A New Kind of Christian*, not *A Sixteenth Century Kind of Christian* and not *A New Kind of NonChristian*. The second title was an attempt to tell the Biblical story, entitled *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, not *The System We Find Ourselves In* and not *The Postmodern Culture We Lose Our Christian Identity In*. The trilogy recently concluded with *The Last Word and the Word After That*, not *My Word Is The Last Word* or *The Last Word is Condemnation*.

I also wrote a book to help people share their faith with unchurched or dechurched non-Christians. It was called *More Ready Than You Realize*, not *How to Intimidate And Scare People Into Heaven*, and not *How To Keep Your Faith a Personal Secret So You Never Offend Anybody*.

The book that especially seemed to upset some of my critics was *A Generous Orthodoxy*. I was recently asked to add an epilogue to the book, from which I include this title-oriented paragraph:

A number of people have asked me if I have learned anything from the book's critics. The answer is yes, many things. But apart from a few small edits, there is only one substantial change I would make: I wish I would have entitled the book *Notes Toward A Generous Orthodoxy*, or *Stumbling Toward a Generous Orthodoxy*, or something like that. The awkward and excessive subtitle was intended to reduce or undermine any immodesty implied by the title. (Who am *I* to try to define a generous orthodoxy for anybody?) It was also intended to put the book more in the personal, confessional genre of, say, Annie LaMott's *Traveling Mercies* or *Plan B* (though I am not a fragment of the writer she is). But in spite of the subtitle, I fear that the title as it stands seems to promise something the book doesn't deliver, namely a comprehensive, scholarly, well-defended systematic theology for a new movement. That failure has been duly noted by a number of critics, and I wish I would have anticipated and somehow avoided it. Other than that, though, even if I had the chance for a "do-over," I wouldn't change anything substantial, including the few statements that have been so often quoted (and misquoted) by my critics. I trust that my meaning and their misunderstanding will become clear over time – and that our honest differences in both content and rhetoric will make clear what I mean by *a new kind of Christian*.

In the end, *A Generous Orthodoxy* was written from my lifelong evangelistic impulse: hoping to encourage the church to be a more hospitable, healthy, and wholesome place for seekers, so when they come in and become disciples, they will not be socialized into believers who are excessively argumentative, judgmental, and hostile to both the world and to many of their fellow Christians. Even those who are most critical of me and my work will probably agree: we have enough of those kind of folk around already.

Originally, it was pragmatic struggles in evangelism (a.k.a. church growth – an increasingly problematic term, in my mind) that got me asking some pragmatic questions – like “how do we

reach postmoderns for Christ?” Then, those pragmatic questions led to honest theological questions - like “Why do we who claim to be biblical talk so much about *accepting Christ as personal savior*, which is not really biblical language – and so little about *the kingdom of God is at hand*, which is at the core of Jesus’ message in the Bible?” Those theological questions in turn led to political questions – like “why do conservative American Christians focus so much on some issues (abortion, homosexuality) and so little on other issues (poverty, racism, peace)?” And they no doubt lead back to new pragmatic questions – like “how do we form authentic disciples of Jesus who integrate concern for personal spirituality with global social justice, so the church of the future will pursue holistic, integral mission?”

With these questions fomenting in my heart, in recent years I have felt increasingly called to address issues of justice, compassion, and peace from a biblical perspective. The genocides in Rwanda, Burundi, and Darfur ... the legacies of slavery, anti-Semitism, colonialism, and racism ... the linkage between the prevailing eschatology of the religious right and a “manifest destiny” and pro-war American foreign policy ... growing concerns about “just war theory” and the idea of “redemptive violence” in an age of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons ... these kinds of issues have called me to new levels of activism and outspokenness. My next book (*The Secret Message of Jesus*), which explores Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God for a “spiritual but not religious” audience, will provide another example my essential evangelistic passion - integrated with these emerging concerns for justice and peace.

I hope this brief narrative gives people a more accurate understanding of who the nonfictional Brian McLaren is, and I hope it will reduce collateral damage against people involved in the emergent conversation and the larger emerging church community. I also hope we can as soon as possible stop talking so much about certain notorious personalities (either semi-fictional ones or real ones) and certain notorious buzzwords (*postmodern, emerging, etc., etc.*), and instead get on with the more important mission which the Lord gave us: being and making disciples, in authentic community, for the good of the world. I hope that recent controversies about *emergence* will give way to a profound new *convergence* – where formerly alienated people come together as never before to form Christ-centered communities in which more and more of us learn to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength ... in which we learn to love our neighbors and our enemies according to the teachings of Jesus ... and through which we teach others by word and example to do the same, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Toward that convergence I will continue to bend my efforts in grateful collaboration with all who dream a similar dream.