

Fast Forward: New Maps for a New World

By Brian McLaren

"One of the greatest injustices we do to our young people is to ask them to be conservative. Christianity is not conservative, but revolutionary. To be conservative today is to miss the whole point, for conservatism means to stand in the flow of the status quo, and the status quo no longer belongs to us...If we want to be fair, we must teach the young to be revolutionaries, revolutionaries against the status quo."

-Francis Schaeffer, 1970

"Maybe I'm reacting as a middle-aged baby boomer, but don't read Brian McLaren's *Reinventing Your Church* unless you have a passionate desire to confront yourself and your ministry. Reading Brian excites me for the young church planters who read *Cutting Edge*, even as it reminds me that the rest of us may need to do some reinventing ourselves as we navigate the cultural shifts around us.

"I would tell all church planters to read McLaren. Here's a book to help you become the kind of learning pastors who create truly learning churches that can humbly, but faithfully, guide people to Jesus."

- Todd Hunter , Director, AVC USA

While many are discussing the current shifts in culture and the changes in worldviews, few are talking about the pragmatics of what ministry might look like in that emerging world. Brian McLaren gives us some fresh thinking with the wisdom of a seasoned church planter. Here are some excerpts.

You and I happen to have been born at an "edge," at a time of high "tectonic activity" in history—the end of one age and the beginning of another. It is a time of shaking. Yesterday's maps are already outdated, and today's soon will be, too. The uncharted world ahead of us is what we will call "the new world on the other side:" the other wide of two world wars and one cold war, the other side of communism, the other side of theological liberalism, the other side of the second millennium, the other side of modernism. There used to be an Old World, the a New World, then the Third World, but now all three are being swept up in a new new world.

During the last hundred years, and especially the last fifty, old-world technology has intensified cultural pressures and unleashed tremor after tremor, each far more significant than could ever have been imagined. These technological tremors have helped bring to an end the old world that created them. Think of the automobile and its effects on the environment, the economy, the family unit, and even courtship and sexuality (especially when the car is equipped with a back seat). Think of radio, air travel, birth-control pills, antibiotics, and the cathode ray tube—and we're barely past the mid-century mark. Then came the tidal wave of social change set in motion during the sixties. No wonder the old maps don't fit the new world!

Think of space travel and the personal computer, the cellular phone and the microwave, the fax machine and the Internet, the compact disc and genetic engineering. (I heard Dr. Leonard Sweet of Drew University say that the most significant scientific milestone of the whole century may have occurred in 1995, as the human genome project reached the 50 percent point in mapping the human gene. Who knows where that will lead—what horrors, what wonders?)

On Theology

We live in a time when the old systematic theologies are fading. They are not surviving the transition time well. Calvinism (or neo-Calvinism) is probably the strongest and most virile of all the systems, but even that is showing signs of defensiveness in many quarters that expose its decline. Actually, I think the new theology has been, in some seminal form, alive and well among

us already for quite some time. In the middle of the twentieth century C.S. Lewis expressed early articulations of it in essays and, even better, in fiction. By the end of the century, one feels the new theology moving in Roman Catholics such as Brennan Manning, Romano Guardini, Henri Nouwen, and Pope John Paul II, and in Protestants such as Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Leonard Sweet, Lesslie Newbigin, and the later Billy Graham.

If one believes that the systematic theology par excellence has already been achieved and perfectly articulated for all time (whether in Calvinism or Dispensationalism or Liberation Theology or whatever), then in a sense that person kills theology as a scholarly pursuit and turns seminaries into technical schools. Only where there is a need for creativity and problem solving do we find life. If all problems have theoretically been solved, and if everything worth saying has been said as well as it can be, then theology is dead, whether God lives or not! Of course, no one in the old theology would say it so crassly. Many have noted the listlessness and boredom of seminary education in recent years and have bemoaned its drift toward arid theory or touchy-feely psychology or organizational management devoted to the bottom line. Perhaps these were signs that theology itself didn't have much to keep itself busy, on the assumption that it had pretty well mapped out the Word in its own terms.

In the new church, then, for better or worse, I think theology must come back to life-and not just as a technical matter, but as a creative pursuit and passionate inquiry, like the best art and the best science. Psychology, sociology, the new physics, history, comparative religion, and spirituality-not to mention postmodernism in general-all are calling for some creative Christian theologians to unfold some new paradigms for us to use in our explorations. The old systems feel tired, used up, old hat, and worn, but the thirst for God is as strong as ever. New theological wineskins? I think so; I hope so. What a change occurs in the atmosphere of a seminary when we see the theologian as the creative thinker, the pursuer of truth, the wholehearted seeker and explorer and learner, rather than the memorizer, repeater, and defender of old formulations. What a challenge we encounter when we open ourselves to discover how Jesus Christ wants to theologically incarnate himself for the postmodern world, just as he did for the post-Enlightenment world of the old church.

On Apologetics

Postmodernism is the intellectual boundary between the old world and the other side. Why is it so important? Because when your view of truth is changed, when your confidence in the human ability to know truth in any objective way is revolutionized, then everything changes. That includes theology-and not only the content of your theology, nor only its categories. More far-reaching, the mind of the person doing and learning theology is also changed. We have the same basic data-but different software and different hardware. And that changes everything.

I read an interview with a popular Christian apologist a few years back. He was asked what he thought of postmodernism, and he answered something like this: "It must be opposed at all costs." There came the follow-up question: Why? "Because it destroys our apologetic."

I thought, Thank God this guy is over sixty-he can afford to think that postmodernism can be opposed. But for me and those younger than I, opposing postmodernism is a futile as opposing the English language. It's here. It's reality. It's the future. It's not only a fact on the event horizon; it's the way my generation processes every other fact on the event horizon. What are we going to do about it, with it, in it?

So one of the biggest questions on my screen these days is, How does the Spirit of Jesus Christ incarnate in a postmodern world? This question very likely terrifies or infuriates some Christians because they see the traumatic implications of what I am saying. And maybe they are right: Maybe there is no way ahead. Maybe the faithful thing to do these days is to become intellectually Amish and create communities that live in the past.

But in spite of my fear, I have this faith-that if we push forward through this transition time, some of us may find a good land for Christian faith on the other side. It will require courage, creativity, honesty, humility. It will require that Christian theologians become more like the best artists and scientists-passionately devoted to truth, and less like politicians-concerned about institutions and alliances and re-election (tenure) and book sales.

On Evangelism

I think a new approach to evangelism will have at least five themes:

1. We don't just offer "answers"; we offer mysteries.

In the old apologetic, we acted as if we had easy answers to the big questions, as if they were math problems. Our easy answers wore pretty thin pretty fast. In the new apologetic, we offer the faith, not because it has easy answers to the big questions (that is, shallow answers to deep questions), but because the faith is the context in which one can explore the mysteries that underlie these questions. Instead of "Here's the solution to your mathematical problem," we will say "Here's the place to learn math," or better yet, "Here's the place to work with your questions, live your questions, explore possible answers, and find direction to live by."

2. We don't debate minutiae; we focus on essentials.

In the old era, apologetics got distracted from hunting tigers to chasing field mice. Instead of focusing on the eternal need for God, meanings, values, morals, and moorings, our apologetics focused on fossils, archeology, politics, legislation, and personal problems. It will be to the larger issues that the new church will devote her best energies. "Is there meaning to life?" is a tiger question; "Is the earth ten thousand years old?" is a field mouse question.

3. We don't push credibility alone; we also stress plausibility.

Credibility has to do with the intellectual coherence and verifiable evidence for our faith. Plausibility has to do with its beauty and satisfactions-balanced realistically with its costs and struggles-as it is lived out in real life. If we don't sufficiently stress plausibility, people may concede, "Yes, Christianity has a certain logic; it can be seen to make sense." But, they will quickly add, "It doesn't appeal to me." If we don't sufficiently stress credibility, people may say, "Yes, those Christians are delightful folk, but how can such nice people believe such a load of nonsense?"

4. We don't condemn our competitors; we see them as colleagues of sorts and reason with them with winsome gentleness and respect.

It is a sign of desperation when a disputant has to attack an opponent personally. Yet much of our apologetic has been, in the final analysis, sophisticated (or not so sophisticated) name-calling:

- "That's secular humanism!"
- "You're liberal!"
- "That's pantheism!"

Yes...and so?

One of our toughest challenges in the reinvented church will be to develop a new way of talking about-and with-other religions. To dismiss Buddhism when all Buddhists lived on the other side of the world was easy; but when a Buddhist lives next door and teaches your college chemistry class and proves to be a very good neighbor or professor, his or her beliefs are not so easily dismissed. To caricature all Muslims as terrorists is easy until you meet a Muslim of grace and ethical depth. To focus on the cruelties of some Hindus and in so doing dismiss Hinduism might work until a Hindu points out a few of our own embarrassments and egregious failures as Christians. Just as we must acknowledge that both kooks and saints stand under the Christian

banner, we will have to stop giving ourselves permission to be prejudiced and stereotypical about members of other religions. We can't keep comparing our best with their worst and feeling smug.

5. We don't rush people; we help them at a healthy pace.

Twentieth-century Americans like me were taught to focus on an instant salvation, a decision-oriented regeneration, a conversion event. The new church, more in keeping with Christians throughout history, will emphasize the process of conversion, not only the event. Just as the birth event is the culmination of a long process, and is the commencement of another long process, and in and of itself constitutes a process (and a laborious one at that)-so the conversion event will be seen in the new church as a snapshot of a flowing river, a rain shower in a larger weather system, an important episode in an all-important process.

As a result, we won't rush people toward a decision. We will see rushed decisions as potential abortions-harmful, dangerous, even criminal. We will see this process and its component events as all taking place under the watchful eye of a provident, relational, dynamic God.

On Programs

The new church will be relativistic about its program. It will expect change. A certain kind of small group may be the rage for five years, but it will eventually reach its potential and then become incapable of holding the new wine. Then a new kind of group-or midweek service or class or prayer meeting or one-to-one program-will take its place. Worship will evolve from liturgical to spontaneous and back again. Children's ministry and youth ministry will experience ebbs and flows, innovation and adaptation and frustration, in predictable cycles.

In the old church, wineskins were mandates. They couldn't be changed. They were defended as being "the biblical pattern." Denominations enfranchised them, movements dispersed them, seminars marketed them, and companies profited by them. In the new church, we will not only be open to a new program but will loosen up about programs altogether. The leaders of the church will see themselves as the architects of temporary programs, as change agents to help their congregations prepare for changing programs. We won't just trade one old, hallowed program for an alternative hallowed tradition but will accept the notion that no single new program will serve and satisfy us forever.

On Church Structure

- A structure that works tends to promote growth, which will eventually make the structure obsolete. In other words, yesterday's successes and progress guarantee today's organizational failures and problems. Success today guarantees trouble tomorrow. Churches, like snakes and lobsters, need to shed their organizational skins as they grow.
- The Bible, rather than imposing one perfect structure (such as patriarchy, polygamy, or kingdom), presents a variety of structures through which God works at various times according to the need of the moment. Scripture therefore demonstrates the need for ongoing organizational evolution-or revolution.
- It will often be the case that structures are like cocoons or wombs: They must be left behind before the next stage of development can begin. In other words, a church needs to abandon some structures before they feel the need to do so. They will only know in retrospect-as they spread their wings or breathe fresh air-just how much the change was needed and what they would have missed by postponing the change.
- We need an ecclesiology that acknowledges latent periods without guilt. We are prone to guilt-tripping ourselves and others even though guilt trips take us nowhere but backward. For example, we glorify extraordinary revival experiences so as to feel like failures during ordinary times, not realizing that if last year's extraordinary revival experience continues for more than a few weeks, it becomes the new ordinary experience. If last week's worship was awe inspiring, this week's must at least equal it in emotional force; otherwise, someone is sure to tell us we are backsliding and will threaten to go down the street "where God is really moving." The result

in some churches is an ever-inflating hype, which might seem exciting from the outside, but from the inside is pressured, desperate, and pathetic.

The fact is, down times are important for many reasons, not the least of which is that without them there are no up times. All of life runs with times and seasons, ebbs and flows, work and rest, expansion and consolidation, death and birth. This is normal; it is also biblical, and our ecclesiology should acknowledge it.

On Success

- The most celebrated and notoriously successful models as I write-Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and John Maxwell, for example-became successful through bold innovation and creative synthesis, not through unthinking imitation. Thus we can imitate their product, but in so doing, violate the very process that made them successful.
- The successful models became successful by trying new ideas that were too radical to be popular. Wait until a model is popular enough to imitate and you're almost sure to be too late. Tomorrow's successes are more likely to be considered radical and unpopular today.
- The truly successful models earned their success the old-fashioned way-through pain, tears, endurance, mistakes, and prayer. (The leaders I have mentioned have done us a wonderful service by being refreshingly honest about their struggles.) In the process, they developed the very character that made them worthy from God's perspective (I imagine) to be entrusted with something as dangerous, potentially destructive, and burdensome as success. Some of us imitators may be looking for a shortcut-which, as you can see, is not too good an indicator of future success.

After teaching English literature at the university level for several years, Brian left academia to become founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church near Washington, D.C. He helped form the Seed Fellowship, a network for church planters, and is the board chair for International Teams, an international missions catalyst. His interests include evangelism, apologetics, church growth, art and music, and pastoral survival and burnout issues. He is married to Grace, a corporate consultant in team-building and human resources development. They have four children. **Coordinates:** BrianCRCC@aol.com. Website: www.crcc.org. Taped sessions with Brian, such as "Planet of the Pomo Theologians: Amateurs Tackling Tough Issues" and "Storytelling" are available by visiting www.youngleader.org and clicking to the "YL Mall."