

May 09, 2005

## to hell and back with [brian mclaren](#)



it's going to be a week of blog whoredom, people! books, books everywhere and a magazine to boot. today my guest is the godfather himself, [brian mclaren](#), pictured here with my soulsisters edna quiros and [liz rios](#). the interview is right here below and feel free to stick around and ask brian all kinds of questions in the comments like "how the hell do

you manage to write so many damn books?" or "what the hell can we do about the sudan?" he promises to answer all with candor and charm.

tomorrow it is brian's good friend [dave fleming](#), a truly great guy/author/friend who has got it going in, imho. and the best for last, karen neudorf towards the end of the week, talking about [beyond](#), the best little magazine on the planet. when karen gets here, there will be chocolate and red wine. and prizes.

humor me, stay tuned; make me happier still you nash-vegas emergent people and register for my [critical concerns course](#) about power and gender in the emerging church with heather kirk davidoff. more on that later.... but first! the interview....

**jenlemen:** hell is one of my favorite words. there's so many ways to use it. you can say you're mad as hell, that it's hotter than hell, that you had a hell of a great time. unfortunately, just the thought of the word "hell" can also put the fear of god in us and make us less brave when we try to broaden our theological perspectives. and the idea of hell, in my opinion, is one of our least attractive selling points for christianity when talking to people looking for a spiritual path. so, i'm curious, what possessed you to write the third book about hell? did you know all along that this would be the direction of the trilogy or did it come to you some other way?

**brian mclaren:** *Good question, Jen. Before I answer it, can I make a quick comment on your idea of the linguistic usefulness of the term? There's a strange pattern in English (not sure if it's the same in other languages) where words go from being positive to negative to positive (or at least neutral) again. The strength of the word seems to make it especially useful: For example ... Awe-ful = Awesome --> awful = lousy --> awful = very (awful good pizza); terrible = awesome --> terrible = lousy --> terrible = very (it was terribly rainy) That's probably worthless information, completely irrelevant to your real question.*

*I hit the issue of hell in [Book 1](#), when I had just begun rethinking the subject and when C. S. Lewis (who was also disturbed by the traditional conception)*

*was the most radical thinker I knew about. I was aware the John Stott had also rethought the subject and gained much criticism as a result. I had read Ed Fudge's well-argued book ([The Fire That Consumes](#)) too. But that's as far as my thinking had gone. I hadn't researched the history at all.*

*In [Book 2](#), I was trying to tell the Biblical story in a sense that was not focused solely on the solution of the individual guilt problem. This intensified the need to eventually deal with hell. So after finishing "[The Story We Find Ourselves In.](#)" I decided it would be a major focus of [Book 3](#), and I would try to dig up information on the history of the idea of hell. It's not as easy as one might think: there's not that much published on the subject.*

*Meanwhile, the work of [GOCN.ORG](#) and missional theology was progressing, which turns the focus even more away from the gospel being about "sin management" - a term which evokes Dallas Willard's work, too - although I'd be careful not to infer that Dallas would in any way agree with my newest book. I should also add that N. T. Wright's books have had a huge influence on me while I've been working on this trilogy, and that gave me added impetus to apply some of his insights about "Second Temple Judaism" to Jesus' thinking on the subject.*

**jen asks: you've been very careful in this book to not come down definitively on your views of the afterlife, but it seems inevitable to me that some people will consider for the first time the idea found in some ancient Jewish thought that death is really the end. do you think it's possible to live a life rich in hope and confidence in God's goodness while entertaining the possibility that there is no life after death? and how does taking the emphasis off an afterlife reposition a Christian's sense of hope in this life?**

**brian responds--** *I hope I make it clear in all three books that I deeply believe in the afterlife. I think there are major problems - logically and existentially - if we don't, just as I believe it's essential to believe in judgment of some sort. (The "truth and reconciliation commission" of South Africa comes to mind in this regard ...) If your life is going well, perhaps you can have confidence in God's goodness without hope beyond this life. But if you have a chronic, wasting disease ... if your child is damaged or scarred due to the injustice or carelessness of another ... if you live under the oppression of a brutal regime ... I think you'd be tempted to conclude that there is no goodness here, if this life is all there is.*

*Here's where afterlife can be easily abused though ... The Pharaohs used it to say, "You peons have no hope beyond this life, but if you serve me, you may get in on my coat-tails." Terrorists (ancient and modern) used it to say, "If you have the courage to do a suicide mission for our cause, you will go straight to heaven and have a bunch of hot women waiting to fulfill your every desire, so go kill some people in God's name!"*

*In contrast, I think Jesus says, "If you believe that good here will be rewarded beyond this life, do good whatever the cost. You don't have to survive. You can*

*end this life with a huge moral credit balance, meaning you've given much more than you've taken, and beyond this life, it will come back to you." That can be a powerful motivation to generosity, sacrifice, service, and love. C. S. Lewis emphasizes this theme as well.*

**jen asks: there's nothing like deconstructing hell to get you sent there by your critics. how can we refute the claim that we are not real christians if we say the point of the christian life is about something more than trying to get to heaven? many of us will be declared "not saved" by family, spouses, pastors and mentors if we confess our views about hell are changing.**

**brian responds--** *This is a disturbing trend. I call it the "Fox-Newsification" of the world - or the "Jerry Springerization" of Christianity. It's becoming acceptable again to accelerate from 0 to 90 in ten seconds in terms of religious rhetoric, and this has not produced good results in the past. Here is my commitment: to respond to harsh words with gentle words - and so avoid shouting matches; to let my life speak in my defense, rather than relying on words; to pray for those who are unkind to me (this really has a profound effect); to thank people for their feedback whenever there is the slightest grain of truth to it; to admit that I might be wrong and model a teachable attitude and one that seeks truth; to avoid becoming quarrelsome; to clarify patiently when people mis-state what I've said (which happens awfully often), and to realize that even if I'm 100% right - I have to expect nearly universal disapproval in the beginning.*

*-- And if I'm largely wrong, at least I can model a good spirit in the process ... since the people who claim to be right too often model a terribly bad one. In the end, since I hope to shift focus from the idea that the gospel equals hell avoidance to the idea that the gospel (of the kingdom) equals God's plan for personal and social transformation, I hope I can at least model a bit of the latter!*

brian's ready and waiting to hang out with us in the comments, so bring on the questions, responses, hi fives, huh?s and all the rest....

Posted by Jen at May 9, 2005 07:01 AM

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#### Comments

Hi Brian,

This came up before on the Generous Orthodoxy blog, but I am keely interested, so I thought I would bring it up yet again.

One of the most logical and convincing notions of hell I've encountered, and one that I think fits very well with a loving God who is all about personal and social transformation, comes from Eastern Orthodoxy. It is the view that when we die, all go to be with God. However, the degree to which your heart has come to be like God in this life, determines what the afterlife will be like for you. For those who have been transformed by Love, the light of Christ will be heavenly bliss. For those who have chosen the other path, the light of Chirst will be the fires of hell, as they are completely incompatible with it.

Perhaps you have already addressed this in the book (in which case, just tell me to go buy a copy), but if not, I was wondering if you would comment on the Eastern Orthodox view and how it might converge with some of the thinking you have been doing on the subject.

Posted by: JJ at May 9, 2005 02:31 AM

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Hi, J.J. - I spoke a bit about the Eastern Orthodox idea of hell in A New Kind of Christian, but not extensively. In its favor, this view says "There is nowhere you can go to be separated from God's presence." (By the way - the oft-quoted

idea that "death is separation" - is, I think, on the same level as "God helps those who helps themselves." It's not in the Bible, but many people think it is.)

The view raises other problems ... like, "How could heaven be a pleasant place if many or most of the people walking around were in agony?"

What I really like about the view is that it focuses attention not on whether you have the right "bar code" of having said the "sinner's prayer" or not ... but rather, it focuses attention on what kind of person you are becoming here and now.

That, I think, is Jesus' concern. The Pharisees could be highly religious - but they had become vicious people in the process. Their piety covered ugly things. Judgment (very important in my mind!) means the truth is told about what's hiding under the skin of piety ... The truth comes out; the masks and lies are torn away.

If we believe we will face this kind of judgment later, we can choose to face reality now. Pretense, hypocrisy, spiritual cosmetics don't make sense if they're ultimately failing, self-destructive strategies. So we choose to face the truth now ... and seek to live accordingly.

That will change the direction of our lives (i.e. repentance) and set us on a course of living in harmony with our beliefs about God (i.e. faith) and as a result - we will become a different (better) kind of person than we would have otherwise been. As that happens to more and more people, the trajectory of the world's future shifts from self-destruction to hope (kingdom of God). Jesus, I believe, came to accomplish this very thing.

Posted by: [brian mclaren](#) at May 9, 2005 08:08 AM

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Brian, thanks for the courage and gentleness in addressing some very difficult issues in your recent writings. I think one of the major contributions you're making is a gentler tone of voice for Christian faith dialogue.

I'd imagine it was quite challenging to do the metaphorical archeological dig for the history of hell, and your latest book might be perceived as doing too much to decouple the notion of hell as eternal conscious torment from the Gospel's more holistic message and intent, rather than presenting an answer or prescription for how to live out the Gospel for the sake of the Kingdom.

Perhaps it's too much to ask for in one book to do both? Or, to say it another way, might some of your readers be asking for too much, for you to both deconstruct and to construct in the span of a book?

Posted by: [dichuang](#) at May 9, 2005 08:44 AM

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Brian, Why do so many western Christians behave the way they do and focus on law rather than the great commandment? If I understand you correctly you are saying that a major factor is their understanding of hell. But couldn't the real problem be our understanding of what it means to believe instead? That we have never figured out what James 2:18 was saying? One of my concerns with your emphasis on hell is how it balances grace and works. Isn't there a danger of devaluing grace?

Posted by: Tom at May 9, 2005 10:14 AM

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Brian--really enjoyed the book, it has helped me deal with some of the fundamental baggage I've had for a while about hell and evangelism. I especially liked the list/categories of the scriptures dealing with hell in the book. My question is more on the practical side--how do we raise these questions in our conservative churches without being stoned. I am still working out my own views on hell and the gospel--and it is like a fresh new wind in my life, but in honesty, it's been difficult to share this or translate it in my faith community. Any thoughts?

Posted by: [brian orme](#) at May 9, 2005 10:17 AM

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(oh, this cracks me up. how we can raise these questions without getting stoned. so true.)

Posted by: [jen lemen](#) at May 9, 2005 10:22 AM

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Why are we so worried about getting stoned? Let's just get into our pulpits, rattle off all these new ideas, and brace ourselves for the firestorm.

Or not.

I think one thing that is important (oh, crap, I'm not Brian...what am "I" doing answering this) is to simply remember where we have been, and what we have come through. We can't assume that just because, through a series of events, conversations, books, encounters, etc., now we've arrived at some belief, that others will simply want to jump on the train with us at the spot, without having gone through all the agonizing, gut-wrenching stuff that got us to where we are...

That doesn't mean we can't raise questions, be prophetic or potentially make some waves...but I think we just need to keep in 'the journey' of others in mind...

Posted by: [Adam](#) at May 9, 2005 10:42 AM

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Hey Brian,

I love your books! I have been especially affected by "Dorothy on leadership" as you can see on my blog, which is called "Inner Dorothy"...

Question: I'm a pastor in the United Church of Canada, and I've noticed that a lot of the time, when I read about the emergent/emerging church I find myself saying "Hey, that's us!"

As a denomination, we in the UCC:

--try to draw on to the best of the traditions and experiences that came before us.

--we try to learn from past screw-ups.

-- we try not to be bound by "we've always done it this way"

-- we strive to be inclusive, basing that theologically on the life of Jesus.

-- we try to speak a relevant Word in creative and meaningful ways to a searching world.

The question: Are we emergent????

Peace, Sue

Posted by: [Sue](#) at May 9, 2005 11:28 AM

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Sue, I don't know what Brian would say, but answer is yes.

Posted by: [Jay](#) at May 9, 2005 11:47 AM

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Hey Brian:

My question stems from both my reading of the book and some of the comments you made in Banff last weekend...

I've been blogging through the book, chapter by chapter. To me the most outrageous and liberating concept you presented came in Chapter 22.

Let me refresh your memory:

"Salvation by grace, judgement by works. There's nothing in the Bible clearer than those two realities. Of course, you have to define salvation in Jesus' way, not just modern Western Christianity's."

and

"I didn't realize that being judged isn't the same as being condemned and that being saved means a lot more than not being judged."

In Banff you spoke of justice and mercy. Now, I see a link. I've always been perplexed by the legitimacy of me being a good Christian - that is, to "follow" a deity who obviously cared about the poor, the oppressed, the widow and the orphan, the ignored and overlooked - while not doing any of the same.

The notion that we will be judged by our works makes intuitive sense to me, as long as we broaden our narrow Western Christian definition of "judgement". While recognizing that this probably falls under the "I don't know" category, can you elaborate a little on this idea of the judgement of believers?

Posted by: [Mike](#) at May 9, 2005 12:09 PM

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**Post a comment**

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