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"Conversations About Hell" with Brian McLaren

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McLaren on pomomusings | May 9th

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09 May 2005

"CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HELL" WITH BRIAN MCLAREN

We are privileged here at pomomusings to have Brian McLaren be a guest blogger today. Brian wrote the following post, and he will be checking in once a day to read comments and reply to them. Please engage with him, ask him any questions you want, and enjoy this stop on Brian's "Conversations About Hell" Blog Tour. Thanks friends! Adam @ pomomusings.com

Hi, everyone - it's an honor to be your guest and have a bit of conversation about my newest book, "The Last Word and the Word After That."

One of the sub-themes of the book is that our understanding or misunderstanding of hell, judgment, the purpose of God, and the character of God has huge ramifications in how we live - including how we treat other humans, other living creatures, and the planet itself.

For example, I think we need to ask what are the consequences of belief that God, before the foundation of the earth, determined that some people are keepers and others are throw-aways. No responsible person, I think, would say it that crassly, but there is a degeneration of all ideas (including my own) from the time they leave the scholars or writers to the time they take on a life of their own on the street (or on the radio). Similarly, we need to think of the consequences of belief in a God of universal and infinite tolerance and without judgment or wrath over injustice (including injustice committed by the people who have the "right" view of hell, whatever that may be).

I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on these matters and your reactions to the book, if you've read it.

Brian McLaren

www.anewkindofchristian.com

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Adam B. Cleaveland: A Christ following, book reading, Subaru driving, Mac loving, beer drinking Princeton Theological Seminary student...

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Blogging 101: Anonymous comments.

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Hard Times
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eastmountainsouth

Continue reading for an excerpt of the book, information about Brian and information about the book.

Conversations About Hell

an excerpt from the new book

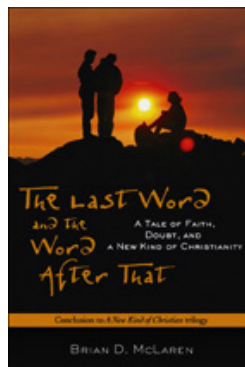
THE LAST WORD AND THE WORD AFTER THAT: A TALE OF FAITH, DOUBT, AND A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIANITY

by Brian D. McLaren

INTRODUCTION

Brian McLaren is a leader in the emergent church movement. He was interviewed by Larry King on February 1, 2005, after *Time* Magazine named him one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America.

The Last Word is the third book in McLaren's *New Kind of Christian* trilogy. It combines deceptively entertaining narrative with Socratic style dialogue and sound theological insight. "I am more interested in generating conversation than argument," McLaren says in the introduction. The book is presented as a series of conversations about hell.



According to one character in the book, "Millions of people, young and old, have given up on Christianity because our way of talking about hell sounds absolutely wacky. 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,' we say, 'and he'll fry your butt in hell forever unless you do or believe the right thing'... No wonder Christianity -- or that version of it -- is a dying religion in so many places in the world."

More information about *The Last Word and The Word After That* -- and author Brian McLaren -- follows the excerpt.

Conversations About Hell

by Brian D. McLaren

I believe that god is good. No thought I have ever had of God is better than God actually is. True, my thoughts -- including my assumptions about what "good" means -- are always more or less inaccurate, limited, and unworthy, but still I am confident of this: I have never overestimated how good God is because God's goodness overflows far beyond the limits of human understanding. That conviction gave birth to this book.

Now if you believe everything is pretty much fine in the Christian church and its theology, if you believe that only small cosmetic or methodological tweaks are needed in a basically sound enterprise, then there's no need to read this book. If, however, you believe that our common images and understandings of God are generally too small and even mean, then this book may help you -- and us.

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Bending the Rule
Big Lowitzki's Random Ravings
Beth Quick
Boy in the Bands
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Blog for Liberal Seekers
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Empirical Friend
Eric's Tasty Morsels of Thought
Except for These Chains
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Graceful Life
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Gay Marriage: Connect the
Biblical Dots



Every song!
Various Artists: Garden State
Soundtrack



Squares
The Beta Band: Hot Shots II



Nothing Fails
Madonna: American Life

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MY WISH LIST



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On the surface, this book appears to be largely about hell. But it isn't really. Those who read it and react to it as such will have missed the point. True, the subject of hell is worth talking about. In researching the evolution of the conventional doctrine of hell for this book, I discovered that the story is truly fascinating, putting its horror aside for a moment. In Christian theology, hell (which a character in this series calls the tail that first wagged and then became the dog) is catalytic; too little attention has been paid to the practical effects various formulations of the doctrine of hell have had on Christian thought, worship, behavior, and practice. But the subject has all but disappeared, at least overtly, from most contemporary preaching -- whether liberal or evangelical -- although fundamentalist preaching is in many a place still quite spicy with it. As Martin Marty quipped, "Hell has disappeared and no one noticed." (*U.S. News and World Report*, January 31, 2000, p 44.) The widespread suppression, cooling, civilizing, and now near- disappearance of hell deserves some notice and reflection from serious scholars and professional theologians. As a mediocre pastor, former scholar, and amateur theologian, I can't claim to be sufficient for that task. I can only raise questions here that I feel need to be raised and hope that better scholars and professional theologians will provide better answers than I've been able to discover or construct.

As I see it, more significant than any doctrine of hell itself is the view of God to which one's doctrine of hell contributes. William Temple once said that if your concept of God is radically false, the more devoted you are, the worse off you will be. So this book is in the end more about our view of God than it is about our understandings of hell. What kind of God do we believe exists? What kind of life should we live in response? How does our view of God affect the way we see and treat other people? And how does the way we see and treat other people affect our view of God?

When the brilliant and influential American theologian Jonathan Edwards etched the image of an angry God upon our minds in a famous sermon in the eighteenth century, was he helping us or hurting us, telling the truth straight or slanting it?

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire." (Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 1741.)

Whatever you think of Edwards's sermon, the conventional doctrine of hell has too often engendered a view of a deity who suffers from borderline personality disorder or some worse sociopathic diagnosis: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, and if you don't love God back and cooperate with God's plans in exactly the prescribed way, God will torture you with unimaginable abuse, forever" -- that sort of thing. Human parents who "love" their children with these kinds of implied ultimatums tend to produce the most dysfunctional families, and perhaps the dysfunctions of the Christian religion can be traced not to God as God really is but to views of God that are not easy for people swallow while remaining sane and functional.

With this situation in mind, it is no wonder that many theologians and preachers like myself have downplayed or entirely dropped the idea of hell in our writing and preaching. Perhaps intuitively, we have known that something is wrong and so we've backed off until we figure out the problem -- or until some foolhardy person ventures to do so for us.

- I Am a Christian Too
- In the Outer
- Invisible Footprints
- Jesus Politics
- Kenosis
- Kinesis
- Krister's Blog
- Left at the Altar
- Lepper Colony
- A Lie a Day
- Like a Mighty Wind
- MyQuest
- Mainstream Baptist
- Movable Theological
- Nick Lewis
- Musings of a Young Pastor
- New Quaker Notebook
- Nouslife
- Noli Irritare Leones
- New Christianity
- Not Too Much
- Ono's Thoughts
- Off the Beaten Track
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- Progressive Christian
- Progressive Protestant
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- Philocrites
- Pacificus
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- Progressive Ink!
- Perspectives
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- Peregrinato
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- Salt
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- Sojourn Ministries
- Spiritual Diablog
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- Talking Donkeys
- Three Sumach-Dogs I Run With
- 2 Wild Monkeys
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- Words of Grace
- Xpatriated Texan
- Young and Relentless
- Powered by BlogRolling

Meanwhile, the popular reaction against the mean-spirited God distortion often creates an equally distorted and distorting view of God: the divine doting Auntie in Heaven, full of sweetness and smiles, who sees war and corruption and violence and racism and says, "Well, boys will be boys. Would you care for another blessing, dearie?" Along with our doting Auntie in Heaven, we have God the chum, God the cheerleader, God the mascot (denominational or national), God the genie, God the positive force, God the copilot, God the romantic sweetheart, God the sugar daddy, God the rich uncle, God the sentimental feeling, God the watchdog, God the absentee landlord. All of these distortions probably, in some way, flow from an understandable but unhealthy overreaction against God the eternal torturer. Perhaps the consequences of these distortions are not as serious as those of the traditional approach; perhaps they're more serious. But either way, they are scary for their own reasons, as I hope the book will make clear. Is there a better alternative to either of these polarities: a just God without mercy for all or a merciful God without justice for all? Could our views of hell (whichever extreme you choose) be the symptoms of a deeper set of problems -- misunderstandings about what God's justice is, misunderstandings about God's purpose in creating the world, deep misunderstandings about what kind of person God is? (I use this anthropomorphic language intentionally, realizing that it could be misunderstood and hoping it won't be.)

Those are the kind of questions I'm pursuing in this book. No doubt, many readers will dislike the answers given by various characters in this book; I hope they won't blame me for raising the questions and playing out through these characters conversations that many of us have silently in our own minds or in tense whispers among trusted friends in parking lots or dimly lit restaurant booths. Other people will read this book and wonder, *why the fuss?* For them, everything in this book will seem so patently obvious and noncontroversial, they won't be able to imagine anyone needing it, much less arguing against it. The whole subject seems rather medieval to them. I hope they'll realize that a great many people do, in fact, need this conversation -- very, very much.

Many conservative religious people I know complain about "political correctness," which they associate with left-wing restrictions on freedom of speech. I hope they will not impose a conservative P.C. restriction on people who want to bring these kinds of questions and conversations out into the light. (Yesterday someone told me that the pastor of a large church had banned his staff from reading and discussing the first book of this trilogy, so freedom of speech is on my mind today.)

At any rate, at heart this book is about the goodness of God and life with God. This means it is about the gospel and about justice and mercy and a new way of understanding their relationship -- suggesting that God's justice is always merciful and God's mercy is always just. This book flows from the hunch that the heart disease afflicting the Christian community is chronic and serious rather than cosmetic: deep in our hearts, we don't fully love God because we are not fully confident that God is fully good.

Of all my books so far, *A New Kind of Christian* has sold most strongly, elicited the warmest response, and engendered the most controversy. Meanwhile, I feel its sequel, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, is actually a more radical book, although its more subtle tone disguises that fact. This final volume, which rounds out the trilogy, will probably be judged both radical and controversial. I am not proud of this and actually wish it weren't so. I am not a fan of

controversy. As a pastor, "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" is a precious thing to me; no one should disturb the peace unadvisedly or lightly. I would much prefer that my books be banned than have them cause destructive conflict in churches or trouble for pastors, who face enough problems without needless controversies being stirred. I would not go down this road at all if I did not feel, deep in my soul, that the issues raised here need to be raised for at least some people to consider, for the good of individuals who seek God, for the good of the church in all its forms, and for the good of the world at large. It is my belief, hope, and prayer that any short-term controversy will lead to long-term benefits that are truly worthwhile.

I am tempted to beg for mercy in this introduction, knowing that some conventional religious leaders take on an attack-dog affect when conventional formulations -- of hell, God, or justice and mercy -- are questioned. With that in mind, the biblical character I identify with most these days is Balaam's ass, whose story is recounted in Numbers 22 (well worth reading before you continue). As a voice in the ongoing conversation about God and the world, I am, like my equine counterpart, both an unlikely candidate and a last resort. And if I, like the donkey, seem to be veering uncooperatively from the conventional path, it's because I see something ahead that others might not see. Balaam's poor beast was beaten three times, but eventually his message was heard and Balaam stopped long enough to reconsider and see what he needed to see. If I can have similar results, any beatings I get will be well worth it.

I can imagine some impassioned critic of this book concluding a review with a statement something like this: "It's bad enough that McLaren has undermined conventional understandings of hell, but in its place what has he offered? No clear alternative. One cannot even tell for sure, after a careful reading of this book, whether McLaren is an inclusivist, conditionalist, or universalist. All one can say is that he is clearly not an orthodox exclusivist." In response, I might offer, as I have often suggested elsewhere, that clarity is good, but sometimes intrigue may be even more precious; clarity tends to put an end to further thinking, whereas intrigue makes one think more intensely, broadly, and deeply. Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God is a case in point; his parables don't score too well on clarity, but they excel in intrigue.

Even more, I might add that like some politicians, we often seek clarity at the expense of truth: we would rather have something simple and clear than continue to search beyond convention for a truth that won't resolve to a neat formula, label, category, or pat answer. Or I might reply that asking me -- as people often do -- whether I'm an inclusivist or a universalist is like asking a vegetarian whether she prefers steak, pork, or venison. The question that yields these answers as options is a question I have no taste for asking. My intentional avoidance of this question does not spring from fear of saying what I really believe; a fearful writer wouldn't even begin a book like this. Rather, I am more interested in generating conversation than argument, believing that conversations have the potential to form us, inform us, and educate us far more than arguments. So this book is presented as a conversation, with multiple points of view, not as an argument pushing only mine.

Three disclaimers need to be made in this regard. First, this is not a "fair" book. It is not an attempt to give equal time to all views. It intentionally underrepresents the conventional view on the grounds that it is already widely known and defended. Second, while it intends to privilege new voices and minority reports as alternatives to the conventional view, it doesn't even promote

the best-known alternatives but rather explores a less traveled path. Finally, even this path is not very original, depending heavily on seminal ideas presented by Bishop N. T. Wright, Lesslie Newbigin, and others.

Rather than claiming the last word on hell, then, I consider this sketch an accomplishment more suitable to my modest talents: to make a largely secret, forbidden conversation about hell more overt, public, and accessible. That's not everything, but neither is it nothing. I look forward with eagerness to see what creative Christian leaders -- especially young ones, previously unheard ones, and ones from the global South -- might do in taking the ideas and questions raised in this book and working with them further so that we all will see and celebrate the ultimate goodness of God more clearly and so that we may more joyfully and fully do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

About the Author

Brian D. McLaren, born in 1956, graduated from University of Maryland with a BA and MA in English. His academic interests included Medieval drama, Romantic poets, modern philosophical literature, and the novels of Dr. Walker Percy.



After several years teaching and consulting in higher education, he left academia in 1986 to become founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church, an innovative, nondenominational church in the Baltimore-Washington region. The church has grown to involve several hundred people, many of whom were previously unchurched. In 2004, he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity Degree (honoris causa) from Carey Theological Seminary in Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Brian has been active in networking and mentoring church planters and pastors since the mid 1980's, and has assisted in the development of several new churches. He is a popular speaker for campus groups and retreats and a frequent guest lecturer at seminaries and conferences, nationally and internationally. His public speaking covers a broad range of topics including postmodernism, Biblical studies, evangelism, apologetics, leadership, global mission, church growth, church planting, art and music, pastoral survival and burnout, inter-religious dialogue, ecology, and social justice.

McLaren's is the author and co-author of numerous books, including *A New Kind of Christian* -- which won *Christianity Today's* "Award of Merit" -- and its sequel, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, both from Jossey-Bass. Brian's 2004 release, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, is a personal confession and has been called a "manifesto" of the emerging church conversation. McLaren has written for or contributed interviews to many periodicals, including *Leadership*, *Sojourners*, *Worship Leader*, and *Conversations*. Many of his articles are available at the web site, <http://www.anewkindofchristian.com>. He is also a musician and songwriter.

McLaren is on the international steering team and board of directors for emergent, a growing generative friendship among missional Christian leaders, and serves on the board of Off the Map, an organization helping people cultivate a practical spirituality. He formerly served as board chair of International Teams, an innovative missions organization based in Chicago, and has served on several other boards, including Mars Hill Graduate School in Seattle, and

theooze.com in California. He has taught at several seminaries, and is currently an adjunct faculty member at Mars Hill Graduate School.

Brian is married to Grace, and they have four young adult children. He has traveled extensively in Europe, Latin America, and Africa, and his personal interests include ecology, fishing, hiking, kayaking, camping, songwriting, music, art, and literature.

About the Book

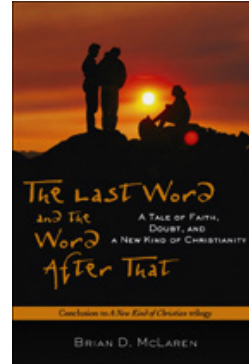
The Last Word and The Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity

by Brian D. McLaren

Published by Jossey-Bass, An Imprint of Wiley
ISBN: 0-7879-7592-3, 224 pages, hardcover, \$21.95

Available through this site or directly from the
publisher:

<http://www.josseybass.com/>



"If [the emerging church] movement can survive in the politicized world of conservative Christianity, McLaren could find a way for young Evangelicals and more liberal Christians to march into the future together despite their theological differences."

-- **Time Magazine** -- which named Brian McLaren as one of the Top 25 Most Influential Evangelicals

"Brian McLaren has written a remarkable book on hell and the grace of God. And it is one hell of a book! ...It evidences yet again why McLaren is an emerging voice to be taken seriously concerning new modes of church and new practices of faith."

-- **Walter Brueggemann**, minister, United Church of Christ; professor, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

"With the passion of a Reformation broadside, Brian McLaren's *The Last Word and The Word After That* goes for popular Christianity's theological jugular: hell and damnation... In a time when some churches have been co-opted by fundamentalist political-theologies, this prophetic tale of a new kind of Christianity serves as a much-needed challenge and corrective."

-- **Diana Butler Bass**, Author, *Strength for the Journey*

In this final installment of the trilogy that began with his award-winning *A New Kind of Christian*, Brian D. McLaren tells an intriguing fictional story that raises urgent questions about the concept of hell and what it means for the Christian view of God and God's relationship with humanity.

Can a contemporary fictional tale weave together ancient history, Biblical reflection, theology, spirituality, and social justice? ***The Last Word and The Word After That*** answers "yes."

As Pastor Dan Poole and his friends and family grapple with their pressing questions about justice in this life and beyond it, readers will find themselves seeing the Christian message of hope and commitment in expanding and transforming new ways. The book aims to inspire readers to view God and neighbor in ways that are more truly biblical, more faithful, more evocative, more healing, more global, more just, and more robust.

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12:00 AM in [Emergent, Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Listed below are links to weblogs that reference "**Conversations About Hell**" with **Brian McLaren**:

» **The great McLaren blog tour** from two and two makes five
 Today is the beginning of Brian McLaren's blog tour to talk about his latest book, *The Last Word and the Word After That*. First of all, what a great idea to promote a book. And, an even greater way [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on May 9, 2005 11:12 AM

[Comments](#)

Brian,

I loved your book, and I am thrilled that you are faithful to bring up this conversation with this part of the church. I've been through this conversation (and conversation it was, over several years, and with many people, especially my friend Frank).

Reading the whole trilogy seemed almost like a much more eloquent recap of my experiences and conversations from say 1987-1995. So much has changed since then. All I can say, is "Thank you, and God bless you."

Posted by: [Jon](#) | May 9, 2005 02:03 AM

Brian, just wanted to thank you so much for coming and joining us in the conversation; even Hula Jesus (see banner above) is ready to learn...

On the last page of chapter 11, you write, *"We have to tell people the good news...the good news that God is even better than we thought, that the gospel is better than we realized. That their thoughts of God have been too small, too unworthy..."*

I definitely resonate with much of the talk of some Christians holding the view of a 'small God' (see my sermon, [Your God is Too Small, here](#)).

You mention throughout the book (and above in your post) about the fact that we may simply be asking the wrong questions. The questions are not to be about simply getting individual souls in Heaven, but rather are about a more holistic approach to our understanding of salvation.

I wonder, as many of the readers of pomomusings are seminarians (especially from Princeton Seminary and other mainline seminaries), how can we go about learning how to ask the better questions (with this issue, and other issues in general) - when we're in an environment that isn't necessarily asking those

questions. How do we begin these conversations and begin to ask these questions at our seminars?

But, more importantly, what is in *your* iPod right now?

Posted by: Adam | May 9, 2005 02:09 AM

Hi, Adam - OK, first the confession: I don't have an iPod. If I did, I don't think I'd have time to download songs into it. Pathetic, I know. Maybe someday. I am a huge lover of music, though, and have just been listening with delight to my friend John Mortenson's mostly live CD of Irish music called "Plays Well With Others." Irish music is good for my soul. I'm also a fanatic Bruce Cockburn fan (when's the next CD coming out?) and love just about anybody who's a singer-songwriter ... Steve Bell (who's working on an album of Cockburn songs - but he's a splendid songwriter himself), David Wilcox, Bob Bennett, Michael Kelly Blanchard are "old" favorites, along with Sheryl Crow, Alanis Morissette, Jewel, Bonnie Raitt ... but there are so many great new talents coming along too. I can't keep up with them all.

Now to your first question ... For me, things really started happening when I first heard the term "narrative theology." I can't remember where I first heard it, but it may have been Jim McClendon's work. Anyway, N.T. Wright (for the NT) and Walter Brueggemann (for the OT) have probably helped me more than anyone in reading the Bible narratively.

When you have a sense of the Biblical narrative, you stop reading the Bible so much as a source of proof-texts for a systematic theology ... and you read it more as a conversation taking place in an unfolding story. (This is really the point of "The Story We Find Ourselves In" - Book 2 in the trilogy, and in many ways, its centerpiece.)

As well, when we enter the narrative imaginatively, we start asking, "Why would Jeremiah say this? Why would Jacob do that? Why would an editor include this story in this way, in obvious tension with the way the same story was told in that other version? What was Habbakuk trying to get his readers to feel, do, think - in their specific historic/political/religious context?" That's when things - for me, anyway - get even more interesting.

Of course, all of this brings us to look at our world - Darfur, Congo, North Korea, the Religious Right, the global economy, Bill O'Reilly, American Idol - and ask the right questions here and now. What dangers do we need to expose and confront? What sparks of hope or virtue do we need to fan? Who is suffering and forgotten? How does God want us to respond?

I hope that's helpful. Feel free to follow up, as this is such an important question, and I may just be rambling.

Posted by: brian mclaren | May 9, 2005 08:32 AM

Brian,

Although I really enjoyed your recent book, I can not understand why you made characters such as Gil Zeamer to be so narrow and judgmental. I know that there are many out there like this but in your book he was kind of the face for more conservative opinions. I know you wrote in the introduction that you were doing this on purpose and did not seek to be fair to all sides, but do you think your new ideas might have been presented in a stronger light if you had made

characters who disagreed with Dan and Neo a little more life like and human, also as I read I was struck by the the Devil being completely absent from the conversation, was this on purpose or how do you think Satan fits into all of this? Thanks for your time.
ryan

Posted by: **Ryan** | May 9, 2005 09:11 AM

Brian, I have not yet read *The Last Word*, but am looking forward to doing so. I have a feeling you may well have articulated a lot of my (and other's) recent soul musings on the subject of hell.

If I'm not mistaken, the Church first started really emphasizing the hell-aspect of the gospel as the Black Death (and its resultant fear) spread across Europe during the fourteenth-century. Incidentally, this is also when the seeds of the Enlightenment began to bloom.

Do you think the emergence of the "Enlightened Individual" somehow helped shape a more self-centered view of the soul, and thus a self-centered/hell-focused gospel?

What can we do to get back to a more communal understanding of humanity's place in God's eternal kingdom?

Thanks, Brian. I'm glad you and others are raising these important issues. La'chaim...

Posted by: **Chris Margrave** | May 9, 2005 09:39 AM

Brian, kudos on the choices of Cockburn, Wilcox, Jewel, etc. That's great.

I thought some of you might be interested in my friend Cory Glover's comparison of Brian's book and the new movie *Kingdom of Heaven*. Check out his post **Making the connection...**

Also, I had a few quotes from **The Meaning of Jesus**, co-written by N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg. I think some of these can shed some light on our conversation here today, or at least add to what Brian has already said about these topics.

N.T. Wright: "Regular talk of 'going to heaven' and the reference to 'heaven and hell' as final destinies can therefore be misleading, encouraging visions of a disembodied future existence...Paradise (as in Jesus' words to the dying brigand) was not, for the Jews, a final destiny but a temporary rest before the final glorious new world." (200)

N.T. Wright: "The 'heavenly country' for which we long, according to Hebrews 11.16, is not, then, a disembodied existence. It is the new world in which heaven and earth are joined at last, in which what God is currently preparing in heaven is brought to birth in a world that we will recognized as physical." (200)

Marcus Borg: "Life in the Spirit is also life in community. The vision of Jesus is not individualistic, even though of course individuals mattered to him. Like the Jewish tradition in which he stood, he saw the covenant with God as not simply about our relationship to God, but also about our relationship with one another."

(245)

Marcus Borg: "A vision of the Christian life that takes Jesus seriously would not be very much concerned with the afterlife. Jesus' message was not about how to get to heaven. The widespread impression that it was grew, to a large extent, out of a misunderstanding of two phrases in the gospels: the Jesus of Matthew's gospel regularly speaks about 'the kingdom of heaven,' and the Jesus of John's gospel often speaks of 'eternal life.'" (245) --> *Of course, McLaren discusses these two very terms as well on pg 77 of **The Last Word...***

Marcus Borg: "My point is **not** that Jesus didn't believe in an afterlife. He seems to have. But he didn't talk about it very much...My point is also not to deny an afterlife. But it wasn't central to Jesus' teaching. The vision of the Christian life that flows out of taking him seriously is about a relationship with the Spirit of God that transforms our lives in the present, not about a reward that only comes later." (246)

Posted by: Adam | May 9, 2005 09:52 AM

Speaking of David Wilcox, on his most recent album, *Into the Mystery*, he has a playful song about Eden/Paradise called **Apple a Day**. It throws a different light on what exactly some people's interpretations of a perfect Paradise would entail, i.e. infinite temptation to eat the apple every day and play God.

This song make me wonder about what, as Christians, we really believe we'll be doing in this empyrean city in the sky. What draws me to the notion of God's kingdom as present now on earth is a sense of an intentional missional responsibility. Thoughts of cloud-living, while temporarily inviting, seem rather boring compared to working alongside God in beautifying God's good creation...

Posted by: Chris Margrave | May 9, 2005 10:27 AM

Brian, When I read your comments about reading scripture as narrative, I was reminded of the Jewish midrash tradition where rabbis took apart biblical narrative and tried to understand and flesh out the story.

Perhaps what impresses me most about that tradition is the confidence and great sense of humor the rabbis showed in trying to understand, for example, the binding of Isaac.

As Christians, we read the story of Abraham and the potential sacrifice of Isaac and accept it without much question. In one of the midrash stories, a rabbi asks, "what kind of God would ask a father to slay his son for a sacrifice?"

They struggled with problems, trying to understand further the story being told. It is an amazing tradition.

Posted by: don | May 9, 2005 11:15 AM

Unfortunately, I haven't yet read "The Last Word". So these comments may be redundant for those who have (and certainly for the author!). But I offer them in the spirit of conversation.

It struck me about a year ago that, in the NT, the threat of hell is set vis-a-vis

ethics - one's relation to one's neighbor (cf. the Sermon on the Mount, woes against the Pharisees, the rich man and Lazarus, etc.). Coming from a very conservative tradition, I expected to read about trust in God or a sinner's prayer. So, I was quite surprised!

As I look back, I had at least three theological problems to confront. First, my theology of sin was too individualistic. I had focused on a broken relationship before God, but not before neighbor. Second, my theology of salvation was too small. I discovered that salvation is much broader than an eternal destination sealed in a moment. And third, I had divorced faith from works (which is, of course, partly the legacy of the Reformation). When I began to read James and Hebrews in conversation with Romans, I realized that the Bible holds faith and works in tension.

So from my experience, I offer this for conversation about hell, heaven, and what might 'get us there': Salvation is a process of healing relationships between God and neighbor in the context of faith and works. (And yes, there's a lot of tension in there!)

Posted by: **patrick** | May 9, 2005 12:26 PM

Brian, many of us are moving away from the 2 polar extremes that we grew up in: that the only way to approach the scriptures were either literal or liberal. I can't imagine this being a problem centuries ago. I am also well aware of the problems the enlightenment has brought our way. But my question is how, or why did the church move away from a narrative approach to a literal approach anyway? Thanks so much for all 3 books, I have really enjoyed and been helped by them.

Posted by: **Benjy** | May 9, 2005 12:34 PM

Brian...Hula Girl and Jesus are waiting to learn from you...

Posted by: **Adam** | May 9, 2005 12:42 PM

Brian,

Watching you try the Accordion on the lawn in Kentucky was worth a few words; by so doing you involuntarily introduced me to the Mortensens while trying John's box of instruments. Thanks - as we (John & Linda & I) had a good conversation that is continuing...

In terms of 'The Last Word...', it is much appreciated. In light of your book as well as others, those of us within this conversation have been criticized from outside voices for not having enough theological voices within our midst. I could argue this, but...

Do you think it is a fair analysis, and thus we need voices such as Wright, Willard, the GOCN voices, as well as others, more directly involved? Or is this a criticism that will be leveled simply because it's always an easy target? (After all, nobody here goes by 'Calvin.)

Blessings Brother.

Posted by: **randy buist** | May 9, 2005 01:01 PM

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Blessings Brother.

Posted by: **randy buist** | May 9, 2005 01:04 PM

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