

Eric Barger's **TAKE A STAND!** MINISTRIES

Report on the “Everything Must Change” Conference

Pastor Chris Bayer • Church on The Rock • Gig Harbor, Washington
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Eric Barger and I attended the “Everything Must Change” conference in Nampa, Idaho, February 7-9, 2008. Eric oversees “Take A Stand Ministries” and travels about two hundred days per year educating the church on cults, Islam, spiritual warfare, etc. Our interest in this conference was Brian McLaren, a leader in the emerging church movement. Both Eric and I shared a desire to hear McLaren for ourselves and formulate our opinions from personal experience rather than just his writings or other media.

The conference was held and hosted by Northwest Nazarene University. I’ll explain more about my fascination with this partnership a little later.

From this point on, I’ll write about my own personal experience with some references to Eric. I encourage you to read Eric’s report when he makes it available on his website (www.ericbarger.com).



My Introduction to Brian McLaren



I first heard of Brian McLaren through friends who had concerns about his materials being used in their churches. They asked if I knew anything about him or the movement he was promoting. I had heard of the movement but knew nothing of McLaren. After a little checking he seemed like a nice guy with a strange bent; sort of the ‘60’s all over again but with a sophisticated twist. The opportunity came to hear him personally so I went to the conference.

I arrived on Wednesday and received an unexpected bonus: Northwest Nazarene University was holding their annual two-day conference which included professors from the university *and* Brian McLaren as speakers. This gave me an opportunity to hear from the university’s theology department, be introduced to their theology and focus, and hopefully to understand why they would host McLaren and support his tour.

The first day began with professor of theology and philosophy, Thomas Jay Oord, speaking on the four main arenas of postmodernism (yawn...but hang in there with me). About ten minutes into it, I realized I had forgotten to switch my common sense, everyday brain for my academic, philosophical brain in order to get into what was being taught. (This is, after all, a university,

where dialogue, debate and discussion are elevated virtually above everything else.) Second, it helped me understand many of the terms and context that were about to be unleashed as the conference went forth.

Missing in this dialogue, however, was the Truth. During the question and answer period specific questions were asked about sin and other things but the professor's answers lacked clear definition. It didn't appear that this was for the sake of dialogue; I'm not certain the professor had drawn any hard conclusions himself. While I can understand the need for dialogue, debate and discussion, when it comes to the simple message of the scriptures, the Gospel and the pure truths of the faith, there are straightforward, non-negotiable answers. So far, these were missing this first morning of the conference.

When it was time for McLaren to speak, he began by using language like "getting back to Jesus" and "kingdom of God". Then he began a history lesson, starting from the medieval period through the reformation to where we are today, and explained, in his opinion, why today's church is wrong, hasn't worked, can't work and why there's the need for deep and dramatic change in the church.

The title, "Everything Must Change", is provocative and I'm sure it was purposefully chosen. But, it's beyond bold. It's a diagnosis and, after attending the conference, I'm certain McLaren lacks the credentials to make it. Take a moment to consider the words: everything... must... change. Everything means *everything*; nothing can remain as it is. Must means *must*; choice is not involved. Change means *change*. Everything must change.

This confronts the work of every Christian, at least presently, who serves God, their churches, their local communities and the greater work around the world. Apparently, they're all doing it wrong. Everything must change.

And, since McLaren is going from city to city making this proclamation, apparently he's discovered the answer and is hoping to help bring this revelation to the rest of God's people.

Changes Are Needed, but...

I agree there is need for change in the church but not in the context that McLaren brings it. And this is really what this is about: **context**.

As McLaren continued, a theology began to emerge that some would call preterist (or partial preterist) and others might call it "kingdom now". The heart of his theology teaches that God, through Jesus, invites us to be active participants in helping Him establish the kingdom of God on earth, not only bringing personal salvation to the individual, but also justice and peace to the entire world, a kind of "social sanctification". (In the chapel session, he extended it to include caring for the planet as well. This emphasis grew substantially when the actual "Everything Must Change" conference began.) Ultimately, the church establishes a peaceful world where God's kingdom covers the whole earth, people, creatures and the creation are esteemed, and Jesus may come and take His rightful place on the throne, not as the Lion, but remaining the Lamb.

This is where a theological discussion would have been helpful to define the terminology being used. This didn't happen. Throughout the conference, it seemed McLaren's emphasis was on discussion, not definition. It was very confusing hearing terms common to Christianity but sensing the definitions were different.

It became clearer and clearer that the foundation of McLaren's belief system stems from injustice (that he either witnessed or studied) being perpetrated by those quoting the Bible, especially white people. This has skewed (rightly or wrongly) his interpretation of what Jesus meant when He taught on the kingdom of God. He sees the kingdom as being not just "within" a man but being extended to the whole earth, born-again or not.

During the chapel discussion McLaren announced that if Jesus were here today, instead of using the term "kingdom of God", Jesus would say He came to establish the "peace network", "eco-system of God" or God's "global love economy". He said that Jesus' use of the term "kingdom of God" was political, not spiritual. He said that Jesus gave no specific definition for the kingdom of God; He just used metaphors and parables.

McLaren also said that he would define being born again as a "shift of consciousness" and/or a "new way of thinking".

Questions

A student brought up a question on eschatology (study of the end times). McLaren said that hundreds of thousands of lives hang in the balance due to the present view of eschatology that most Christians hold to. He stated that this view suggests that the present age will end violently. McLaren's view, however, is that "God doesn't hang people on crosses, He hangs on a cross". He said that God's eschatology could not be violent.

The next question was: "Is the future already determined?" In other words, "Does the Bible actually predict the future; does it teach a deterministic God who has already established or predicted the future?" As I mentioned earlier, McLaren believes in a participatory eschatology where we work with God and He works with us in determining what will actually happen. Concerning our current day, according to McLaren, the future is not preordained, predetermined or even predicted by God in His Word. Working together with God, we can shape the future ourselves; not just the immediate future but the entire future. He said that the Lamb can "win" without becoming the Lion.

The question came up about Jesus saying "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by Me". McLaren stated that he covers this on his web site but continued to explain that even though we can preach this with great confidence, it really doesn't say what Jesus said it does. He said it meant that the disciples were looking for a way to where Jesus was going and Jesus said "don't look for a way, truth or life 'out there' but look to Me, and in Me alone, to find it", or something along those lines. McLaren continued by saying the disciples wanted a "system" and Jesus said it was all centered in Him. (If this is confusing, imagine being there and listening to one unclear answer after another being given to virtually every question that was asked.)

McLaren was asked about how Jesus' words above fit in with other religions. He replied that Jesus is the Savior of the world, the unique Savior, and that we are to help everyone come to know Him. McLaren said it doesn't say that Christianity is the way, but that Jesus is the Way. Finally a straight answer (I think.)

What About Holiness?

A discussion of holiness began and McLaren defined holiness as participating in the “otherness” of God. By this, he meant that holiness is usually taught to be applied personally, but McLaren sees it as an “otherness”, more of a social context. In other words, while Christians should radiate an “otherness” that includes people outside our comfort or theological zone, for the most part we radiate a “we vs. you” type of attitude instead. He brought up the Trinity which intrinsically means that God is, and can only be, about “otherness” because He is Three in One.

A few days before the conference a friend who is sympathetic to McLaren’s message emailed me some material that he felt might help me better understand where McLaren was coming from. I read the material and for the life of me, I couldn’t see the correlation. But, having been here I see it clearly. The material deals with a partial preterist view, or what the author would call a “victorious” view of eschatology. It’s clear that this viewpoint colors McLaren’s view of Christianity, the world, his understanding of the New Testament (especially the Gospels and Revelation), and the ministry of Jesus and His church. That’s covers a lot of ground.

Herein lies the real difficulty many have with McLaren’s views, wording, redefining, et al. McLaren uses terms most Christians would find familiar but they have a much different meaning in the emerging church. While appearing to be open and responsive to dialogue and discussion, there is a very deliberate theology being promoted, but somewhat esoterically. Definitions are available but it seems only to the initiated. Unfortunately, as folks like McLaren discuss their views, those unfamiliar with the definitions of the terms may find themselves agreeing with things that, if defined more clearly, would be anathema to their beliefs.

Having this conference in a Nazarene university really fascinated me. Wesley taught holiness even as he reached into an extremely unholy world. McLaren persistently concluded that there was a direct connection with what Wesley taught and the teachings of the emerging church, even to the point of being a sycophant, in my opinion. I seriously doubt that the core theology of the emerging church would encourage Wesley. Even so, the theology staff seems to think so. They were truly enamored with McLaren.

The “Everything Must Change” Conference Begins

When the “Everything Must Change” conference began on Friday night, I thought the previous sessions would have prepared me for it. After what I had already heard, I thought I was ready for the fullness of his ideas to be unleashed. Sadly, I was not prepared. After just a few minutes, I wanted to leave. I’d seen and heard enough. (The day before, Eric wanted to leave and I encouraged him to stay. He returned the favor and I stayed.)

Before going into the auditorium, Eric and I received our conference materials and we took a minute to look through them, trying to decipher why certain things were included. The first thing we were given was a handout from the Sierra Club titled, “*Communities of Faith Bring Hope for the Planet*”. We didn’t know that in a few minutes we would see a video, produced by the Sierra Club, rebuking coal mining companies and praising Christians for stepping up to save the planet.

We were given a book of artwork called “*Nude Truths: An Odyssey in Poetry, Painting, and Prose*”, by sisters Kristi Ylvisaker and Mary Ylvisaker Nilsen. Later, during the session, we were given the opportunity to use the book to help us quiet ourselves, center, meditate and let the poetry flow. I’m not kidding.

(Note: For the record, Eric and I did not participate in anything that violated our beliefs or

conscience during the conference.)

I was beginning to feel like we were at a New Age garden party or a Pike Place Market coffee house. The spirit and atmosphere were a type of sophisticated late '60's type of thing but there was something much "deeper" going on here. In the '60's we were all seeking; these people, in their minds, have found "it" and, not only have they attached Jesus Christ to it, they believe Jesus is the author of it.

Sponsors of the event included the following (some previously mentioned):

- The Sierra Club
- Mars Hill Graduate School
- Emergent Village
- Sojourners
- Faith @ Work

The agenda of the conference was printed on "post-consumer" paper. (Go back to my comments on postmodernism.)

The Propaganda Begins

During the introduction to the session, Thomas Merton was quoted. (If you don't know who he was just Google him.) I knew things were going to get interesting. I had no clue.

We were told by McLaren that global warming/climate change was a real global crisis. We sang convoluted "worship" songs that included lyrics that any New Ager or Wiccan could have sung about the earth, wind, fire, etc. and relating them to God's attributes. There was even a mention of death itself in these lyrics. They were awful.

When McLaren began to speak the session was all about global crisis. McLaren listed the top global crisis lists that he could find including:

- * A book called, "*High Noon 20 Global Problems, 20 Years to Solve Them*"
- * The United Nations University Top 15
- * The Copenhagen Consensus Top 10 Global Problems ¹
- * The 8 Millennium Development Goals ²
- * Rick Warren's PEACE plan ³

Just to name a few.

He then displayed a diagram explaining the four underlying reasons for all these global problems.

He presented a chart describing in detail how, in his opinion, the world's wealth is distributed unfairly. What he failed to mention was why. He didn't mention that some nations are simply better at promoting and sustaining business and trade, or that some nations serve the devil, or the possibility that some might be blessed by God. Never at any time did McLaren say, or even allude to the fact that sin, the flesh, and the persistent influence of a spirit called Satan, are central reasons for any of our global problems. He did say, and repeat, that Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God on earth and that in doing so all the world's problems would be solved. He did say, and repeat, that terrorism was a result of poverty and a lashing out at those who unfairly had more than they had. Again, I'm not kidding.

Virtually without exception, McLaren's presentations (and conclusions) could have easily been eroded or debunked had any knowledgeable person been given the opportunity to dispute them.

(At this point, even though I had committed myself to staying through the entire session, no matter how bad it got, I had had it. I wanted to leave. Eric wanted to stay. I deferred and kept taking notes.)

Sessions and Stations

The session was broken up into little segments. McLaren would say something and we'd take a little break to discuss it. We'd sing an earthy song, do a responsive reading, discuss, etc. We were given opportunities to share in groups of two or three how we were processing what was being presented. I did this one time and the rest of the time I just sat and talked to Eric. I really didn't want to explain to anyone how I was "processing" for fear I might tell them.

Towards the end, we were given the opportunity to go to several "stations" to deepen our spiritual experience so we could really, truly, seriously, sincerely, purposefully go "deeper". (Eric and I declined.) A large candle was lit from which we could light little tea candles. There was a cross where we could kneel and pray. A large bucket of soil was available to put our hands in and thank God for the earth and to express our love for the earth (which the group had done earlier in one of the songs). Water was available to touch and be reminded of our baptism. And, there were people available to anoint us with oil. This is where Eric and I decided to leave.

Decompressing

Once we were in the parking lot much of the strength God had given me to maintain an open mind "left the building". I could feel all the emotions welling up that I had so purposefully suppressed. I was so broken for the people in that auditorium, so distressed by the deception they were being subjected to, so concerned for the good-hearted among them who couldn't see the forest for the trees. And, I prayed that God would cleanse us from this influence and protect us in the days ahead as we exposed this for what it was.

What makes this difficult (and so deceptive) is that no Christian will deny that the "church" needs some changes, or that we need to feed the poor, clothe the naked, and be good stewards of the planet. These phrases resonate with all born-again people, but they're also generic enough that anyone with a "good heart" can get on board and do the same things but within a completely different context. The problem begins when we talk about a God that loves the world and sent His Son to save it. When we bring sin, fallen man and Satan into the picture, a separation begins to take place. When we fully explain why Jesus really came, not to bring an external kingdom, but to bring the fullness of an internal reign of God and a demonstration of His power over sin, Satan and death, people begin to drop out. Jesus Himself said quite clearly that His kingdom does not come in an outward sense (borders, for example) but is within the born-again believer. In fact, one cannot even see or enter the kingdom unless they are born again.

The kingdom that McLaren is speaking of is a kingdom where we work together as a global family to solve the world's problems. He explained that another central reason for all the world's problems was the inability of the world's religions (including Christianity) to provide "framing stories" capable of healing the societal machine that is broken. He called it a crisis of "Purpose Spirituality".

He listed four reasons for the global crisis we face:

- Domination / Holy Empire
- Revolution / Holy Way
- Revenge / Victimhood-Scapegoating
- Isolation / Withdrawal

Here's how he said Jesus came to fix it: He preached the Good News, which is:

- Don't Dominate - Serve
- Don't Get Revenge - Reconcile
- Don't Scapegoat - Embrace
- Don't Isolate - Draw Near

This is the “framing story” of Jesus. If we will do this, we can solve the world's problems.

This is like saying that if you paint an old car a new color it will last forever even though it's being rusted out from within. I believe that Jesus was a little “deeper” than that.

Some Conclusions

Even though I was hoping to report something more redeeming, there's nothing redeeming to report. Eric called what we had just seen “christian globalism” or “christianized globalism”. This was not a presentation of the kingdom of God as Jesus or His apostles taught it.

In one simple sentence, Paul taught us about the kingdom of God:

- * For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. I Corinthians 4:20, KJV
- * For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. I Corinthians 4:20, NASB
- * For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. I Corinthians 4:20, ASV

The Greek word used here for power is *dunamis*⁴. When Jesus said, “...if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you”. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus displaced demons; drove them out. He didn't say His kingdom came by doing good works and helping us all get along. His kingdom “comes” by displacing and destroying the power of the devil. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil.

Peter further explained that the only reason that Jesus could do what He did was because God was with Him. We are commissioned to carry on His work by that same Spirit that is now also in us. He promised that as we proclaim His Word He would work together with us, confirming His Word with signs, miracles and wonders.

All the “talking” in the world will not displace the devil from human beings, societies, principalities or powers, or governments, earthly or in the “heavenlies”. The only thing that will displace him is the power of God, manifested through the Church, as it moves and operates at the command of God. The kingdom is manifested or “extended”, not via the weapons of this world, but by the weapons given us by the Spirit of God.

We don't need a deep shift to do something “new”. We need a deep shift to go back to what

Jesus said and do it. God's people will see everything Jesus said they would see if they will simply listen to God do what He says, just like Jesus did.

1. <http://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/Default.aspx?ID=158>
2. <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>
3. http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/PEACE/PEACE_Plan.htm
4. Dunamis: strength power, ability
 - a. inherent power, power residing in a thing by virtue of its nature, or which a person or thing exerts and puts forth
 - b. power for performing miracles
 - c. moral power and excellence of soul
 - d. the power and influence which belong to riches and wealth
 - e. power and resources arising from numbers