

'McLaren's *A New Kind of Christianity* is a stellar accomplishment, a combination of hard tack fact and unfettered hope, an overview in delightful narrative of the long way of our coming to this time and of the multiform ways of our arriving. In every way, a dispatch from the front, it is also a love-letter of sorts – a love letter from an affectionate, but seasoned pastor to those who would dare to believe, worship and serve not only now, but also beyond now, into the roily, churning decades ahead.'

Phyllis Tickle, author of *The Great Emergence*

'Just a few books capture and articulate the imagination, angst, hopes and aspirations of a generation, as Brian did in *A New Kind of Christianity*. Almost ten years later, in *A New Kind of Christianity*, Brian lets us listen in to the key questions and conversations catalysed by his work that have taken place around the world since then.'

Jason Clark, Deep Church

'Some books provide us with information about the world, but every once in a while a book appears that enables us to imagine new, more wonderful worlds. The book you hold in your hand is one of these.'

Peter Rollins, Ikon

'I managed to miss train stops twice while reading Brian's book! A sure sign it had me gripped. Brian lays out ten questions that a lot of people are asking about Christianity, on things like the Bible, sexuality, Jesus, the gospel, church and the future, and in his relaxed style probes them in a way that often reframes the question. The most important thing about *A New Kind of Christianity* is that it lays open a space where asking questions and talking about them is a good thing to do, and not something to be afraid of; it's a book that shows that asking questions is often accompanied by passionate faith.'

Jonny Baker

Brian McLaren has a talent for asking the kind of questions that take people out of their comfort zones to expand the horizons of faith. In *A New Kind of Christianity*, taking his inspiration from Martin Luther's ninety-five theses, Brian sketches out the entire map of Christian thought in ten questions. Using these big brush strokes he re-paints the canvas of Christianity, in an attempt to retain its core truths while throwing off some of the cultural accretions that can dull and deaden the spiritual life. In so doing, he challenges his readers to leave behind a "steady state" Christianity in favour of a faith that engages dynamically with the unfolding culture of the twenty-first century.

Maggi Dawn, author and theologian, University of Cambridge.

A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIANITY

Ten questions that
are transforming the faith

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BRIAN D. MCLAREN

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the death penalty for homosexuality and rebellion towards parents. As I mentioned earlier, I was devastated recently to read that white evangelical Christians are the most fervent advocates of government-sanctioned torture, and that frequent church-going is a statistical indicator of support for torture. Quoting Bible verses to buttress 'ethical' positions clearly protects nobody from being a moral buffoon or clod.

Third, we are in deep trouble relating to peace. As much as we love the Bible, many of us are afraid that the Bible is becoming a box-cutter or suitcase bomb in the hands of too many preachers, pastors, priests and others. When careless preachers use the Bible as a club or sword to dominate or wound, they discredit the Bible in a way that no sceptic can. I was appalled during the build-up to the Iraq war in 2002 to hear radio preachers pull out a Bible verse about God 'crushing Satan' under 'our feet' to justify a pre-emptive war. In 2005, I appeared on a radio talk show with a popular radio host who used similar 'Bible-based logic' to argue that the US should pre-emptively declare war on Iran.

Last year I talked with Rwandan Tutsis who told me that some of their preachers used to claim that they were descendants of the sexual union between King Solomon and the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba. To these preachers, this possession of 'Jewish blood' justified their being in a position of dominance over the Hutu majority . . . which in turn helped set the stage for the horrible outcomes there. You could probably turn on a Christian radio broadcast today and hear a preacher deny human rights to Palestinians on similar 'biblical' grounds. It's an old and tired game: quoting sacred texts to strengthen an us-versus-them mentality that, in today's world, could too easily lead to a

last-tango, nuclear-biochemical kamikaze-crusade-jihad.¹ In case after case in the past, there is a kind of Bible-quoting intoxication under the influence of which we religious people lose the ability to distinguish between what God says and what *we say God says*. No wonder, in my travels around the world, that I am asked questions about the relation between the Bible and violence (and, linked to that, about how Christians should relate to people of other faiths) more than any other single question.

This triplet of troubles presents us with corresponding moral obligations, I believe. We must find new approaches to our sacred texts – approaches that sanely, critically and fairly engage with honest scientific inquiry, approaches that help us derive constructive and relevant guidance in dealing with pressing personal and social problems, and approaches that lead us in the sweet pathway of peace-making rather than the broad, deep rut of mutually assured destruction.

These obligations became more obvious than ever to me a few years ago when I prepared some lectures on how to read the Bible. I decided to go back into American history and investigate how the Bible was used by the defenders of slavery in contrast to the promoters of abolition. What I found was deeply disturbing.

Slavery, of course, has a long history. One might say that, in its earliest form, it represented a step up from genocide and abandonment. Instead of being exterminated, the vanquished males were allowed to survive as slaves of the victors, or instead of being slaughtered or abandoned to starve to death, destitute women and children were allowed to survive as slaves of the rich. But from there, slavery extended into a far-reaching global industry, culminating in the Euro-American trade in African

slaves that lasted for about 450 years and stole the freedom and future of 11.5 million Africans.² Nearly everyone alive today experiences benefits or losses or both in the aftermath of this (in)human tragedy.

When I began my research, I quickly discovered how hard it is to find pro-slavery literature today. As Eric McKittrick said, 'Nothing is more susceptible to oblivion than an argument, however ingenious, that has been discredited by events; and such is the case with the body of writing which was produced in the antebellum South in defense of Negro slavery.'³ Several authors, however, have summarised that literature, notably William S. Jenkins in *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Peter Smith Publishers, Inc., 1935, 1959) and Larry E. Tise in *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (UGA Press, 1987).

Tise studied the writings of 275 pre-Civil War pro-slavery writers in America. They came from all parts of the country (not just the South) and from all denominations – notably Presbyterian (almost 30 per cent), Episcopalian (20 per cent) and Baptist (17 per cent). Their lines of argument closely resembled similar arguments posed by pro-slavery British and Caribbean writers from 1770 to 1830. In addition to popular speech-makers and tract-writers, there were highly educated pro-slavery advocates like Thomas Cobb, the lawyer who wrote the Confederate Constitution and the Georgia Constitution and helped found the University of Georgia School of Law. In addition to writing an important pro-slavery text, he painted these words in large letters on his house, showing his passion for the subject: 'RESISTANCE TO ABOLITION IS OBEDIENCE TO GOD'. He died in 1862 as a general in the Confederate Army at the

Battle of Fredericksburg, defending slavery with his last breath.

There were also many pro-slavery novels, counterparts to the abolitionists' famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The last example of pro-slavery fiction was published in Georgia in 1864, as General Sherman was launching his scorched-earth campaign across that same state. It provides a kind of evolutionary 'high point' (and last gasp) in the development of the pro-slavery argument. The novel came from the pen of Ebenezer Willis Warren, a 44-year-old Protestant pastor from Macon, Georgia. It was entitled *Nellie Norton: or, Southern Slavery and the Bible: A Scriptural Refutation of the Principal Arguments Upon Which the Abolitionists Rely: A Vindication of Southern Slavery From the Old and New Testaments*.⁴ The title suggests what becomes all too apparent when reading pro-slavery literature: to the defenders of slavery, the Bible was unquestionably on their side. Wouldn't it make sense for us to try to understand how so many Bible-reading, Bible-believing, Bible-quoting and Bible-preaching people could be so horribly wrong for so terribly long?

As the story opens in 1859, Nellie Norton, a beautiful young New Englander, naïvely believes slavery is cruel. Then she travels with her mother south to Savannah to visit relatives who own a plantation with slaves. She becomes convinced, after long arguments, that:

- slave-owners are *victims* of 'malignant abuse' and 'wicked and malicious slander' by ignorant, arrogant Northerners;
- 'the world is wrong [on the issue of human slavery], and the South must set it right';
- 'the world is in error, and is dependent upon the South for the truth';

- 'the welfare of the negro is best promoted when he is under the restraints of slavery';
- 'slavery is the normal condition of the negro'.

As the novel ends in 1860, Nellie falls in love with a wonderful slave-owner and turns her home into a hospital for wounded Confederate soldiers. One can trace five lines of argument through the novel. First, there is the classic and ever-popular *ad hominem* argument, asserting that abolitionists are despicable people. According to positive characters in the novel, abolitionists are 'ruthless' and 'fanatical', taking positions 'which embody the worst forms of infidelity ever known to the world'. They are sounding 'the funeral knell of a pure Christianity'.⁵ One character asserts, 'I tell you, [abolitionists are] an offense against God, the Bible, religion, the peace of the Christian world, and against common sense, and the more enlightened experience of the age.'

Second is the argument from tradition, asserting, as one character does, that slavery is woven into the fabric of creation and society: 'The truth is, the world never has, and never can exist without slavery in some form . . . Where is the country or the period of history wherein slavery did not exist in some shape or other? . . . Slavery has always existed, and will continue so long as there is a disparity in the intellect or energy of men.'

Third, characters in *Nellie Norton* argue that the South is a kind of paradise, and slavery is an Edenic way of life:

- 'The slaves have many rights. The right of life and limb, the right to be fed and clothed, to be nursed when sick, and cared for in old age when they become helplessly infirm. They are rightfully entitled to protection from ill treatment.'

- Slave children are 'fat and saucy, jolly and lively' and they constantly enjoy 'cheerful songs and merry laughter'.
- Adult slaves are 'happy Ethiopians' with 'bright countenance[s] . . . smiling face[s], and ivory teeth' who 'are fed bountifully, clothed well, nursed when indisposed, and afforded [a] suitable diet'. They 'talk, and laugh, and sing, and pat, and dance', and are constantly 'singing, dancing, laughing, chattering'.
- Slave-masters are 'highly cultivated . . . men of superior general intelligence, refined, polite, [and] genteel . . . I know of no case where the master lives on his plantation with his slaves but what they are treated with justice and moderation'.

Fourth, side by side with these effusive celebrations of the joys of slavery come darker arguments, based on a doctrine of 'negro inferiority'. Repeatedly in *Nellie Norton*, blacks are said to be 'exceptions to the common brotherhood' of man, and are 'sensual and stupid, lazy, improvident, and vicious . . . an ignorant, degraded, indolent people . . . [who could] never . . . be equal with the white man'. What's more, one character asserts that the inferiority of 'negroes' was 'designed by their creator'.

But all four of these lines of argument come to rest on a fifth, the argument that the Bible defends and legitimises slavery. Consider this catalogue of quotes from various protagonists in the novel:

- 'The Bible is a pro-slavery Bible, and God is a pro-slavery God.'
- 'The North must give up the Bible and religion, or adopt our views of slavery.'

- 'Slavery is right, and its enforcement is according to the Scripture.'
- 'Slavery is taught in the Bible, and instituted in Heaven.'
- 'God has ordained slavery.'
- 'Slavery was made perpetual by the positive enactment of heaven.'
- 'There cannot be found . . . in the Bible a single injunction to slaveholders to liberate those held by them in bondage.'
- '[To speak against slavery] is to abominate the law of God, and the sentiments inculcated by his holy prophets and apostles.'
- '[A slave] cannot sunder bonds which bind him to his earthly master, without breaking those which unite him morally to his Redeemer.'

A number of Old Testament passages are quoted as definitive by pro-slavers in *Nellie Norton*: Exodus 21:2–6 (relating to the slavery of poverty-stricken Hebrews), Deuteronomy 15:16–17 (also relating to the slavery of poverty-stricken Hebrews), Genesis 9:26–7 (relating to the curse of Canaan, used to legitimise racism). But the key text was Leviticus 25:44–6 (relating to the buying, keeping and inheriting of slaves):

Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land; and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever.

The King James Version's placement and punctuation of the non-restrictive clause 'which thou shalt have' seemed to render slavery nothing short of a command. It's no wonder, in the light of these verses from the Bible, that a character would say to the young Nellie, 'There is nothing, not one word, in the Old Testament to condemn, but very much to establish, enforce, and regulate slavery'. But it's not only the Old Testament to which pro-slavers go to defend the practice. The New Testament and even the Golden Rule supported slavery in their minds. In fact, they saw in slavery a form of Christian neighbourliness because it put slaves in better conditions than they had experienced in Africa, and exposed them to soul-saving Christian influences as well, a theme known as 'the Ennoblement of the Heathen', which was also used to justify inhumane treatment of the Native peoples.

So characters in the novel joyfully cite the three New Testament passages that exhort slaves to be obedient to their masters: Ephesians 6:5–8; Titus 2:9–10, and Colossians 3:22–4. No wonder a character in the novel concludes: '[I]n the catalogue of sins denounced by the Savior and His Apostles, slavery is not once mentioned . . . not one word is said by the prophets, apostles, or the holy Redeemer against slavery . . . the Apostles admitted slaveholders and their slaves to church membership, without requiring a dissolution of the relation.'⁶

As I re-read these lines of reasoning, a sick feeling gnaws at my stomach. This way of using the Bible is indistinguishable from the way I hear the Bible used today on Christian radio and the way I see it used today in blog discussions. I've seen this way of using the Bible employed in countless sermons and books all my life. Protestants, Pentecostals, Catholics and Orthodox

could all be found proving points by referring to Scripture in exactly the way the pro-slavers did. In fact, I have used the Bible myself in exactly this way in more sermons than I want to remember.

Of course, nobody defends slavery today. (Almost nobody. You'd be surprised to read what some do defend in e-mails I've received.) In McKittrick's words, the whole argument ended up in 'oblivion' because it was 'discredited by events'. We not only stopped defending it, we repented of it, so that now a pro-slavery advocate would be excommunicated from the very denominations whose leading pastors once defended slavery in the name of a 'pro-slavery God', quoting a 'pro-slavery Bible'.

We've gone through a similar process in regard to anti-Semitism, segregation and apartheid. Many of us have also gone through a similar process regarding the status of women in the Church, and some of us regarding the status of gay, lesbian and transgendered people. We are also going through a similar process regarding stewardship of the environment, religious supremacy and (I hope) the sanctioning of war.

But very few Christians today, in my experience anyway, have given a second thought to – much less repented of – *this habitual, conventional way of reading and interpreting the Bible* that allowed slavery, anti-Semitism, apartheid, chauvinism, environmental plundering, prejudice towards gay people and other injustices to be legitimised and defended for so long. Yes, we stopped using the Bible to defend certain things once they were 'discredited by events', but we still use the Bible *in the same way* to defend any number of other things that have not yet been fully discredited, but soon may be. By and large, few of us have become self-critical regarding our assumptions about

the Bible and our ways of using it that flow from those assumptions – often leading to 'discredited' results. That self-critical turn is at the heart of the second passage in our quest. Our quest for a new kind of Christianity requires a new, more mature and responsible approach to the Bible.

We pursue this new approach to the Bible not out of a capitulation to 'moral relativism' (as some critics will no doubt accuse), but because of a passion for goodness and justice. Our goal is not to lower our moral standards, but rather to raise them by facing and repenting of habits of the mind and heart that harmed human beings and dishonoured God in the past. We have no desire to descend down a slippery slope into moral compromise, but rather we want to admit that we slid down that slope long ago, Bibles in hand, and we need to climb out of the ditch before we are complicit in more atrocities. Repentance means more than being sorry: it means being different.