

# Reforming or Conforming?

*Post-Conservative Evangelicals  
and the Emerging Church*

Edited by Gary L. W. Johnson  
and Ronald N. Gleason

Foreword by David F. Wells

CROSSWAY BOOKS

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

For our two respective helpmates, Suzanne and Sally.  
Their value cannot be measured in this brief space.



*Reforming or Conforming? Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*  
Copyright © 2008 by Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason

Published by Crossway Books  
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers  
1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Design and typesetting: Lakeside Design Plus  
Cover design: Amy Bristow  
Cover Photo: Getty Images; Veer Images  
First printing 2008  
Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from *The New American Standard Bible*®. Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added.

Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-0118-0  
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-0472-3  
Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-0473-0

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Reforming or conforming? : post-conservative evangelicals and the emerging church / edited by Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason ; foreword by David F. Wells.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-0118-0 (tpb)

I. Evangelicalism. 2. Theology, Doctrinal. 3. Postmodernism—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Johnson, Gary L. W., 1950– II. Gleason, Ronald N., 1945– III. Title.

BR1640.R43 2008  
270.8'3—dc22

2008020096

VP            16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08  
                  9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Saved from the Wrath of God: An Examination of Brian McLaren's Approach to the Doctrine of Hell

GREG D. GILBERT



No small number of books and articles has been written lately on the subject of hell. Some of these treatments are attempts to rethink and perhaps even reformulate the traditional Christian doctrine of hell as a real place of eternal conscious torment for unbelievers. Others are written to defend that traditional understanding. The main contours of the argument are fairly easy to identify and follow. Those who would reformulate the traditional doctrine fall broadly into two camps: *universalists*, who argue that Scripture teaches the final salvation of everyone without exception, and *annihilationists*, who argue that unbelievers are finally destroyed, or otherwise go out of existence altogether. Of course there are various positions and nuances within each of these general categories. Annihilationists, for instance, may argue that the destruction of believers is due to the direct punitive action of God, or they may argue for a position called “conditional mortality,” according to which a special act of God’s power is necessary to maintain a soul in existence after it is separated from the body. In the case of unbelievers, then, that special act of sustaining power is withheld, and the soul returns to nonexistence.

However numerous the positions in this argument, the common thread among them is that they are all attempting to say something about hell’s ontology, or substance—whether or not it is real, and if so, what it might be like. Yet it is precisely the desire to stop having that conversation that makes the work of Brian McLaren

unique and worth a careful look. A widely-read author and a recognized leader in the emergent church, McLaren has articulated a sweeping vision of the gospel of Jesus Christ, one which challenges the traditional understanding of Christ and the meaning of his life and death on many different levels.<sup>1</sup> One of the more important charges he makes is that the traditional Christian doctrine of hell is simply insufficient. What he finally proposes is that the church should stop focusing on the question of whether hell is real, what it will be like, and who will be there, and start focusing instead on the doctrine's practical effects.

In this essay I hope to offer an accurate, concise summary of McLaren's approach to the doctrine of hell and then make a number of critiques about both his theological method and his conclusions. I conclude that it is McLaren's reimagining of hell, not the traditional doctrine, that proves insufficient. His attempt to turn the doctrine of hell primarily into a rhetorical tool fails both biblically and philosophically, and when he is finally forced to confront hell's substance, what he proposes is wholly insufficient when compared to the Bible's teaching. Moreover, McLaren's deficient rethinking of hell seems to have sprung from his deficient rethinking of the gospel, and there is the most serious problem. For in the end, his struggle to be rid of the traditional doctrine of hell is finally only a symptom of his having misunderstood the gospel of the kingdom.

### **A Summary of McLaren's Treatment of the Doctrine of Hell**

While McLaren writes about hell occasionally in several of his books, the vast majority of his thinking on the subject is found in the third book of his *A New Kind of Christian* trilogy. *The Last Word and the Word After That* brings to a close the story of Daniel Poole, a fictional pastor who in the first book of the trilogy met an affable Jamaican man named Neil Edward Oliver (Neo), who leads him over the course of the story to rethink his understanding of the entire Christian faith and gospel. In this final book, it is Daniel's discomfort with hell that comes to the fore, and Neo (who is now going by simply "Neil") helps him discover a new way of dealing with the Bible's teachings about it.

Before moving on to a summary of McLaren's ideas about hell as articulated in his books, it is worth pausing to note that any project of critiquing McLaren's work is an inherently dangerous enterprise. That is because a good deal of his writing is fictional, and his theological views are placed in the mouths of characters with whom McLaren himself sometimes agrees, and with whom sometimes he does not. In fact, he is careful to warn that the total viewpoint of any one character should not be understood as being his own. Sometimes he even has a character say something with much assurance in the book's text, and then only in the notes at the back of the book says something

1. Other chapters in this volume have dealt ably and at length with McLaren's views about the kingdom of God and its relation to the gospel of Christ. See especially Guy Waters's contribution.

like, “The situation is a bit more complex than Dan and Neil realize.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, McLaren several times in his fictional writing cites books by authors called “Maudet” and “Berton and Chase,” and only in the endnotes does the reader find out that no such authors exist. The words attributed to them are written by McLaren himself, though they are cited amidst dozens of other real authors of widely varying viewpoints.<sup>3</sup> In one sense, that is all very well. The author of fiction is king in the world he creates. Nevertheless, the distance McLaren has constructed between his written words and his own thoughts by doing his theology in fiction calls for an extra degree of care. So I have tried to be careful to note in my reading when I think McLaren may be exaggerating through the words of one of his characters, or when I think he might not hold as strictly to a certain idea as one of his characters might seem to. On the other hand, McLaren is dealing with very real ideas, and he is obviously writing in order to persuade. So I have not hesitated to impute the ideas of McLaren’s characters to McLaren himself when it has seemed justified to do so. When one of his characters offers an idea or makes a statement that is allowed to stand without objection or refutation, I have taken that idea to be one which McLaren himself would be willing to espouse.

At various places in his books, McLaren mentions several different reasons for his discomfort with the traditional doctrine of hell. Sometimes he puts the matter in stark emotional terms, other times more philosophical. One reason McLaren would rather be rid of the traditional doctrine is that, in his view, it implies a capricious, vindictive, and almost sadistic God. The idea that God is love and yet would “fry your butt in hell” is simply “wacky” and unworthy of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> So McLaren dedicates his book *The Last Word* to those who are “seeking for a God to love but have been repulsed by the ugly, unworthy images of a cruel, capricious, merciless, tyrannical deity.” In a similar vein, McLaren cannot seem to imagine that Jesus would allow for any person to spend eternity in conscious torment: “Everything I know about Jesus,” says one of McLaren’s characters, “tells me he would go down there and get them out.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, he objects to the traditional doctrine of hell because of its effects on Christians’ behavior. By putting so much emphasis on the afterlife, he argues, the doctrine of hell minimizes human injustice, shifts focus from justice in this world to salvation in the next, and in the process allows people to take the name “Christian” and still commit atrocities of ostracism and even genocide.<sup>6</sup>

In light of all this, McLaren wants desperately to move away from questions about what hell is, or who might be there. In short, he wants to avoid the debate about hell’s substance that I briefly described above:

2. See, for example, Brian McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 189.

3. *Ibid.*, 195.

4. *Ibid.*, 75.

5. *Ibid.*, 32.

6. *Ibid.*, 61, 83, 85, 135, for example.

Personally, while I believe these reflections [on annihilationism, universalism, etc.] are valuable, I lean toward the conclusion that they are trying to answer questions that aren't the best questions to ask, even though those questions do inevitably energize our curiosity. The language of hell, in my view, like the language of biblical prophecy in general, is not intended to provide literal or detailed fortune-telling or prognostication about the hereafter, nor is it intended to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but rather it is intended to motivate us in the here and now to realize our ultimate accountability to a God of mercy and justice and in that light to rethink everything and to seek first the kingdom and justice of God.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, to ask what finally happens to the wicked in eternity is not the right question, nor is the debate between traditionalists, annihilationists, and universalists the right conversation to be having. Instead, Christians ought to be talking about how the idea of hell functions in our lives. Does it lead us to ostracize and hate other people, or does it spur us on to realize that God wants no one to be an outcast from his kingdom? As Neo puts it sharply, "It's none of your business who does and does not go to hell. It is your business to be warned by it and to run, not walk, in the opposite direction! . . . Now stop speculating about hell and start living for heaven!"<sup>8</sup> McLaren calls this idea, learned from Lesslie Newbigin, "predicamentalism."<sup>9</sup> Instead of leading Christians to speculate on the eternal fate of other people, it focuses them on their own lives, their own predicaments.

### **"Its Best Good Work": The Rhetorical Purpose of Hell**

In order to arrive at this "predicamental" understanding of the Bible's teaching on hell, McLaren embarks on a project of deconstructing the traditional doctrine. He is entirely straightforward in saying that this is his goal, and contrary to its popular reputation, he understands the process of deconstruction to be a good thing. "The word *destructive* is often associated with the word *deconstructive*, but the association is erroneous. Deconstruction is not destruction; it is hope."<sup>10</sup> By clearing away the accumulated traditions, customs, and expectations about certain ideas, he argues, we may be able to see something much better than that with which we started. "It's like taking apart a cheesy billboard that somebody built along the highway so that people can see the beautiful view the billboard was hiding."<sup>11</sup> The best way to do this work of deconstruction is by doing history. By tracing the development of an idea through time, one can perhaps get behind current formulations of that idea to the original motivations and forces that gave rise to it in the first place.

7. *Ibid.*, 188–89.

8. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 126. See also Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 122–24.

9. McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 126. See also McLaren, *Last Word*, 103.

10. McLaren, *Last Word*, xvii.

11. *Ibid.*, 106.

McLaren begins his project of deconstructing the idea of hell by asserting that the ancient Jews thought very little about the subject:

One thing was clear to me, I explained: hell was not “revealed” in the Old Testament. Nowhere did a Hebrew prophet have a vision or dream that revealed the reality of hell. It’s never mentioned once in the whole Hebrew Bible. Even the latest books of the Old Testament, thought to have been written about 450 B.C., have no reference to hell. Instead, the idea appears suddenly—to us, anyway—in the Gospels, on the lips of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, McLaren asserts, the Old Testament is characterized by a “persistent Jewish disinterest in afterlife.”<sup>13</sup> So where did Jesus’s idea of hell come from? If not from the Old Testament, where did he get it, and why did it form such an important and frequent part of his teaching?

McLaren proposes that the idea of eternal torment in hell that prevailed in Jewish thinking at the time of Jesus was actually an amalgamation of ideas drawn from four different “threads” of history and belief, as well as one other idea called “the scapegoat factor.” Those four threads were the Babylonian (Mesopotamian), Egyptian, Zoroastrian (Persian), and Greco-Roman cultures, each of which represented an important point of contact for the Jews during the intertestamental period. It was from these cultures, McLaren says, that the Jews learned and appropriated ideas about a disembodied afterlife, rewards and punishments after death, and eternal conscious torment. Here is how McLaren, through his character Dan, summarizes the original development of the idea of hell:

So, it all comes together in the intertestamental period when many Jews, to greater and lesser degrees, are attracted to a belief in life after death. Since they don’t have the resources for that in their own religion, they start weaving together elements from the first four foreign threads—the Mesopotamian [Babylonian], the Egyptian, the Zoroastrian or Persian, and the Greco-Roman—with their own key fifth thread: the Messianic.<sup>14</sup>

McLaren adds one other thread, one that “helps explain the prevalence of hellfire rhetoric at several other times in history”—the “scapegoat factor.”<sup>15</sup> When people have an enemy they need to ostracize or weaken, he explains, they often make that enemy a scapegoat for whatever is wrong with the world, blaming them for society’s ills. Anti-Semites have used Jews for this purpose, he says, and whites have

12. *Ibid.*, 45.

13. *Ibid.*, 46.

14. *Ibid.*, 60.

15. *Ibid.*, 61. McLaren credits the “scapegoat factor” to Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random, 1995).

used blacks. In fact, the scapegoat factor is a universal theme in the history of humankind. In the time of Jesus, the scapegoat factor was in wide use as the Jews tried to explain how they, as God's chosen people, could possibly be languishing under the domination of the Roman Empire. One group in particular, the Pharisees, believed that God had abandoned the nation because of rampant sin in the lives of the people. Thus the Pharisees "scapegoated" the prostitutes and drunks in society, blamed them for Israel's problems, and then brandished the idea of eternal conscious torment to frighten the sinners into stopping their sin.<sup>16</sup>

"Into this scenario," Neil says, "Jesus came. He didn't create the beliefs about hell promoted by the Pharisees and embraced by many of the common people, and he didn't endorse them either."<sup>17</sup> In other words, the doctrine of hell did not come from Jesus, nor was it revealed by God in the Old Testament. It was rather an outgrowth of Israel's contact with pagan cultures. Yes, Jesus appropriated the language of hell for his own purposes, but he did not necessarily accept that language as corresponding to reality.<sup>18</sup> Instead, he took the Pharisees' threats against "sinners" and turned their words back on them. "He was like a practitioner of jiu jitsu—he turned the force of the argument back on the heads of the Pharisees."<sup>19</sup> Jesus' reasons for doing this were many, McLaren says. Besides wanting to protect the old scapegoats, he uses the language of hell to redefine "goodness" and "righteousness" over against the Pharisees. Instead of the "cold, exacting, heartless, merciless" righteousness that the Pharisees demanded, God's righteousness was a matter of mercy and kindness and inclusion, especially for the outcast and the sinner.<sup>20</sup> Through this process, then, Jesus "deconstructs" the Pharisees' idea of hell, "fulfills" it, and "sows the seeds for its own demise and replacement."<sup>21</sup> Where the Pharisees used hell to ostracize undesirables, Jesus used it to teach the folly of exclusion. In other words, "Jesus uses the power language of hell to disempower the injustice of the powerful and to empower the disempowered to seek justice."<sup>22</sup>

Here is where McLaren's deconstruction of hell comes to its point. "Neil," says Dan, "we Christians use the whole doctrine of hell exactly as the Pharisees did! We're

16. McLaren, *Last Word*, 62.

17. *Ibid.*, 62.

18. See *ibid.*, 73, and especially 57, where Dan is relieved to realize that Jesus is not "to blame" for the idea of hell. "I guess I'm kind of relieved," he says. "I used to believe that Jesus must have invented all the talk about hell, you know, since it isn't overtly found in the Old Testament. I think a lot of people feel that way: since Jesus is the first to talk about it in the Bible, he was revealing it. But now I realize hell has this long and . . . fascinating history. Jesus isn't to blame for thinking it up" (ellipsis in original). Why is Dan relieved? The only sensible explanation is that his relief comes from his realization that the doctrine of hell is not part of special revelation, neither by God the Father nor by Jesus. Therefore, presumably, he no longer has to believe in it.

19. *Ibid.*, 63.

20. *Ibid.*, 63.

21. *Ibid.*, 74–76.

22. *Ibid.*, 136.

playing on the wrong side!”<sup>23</sup> While we follow the Pharisees’ example of using hell to threaten sinners, divide humanity, and mark out those who are excluded from God, Jesus used the rhetoric of hell to threaten the very ones who were doing the excluding, and to show them that God’s kingdom is kind, merciful, and compassionate, not cold and exacting. At bottom, McLaren argues, Jesus’ use of hell-rhetoric is meant to teach believers the evil of excluding and ostracizing others, and stir them up to “bear fruit now . . . especially in the area of compassion for the weak and needy and vulnerable.”<sup>24</sup>

If he were able, McLaren really would like nothing more than to stop the conversation there. Over and over again in his books, he drives home the point that this, the rhetorical *use* of hell, is the point, not whether it really exists or who will be there. To ask such questions is to miss the point of hell entirely. “Daniel!” Neo shouts—and the reader gets the distinct impression that he could just as well insert his own name there—“That’s not the point! Can’t you see? . . . The point is not whether there is a hell: the point is God’s justice! The point isn’t whether Jesus—by using the language of the construction—confirms it. The point is, for what purpose does he use the language?”<sup>25</sup> Or as another character writes in verse:

Hell is not my condition or my destiny. . . .  
 Hell is neither state of mind nor lake of literal fire. . . .  
 Hell is a warning, and like all warnings, issues  
 From love, from wisdom, from better judgement—  
 Whether God’s or from our own best selves,  
 It does not matter.<sup>26</sup> Its purpose, not its substance, is the point. . . .  
 Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God,  
 And hell has done  
 Its best good work, like Nineveh’s threatened destruction,  
 Which upset Jonah when it didn’t occur. Anyway, you  
 Can forget about it.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Yes, But Is It Real?—The Substance of Hell***

But of course you cannot forget about it. Even if one were inclined to accept everything McLaren says about the rhetorical purpose of hell, the question still remains: But is it real? To his credit, McLaren acknowledges the urgency of that question, and he puts it into the mouth of one of his most likeable characters: “Markus chuck-

23. *Ibid.*, 64.

24. *Ibid.*, 121.

25. *Ibid.*, 71.

26. Another denial of the idea of hell having been revealed by God.

27. McLaren, *Last Word*, 26.

led, ‘Of course, even if you buy all that, you’re still left with the question of what hell is. Is it real, or is it just a rhetorical device?’”<sup>28</sup>

Before answering that question, McLaren lays some theological groundwork that will allow him to understand the substance of hell in a way that does not correspond to Jesus’ words about it. He has Neil propose that perhaps Jesus did not intend for his words about fire, worms, and torment in hell to be understood literally, but rather that he used the language of hell as a “truth-depicting model,” similar to what scientists do when they portray the atom as a group of balls with other balls swirling around them. “We use those models,” Neil says, “even though we know they aren’t literally true.”<sup>29</sup> Even so, such models are not considered untrue, much less a lie, McLaren argues, because they are the best humans can do in their attempts to explain the concept lying behind them. They are “truth-depicting” and “truth-conveying.” Perhaps this is what Jesus was doing with the language of hell: using a truth-depicting model, but without necessarily endorsing that model as the literal truth.<sup>30</sup>

With that established, McLaren floats a number of trial balloons in answer to the question of hell’s substance, but it is never clear exactly what he believes on the matter. At times, he seems to be flirting with universalism and annihilationism, but then he usually backs away at the last moment. In *A New Kind of Christian*, for example, the reader is treated to a sermon on death and judgment by Neil in which he reads a portion of C. S. Lewis’s *The Last Battle*. In the story a soldier who had spent his entire life serving the evil god Tash meets the great Lion Aslan, a representation of Christ. The soldier is fearful that Aslan will punish him for his service to Tash, but to his surprise, the Lion says to him that any good service he has done for Tash, he will account as service done for him.<sup>31</sup> The reader could be forgiven for thinking that Neo (and McLaren through him) was hinting toward a universalist understanding of the judgment. Not so. When Dan questions him about the sermon, Neo explains that the whole thing had been a head-fake, a metaphor, evocative language. “I know that moderns don’t have much capacity for poetry,” he says, “having been enslaved to modern technical correctness for so long. But Jesus—Jesus was allowed to be evocative in his language. Shouldn’t we—or should I say, shouldn’t you, as a pastor?”<sup>32</sup>

McLaren also seems at times almost to embrace an annihilationist understanding. In a note at the end of *The Last Word*, for example, he articulates the view of C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* that hell is the process by which God causes wicked souls to shrink and decay into something less and less human and thus less and less capable of experiencing suffering. He then comments that such a thought might bring some

28. *Ibid.*, 137.

29. *Ibid.*, 72.

30. *Ibid.*, 73.

31. McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 92.

32. *Ibid.*, 95.

relief in the face of eternal conscious torment.<sup>33</sup> In the same note, McLaren also offers for consideration the position of author Jonathan Kvanvig, who proposes a modified annihilationism in which hell is understood as a continuing descent of the wicked soul toward utter nonbeing, but with the possibility that the final choice actually to finish the disintegration is left to the wicked soul itself.<sup>34</sup> Finally, however, McLaren demurs without commenting either positively or negatively on this position, reiterating his position that such questions about hell's substance are the wrong ones to ask.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond all this, there is one other conception of hell's substance that shows up repeatedly in McLaren's works. It finds its way into the mouths of several different characters, and is stated in several different ways. Because of its ubiquity, it seems reasonable to assume that this understanding of what hell might actually be is the one McLaren would most readily claim as his own. Put simply, hell is judgment. It is standing naked before the Creator and finding out that one's life has been wasted, that all one's years have been used not in the service of God's love and compassion, but rather for causing others pain and sorrow, for oppressing and ostracizing, and for working against God's good plan for his world. The character Markus puts it perhaps most clearly:

Here's what I'd say. Judgment is real. Accountability is real. A good, just, reconciling, loving, living God is in everybody's future. The danger of wasting your life and ruining other people's lives is real. Whatever road you take, you'll end up facing God, and that means you'll face the truth about your life—what you've done, who you have become, who you truly are. That's good news—unless you're a bad dude, you know, unjust, hateful, unmerciful, ungenerous, selfish, lustful, greedy, hard-hearted toward God and your neighbor. You know, if God judges, forgives, and eliminates all the bad stuff, there might not be much left of you—maybe not enough to enjoy heaven, maybe not enough to feel too much in hell either.<sup>36</sup>

Put another way, people should not think of their eternal destiny as location in heaven or hell, but rather as relation to God. For those who lived in accordance with Jesus' teachings of love and compassion, to be in the presence of the all-merciful and all-compassionate God will be exquisite joy. For those who lived in opposition to God's plan, to be in his presence will mean agony, if not outright nonbeing.<sup>37</sup>

### **A Critique of McLaren's Treatment of the Doctrine of Hell**

A comprehensive critique of McLaren's understanding of hell would begin with a restatement of the Bible's teaching on the subject and a refutation of the annihila-

33. McLaren, *Last Word*, 186–87.

34. Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 146, 168.

35. McLaren, *Last Word*, 188–89.

36. *Ibid.*, 137.

37. *Ibid.*, 164. See also McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 130.

tionist and universalist positions with which McLaren seems sometimes to flirt. Such an extensive project need not detain us here, since there are resources readily available that already have taken up and accomplished both those objectives.<sup>38</sup> Our unique interest is in McLaren's project of trying to turn the church's conversation away from the ontology of hell and toward its rhetorical use. Has McLaren's historical deconstruction of hell succeeded? Is he right to say that Christians have been distracted from the real meaning and purpose of the Bible's hell language? It seems to me that McLaren's reconception of the traditional doctrine of hell as primarily a rhetorical tool falters on at least two counts. First, his historical deconstruction of the doctrine is simply false. Second, in his description of Jesus' purpose in using the language of hell, he draws a false dichotomy between *warning* and *assertion of what is true*. Moreover, it seems to me that his proposal for how to understand hell's substance is woefully subbiblical, and confusing to the extreme. But it is to his case that hell's primary meaning is rhetorical that we first turn.

### ***McLaren's Historical Deconstruction of the Doctrine of Hell***

We have already seen that McLaren begins his deconstruction of hell by examining its history. He concludes that since the Old Testament contains no hint of the subject, the Jews must have picked up the idea from the cultures in which they were immersed during the intertestamental period: the Babylonians, Egyptians, Zoroastrians, and Greeks. Neither of those two assertions, however, comports with the facts of history.

First, it is simply not the case that the Old Testament contains no hint of the idea of hell. True, the word itself is not used, and we must acknowledge that what teaching there is about the eternal judgment of the wicked is not extensive. But there can be no doubt that when the ancient Jews looked forward to the great and awesome Day of the Lord, part of their hope was that God's enemies—and theirs—would be judged.<sup>39</sup> It is true that the hope of Israel seems to have been mainly an earthly one, tied to matters of land, throne, and power. But there are a few passages in the Old Testament that quite clearly reach beyond this life to an afterlife, a part of which will be the eternal punishment of the wicked. Take Daniel 12:2, for example, which speaks of the resurrection of the wicked "to shame and everlasting contempt." N. T. Wright and others have shown convincingly that while its immediate context is the return of the nation from exile, this passage undoubtedly looks forward to a bodily

38. For a statement of the Bible's teaching on the subject of hell, see the essays by Daniel Block, Robert Yarborough, Douglas Moss, and Gregory Beale in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). See also the systematic theologies of Wayne Grudem, Millard Erickson, Louis Berkhof, and Robert Reymond, just to name a few. For refutations of the annihilationist and universalist positions, see the essays by J. I. Packer and Christopher Morgan in *Hell Under Fire*, as well as the treatments of hell in Reymond's and Grudem's systematic theologies.

39. See, for example, Wright's comments on Psalm 73 and 49 in N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 106–7.

resurrection in which some people will be sentenced to everlasting shame and contempt.<sup>40</sup> Even more to the point is Isaiah 66:24, the verse Jesus himself quoted in Mark 9:48 as a description of hell: “And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” The fact that Jesus quotes this passage, rather than a Babylonian or Zoroastrian one, as the source of his teaching about hell is quite possibly enough all by itself to refute decisively McLaren’s theory about hell’s origins. For Jesus understood his teaching about hell to be rooted in the Old Testament’s teaching of the punishment of the wicked at the end of the age, not in Zoroastrianism.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, McLaren’s assertion that the Jews had to have learned about the afterlife, and consequently about hell, from the Babylonians, Egyptians, Zoroastrians, and Greeks is simply not borne out by the evidence. Wright has shown decisively in his magisterial work *The Resurrection of the Son of God* that the idea of afterlife and resurrection is a natural outgrowth of Israelite hope and theology. “It would be easy, and wrong,” Wright says, “to see the hope for the resurrection as a new and extraneous element, something which has come into ancient Israelite thinking by a backdoor or roundabout route.”<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, belief in the afterlife and resurrection developed from Israel’s faith that their covenant God would restore them from exile, including those who had been martyred for the faith of Yahweh.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Wright specifically refutes the idea that Israel learned of afterlife and resurrection from the Zoroastrians, pointing out that the idea finds its roots well before any likely influence from Persia, and that anyhow it would be exceeding strange if the Israelite idea of resurrection—which they took as the crowning emblem of their special status before God—turns out to have been borrowed from the very people who had the chosen people under foot!<sup>44</sup> Now it is true that in all this, Wright’s primary focus is not the judgment of the wicked. Nevertheless, if the hope of the afterlife and resurrection arose from within Israelite theology, it is entirely reasonable to imagine a doctrine of eternal punishment for God’s and Israel’s enemies similarly taking shape as a part of that hope, particularly given passages such as Daniel 12:2 and Isaiah 66:24.

McLaren’s assertion that the idea of hell had to have arisen from Babylonian, Egyptian, Zoroastrian, and Greek myths is simply false. There is ample material in

40. See Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 109–15, and Daniel Block, “The Old Testament on Hell,” in Morgan and Peterson, *Hell Under Fire*, 61–64.

41. Remarkably, McLaren mentions the crucial passage of Isaiah 66:24 only once in *Last Word*. It appears in a chart on pages 118–19, and his only comment is that it refers to “dead bodies, not disembodied souls.” That is true of the passage in its Old Testament context, but Jesus clearly claimed the text as a source of his teaching about an eternal hell. How likely is it, really, that he was infusing that Old Testament text with an old Zoroastrian idea for mere rhetorical effect?

42. Wright, *Resurrection*, 121.

43. *Ibid.*, 121–28.

44. *Ibid.*, 124–25.

both the Old Testament and the literature of the intertestamental period to establish hell firmly as an extension of the Jewish hope for the resurrection of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked.

### *McLaren's Use of Speech-Act Theory*

At one point in *The Last Word*, McLaren has Neo explain to Dan that his understanding of hell as primarily a rhetorical tool is an example of “rhetorical hermeneutics,” also known as speech-act theory:

“That reminds me—have you ever heard of rhetorical hermeneutics?” Neil asked.

“Can’t say that I have. What’s that?”

“It’s an approach to Scripture that among other things tells us that we normally pay too much attention to what the writers are *saying* and not enough to what they’re *doing*. Rhetorical interpretation would ask, ‘What is Jesus trying to do by using the language of hell, plus all these other negative outcomes—missing the party, having to repay a debt, being cut to pieces, being sent into the darkness outside, whatever?’”<sup>45</sup>

From there, McLaren makes his argument that Jesus’ point was not to endorse the idea of hell or to suggest anything about its reality, but rather to warn and prod his listeners to do certain things with their lives. I believe McLaren makes two serious errors in his use of speech-act theory, the first of which blunts the force of his argument and the second of which actually turns back on him, jujitsu style, to firmly establish what McLaren is trying to deny.

First of all, in asserting that speech-act theory tells us that we should focus on what Jesus is *doing* with his words rather than on what he is *saying* is only a half-truth at best. He is right that speech-act theory is concerned with what words accomplish when they are spoken, but that does not in any way mean those words can only perform one job at a time. McLaren’s major thrust seems to be that when Jesus talks about hell, what really matters is that he is warning his listeners, *not whether he is asserting anything about hell’s reality*.<sup>46</sup> But speech-act theory does not say at all that a person can only do one thing at a time with a speech-act, nor is it legitimate to say that the act of warning is more important than the act of asserting. John Searle, one of the pioneers of speech-act theory, said that we do five basic things with our words: “we tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes, and we bring about changes through our utterances. Often, we do more than one of these at once in the same

45. McLaren, *Last Word*, 81.

46. It might be objected here that McLaren does allow that Jesus is saying *something* about hell’s reality, since he allows that he might be using the language of hell as a “truth-depicting model.” Fair enough, but McLaren could hardly be clearer, and he could hardly say more frequently, that the reality of hell is not the point and that compared to its rhetorical use, its reality and nature are unimportant.

utterance.<sup>47</sup> If that is so, then McLaren is guilty of oversimplification and a false dichotomy. It simply is not the case that what words are *doing* is more important than what they are *asserting*. In fact, asserting *is* doing. Thus it is entirely possible that when Jesus spoke of hell, he was actually doing two things of equal importance with his words: warning his hearers to live in a certain way, and asserting something about reality, namely the existence of a real hell.

Not only that, but speech-act theory would suggest that precisely because Jesus was using the language of hell as a warning, he actually *had* to have been asserting its reality at the same time. Kevin Vanhoozer, in his article “The Semantics of Biblical Literature,” identifies a number of conditions that must be met in order for a speech-act to be legitimate. One of those is that the speaker must be sincere. So in the case of a warning like Jesus’ about hell, “the speaker must really believe that a certain event is not in the best interest of the hearer.”<sup>48</sup> Another condition is that the speaker must have good evidence for believing that what he is saying is actually the case. A warning, for instance, is illegitimate if the speaker knows that the event of which he is warning is not actually about to happen. In order for his speech-act to be legitimate, the speaker must have good evidence to believe that the event of which he is warning actually obtains.

Now the upshot of all this is that if Jesus’ warnings about hell were legitimate and not frivolous—and we must assume that to be the case—then he cannot simply have been using the language of hell for its rhetorical punch. He must have had some reason to believe that his hearers were actually in some danger. Put another way, if Jesus was warning people about hell, and he did not believe (and have good reason to believe) that there was a real hell, then his warnings were illegitimate, frivolous, and even deceitful, not to mention insincere. For a legitimate warning requires that the speaker truly believe that his listeners are in danger; otherwise the warning is illegitimate and insincere. At the very least, all this would seem to undermine entirely McLaren’s rhetoric about the reality of hell “not being the point.” In fact the reality of hell *has to be* the point, for Jesus’ warnings about it only make sense if he believes it to be real.

This argument is only strengthened when we consider that Jesus was the Son of God—which McLaren happily acknowledges—because then his beliefs about hell would have been based not on merely *good* evidence but on *certain* evidence. As the second person of the Trinity incarnate, Jesus was not simply giving his best guess as to the nature of the afterlife. He had perfect knowledge about it, and thus he knew perfectly and infallibly whether or not hell existed. It follows from this that when

47. John Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 29. Quoted in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture’s Diverse Literary Forms,” in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

48. Vanhoozer, “Semantics,” 96.

Jesus warned about hell, he was doing so with the certain knowledge that hell is real.<sup>49</sup> For if Jesus gave such warnings while knowing certainly that hell does *not* exist, then his warnings were beyond insincere and illegitimate; they were lies. Perhaps McLaren would object here that he does in fact acknowledge that Jesus thought his hearers were in real danger; He allows that Jesus' hell language is in some way a "truth-depicting model," though without specifying what reality lies behind that model. Indeed, it is true that Jesus could have been using metaphor to describe the danger of hell. We do not have to take his images of hell literally for his warnings to be legitimate and true. What is simply not allowable, however, is to say—as McLaren so often does—that it does not matter whether Jesus thought there was a hell or not. On the contrary, our very faith in him as the Son of God means that when we encounter his warnings about hell, we understand that behind those warnings is certain knowledge of a real danger. In other words, McLaren is simply wrong to say that Jesus was not asserting anything about hell's reality; for unless we are willing to make Jesus insincere or ignorant or worse, we must understand that implicit in and inherent to his warnings about hell is also an assertion of hell's reality.

### *McLaren's Proposal about Hell's Substance*

What are we to make of McLaren's proposal that hell—if it is anything real at all—might be the experience of standing exposed before God and finding out that your life has been worthless? For one thing, we should note that there seems to be some unreconciled tension in McLaren's own mind about just how unpleasant such an experience would be. On the one hand, he is terribly uncomfortable with the Bible's imagery of hell as a place of everlasting fire and torment. For God to inflict something so horrible on mere human beings would make him cruel, capricious, merciless, and tyrannical.<sup>50</sup> Further, as we have already seen, he finds comfort in C. S. Lewis's suggestion that perhaps one effect of hell is to cause a person to become less and less human and thus less and less capable of suffering. On the other hand, McLaren also wants to say that thinking of hell in his terms is actually *worse* than the traditional doctrine. In fact, it is as serious and horrible a thing as one can imagine. "Nothing can be more serious than that," Neil says. "Compared to that, fire and brimstone are. . . ."<sup>51</sup> At this point, it would not be unreasonable to ask McLaren to decide please whether he'd like to have his cake or eat it. Why is it that the traditional doctrine of hell earns such impassioned prose from him, if his own vision of hell so utterly outstrips it in terms of horror? Does he want hell to be unpleasant or not?

49. Vanhoozer writes on this point: "Divine warnings, since they infallibly fulfill the preparatory condition, will always be true, for God is all-knowing and will not only be justified in thinking that something is not in my best interest; He will be certain of it. When God asserts, His speech act implies that he has *certain* evidence for the truth of His assertion; when God warns, He has infallible reason to believe that something is not in the hearer's best interest." ("Semantics," 98.)

50. McLaren, *Last Word*, dedication page.

51. *Ibid.*, 80 (ellipsis in original). The sentence dramatically trails off.

Even more importantly, the idea that hell consists merely of standing before God and becoming aware of one's own worthlessness does not even begin to do justice to Scripture's language and imagery about the final judgment of God's enemies. From beginning to end, the Bible portrays judgment as God's active retribution against sinners. That is the thrust of the passage Jesus quotes with reference to hell, Isaiah 66:24. The men who lie dead in the valley of Gehenna were those "who have rebelled against me." Similarly, those who are sent away to "eternal punishment" in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46) are those who did not serve the Son of Man. The people thrown into the lake of fire at the final judgment were those who had served the beast instead of Christ, and whose names were thus not found in the book of life (Rev. 20:15). All these are images of retribution, of action God takes in order to punish those who have set themselves against him. McLaren's proposal, which he evidently takes largely from C. S. Lewis's ideas in *The Great Divorce*, ignores all this. In his vision of hell, God is entirely passive. He does not punish his enemies, much less "cast them into hell," as Jesus seems to think he might (Luke 12:5). Perhaps it is most accurate—if we are allowed to take McLaren's metaphor on this point seriously—to say that God simply stares sternly at his enemies, the way a father might stare at a wayward child until the child realizes what an awful thing he has done. For "that," says Neil, "[is] judgment par excellence."<sup>52</sup> McLaren's hell is not one of just retribution; it is one of natural consequences. It does not involve a God who is active in the judgment of his enemies; it involves one who passively allows his creatures to become what they insist on becoming. Neither of these ideas is new, but they both still fall far short of what the Bible says about how God intends to deal with sin.

Finally, McLaren's proposal raises a number of theological questions. Is this annihilationism, or something close to it, like Kvanvig's proposal? Is it a modified universalism where everyone ends up in heaven after all evil is judged, forgiven, and forgotten? Or is it a sort of attenuated exclusivism in the mold of Lewis, where the torments of hell are lessened so as to make the thought more bearable? Moreover, even if we could finally untangle the theological and philosophical confusion here, where exactly would an idea like this—that perhaps God forgives people into oblivion—find any positive support in Scripture? McLaren would surely answer me by saying once again something like, "It doesn't matter. Don't you see you're missing the point? What hell *is* doesn't finally matter. What matters is what the language of hell spurs you to *do*." Furthermore, he could not be clearer (ironically) that the lack of clarity in his understanding of hell's substance does not bother him in the least. "Clarity is good," he says in the introduction to *The Last Word*, "but sometimes intrigue may be even more precious; clarity tends to put an end to further thinking,

52. *Ibid.*, 80.

whereas intrigue makes one think more intensely, broadly, and deeply.”<sup>53</sup> In the end, McLaren is willing to trade a clear doctrine he cannot abet for an ambiguity with which he can be comfortable.

The conclusion of all this must be that not one major point of McLaren’s proposal for reimagining hell is able to stand up under scrutiny. For one thing, the idea that Jesus used it primarily as a rhetorical tool rests on the premise that the traditional doctrine of hell was not revealed by God—either in the Old Testament or by Jesus himself—but was rather an extraneous appendix to the Jewish faith taken from Babylonian, Egyptian, Zoroastrian, and Greek cultures. As we have seen, that is a position built on numerous historical blunders, as well as a sorely deficient understanding of Israel’s faith. Furthermore, the rhetorical hermeneutics McLaren invokes to make his case actually end up working against him. Not only is it perfectly reasonable to think that Jesus could have been doing two things at once with his words (admonishing his hearers with the language of hell *and* making an assertion about its reality), the very fact that he was warning his hearers about it means that he must have had good evidence—indeed certain evidence, given his divinity—that hell really exists and that it is horrible. Finally, when McLaren is at last forced to address hell’s substance, what he proposes must be judged to be severely subbiblical, refusing as it does to take seriously the Bible’s teaching that God’s response to his enemies will be active retribution. Moreover, it actually ends up creating more theological and philosophical confusion than it dispels. In the end, McLaren has offered no good reason to think that Jesus and the apostles intended to convey with their teaching about hell anything other than that it is a real experience of eternal conscious torment of God’s enemies.

### **Whence McLaren’s Discomfort with Hell?**

One final question remains to be answered about McLaren’s handling of the doctrine of hell. Why is he so uncomfortable with the traditional idea of hell as an experience of eternal, conscious torment for the enemies of God? We have already seen some of the reasons he states for his discomfort with the idea, but it seems to me there is another explanation as well, one having to do with his understanding of the gospel of the kingdom. I believe that McLaren’s deficient reinterpretation of hell finds its best explanation in his deficient reinterpretation of the kingdom. Essentially, the kingdom he envisions is so present-focused, so socially and politically oriented that it has no obvious place for a doctrine like hell.

Guy Waters has offered in this volume a detailed summary of McLaren’s view of the kingdom of God, so we need not remain long on the subject. Suffice it to say that McLaren believes that the church has traded Jesus’s “gospel of the kingdom” for a gospel of “getting into heaven after you die.” Instead of being concerned with matters of justice and injustice, good and evil on a global scale, the church has been sidetracked

53. *Ibid.*, xv.

and hamstrung by the idea of (as Neil puts it delicately) “getting your butt into heaven.” What McLaren envisions instead is a gospel that calls Christians to join Christ’s mission of working for “God’s dream” for the world, that is, what God intends the world to be. Practically, that means Christians will give their lives in compassionate and loving work for the good of humankind, especially for the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed.

Of course there is much in McLaren’s telling of this story that is commendable and exciting. Surely he is right that Jesus’ message is not merely about the future, and that it ought to have social, political, cultural, artistic, economic, and intellectual ramifications in our own lives. On top of that, what Christian’s heart does not long to invade a world of darkness and hopelessness with Jesus’ message of love and compassion and salvation? For all its commendable features, however, McLaren’s view of the kingdom of God is not sufficient. He has sold the kingdom short, and in doing so he has missed out on a good part of what makes the gospel of the kingdom so glorious. I believe McLaren has made two fundamental errors in his understanding of the kingdom, errors that are strikingly reflective of those made by classic theological liberals: First, McLaren’s emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as present, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as eschatological. And second, his emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as social and political, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as spiritual.

Concerning the first error—that McLaren’s emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as present, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as eschatological—the first thing we must acknowledge is that McLaren is not wrong to point out that the kingdom of God has a present, here-and-now dimension. He is right that part of the shock of Jesus’ message was that the kingdom of God was *at hand*. This was not something that the Jews expected. Based on their reading of the prophets, they expected that the kingdom of God would come in one explosive cataclysm at the end of time, when God himself would descend from heaven, establish his rule in the person of a restored Davidic king in Jerusalem, and subdue all the nations of the world under his dominion. Yet Jesus came preaching that all those prophecies and expectations of the coming kingdom had been fulfilled in him (Luke 4:16–21; Matt. 11:2–6). There was no cataclysm, no explosive descent from heaven, and no end of the world. Yet the kingdom was here—now! McLaren is right to emphasize all that, but there is another dimension of the kingdom that he seldom engages and never truly integrates into his program.

Even after Jesus’ declaration that the “Age to Come” had broken into the present age, the expectation of an eschatological consummation of the kingdom remained. Both Jesus and the apostles preached this constantly. Even if we leave aside the prediction of future judgment in Matthew 24–25, given the debate over whether Jesus’ words there refer to the eschaton or to the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the fact remains

that Jesus frequently told of a final, consummative judgment that would take place sometime in the future. In John 5:28–29, for example, he says, “for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” In Matthew 25 he tells of the separation of the sheep and the goats—based on their works in this life to be sure, but this is still a picture of a final, eschatological judgment. And how else but eschatologically can his words to the Pharisees be understood? “But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64).

The apostles also look forward to a future resurrection and judgment. When Paul reminds the Corinthians of “the gospel I preached to you,” he talks about the death and resurrection of Christ and then turns immediately to the resurrection of the dead in eternity (1 Corinthians 15). When he sings a hymn of praise to God for the gospel, he tells the Ephesians they have been sealed by the Holy Spirit “who is the guarantee of our inheritance *until we acquire possession of it . . .*” (Eph. 1:14). A chapter later, he says God has saved us “so that *in the coming ages* he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7). Peter speaks of a “salvation ready to be revealed *in the last time*” and hopes that the genuineness of his readers’ faith will be “found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1: 7). The author of Hebrews tells his readers that they are “strangers and exiles on the earth” and that they should look forward to “the city that has foundations” (Heb. 11:10). Finally, despite McLaren’s efforts to pull it into the present, the Revelation of John remains a testimony to the eschatological expectation of the kingdom.<sup>54</sup>

Now I must admit here that I do not think McLaren would deny anything in those last two paragraphs. He does look forward to a final judgment, to a resurrection, and to a final consummation. But this eschatological dimension of the kingdom is vastly underemphasized in his books. He says at one point that the present, here-and-now dimension of the kingdom is “more significant” than the eschatological, and he even goes so far as to say that as good as Jesus’ work of atonement and redemption is, it is “not terribly important” in terms of this present world and the status quo.<sup>55</sup> McLaren’s attention, energy, and focus is all but exclusively on the kingdom as present, and the result is that he ends up with a gospel of the kingdom that is at least as emaciated as he would charge other Christians’ eschaton-focused gospel of being.

With regard to the second error—that McLaren’s emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as social and political, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as spiritual—any fair reading of his books will come to the conclusion that he sees the

54. See his treatment of Revelation in Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: W Pub., 2006), 171–72.

55. McLaren, *Story We Find Ourselves In*, 116; McLaren, *Secret Message of Jesus*, 33.

gospel of the kingdom primarily in political and social terms. Neo puts it like this, over and over again: “I think what Jesus was about, and really, what all the apostles were about at their best moments . . . was a global, *public* movement or *revolution* to bring holistic reconciliation, a reconnection with God, with others, with ourselves, with our environment. *True* religion, *revolutionary* religion. That’s what got them in such trouble.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, McLaren’s gospel is a “historically rooted, politically engaged approach” in contrast to the “timeless truths approach” that dominates most of evangelicalism today.<sup>57</sup>

Again recognizing the good in what McLaren says—that there is a social, political, economic, intellectual, cultural, and artistic dimension to the gospel of the kingdom—I believe he has actually downplayed what is truly astonishing and revolutionary about the kingdom. What the Jews *expected* was a social and political kingdom. Had they gotten that, there would have been nothing much astonishing about it at all. What they got instead was a Messiah who went out of his way to make it clear that his kingdom was *not* of this world (John 8:23; 18:36)! He avoided language that would reinforce this-worldly thinking among the Jews, seldom, for instance, using the term “Messiah” because it held so many this-worldly connotations. If the people started thinking in terms of Messiah, they would try to make him king by force (John 6:15). So he used a term with less political baggage—“Son of Man.” Whatever else it might be, Jesus’ kingdom was a spiritual one.

This is even clearer when we consider that both the Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself preached that the kingdom confers certain benefits on its members. I appreciate McLaren’s emphasis (learned apparently from Lesslie Newbigin), that Christians are elected to service, not privilege.<sup>58</sup> But the fact remains that both the prophets and Jesus taught about several benefits that are given to the people of the kingdom. The gift of eschatological salvation is one (see Ezek. 34:16, 22; Matt. 5:8; 25:21, 23, for example). Forgiveness of sin is another (see Isa. 33:24, Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 18:31; 36:22–28; Mark 1:4; 2:10; Luke 7:48, for example) and righteousness another (see Matt. 5:6; Luke 18:14, for example).<sup>59</sup>

Even beyond all this, McLaren misses what is perhaps the most astonishing surprise of the New Testament story: that Jesus simultaneously filled the roles of the Davidic Messiah, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and Daniel’s Son of Man. That McLaren does not see this, or at least does not hint at it in his books, is all the more surprising because he is so careful otherwise to situate the story of Jesus in the narrative of the nation of Israel. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah and the Son of Man of Daniel 12 are not insignificant themes in the Old Testament, and they were not in-

56. McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 73.

57. McLaren, *Secret Message of Jesus*, 236.

58. McLaren, *Last Word*, 103.

59. Information in this paragraph learned from George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1993), 68–78.

significant ideas in the Jewish mind during the time of Jesus, either. How McLaren could ignore them so completely, not to mention the startling role they play in Jesus' own self-understanding, is nothing short of a mystery.

At least twice, McLaren accuses the church of imposing on Jesus a message of eternal, spiritual salvation. In his telling, Christians have misinterpreted Paul and John and then used those misreadings to silence the true message of the kingdom found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. "Basically, it's a conspiracy theory about Paul and John ganging up against Matthew, Mark, and Luke—well, not really them, but people who interpret them."<sup>60</sup> But McLaren is wrong. It was no misinterpretation of Paul and John that injected eternal and soteriological meaning into the story of the kingdom. It was Jesus who did so. He declared himself to be the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes (that is, the head of the kingdom), and at the same time constantly referred to himself as the divine "Son of Man" from Daniel 12. Further, Jesus said of the Son of Man that he "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"—an allusion to the Servant's being made an offering for sin in Isaiah 53:10. By making that allusion, Jesus "took over a term that appears in Daniel but that was not widely used in contemporary Jewish hopes, but radically reinterpreted it. . . . Jesus poured the content of the Suffering Servant into the Son of Man concept."<sup>61</sup>

The Jews had hopes for a kingly Messiah and also for a Servant of the Lord; they even had a vague expectation of a divine "son of man" who would appear at the end of the age. But no one ever pulled the three concepts together, at least not until Jesus. Jesus, however, took the divine nature of the Son of Man, joined to it the substitutionary and vicarious suffering of the Servant, and finally incorporated it all with his Messianic role. By the time Jesus finished gathering together all the threads of Jewish hope, the Head of the kingdom was infinitely more than an earthly revolutionary; he was a divine Messiah-King who would suffer and die for his people to win them spiritual salvation, not least so that they would be *able* to live the life of the kingdom on earth. That is why Jesus made one's response to his person and message the single determining factor in whether one would be included in the kingdom.<sup>62</sup> The only way into the kingdom was through the blood of the King.

When one begins to grasp that part of the New Testament narrative, one also begins to realize that McLaren is simply missing a huge part of the plot. His gospel of the kingdom is so focused on the kingdom's political and social ramifications that he seems blind to this entire astounding storyline. It is a grievous blindness, for it leaves McLaren with a gospel that, next to the real thing, seems truncated, unexciting, and rather pedestrian.

60. McLaren, *Last Word*, 149; see also McLaren, *Secret Message of Jesus*, 91.

61. George Eldon Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 155.

62. *Ibid.*, 62. See Matt. 8:11–12; 13:37–38; Mark 10:15.

This diminishing of the biblical teaching about the kingdom helps to explain McLaren's halting confusion about hell. He simply cannot, it seems, see how an eternal conscious judgment would have a place in a kingdom of God like the one he envisions. To be sure, if the kingdom is primarily about the here-and-now, the social, and the political, then the idea of God inflicting eternal punishment on people makes little sense. If the kingdom is all about including outsiders and empowering the oppressed, the idea of God creating a permanent "outsider" class in hell and then eternally disempowering them does not sit easily. But if the kingdom is understood in its full-orbed reality as Scripture presents it—not only present but also eschatological, not only social and political but also spiritual—then the judgment of God's enemies and the enemies of his people is not so alien a concept. It certainly was not so for the Jews. As we have already seen, when they looked forward to the establishing of God's kingdom at the end of the age, a crucial part of their hope was that God would judge his (and their) enemies. To be sure, Jesus took the idea, clarified it, and filled it with vivid content, but that new revelation was all still a part of the story that Scripture tells from start to finish, the story that ends with God's enemies punished and all evil subdued.<sup>63</sup> In the final analysis, an understanding of the kingdom that roots itself in the present, the political, and the social simply has no place for eternal judgment; but a kingdom that takes seriously the spiritual and eschatological purpose of God to save his people and vindicate his name cannot do without it.

### Concluding Thoughts

A person who has read only *The Last Word*—or only this essay, for that matter—could easily make the mistake of thinking that the problem of hell is McLaren's primary concern. It is not. Nor is a critique of his handling of hell the most important critique that can be made about his works. Placed within its context, McLaren's subbiblical and ultimately untenable proposal for reimagining hell is only one symptom of the much larger malady that afflicts his entire theological project. There are other symptoms as well.

Consider his handling of Christ's work of atonement, for example. One of the most consistently puzzling things about McLaren's books is how little space or time he seems to have for the cross. McLaren asks for the benefit of the doubt here, saying in one of his books, "I know you will find weaknesses to point out. For example, you may wish I had said more on particular dimensions of Jesus' message or life that are of special importance to you."<sup>64</sup> He gets more specific in an endnote: "For example,

63. Robert Reymond follows Meredith Kline and Geerhardus Vos in arguing that hell is the fulfillment and consummation of the Old Testament principle of *herem*, the irrevocable giving over of persons and things to the Lord, often by destroying them. See Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1071; Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 68; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1996), 141, 143.

64. McLaren, *Secret Message of Jesus*, xiii.

the theological meaning of Jesus' death is central to all streams of Christian thought and life, but since this is a book about Jesus' message, I limit my reflections on his death here to how it relates to his primary teaching theme. Emphasizing one theme is not meant to minimize the other.<sup>65</sup> But even if the benefit of the doubt is granted, the lack of attention McLaren gives to the cross across the whole of his theological project is not easily explained. The most extended treatment of the atonement takes place in *The Story We Find Ourselves In*. But even there, the conversation between the characters spans no more than six pages, and it amounts to the characters describing six different theories of the atonement and then pointing out what they see as the flaws of each. When Dan describes penal substitution, for example, one likeable character named Kerry wonders why God did not simply forgive us, if that is what he wanted to do. To punish an innocent person, she says, "sounds like divine child abuse."<sup>66</sup> This objection, commonly wielded by feminist theologians, is never answered. McLaren allows it to hang in the air of the story as if it were unanswerable.

Having rejected all the historic understandings of the atonement, McLaren offers up two theories of Christ's death on the cross that, so far as I can tell, are wholly his own. The first he calls the "powerful weakness" theory of the atonement, the idea of which is that by becoming vulnerable on the cross and dying at the hands of the Romans, Jesus shows the world that violence is not the answer, that what God wants is not retaliation and revenge, but rather kindness and forgiveness.<sup>67</sup> The second is based in Neo's experience of being betrayed by his wife and forgiving her. "When I think of the cross," Neo says, "I think it's all about God's agony being made visible—you know, the pain of forgiving, the pain of absorbing the betrayal. . . . It's not just words; it has to be embodied, and nails and thorns and sweat and tears and blood strike me as the only true language of betrayal and forgiveness."<sup>68</sup> But it must be objected against both these understandings of the atonement that neither of them makes of the cross anything more than a dramatic spectacle, something to be seen. In the first case, the cross is made a picture of power through weakness, and in the second, it is made a picture of God's pain. But however poignant such images may be, in neither case can the cross be understood actually to *accomplish* or *do* anything. How does a mere display of weakness or of God's pain do justice to Paul's statement that we are "justified by his blood" and "reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:9–10)? The cross was not just a means for God to show the world something, whether weakness or pain or love. It was a saving act. It accomplished something. As the apostle John puts it, "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

65. *Ibid.*, 226.

66. McLaren, *Story We Find Ourselves In*, 102.

67. *Ibid.*, 105.

68. *Ibid.*, 107. See also McLaren, *Secret Message of Jesus*, 69–71, where the essence of these theories is restated.

Ultimately, I believe the explanation for this weakness in McLaren's thought with regard to atonement must lie in his deficient view of the gospel of the kingdom. McLaren's gospel is so socially and politically oriented, so focused on the present, and so unwilling to address the reality of eternity that it has no obvious place for concepts like substitution, justification, atonement, sacrifice, or propitiation. Yet those are the concepts and themes that come together in the Bible's narrative to give meaning to the cross. The fact is that the kind of kingdom McLaren wants Jesus to have preached—one where each person simply decides to live a life of compassion and love in an effort to redeem the world in the here-and-now and bring about "God's dream" for it—does not have any obvious use for a cross. Indeed it is difficult to see how McLaren's own two original theories of the atonement, the only ones not riddled with objections by his characters, are at all integral to his story. At best, they both make the cross a superfluous illustration of the kind of life the kingdom would call us to live.

Consider also how McLaren approaches non-Christian religions. Again, some of what he says on the subject is quite good. It is certainly true that Christians should love people of other religions, not seek to destroy their cultures, treat them with compassion and respect, and engage them in meaningful, respectful, and genuine dialogue.<sup>69</sup> None of that should be minimized, and if that were McLaren's only point, there would be no cause for concern. But McLaren seems to be doing more than calling for compassionate engagement and loving evangelism. At one point, for example, he has Neil assert that, "Dan, when it comes to other religions, . . . the question isn't so much whether we're right but whether we're good. And it strikes me that goodness, not just rightness, is what Jesus said the real issue was—you know, good trees produce good fruit, that sort of thing."<sup>70</sup> McLaren frequently objects to the idea that salvation depends upon, as he puts it, "being right" or "believing the right things." It is inconceivable to him that "all God will care about on judgment day is opening up our skulls and checking in our brains."<sup>71</sup> Of course, all evangelicals would happily join McLaren in hacking down that straw man. But even if the point were put less tendentiously, the argument that it does not matter what one believes about Jesus the King only makes sense if the gospel of the kingdom is reduced to living a life of compassion, love, and kindness. But if the kingdom is more than that, if one's place in the kingdom depends on one's response to the Messiah-King himself, then McLaren is far off the mark here. The question is not at all "whether we're good." It is whether we respond in faith to Jesus the King.

At another place, McLaren (or rather Neil) goes perhaps even further, saying, "In the long run, I'd have to say that the world is better off for having these religions than having no religions at all, or just one, even if it were ours."<sup>72</sup> Compassion is

69. McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 278–91.

70. McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 61.

71. McLaren, *Last Word*, 136.

72. McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 63.

certainly to be desired, as is respectful engagement of other religions, but surely McLaren has gone beyond appropriate compassion and respect here. Perhaps that is not so surprising, though, given his theological project. Again, if the kingdom is primarily about compassion, love, mercy, kindness, and the redemption and valuing of culture, then it makes perfect sense for McLaren to believe that non-Christian religions have given their adherents many wonderful things, and therefore that the world is better off for having them. But if the kingdom involves more than that, then non-Christian religions are not beautiful at all, cultural treasures notwithstanding. They are lies that keep people from knowing and responding to the King, and therefore from enjoying the benefits, and the life, of the kingdom.

In light of all this, the question cannot be merely whether or not McLaren has misfired on the doctrine of hell particularly. Rather, it has to be whether he has misunderstood the gospel as a whole. That is an important question because McLaren's audience is only growing, and the influence of his emergent network is only expanding. Besides, Brian McLaren himself seems to be gifted with exactly the kind of affable and disarming spirit that would make him uniquely suited to engage deeply and trenchantly with this postmodern generation about what God has done in Christ. Indeed it is precisely that irenic spirit which evidently has launched him on this project to make the gospel attractive to postmodern ears. Unfortunately, it is hard to avoid the conclusion—at least from his published writings—that the substance of that project has been to empty the gospel of anything that might be considered offensive to postmodern sensibilities. For in the process of articulating this new, more attractive gospel, McLaren has argued that religions which deny Jesus Christ are good for the world, he has lost sight of the meaning and centrality of the cross, he has all but ignored the eschatological and spiritual character of the kingdom of God, and he has done everything in his hermeneutical power to read the traditional doctrine of hell out of the Bible. All in all, there does not really seem to be much of the gospel there left to deny.

We live today in a difficult and demanding generation, one that does not hear spiritual truth with willing ears. Because of that, none of us has any choice but to think hard about how to communicate the gospel of Christ to a world that has little interest in hearing it, and that finds much of what we have to say repugnant. But has it not always been that way, even from the very beginning? Yet even then, when the apostle Paul said the gospel was to most everyone in his generation either a stumbling block or foolishness, faithfulness to the task was not a matter of reimagining the gospel, rethinking every doctrine, and removing every offense. Nor is that what faithfulness requires now. What it requires is that we engage people with a simple, profound, and very old truth: that Jesus Christ came, died, rose, and now rules so that we might “be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 5:9).