

A Talk with Brian McLaren

author of *A New Kind of Christianity* (HarperOne, February 2010)

Why does a nice guy like you disturb some of your fellow Christians so much?

I often ask myself that question! Asking questions makes some religious leaders nervous because they're interested in telling people what to think, not challenging them to think. And that's what I'm trying to do in this book. I seek to do this with a sincere engagement with the Scriptures and Christian tradition, but still some people get nervous when new questions are raised.

Why are some Christians—you call them “fundasexuals”—so preoccupied with homosexuality?

Beyond the ways views on sexuality are exploited for political purposes, I believe we are undergoing a profound transition in our understanding of not just sexuality, but humanity. Sexuality is one dimension of the much larger conversation about what human beings are, how we are still developing, what's wrong with us, and what it means to be whole and holy. Some people miss this much bigger conversation and focus only on rules about sex. I don't think we can get the rules right until we understand the bigger picture.

What do you think the church needs to do about the “sex question”?

Since it's clear that we're not about to break into mass agreement about homosexuality, we need to be able to talk about it without vilifying one another. We need to realize that there are other critical sex questions, too, such as why marriages fail so often, why premarital sex is prevalent even among those most vocally against it, and about the status of women and the breakdown in fatherhood. It's not enough for us to take positions on problems; we need to bring wisdom from our faith to actually make a difference.

A recent survey found that some Christians support state-sponsored torture. How does that mesh with the gospel?

It meshes perfectly with a distorted vision of a violent second-coming Jesus. I argue that the Jesus presented in the gospels is who we're supposed to follow – One who never tortured anybody but was tortured, who never killed anybody but was killed. Whether it's torture, slavery, oppression of women, or exploitation of the environment, we Christians have found ways to quote the Bible to defend the indefensible. If we want to avoid repeat performances, we need to rediscover the gospel that Jesus himself taught. Sadly, it's often quite out of synch with the gospels we teach – whether it's a gospel of magic prosperity, American manifest destiny, or personal enhancement.

How do you see a new Christianity repairing relationships with people of other traditions?

This is such an important question. Isn't it ironic that some forms of the Christian religion have led people to feel guilty for loving their Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or atheist neighbors as themselves? I believe Jesus would lead the way in helping us see that the line between good and evil doesn't run between religions, but rather that it runs within every religion, and within every human heart.

Are you seeing signs of this new kind of Christianity in the American church?

Absolutely. Churches are speaking out on subjects like health care for the poor, protection of the environment, and the practice of ethical buying or fair trade. They're promoting a new national identity as neighbor and partner rather than as superpower. They're welcoming people who used to be excluded. They're reclaiming ancient traditions with new purpose and vitality, all with the goal of forming and deploying people who embody Christ's love and are agents of Christ's mission in their daily lives.

For an interview with Brian McLaren, please contact Kelly Hughes,
(312) 280-8126 or kelly@dechanthughes.com