

“Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith” Series
What About The Future?
June 6th, 2010

We’re looking at Question 8 in our series, Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith, based on Brian McLaren’s book, *A New Kind of Christianity*. Eschatology is the biblical study of the last days, or last things. Some of us grew up with a view of eschatology that was dispensationalist. Dispensationalism was developed in the 1830s by an Anglo-Irish pastor named John Nelson Darby. His view of the end times came to be popularized in a Bible called the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. It is a way of interpreting Scripture, and especially the writings we know as apocalyptic texts like Daniel and Revelation.

The “Left Behind” books and movies have popularized this view. According to the way they interpret the words of Jesus at the end of the Gospels, and the way they interpret Revelation, the world will get worse and worse. A one-world government will take power, headed up by someone called the antichrist, Christians will be persecuted, and an event called the rapture will happen that will draw Christians out of the world to heaven. There will be a final battle, and then Christ will come again for the last judgment. Finally God will make a new heaven and a new earth.

Now some of that timetable will change according to who is doing the interpretation, but that is the general outline of the future. And according to this version of the future, things look very predetermined, don’t they? We are going along a path in this fallen world, and things are getting worse and worse, and there’s nothing we can do about it, because that’s God’s plan. And the way I grew up, our job as Christians was simply to save souls from destruction before Jesus comes again. The Gospel didn’t have anything to do with endangered species or a warming planet or peacemaking or global poverty because the world was supposed to be getting worse and worse, and then the end would come.

The ultimate battle, according to this dispensationalist view, is going to come down to the forces of Light versus the forces of Darkness, and when I was growing up, the Soviet Union was usually seen as the being part of the dark alliance. Now those who read Scripture this way see the Muslim world as the great enemy that will need to be defeated in the last battle.

I said earlier that this is a deterministic kind of eschatology: everything has already been set out in advance according to God’s timeline, and our job is to simply read the signs. By the way, scientists have a deterministic view of the future too. There are two theories from scientists about how the universe will end: It will either be a collapse of gravity, which we could call a big crunch, or our sun will go dark, and we could call it the big freeze. We’ve either got determinism from a secular scientific point of view, or determinism from the dispensationalist point of view. Either way, there’s nothing we can do but watch things unfold.

But I want you to know that's not the only way to interpret Scripture. Brian McLaren paints another view from Scripture of what the future might look like. Instead of a determined flat-line where everything gets worse and worse until God intervenes, McLaren pictures the Gospel in its fullness being released in the universe. Remember when we talked about the Gospel, we looked at Jesus as carrying on three main themes from the Hebrew Bible: Creation, Liberation, and Peacemaking.

We looked at Jesus' inaugural sermon from Capernaum (Luke 4:16f) when he quotes from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus calls that good news, or Gospel! The Gospel is not just about believing certain things about Jesus so that we have a ticket to go to heaven. The Gospel in all its dimensions creates a new world. It creates the kingdom of God in the very world around us!

So instead of a flat-line deterministic theology where the world gets worse and worse and finally ends with God creating something new, Scripture can be interpreted differently. There are pictures of an open future, where we are co-partners with God in bringing about a new creation, and liberation, and a vision of peacemaking. And instead of a flat-line leading to doom, we might want to think of this model as a tree that is reaching up into the light and the air, a tree that is growing and expanding with possibilities...

God is calling everything from chaos and darkness into order and fullness and life. The direction is up and out and into fuller participation into God's vision for this world.

One of the questions then is how does God relate to this universe. Many people believe God is like the machine operator pulling levers and controlling the world. Whatever happens is what God wanted to happen. God is like a chess master moving bishops and pawns. Some people have a more Deist interpretation of God's involvement in the universe. God got everything started, but then backed off. So now everything is up to us. Or there are those who say that everything in the universe is just random and purposeless.

McLaren suggests, and I agree with him, that God is *in relationship* to this universe. God is like a rider on a horse with a will of its own, or like a parent guiding a child with a will of her own. God does not so much control us as much as God is *in relationship* with us. And when we pull out of that relationship, like a rebellious child sitting in the corner, we harm ourselves and creation. And it's Jesus who shows us what a right relationship with God looks like, and what that looks like for our relationships with people.

So when we ask the question, What about the future? or What does the future hold? The answer might be "that depends." God at every moment is holding out a brighter future, and the question is, are we willing to receive it and work together with God? We are participating in what the future will be.

So in many of your minds right now you are asking the question, Well, what about the second coming? We declare in the Apostles' Creed, "He (that is Jesus) will come to judge the living and the dead." Isn't there a linear progression to history where God will at some point bring all of this to a close? What about the Bible passages that talk about a final judgment? That's different than a tree of life that just keeps expanding.

We'll get to that in a minute, but first of all let me say that many scholars don't believe that the early New Testament writers believed that the world was going to end. They believed that the world *as they knew it* was going to end and a new spiritual-historical age was going to begin. When we read the Bible passages about the end times, we often interpret it to mean that everything as we know it will end. But the early Christians didn't believe God was going to end everything as they knew it, but that a new era was going to begin. We know of at least three stages that future came in.

The first future focused on the resurrection of Jesus, from Maundy Thursday to Easter morning. And that hope was fulfilled in the resurrection, when the disciples met the risen Christ. The second future that was fulfilled was Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit; there was the period of hopefulness between the resurrection and the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon 120 followers of Jesus and the church was born.

The third hope that Christians had in the future may have been described in our Gospel today from Matthew 24. Matthew's Jesus seems to be talking about a disaster that will come in their lifetimes, as well as events that could happen at the end of human history. The third hope for the future focused on the survival of God's people through a catastrophe that was coming, and that was the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70AD. Jesus says in our Gospel today, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." In that part of the passage, he may be talking about the fall of the temple; the generation he was talking to would see the destruction of the temple.

So the early Christians had three reasons for hope in the future; hope for the resurrection; hope for Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit; and hope for survival through persecution and the fall of the Jerusalem temple. But here's the question: Was everything they expected fulfilled in the destruction of the temple, or were they expecting something more? And here is where we might say, They were expecting the second coming of Christ.

The term "second coming" doesn't appear in Scripture, by the way. The word we translate second coming is *parousia*. It means the arrival of a friend or associate. So in the gospel today, the disciples ask Jesus, Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming (*parousia*) at the end of the age?

Now here's where Brian McLaren really thinks outside the theological box, and I have to admit, this stretches me. He wonders if the *parousia*, or the second coming, might mean not the arrival of the end as we have always thought it, but it might mean the arrival a

new age in human history, where Christ is present through the Spirit, and we continue his work.

The destruction of the temple, the end of sacrificial system in 70AD was the end of an era, and the parousia, the second coming, was Christ in the Christian community. So if that is true, the point is not to try to get history over with so that God can destroy this world and create everything over again. We are more like a musician, not frantically trying to get through a beautiful song, but we are playing it like every note of the song is precious. Jesus said the kingdom of God has come near. It doesn't mean that it's full grown, but that it grows like yeast in bread or seeds in a field. So McLaren wonders, was that parousia event that early Christians talked about, was that Christ coming to the church through the work of the Holy Spirit?

But then, if the parousia is now, what about a final judgment? Do things just keep going? Do we just keep expanding the kingdom? Judgment is a theme all across Scripture, but the question is, What does God's judgment accomplish? Is it just to reward and punish people? I believe God's judgment is higher than that: God wants to reconcile and restore, and not merely punish. As Jesus says in John 3, he came into the world not to condemn it, but to save it.

And so one thought would be that when the final judgment comes, God will examine our lives for signs of Christlikeness: did we give a cup of cold water or a hot plate of food to someone in need; did we provide beds for a homeless family; did we visit a prisoner. And those parts of a person's life will be saved, will be remembered, will be raised up for a new beginning. And all the unloving, un-Christlike parts of our lives- and of all nations, families, churches- will be burned away, condemned and forgotten forever.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had this kind of hope within him that all people would be saved and freed in the battle for civil rights. In his Christmas Sermon on Peace, this is what he said: "To our most bitter opponents we say: 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, we shall continue to love you. ...Throw us in jail, we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that *we shall win you in the process* and our victory will be a double victory.'"

And maybe that will be how God judges the world: what is Christlike in all of us remains, and what is un-Christlike in all of us will be burned away. And there will not be cruel, eternal torture, but gentle conversion. What about the future? I believe that God is allowing us to form it; God is allowing us to be partners in carrying on the work of Jesus. When God does the work of judgment, remember it will be Jesus who does the judging. And in the end, as Paul says in our first lesson today, God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). Amen.