

## Interview with Brian McLaren

August 7, 2001  
Kansas City, Missouri

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*EC:* What was your best day as a pastor?

*BMcL:* There have been a lot of good days. One of my best days as a pastor was the day that this little church that we planted, that started with 11 people, bought 63 acres and built a building. Our first Sunday in the new building showed me that the people had taken ownership of the church and were ready to give sacrificially to make that happen--I felt that day like this wasn't just *my* church as the pastor it was really *our* church. So that was a good day.

And then there have been a lot of good days when I look out at people and say, boy, she was an atheist a year ago, look how far she's come. He told me he was Buddhist when he came and now he's playing in the worship band...things like that.

*EC:* You seem to be one of many pioneers these days. What's driving all the church planting that seems to be happening?

*BMcL:* I think across all denominations and among non-denominational congregations there are a lot of innovative young leaders who are saying that the existing structures don't seem willing to make the changes necessary to reach the people who are not already in the church culture. And so they are driven by a lot of evangelistic passion and they are driven by a desire

to see a ways of living a Christian life, and ways of worshipping, and ways of expressing community that are different, fresh, and new. And so I think it is a very exciting time for church planting. I think one of the good things that came out of the church growth movement in the '80's and early '90's was that more and more people heard that church planting was the most effective form of evangelism. And so more and more people realize that it is a great option. So that's the positive side.

The saddest part that goes along with that is that there are so many traditional churches that have a very difficult decision to make. Will they stay the same and be the kind of church that their children and grandchildren won't want to attend, or will they be willing to change so that they will have the kind of church that their children and grandchildren and their unchurched friends *will* want to attend. And when all of the innovative people are told by the existing churches, we aren't going to change, I'm glad they have the option of church planting, but I'm sad that many of the traditional churches lose a chance to make some changes themselves.

*EC:* What would some of those changes look like, how would we know that they were happening?

*BMcL:* One of the most profound changes is clarifying *why* the church exists. If we say that the church exists for the benefit of its members we will end up with a church that is very different than if we say the church exists for mission. If we say the church exists to perpetuate a certain form of worship, we will have a very different church than if we say the church exists to make disciples. So, there are questions that we have to go back and address. I think the more honest and direct we are about the purpose of the church, the greater the chance that we can express changes that will be positive. Because not all change is good, some changes can make things worse.

*EC:* So at its root, a lot of this is really a theological decision?

*BMcL:* You can talk a lot about techniques, programs, and practicalities, which are important, but I think the deepest problems are theological. And they have to do, not only with the concepts of our theology, but they also have to do with our spiritual lives. How much do we love the Lord, do we love the Lord more than we love the wineskins, the structures of the church? How much do we love our neighbors, do we love our neighbors more than we love our comfort? And those are pretty intense questions.

*EC:* I hear you saying there are not many pre-packaged answers in terms of what churches should be doing. Is that true?

*BMcL:* I think there are a lot of formula-like answers to tweak the existing systems and those things can be helpful. But, the kind of changes that I think our children and grandchildren are telling us that we need, and that our neighbors and friends that don't attend church are telling us that we need, require addressing some deeper issues of heart and soul. They are more than a matter of just buying a box that has a new technique or program in it.

*EC:* So it's not just a matter of finding the easy answers and applying them?

*BMcL:* Right. I think it's a matter of deepening our understanding of the scriptures. It's not so much more knowledge, more information, it's getting closer to the heart of the message that runs all the way through the scripture. And it has to do with shaking ourselves up. We have to ask, is church just something that we do on the side? We are busy with our jobs, and we are busy with our families, and we are busy with our hobbies, and we are busy with entertainment, and so we just do the minimum to keep church going on the side. Or, do we believe that being a Christian is such a high and holy calling that it demands that we fit everything else in around *it*. Do we seek first the kingdom of God?

*EC:* What can the average person in a local church do in the context of his or her own life to reach out with God's love?

*BMcL:* What a great question. Two things come to my mind; the first one is that every single person reading or hearing these words would agree that their church is not perfect. So if their church is not perfect it means it needs growth and it needs change in some way. And every person who reads this will either be someone who makes it easier for those improvements and changes for growth to happen or they will impede improvement. And so if every reader or hearer of these words were to say, God, help me encourage every good idea that comes along in our church, even if it's something that we've never tried before, even if it's something a little outside the lines; if it's from you, help me to have a heart that will encourage it. This would be just wonderful. It's a terrible thought, isn't it, that we could live our lives and grow old and retire and die and find out that we were in the way of good things that could have happened in our churches. And it's a wonderful thought, whether you are sixteen years old or seventy-six years old, that you could be an encourager of fresh and new growth in your church. So that's the first thing.

The second thing that comes to my mind is if every person who reads a publication like this were to say part of being a good Christian means loving non-Christians. And if we woke up everyday and said Lord help me show love to a non-Christian today, and maybe help me Lord to have the chance to speak a good word about you to someone today. It might just be to say, "God bless you," to someone, or it might be to listen to someone and say, "I will be praying for you." Or, it might be telling someone what you did over the weekend including the fact that you had a great time in church. And it might be just showing kindness, inviting a neighbor over for dinner, going out for a walk with someone, having lunch and getting to know him or her better.

Those two things, encouraging, improvement and progress in the growth of your church and developing relationships with non-Christians, I think those are very powerful actions.

*EC:* When a church member looks to develop those relationships are there ways in which their personal evangelistic ministry will be different today than it would have been with an unbelieving person say a generation ago?

*BMcL:* Absolutely. Most of, or a higher percentage of, the unbelieving people that we meet today don't have a lot of background or knowledge of the Bible and of the gospel. Or, if they do have knowledge it's filled with misconceptions, or it is a negative impression rather than a neutral or positive one. So we have to go a lot farther in preparing the way for the *words* of

the Gospel by showing the *deeds* of the Gospel. And so this means being patient and this means listening. This often means not saying something critical, just holding our tongue so that we can show that we are not critical people and then the opportunity will come maybe to say something positive about the Gospel. I also think so much our evangelism training in the past was about learning arguments, and now I think people are tired of arguments. There are so many political arguments and, in a way, every advertisement on radio and television is an argument about why you should buy my product. People are tired of that. When they hear another argument coming it's like a telemarketer. It doesn't matter how good the product is, I am just tired of being hounded by telemarketers. So we have to help our people to see that the gospel isn't an argument; it's a story about God and His love for us, and it's a story about how God has moved in my life and a story of how God wants to move in my friend's life. So I think one of the things we do is we tell our people worry less about learning arguments and memorizing outlines and concentrate a lot more on being a good neighbor, on serving and showing love, by asking good questions and listening and starting an ongoing conversation where it is alright to talk about God and spiritual things.

*EC:* So anybody can be an evangelist if they are willing to embrace the culture around them?

*BMcL:* If they are willing to embrace the culture around them, I would say, people are far more ready than they realize to do great evangelistic work. Actually, this is the title of the new book on evangelism that I have coming out in January: *More Ready than You Realize*. The title has a kind of double meaning – we Christians are more ready than we realize, and our unchurched neighbors are also more ready.

*EC:* When you look at the American cultural landscape what are some of the big factors you see that influence the climate for evangelism?

*BMcL:* One of the words that people use for this, concerns the transition from a modern to a postmodern world; other people talk about there being a new, emerging culture. I think a lot of people in our churches see all the negative sides to this. And preachers like myself spend a lot of time talking about what's wrong with the changes. And there are a lot of wrong things to be upset about. But, at the same time, we can be so preoccupied with the problems that we don't see the opportunities. For example, a generation ago people were far more likely to say, "I believe in science, I don't believe in religion." Now almost everyone wants to say, "I am a spiritual person." And what I think they mean by that is, "I respect science but I don't think science has all the answers, so there must be something beyond science." Well that gives us enormous common ground to work from. It's true our culture is increasingly intolerant of intolerance. So it requires us to show more tolerance, and many of us aren't used to showing tolerance. But really this gives us a chance to be more Biblical. 1st Peter tells us whenever we share the gospel we should do it with gentleness and respect. And that gives us a chance to be more Biblical by being respectful to people who disagree with us.

*EC:* What role do you think colleges and university campuses are playing in these cultural shifts, and what difference could effective campus ministry make at this point in our history?

*BMcL:* One of the interesting things going on at almost every secular campus in the country is that the campuses now are divided. The science departments, sometimes the history

departments, and others turn out to be very aligned with a more modern mindset, meaning the kind of thinking that has predominated for the last 3-500 years. Then the English departments, maybe the Art departments, Sociology departments, they will be much more aligned with the postmodern mindset. The kind of emerging thinking that many of us are talking about and feeling is very significant. And the students tend to align themselves, some of the non-Christian students will be more modern and they will have modern reasons for opposing Christianity. And then the postmodern students, they will have another set of questions. So this creates challenges for our campus ministries. One of the things I hope our campus ministers can do increasingly is learn to seize the opportunities presented by the postmodern, emerging culture. This would involve teaching our Christian students how to have productive spiritual conversations--how to be listeners before they are speakers. And it would also involve reintegrating service and action with faith and proclamation. Something that James and Jesus and other pretty important people told us that we should do. So this would mean the campus ministries would not only be teaching their students about the scriptures but they would be getting them involved in showing God's love to others. I know of one Chi Alpha ministry near where I live that has been doing wonderful things in this way: getting people involved, hosting and showing kindness to international students. This becomes very, very powerful and important. That's another reason why campus ministry is so important. On every campus now, almost every campus, we have people from so many different countries and cultures, so the world is brought to our doorstep.

*EC:* So when we touch the campuses we are really touching the nations?

*BMcL:* We are touching the nations of today and tomorrow because these students will become the leaders of our country and other countries. And I believe that we have an example from Jesus, and from the early apostles, that we should preach the gospel to the poor but we should also make disciples of the leaders. And we should take every opportunity we can to get the gospel to leaders. We see Paul doing that in the book of Acts. We see Jesus calling humble fisherman who might be like blue-collar workers today. And then more educated people and so I think we need to follow that example too.

*EC:* When issues of change and culture in church are being discussed what do Pentecostals bring to the table?

*BMcL:* One of the challenges that modernity threw down at the feet of the church was the belief that there is no such thing as the supernatural, that everything can be explained by cause and effect and physical mechanism. And Pentecostals had the courage to say, "No, God is not in a box, His hands are not handcuffed. He is living and active and answering prayer and giving powerful signs of His reality and presence." And in this way Pentecostals show that they were not intimidated by modernity. And I think that this belief in a living and active present God is tremendously important. Pentecostals have had a high view of experience. We get a chance now to see a world that is really looking for spiritual experience. So these are tremendous conversations. As well, Pentecostals have been so committed to evangelism and have shown a willingness to work among the poorest of the poor and our world is more in need of that kind of heart than ever.

EC: Is there any particular parable or New Testament story that captures for you what the mission of the church is in this culture?

BMcL: Well I love those three parables from Luke's gospel where Jesus tells about the lost coin, and the lost sheep, and the lost son. And I think those parables are so precious because what they tell us is that the coin, and the sheep, and the son are not seen as things to be condemned or forgotten or ignored; they are missed and they are seen as precious. So Jesus tells us through those parables that God's heart is always going toward the missing ones. And He misses that coin, and He misses that sheep, and He misses that rebellious, arrogant, self-destructive son. And this tells me that the church should never consider that it exists for its own benefit. But that we are a people called to be God's arms and hands and legs to reach out and run out to seek all of those who are lost.

EC: Sounds like we have some things to learn from our missionaries.

BMcL: In many ways we would do ourselves a great favor to say that every pastor needs to think of himself as a missionary. Really he needs to think of himself as a missiologist-in-training so that he can train all the people in his church to be missionaries. You know the earliest Christians were called disciples. And disciple is the first stage of training to be an Apostle. A disciple is one who is called in to learn and then sent out to teach and we should understand being Christian means being called in to learn so that we can be sent out to teach. My favorite part of church, every Sunday (I love to preach), but my favorite part is the end of service when we send everybody out into the world. And I just love to think that we are sending people out to serve God and love their neighbors, to make a difference in their world. So we help our people to say we are sent people, we are missionaries.

EC: What do we *not* know today about these changes in culture and church that you think we *will* probably know in say five or ten years?

BMcL: This might sound shocking but I think we don't know how to present the gospel in a postmodern setting. So many of the ways we have learned to present the gospel have really risen in the last few decades and they are modeled after sales presentations. Where you make some points, you handle some objections, and you make a close on the deal. And I am not trying to say that that is evil or wrong; those have been very effective but we are moving into culture that feels that anything that is sacred is cheapened by putting it into a sales pitch. Or anything that is authentic is cheapened by being raised as an argument. So when we are so used to presenting the gospel as these little sales pitches and as arguments we almost have to learn all over again. To present the gospel as what Jesus said it was: it's news. It's a story. I hope a few years down the road we will find new ways to talk about the gospel. That's a good question.

EC: That's great, that's also the last one. Thank you so much Brian McLaren. Brian McLaren is the author of *The Church on the Other Side* and *Finding Faith*, both published by Zondervan.