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Book reimagines evangelism for a post-apologetic world

By Greg Warner

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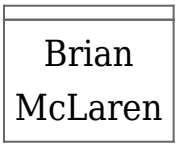
SPENCERVILLE, Md. (ABP)–What can the mating habits of tortoises teach humans about their spiritual connection to God?

Most people never would think to ask such a question. But most people don't think like Brian McLaren.



Since childhood, McLaren has been fascinated with nature. “Turtles, birds, all wildlife, geology, weather,” he explained. “It's kind of a spiritual thing for me.”

Nature, tortoises and evolution figure prominently in McLaren's new book, “The Story We Find Ourselves In.” It's a sequel to his popular but somewhat controversial “A New Kind of Christian.” Both books are written in an unusual narrative non-fiction style–using fictional characters, rather than sterile discourse, to incarnate theological truths.

Much of “The Story We Find Ourselves In” is set in the Galápagos Islands, the same islands that helped Charles Darwin forge his evolutionary

theories. Gigantic tortoises are among the famous wildlife of the islands (galápagos is Spanish for turtle). And the storyline allowed McLaren to indulge his passion for tortoises–10 make their home in his Maryland backyard and winter in his basement.

The central character is once again Neil Edward Oliver (Neo for short), a Jamaican preacher-turned-science teacher whose easy manner and unorthodox views somehow manage to guide Christians and seekers through crises of life and faith.

Neo is the prototype in Brian McLaren's experiment to reimagine evangelism for a post-apologetic world. Neo's latest adventure is likely to stir some controversy as well, because the hero extols evolution as testimony of God's creative imagination.

“Nature is God's artwork, God's text, showing us so much about the Creator,” McLaren told FaithWorks magazine. “I am very respectful of what I can learn from nature.”

Prophetic voice

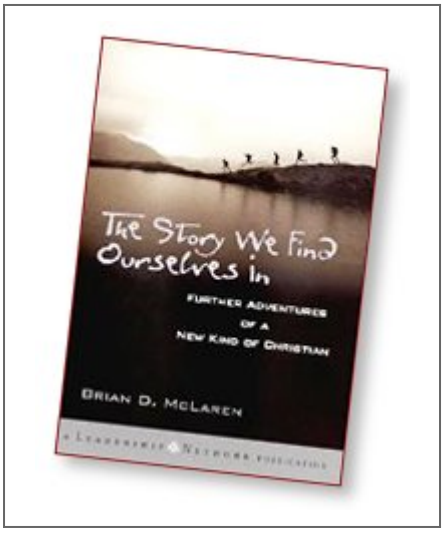
The author is in fact a teacher-turned-preacher, a former English professor who's now pastor of a non-denominational church outside Washington, D.C. But he's more than a pastor with a knack for writing.

McLaren often is cited as a leading voice of the next generation of evangelicals. And he's a key figure in the “emerging church,” a mostly under-the-radar movement of Christian leaders in their 20s and 30s that is beginning to toss a few waves on the shores of evangelicalism.

In “The Story We Find Ourselves In,” McLaren is not just teaching spiritual object lessons from nature. His goal is much more ambitious. He wants to show that faith and science are not natural enemies, that together they tell the story of God's creative purpose.

“One of our crises, as we enter the postmodern world, is that Christianity has presented itself as a system of belief instead of a story. And we got on adversarial terms with science.”

When science sought to explain the world without God, it produced a story without meaning, McLaren said. And Christians, trying to recast the gospel in the language of science and reason, produced a propositional belief system that lost touch with the story that gave it power.



“I am interested in seeing science and faith as collaborators,” McLaren said.

Nature can teach Christians about diversity and interdependence, said McLaren, who contends both will characterize the future church.

“Life evolves to thrive in many different niches,” and the same should be true among Christians, he said. “We need incredible diversity to fill many, many niches.”

Interdependence, although imbedded in nature, is foreign to the Western individualism so ingrained in American Christianity. That's why McLaren's “new kind of Christian” often uses words like “journey” and “conversation” to describe Christian life beyond the postmodern divide.

Starting a conversation

Conversation implies Christians can learn a lot by interacting with–and listening to–the world, especially non-Christians.

“Their questions are an essential facet of our discipleship,” McLaren said. “They change us.”

“Jesus said we shouldn't worry when people ask us questions; the Spirit will guide us. That says to me there are things we're going to learn when we engage people missionally that we would not learn any other way.”

McLaren and his cohorts emphasize dialogue over debate, community over individualism, experience over proof. They willingly shed the modernist expectation that Christians should have all the answers. Critics accuse them of abandoning all absolutes. But most postmodern Christians don't deny absolutes exist–only that they can be proclaimed unequivocally, without hesitation or humility.

“Certainty is overrated,” McLaren declares. “God calls us to faith and to seek the kingdom.”

There is great danger in the quest to be right, he warns. “History teaches us that a lot of people thought they were certain, and we found out they weren't.”

Likewise, cookie-cutter formulas and go-it-alone strategies will be ill-suited for the church in the new world.

“Our theology and the way we treat people, this to me is really the big issue,” McLaren said. He quotes a fellow staff member who contends their church could trade its contemporary worship style for the Episcopal liturgy and it wouldn't change the character of the church.

“All the things people focus on–style of music and so on–are all much less

significant than we realize. One reason we have to pay so much attention to 'cosmetics' is because we are trying to market a message that is very much flawed. We think the gospel is about how to get individual souls into heaven when they die, when for Jesus the message was about the kingdom of God, which is a here-and-now experience, not just a heavenly one, and a communal experience, not just an individual one, and involves all of creation, not just an invisible part of us called our soul."

Unlikely preacher

Such bold statements can sneak up on the listener, who's easily lulled by McLaren's soft-spoken and winsome manner. The unimposing pastor is not a likely suspect to lead a theological movement, or even to lead a church.

"I'm a total misfit," he admitted. "I'm a middle-aged bald guy without proper credentials."

His training is not in theology but in English–a bachelor's and master's from the University of Maryland–and he backed into the pastorate. While in graduate school, McLaren and his wife, Grace, started a Bible study in their home. It attracted mostly graduate students and faculty and in 1982 took the shape of a house church. McLaren led the church while teaching English composition at the university. But as the congregation grew, so did the demands.

"I was either going to have to step back or step in," he said. In 1986 he left academia to become pastor of the congregation, which became Cedar Ridge Community Church.

Although he never went to seminary, McLaren first bumped up against postmodernism much earlier than most seminary students or pastors.

"In graduate school in the '70s, postmodernism was first hitting the academy through literary criticism. I was exposed to deconstructionism and

postmodern thought. I remember thinking, if this kind of thought catches on, Christianity is in real trouble."

It would be another two decades before the conversation migrated into Christian circles. But for McLaren, the questions raised in those classroom discussions always "simmered on the back burner."

A new way of thinking

Then he began to detect something different about the young non-believers Cedar Ridge was attracting. "I thought, oh no, that new way of thinking is the way all the people who walk through the doors of our church are thinking."

He began to re-examine the way he understood the gospel story, particularly the modern, rational formulations and apologetic evangelism he picked up from his Reformed background.

"I went through a real personal theological and faith struggle in the mid-'90s," he recalled. "I didn't know any other Christians who were struggling with these issues."

He stumbled upon "Truth Is Stranger than it Used to Be," by Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, and later the writings of Leonard Sweet.

"I was so relieved to find at least a few people talking about these things," he confessed.

Today, McLaren writes "to help get a conversation started" about the Christian faith, he said modestly, but also "to free our understanding of the gospel from these modern categories."

His earlier book, "A New Kind of Christian," provoked conversation within the evangelical establishment, not all of it pleasant. Although most reviews were positive, a few were "blistering." The book was the subject of a four-

part analysis in “Books and Culture” last year.

The book questioned Christianity's sometimes clumsy, sometimes costly, accommodation to modern rationalism. Critics said McLaren either offered nothing new or abandoned centuries of essential tradition.

“The people who dislike the book the most tend to be strict, high Calvinists,” McLaren said. That makes sense, he adds, because Calvinism “is the highest expression of modernism.” But he is heartened by the response he receives from other readers, most of whom praise its fresh approach. Some of that affirmation comes from older evangelicals who nonetheless recognize that traditional expressions of the gospel “have turned off their children and grandchildren.”

McLaren seems untroubled that he may not be embraced by the evangelical mainstream. “What I'm really excited about is the next 20-to-30 young leaders who are planting churches, who are in seminary, women as well as men, minorities. They're getting to start so much further along.”

Influence expanding

This “misfit” has quietly earned the respect of the thought leaders, innovative pastors, church starters and entrepreneurs who make up the rag-tag “emerging church” movement. Although McLaren, 46, is older than many in the movement, they usually look to him for leadership. Those young leaders value not only McLaren's insights but the charitable tone he sets for the postmodern conversation.

“Brian has moved beyond simple deconstruction and stone-throwing to a much more productive combination of healthy critique along with future-thinking and praxis,” said Mark Oestreicher of Youth Specialties.

To these younger leaders, McLaren's status gives him credibility. “I wasn't indoctrinated. I wasn't socialized into that. There's a certain perspective

you have on the fringe of things," McLaren said.

Raised among the tiny Plymouth Brethren, shaped by the Jesus Movement, trained in the secular academy, impassioned by art, music, philosophy and nature–McLaren doesn't fit neatly into any evangelical stereotype. But that works to his advantage in an era whose zeitgeist is eclectic, holistic and global.

"I'm not interested in saving evangelicalism or reforming evangelicalism, although others might have that calling. My dream is that there could be a conversation and a friendship among grass-roots leaders and theologians in evangelical, mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities, and in some small way that this kind of broad friendship could bring new possibilities to Christian churches around the world."

"I really see a convergence happening," he added.

Already McLaren sees evidence that young Christians are more willing to look past doctrinal differences to find fellowship. They see denominations as "structures for connection rather than barriers for isolation." They are more open to the wisdom and practices of the ancient church and non-evangelical traditions–"resources grossly undervalued in recent decades."