



The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything

Brian D. McLaren

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When Brian McLaren began offering an alternative vision of Christian faith and life in books such as "A New Kind of Christian" and "A Generous Orthodoxy," he ignited a firestorm of praise and condemnation that continues to spread across the religious landscape. To some religious conservatives, McLaren is a dangerous rebel without a doctrinally-correct cause. Some fundamentalist websites have even claimed he's in league with the devil and have consigned him to flames.

To others though, Brian is a fresh voice, a welcome antidote to the staleness, superficiality, and negativity of the religious status quo. A wide array of people from Evangelical, Catholic, and Mainline Protestant backgrounds claim that through his books they have begun to rediscover the faith they'd lost or rejected. And around the world, many readers say that he has helped them find-for the first time in their lives-a faith that makes sense and rings true. For many, he articulates the promise of what is being called "emerging Christianity."

In "The Secret Message of Jesus" you'll find what's at the center of Brian's critique of conventional Christianity, and what's at the heart of his expanding vision. In the process, you'll meet a Jesus who may be altogether new to you, a Jesus who is... Not the crusading conqueror of religious broadcasting; Not the religious mascot of partisan religion; Not heaven's ticket-checker, whose words have been commandeered by the church to include and exclude, judge and stigmatize, pacify and domesticate.

McLaren invites you to discover afresh the transforming message of Jesus-an open invitation to radical change, an enlightening revelation that exposes sham and ignites hope, an epic story that is good news for everyone, whatever their gender, race, class, politics, or religion.

"Pastor and best-selling author McLaren revisits the gospel material from a fresh-and at times radical-perspective . . . He does an excellent job of capturing Jesus' quiet, revolutionary style."

--"Publishers Weekly" (starred review)

"Here McLaren shares his own ferocious journey in pondering the teachings and actions of Jesus. It is McLaren's lack of salesmanship or agenda that creates a refreshing picture of the man from Galilee who changed history."

--Donald Miller, Author of "Blue Like Jazz"

"In this critical book, Brian challenges us to ask what it would mean to truly live the message of Jesus today, and thus to risk turning everything upside down."

--Jim Wallis, Author of "God's Politics" and editor of "Sojourners"

"Compelling, crucial and liberating: a book for those who seek to experience the blessed heat of Christianity at its source."

--Anne Rice, Author of "Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt"

The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything Details

Date : Published April 1st 2006 by W Publishing Group

ISBN : 9780849900006

Author : Brian D. McLaren

Format : Hardcover 237 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Christianity, Nonfiction, Christian, Spirituality, Faith

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Big Mike Lewis says

I don't think his historical background of the people of the day is accurate. I did some research into what he says about the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.

And throughout the book, he not only misses the mark, but completely obliterates it. His claims about Jesus in Scripture are so generalized and skewed that he makes Jesus sound like a Marxist.

By the end, McLaren never tells us what Jesus' message really is (because he is so vague) and never points us to a Scripture where we can find this message.

Jenny Conatser says

Brian McLaren speaks to my heart in a way that no person, novel, or church has in a long time. The only reason this book isn't getting five stars from me is because I've also read A New Kind Of Christianity (same author), and I prefer it. But there aren't a lot of negative comments I can make about McLaren's message. If you, like me, want to believe in Jesus' message and follow his example, but aren't very impressed with the way the church has interpreted the Bible's teachings, I'd highly recommend this and other McLaren books.

Cecil Calvert says

Revolutionary way of looking at Jesus' life and purpose.

Dan Salerno says

Although I enjoyed McClaren's book, it was the Appendix section that made me snap to and really pay attention.

Appendix I asks the question "Why Didn't We Get It Sooner?" (It being Jesus' secret message.)

In this section, McClaren writes about the historical significance of the early church becoming separated from its Jewish roots within a century or two of Jesus ascending into heaven. With much of the social significance of Jesus' message being lost to present day followers.

"Some might argue that the esoteric (doctrinal) arguments (of Christianity) were necessary; otherwise Christian theology would have lost its doctrinal integrity and become a subset of some other ideology. But if it did indeed succeed in saving its doctrinal integrity, one wonders, if it lost its ethical integrity in the process..."

Just as troubling is McClaren's assertion of the marriage of the established Christian church with the political state (or, as what some current social justice writers call "the empire.")

"What we have seen with this alliance between church and empire came an endorsement of the use of violence in the service of the kingdom of God."

Witness the 45th's recent seemingly off-the-cuff declaration to unload "fire and fury" on North Korea if they don't stop trying to be like the US and set up their own nuclear arsenal.

Oh well. (What's that about imitation being the sincerest form of flattery?)

As if to offset the dilemma found in Appendix I, Appendix II offers a host of very practical, do-able and fun activities to promote the spread of Jesus' secret message. Even if you aren't a believer, I think you'd appreciate more than a few of them.

On a bibliographic sidenote, McClaren cites Walter Wink's "The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium."

Sounds like a good one to put on the shelf!

Christopher Endress says

I would say that this book should be read and used more of as a traditional children's story: Don't take it too seriously and you might end up with a good moral at the end. McLaren's problem is that he neglects everything that disagrees with his perspective - and thus loses out on huge (and I mean HUGE) theological necessities of Christianity. If I were to read this book as a strict theological text, I would have rated it a zero (or given it an 'i' for incomplete).

However, if you take this book as simply one man expressing a far-out idea for the purpose of proving a point or getting us to shift slightly more to his angle, it wasn't terrible. I disagree with the very idea of making a hyperbolical viewpoint to force a paradigm shift (think "the earth will end in 5 years" scare tactics to get people to do something reasonable like recycle), but McLaren is much more literature-based than he is scientific method-based so I can look past it.

Long story short, don't take this for what it says. That is, don't take this for what it says if you want to enjoy it at all (without the need to rip your hair out in frustration).

Bobbetylou says

If this guy doesn't watch it he is soon going to be one of my top five favorite authors, right up there with C S Lewis, Annie Dillard, John Howard Yoder, etc.

It is a catchy title, I suspect one that was dreamed up by the publisher with an eye to sales, sort of like having the word SEX on the front cover. But this is no "DaVinci Code" nor is it subversive or even secret. It IS a fresh way of reading the New Testament, especially the gospels.

Consists of 39 relatively short chapters. My favorites are "Kingdon Ethics" "The Language of the Kingdom" and "The Future of the Kingdom," all of which are full of memorable lines. Unfortunately I read a library copy so could not underline or those quotes would be handier to reproduce here. Maybe I'll just buy my own copy and read it again . . .

A true story told by Tony Campolo on pp 145 and 146 was so good that I couldn't read it to my own wife without choking up; had to have her read it herself and she agreed. Check it out.

Romulo says

O título e a capa deste livro pode assustar ou afastar uma parte do público para quem ele foi escrito. Mas não se deixe levar por esses dois motivos iniciais. O livro vale a pena ser lido.

Brian McLaren é um pastor e escritor cristão contemporâneo. Tem se destacado por tentar comunicar a mensagem do cristianismo para o contexto de um mundo pós-moderno. Com uma linguagem informal e constantemente interativa com o leitor, Brian procurar ser pessoal nos seus livros. Entende as questões da nossa época. Traduz a linguagem religiosa nos termos que o leitor do século XXI consegue entender.

Sua forma de escrever e, sobretudo suas críticas às igrejas evangélicas, especialmente as americanas, têm suscitado críticas, mas internas do que externas. Seus livros são lidos pelos que apoiam o movimento chamado de "emerging church" nos EUA, que procura novos caminhos para para uma igreja que se institucionalizou e se tecnologizou demasiadamente.

Neste livro Brian procura responder qual é a mensagem real de Jesus de fato. Baseando-se nas narrativas dos evangelhos e na contextualização histórica do mundo judeu e grego-romano do século I, Brian nos ajuda a entender que a principal mensagem de Jesus, foi sobre a chegada de uma nova ordem, um novo Reino. Na verdade um reino esperado, mas diferente das expectativas daqueles que o esperavam. Diferente também das expectativas de muitas pessoas hoje.

No Reino que Chega com Jesus, Ele é o Rei. Mas os valores desse Reino não são aqueles presentes em outros reinos. Brian mostra neste livro qual é o manifesto desse reino, sua ética, sua linguagem, as fronteiras, o futuro e colheita que será feita na consumação deste reino.

Esse reino não foi entendido por aqueles que o viram chegado no tempo de Jesus. Muitos viram, mas não entenderam. Nós agora temos a oportunidade de não deixar que isso aconteça novamente. Este livro nos ajuda a não errar novamente.

Donna says

As someone who has always questioned the existence of an after life, I found this book to be intriguing. I believe that organized religion is too rule oriented and not enough love oriented (at least in my experience) and really enjoyed the message McLaren was speaking of. You can refute or embrace the message yourself but it speaks to my heart.

Devan says

McLaren prefers in many parts of his book to set up this dichotomy: "traditional" Christians (who prefer traditional doctrine and ethics) and "New" Christians (who are engaged in conversations about new ways of understanding the bible, Jesus, and are concerned with social justice).

Like arguments against any straw man, I think McLaren makes some good points and some bad ones. I've read some of his articles and blog posts, and after reading this book, I realized the struggle I have with reading McLaren: I don't know what Christians he is talking about. Certainly, each Christian has a little bit of a legalist in them, each is guilty of not welcoming with love all those who are in need of Christ. There are some who take traditional doctrine to un-Christian and unbiblical ends. Christians are always seduced by non-engagement with the culture (particularly when the culture generally doesn't invite us to engage). Yet, when I read McLaren's works, I don't get the feeling that he has much grace toward Christians (at least, Anglo-American Christians, toward whom his critique is targeted) and that he is reacting against conservative, legalistic, fundamentalist Christian tendencies rather than soberly responding to them. As a result, what comes across is a need to re-invent Christian doctrine to facilitate the kind of Christian he wants to see. That is the goal of this book.

So what does the book say? Well, first of all, McLaren posits that we have been missing the real message of the Gospel for 2,000 years (and, guess what?, a guy in Baltimore just figured it out!). He states that the real message of the Gospel is that of the Kingdom. He defines the kingdom as:

...a life that is full and overflowing, a higher life that is centered in an interactive relationship with God and with Jesus. Let's render it simply 'an extraordinary life to the full centered in a relationship with God.' (By the way, I don't expect you to be satisfied with this as a full definition of the kingdom of God. I'm not satisfied with it myself. But it's one angle, one dimension, one facet.(p. 37)

This is the closest thing to a thesis statement that one is going to find in the book. Well, at least its part of his thesis: if Jesus's secret message is the kingdom of God, then this is his definition of the kingdom.

Unfortunately, I don't know how to proceed with his work when his very definition of the thing he is talking about is shoddy.

McLaren goes on to explain that we are secret agents of this kingdom. He says that Christians can imagine "seeing everyone as potential agents of the kingdom". Once again, McLaren doesn't clearly define his terms for me. As such, this statement could be taken to mean one of two things:

- 1) that Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Ba'Hai, and other religions are just as legitimate claims to salvation as Christianity and that those who follow these religions are working toward building the kingdom of God.
- 2) that everyone in the world is capable of responding to the call of Christ, repenting, and becoming faithful followers of Jesus.

I'd like to think that McLaren believes in option #2. It would seem, however, that he's speaking more to option #1.

He then goes on to describe how Christianity is a religion against state violence (chapter 17 "The Peaceable Kingdom"). I think he does a good job of synthesizing some of the work of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas here. However, one gets the impression from his sweeping view of Church history that

Christianity had nothing to contribute but violence and death from the time of Constantine until modern times (p. 153-154). Surely, the Church contributed more to art, culture, music, social cohesion, etc., and didn't just go around hacking up non-Christians through the Crusades?

I was loving Chapter 18 ("The Borders of the Kingdom"). McLaren's discussion is of how naive inclusiveness allows people into the church who are divisive. He claims that exclusiveness was against Jesus's Commission, so that's not the alternative. Then, he argues for a third way: "to be truly inclusive, the kingdom must exclude exclusive people (p. 169)." I try to say this in the most charitable way possible: this is nonsense. How do I determine exclusiveness? Apparently, there is a presupposition about what "exclusiveness" means for his reader - or rather he chooses to not define exclusiveness so that his reader can do so (which, to me, is more confusing than it is freeing). Excluding exclusive people would exclude those who are excluding exclusive people because they are also being exclusive. See how this gets confusing? I think the church should define who it excludes: those who teach false doctrine (i.e., Jesus wasn't resurrected, didn't live, the Trinity is false, all will be saved regardless of faith, etc.), those who are religious hypocrites (who judged salvation based on works rather than faith), and those who persist in sin despite frequent counsel (1 Titus 5:20).

McLaren avoids - at all junctures in his exegesis - the references Jesus makes to personal sin. These ideas are rather cast as commands toward social justice. The closest he gets to addressing personal sin and regeneration of the heart is in Chapter 17:

...we need to realize that both our enemies and we ourselves have a common enemy: the very internal darkness Jesus' secret message addresses - the dark drives of lust, greed, anger, and hate that thrust us into conflict and war...the secret message of Jesus, by dealing with the root cause of war in this way, does not promise the easiest, fastest, safest and most convenient method of ending violent conflict - but offers, I believe, the only sure one. (p156)

Here, McLaren completely overlooks the need for repentance of sin for salvation and instead demonstrates that it's about improving social conditions. Now, surely, one of the effects of a regenerate heart is love towards one's brothers and sisters and - hopefully - living peaceably with all (Rom 12:18). But is that all that repentance is about? Surely, God saves us from eternal death! And I think it is because we can see ourselves as sinners in need of a God who will forgive us, we are then able to forgive the small errors of our brothers and sisters and live peaceably with them. Because Christ forgave his oppressors who nailed him to a cross, we can forgive others as well.

But McLaren seems to side-step salvation altogether. Here's one quote where he actually speaks of salvation:

What would it mean if, at this moment, many readers actually began to believe that another world is possible, that Jesus may in fact have been right, that the secret message of the kingdom of God - though radical, though unprecedented in its vision, though requiring immense faith to believe it is possible - may in fact be the only authentically saving message we have? (p. 128)

These are his concluding remarks from his Chapter on forgiving enemies. If McLaren believes that our forgiveness of our enemies is the only "authentically saving message" that we have, then he has abandoned the Gospel. I can't think he actually believes what he is saying there. If Christianity is only about forgiving our enemies in this life, then Christ didn't need to be nailed to a cross for our sins and - by allowing it to happen - God's work was unnecessary and disgustingly unjust because he allowed his Son to be tortured and killed for no good reason at all. I can't believe in that God.

McLaren concludes his work with this comment on his own view on the book:

If this reading of the Gospels is accurate, why didn't scholars see it a hundred or five hundred or eighteen hundred years ago? Critics might reply that the answer is obvious: this reading isn't rooted in the text of the Gospels at all; it's like a smudge on the glasses of recent scholars, saying more about our contemporary perspective than about Jesus himself.... I don't believe this criticism is legitimate...[t:]his reading of the biblical text - that at the heart of Jesus's message is this rich and radical idea of the kingdom of God being "at hand" and "coming down" here and now - accounts for far more of the biblical text than any other I've seen. Traditional readings, which assume Jesus has come primarily to solve the timeless problem of original sin so we can go "up" to a timeless heaven "by and by" after we die, do indeed account for some of Jesus' words and actions, but not with the intensity and resonance of this reading....in my opinion, [this study:] brings the text together and makes sense of its details as no other reading I've ever come across. (pp. 210-211).

I don't agree. I think this reading accounts for some of the biblical text but certainly not far more than other readings I've read. I think Augustine's treatise on the Trinity accounts for more. I think Aquinas's Summa accounts for more. I think Calvin's Institutes, Luther's Catechism, St. Basil's treatise on the Holy Spirit, and the works of the Church Fathers and Doctors account for much more of the Bible and stay faithful to it. Innovative doesn't mean correct.

Unfortunately, much of McLaren's reading is reductionism gone wild. He feels the need to downplay or silence traditional doctrine because it does not fit with the paradigm he has. I think you can argue many (though certainly not all) of his same conclusions in and through the Biblical text and traditional doctrine while staying orthodox. I don't know why he feels he needs to work outside of that mold but he does.

And, in the epilogue, he talks about how fresh and new and original his approach to the Gospel is. Cute. Please pat yourself on the back later.

Sue says

The book is about the Kingdom of God as understood in the first century, and also relevant today. Those who follow Christ are described by the author as 'agents' of the Kingdom, our job being to spread the message of Jesus: of peace, reconciliation, and so on.

The first few chapters set the scene in the historical and Jewish cultural contexts in which Jesus lived as a man on earth. The second section looks at how the author sees the message, in contrast to how some fundamentalist churches tend to portray it, and the final section looks at what it means in the 21st century.

The writing is good, the author's views clearly expressed, and there's plenty of Biblical backing. The book covers portions of the 'sermon on the mount', for instance, and reminds readers about the meanings of the 'parables of the Kingdom', from the perspective of the first century audience.

I'm puzzled about the idea of it being a 'secret' message. This is broadly how I understood the Christian message growing up in an Anglican Church in the UK; it was explored more fully in RE lessons at my secondary school, and is similar to much of what I have read over the years.

Still, this book gives some excellent and thoughtful writing about the Kingdom of God in its many aspects,

and much to think about. If it weren't for the title and insistence that this is a 'new' understanding, I'd have given it five stars.

Harro Medema says

Great book! Different thoughts on scripture and yet so close to its meaning.

John says

I do not recommend this book for its Christian Orthodoxy. However, if you want to understand the Emergent Church and the "personalities" within this movement, you unfortunately have to read their material to understand their teachings.

Melanie says

I liked this book mainly because the experience of reading it was a little bit like finding new windows to look through in the walls of the house where you've lived a very long time. McLaren's chapter on the parables of Jesus (Chapter 6: The Medium of the Message) made me think in fresh ways about why Jesus chose to teach in parables. Here is an excerpt from Chapter 6:

Parables entice their hearers into new territory. If the goal is an interactive relationship...a parable succeeds where easy answers and obvious explanations couldn't. With a clear and easy explanation, hearers can listen and achieve understanding and then go on their way independent of the teacher. But when a parable confounds them, it invites them to ask questions...If a parable leaves you confused, you will have one of two responses. You can respond with arrogant and impatient anger...which makes you walk away. Or you can respond with eager and curious humility...which keeps you coming back. In this way parables have a capacity that goes beyond informing their hearers; parables also have the power to help transform them into interactive, interdependent, humble, inquisitive, and persistent people...Human kingdoms advance by force and violence with falling bombs and flying bullets, but God's kingdom advances by stories, fictions, tales that are easily ignored and easily misunderstood. Perhaps that's the only way it can be (45-46, 49).

I also particularly liked Chapter 10 - Secret Agents of the Secret Kingdom and Chapter 17: The Peaceable Kingdom.

I would like to explore more of the authors that McLaren named as influential to his thinking, particularly Walter Wink and John Howard Yoder.

Sheila says

I enjoyed this book and found some wonderful gems in it, even though the "secret" is not such a secret, that

Jesus wants us to make our lives on earth more meaningful by caring for each other. Even though McLaren is not a fantastic writer, his thought process and analysis of the gospels is very compelling and faith-filled. He is humble, yet passionate, and refreshingly modern in his thinking about what it means to be Christian in the real world. His down to earth approach alone makes me a fan. I especially enjoyed his chapter on the Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes were illuminated in a new way for me, and are now a regular part of my prayer life. I also liked the idea that faith is "practice" with a defined set of exercises which makes me feel better about those moments when my own faith is weak and small. In "practicing" faith, you can strengthen it through action, even when your heart is in doubt.

derek says

While I'm grateful McLaren emphasizes Jesus' ministry to the poor and downtrodden, I'm disappointed that he feels like he needs to sacrifice the main message of Jesus to do it.

He focuses on explaining how Jesus preached the "kingdom of God" as here and now, but for some reason ignores that the Kingdom is also for eternity. Also, it seems like McLaren thinks that establishing "justice on earth" is the ultimate goal of Christ.

Why do we have to trivialize the eternal aspect of the Kingdom- like SALVATION in particular- to emphasize the earthly aspects? to me, the eternal is the foundation upon which the earthly is built.

Laityfamily says

This book completely transformed my way of thinking about Jesus. I went from knowing I needed Him. To really Loving Him.

After reading the first couple pages of this book, I put it down. It was obvious that this book was going to shake my foundations and I wasn't sure I was ready yet. I did pick it up again after a short amount of time and a deep breath.

I won't ever be the same.

Katherine says

Refreshing, as always, to see McLaren's take on things. This book, he claims, was aimed toward "a broad, nonscholarly, and in many cases nonreligious audience", and he did a very good job of writing something that can easily be understood and appreciated by Christians and non-Christians alike, something that people at any level of theological interest can reflect upon.

Written in a way that is easy to read and digest, this book shows us another way of looking at the message of Jesus - one that's not as wrapped up in the more traditional way of understanding, one that shows us more than what we find in the traditional explanation. He goes into the political issues of the time, the different responses to the Roman occupation, showing us how Jesus' response compares and differs from the other Jewish responses at the time. He also goes into the idea of "the kingdom" being attainable and achievable here and now, if only we would strive to see it be in our lives and in the world. Most of the Christians we hear try to tell us, or at least leave the impression, that the point is gaining our ticket to some sort of

exclusive club after this life is over, and it's nice to see someone saying that such thinking misses at least some of the point of Jesus and his message, which is meant to be applied to *this* life. Not that he seems to be denying an afterlife – but that seems to be beside the point of his main focus, which is to show us how the message of Jesus is meant to be understood and applied in our lives and our faiths in each and every moment, instead of seeing faith as merely a looking forward to a future moment or time.

Whether one is a Christian or not, this side of Jesus and his message is something I would recommend everyone take the time to consider. McLaren is an author I highly recommend to Christians and non-Christians alike. He offers a fresh perspective, and I'm constantly pleased in my exploration of his books. :)

Marilyn says

This was an excellent choice for our Monday morning Companions group discussion. The weeks leading up to Easter are ripe for questions, observations, introspection, uncovering secrets, etc. McLaren doesn't have the answers nor can he see the end results; but, he is content to accept that Jesus was "more interested in stirring curiosity than in completely satisfying it - in making people hungry and thirsty for more than making them feel completely stuffed. Perhaps that's how it should be."

Bill Wrabley says

I loved his focus on the message of Jesus. His teaching to create the Kingdom of God here on earth through our actions and how we treat one another. My only complaint was his style of writing. In stead of coming right out and stating the message he hides it throughout the book. Revealing it has the book finishes. I appreciated the foundation he lays through historical background but at times it made me feel like he was trying to interest the page count. I still thought the book was worth reading for its message.

Michael says

The more I learn about early Christianity, the more convinced I become that somewhere between Constantine's empire and the influence of Aristotle (as well as other Greek philosophers), the whole program went off the rails. This is the third book of Brian McClaren's that I've read, and I think this may be my favorite of all. In sum, the author makes a convincing case that the secret message of Jesus is quite simple: the Kingdom of God is at hand. Not coming after you die. Not some pie-in-the-sky cloud-filled angel fest, but here, now, in front of us if we only had the eyes to see it. And what is this Kingdom? Love God, love your neighbor. Give to the poor. Pray. Work for justice. Be peaceful. Be pure of heart. Share.

Seem easy? Try doing it tomorrow.

McClaren certainly isn't the first to say this, although he is perhaps the most compelling (after Shane Clairborne, who I love). Considering the state of the church these days--dying mainstream Protestantism in the US, more (and more and more...) horrifying Catholic scandals, and a rapidly rising fundamentalism both around the world and here at home, it seems to me that more Christians could use a little history lesson with regard to what Jesus was actually saying, to whom he was saying it, and why.

Here is the money quote: "Faith is not the absence of doubt, but the presence of action." Sign me up.
