

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

A New Kind of Christianity

by

Brian D. McLaren

This reading guide is designed so that both individuals and groups can spend time engaging with and discussing the ten questions McLaren explores in *A New Kind of Christianity*. The first set of discussion questions are meant for individual reflection, though can be used by groups as well, and are intended to help readers go deeper with the text. The second set of questions can be found under the heading “Questions for Reading Groups” and are designed to be used by small groups to start conversation. Lastly, at the very end, there is a section called “A Five-Step Reading Circle.” This is an exercise specifically designed to allow groups to thoughtfully connect with each other and the text in an effort to join the conversation and continue in the “quest for a new kind of Christian faith.”

THE NARRATIVE QUESTION: CHAPTERS 4–6

1. The author quickly introduces two very important ideas: the six-line narrative and reading the Bible forward instead of backward. Try to summarize each in your own words, and discuss your reactions to each.
2. The author distinguishes Theos, the God of the six-line, Greco-Roman narrative, with Elohim, the God we encounter in the Bible. Summarize those differences.
3. Summarize and respond to each of the three narratives the author proposes as essential to the Bible: the creation narrative, the liberation narrative, and the reconciliation narrative.
4. Respond to the author's reflections on scripture, especially his reflections on Genesis, Exodus, and passages from the Prophets. Do his readings make sense or ring true to you? Why or why not? If time permits, read the Bible passages in chapter 6 aloud slowly, and reflect on what these passages say to you after having read and discussed these first six chapters of the book.

Questions for Reading Groups:

1. What one, two, or three passages or ideas in this chapter did you respond most strongly to? What was your response? What feelings and ideas did the idea(s) or passage(s) elicit? Why do you think you responded in this way?

2. What quotes, points, or questions from this chapter would you most like to talk about with your group? What would you like to ask your other group members about these quotes, points, or questions?
3. How would you complete this sentence: “For me, the most important take-aways from this chapter were . . .”

THE AUTHORITY QUESTION:
CHAPTERS 7–9

1. Compare your experiences with the Bible to the author’s, and respond to the “messes” he summarizes in chapter 7.
2. Respond to the way the Bible was used by the pro-slavery forces in American history. Do you see the Bible being used the same way today?
3. The author suggests we typically read the Bible as a constitution, and recommends we rediscover the Bible as a portable library. Contrast what expectations we bring to a constitution and a library, and how you respond to the author’s proposal.
4. Chapter 9 offers a reading of the Book of Job as a model for how revelation happens through scripture. How did that reading work for you? How do you respond to the idea of being put “in” the text rather than “under” it or “over” it? How has your small group been going so far, and how has your conversation been working as an extension of the biblical conversation?

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2. What quotes, points, or questions from this chapter would you most like to talk about with your group? What would you like to ask your other group members about these quotes, points, or questions?
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THE GOD QUESTION: CHAPTERS 10–11

1. The author proposes that the Bible presents a trajectory of growth and maturity in human understanding of God in relation to God’s uniqueness, God’s ethics, God’s universality, God’s agency, and God’s character. Do you agree with this proposal, and why?
2. The author offers two analogies to understand the idea of an evolving understanding of God—math textbooks and a trip to the future. Restate these analogies, and respond to them.
3. Have you ever considered the Noah story as a story of global genocide? Respond to the idea of “trading up”

understandings of God, as represented in the illustrations at the beginning of chapter 11.

4. Talk about the four diagrams at the end of chapter 11 and the different ways of reading the Bible they represent. Which approach best approximates the way(s) you have read the Bible in the past? How difficult would it be for you to shift to the way of reading the Bible advocated by the author—seeing Christ as the ultimate revelation of God, and the Bible as a witness to Christ? How difficult would it be for your church or domination to adopt this approach, and why?

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2. What quotes, points, or questions from this chapter would you most like to talk about with your group? What would you like to ask your other group members about these quotes, points, or questions?
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THE JESUS QUESTION: CHAPTERS 12–13

1. The author suggests in chapter 12 that there are many versions of Jesus in play in today's world and church. Describe the versions of Jesus that you have been exposed to in your experience.
2. Respond to the author's reading of Revelation 19 and his impassioned defense of the nonviolent "first coming Jesus" not being reinterpreted in light of a violent "second coming Jesus." Describe why you think he finds this issue so important and what you see at stake in which version of Jesus—violent or nonviolent—is seen as normative.
3. In chapter 12, the author explores how John's Gospel presents Jesus in terms of the Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah narratives. How did these portrayals inform or enrich your understanding of and appreciation for Jesus?
4. Describe Jesus's role, importance, and meaning in terms of the six-line, Greco-Roman narrative and in terms of the three narratives of creation, liberation, and reconciliation. Which vision, to you, is most compelling and why?

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response? What feelings and ideas did the idea(s) or passage(s) elicit? Why do you think you responded in this way?

2. What quotes, points, or questions from this chapter would you most like to talk about with your group? What would you like to ask your other group members about these quotes, points, or questions?
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THE GOSPEL QUESTION: CHAPTERS 14–15

1. The author describes his background as a “Romans Protestant” because of the importance of Romans in his tradition. How was/is your tradition similar or different?
2. Try to put into your own words the definition of the gospel given by Jesus and affirmed by the author: “The kingdom of God is at hand,” and respond to the author’s statement that Jesus didn’t come to start a new religion, but to announce a new kingdom.
3. According to the author, the purpose of the Letter to the Romans is not to define the gospel, but to do something else. How would you explain that purpose?
4. In the end of chapter 14 and through chapter 15, the author presents an overview of Romans. How did you respond to that overview? What new insights into

Romans did you gain through this chapter? And how did you respond to the author's reference to the final scene in the Book of Acts?

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THE CHURCH QUESTION:
CHAPTER 16

1. The author says that churches save people in some ways and sometimes afflict them in other ways. In what ways have churches saved and afflicted you?
2. Describe the process of diversification (rather than division) presented in this chapter. What's the difference between diversity and division? Describe the tension between love and knowledge presented in the

chapter. Where do you see this tension at work in the Christian community today?

3. What insight from the overview of 1 Corinthians seemed most important and helpful for you?
4. The church's grand mission, according to this chapter, is the formation of Christ-like people. Who are the most Christ-like people you have ever known? How has your church experience helped you become more Christ-like and loving? What could your church do to help you in your pursuit of becoming a more Christ-like person?

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THE SEX QUESTION: CHAPTER 17

1. How did you respond to the author's introduction? Did you see what was coming?
2. The author surveys how our answers to the previous questions affect the way we look at the issue of homosexuality. Which part of his survey was most interesting, troubling, or helpful to you?
3. What from the reading of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch most struck you, and why?
4. How hard do you find it to stay in conversation and friendship with people who hold a different opinion from yours on the issue of homosexuality? Why do you think this issue is so stressful and divisive? Has your reading of this chapter helped you imagine a less strident or divisive way of addressing the issue? Which of the other sexual issues, beyond homosexuality, do you think is most critical for us to begin thinking about, and why?

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THE FUTURE QUESTION:
CHAPTER 18

1. How much have you been exposed to “eschatology”? Share your experiences with the subject, and why you think it’s important.
2. Contrast the two diagrams in the chapter, and talk about what it would feel like to live “inside” each one.
3. Review the author’s proposed understandings of the importance of AD 70, the “parousia,” an open (as opposed to determined) future, and final judgment. How plausible do you find these alternative understandings?
4. Review the author’s reading of the Book of Jonah, and respond to the final quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Jurgen Moltmann.

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2. What quotes, points, or questions from this chapter would you most like to talk about with your group? What would you like to ask your other group members about these quotes, points, or questions?
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THE PLURALISM QUESTION: CHAPTER 19

1. Why do you feel the question of religious pluralism is so important, and how do you rank the dangers of the two common responses ("It's either us or them" and "Whatever you believe is fine") described by the author?
2. The author reviews several passages of scripture that could be brought to bear on the question of how we relate to people of other religions. Which of those passages was of most interest to you?
3. The author identifies the Greco-Roman mind as the real problem in the mindset of Christians towards people of other religions. Explain why.
4. What is the meaning of John 14:6 according to the author, and how relevant is it to the issue of religious pluralism?

Questions for Reading Groups:

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THE WHAT-DO-WE-DO-NOW QUESTION:
CHAPTERS 20–21

1. Summarize the seven zones of the quest in Chapter 20—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. What zone best describes you? Your church or denomination? Your nation? Describe how the violet zone must be different from the others, and why the author feels it is so important for more of us to enter this zone.
2. The author is hopeful about the quest for a new kind of Christianity for three reasons. After reviewing those reasons, how hopeful are you about this quest, and why?

3. What practical guidance from chapter 21 is most helpful for you at this point, and why?
4. As you turned the last page of the book, what did you feel? What thoughts and feelings have lingered with you since finishing the book?

A FIVE-STEP READING CIRCLE

A convener invites a circle of friends to read the book. The convener proposes how many chapters will be read per week, and when, where, and for how long the group will meet. At each meeting, the convener reads these five steps as ground rules for the group, and intervenes to uphold these ground rules as necessary. The convener may also lead in a brief opening and closing activity, such as reciting the Lord's Prayer, observing a period of silence, journaling, etc.

1. A volunteer reads a sentence or paragraph from the week's reading that was important to him or her for some reason.
2. That group member then talks about the passage for an agreed-upon period of time without interruption. (Ten minutes would be a good maximum, but five or seven minutes might be better for groups of more than five people.) He or she shares why the passage is important, what the passage means to him or her, and how he or she responds to it. Other members seek to "listen the speaker into free speech" through their attentiveness.

Again, no interruptions are allowed, and periods of silence are fine.

3. That group member invites others to ask further questions about his or her responses to the passage for the purpose of understanding the group member (not debating, not critiquing, not agreeing or disagreeing, only seeking to understand the group member better). Or that group member may ask a question of fellow members to which they may respond.
4. Another group member volunteers (or is invited by the leader to go next), and the process continues around the circle.
5. If time permits, the group leader may invite each member to reflect on what they have learned or gained from one another during the gathering. The group confirms the next week's readings and meeting details.