



The Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity

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For all those seeking more authentic ways to hold and practice Christian faith, Brian McLaren has been an inspiring, compassionate--and provocative--voice. Starting with the award-winning *A New Kind of Christian*, McLaren offered a lively, wide-ranging fictional conversation between Pastor Dan Poole and his friend Neil Oliver as they reflected about faith, doubt, reason, mission, leadership, and spiritual practice in the emerging postmodern world. That conversation widened to include several intriguing new characters in the sequel, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, as Dan and friends continued to explore faith-stretching themes from evolution to evangelism, from death to the meaning of life. Now, in this third installment of their adventures, Dan and his widening circle of friends grapple with conventional Christian teachings about hell and judgment and what they mean for our relationship with God and each other. Is there an alternative to the usual polar views of a just God short on mercy or a merciful God short on justice? Could our conflicted views of hell be symptoms of a deeper set of problems - misunderstandings about what God's justice and mercy are about, misconceptions about God's purpose in creating the world, deep misgivings about what kind of character God is and what the Christian gospel is for?

The Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity Details

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Cathy says

This is the final book in McLaren's trilogy "A New Kind of Christian". Of the three, this was my favorite. His discussion of hell, what it means to be saved, how we live out the gospel (which he argues, is not 'going to heaven when I die' but living in the Kingdom of God now and eternally) and what it means to be 'church' were all very helpful in my own thinking and faith. It will not be a book for all people, but it certainly provides good fodder for conversation, for challenging one's own convictions and for seeing faith through a different set of lens.

Zack Dean says

The book was good for me to read to learn different ideas about hell but I wasn't a fan of his creative non-fiction. This is where he came up with a fictional story that deal with real topics. Sounded like a fiction book to me. It seemed to be this guy who was unhappy with his stale faith until he met these people who do things differently than him. When he prayed with them, it was amazing. When he spoke with them, he was enlightened by their words.

To me, he seemed to be pushing the idea that the new "emergent" church is inline with God and everyone else isn't.

Besides that, I did like the story line of hell to give me different ideas but this is only the beginning for me to be reading on this topic!

I further read "Love Wins" by Rob Bell and I plan on getting "The Great Divorce" by CS Lewis!

Brendan Egan says

+5 stars for its humanist message. -2 stars for its theistic message.

You're right, Mr. McLaren. It is awful to terrify your kids into subordination using imagery of hellfire and eternal torture. Bravo for joining the rest of us.

It's nice to see that some Christians understand what their savior--either the son of their god or their god himself--is trying to say. If only more Christians could put their politics aside and come to the same conclusion: we are all we have and we need each other if we hope to make things bearable, or even great, for everyone. Unfortunately, I don't think those entrenched in conservatism are so easily swayed. Otherwise the latest Pope wouldn't be causing a stir.

There were plenty of lines that made me cringe, but it's more than a good start, anyway. There's hope for

humanity yet.

As far as the book itself, it's entertaining. I enjoyed the various dialogues, for the most part. It could have used another pass from its editor, though. I don't think it was particularly well written, but it was sufficient to get its point across.

It's too bad that so many cling to faith and can't experience wonder and awe at reality and nature without the help of a supernatural being that seems to just sit on the sidelines and watch its creation fall apart. I don't believe in miracles, but there's definitely something wonderful about humanity and I hope more people are able to realize that in the future.

We can be good without gods.

Jack Kooyman says

In this very well written work of "creative nonfiction," McLaren provides thinking, questioning, and open minded Christians--evangelicals in particular--with a very helpful treatment on the topic of hell. I especially appreciated learning much more about the cultural and historical context on the subject within Scripture as well as how the church and various Christian scholars have understood hell as well.

Additionally, within the context of a very well written story, McLaren also does an outstanding job of having his readers contemplate a new--actually more ancient--and broader view of salvation as well as God's purposes for all of creation and its creatures since the beginning, i.e. the missio dei or mission of God.

Although the characters are fictional, their experiences, feelings, and struggles are quite real and familiar . . . especially to evangelicals who question and struggle with and question certain beliefs, but hesitate to share them for fear of judgment and exclusion from their "church family." However, I suspect that if people felt safe enough to honestly and openly share their thoughts and questions, we would discover that many more people than we might expect would admit such doubts and struggles.

Hopefully, many will read this book and begin conversations with others within their faith communities as well. Perhaps as more of us begin openly discussing these important and essential matters to the life and work of Christ's body, the Church, churches will increasingly become the loving, accepting, welcoming, and safe communities which reflect and witness to God's redemptive love and desire for shalom.

Dwayne Shugert says

Again...excellent, simply excellent. The last word is always love, and the word after that is always love. A powerful and thought provoking book about our concept of Hell and what this means for the church. Brian

takes us through history and theology in the midst of friendship and relationships. This book represents a beautiful picture of reconciliation, of forgiveness and of love for God and for others and for all of creation. But this poem from the book is simply brilliant, profound and beautiful not to share...

Scripture ends in a marriage.
This is the end to which all
Things tend, the end which makes all
Things new. Marriage unites, but
In its fire, true love does not
Consume. Selfishness burns. All
That makes love ignites, makes ash.
But faith, hope, love survive. Love
Is the last, best word, the end
Into which all will bend, and
Then begin again. The next
Word and the new will be love
As well: for love never ends
And in love all are made, yes,
Friends.

papasteve says

In this third book in a trilogy by McLaren, he takes a hard look at the place of evil in the world. It's the question that plagues anyone of faith: if we live in a world run by a good and loving God, what do we do with evil, judgement and hell? I have gained so much by all three of his books in this series, because he's not afraid to ask hard questions and look for answers that move us past sunday school, regurgitated churchianity. If you're tired of the worn out company line, don't just read this book; read all three.

Jenn Raley says

This was a pretty good way to wrap up this series of stories, and round out the character development.

The exploration of the concept of hell is pretty satisfying, but unfortunately it doesn't go much further. This book would have been stronger if it had included further exploration of the afterlife in general - there are just as many misconceptions about what the Bible says about heaven as about hell, yet this book doesn't do much in that area. Too controversial?

To fill in, I recommend NT Wright's "Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church".

Jonathan Tysick says

Not so much about hell as it is about the nature of God's character, the gospel and how we should live it out. Startling, imaginative, unsettling, inspiring, entertaining, and thought-provoking. I wish McLaren would have

incorporated more about Paul's understanding of salvation and the rest of the New Testament (not only focusing on Jesus and the gospels), although he briefly touches on this. A great finale to the trilogy! Probably equal to the first book (A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey and definitely better than the second (The Story We Find Ourselves in: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian.

Jennifer Barten says

By far the best book in the trilogy. Gave me so many things to think about and ponder and changed many of my views on hell.

Jared says

This book provided an excellent treatment on the topic of hell and eternal punishment. Many sides of the debate were handled with no single one coming out as the one that was "officially" supported by the author. It left me feeling like I was prepared to ask the questions on my own mind and soul rather than providing the answers that the author felt I needed to have, which is a rare treat when it comes to books dealing with such significant topics.

I'll probably read it again, along with some of N.T. Wright's work regarding the issue of hell as Christ preached it during His earthly ministry.

Kerrie-Anne Crosby says

Best one of the series, ties it all together and introduces some great new characters.

Eric says

The best book, I think, in the New Kind of Christian series. McLaren's fiction has gotten much better (and perhaps therefore more believable) since his first book. But more importantly, the thoughts encompassed in this finale are an important capstone to the building McLaren has been constructing through the first two books.

One item of confusion (contention?) for me was the use of quotes from Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy at the beginning of each chapter. (By coincidence, I was finishing off the Paridiso after months of trudging through that work at the same time I was reading Last Word.) The quotes seemed quite out of context in McLaren's use, and rather unnecessary overall. It wasn't until I read the commentary at the end of the book that I realized (to my shame) that McLaren intended a certain parallelism between Divine Comedy and Pastor Dan's travels from the very beginning of the book. Dan's journal entry is reflective of the opening canto of Divine Comedy. (And I, who had just been reading it, didn't even realize it!)

I especially appreciated the inclusion of McLaren's commentary on his own book. It was helpful to realize

that even Neo, the superChristian, doesn't get everything correct, according to the author.

I look forward to reading some of McLaren's latest writing and seeing where he is going with his new kind of Christianity.

Megan says

This was a great book about understanding the many views of Hell, and ultimately that where we are going when we die isn't really the most important question to ask. I really enjoyed this "creative nonfiction" style a la Plato's dialogues. Except here Sophocles isn't a pompous guy and whoever he is conversing with isn't an idiot. It was basically a fictional conversation that condensed a lot of scholarship into easy to understand chunks. This book is the last of a trilogy but can also stand alone; however, I think I'll be checking out the first two books now.

Rachel says

McLaren wraps up his New Kind of Christian trilogy with a volume that focuses on what it means to be "saved," to follow Jesus, to face judgment, and to believe (or not) in an afterlife, specifically focusing on the doctrine of hell.

As with the two preceding books in the set, McLaren has chosen the genre of "creative non-fiction," as he calls it: most of the theology is unpacked via the characters' conversations about the main ideas, and the same characters demonstrate the relative praxis through the ins and outs of the story.

The ideas McLaren espouses come as a breath of fresh air to some of today's evangelicals who have become disillusioned with the current direction of the evangelical movement, namely interpretations of Scripture that reinforce western consumerism and empire thinking. The dominant thread seems to be that whatever our nuanced beliefs are about judgment, hell, and salvation, they are no good if they cause us to focus on the afterlife instead of working for love and justice for all in this life.

Sue says

Wow.

Controversial stuff, yet at the same time oddly reassuring.

In his slightly strange 'creative non-fiction' style, McLaren gently introduces doubts about the conservative evangelical viewpoint of hell - the kind of thing that many of us have puzzled about over the years. Featuring the pastor Dan - who, McLaren declares, really isn't himself - his friend Neil, and a host of other interesting characters, the history and theology of hell are discussed at length.

There's room for disagreement; at one point Dan bemoans the fact that if he figures out how to help his daughter Jess in her understanding, he will upset his wife Carol, who continues in a fairly conservative exclusivist viewpoint. And there's also room for a great deal of thinking and pondering, and searching of the

Scriptures.

Whatever the truth - or otherwise - of hell, many excellent points are made about the importance of living for Christ, of caring about justice on earth, of showing love and kindness to all. Far too many Christians come across as angry and judgemental, almost seeming to rejoice in the idea of the condemnation of the unsaved, and while people of that persuasion would probably consider this book heretical, it's important that those of us who tend towards the more inclusivist viewpoint should not judge or condemn those who are more conservative or intolerant in their view.

Powerful stuff, leaving open as many questions as it answers. The fiction part is rather lightweight, more a vehicle for the theology and history than anything else, but it works. And is very readable.

Highly recommended.
