

# My Journey into Foresight

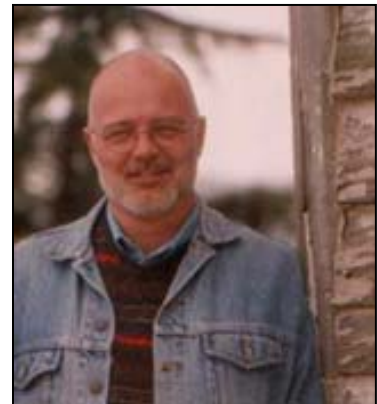
## A Personal Essay

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Rev. Brian D. McLaren  
Cedar Ridge Community Church, Spencerville, MD

From September 23-25, 2004, the School of Leadership Studies hosted Brian McLaren on campus at Regent University, for the second annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by McLaren was circulated to participants beforehand. We encourage you to join us next year for our annual Foresight conference, as we hear from top futurists from the both the U.S. and around the world.



### **Brian McLaren**

*Since 1986, McLaren has served as pastor Cedar Ridge Community Church near Washington, DC. He is a sought after speaker on the emerging church and developing spiritual friendships. His book, A New Kind of Christian is a must read for pastors, leaders and everyday followers of Jesus. He is considered a leader of the emerging postmodern church in North America.*

### **Essay**

I was brought up in a conservative Evangelical (i.e. fundamentalist) home. My parents were and are generous and loving people, and the Christian environment in which I was raised was by and large everything a child could hope for.

However, the fundamentalist theological framework in which our church functioned created significant problems for a young boy like me with an active mind and an insatiable interest in science and nature. By the time I was finished with middle school, I had read every biology book available in our library, including college textbooks. But every Sunday, I entered a very different world of Biblical literalism and anti-science thinking.

For us, the world was 6,000 years old. Any talk of fossils and dinosaurs had to fit into that framework. As well, the world would soon be interrupted by the Rapture, when all Christians would be beamed up and out of history, and the world would experience a 7 year tribulation period followed by a thousand-year millennial period. After that, "time would be no more," and we'd all be in a happy eternal state where nothing new would ever happen again (heaven enough for a certain kind of personality type!). The bottom line was that the history of earth and the whole universe would be something under 8,000 years max, as we saw it.

With rapture and tribulation the next scheduled events on the prophetic calendar, there wasn't a lot to look forward to, especially since both would be preceded by wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines. Yes, beyond the Great Tribulation, as beyond death, there was the hope of heaven. But between here and heaven there wasn't much to look forward to, except a lot of hard work for Jesus and a lot of suffering.

Along with science, I was also very interested in science fiction in my early adolescent years. I loved to read novels about interstellar voyages, colonizing distance planets, going boldly where no one had gone before. I dreamed about living on a space station, imagined weightlessness, and fantasized about what life forms I might find if I were chosen as an astronaut to distant solar systems. It was with some regret that I would return to earth from my imaginative voyages, realizing that, if the end-times teaching of my church were true, there would be no such adventures in the future – just the Mark of the Beast, the Seven-Year Tribulation, along with bowls and trumpets, and plague, pestilence, and famine. I didn't like to daydream much about that. (I remember as a young boy being terribly disappointed to find that the Apocalypse's beast coming up out of the sea – which I imagined looking more or less like Godzilla of Japanese monster-movie fame – was to be interpreted symbolically, even in my fundamentalist church.)

No wonder, then, that our focus was strictly backward. Because we were a Bible-centered folk, or more accurately, because of the way we read and interpreted the Bible, the best days were always behind us and we were always looking back – back to Bible times when God did miracles, back to the days when the church was in its infancy.

Really, ever since the Garden of Eden, which we knew was created in 4004 BC (give or take a few years), history had been going downhill. True, it was nice when a prophet or apostle came along, but their message, as we understood it, was all and only about warning us of the dark days to come, so we humans would repent before it was too late, and put our focus on heaven, not earth, by trusting in Jesus to save our souls. This whole created order was going to burn, and if we were good Christians, we would have as little to do with it as possible. Concerns for justice, for the environment, for the plight of the poor and oppressed? Concerns for our descendants generations downstream from us in history? That kind of talk was “social gospel,” spewed by people who didn't understand Scriptural teaching.

I realized in my early teenage years that this approach didn't hold much appeal or hope to me. I thought, with some sadness and fear, about how I would make my escape from this system when I grew older. I felt badly that my parents would have a wayward child, but a few of my cousins had prepared the way; I would try to be as polite as I could about my apostasy when I announced it. The option of choosing a less fundamentalist approach to Christian faith never crossed my mind, as that well had been poisoned, so to speak, by our preachers: *the other denominations were “liberal” and had nothing to offer*. So, it was either our way or out the door of Christianity altogether.

God had other plans and intervened in my life through several influential friends who a) had a more passionate Christian commitment than I had ever seen, and b) who were not stuck in the strictures of my fundamentalist heritage.

In my late teenage years, I had become a vibrant and committed Christian, with signs of leadership ability. Yet I had nagging questions, especially this one: how could one maintain intellectual integrity about matters of science and yet be faithful to the Bible?

Today I would not be a committed Christian interested in future studies if I had not learned a different approach to the Bible. That different approach has evolved gradually, through many influences, over several decades now. It continues to evolve. I'd like to sketch out some of the parameters of that approach.

**1. Literary, not literal:** I became an English major in college, which gave me a sensitivity to genre. Our literal readings paid a lot of attention to Greek roots, prefixes, and suffixes, but that was like focusing on the veins of individuals leaves, and missing not only the forest, but the trees as well. Because we were unaware to what a great degree we had bought into modern, Enlightenment-era assumptions about truth and meaning, we had a flat, wooden approach to texts, especially the Bible. We approached the Bible as we approached our favorite modern books – newspapers, telephone books, dictionaries, encyclopedias, legal codes, engineering

documentation. It was a “just the facts, Ma’am,” approach, with a stunning insensitivity to questions of historical context, literary genre, and the like. My training in literature helped me to honor the Bible as I would the greatest human literature – by submitting to its particularity in genre, setting, style, and so on, not by treating it like a bland, prose encyclopedia.

Looking back, it seems ludicrous that people tried to develop a view of the future based on wooden readings of Revelation and Daniel, never realizing that they were both examples of the literary genre of Jewish apocalyptic, with a specialized style and conventional imagery. It would be like walking into a Shakespearian tragedy and interpreting it as if it were a physics lecture.

**2. Rhetorical, not scientific:** A literary approach sensitized me to issues of rhetoric – the art of persuasion. Our literalistic readings acted as if God were only about one thing in the Bible: informing us with information. A rhetorical reading saw a far more going on. God was seeking to form a people, to guide history, to avert disaster, to stimulate positive action, to evoke emotion, to stimulate thinking, to inspire awe. I came to realize we must ask not just what the text is *saying*, but more, what it is *doing*, or attempting to do. For example, when a lover in an argument says, “You never listen to me!,” she isn’t asserting a fact, that (literally) her beloved never even once listens to her. If that were the case, it would be absurd for her to even say so, since he wouldn’t be listening anyway! Literally, she is uttering a falsehood, but rhetorically, she is pleading: *Please listen to me now!* This approach freed me from the heavy and irrational burden of requiring God to speak like a lawyer or engineer or academic, but never like an impassioned lover in a quarrel with his beloved.

**3. Missional, not escapist:** Sometime in the early 1990’s, I came across the writings of Lesslie Newbigin, English missiologist and career missionary to India. Newbigin loved to identify the greatest heresy in the history of monotheism as misunderstanding election (God’s choosing of nations or individuals). Bad monotheism involved people believing God has chosen them for privilege, to bless them to the exclusion of all others. True monotheism involves seeing oneself or one’s people as chosen for service, for the benefit of all, so that we are blessed to be a blessing.

In this view, God is not holding his divine nose, patiently waiting until this stinking universe can be thrown in the dumpster of judgment and burned in the incinerator of annihilation. Rather, God is on a continuing mission, the mission of creation. Adam and Eve didn’t ruin God’s creation, so that it must now be disposed of and a new one started. Rather, human sin brings terrible sickness and suffering into creation, which God wants to heal so that this creation can be renewed, restored, saved. Our role is not to escape from this world, nor is it to withdraw and isolate so we can critique and condemn. Rather, our role is to be sent into it with words and deeds of God’s saving love.

The Bible, in this view, contains the memoirs of the first two-thousand years of this mission, from Abraham through Jesus and the apostles. It’s purpose is to orient us to take our place in the ongoing mission. In addition to Lesslie Newbigin’s work, the work of David Bosch and the Gospel and Our Culture Network helped me greatly in this regard.

**4. Catholic, not individualist or sectarian:** I’m using “catholic” here to mean “living in relation to the whole,” as opposed to “living in relation to a section only.” And by the whole, I mean the whole planet (and beyond), and the whole of history. My upbringing (and I’m far from alone in this) taught me to read the Bible as a sectarian: everyone else interprets the Bible wrong, so we focus on the right, correct interpretations of our little group. Often, the circle of the correct would shrink to hold precisely one person: me. In contrast, to read the Bible with catholicity doesn’t look at varying interpretations across geography and history and say, “What a mess! How can we eliminate all but one interpretation?” Instead, it says, “What a rich diversity of interpretations! How can we be informed by all of this diversity to help us engage with the Bible wisely in our time and setting?” My readings in postmodern philosophy helped me see the value of listening to marginalized voices and giving them a place at the table.

**5. Conversational, not totalitarian:** A literary, rhetorical, missional, catholic approach to the Bible doesn’t seek to impose one set of “this-is-the-last-word” views on everyone. Neither does it accept everyone’s views as equally valid (which would be absurd, inane, and insane). Rather, it seeks to participate in an ongoing conversation, where differing approaches are shared and evaluated, sharpening one another, correcting one

another, improving one another. In this way, counterpoints are not seen as contradictions, but rather as enrichments, challenges, or stimuli for ongoing response and reply and counter-reply.

For example, if we ask, “What is the Biblical analysis of the Jewish Monarchy?” some will immediately say, “Negative.” Choosing an earthly king was an act of conformity to godless neighbors, and it entailed a rejection of God. Yet other biblical passages suggest that one of the greatest things God ever did was give the nation a king like David, and in light of his reign (in spite of his mistakes), the kingdom/monarchy is a glorious thing. Is this a contradiction?

Some would say so, and would seek to fix it by subordinating one emphasis to the other to “smooth out the wrinkles,” so to speak. But might it be wiser to say that the Bible presents a dynamic and nuanced conversation about the monarchy – that over time, people assert that it can represent a form of idolatry and rejection of God, while others assert that it can also represent a pursuit of justice and peace, and that both can be right? Doesn’t that more nuanced view match our ongoing experience of government in its many forms? This more nuanced conversational view thus validates both points made in the conversation – that the monarchy is a gift from God, and that it is potentially dangerous. Thinking back to the issue of rhetorical intent, asking what the text is trying to do, not just say, the intended response becomes clear: thank God for every good political leader, and don’t be hopeless about your political system, for God can work through it; yet don’t idolize it either, and always be on guard for the ways in which it, like all God’s good creations, can be corrupted. More than anyone else, Walter Brueggemann helped me see this fresh approach to Scripture.

**6. Imaginative, not technical:** By imaginative, I don’t mean that the Bible is to be read while smoking marijuana. Rather, I was influenced again by Walter Brueggemann’s writings to see the prophets as using poetry to fund our imagination with images of the kind of future God desires. Images of lions and lambs, swords and pruning hooks, celestial cataclysm and revived stumps were intended to fill our minds and hearts with images of the coming shalom of God – when God’s justice confronts injustice and God’s mercy heals wrong. This approach to the Bible, far from demythologizing the text (as liberals did) or flattening it (as literalists did), allowed me to see the richly textured Biblical text as inspiring profound hope and accountability – the polar opposites of the despair and escapism of many traditional approaches.

**7. Timely, not timeless:** The writings of Nancey Murphy (*Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*) and Stanley Grenz and John Franke (*Beyond Foundationalism*) helped me see how the pervasive literal, scientific, escapist, sectarian, totalitarian, and technical approaches to the Bible represented a high-modern attempt at establishing timeless, context-free truth. Part of the postmodern turn of mind was to realize that such timeless, completely objective viewpoints are not possible for creatures like us who live for a few brief years in a specific habitat. Creatureliness means timeliness, not timelessness; for this reason, the Bible should be celebrated for its timeliness – its relevance to its specific contexts. That doesn’t make it irrelevant to subsequent contexts, any more than an understanding of my early childhood is irrelevant to my present adult behavior. It is relevant because of its essential timeliness.

In essence, this understanding helped me see the Bible more truly as a grand, ongoing, God-inspired story than as a bank of God-dictated propositions. N. T. Wright’s important work on Jesus in his historical context impacted me greatly in this regard. When we look back to see the Bible’s narrative trajectory (Grenz’s helpful term), we wrestle to conceive how we fit in with that trajectory today, and we project where that trajectory will lead.

To make those projections, we are not only guided by the past, of course. We also have the images of the future given us by the Scriptures – a future in which judgment and destruction never have the last word, but only the next to last word: the word after that is always grace.

With this approach, I can imagine a church history written in 240,000 AD, in which the first 2000 years of church history take but a page and a half. I have a theology of hope and possibility, along with accountability and danger.

Many other writers and thinkers continue to help me in this ongoing process, from Tom and Christine Sine to Jay Gary. My exposure to systems thinking (via Peter Senge and Harold Friedman’s work) also played a huge

role in my intellectual/theological development. Now, instead of seeing faithfulness as requiring us to think in short time spans, I feel the Biblical call to wisdom and understanding requiring us to do the very opposite, with the confidence that just as God has been with us in the past, so will we be accompanied into the future.

This broadened perspective has played out in my writing and my work with the emergent network ([www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com)). In the early 1990's, I became increasingly aware that the spiritual seekers walking through the doors of the church I serve as pastor were different; they were asking different kinds of questions, and the answers that helped them differed from the answers that had helped me back in the 1970's when I was coming of age. I sensed a resonance between what I was seeing in these spiritual seekers and a new approach to literary criticism I had encountered back in graduate school. Back then, it was called post-structuralism; that approach had broadened into the troublesome yet fertile term, *postmodernism*. Having been exposed to Kuhn's concept of the paradigm (not just as a way of thinking, but more deeply as a methodology for seeking truth), I suspected that we were in the middle of a profound shift from modernity to postmodernity.

For the next several years, I struggled with this: could my faith survive a disembedding from modern forms, to re-engage with postmodernity? If modernity goes down, does Christianity go down with it? Could one be, to some degree at least, postmodern and still be faithfully Christian? I had always been fascinated with history, and I began to reflect on the ways that modernity differed from the medieval and ancient worlds, and over time, modernity began to lose its absolute hold on me.

I became fascinated with the way certain themes could be traced through various historical stages (knowing that stages themselves are convenient fictions). I sensed a kind of complex conversational process going on – if not Hegel's tidy thesis-antithesis-synthesis, something similar in that it was ongoing and dialectic: statement, counterstatement, disillusionment, restatement, counterstatement, stalemate, retrenchment, breakthrough ... that sort of pattern we all instinctively know from personal conversations.

With this growing sense of the conversational nature of Christian theology and practice came a growing sense of responsibility. How would I participate in that conversation? My writing and public speaking have been the result. Specifically, some of my books have sought to do the important work of deconstruction, especially for Christian leaders: *The Church on the Other Side*, *A New Kind of Christian*, *A is for Abductive*, and *Adventures in Missing the Point*. My other books have focused on constructing new ways to talk about the faith: *Finding Faith*, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, and *A Generous Orthodoxy*.

Looking ahead toward the next ten years, I sense several challenges:

1. How can I write and speak about the Bible and the gospel in this new (postmodern?) way? I feel like a scientist working on a hypothesis: the experiment may not work, it may. Even if my experiment fails, I feel compelled to at least try.
2. How can I help Christian leaders who have been spiritually formed in modernity – but who are deeply disaffected and disillusioned – to transition out, to pass through the liminality with all its discontents – as I have been doing? How, together, can we help our churches and organizations go on this journey as well?
3. How can I respond graciously to those who are certain this whole adventure is misguided? And how can I do so without becoming distracted or stalled?
4. Perhaps most important to me at this moment (and in this election year): how can I integrate all I am writing and thinking with my growing concern for justice – especially as it relates to the poor and the rich, the environment, issues of war and peace, the rising danger of crusade versus jihad?

In short, how can we present a gospel-inspired vision for the future that seizes imaginations and launches people into the missional trajectory of the kingdom of God?

### Related Links

A New Kind of Christian,

<http://www.anewkindofchristian.com>

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