

The Last Word, & the Word After That

I want to thank a friend for pointing me to a book published just this year, "The Last Word and the Word After That" by Brian McLaren (2005, Published by Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint"). McLaren is the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Baltimore-Washington area. "The Last Word" is a work of fiction, but it brings to light in a most effective way God's plan, as revealed in Scripture, to ultimately save all mankind. It is the story of Pastor Dan Poole's struggle with the traditional church's teachings concerning hell, and his quest toward learning what the Bible really says about hell.

In the Introduction McLaren says, "As I see it, more significant than any doctrine of hell itself is the view of God to which one's doctrine of hell contributes." I couldn't agree more. The view of God as held by most within the traditional church is that God is love, but His "justice" and His "righteousness" will not permit Him to save all mankind due to man's sin. This thinking blasphemes God's character.

McLaren comments on the famous Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God" (also in the Introduction): "Whatever you think of Edwards's sermon, the conventional doctrine of hell has too often engendered a view of a deity who suffers from borderline personality disorder or some worse sociopathic diagnosis. 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, and if you don't love God back and cooperate with God's plans in exactly the prescribed way, God will torture you with unimaginable abuse, forever—' that sort of thing. Human parents who 'love' their children with these kinds of implied ultimatums tend to produce the most dysfunctional families, and perhaps the dysfunctions of the Christian religion can be traced not to God as God really is but to views of God that are not easy for people to swallow while remaining sane and functional."

I am hoping you will pick up this book and read it, but I will share a few hi-lights as I see them.

Pastor Dan's daughter begins to question her Christian beliefs because she believes there are only two alternatives.

"If Christianity is true, then all the people I love except for a few will burn in hell forever. But if Christianity is not true, then life doesn't seem to have much meaning or hope. I wish I could find a better option." (page 5)

How many Christians are caught in this dilemma, not realizing that it is not "Christianity" that is the problem, but man's teachings and interpretations as to what God's Word is saying. In fact, God's Word very clearly teaches that all mankind will be saved and reconciled to Him. What wonderful good news! But my how this good news is distorted and mitigated by what most in the church are proclaiming.

"Should the purpose of Christianity be reduced to this: to increase the population of heaven and decrease the crowdedness of hell? Was the message of Jesus and the apostles, at the root, information on how to get your personal soul into heaven after you die? Is that what it all boiled down to?" (page 8)

Again ... problems created by the mis-teachings of most within our traditional church today. How we are to live our lives is set aside to simply focus on a one-time salvation of the soul, putting a notch in our Bibles and moving on to

the next. This is modern-day evangelism! But how man-centered!! Should the gospel not be more God-centered? The true gospel tells us of God's amazing grace and love ... how God thru Christ is working toward the reconciliation of all things! And as Ambassadors the Body of Christ (the "Church") is to proclaim this wonderful good news. And in response to God's love and grace we are called to live our lives in a way that is worthy.

"One thing was clear to me, I explained: hell was not "revealed" in the Old Testament... Instead the idea appears suddenly – to us, anyway – in the Gospels, on the lips of Jesus." (page 45) ... "Sheol simply meant the place of the dead, the grave." (page 46)

But sheol, and its New Testament equivalent "hades," are often rendered "hell" in our modern English translations, even though sheol/hades is simply the place of the dead ... all dead ... good and wicked alike.

"Neil, we Christians use the whole doctrine of hell exactly as the Pharisees did! We're playing on the wrong side! Our concept of righteousness is like theirs – it's like we've missed Jesus' whole point." (page 64)

"We have to tell people the good news', he said, 'the good news that God is even better than we thought, that the gospel is better than we realized. That their thoughts of God have been too small, too unworthy ... that the truly good news is bigger and better and more powerful than the conventional news they've been believing and preaching.'" (page 68)

"Because when we talk about hell, it's generally not to unsettle ourselves. It's generally the opposite – to reassure ourselves, so we think, 'Aren't we glad we're insiders with God and going to heaven? Isn't it a shame those other people are so bad and wrong and going to hell?' It's part of a system that reinforces us-them thinking." (page 101)

"Human beings constructed the idea (of hell) by taking elements from lots of other cultures. You're trying to go back and show how those elements were used to construct the idea so that you can see what's left when you deconstruct it." (page 105)

"But it's hard for me to imagine somebody being more stubbornly ornery than God is gracious." (page 138)

"I am overwhelmed. And a little scared. I've read the Bible all my life, and I've always seen it a certain way. I assumed that anyone who didn't see it my way just didn't respect the Bible. But here you are, showing great respect for the Bible, yet you see things so differently." (page 164).

"I tell people God loves them, God accepts them, God isn't holding their sins against them, God wants them to follow his way. I ask them to rethink their lives, to be ready for a new beginning..." (page 165)

"Many Christians assumed that to be called or chosen by God was a matter of privilege and blessing only, not for responsibility and service. So God chooses some for heaven and others for hell, and we need to acquiesce to God's choice. Biblically, however, God chooses some, not to the exclusion of others but for the benefit of others: they're 'blessed to be a blessing.'" (page 169)

I hope this has whet your appetite to read more, and perhaps to pass this book along to others.

– Bob Evely -