

Brian D. McLaren. *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything.*

Nashville, Tenn.: W Publishing Group, 2006

Reviewed by Gary Gillum

Scholarly friends of the Church have become increasingly numerous in recent years: Jan Shipps, Margaret Barker, Richard J. Mouw, and Douglas J. Davies, to name a few. Other friends resonate with some truths of the gospel unwittingly: Bart D. Ehrman, James Charlesworth, Elaine Pagels, Karen Armstrong, and many others. Pastors as friends are much more rare, however, given the problems Joseph Smith and many Latter-day Saint missionaries have had with men of the cloth since the Church was restored. Brian D. McLaren, Evangelical pastor of the Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Washington-Baltimore area, is an exception who fits the bill very well, although he may not be aware that many of the ideas in *The Secret Message of Jesus* have been taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for many decades.

While the title implies that the book is a controversial one (like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*) or at least a newly discovered pseudepigraphical work, it is neither. I found *The Secret Message of Jesus* more edifying and important than either possibility. Pastor McLaren assumes a mission of attempting to bring Christians and non-Christians together—despite their theological differences—by elucidating for us the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus Christ in Matthew chapters 5–7. He points out that even though all Christians are familiar with what he calls “the Manifesto of the Kingdom,” they miss the practical message of how the words of the Savior can be literally carried out in everyday life. He reminds us that “Jesus is calling people to a higher way of life that both fulfills the intent of the Law and exceeds the religious rigor of the religious scholars and Pharisees who focus on a merely external conformity and technical perfection” (122) by substituting “God’s perfection [which] is a compassionate perfection” (127). “The secret message of Jesus isn’t primarily about ‘heaven after you die.’ It doesn’t give us an exit ramp or escape hatch from this world; rather,

it thrusts us back into the here and now so we can be part of God's dreams for planet Earth coming true" (183).

The section in the book that offers the most interest to Latter-day Saints is actually appendix 1, "Why Didn't We Get It Sooner," in which McLaren outlines seven "fateful turns" in Christianity's history. Most of these approximate a few of the elements of our own belief in a great apostasy, but with some added turns. Here is a brief summary of McLaren's list:

First, Christianity went from being a Jewish sect to a "Gentile religion with persistent anti-Semitic tendencies" (211). Second, "the church's early divorce from Jewish roots was accompanied by a corresponding love affair with Greek philosophy" (211–12). Third, in the fourth century, Christianity was embraced by the emperor Constantine and became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Fourth, with this "alliance between church and empire came an endorsement of the use of violence in the service of the kingdom of God" (213). Fifth, "after the Middle Ages, when Protestants broke with the Western church," Christendom "metamorphosed into various new forms of civil religion, each a willing servant of nationalism" (214). Sixth, "new documents from the ancient world were discovered and translated, including the Dead Sea Scrolls" (214). And seventh, "like a team in the middle of a winning season or a rock band ascending to superstardom, a religion expanding in partnership with colonization does not find itself in a highly reflective mode, especially about the injustices associated with colonization itself" (215).

At the end of the appendix, McLaren attaches an account which parallels several prophecies of the Restoration found in the North Visitors' Center at Temple Square in Salt Lake City—and was actually quoted by Elder Levi Edgar Young in the *Improvement Era*.¹ Edward Winslow, the third signer of the Mayflower Compact, recorded these words of Pastor John Robinson, as Robinson said goodbye to the Pilgrims who were setting sail from Holland for America aboard the Mayflower in 1620:²

I charge you before God . . . that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveals anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of *His Holy Word* [emphasis mine]. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which . . . will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His will our God had revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented. (217–18)

The book's message says much about the messenger, Pastor McLaren, whom *Time* magazine calls one of the twenty-five most influential Evangelicals in America. A sincere, honest, and clever seeker after the real truth of the Savior's messages, he offers many instructive thoughts to prove his genuine attitude of seeking, as his following observations show:

What if, properly understood, the canonical (or accepted) Gospel of Matthew is far more radical and robust than the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, or the canonical Gospel of John is far more visionary and transformative than the apocryphal Gospel of Peter—if only we “had ears to hear,” as Jesus says? (xi)

I sit in those great cathedrals and grieve this terrible loss of identity and direction, this sad adventure in missing the point. It may sound strange to say, but I feel sorry for Jesus, sorry for the way we've dumbed down, domesticated, regimented, or even ruined what he started. (85)

Like the late Elder Neal A. Maxwell (and many other Latter-day Saints), McLaren relishes the thoughts of C. S. Lewis. He quotes him five times in chapter 20, “The Harvest of the Kingdom.” McLaren's own colorful style is neither scholarly nor professional, however. It is meant for the common layman, who may be listening to his sermons on any given Sunday—and in fact, many of his thoughts in this book probably germinated at his pulpit. He has written at least two other books that precede *The Secret Message of Jesus*, and they are meant to prepare readers for it. Both, like *The Secret Message of Jesus*, are remarkable for their forthrightness, clarity, and high-altitude understanding in ascertaining the essence of the Savior's message.³

Pastor McLaren attempts, like the Apostle Paul, to be all things to all men, yet within Pastor Robinson's exhortation quoted above are three words that summarize the difficulties that prevent Evangelicals from understanding Latter-day Saints and vice versa: “His Holy Word.” How does one interpret these three words? Is the holy word limited to canonical scripture? Or can it include continuing revelation, portions of the apocrypha, and the Dead Sea Scrolls? I see the question of interpretation as the roadblock to true understanding among all believers. Perhaps all those who believe in the true message of Jesus Christ, “pure religion and undefiled” (James 1:27), should seriously reflect on the closing words of Terryl Givens in his article on Mormons in the recent *Encyclopedia of Christianity*: “Recent decades especially have seen Mormons participate vigorously in interdenominational efforts aimed at humanitarian ends, and initiatives to further interfaith dialogue, tolerance and understanding.”⁴ Some Latter-day Saints criticize other religions for their criticism of us, but do they really take the time to read what other religions have to say and truly

embrace truth wherever it can be found? Brian McLaren's *The Secret Message of Jesus* is a good place to begin, for McLaren aids in our own cause of proclaiming the rediscovery and restoration of the truth that, even now, is changing everything in the hearts of millions throughout the world.

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1. Levi Edgar Young, "They Prepared the Way," *Improvement Era* 46 (January 1943): 43.
2. One of the earliest references to this quote is in Daniel Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2 vols. (London: J. Buckland, 1754), 1:269.
3. Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); and McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004).
4. Terryl Givens, "Mormons," in *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 800-803.

Errata in Recent Issues of *BYU Studies*

In the review of Janet Bennion's *Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahua Valley*, *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 177-80, neither *BYU Studies* nor the reviewer, Mark Sawin, intended to imply that the people of Colonia Juarez currently practice polygamy or are in any way affiliated with the LeBaron group at Colonia LeBaron.

On the cover of *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006), the title "Willie Handcart Pioneer Remembered" referred to the article about Francis Webster, who was in fact a member of the Martin Handcart Company.

In "Two Ancient Roman Plates," *BYU Studies* 45 no. 2 (2006): 54-76, the word *constituto* should read *constitutio*, and on page 56, David Swinger's name is misspelled once.

In "A Metallurgical Provenance Study of the Marcus Herennius Military Diploma," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 80, figure 2, the *y* axis should have been labeled Sn, not Su.