

A READER'S GUIDE  
FOR THE  
NEW KIND OF CHRISTIAN  
TRILOGY

Timothy Keel

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## A NOTE FROM BRIAN MCLAREN

THERE ARE MANY WAYS YOU GET TO KNOW PEOPLE—sharing a common interest, surviving a crisis together, hanging out—but I find I get to know people closest and best by working with them. That’s how I’ve gotten to know Tim Keel.

We’ve been collaborators in the emergent conversation ([emergentvillage.com](http://emergentvillage.com)) for several years now. Tim’s a quiet guy—not flashy, not domineering in any way. But he got my attention early on in our collaboration because of his flashes of insight and creativity, and because his ideas and suggestions consistently found their way to the top. For example, he introduced the term “generative friendship,” which you’ll see in all the best explanations of what the emergent conversation is about. As soon as Tim offered the term, we all knew it expressed exactly what we had been seeking.

As we’ve been getting to know each other, I’ve been working on the New Kind of Christian trilogy. Increasingly over the last several years people have been reading the book in groups, and they’ve repeatedly requested reader’s guides. When Tim’s name came up as a possible author for the guides, I couldn’t have been more pleased.

Like me, Tim is at heart a pastor, leading a wonderful faith community in Kansas City called Jacob’s Well ([jacobswellchurch.org](http://jacobswellchurch.org)). He knows how important it is for local congregations to learn, think, study, and converse together. That’s what makes him an ideal person to offer these reader’s guides—so they can help more and more congregations engage in conversations that lead to generative friendship. Tim and I share the belief that generative friendship can change the world. It is toward that end that he and I continue to collaborate.

—BRIAN MCLAREN, pastor ([crcc.org](http://crcc.org)),  
author ([anewkindofchristian.com](http://anewkindofchristian.com))

## INTRODUCTION

BRIAN MCLAREN HAS SAID that he began *A New Kind of Christian* with three questions:

1. Why am I not the same kind of Christian I used to be?
2. What might a new kind of Christian be like?
3. How might one become a new kind of Christian if one is so inclined?

After reading any book in the New Kind of Christian trilogy, you may have the same questions yourself. Or perhaps you need a way to process all that you have just interacted with in order to make some sense of it. Either way, this Reader's Guide is an attempt to provide a basic framework for your explorations, both as a guide for self-directed learning and as fodder for discussion in groups.

You do not have to join a group to make new discoveries. As an individual you can use this Guide to help clarify your own thinking. However, because so much of Brian McLaren's work is about engaging one another over matters of faith in response to the reality of the world we live in today, I strongly urge you to undertake this challenge *in community*. It is my experience that a discussion group can be a fertile ground for generating and exploring ideas and making new connections even (and perhaps especially) if the ideas are different from your own.

For those adventurous souls out there who choose to explore these books with others, let me offer a couple of approaches. The first is open-ended. I suggest reading every chapter with an eye toward these three questions:

1. What did I agree with?
2. What did I disagree with?
3. What didn't I understand?

Obviously you can create your own variations of these questions, but the point is that they are simple, consistent, and provide an easy means of

engaging one another quickly. To this end, you might assign each of those questions a different colored highlighter and as you read you can mark accordingly. This will provide for quick and easy reference in subsequent discussions.

The second approach is more directed and will occupy the remainder of the Reader's Guide. The questions offered here are intended to encourage conversation and help us integrate the content of those conversations and the ideas of these books into the context of our lives.



In Chapter Seven of *A New Kind of Christian*, Neo likens evangelism to dancing. He says, "You know, in a dance, no one wins and nobody loses. Both parties listen to the music and try to move with it." It seems to me that throughout the three books in the trilogy Neo and Dan are engaged in the very kind of dancing he describes. Perhaps Brian McLaren has heard some unusual but familiar music. He has invited us to dance with him as we try to catch the tune of the gospel and begin (again and again) to move in relation to Jesus, one another, and the world. If we are being invited, after all, to become a new kind of Christian, then we must be evangelized, too.

A READER'S GUIDE FOR  
*A New Kind of Christian*

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### Chapter One

1. A recurring theme throughout the book is the importance of dialogue around matters of faith. Everyone seems hungry to talk but afraid of the risks involved. Have you had relationships that felt safe enough to talk about your struggles and doubts regarding your faith? What made them so?

2. As the book opens, Dan is isolated; his wife is the only person with whom he discusses his difficulties. As a pastor he does not feel safe in having such dialogues with other people and as a result, he seems to fight loneliness and anger. Would you agree that pastors are not, to quote Neo, “regular people”? Why or why not? Does this tension contribute to the difficulty Dan has with self-disclosure? What risks are involved when a person cannot be honest?

3. Neo says to Dan, “Well, Reverend, it sounds like you could use a friend.” In response to this simple invitation Dan is overwhelmed by emotion. How does the invitation to friendship change the nature of conversation? What kind of “posture” do friends take toward one another? What postures do we normally assume when we talk about matters of faith? What do you think it means to use a term like “posture” when talking about how people engage each other relationally?

4. One of the hallmarks of Christianity in the modern era is a focus on the idea of truth. At the same time there seems to be a corresponding absence of honesty, especially when facing what we don't know or understand. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?

5. Neo defies easy stereotyping: he is a scientist who believes firmly in evolution, and at the same time he is a committed Christian who firmly believes in God's direct involvement in creation. This position causes him to

get flack from all sides. Without engaging in all the technical arguments of the debate over creation versus evolution, do you believe it is possible for a person to hold these beliefs and still be considered a Christian? What other issues have become litmus tests or dividing lines for Christians?

## Chapter Two

1. The topic of Dan's fear resurfaces in Chapter Two. As a pastor, Dan always feels the pressure to be the one who has the "answers." Neo seems to think this is a particularly modern sensibility, an age characterized by "debate, dialectic, argument, and discussion." What is the role of a leader in the church? Do we pay pastors to be the answer-men and -women? What is the cost of such an approach? How might the way we train such leaders dictate the kind of leaders we produce?

2. Sometimes a well-formulated question can be more productive than a matter-of-fact answer, even when it is "correct." Do you agree or disagree? Why?

3. Neo locates the greatest source of Dan's struggle as an issue of "immigration" from a faith shaped by the cultural forces of modernity into the reality of the postmodern world. After reading Neo's ten characteristics of modernity (pp. 16–18), do you agree with his assessment that Dan is facing an immigration problem? Have you ever struggled in the same way? If so, how have you described your struggle to others, if at all?

4. Neo divides the timeline of history into five eras: prehistory, the ancient world, the medieval world, the modern world, and the postmodern world. Have you ever considered history in these ways? What is helpful about these classifications? Is there any danger in simplifying history in this way?

5. Consider the ten phrases introduced by Neo to describe modernity. Do you see examples of these themes in contemporary life, and in the church in particular? If so, where?

## Chapter Three

1. As Dan journals about his response to his conversation with Neo, he imagines the potential responses and objections many of his Protestant friends might have: "We're not modern—we're biblical! We believe in

‘sola Scriptura’! We follow the New Testament!” Did you have any of the same reactions, or others? If so, which ones? What do you think of Dan’s analysis that the way we approach the Bible is severely conditioned by modernity?

2. Dan wonders if he can trust God beyond his own theological understanding. What does that mean? Is it possible?

3. Dan says, “I remember hearing a saying somewhere that he who marries the spirit of the age is sure to be a widow in the next.” What does that mean? Is this a good metaphor? Why or why not? Inherent in this quote is an assumption that there is a context-free position from which to assess the age in which one lives. Is there such a place? This quote also seems to imply, albeit subtly, that the preferable position from which to engage the world we inhabit is a place free of commitment and risk. Again, is there such a place, and if so, is it even desirable?

4. Reread the journal entry from September 7 (pp. 24–25). Dan highlights the differences between how we live and use language within the church (within a largely modern framework) and how we live and use language outside the church (the postmodern world). Do you agree there is a “disconnect” between how we talk about reality and how we live in reality? If so, where do you see the discrepancies?

5. The chapter ends with Dan sitting on a panel next to a prominent Christian thinker and leader for whom he has a great deal of respect. When asked whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about what they see coming in the new millennium, they have very different responses. How do you reconcile the two different worlds these people describe? Which story is more resonant for you? What story do you hear told more frequently in Christian circles? Why do you think this is so?

6. Reflect on and respond to the Native American dream catcher hanging by the cross.

7. Compare Dan’s posture from Chapter One to Chapter Three. What has changed? Has your posture changed, and if so, how?

## **Chapter Four**

1. At the philosophical heart of this book is the issue of *worldviews*, or how cultures create mental maps that function as working models of reality. Neo describes the transition from modernity to postmodernity by

likening it to the last major worldview transition: from the medieval world to the modern one. Why is it helpful to compare our situation to another as we try to understand our present context?

2. Neo lists seven major factors that contributed to the shift from a medieval world to a modern world (pp. 29–30). Review the broader general categories and the specific event within each category that were transformational for the medieval world. Consider how each of these events are significant individually, and taken together, how they altered people's understanding of "reality."

3. Neo also identified recent events that fit the seven transitional categories (pp. 30–31). Can you think of other specific events of recent years that fit these categories? Why are each of these events significant individually, and taken together, how are they altering our understanding of our own "reality"?

4. Dan is distracted by something Neo says during his talk. He is reminded of a time when one of his theological heroes was criticized, specifically the work of Francis Schaeffer as he sought to articulate "the Christian worldview." Why is Neo suspicious of such grand aims as Schaeffer's?

5. Neo enlists the ideas of C. S. Lewis to illustrate ". . . how one's subjective posture affects what one sees and 'knows objectively.'" What does that mean? Neo's words work to warn us of what Lewis later termed "chronological snobbery," that is, the temptation to think that because something is chronologically more recent, its claims to truth and goodness are automatically of greater value. Is this a significant point? How is modernity guilty of chronological snobbery? How can Lewis's words challenge *us* in this discussion?

6. Neo concludes by challenging his young audience to get busy building a new ship rather than trying to keep the old one afloat. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

## Chapter Five

1. One student expresses doubt about the significance of the changes Neo describes. Is Neo guilty of what this student sees as every generation's tendency to perceive itself as living in a pivotal age of historic change and exaggerated importance? Is this another example of Lewis's notion of

“chronological snobbery”? (See Chapter Four questions for an explanation of “chronological snobbery.”) Discuss Neo’s distinction between *change* and *transition*. Can you think of specific examples of each?

2. A young woman asks Neo if he is scared by all the talk of change. While affirming the dangers inherent in times of transition, Neo wonders aloud about the danger of simultaneously upholding the status quo. What are the risks of moving forward? What are the risks of maintaining the status quo? Are there other options? What might those be?

3. Even though she couches her question in humor, the same young woman seems more concerned with what she calls “major heresy.” Heresy is a loaded and powerful word that can change the entire tone of a conversation by instilling fear. The word *heresy* is derived from the Greek word *hairesis* and means “to choose for oneself.” It has come to mean departure from accepted or orthodox dogma, or teaching. What has Neo said that makes the young woman fear heresy? Is the word heresy bandied around too freely in Christian circles today? Why or why not?

4. In the modern era, “faith” has often come to mean an accepted set of doctrinal affirmations about Jesus, as opposed to a way of being or behaving in response to Jesus. Do you agree with this assessment?

5. Neo confesses that he believes the Holy Spirit is with us, as Jesus promised, and is leading us into a time of change (p. 42). How do you respond to Neo’s fear of lagging behind the movement of Jesus and the Holy Spirit? Do you see examples of this in the gospels or the Acts of the Apostles? When did Jesus’ opponents and even his disciples have a difficult time keeping up with him? What were the issues and activities that distressed them?

## Chapter Six

1. In Chapter One, Dan seems intent on pigeonholing Neo as a “liberal Episcopalian” until Neo reminds him that “liberals can be fundamentalists, too.” In this chapter, Dan asks Neo to distinguish between how “postmodern Christians” respond to various issues, as compared to “traditional Christians.” Neo bristles at the labels, challenging Dan about his use of language. Why are labels so appealing? What is the function of a label? In what ways are labels part of modernity? Why is Neo so wary of them? What are the alternatives to labels?

2. Neo contends all the debate in the church takes place on a line. In this mode of debate, the issue becomes finding the right point on that line and defending it. What does he mean that all debate takes place on a line? Is Neo right to assert that point-defending is pointless? Why or why not? What points have you defended or do you feel compelled to defend? What has the result been? This mode of debate can also lead to a view that those to the right of us are fundamentalists and everyone to our left, liberals. Do you agree or disagree?

3. According to Dan, one of the biggest “points” of debate is the Bible, especially between “conservatives” and “liberals” (p 48). Characterize the caricatures of conservative and liberal debates about and approaches to the Bible (pp. 48–49). How does Neo put context around these approaches?

4. Dan states that the Bible is the foundation for everything and that liberals sift and sort through the Bible picking and choosing that which suits them. Neo’s response is not to disagree but to point out that evangelicals do the same thing. Thus the argument, according to Neo, is less about the Bible and more about the superiority of one *grid* over another. How do you respond to that?

5. Neo refers to the use of the Bible to defend slavery in the nineteenth century. How would you respond to the question, “How are you sure that some of your ironclad interpretations today aren’t similarly fueling injustice?” What could posterity judge Christians today with justifying or “overlooking”?

6. Issues of authority are enormous in Neo and Dan’s conversations. Neo says that conservatives look at the Bible the way medieval Catholics looked at the church and the Pope: infallible, inerrant, and absolutely authoritative. He claims that liberals approach the Scriptures as a dated collection of artifacts that, while inspiring, are not authoritative. Why is the issue of authority so problematic? Respond to Neo’s question: “What if the issue isn’t a book that we interpret with amazing creativity but rather the will of God, the intent of God, the desire of God, the wisdom of God—maybe we could say the kingdom of God?”

7. Neo says that approaching the Bible as the story of God and his people is better than the “answer book” approach. Do you agree? What do we risk losing when we relinquish the answer-book approach?

## Chapter Seven

1. For Dan, and for the majority of evangelical Protestants, the Bible is foundational to the faith of Christianity. While affirming the centrality of the Scriptures, Neo questions the value of using a word or metaphor like *foundation* to adequately express the role of the Bible and what is contained therein. Summarize the difference between the building or foundation image and the web image for describing the role of the Bible in Christian thought and practice.

2. In questioning the adequacy of the foundational metaphor, Neo seems to undermine Dan's faith. Is there a danger in having a faith that rests on merely one foundation (such as the Bible, authority, or an interpretive scheme)? How might a faith that is built on one foundation crumble when that foundation is challenged? Have you seen or experienced such a crumbling of faith?

3. In talking about the factors that contribute to a stable faith, Neo points to the historical figure of John Wesley who emphasized Scripture, tradition, reason, and spiritual experience (now known as Wesley's quadrangle). What has been the foundation of your faith? How has that expressed itself in your life?

4. What does Neo mean when he asks, "What if instead of reading the Bible, you let the Bible read you?"

5. Neo engages Dan in a little thought experiment by asking him to describe the postures of a scientist and a detective toward a subject in their given fields. Are these similar to postures we have taken toward the Bible? What do you think of Neo's suggestion that we approach Scripture in a way analogous to how a teenage boy approaches a teenage girl? What other analogies might we use?

6. Dan asks Neo a rapid-fire set of questions about seeing the Bible as story (p. 58). How would you reply to Dan's questions? What is the story? What is the difference between getting the story and getting answers? Is there really a difference between a story and an answer?

7. Neo says he ". . . found the pastorate a pretty hard place to be a growing, thinking, honest Christian." Reread his reason for leaving professional ministry (p. 59). What does this say about our expectations for leaders? Are there any correlations between how we treat the Bible as a modern text and the expectations we place on leaders? If so, what are they?

## Chapter Eight

1. Several times in the course of this discussion about other religions Dan gets aggressive, hostile, and ultimately violent. Why does this topic provoke such strong reactions from Dan? Neo tells Dan he feels like “. . . we just switched gears from two friends talking sincerely and openly to a kind of inquisition.” Have you ever experienced this? What were you discussing? What was the result?

2. “Dan, when it comes to other religions, the challenge in modernity was to prove that we’re right and they’re wrong. But I think we have a different challenge in postmodernity. The question isn’t so much whether we’re right but whether we’re good.” What does Neo mean by this? Do you agree that this is an important challenge for Christians? Why or why not?

3. Does this distinction between right and good set up a false dichotomy, or have Christians been so far on the “right” side of the continuum that there must be a corrective swing? Do people who are not Christians view Christianity as a force for good in the world? Why or why not? Is this fair? What has your experience been?

4. Neo defines truth as more than mere factual accuracy; rather, he suggests, truth is ultimately being in sync with God. This presents an issue for Dan, who sees evangelism as trying to convince people of the truth (that is, the factual accuracy of our information about God). Do you agree that in the modern era, Christian evangelism has largely been about convincing people of the truth?

5. Neo suggests that evangelism is more dance than conquest or argument. How does the dance image work for you? How do you respond to Neo’s description of some evangelism as “assault”?

6. How do you respond to Neo’s view of other religions?

7. Neo relates the story of a conversation with a Jewish man who was very hostile to the Christian faith due to his experiences of persecution. Dan asks if Neo felt obligated to defend the faith to this man. What do you make of this whole encounter? How do you react if you are the Jewish man in the story? How do you react to Dan’s impulse to “defend the faith”? What about Neo’s decision to model a different kind of Christianity for the Jewish man? Neo says, “Christianity isn’t salvation . . . the good news is.” He later elaborates: “I believe Jesus is the Savior, not Christianity.” How do you respond to these statements?

8. Why do you think Dan responds so intensely at the end of this chapter?

## Chapter Nine

1. Carol confesses to Dan that she has been praying for him, telling God that Dan's questing for truth is a function of his love for God. She says to God, "If he didn't love you, if he didn't love the truth so much, he would just play the game, just fulfill the role . . . he is suffering because he really wants the truth." Carol suggests that Dan could actually be "falling into God," not falling away. Do you think Carol's assessment of the source of Dan's struggles is accurate? How might a time of doubt and intense questioning result in a person's "falling into God"?

2. Part of Dan's suffering comes from the real-life implications attached to his role as a pastor, where changes in theology have serious ramifications. What are some of the ramifications pastors and other leaders face when they begin to engage in dialogues about changes in theology? Should these concerns overshadow (in this instance) Dan's search for truth? How difficult might it be to live in this tension?

3. As Dan, Carol, and Neo discuss "organized religion" the topic naturally shifts to culture. On each end of the religious spectrum are ways of engaging with culture. One way is to accommodate or serve the culture on its own terms; the other way is to completely disengage from the dominant culture and set up a subculture. Neo says that religion, Christianity specifically, is not a matter of ". . . private comfort or political power. It's a matter of revolutionary mission" (p. 73). What does Neo mean by that? Can you think of examples of Christianity as private comfort and political power? Have you ever experienced Christianity as revolutionary mission?

4. How do you respond to the story of the Ugandan dancers and the Native American pastors? Has exposure to another culture ever caused you to question some of your underlying assumptions about what is essential and what is cultural?

5. Reread the story (pp. 76–77) that leads up to Dan's statement: "Wouldn't it be ironic if, in the name of Christ, we try to conserve and preserve the very same native cultures in the twenty-first century that we tried to wipe out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?" How do you respond to this idea?

6. Neo says that Buddhism is more than a *culte*; Buddhism is also a *culture*. He goes on to suggest that Jesus can invade a culture (Buddhist, for example) and spark a new and authentic expression of Christianity. How might an expression of Christianity from a Buddhist or Islamic culture challenge a Western European version of Christianity? Is this already happening?

7. Carol and Dan worry about syncretism, that is, blending pure Christianity with pagan elements. Neo replies that “. . . syncretism is usually what Christians who are thoroughly immersed in one culture talk about when Christianity is being influenced by other cultures.” Is there such a thing as “pure Christianity”? How does Neo suggest that the church can engage culture and avoid losing its identity through syncretism? Do you think he is being overly optimistic? Do you see other ways the church can both maintain its identity and engage in mission in the midst of conforming cultural forces?

## Chapter Ten

1. Discussing the nature of the Bible in Chapter Seven, Neo distinguishes between the Bible as a book of answers and the Bible as the story of God and his people. In this chapter he clarifies further, stating that he was raised to believe that *the* central story of the Bible is the saving of individual souls. What does he mean by that? Is your experience similar to Neo's? Is there an alternative story in the Bible, or even a different understanding of what salvation is? If so, what might it be?

2. Neo identifies several issues that are problematic for the view of salvation he was raised under: it is too selfish, it is too preoccupied with the individual, and its scope is all too otherworldly. What is missing, according to Neo, in this view of salvation? Do you agree or disagree? How might the modern culture of the West, with all that it emphasizes, produce such a view of salvation?

3. Neo articulates a more holistic and encompassing view of salvation: while affirming the spiritual and eternal aspects of salvation, he proposes that it has physical and temporal dimensions as well. Is there a danger associated with a view of salvation that emphasizes only the spiritual and eternal? What about the opposite extreme? Can you think of examples of these views in different theological traditions? Do you agree that the biblical view of salvation is comprehensive of both?

4. If we are to have a different, more holistic, and comprehensive view of salvation, Neo asserts that we must have a better understanding of the kingdom of God and how the church relates to the kingdom. What is the kingdom of God? Is it different than the church? What are some of the metaphors Jesus used to describe the kingdom?

5. Some Christians believe the church equals the kingdom. Others disassociate the two completely. Neo again proposes a third option, an alternative to what he sees as two unacceptable choices. What is Neo's third version? How is it consonant or dissonant with some of the metaphors Jesus uses to describe the kingdom?

6. Dan has to know: "Do you believe that people of other religions will go to heaven?" Neo responds by giving Dan a tape of a sermon he preached, called "Death." Do you think Neo is proposing that heaven and hell are the same place? Why or why not? What would be the effect of believing that God is like Aslan as pictured in the C. S. Lewis story at the end of Neo's sermon?

## **Chapter Eleven**

1. When Neo rants that the Bible is not "biblical" in the way that Dan's critics are using it (p. 95), what does he mean? Do you agree? Do you agree that evocative language must be used to discuss spiritual realities? Why or why not? Can you think of examples of evocative language (or behavior) in the Bible that would be scandalous to Christians today? How has modernity limited the kind of language available for spiritual conversations?

2. Dan likes Neo's sermon on death but can't imagine preaching it himself. He makes the observation that people are comfortable reading C. S. Lewis in their homes but are less comfortable when his ideas and approach are taken into the pulpit. Why do you think this is the case? Does Lewis's use of story make hard ideas more palatable? Why might this be so? How does this parallel Jesus' approach?

3. "Why do you think that church people get so tense, so inflexible?" Dan asks Neo. Is this a true or fair description of "church people" in your experience? Why or why not?

4. What is lost when certainty and safety become the chief concerns for Christians and churches? What happens when faith is sanitized? Do

you agree with Dan that fear of “heresy and sin creeping into the camp” is a legitimate concern? Why or why not?

5. How would you answer Dan’s question: “How do we remain open and accepting of people without compromising and condoning sin?” How does the messiness of people playing by different sets of rules (p. 97) mirror, in Neo’s opinion, the first-century church?

6. Neo says the contemporary understanding of sin is truncated (p. 99). What does he mean by this? According to Neo, what is dangerous about a modern understanding of sin (pp. 99–101)? Do you agree? How do you respond to Neo’s desire to include the social, or systemic, nature of sin in the discussion?

7. Neo distinguishes *righteousness* from *goodness*. What do you make of this distinction? How does the righteousness Neo describes as modern differ from the righteousness described by Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan?

## Chapter Twelve

1. At the bar, in the parking lot, and at the soccer game, Dan is amazed at the ease with which Neo engages people who are not Christians. Neo admits that at an earlier time in his life, whenever he was with people from outside the church he was tense. “There was always this threat in the air—either I was going to be pulled down by their bad behavior, or else I was going to judge them and preach to them.” Have you felt this tension? How have you resolved it? Is there any irony in the contrast between Jesus’ apparent comfort among those his culture labeled “unclean” and the difficulty his followers seem to have around “sinners”?

2. Compare and contrast the way the phrase *born-again* is understood and used today with how Neo describes its meaning in the context of a first century conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Do you agree that the term *born-again Christian* has an overwhelmingly negative connotation to people who aren’t Christians? If so, why do you think this is the case?

3. In contrast to modernity, which stresses abstract principles and universal concepts, Neo talks about the need for postmodern theology to *reincarnate*, that is, to rediscover the importance of language, setting, and context in conveying meaning. Describe the context and setting of the first

century, according to Neo, and why the language of the “kingdom of God” and the “kingdom of heaven” was so explosive. What kinds of images and creative language might be used to describe God’s work in the world today? Would such language be as potent for Christians today as it was for first-century religious people? If not, why not?

4. When asked to summarize how he would describe the gospel to someone, Neo emphasizes the importance of introducing a person to the church so that they can experience Christian community. Have you ever thought of this as an integral part of the gospel? Do you agree that it is? Why or why not? Is integration with a local church an essential part of becoming a Christian?

5. Why does Dan react so strongly to Neo’s presentation of “the kingdom of God”?

6. What is the difference between counting conversions and counting conversations? Do you agree that people are sick of Christian sales pitches and formulas? Neo believes that “friendship evangelism” is just another version of these manipulative strategies. Do you agree? Why or why not?

## **Chapter Thirteen**

1. Dan notes that when he and Neo are forced to communicate via e-mail it changes their relationship in a surprising way: “as soon as he was so physically distant, we seemed to get closer.” Have you ever experienced this? In Chapter Four, Neo lists how major changes in technology, specifically in communications technology, alter the nature of the world in which we live. Do you see the interconnectedness of the world changing our perceptions of reality? How are developments in communications technology changing the nature of our relationships?

2. According to Neo, for any kind of Christianity to be valuable it must engage the financial realities of our lives: “if we can’t discipline ourselves to learn the joys of generous living, I think we’re an embarrassment to the gospel.” In a culture that is awash in individualism and consumerism, why is generosity so radical and necessary? Why does Dan continue to push aside the issue of money? Is Neo right to be concerned?

3. Neo writes about Christian institutions and media ministries being captive to money. What does he mean by this? Do you agree? If so, where have you seen examples of this captivity? Is Neo right when he asserts that this captivity keeps these Christian organizations from being able to

respond to the reality of our world? Why do appeals to fear generate revenue for ministries?

4. Dan comments that he fears his thinking is shrinking back to where it was prior to his relationship with Neo. Is this a legitimate concern? How does learning stimulate more learning?

5. In helping Neo deal with his crisis, Dan discovers Neo's "secret" life: generosity. Why does Neo believe that the spiritual practices done in secret are so crucial? How is the public practice of Christianity dangerous for those "up front," like professional clergy? Can you think of any warnings from the Bible that mirror these concerns? What practices does Neo recommend in light of this? Do you know of or practice others?

6. How do you respond to Neo's observation that many of our Christian disciplines have been practiced in isolation from creation? There has been a rise in traditions (Celtic Christianity) and religions (Buddhism, New Age) that emphasize the physical nature of what it means to be human in relationship to God. How has modernity helped shape a Christian spirituality that is at best ambivalent, and at worst hostile, toward creation?

7. Neo reinterprets Dan's most meaningful spiritual experiences in light of ancient practices. Reread Neo's response to Dan's last e-mail and discuss how we might develop, in Dan's words, ". . . a more holistic, balanced spirituality in people . . . without a boatload of guilt." How might Neo's call for a more communal understanding of spiritual formation and his reinterpretations of Dan's experiences contribute to this opportunity?

## Chapter Fourteen

1. Neo claims that religious television is "pretty weird stuff" and finds Dan's tribe of evangelical Christians abnormally fixated on hell. Do you agree with Neo's assessment that there is an abnormal fixation on hell within some Christian subcultures? He later observes that in his research of the subject, he has come across authors who seem to delight in the assertion that most people will be eternally damned, and he appears to think this "tone" is all wrong. What is he getting at with that comment? Do you agree? Does the manner in which Christians communicate speak as powerfully as the content of the communication?

2. Summarize Neo's description of the various doctrines of salvation and eternal destiny: universalism, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism/relativism. Contrast them with Neo's concept of "predicamentalism."

What do you make of Neo's conviction that the position "above the line" in this discussion of hell is that it's "none of our business" who goes there? Why does he say this? What is his suggested alternative?

3. Neo throws down the gauntlet when he says that the way modern evangelicals use the word *saved* is unbiblical. Is getting souls into heaven the focal point of the gospel? Why or why not? How is this view of the soul more characteristic of Platonism than Christianity (p. 129)? Do you agree that God is concerned with saving the whole world?

4. Neo asks Dan a series of direct questions that are worth considering. Do you think that God would want a heaven filled with people who care more about being saved from hell than saved from sin? Who care more about getting into heaven than being good? Who care more about having their sins forgiven than being good neighbors? How does Neo's description of this active, engaged, and "worldly" faith mirror the description of faith found in James 2:14–19?

5. What does Dan mean when he states that heaven is a by-product, not the main point (p. 131)? Reread Neo's technology metaphor that compares how a computer "saves" data with what it might mean for people to be saved (p. 130). How effective is this analogy?

6. Compare and contrast what it means to be "saved for privilege" versus being "saved for service." Dan describes his dream for his church: ". . . that it would increasingly become a community of communities, a place full of little 'villages of Christ' where people really connect, really care, really make their faith visible through love. A place where we help people believe and become by helping them belong." Have you ever experienced a church community like the one Dan describes? How does such a community cut across the grain of an individual-centered faith?

## Chapter Fifteen

1. Neo discovers, with amazing force and clarity, that he is being pulled back into the pastorate. Throughout *A New Kind of Christian*, Neo has been a blessing and benefit for Dan in his struggles. How has Dan played that same role for Neo?

2. Besides Dan's influence, what else contributes to Neo's desire to return to pastoral ministry?

3. What is it about the work of pioneering that makes it so demanding, and as a result, so exhausting? Is pioneering necessarily a solitary

task? If so, why? If not, how might communities of people pioneer into this new territory? What qualities would such a community have to possess to go on this journey together?

4. After Dan speaks to a group of young adults, one woman confesses that hearing him speak was a very emotional experience for her: “. . . whenever I get to know individual non-Christians—I mean really get to know them—I am completely convinced that I find God already there and at work in their lives.” Is she right that Christianity doesn't own God? Compare what she says to Dan with Jesus' description to Nicodemus of the ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 3:8). Are there any similarities? Have you ever had an experience like that of this young woman?

5. Reread Dan's description of his two alternatives as he looks to his future and his decision to take a riskier third option (p. 142). Where are you on this journey? Do you have any sense of being called to explore terra nova? How might Dan's three alternatives be expressed in your life?

## Chapter Sixteen

1. The chapter opens with Dan asking himself, “What have I gotten myself into?” He likens his decision and the way he feels about it to his decision to marry Carol. How does a marriage commitment mirror Dan and Carol's decision to stay connected to Potomac Community Church in a new way? How does commitment change the nature of relationship with another human being as well as with a community of people?

2. For the first fifteen chapters of the book, we eavesdrop on a conversation between Neo and a white, middle-aged male pastor from a modern, evangelical Protestant church. Casey is a young, female African American youth pastor from a high church tradition. Does the nature of this conversation change at all when the person is of a different gender, age, race, and tradition? Why or why not? Respond to Neo's description to Casey of Dan's meltdown. Did your perspective change when hearing it related from a different point of view?

3. Casey wants to move on from youth ministry into ministry to adults. Neo says, “. . . working with teenagers is generally more important and more strategic than working with adults.” What would lead Neo to say this? Do you agree or disagree? What is appealing about working with adults?

4. As she considers changing the focus of her ministry, Casey is compelled to continue her education. Neo is tentative about recommending seminaries, however. Neo believes that most seminaries work on a modern model and are more able to prepare students for ministry in the 1940s, not 2040. List the reasons seminaries are ill-equipped to deal with the kind of education needed to train leaders for ministry in 2040 (pp. 145, 146, 150). Describe Neo's vision for a new kind of seminary.

5. Describing the difficulty of transitioning a church from a traditional, modern framework to a postmodern, missional framework, Neo employs some pretty sobering statistics (p. 147). Have you ever been a part of an organization that has undergone significant change? What was that experience like? Did the organization survive the transition? Is it easier to start over from scratch?

6. Neo lists several options leaders have when facing change. First, he says, you can scare people or inspire them. Second, you can move incrementally or innovatively. Third, you can seek to minimize or maximize discontinuity. Explain what Neo means by each of these distinctions. Are these options mutually exclusive or is there a third, higher way of operating "above the line"?

7. Reread Neo's quote about "Nobodies" who change the world (pp. 149–150). Do you agree that those on the margins initiate the leap into terra nova? Does his thesis about "Somebodies" and "Nobodies" inspire or frighten you? As it relates to the subject of this book, are you a "Somebody" or a "Nobody"?



A READER'S GUIDE FOR  
*The Story We Find Ourselves In*

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*In The Story We Find Ourselves In, Neo breaks the Biblical story into seven distinct episodes (creation, crisis, calling, conversation, Christ, church, and consummation). The following questions center around Neo's description of these seven themes as they unfold across the span of several chapters.*

### **Creation (Chapters Four to Eight)**

Neo and Kerry enter a theological dialogue that develops into what Neo calls “the story we find ourselves in.” Neo introduces Kerry to the first episode, *creation*, as they explore the wonders of the Galápagos, beginning a relationship and a conversation about the Creator and all that flows from him.

1. Neo listens to Kerry's theological questions and after a pause, asks her if he might respond by telling her a story (p. 21). What are the characteristics of a story? What qualities do good story-tellers possess? How does telling a story differ from answering theological questions? If you had to describe the story of God as interpreted from the Bible, how would you tell it? How have you heard it told? How did Jesus use stories in the gospels and how did that create tension between himself, his disciples, and the religious leaders of his day?

2. Throughout the *creation* episode, Neo stumbles with language as he seeks to describe the ultimate Being and the ways in which creation is called into existence. More than once he transitions his language from technical and descriptive to poetic and imaginative. Why does Neo think poetic language is so important when talking about theology? Is poetic language less “real” than technical language? Why or why not? When the Scriptures, and specifically the creation accounts of Genesis, are written so poetically, why has so much of the dialogue around creation become so technical and precise? What is lost when the language of science

(mathematics, according to Neo) becomes the lingua franca, or common language, of theology?

3. Often creation is understood as what happens at the beginning and is then completed, but Neo describes creation as an ongoing, generative reality. He says that the true story is a story that “. . . begins with the words, ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,’ a story that ends with ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ This story that begins and ends with creation is all about creation in between its beginning and end . . .” (p. 24). Why might it be significant that creation is an ongoing and present reality in the world? What is an alternative, and how would that change the story and our picture of the Creator?

4. Kerry asks the question, “Before the beginning, what was God doing?” and then rephrases the question, “What was God being?” or “What was Being being?” In response Neo begins to *imagine* such a Being. What stands out to you about Neo’s musings about God (pp. 28, 29)? What do you make of Neo’s description of this Being’s decision to become something it had never before been?

5. In making the decision to become Creator, Neo says the Being (God) “. . . must begin by creating a not-God, an outside, a place for beings to exist” (p. 30). Is it significant that beings exist *somewhere*, in an *outside* that is not God. Why? Have you ever considered the fabric of reality (time, space, and whatever else is considered to be an aspect of creation), or has your picture been more limited? How does this understanding of creation alter your understanding of the Creator?

6. The creation versus evolution debate continues to rage on, several decades after the legendary Scopes trial. Many Christians believe that to be faithful to God and the Bible one cannot entertain evolution as a viable interpretation of the origin of life. In this book, Brian McLaren directly confronts this assumption. In *A New Kind of Christian*, Neo describes taking part in debates over this issue. Have you ever been a part of such debates? What was the impact of the debate on those involved? Did it affect how you felt about your faith, or, as far as you could tell, how those who took an opposing view felt about their faith? How do our previous conversations about language, specifically science versus poetry, come to bear on this issue? Reread the first paragraph on page 34. What is emergence? Is it a better word than evolution?

7. Kerry identifies two options for approaching the Scriptures: literally or mythically. Neo refuses the either/or ultimatum. What does Neo

mean when he says the beginning of the story we find ourselves in is far more than “just myth” or “just fact” (p. 33)?

8. Read Genesis 1 and 2, paying attention to the “two creation accounts.” Describe the differences between these two stories. When Kerry reacts to the male-focused nature of the story, Neo acknowledges the effect of bad readings of this story and asks Kerry to listen to it differently. How does Neo’s telling of the story (p. 36) differ from the one that Kerry says locates women as the origin of all evil?

9. Neo says, “. . . God does not want to be the only reality in our lives, the only relationship in our network, the only message on our screen” (p. 37). How do you react to that? On the same page, Neo warns against the dangers of being caught between two extremes. Describe those dangers. Do you agree that these are dangers? Why or why not? Have you seen examples of people at either end of this continuum?

10. The most profound way we bear the Creator’s image, Neo claims, is to be human beings—apprentice artists, co-creators with God. He says, “We’re capable of giving being to new things, babies—to be sure, a dimension of the image of God given to all living things—but more: ideas, languages, poems, songs, homes, cities, civilizations, even religions” (pp. 40–41). React to Neo’s description of human beings as creators alongside God. Often our comfort with acknowledging our creative calling dissolves when it comes to “religion.” Do human beings create religion?

11. In response to Kerry, Neo acknowledges that other religions offer other tellings of the story; however, he does not seem too threatened by the alternate versions. Neo gives a couple of thumbnail sketches of other stories (pp. 41–43). Describe the secular story. Where do you see this story played out? Describe the Hindu narrative, the story of creation as “illusion.” Why does Neo see some aspects of this story as a corrective? What is this story a corrective to? Do you agree or disagree? According to Neo, and to your own understanding, how does an ancient, Eastern mind differ from a modern, Western mind? How do those worldviews affect the story we find ourselves in?

### **Crisis (Chapters Nine to Eleven)**

Neo and Kerry continue their conversation and invite Glenn, an ornithologist, to join them. As they talk, they begin to reckon with the reality that while the creation of God is good, this story is also a story of *crisis*. Unsatisfied with the immeasurable gift of being created in the image of the

Creator, and unwilling to live within limits as God's creatures in creation, we want more.

1. As Neo and Kerry bring Glenn up to speed on the story of creation, Glenn wonders about miracles. Neo replies that he believes miracles are overrated (p. 47). What does he mean by that? What are some of the problems, according to Neo, with the way we often talk about the "miraculous"? How would God's constant "interference" undermine Neo's assertion that the universe we live in is "real"? Does belief in the miraculous, or God's supernatural intervention, begin to compromise human responsibility? Why or why not?

2. As the conversation about miracles continues, Neo begins to question the fundamental underlying assumption of the differentiation of the world into two categories—the natural and the supernatural, the normal and the miraculous (p. 48). Neo asks whether these are adequate means of categorizing reality. What do you think? What alternative does Neo propose? What do we gain when we refuse to reduce what we observe in the biblical story into an either/or dichotomy? How does Neo's explanation compare to and differ from the mechanistic explanation of the universe?

3. In Chapter Ten, Neo begins to explore the influence of Greek culture and philosophy on early articulations of the gospel. He states that determining how to engage with Greek culture would be one of the toughest decisions ancient Christians had to make. Describe some similar tough decisions today. How might North American individualistic consumerism be the equivalent of ancient Greek thought in its impact on Christians?

4. Describe the difference for Greeks between the ideal (or *real*) world and the material (or *less real*) world. According to Neo, how do these categories affect our understanding of the fall? How are Greek notions of "perfect" different from the Hebrew concept of "good" (p. 52)? Discuss how these notions of perfection have shaped our understanding of God, creation, and ourselves. What changes when we recognize the world as good in the Jewish sense of the word: that is, a world that is dynamic, creative, fruitful, and robust? How is God's world still good and not simply a product of the fall? How is the crisis in Genesis an ongoing crisis?

5. Neo begins to interpret the story of Genesis, particularly the story of *crisis*, in light of the development of humans living socially and culturally (pp. 54–55). Adam and Eve live in a garden of provision as hunter-gatherers. Abel, with his animal sacrifice, has become a pastoralist,

whereas Cain, with his sacrifice of crops, is an agriculturalist. What do you make of this telling? Earlier we discussed a Jewish unwillingness to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. How might this perspective influence how we read these stories? Is it possible for a story to be both literal and metaphorical?

6. Do you agree that humanity's advancement has caused a crisis? Where do you see the impact of humanity's unwillingness to live within limits, both personally (relationally) and globally (socially)?

7. We often speak in abstract terms about the crisis that has become part of God's creation story, distancing ourselves from long-ago, far-away concepts like the fall. Where do you see this crisis of disconnection from God and God's story in your own life, in your family, in your country, and in our world? What will happen if this crisis continues unabated, if we fail to reconnect to God and the story of God's creation?

### **Calling (Chapters Twelve to Thirteen)**

The *crisis* episode ends with a crisis of its own: Neo challenges Glenn on some relationship decisions he has made and in doing so, offends Glenn *and* Kerry who both storm away. Neo is surprised, however, to find both Kerry and Glenn in attendance for worship on *La Aventura* a few days later. It is in this context that Neo tells the story of Abraham and God's intent to intervene in the crisis within creation by calling out a people, blessing his tribe in order to bring blessing to the peoples of the world.

1. Neo gives a lecture aboard *La Aventura* about Abraham and God's call to him (read the biblical account in Genesis 12:1–6). It has been said that the greatest misunderstanding in the history of religion is claiming one part of Abraham's promise and ignoring the other. What are the consequences of focusing on "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great," without giving equal weight to "you will be a blessing . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"?

2. Imagine serving a god who called you to the exclusion of everyone else, and then imagine serving a god who called you for the blessing of everyone else. How would it feel to worship each of those versions of God? How does misunderstanding the nature of one's call (believing one is called exclusively to be blessed) actually worsen the crisis in creation, not improve it? Why must calling be understood within the larger stories of original creation and creation-in-crisis?

3. Neo tells the gathered group on the boat his personal story about his transition from professional ministry, to teaching high school, and ultimately caring for his ailing mother. He says, "It was all the same. . . . Different jobs, different titles, different cities, but the same calling: to enjoy God's blessing so that I could be a blessing to others, whether to a church, to a classroom, or to my mother" (p. 65). Many people believe a "calling" is only for those in professional ministry. What is wrong with this view of calling? What is your sense of your calling? How do you perceive your life as blessed and a blessing?

4. At one point in the lecture a young man asks about the "curse" part of the God's call and promise to Abraham (p. 66). According to Neo, how are we to understand the notion of "curse"? What kind of activities are examples of people opposing God's work in the world? What are the costs of working for good and resisting all that is evil in the world?

### Conversation (Chapters Fourteen to Sixteen)

Neo and Kerry take their normal Monday excursion, this time on horseback, riding up a volcano to study iguanas. While they ride they discuss the fourth episode: God's *conversation* with his people. As God's called people live out their identity in creation, how do they continue to engage with their Creator?

1. Throughout the story, God's people go through cycles of following his call, drifting and rebelling, then repenting and ultimately returning to God's agenda. Neo observes that throughout all these cycles ". . . God is their faithful guide and companion" (p. 74). Is this what you would expect from God? Why or why not? He goes on to say, "If you focus on the human tendency to miss the point and wander from the path, episode four is totally depressing. But if you focus on God's constant faithfulness and patience through the deepening conversation, it's just as inspiring." Where do you focus in this story? Do you find it depressing or inspiring? Have you always felt this way?

2. Neo summarizes the biblical story chronologically and geographically, and Kerry comments that it is easy for Neo to understand what is happening because he knows the whole story, while she only know isolated episodes. Neo calls this an "educational fiasco" (p. 75). What does he mean by that? What is the difference between knowing Bible stories and knowing the biblical story?

3. Reread Neo's abridgement of the basic story line of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament (pp. 76–77). Have you ever heard the story told in this simple way? How does this telling change how you view the Old Testament?

4. As hundreds of other stories play out within the larger story, Neo says, something very important is happening: these people are being formed as a culture and a community. Why is story so important to the formation of identity? What happens when God's people forget their identity? How does God sustain the conversation that reminds the people of their identity and call?

5. Who are the people that are inspired and sent to keep the communication flowing between God and God's people, according to Neo? Summarize the four roles and the different ways God uses each of these kinds of leaders to fulfill his purposes in his people.

6. Have you ever thought of yourself as a part of an ongoing conversation with and about God, a conversation that stretches back to Abraham, Moses, and David? In a conversation, people tell stories, draw conclusions, raise questions, offer answers, make counterpoints, warn and encourage, ask for and offer help, and more. What do you take from this ongoing conversation today, and what can you contribute to it?

### **Christ (Chapters Eighteen to Twenty-Three)**

Reunited in the United States, Dan, Carol, Neo, and Kerry spend a day picnicking and boating along a river, where they continue to tell the story of God in creation. After a brief discussion about evolution and the origins of the universe, their conversation turns to Jesus, and they enter the *Christ* episode of the story.

1. Kerry says that the Jesus part of the story always seemed tacked on to her (p. 100). What does she mean by that? Neo replies that he has been able to tell the story the way he has because of the central place Christ occupies in the story for him. How does Neo's understanding of Jesus shape the story he is telling?

2. Listening to Carol articulate her understanding of Jesus and his work on the cross for the sins of humanity, Kerry has a pretty strong reaction. She says, "I've heard all this before . . . in my childhood in Sunday school, and also whenever I happen to flip through channels and force

myself to watch one of those religious broadcasts . . . I'm tempted to say, 'Yeah, yeah, I know all that already'" (p. 101). Kerry seems saturated by religious information. Is there a danger that in talking so much about Jesus' death, people become inoculated to its significance?

3. The title of the first chapter in the *Christ* episode is "More Than Even All the Windows Can Show." Explain how the metaphor of the window relates to the significance of Jesus' death. In light of that metaphor, what does the chapter title imply? How do you respond to this view of Jesus and the cross? How does modernity's quest for certainty eliminate the ability to hold these different views at the same time?

4. List the seven theories of atonement, including Neo's theory based on his divorce (pp. 101–106). Summarize each view, along with the "enemy" that is being overcome by the death of Jesus on the cross. Which of these views describes the way you or your tradition has understood the cross? Have you ever been exposed to these different theories of the atonement, and if not, what is your reaction to them?

5. In a very touching scene, this small group of friends and family share communion. Then Kerry asks to be baptized. As Neo and Dan fumble to determine if Kerry believes "enough," Carol nearly melts down (p. 112). To what other conversion experiences does Carol compare this experience with Kerry? How do you react to this comparison? How much of the right doctrinal "information" about God is enough? How would you have responded in the same situation?

6. Kerry asks Neo for his perspective on Jesus. In response, Neo begins to discuss his understanding of Jesus beyond the implications of his death; he wants to engage with the life of Jesus and the way in which he embodied a new kind of revolution (pp. 115–119). Describe the political context at the time of Christ. What are the four different ways people chose to respond to the situation of Israel? Do you see parallels to the way different groups respond to culture today? If so, what are those parallels?

7. According to Neo, the death and resurrection of Jesus has implications not just for the next life but for this one, too. What are the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection for people living today, in light of his revolution?

8. Jesus still calls people to follow him today. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus and to join him on his mission of bringing God's healing, saving, and reconciling love to all creation. Is this your under-

standing of Jesus' call? In what ways would joining his revolution affect the way you live?

### **Church (Chapters Twenty-Four to Twenty-Five)**

The events of September 11, 2001, form the backdrop for the next episode of the story we find ourselves in. Neo, Kerry, Dan, and Carol watch in horror as the World Trade Center towers collapse. As they discover the power of the terrorist cell bent on destruction, the need for different kinds of cell networks becomes clear. Episode six reminds us that Jesus came to create a community of followers that would embody his *messianic way of living*.

1. What is your experience of church to date? How would you describe your community of faith in light of this episode of the story?

2. Kerry tells Neo that she doesn't consider Christianity a way of living (p. 126). What does she mean by that? She goes on to say that she understands Christianity as a system of beliefs, but not much more. How do you respond to that? Do you agree or disagree? Do you think that Kerry's view mirrors common conceptions of Christianity in our culture? Why or why not? Do you see this gulf between believing and living as dangerous for followers of Jesus? Do we have a pop-culture understanding of Christianity? Why or why not? How do you think we have gotten here?

3. How is Jesus' revolutionary message and model significant to the church's understanding of its own purpose? Have you ever heard the local church described as a revolutionary community of disciples expanding the kingdom of God in the way of Jesus? Has church ever been expressed to you (in word or in deed) in revolutionary ways? If so, what was your reaction? If not, what do you think has held the church back from understanding itself in this way? What is the cost of neglecting this understanding of the church?

4. At the end of his sermon following the attacks on September 11, Dan discusses the terror cells that accomplished the destruction of the World Trade Center towers. He then says that ". . . with a completely different motivation, the church [must] bring together cells of committed people, willing to give their lives for God's mission, plotting a spiritual revolution of love and hope and reconciliation to achieve God's dreams" (p. 135). How does the metaphor of cells change the way we think about the church?

5. How do you respond to Dan's gesture to the Muslim community and mosque at the end of Chapter Twenty-Five? Can you think of other opportunities that local churches have to reach beyond their comfort zones to express the love of God in word and deed?

6. The church is most often seen as an institution or organization. However, in light of this episode and in the wake of September 11, a different picture emerges: the church as a community of imperfect but growing people learning to live in a new way and joining together in the ongoing mission of Jesus, a mission of love, joy, service, peacemaking, and hope. What would happen if more churches understood this as their identity and reason for existence?

### Consummation (Chapters Twenty-Seven to Thirty-Three)

As Kerry's life comes to an end, so does the telling of the story we find ourselves in. The last episode is the story of *consummation*. Gathered around Kerry's hospital bed, Neo describes how all things come together in Jesus. In his usual fashion, Neo turns everyone's perception of reality upside-down, or better, he turns their understanding of time forward-backward.

1. Neo says, "Instead of history being driven by the past, what if history is constantly being invited to receive the gift of the future?" (p. 148). Describe Neo's vision of time and how it relates to the kingdom of God. How do you react to this view of time and the way history is moving?

2. Neo says the church is the community of people who are learning to live in the present the way everyone will live in the future (p. 150). He goes on to say that the future is not some technologically advanced reality, but a reality defined in terms of love, hope, faith, peace, commitment, character, and respect. What do you think of this image of the future? How does this picture of the future affect your perception of the present and how you choose to live?

3. At the consummation of time and space, Neo explains, all reality will come together and be reunited, flowing from God's memory: "When we get there, not only will we be what we are at that final moment, but also we will find all that we have ever been . . . and we will be reunited with all that we have ever been" (p. 152). Often we talk of reconciliation in terms of our relationships with others. Have you ever thought of being reconciled to yourself and all the parts of your life and story? How do you react to this idea?

4. It is in the context of reconciliation that Neo says we will be judged. At first Kerry reacts negatively, but as Neo explains his understanding of judgment (pp. 153–155), she discovers it to be beautiful. What is your reaction to Neo’s view of judgment? What was your understanding of and attitude toward judgment prior to reading this description? Neo states that judgment is not simply condemnation, but perfect assessment. Is judgment “good news” and an occasion for celebration? Why or why not?

5. In Chapters Thirty-One and Thirty-Two, Neo and Dan continue to talk about judgment and the new creation that follows. Respond to Neo’s articulation of how God might respond to someone who has not “. . . done so well.” Dan wants to know their final outcome. Do you think this is an important question? Why or why not? Why does Neo react so strongly? How does he resolve this issue of final outcomes? According to Neo, what are the contemporary horsemen of doom?

6. The book concludes with Kerry’s funeral. Friends and family members gather and share stories of Kerry’s life and work, her story becoming part of the larger story of God: creation, crisis, calling, conversation, Christ, church, consummation. How does this understanding of the larger story of God engage with or give meaning to the story of your life?



A READER'S GUIDE FOR  
*The Last Word and the Word After That*

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### Introduction

1. Prior to reading this book, what has been your history with the doctrine of hell? How has your understanding of hell been shaped? What were your feelings as you began to read this book? Fear? Excitement? Trepidation? What motivated you to read this book? Or are you coming from the other side of the continuum and wondering, “Why the fuss?” Do you agree this conversation is for “mature audiences only”?

2. Brian McLaren states “. . . too little attention has been paid to the practical effects various formulations of the doctrine of hell have had on Christian thought, worship, behavior, and practice” (p. xi). What does he mean by that? Do you agree or disagree? Should the effects of a doctrine in people’s lives over time cause us to re-evaluate the doctrine’s validity? Why or why not?

3. McLaren asserts that the doctrine of hell has all but disappeared from contemporary preaching (fundamentalists excluded). Has this been your experience? If not, how was hell preached? If so, why do you think it has disappeared?

4. McLaren states that he aims to raise questions about the nature of hell, but, more important, about the nature of God. If the doctrine of hell is functionally disappearing, why bring it up? Does the doctrine of hell “haunt” contemporary Christianity? What is the benefit of raising these questions and engaging in this dialogue? By having this discussion do we, in fact, gain a better understanding of God?

5. Scot McKnight, a New Testament scholar and professor of religious studies at North Park University writes:

McLaren’s essential stance in this latest novel (or whatever one calls a book where we’ve got two fellas sorting out their theology) is

*rhetorical*. That is, he's trying to get a conversation going about hell and heaven and the shape of the gospel in the light of the "old model" and the "new kind of Christianity model." He's accomplished this. I'm not quite sure if McLaren stands with Neo or Dan, and I don't think it matters right now, because he's got lots of people thinking about this topic. So, he's done what he set out to do. This is a significant topic, and it brings to light an untold number of theological issues and stances . . . the function of the book is to get the conversation rolling.

How did the "rhetorical" nature of this book help you to engage with the various doctrines of hell? Which characters did you identify with most strongly throughout the course of the story and the conversations? Why is it important to get this conversation rolling?

6. As you read this book, did you think to yourself, "I would really like to have so-and-so read this book" or "I sure hope such-and-such a person doesn't get hold of this book"? Who came to your mind as you read? Do you have people in your life with whom you can engage in conversations like this?

7. Reread pages xii-xiii, specifically noting the caricatures that McLaren describes as indicative of our understanding of the nature of God and his character. At one end of the continuum is the fire-and-brimstone God, cruel and judgmental. On the other end is the doting-grandmother God, docile and impotent, more a reflection of our self-indulgent wishes than of scriptural realities. McLaren asks if there is a better alternative to these polarities. What is your first reaction? Do you think there is? If so, what is it? Do our views of hell betray a deeper set of problems: misunderstandings of the nature of God's justice, misunderstandings about God's purpose in creating the world, deep misunderstandings about God's character?

8. McLaren differentiates between *deconstruction* and *destruction*. How does he understand those to be different? What is the purpose of deconstruction, according to McLaren? What is the place of deconstruction when it comes to our faith? Why must we deconstruct before we can construct?

### **Book One: The Last Word**

1. The book opens with Reverend Dan Poole and his daughter Jess discussing her crisis of faith as a result of the doctrine of hell. Have you

ever had a crisis of faith? What were the circumstances surrounding your crisis? Has it been resolved? If so, how was it resolved? If not, what continues to cause your crisis? Are you comfortable in your current position? Why or why not?

2. Jess states that if the doctrine of hell is true, “. . . all the people I love except for a few will burn in hell forever.” What do you make of her assessment? Have you ever allowed yourself to feel the force of this view played out eternally? How have you reconciled this picture of the future? To quote Jess, “How do you deal with this?”

3. Explain the four views of eternal life and hell that Dan describes to Jess: *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, *conditionalism*, and *universalism*. Discuss the issues involved with these four ideas and the strengths and weaknesses of each from your perspective. In your background or tradition, what view did your community hold? Are you in the same place now? Prior to reading this book, had you ever heard of these four views?

4. In the months following his conversations with Jess, Dan asks himself a series of questions, including “What if I modified or jettisoned my orthodox idea of hell? What would go with it? Would any sense of justice or accountability remain? Could and would people be good without hell looming beyond death?” Have you ever asked yourself any of these questions? If so, which ones? Continue reading the rest of the questions (p. 9), identifying those that raise particular concern for you.

5. *The Story We Find Ourselves In* ends with Dan taking a leave of absence while the church board examines his doctrinal beliefs. That story resumes and comes to a head in *The Last Word and the Word After That*, particularly in the person of Gil Zeamer. Describe Gil’s character. Without mentioning specific names, have you ever known someone like this? Have you ever been a part of a church that has gone through a similar situation? If so, what was the result? If not, have you ever had a relationship with someone like Gil? Describe the benefits and challenges of a relationship with someone cut from this cloth.

6. Dan remembers Neil saying that our faith is “situated.” Reread the bottom half of page 15. What does he mean when he says that our story requires a context? How does the reality of the incarnation foil the quest for “timelessness”?

7. Dan’s friend Ky says that in view of the theological journey on which Dan has led the people at Potomac Community Church, two opposite things were happening at once: some people were opening up, while

others were tightening up. What is at the root of this phenomenon, in your opinion? This dynamic is not limited to the church. Change is difficult wherever it happens. Have you witnessed this dynamic before? Where? What was the outcome?

8. The issue of homosexuality comes up in Chapter Three when Dan and Carol are introduced to the aunt of a congregation member. Pat Murray is an *intersexual*, a person born with both sets of genitals. How comfortable are you talking about the subject of sexuality? How comfortable is your church talking about the subject of sexuality? How do you view the issue of homosexuality? Do you have any friends or family members who are homosexuals? How has that affected your view of this issue?

9. In his commentary on Chapter Three, McLaren asks the following two sets of questions about the issue of homosexuality, each with a different audience in view. Read both sets of questions and respond to the set that most accurately represents where you are coming from on this issue.

- If you take the “conservative” position, assuming you are right, how do you believe homosexual people should be treated? Should they be constantly shamed? Made to live in secret or hiding? Deprived of basic human rights, equal pay, housing, and so on? Accepted, but on some second-class status that would treat them differently from other people? And if you cannot accept homosexual people in your midst, can you accept those who do, or must you reject (on some level) both homosexual people and those who accept them?
- If you take the “liberal” position, assuming you’re right, how do you recommend we decide what is right or wrong sexually? Does “anything go,” and if not, how do we decide how to identify any sexual behavior as wrong—on what basis? What are the personal and social consequences of a lack of moral clarity on sexual issues, and how can those consequences be avoided or dealt with? And if you accept and affirm gay people, how will you deal with those whose consciences will not allow them to do so? Does your acceptance of gays require a rejection of those who do not agree with you, and if not, how will the difference be dealt with?

10. What does Neil mean when he says that learning “. . . isn’t a consequence of teaching or listening . . . but a consequence of thinking” (p. 39)? How do we encourage or discourage real thinking in our churches? How does fear quell true learning? Are there some subjects we simply

should not think about? Do hell and homosexuality fall in that category? What is the cost of holding positions that are never truly examined? What is the cost of examining issues without any firm commitments?

11. Neil says both liberals and conservatives run the danger of rewriting the gospel to suit the needs and biases of each constituency. In that context, Neil asks Dan to list his commitments, his “nonnegotiables” (p. 41) as he thinks through the subject of hell. Review Dan’s list and talk about his commitments. Do you agree with his four nonnegotiables? Would you add any or take any away? If so, what are they? Why does Neil say it is important to include “minority reports” (p. 42) when examining what theologians have said throughout history?

12. Neil asks Dan what he will do if at the end of his inquiry he is unable to reconcile all the data. Dan has an epiphany of sorts when he gives himself permission to say, “I don’t know.” He says, “It’s funny how ‘I don’t know’ can feel like a revelation, a liberation, when you’ve been pretending to know something you didn’t, which is a lot like pretending to not know something you do” (p. 42). Do you agree? Why is saying “I don’t know” so hard for so many of us? Is there something specific to pastoral ministry that raises the stakes?

13. Neil says that in modernity, the essence of knowing is analysis, that is, knowing things by breaking them down into smaller pieces. This has affected our approach to the Bible, and thus our theology. He says, “. . . we break the Bible down into testaments, and testaments into books, and books into chapters, and chapters into verses, sentences, clauses, phrases, words, roots, prefixes, and suffixes” (p. 44). According to Neil, we think we have gained knowledge of the text, but in reality we are missing “one small detail.” What is this small detail?

14. Chapter Seven is about discovering the “architecture of the Bible.” What does that phrase mean? Discuss Neil’s analogy of the design of Washington, D.C., with the “architecture” of the Bible.

15. Dan has been researching the historical development of the doctrine of hell. Like most pastors, he believes the Scriptures to be the inspired Word of God, and acknowledges that our theological systems are contextual responses to the Word of God located in a specific time and specific place, responding to specific concerns. The study of how theology has developed over time is called historical theology. Have you ever thought about how theology “developed”? How do you react to the idea of historical theology?

16. In Chapter Seven, while Dan discusses his study of the doctrine of hell, he begins to make some surprising discoveries. The first is that there is no direct revelation of hell in the Old Testament. As you read this discussion, were you surprised by the statements Dan makes about the afterlife and its absence in the pages of the Old Testament? What is “sheol”? Neil states that in comparison to their neighbors, the Jews displayed “. . . a persistent . . . disinterest in the afterlife . . .” (p. 46). Dan and Neil cite three specific references to the afterlife in the literature: Job, David, and Ezekiel (pp. 46–47). How does Neil interpret these passages?

17. Chapters Eight and Nine explore the different streams of ancient thought that helped shape contemporary notions of hell. Describe the four streams and list the characteristics of each. What stands out to you in this list? Neil asks Dan how all of this is affecting him (p. 57). How is all of this affecting you? Do you resonate with Dan’s feelings of relief *and* confusion?

18. Chapter Ten explores the context of the first-century world Jesus inhabits. In this world he consistently interacts with different groups of people with specific theologies, worldviews, and politics: Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Essenes, and Zealots. How did each of these groups understand the afterlife, specifically hell? How do traditional understandings of the Pharisees and Sadducees conflict with what Dan discovers in his research (pp. 59–60)? Describe Neil’s theory of the “scapegoat factor.” How does Lincoln’s second inaugural speech illustrate the necessity of refusing to “scapegoat” one group of people in the face of calamity (pp. 65–68)?

19. How does Jesus take those who have become scapegoats (and those who are scapegoating) in the first century and turn their worldview upside-down? How does Jesus deconstruct the Pharisees’ doctrine of hell (p. 63)? Dan comes to the conclusion that Christians today use the doctrine of hell in the same way the Pharisees used it in the first century. After digesting Dan’s interpretations of Jesus’ teachings and his critique of the Pharisees, do you agree or disagree with the parallel Dan makes between the Pharisees and Christians today? Why or why not?

20. Why is universalism not a good enough answer, according to Neil? What is the wrong question it seeks to answer, and what is the better question (p. 69)? Why is God’s wrath a good thing, especially for the oppressed? Toward what is God’s wrath aimed, according to Neil? How does Neil’s perspective strike you? Why have so many tended to emphasize the personal and the moral nature of sin to the near-exclusion of the social and historic dimensions of sin?

21. Neil says, “The point is not whether there is a hell: the point is God’s justice! The point isn’t whether Jesus—by using the language of the construction—confirms it. The point is, for what purpose does he use the language? What’s his point in working with the construction?” (p. 71). How would you answer Neil’s question in light of all that you have read and discussed thus far? What is the purpose of a model? What does Neil mean when he says “. . . Jesus isn’t necessarily endorsing the whole construction by using the language . . .” (p. 73)?

22. In the first part of Chapter Thirteen Neil describes how Jesus turns the whole Pharisaical construct of hell on its head. He goes on to say that the inevitable result of the message of Christianity is the deconstruction of the notion of hell. Reread the different New Testament passages about hell that Neil and Dan discuss. According to Neil, what is the purpose of the language of hell?

23. Neil and Dan visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. As they talk about hell, the museum provides a real and gruesome milieu in which they grapple with human sin and its consequences. How did this part of the book affect you? Have you ever visited a Holocaust museum or watched a movie about the Holocaust, such as *Schindler’s List*? Talk about Dan’s reaction to what he experiences there, particularly the story of the Jewish piano player whose hands were crushed. Dan asks, “How am I supposed to believe that after all Shirley’s father suffered, he’s going to burn in hell forever, eternally tortured, because he didn’t believe in Jesus? What kind of God would add his own eternal torture to the obscenity of human torture her father suffered?” (p. 85). How would you respond to Dan’s question? When does the question of hell stop being theoretical and start becoming real?

24. Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen contain Casey’s notes from her research about hell. Reread these two chapters and pick one or two of the thirty-two quotes that are significant to you. Read your quote(s) to the group and talk about what strikes you as significant about that passage. Do you agree with what the author is saying? Why or why not?

25. Dan’s doctrinal examination finally arrives, though under different circumstances than Dan originally anticipated. Review Dan’s answers to the three questions (pp. 110–112). If you were on the board of that church, would you be satisfied with Dan’s answers? Why or why not?

26. Read through Dan’s “homework” from Matthew’s Gospel in Chapter Nineteen. Do you agree with Neil’s description of the Western

conservative gospel? According to Neil what is the behavior, consequence, and point of this gospel? How does this compare to what Dan discovers in his reading of the Gospels? What stands out to you from the passages Dan includes in his table? Were you surprised by anything? According to Dan, what is *not* the point that Jesus is seeking to make by his use of the language of hell? In what then was he interested?

## **Book Two: The Word After That**

1. After the doctrinal examination, Dan and Potomac Community Church find resolution and Dan returns to full-time pastoral ministry. This resolution comes with a cost, however. Dan finds himself harboring strong resentment, even hatred, toward Gil. Have you ever felt these kinds of emotions toward another follower of Christ? Toward another human being? How did you deal with them? Why is hatred so dangerous, even toward our enemies? Would you have responded to Gil the same way Dan does when he encounters him in a parking lot?

2. Much of the second half of the book takes place in the context of Neil's "knowing community," four other people with whom he has shared life and learning. In explaining the group to Dan, Neil says "I have found I can only know so much until I find a community that shares my knowing. If I begin growing very far beyond what my community allows me to know, I need to persuade my community to think with me or else find or form a new community" (p. 129). Respond to the idea of knowing in community. Do you agree or disagree? Do you have a "knowing community," a place where you learn communally? Have you ever had to move on from a community to accommodate your learning?

3. In conversation, Markus tells Dan that hell is a frequent preoccupation of recovering fundamentalists. What do you make of that statement? Markus goes on to explore the connections between certain theological and political commitments (pp. 134–136). Do you agree with Markus that approaching theology and politics from the minority viewpoint changes one's outlook? Consider how often Jesus interacts with those in the margins of first-century Jewish culture. Have you ever considered how much of the Gospels is a "minority report"? Can you think of specific examples of minority reports from the Gospels?

4. How is being saved different from being judged? Why, according to Markus, are they not mutually exclusive (p. 138)? What does Markus mean by the phrase, "Salvation by grace, judgment by works"? What

does it mean to secede from Imperial Christianity, from a theology of the empire? Do you agree with his assertion that most of Western Christianity is the religion of the empire? Why or why not?

5. In Chapter Seven, Neil and Dan discuss the “architecture of the Bible.” In Chapter Twenty-Four, scriptural architecture again comes into play when Neil’s learning community deconstructs our modern notion of salvation: believing the right information about Jesus so that individuals can live in heaven after they die. Starting in Romans and moving through the Gospels, Father Scott traces how this view may have developed (pp. 149–152). Summarize Father Scott’s theory.

6. Every year this community of friends asks five questions of themselves and each other; they call them “the five queries”: How is your soul? How have you seen God at work in and through your life since we last met? What are you struggling with? What are you grateful for? What God-given dream are you nurturing?

Do you think having a group of people that can answer these kinds of questions with one another over an extended period of time is important? Why or why not? Do you know people with whom you would be willing to do this sort of thing? How would you answer these questions if given the chance and the right group of people? What is the benefit of conversations like these over time?

7. Ruth uses the term “deep ecclesiology” to describe this group and what it does (p. 140). What does she mean by that? In Chapter Twenty-Five, Father Scott describes this group as “. . . part of something that’s happening quietly, behind the scenes, around the world” (p. 155) and says that they are a catholic, missional, monastic faith community. What are Father Scott’s definitions for each of those words? What stands out to you in those descriptions? Ruth calls the group “post-Protestant,” saying they are done protesting and now they are “pro-testifying.” What is the difference between the two?

8. Father Scott says, “An order is different from a denomination, which is a group defined by structure and doctrine. An order is defined by practice. I suppose there’s a lot of doctrine hidden in each practice, but we’re more and more convinced that the best way to get to good doctrine is through good practice, instead of the other way around” (pp. 155–156). Respond to this statement.

9. The story comes full-circle in Chapters Twenty-Six through Twenty-Eight when Dan talks with Chip Griffin from BEF about this new

kind of Christianity. What happens to Dan when he becomes not just a learner but a teacher and shepherd? Why does teaching something internalize knowledge in a way that simply listening or reading never can? Have you ever had to pass along knowledge you had just received, even when you were still potentially unclear about it yourself? What was the result? How does Dan's ability to enter into this conversation and relationship with Chip illustrate his growth beyond simply learning?

10. In an e-mail to Dan, Chip differentiates between two key sets of questions: those formed by the modern Western way of telling the gospel and those that are being shaped by our new understanding of the gospel (p. 171). What are those questions? Have you ever been asked the first set? What about the second? Do you agree that both sets of questions have validity? How might people who are not followers of Jesus respond to each set of questions? What driving motivations do you detect beneath each set? How does the second set of questions reinforce Father Scott's emphasis on the importance of practices? How does the first set of questions return us to already well-charted territory?

11. The book ends with a chapter titled "The Last, Best Word." A number of things are noted in the chapter, bringing closure to much of Dan and Carol's journey: their own faith and commitment to mission is revitalized, the church community at PCC is renewed and thriving, they are part of a larger community of learners who meet regularly and share their lives, and weddings and news of impending births round out the overflow of abundance they are experiencing. It is a very different picture from the one that begins *A New Kind of Christian*. Also included in this chapter is a vignette of Dan and Gil's reconciliation. How does this resolution, maybe more than any other, illustrate and bring to closure the exploration of hell in which Neil and Dan (and others) have been engaging?

12. In the commentary section at the end of the book, McLaren says, "Many of my friends and acquaintances who have read parts of the manuscript of this book or who have heard me speak on this material have told me about the deep and positive effect it has had on them." He also adds that he knows ". . . that some good people will read this book and find it disturbing or unsettling" (pp. 198–199). As you come to the end of this book, what is your reaction to it? Has this been a profitable conversation to listen in on? How deeply have you engaged with it? What are a few of the most significant aspects of this book for you? Were there aspects of the book that were hard for you to process? What conclusions

have you drawn, if any? Do you agree with McLaren's opening assertion that this book is less about hell and more about the kind of God in whom one believes? What have you discovered about God?

