A New Kind of Christian

by Brian D. McLaren

Discussion Guide

A New Kind of Christian, by Brian D. McLaren (Jossey-Bass, copyright © 2001), begins as a conversation between two men in search of answers about faith, God, the church, and the future of Christianity. As the men talk, they take the reader on a spiritual journey by asking the tough questions and daring to provide honest answers about where the church stands today and where it may be headed. The book examines the potential for postmodern Christians by looking at spiritual issues and the ultimate need to become a new kind of Christian.

Permission is granted to reproduce this discussion guide.

Chapter 1

Sometime the Peacock Wish to Be the Seagull

This chapter introduces the characters of Neo, Carol and Dan, a pastor considering a career change.

1. Have you ever been in the same position as Dan, thinking about a career change? If so, explain how it feels. How will it help him to talk about it with Neo?

2. How do you know if someone is “safe” to talk to about something intimate or important?

3. Neo tells Dan that, “liberals are often just fundamentalists with a different set of beliefs.” Discuss what he means. Do you agree?

4. Are labels like “liberal” and “fundamentalist” helpful or useful? Why or why not?

5. When Dan tells Neo that he is considering leaving the pastorate, Neo responds with a Jamaican saying: “Sometime the peacock wish to be a seagull.” How do we tend to put our ministers “on a pedestal”? Is this fair?
Chapter 2

**Entering that Awkward Age, or Does Jonah Eat Bagels?**

This chapter offers a history lesson and introduces the postmodern world of Christianity.

1. Explain what Neo meant by Dan having an “immigration problem.”
2. Explain what “postmodern” means in your own words.
3. What are some of the characteristics of the modern world that Neo lists?
4. What does it feel like when you are struggling with your faith and you are searching for answers?
5. How was this conversation a good beginning for sorting things out? What do you need to do in order to tackle a problem of faith?

Chapter 3

**Dan Discovers Where the Cross Meets the Dream Catcher**

This chapter continues to compare and contrast modern and postmodern.

1. Dan wonders if modern Christianity distorts his understanding of God. How have the characteristics of modernity shaped our faith, our theology, and our approach to the Bible?
2. Discuss how the meaning of “God is in control” has changed over the years. How have our modern, mechanistic ideas of control affected our view of God?
3. How does Dan see the image of the dreamcatcher juxtaposed with the cross as a possible corrective or complement to Christianity rather than something opposed to it? Do you agree or disagree?
4. How does one hold on to the “fundamentals” or important truths of one’s faith tradition while still making Christianity relevant to one’s current situation and life?

Chapter 4

**What a Difference a Worldview Makes**

This chapter contains Neo’s presentation to students on the current transition from modernity to postmodernity.

1. What evidence is there that this is the end of the modern period? Do you personally see signs of a change? Explain.
2. Give your own overview or summary of Neo’s presentation. Do you agree with him totally or partially? Explain.

3. Discuss the difference between believing one’s worldview is true and recognizing that it is simply a “view from a point”?

4. Explain why our faith needs to change with our changing world.

5. Share your ideas on what it might mean to practice your faith in postmodernity.

---

Chapter 5

**Neo Worries About Keeping Up with Jesus**

*This chapter begins after Neo’s presentation and centers on questions by students.*

1. In your own words, explain the meaning of the title of this chapter.

2. Why do you think Neo’s talk was so well received by the students? Which question and answer intrigued you the most?

3. What’s the difference between change and transition? Do you believe this is an age of transition? Why?

4. What risks and dangers are there in this transition, according to Neo? What are the dangers of maintaining the status quo and resisting transition?

---

Chapter 6

**Hot Words About Biblical Interpretation**

*This chapter continues the new kind of Christian discussion with a spirited and spiritual look at biblical interpretation past, present and future.*

1. Why is “a new kind of Christian” the best language to use to discuss this new direction?

2. Discuss Neo’s point that interpretations reveal less about God or the Bible than they do about us.
3. What happens when we let go of the Bible as a modern answer book? What is a better way to view the Bible?

4. Discuss the implications of the fact that the Bible never calls itself “authoritative” or “the foundation.”

5. Neo asks, “what if the real issue is not the authority of the text itself but rather the authority of God or the will of God?” What does he mean? How does this reframe the entire debate between the evangelical and liberal views of the Bible?

Chapter 7

**Letting the Bible Read Us**

*This chapter looks at how we read the Bible as Neo reveals his secret.*

1. What new insight about the Bible did you receive from reading this chapter?

2. Discuss the benefits of faith having a number of anchor points. Discuss some of the other important anchor points for your tradition.

3. How do liberals and conservatives read the Bible differently? What do you think of Neo’s remark that perhaps neither group takes the Bible seriously enough?

4. Explain what is meant by “letting the Bible read you.”

Chapter 8

**Yeah, But What About the Other Guys?**

*This chapter examines other religions and the topic of Christian evangelism.*

1. What were Neo’s thoughts about other religions? Do you agree with him?

2. What did Neo mean when he said that sometimes Christianity is the enemy of the gospel? Why does he want to separate Christianity the religion from the person of Jesus?

3. What did you learn about evangelism from reading this chapter? How is it more like a dance than a sales pitch?

4. Discuss Neo’s statement that some Christians use Jesus as a “shortcut to being right.”
Chapter 9

Redeeming Our Culture Over Dinner

This chapter recounts a dinner conversation about organized religion and other cultures.

1. Discuss what you saw as the highlights of what was said about “organized religion” during dinner.

2. Discuss what was said about how Christ can enter other cultures.

3. What is “syncretism” and why is it considered by many to be bad? Why does Neo say that it is something that we can’t completely escape?

4. Carol asks how, given the fact that culture shapes our interpretation of the gospel, do we “know that we are really getting the gospel at all?” What does she mean? What are some of the protections that help us evaluate whether we have completely identified the gospel with our culture?

Chapter 10

C.S. Lewis in the Pulpit, or What Is Heaven About Anyway?

This chapter looks at salvation, the kingdom of God, death, and heaven.

1. What problems does Neo have with the idea that the central story of the Bible is about saving individual souls? What, according to Neo, are the two dimensions of salvation?

2. Based on their conversation and your own ideas, talk about why the church exists.

3. What is the relationship between the church and the Kingdom of God? Why are they not one and the same?

4. What new insights did you receive from Neo’s sermon on death?

5. Share your thoughts about the C.S. Lewis story about the soldier and the great Lion.

Chapter 11

Getting Beyond Righteousness

This chapter takes a look at spiritual realities of modern and postmodern Christianity including sin and tolerance.

1. How does Neo define the modern view of sin? What are the problems and limitations of this way of defining sin?

2. Discuss Neo’s statement that spiritual realities require risky language.
3. How might a new kind of Christian understand sin? How would this understanding of sin go beyond the idea that sin is merely an individual act? What would the implications of this view be?

4. What is the difference between righteousness and truly embodying goodness? How does the parable of the Good Samaritan help illustrate this difference?

5. Why is the subject of other religions so troubling for Dan? Is it troubling for most people?

6. Discuss ideas on how churches can be accepting of all people without compromising and condoning sin.

Chapter 12

**French Fries and the Kingdom of God**

*This chapter looks at the kingdom of God and how to talk to others about God.*

1. Why is Neo comfortable with non-Christians? How is he different from most Christians in that regard?

2. What is the problem with “friendship evangelism” and what are the alternatives?

3. How has the term “born again” been damaged by modern Christianity?

4. What new insight about the kingdom of God did you receive from Dan and Neo’s conversation?

5. Discuss Neo’s suggestion that postmodern Christians should not think about evangelism in terms of conversions but rather conversations. Do you agree? What are the implications of this?

Chapter 13

**Spiritual Practices: Secret and Shared**

*This chapter deals with Neo’s sudden move to Seattle to take care of his mother after his father’s death. E-mails replace conversations and the topic of spiritual formation is discussed.*

1. Share your thoughts on keeping a journal and secret spiritual practices.
2. What shared spiritual experiences does Dan list?

3. Discuss some areas of spiritually that need to be rediscovered.

4. Discuss how Neo thinks that future approaches to spirituality will look more like ancient practices than modern ones. What examples does he give? If you have been involved in any of these practices, share your experience with the group.

5. Discuss Neo’s statement that a new kind of Christian needs to be radically generous. Share your thoughts on postmodern financial stewardship.

Chapter 14
It’s None of Your Business Who Goes to Hell

This chapter looks at the various doctrines of hell and how a new kind of Christian might handle the topic in the future.

1. How might a new kind of Christian deal with the subject of hell? How is this topic dealt with today? How is it different from other approaches to the subject?

2. Is getting souls to heaven the focal point of the gospel? What is the focus? Discuss the comment that heaven is a by-product and is not the main point.

3. What is the modern definition of salvation and why is it deficient? What does Neo mean by saying that salvation is “joining God’s mission”?

4. Discuss the importance of the role of Christian community in salvation and how it is where we live out our salvation.

Chapter 15
Beginning the Journey into Terra Nova

This chapter tells how Neo deals with the death of his mother. Dan and Neo consider their futures.

1. Discuss the two urges Neo had after the death of his mother. What caused these urges? Explain the feelings and possible reasons involved.

2. Looking at Dan and Neo as men who aspire to be a new kind of Christian, how would you describe them?
3. What was meant by the statement of the woman who said that, “Christianity does not own God?”

4. Dan talked to Carol about his two ministry alternatives. List and discuss them. Then compare them to the third alternative as suggested by Neo.

Chapter 16

Notes on Church Leadership from One Certified Nobody to Another

This final chapter provides thoughts from Neo on church leadership from e-mails to Casey.

1. What new insights about church leadership did you receive from reading this chapter?

2. Neo mentions two options for bringing about change. What are they? Given your own experiences of change, do you agree?

3. Neo believes that church does not exist for the benefit of its members. Why does he believe it exists? How does the church accomplish its mission?

4. Neo doesn’t distinguish between clergy and lay when it comes to carrying out God’s mission. He believes both are equally sent into the world to accomplish God’s mission. Discuss ways that you are fulfilling this mission in your own life. How can you improve?

5. How have these readings and discussions changed you? How have they challenged you?