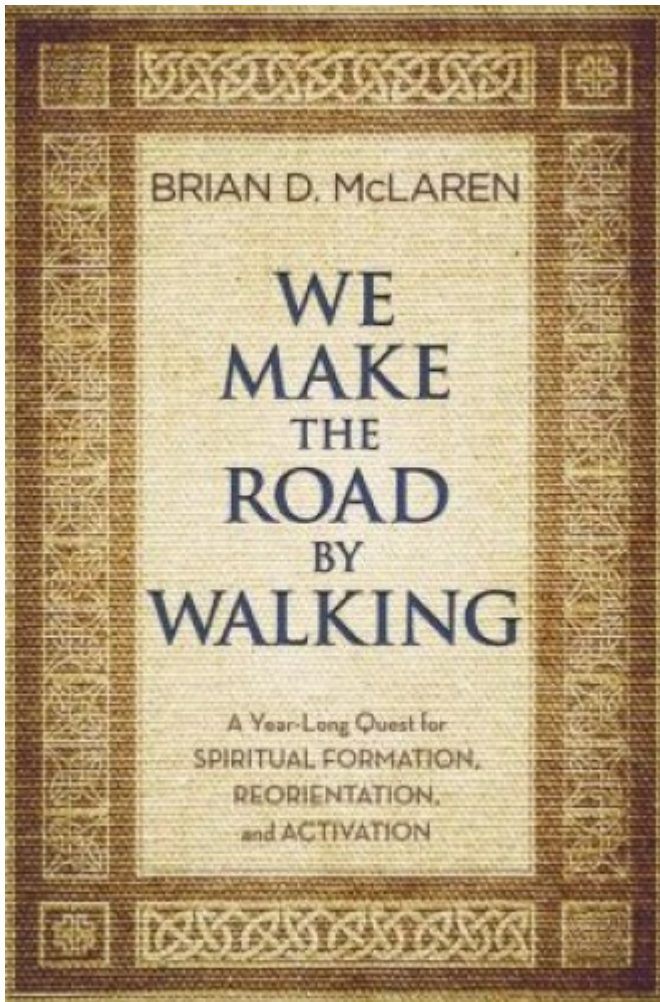


We Make the Road by Walking, by Brian D. McLaren

reviewed by [Charles Scriven](#) in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue

In Review



We Make the Road by Walking

By Brian D. McLaren
Jericho

For its potential usefulness in the congregation, this book is as good as sun on soil. Academics may find no theological breakthrough here, but the ones who care about church life may still do a double take. A leading voice of the so-called emerging

church interprets the Bible story in a manner that is uncommonly accessible and arresting, and also conversant with contemporary scholarship.

McLaren is aiming to draw both pastors and laypersons into conversation and conspiracy. Christian faith, he says, involves shaking off mere convention and taking part in subversive upheaval. Such faith is story-shaped, so in service to God's reign it takes for its compass the whole drama that culminates in Christ. Faith aims for social transformation, seeking peace and justice without descending into violence. Engaging the whole life, it not only requires much, but also grants much. Discipleship is countercultural and hard; at the same time it's a path to fellowship and "true aliveness." If faith is participation in an "uprising," it is also the healing of the self.

The heart of the book is 52 short chapters, set forth with a view to both the liturgical year and the needs of discussion groups. Each chapter takes key Bible passages as a reference point. Interpretation centers first on Genesis and proceeds, along lines suggested by scripture itself, all the way to the book of Revelation. Chapters end with six discussion questions, always including one especially for children. One of the appendices contains "guidelines for learning circles."

McLaren refers at the beginning to "a new moment of emergence, pulsing with danger and promise." This signals his intention to advance the cause of "Emergence Christianity," or what he calls an "emerging spiritual movement in service of aliveness." Leaders of this movement take as their basic premise (aside from faith itself) the cultural shift called to mind by the term *postmodern*. By their lights that shift involves relativism, whether extreme and deeply skeptical or merely a kind of humility in its grasping after truth. It involves democratization of information, with attendant undermining of hierarchy, and new awareness of religious diversity accompanied by growing reluctance to scorn or dismiss what others believe.

One result is growing doubt about whether anyone sees objectively, or whether any authority, not least that of sacred texts and sacred institutions, deserves to be trusted. This puts more and more pressure on institutional Christianity. Traditional church life—its doctrinal fixations, collusion with violence, lack of humility and unwillingness to change—seems increasingly off-key, and people, especially young people, are walking away from it.

Movement leader Phyllis Tickle names this cultural shift the Great Emergence and likens it to an every-500-years “hinge time” such as the Great Reformation and the Great Schism between the Christian East and West. If hinge times are a threat, they are also, according to Emergence Christianity, an opportunity.

For one thing, “rummage sales” can take place. It’s important now to let go of top-down, or Constantinian, Christianity; the same goes for ungracious responses to people outside the church. At hinge times the radically new can break in. One urgent need is for fresh (noninerrantist) appropriation of scripture, a reading that sees Christ as both climax of the Bible story and model of authentic Christian existence. Another is for new embrace of the Holy Spirit. Amid cultural cataclysm, the Christian calling requires persistent, Spirit-guided conversation about what to think and do.

Emergence Christianity returns again and again to the Holy Spirit, who is thought to provide both authority and energy for renewal. The Spirit is untamable, not subject to our settled assumptions. It is the divine reality within, throwing us off balance, teasing new discernment out of human brokenness. Emergent movement critics (with whom I sometimes resonate) say that this emphasis elevates experiences over the authority of scripture. But for McLaren, the Holy Spirit extends the ministry of Jesus, the one whose story is told in scripture. To be alive in the Spirit is to attend to the Bible for the purpose of ever deepening discipleship.

McLaren does not invoke Bartimaeus, the blind beggar (Mark 10) whose newfound faith consists in learning and living on the road with Jesus. But if you introduced his book by telling that story, you’d be using scripture to communicate its point—and back it up.