

TALKING THE WALK

Do I stay Christian?

Episode 31 | Brian McLaren

Fans of [The All Terrain Podcast](#) will be thrilled to know that season four has already started, albeit with a new host and a slightly new look.

If by some miracle you've not heard of, or listened to, the podcast yet, it's a venture by the Youth and Children's Ministry team that invites Christians from a range of fields (eg TV, psychiatry, politics, charities, church leadership, academia) to take a hypothetical hike with the podcast host, making four choices and answering four questions along the way.

Thinking differently

The new season kicks off with writer and speaker, Brian McLaren. Having pastored a church in the USA for 20 years, he was recognised by *Time* magazine in 2005 as one of the '25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America', and has recently published a new book, titled *Do I stay Christian?: A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed and the Disillusioned*.

Part one of the book gives ten reasons one might answer 'No' to the question. This may sound controversial, but Brian's point is that as Christians we tend to brush under the carpet many of the motivations people give for leaving the church – for example, the church's use of violence and slavery at various points in its history. Christianity could – and should – have had a much more transformative impact in our world.

Part two introduces ten reasons one might answer 'yes' to the question – including that 'leaving defiantly or staying compliantly are not my only options' and 'Christianity is changing (for the worse and the better)'.

Part three then shares some useful practices for staying Christian – some of which feature in Brian's answers when he spoke to the new host of *The All Terrain Podcast*, Jo Taylor. As the UK and Ireland territory's Youth Discipleship Specialist – and the person who heads up the Youth and Children's Ministry team's discipleship 'year-in' programme called Terrain (from which the podcast was birthed) – Jo was the perfect choice to take the mantle from Matt White, who has hosted seasons one to three.

View God as drawing us towards the future

Guests of the podcast have given a wide range of answers to the question, 'How do you face change?' Some have seen change as something of an inconvenience that they begrudgingly accept. Others see it as something exciting that they actively seek out.

'I grew up in a religious tradition where change was viewed as a mistake,' explains Brian in the podcast. 'We believed that God was unchanging, so if the world was in its proper state, nothing should change.'

'But I have changed my attitude toward change. What I feel now is that, just as in life, we don't really have a choice between change and no change: it's a choice between change and stagnation.'

'That leaves the question: what kind of change are we seeking?'

It's a great question for all of us who love The Salvation Army and want it to continue to be a vibrant movement that seeks fullness of life for all with Jesus.

'Years ago I was inspired by an insight from a scholarly community called process theology, which says "instead of thinking about God in the past, setting the universe in motion, think about God in the future, inviting us to come toward God in the future."

'Seeing it this way means that every moment is an opportunity to move toward a better future or a worse future. That's encouraging, because no matter how bad things get, we're only one turn away from our best option at that moment.'

≡ *How much of your walk of faith within The Salvation Army harks back to the past? Do you ever find yourself measuring your level of faith or goodness against 'ideals' like the early church in the book of Acts – or even Booth's Salvationism of the 1860s?*

≡ *What positive impacts might it have on our discipleship and our mission if we were to view God as being in the future tenderly beckoning us towards him, asking us to explore how we might embrace change and be part of creating something fresh to serve suffering humanity?*

Concentrate carefully

When Jo asks Brian how he moves through suffering, he says: 'There are so many things that are outside our control. We don't have a choice about what period of history we're born into, or whether someone is going to invade your country.'

'But we do have a choice on what we concentrate on, think about, and what questions we ask ourselves.'

'I am one of those people who wake every morning and grieve over yet another day that our governments and political systems are failing and putting my grandchildren's lives into great danger.'

Asked what practices he has learnt that help, Brian says he's become aware of two paths that people often take, both of which he tries to avoid:

'We can turn towards optimism, the path that tells us that everything's going to be okay. I think we have an inborn bias that helps us deny negative reality, to maintain comfortable illusions. And I understand that that's very tempting. And so I'll read one article that says, "Oh, here's a positive sign," and then something in me wants to say, "Okay, I can go back to my previously scheduled complacency." And I just don't think that's healthy: it makes me feel better, but I don't think it makes me a better person.'

'Or there's a turn you can take that leads you into despair, where you say, "Oh, it's too late, there's nothing that can be done. So I might as well return to my previously scheduled complacency.'

'So in a certain sense, optimism and pessimism lead to the same kind of complacency.'

Brian says he aims to reject both of these and instead chooses to live in the moment. This is helped by adopting two practices:

'The first is to actually *enjoy* this moment. Life always has an ending to it on this earth. And so knowing that life is limited makes us say, "I'd really better enjoy this meal, and I'd better enjoy this day and this opportunity to work." So enjoyment, I think, is one of those practices: being in the present and savouring the gifts of it.'

'And the second is action. Asking, "What can we do about this today? Who can I speak to about this today?" And sometimes we carry out our actions not because we even think they're going to solve the problem, but because we think *this is the right thing to do, whether it solves the problem or not.*'

☰ *Would you say you have a tendency towards optimism or pessimism? Do you agree that both can lead you toward complacency?*

☰ *How might fully experiencing the present help you to walk an alternative path? What elements of life could you consciously choose to enjoy more fully right now? Are there any areas of your life where you could more effectively be using your time and energy to do the right thing?*

Choose curiosity

In *Do I stay Christian?*, Brian identifies eight biases that we can easily fall prey to, including confirmation bias, complexity bias, and confidence bias. (Helpfully, he has named them so they all start with a 'c').

'Biases are ways we shield ourselves from uncomfortable or inconvenient truths. And curiosity in many ways is our only path out of our biases, our path out of hostility. Because if someone says something that bothers me, I naturally either want to retreat or attack and tell them how wrong they are. But if instead I can become curious, I wonder why they think that, where they got that idea. It puts me in a different mode where I can continue to learn.'

What does curiosity look like in practice?

'For me,' says Brian, 'the deepest dimension of receiving joy always involves getting outdoors and just feeling the logic and the beauty and harmony and interaction of the created world.'



One of the six chapters in his book that dig down into the ‘how’ of staying Christian is about ‘re-wilding’: a way to ‘let our inner beings realign with the original language and architecture of creation.’

‘There’s a way that this beautiful earth speaks to us. I can’t tell you how many people have shared that with me. They just come and start telling me their stories, and so often their stories involve a tree: they sat under a tree and started to notice things.

‘Religious people don’t need to worry that this is competing with the Bible: it’s actually the Bible that tells us to go and learn a lesson from the ants walking through the grass,¹ or from the starry sky.’²

- ☞ *Take a moment to be honest with yourself about the biases you have: how might they stop you experiencing joy in the world?*
- ☞ *How might curiosity help you to have a more expansive view of God and the world around you? In what ways could you bring new life and perspective into your walk with Jesus by interacting with the natural world through rewilding?*

Identify what makes you come alive

In answer to the podcast’s final question, ‘How do you mature in service?’, Brian explains, ‘I’m at a stage in my life now where I don’t want to run anything, but I want to do everything I can to encourage and help people who are in the middle of trying to run things.

‘A thinker I deeply appreciate is Howard Thurman, an African-American theologian who had a huge influence on Martin Luther King. He said, “Don’t just ask what the world needs, but ask: ‘*What gives you joy, and makes you come alive?*’ Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

‘And so one of the things that has helped me mature is to acknowledge the things I do that the more I do them, the more energised I become.

‘And also, if I love my neighbour as I love myself, then I’m not only asking what helps me come alive, but what helps my neighbour come alive.’

- ☞ *What are the things that energise you: not simply what you enjoy doing, but what makes you feel alive? Who has God made you to be? What things make you feel fully yourself?*
- ☞ *What do you do now that has stopped giving you life, and which you should stop doing, right now? (Perhaps you are identifying something but have immediately started thinking about the people you might let down if you were to give it up: put that to one side for now.)*

¹ Eg Proverbs 6:6-11

² Eg Psalm 8:3-6

Something better?

'Do I stay Christian?' may be a question you've been asking yourself, or perhaps in your view it's the kind of question proper Christians should never consider.

But what if, by being honest about the ways Christianity has failed the world, by reconsidering the reasons why we should re-commit, we could experience God in fresher, deeper ways?

'The version of Christianity – or the version of life – that you have been trained very hard to live in might be wonderful,' concludes Brian in the podcast.

'But there might even be something better if you keep your eyes open, and this part of life involves allowing our hearts and our vision to grow bigger.'

I'm open to that. Are you?

TALKING THE WALK is a blog series reflecting on episodes of [The All Terrain Podcast](#), written by Matt Little.

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