**Steve Spilde:** Today, it is my great privilege to welcome Brian McLaren to the podcast. Brian is a father, a husband, a preacher, a teacher and the best-selling author of more than 20 books. Richard Rohr has said, “Anything written by Brian McLaren is always filled with insight, courage and creative theology, refining the meaning of orthodoxy in our time.” Brian, I am honored to welcome you to the podcast.

**Brian McLaren:** I’ve been looking forward to this, so I’m happy to be with you, Steve.

**Steve:** Brian, your new book is titled, “Do I Stay Christian?” In the beginning, you outline 11 different ways that one may identify as a Christian. As you’ve grown throughout your life, what are some different ways that your personal meaning of what it means to be Christian has evolved and changed?

**Brian:** I think this is part of what makes the discussion of Christian identity so complicated. It’s defined in such opposite ways by different people. I grew up in a very conservative Protestant family in the context people that today would call “fundamentalists.” In that context, Christianity was defined primarily as a belief system. You had to adhere to certain beliefs, and those beliefs identified you as a Christian. I think also, our little group emphasized experience. There were certain spiritual experiences that you were supposed to have that would identify you as a Christian. That was really my framework growing up. The problems began for me when I found out that there was maybe the obvious list of beliefs that you had to have, and then there was a bunch of fine print that kind of added to it. I remember being just a kid – sixth, seventh, eighth grade – and finding out that I wasn’t allowed to believe in evolution, where I’d already read enough science books that that made sense to me. I remember thinking, “Oh, no, what’s this all about?” But I think other people grew up in very different contexts. For some of them, they aren’t really faced with that many beliefs. But for them, it’s more of an institution, or maybe even an authority structure that they are reverential toward. And for other people, it might be actually more a matter of practices, like, “I go to church on Easter and Christmas, and I had my babies baptized. That means I’m a Christian.” That’s more of a pragmatic kind of an approach.

I think for some people these days, I hate to say it, but I think it’s true, there’s more of a political and social construct that if you vote for certain candidates or identify yourself culturally in a certain way, you see yourself as Christian. And there are many other ways that people define it as well.

**Steve:** In what ways is your identity as a Christian more meaningful than ever? You’ve referred to how your perspective has changed. I assume that that label has more meaning to you rather than less.

**Brian:** Yes, it does for me, Steve, although obviously for other people they have a very inflexible definition that they’re given. They reach a point where they say, “Well, according to this definition, I don’t fit anymore.” That’s one of the reasons why many people leave the Christian faith. As I said, growing up with a list of beliefs and then finding out that there was a lot of additional fine print, that had certain benefits because you were with a group of people you could always be sure they agreed with you. And in a sense, and when you’re in that setting, you spoke the same language and you had the same assumptions and there was a feeling of safety, and there’s many other dimensions to it that were very reassuring and meaningful. As I said, it also became a little bit claustrophobic.

In my own spiritual development, one of the things that pulled me through is that – this might sound almost like I’m making a joke, but I mean this completely seriously – I became a pastor [and] I became a preacher and I actually had to read the Bible more, and I actually started reading the Gospels more. And for me, my actual delight and fascination and interest in this figure Jesus Christ became more and more compelling to me. What I realized is that many of those very rigid definitions that I had learned from different Christian groups or denominations or institutions were so out of sync with kind of the spirit and personality and value system of Jesus. That really is what has through the years become more and more meaningful for me. Can I just give a quick example?

**Steve:** Sure.

**Brian:** Part of my own spiritual development has been taking more and more seriously the contemplative or mystical approach to Christian faith. One of the words that’s often used in that regard is the word “nondualism,” [which is] learning to see that yes, you can put things in two categories [such as] “right/wrong,” “us/them,” “friend/enemy,” “insider/outsider.” But then you start to realize that life is more complex than that, and eventually you learn to see. You hold the ability to see things in terms of both inside and outside [and] us/them, but also to see us all as connected, and you begin to see these larger holes. A couple of weeks ago as part of the lectionary at church was the reading of the Prodigal Son story. I’ve preached probably 20 sermons on the Prodigal Son – maybe more in my life – [and] I’m certainly familiar with that text. But as it was read, it just struck me [and] I just felt like I saw it in a completely different way. I remember thinking to myself, “If the greatest genius alive wanted to construct a story to help someone outgrow dualistic thinking, that story is perfectly designed.” And I just came away feeling, again, just another wave of admiration and respect for Jesus as a storyteller and as an educator, and as a parable designer. Yeah, that just keeps happening.

**Steve:** As I listen to you, the word “intimacy” comes to mind. I hear then two levels. One is I hear that you have a more intimate relationship with Jesus. Jesus has become more personal [and] more real to you. And then [I] also [hear that you have] intimacy with others. I mean, [within] the safety of that tight group you had intimacy with other people, but now you’re allowed to have intimacy with more people beyond that group, or a larger group.

**Brian:** Oh, my goodness, that is so well-said. That is so well-said. And in fact, it makes me think, again, of this image that Jesus used. It’s in the fourth Gospel. He says, “I’m a vine ...” – he’s speaking to his disciples – “… and you’re branches.” He uses this image of a branch that abides in the vine. In other words, a branch that maintains its sense of connectedness to the vine. This for me has been one of the treasures of Christian faith. Let me say it this way: One of the treasures that I feel is given to me by Jesus that is in tension with many expressions I’ve seen of the Christian faith. Because here Jesus is in a sense, he is saying, “Have a deep, deep connection to me.” In the story of the Prodigal Son, he’s saying those two brothers, they had a deep connection to each other that they didn’t recognize. The father recognized the connection to each son even though they didn’t realize their connection to each other. This sense of connectedness is so deep.

You sadly often see the Christian religion in its various forms try to divide people and increase people’s sense of disconnection and alienation from each other. Yes, that word “intimacy” is beautiful because then we come to not only have an intellectual understanding of our connectedness, but also it’s something we can’t escape on a feeling level.

**Steve:** The people who come to you with concerns about losing their faith, how many are simply letting go of one meaning of that word “Christian” and maybe transferring to another meaning, or an even more expansive meaning of “Christian?”

**Brian:** I think very often that’s the case. But sadly, for a lot of people … I’m not blaming them for this [because] this is not their fault in any way, but they only have ever heard one definition. Someone grows up and their mother is a devout Catholic, and in her mind, to be Christian you go to Mass and you go to Confession, and they think, “Wow, I’m not living up to that.” I grew up in a sect of Protestantism that was super, super concerned about sex. You think of all the people who grow up and they find themselves to be gay, or they are gay, but they get married and then they get divorced, and they’ve been told, “You can’t be a Christian if you’re divorced. You can’t be a Christian if you’re gay.” They believe what they were told by people they trusted, so I totally understand why then they think, “There’s no place here for me.” I guess it’s one of the reasons why – gosh, Steve, when you said that, I’ve written over 20 books and I thought, “Gosh, I’m a long-winded person.” – but I suppose it’s one of the reasons I keep writing, [and that] is I want to get the word out to everyone I can that there’s more than one way to see a lot of these things.

**Steve:** I was born in 1962; I think you’ve got me by a few years. Within my lifetime, I’ve witnessed a shift in the meaning of “faith,” [going from] a trust in something I can’t see to faith as a need to be certain. In what ways is this a religious development or a cultural development, or even a political phenomenon?

**Brian:** Wow, what a great question, Steve. I should say if people are interested, if they go to my website, brianmclaren.net, I wrote two little e-books: one on bias that’s called “Why Don’t They Get It?” and another on authoritarianism that’s called “The Second Pandemic.” This new book, “Do I Stay Christian?”, is in many ways paired with the previous book, “Faith After Doubt” – they really kind of grew up together. In “Faith After Doubt,” one of the things that I tried to convey is that doubt is not an enemy of faith – doubt is an enemy of authoritarianism. And I think one of the struggles that we have is that there are certain leaders – they can be religious leaders, they can be political leaders, and the way they gain power over their followers is they require their followers to say certain things. When those followers say certain things, maybe they believe them, maybe they don’t, but the act of saying that thing shows their submission to the authoritarian leader because the authoritarian leader demands it. Again, not to be too obvious here, but I think we all remember a certain president not long ago who, there were photographs of his inauguration crowd that were very obviously smaller than his predecessor’s crowd. But he required people to say that they were larger, [and] a lot of people were happy to do so.

I live in Florida. Our previous governor made it [so] you weren’t allowed to say the word “climate change” or you might lose your job if you were a state employee. When people can control what you say, in a sense, that’s why freedom of speech is so valuable to us, right? But when you’re afraid to speak the truth as you see it, or you say things you don’t think are true to submit to someone, it really builds kind of an authoritarian structure. That, I think, is going on. I think it’s going on in religion. I think it’s going on in politics. It’s not just happening here; we see it around the world. There’s all kind of really interesting research that’s been done, especially since World War II, on what renders people susceptible to authoritarianism. You might say it very simply like this: That when our fear or our shame or our stress level gets to a certain point where it feels unbearable to us and someone comes along who is ready to take charge, there is something in us that wants to go along with it. I think that’s happening, and it’s happening in religion and in politics, and very often the cleverest politicians use the religion element to their advantage, too.

There’s an old saying, Steve – maybe you’ve heard it – that, “The masses think their religion is true. The elites think that all religions are false. And the politicians know that all religions are useful.” I just think that’s part of our world today. This is one of our challenges in Christian identity, and Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and other religious identity, that we’re having to reclaim our sense of what it means to be a person of faith from people who are trying to manipulate it for political ends.

**Steve:** On the one hand, I thank you for your wisdom. I’m not thrilled at the content [because] it’s pretty depressing, but I’m thankful that you’re naming that dynamic.

**Brian:** Just to circle back, if this is where, suddenly to see what’s going on with Jesus in such an electric … It’s just radiant, because then you realize for Jesus to say, “The Kingdom of God is at hand,” he lives in a totalitarian regime: the Kingdom or Empire of Caesar. So, he speaks in parables as a way of telling the truth without guaranteeing that he’s going to get arrested tomorrow. And you just see his wisdom and courage to say … and in a sense, he presents God, you could say the ultimate authority figure who wants to set us free rather than oppress us, and [who] wants to heal us rather than threaten us with death. I just think that’s what’s going on with Jesus. It’s a part of human history, and it’s something that hopefully we’re making a little bit of slow progress on. Hopefully, we’ll keep the progress going.

**Steve:** In October, we will be excited to visit with you at the Franciscan Spirituality Center to discuss your prior book, “Faith After Doubt,” which you mentioned. Roughly, how would you describe the four stages of faith you outline in that book?

**Brian:** I’m really looking forward to being with you, and as you know, I’m a deep lover of St. Francis. I just can’t express my gratitude for the gifts of the Franciscan tradition. In many ways, you can see St. Francis as a real illustration of these four stages that I talk about in “Faith After Doubt.” We start with simplicity. In simplicity, we believe what authority figures tell us because we’re children and we depend on authority figures for life and health and everything, and protection, so of course we trust them. We see that St. Francis grows up in his family and in his culture, and then he goes off and he tries his hand at being a soldier. [Then] he tries his hand at running his own life, and things don’t go so well for him, and he encounters complexity. Stage One is *simplicity*. Stage Two is *complexity*. He encounters complexity. Then he faces a period of *perplexity* where he now has to say, “The set of values that my father lives by and the sort of standard form of Christianity that’s being practiced by most people, this doesn’t work for me. It doesn’t make sense for me. There’s something’s wrong.” Then he has a deep, spiritual experience where he feels God gives him permission to rebuild – rebuild my church. In a sense, it's a way of saying, “Pick up the pieces and see what you can do creatively in this situation.”

In his life, what happens to him in that what I would call a fourth stage of *harmony*, as we were talking about a few minutes ago, he sees his connection with everyone. He’s willing to embrace a leper, which was seen as the most horrible point of contact you could have. And he develops a love for the poor. He even starts to understand we human beings are connected to the wolf and the birds and the other living creatures, and even to the moon and the stars. And he sees this all as being connected in that beautiful canticle to the sun. We’ll be talking about those four stages, and that’s what this book, “Faith After Doubt,” explores: these four stages as a way of understanding natural progression. It’s not a set of rules. It’s just a pattern, just like we have winter, spring, summer, and fall. You can have a couple of warm days in the winter, and a couple of chilly days in summer. They’re not exactly rules, but it’s a pattern. And I think this pattern kind of helps explains what a lot of us experience.

**Steve:** At the FSC in our programs, and within my work as a spiritual director, I meet many people who are in or who are entering the fourth stage of faith. This can be a lonely place. In the future, do you think we’re likely to find Stage Four churches? Or will people who identify with the Stage Four faith find spiritual support in other sorts of communities and gatherings, like spirituality centers?

**Brian:** Such an insightful [question]. That’s exactly why I think spirituality centers are so important now, and they have been in our past history. I’ll tell you something as someone who grew up Protestant, there is this dirty little secret that spread among Protestant clergy that they were sneaking off on weekends to the local Franciscan center, the local Benedictine center, and they would meet with a nun or with a brother who would be their spiritual director because it was the only place where they would be invited to face their questions, and invited to listen to what was happening in their soul. The way I would say it is I think those kinds of centers – retreat centers and open monastic communities – there were midwifes helping people give birth to Stage Three and Stage Four faith. They played such an important role, and I imagine they will continue to do so in the future. But I think part of the foment and dynamic and promise of this moment, this is such a difficult time. But it could be that we’re giving birth to a shift where we could be in a very different place in 20 or 30 years.

I think early-stage forms of Christianity right now are doubling down, circling the wagons and digging in their heels and locking the doors. I think that’s going to continue happening. What that will do is drive more and more people out, and they’ll be looking for other communities. What I envision, what I hope can happen – and I think it’s up to all of us to play a role in this – is that we would have communities that are led by people in Stage Four. [And] those people in Stage Four would learn how to speak the language of people in Stages One, Two and Three, so that they’d help them do the work and learn the lessons of their stage, but always let them know that there’s something more. This is kind of a silly example, but I think I was in sixth grade – it might have been seventh grade; I’ve forgotten now. After about four days of school, I got bronchitis and I missed three weeks of school. I was very sick. When I left in math class, we were using numbers. When I came back, they were using letters – 3x plus y equals … I was so lost. I was so confused. What I wish somebody would have told me is, “Right now we’re only using letters, but you’re going to do a kind of math down the road. You’ll use numbers and letters, and that is something you’re going to learn eventually.” I just remember being terrified by the letters, by algebra. It just terrified me because I never even knew that such a thing was waiting for me down the road.

It would be so great if we had more spiritual leaders who help people have this sense that, where you are now is good, and there are things for you to learn where you are. But just remember, there will be something more, and there will always be something more because life is an unending series of opportunities for curiosity and discovery and learning and growth.

**Steve:** I know that you do work with Richard Rohr. Thinking about what a Stage Four church might look like, I wonder if one variation of that is his daily emails. What’s he up to, like a half-million people a day? Basically, everybody I know I consider a spiritual friend, that’s where they get fed on a daily basis. To what degree is that a prototype of a Stage Four church?

**Brian:** It really could be, and I think this is one of these things that we’re all having to unlatch the box and imagine new possibilities. I’ll give you an example. Here, if I spend five minutes a day reading that daily meditation, at the end of a week I’ve spent 35 minutes listening to some wise, carefully edited and presented teaching. I’ve gotten more than a sermon’s worth just divided out over seven days, so instead of listening to one 35-minute sermon, I’ve had seven five-minute sermons in a sense. Not only that, but I’ve had the chance to think about them because if I get a five-minute input, that gives me something I can think about through the day. If I get 35 minutes, I’ve probably forgotten the first 25 minutes, and I only remember the last few things. So, you could even imagine there being an even greater educational impact from that.

As you know, in many spiritual centers of different sorts, they have weekend retreats or weeklong retreats. And I often think some people may be, instead of attending church 52 times a year for one hour, will be part of a spiritual community that gathers for 52 hours once a year. And the intensity of that experience may turn out to be as great or greater, especially if there’s a daily contact by an email in between. We’re just at a place of … I think we have to give ourselves permission to say that anything is possible, and that maybe this is where the spirit of God will work through us to seize these opportunities creatively to help spread hope and life and light and freedom even more.

**Steve:** How long have you been talking about a variation of Fourth Stage Faith?

**Brian:** I wrote a book – I think it was in 2010 – called “Naked Spirituality.” That was the first time I put any of these ideas in print. But it was probably a few years before that in my time as a pastor. I actually remember I was having lunch with a fellow minister who was going through a really, really hard time. I had been thinking about this, and I didn’t even have those words “simplicity,” “complexity,” “perplexity,” and “harmony,” but I had been reading other human developmental theorists. Many people in the Christian tradition would know the work of Fowler and Kohlberg and a number of others, and I tried to share with him some of those ideas because he was in a very dark place and he was planning to leave the ministry. What was clear to me is that he felt something was wrong with him, but it was clear to me he was growing. I remember in that conversation with him over lunch, I left him thinking, “I’m telling him this, but I need to hear this myself.” That’s sort of where the beginnings of “Faith After Doubt” took place, and the earlier book “Naked Spirituality.”

**Steve:** I would say that there is a strong prophetic component to your work. I think you and I grew up in similar environments. Prophets were people who could foretell the future. I don’t think that’s a very helpful understanding of prophecy. It’s like “The Emperor’s New Clothes” [and] being the one who says, “Hey, the guy’s not wearing any clothes.” I see you doing a lot of prophetic work. What is the public toll of this work for you, personally?

**Brian:** I really did not set out to do that kind of work. I’m not a fighter by nature, but in my years as a pastor I started having to make choices between being honest and getting in trouble, or being dishonest and staying out of trouble. My conscience just bothered me too much when I was dishonest, so I tried to be honest. But I was not very well introduced to, especially issues of social justice – it just wasn’t part of my religious training or even my family training – but a sense of morality and being honest and treating people well was. I’m just enough older than you that this could be true of me [and] probably less likely for you – at least for you to remember. The church I attended as a child was a segregated church. There were some very white men in suits and ties who looked very professional. And if a Black person came, they’d be treated very respectfully, but somebody would tell them, “Here’s the name of a church of our denomination that you would …”. It was all very polite, but it was white supremacy in a suit and tie. My parents knew that was wrong, and they did what they could to get around it. We would have people at our table of all different races and religions, so they modeled this for me as a child, for which I will forever be grateful.

But what happened is during my years as a pastor, one by one I was confronted with social issues that forced to then face the next one and the next one and the next one. Of course, as you say, the prophetic tradition in the Bible is really, really deep. Because I was a preacher, I remember once I was reading through the Book of Isaiah. And when I read through Isaiah, it was just clear that Isaiah’s fury at lack of compassion for the poor and the widow and the elderly, and Isaiah’s dream that someday we would have a world without war and a world without poverty and oppression. Those things began to soak their way into me, so I was sort of lured into a more prophetic kind of faith in those ways.

**Steve:** How do you remain resilient in the face of challenge or even hostility and attack? I’m sure you’re careful when you read Twitter or Instagram or whatever.

**Brian:** Actually, you asked about this a few minutes ago, and I don’t even think I did a good job of answering it then. I confronted this a lot in my late 30s and early 40s, and I was unprepared. I was defensive and I was hurt, and I took everything personally. I won’t go into all the details, but two things happened. I had a major Christian periodical take one of my books – I wrote a book called “The New Kind of Christian” – they took it very seriously in that they devoted four reviews in four successive issues of their magazine to the book. One was sympathetic, one was critical, one was hostile, and then I was allowed to write a response. In the writing of that response, I stayed up late and I finished my response, and thank God I didn’t hit “send.” I decided to wait until the next morning. When I read it the next morning, it was so defensive and it was so passive-aggressive. I just felt it was dripping with ego, and I thought, “Gosh, this is the first really negative set of reviews I’ve gotten. I’m probably going to get a lot more. If I keep this up, I’m not going to like who I am.” I just felt sort of a little pressure in my spirit, and I hit “delete” instead of “send” and started over. That was sort of the start of saying, “I don’t want to play that game.”

The second thing that happened [is], one of my mentors handed me a little handout. You might remember ditto paper; it was a dittoed handout. It was the prayer of a Serbian Orthodox bishop. In fact, if people are interested, on my website they could look it up – it’s called “Prayer for Enemies.” [They’ll find it] if they just go to the little “Search” bar and put “Prayer for Enemies.” He handed this to me and he said, “I think you’re going to need this.” What that did is it helped me see it wasn’t what people said to me or about me that was going to hurt me. It was how I responded to it that would hurt me. It helped me take seriously my own internal response. I can’t explain how much good that did to me. Literally, that little mimeograph of two pages sat on the corner of my desk for a couple of years. And when one of these bad reviews or kind of a nasty attack – this was before Twitter – I would take that prayer and literally just pray it through. It's very long, but I almost memorized it. I just read it so deeply.