

# A READING OF JOHN 14:6



BRIAN MCLAREN

## A Reading of John 14:6

By Brian McLaren

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**A Note from Brian:** *This material was included in an early draft of The Secret Message of Jesus (W/Thomas Nelson, 2006), but I felt it went too far afield from the main subject and required a level of detail that wasn't appropriate for the broad audience of that book. So, I wanted to make it available for friends of emergentvillage.com. Feel free to use it for discussion – charitable dialogue, not bitter argument! – but please do not take parts of it out of context. That would be unfair to me and the text (John 14:6) itself. If you duplicate it for a small group or class discussion, please only duplicate it in its entirety, with this introduction. See [brianmclaren.net](http://brianmclaren.net) for additional articles and resources, and [emergentvillage.com](http://emergentvillage.com) for more about this generative friendship for missional Christians.*



It is one of the questions I am asked most frequently: “Do you think Jesus is the only way?” Sometimes Christians ask it as a test question, to see if I give the right answer. Sometimes nonChristians ask it, hoping to hear the opposite answer as the right answer.

The question raises another question, actually: “The only way to what?” If you want to learn about the eight noble truths or the four-fold path, Buddha is the way, not Jesus. If you want to learn about submission to Allah, Jesus can’t help you, but Mohammed can. If you want to talk about the triumph of the proletariat over the controlling elites, or the relation of id, ego, and superego, talk to Marx or Freud, and if you want to learn about how to get rich quick (without work) or healthy immediately (without diet or exercise) through faith and prayer, there are some prosperity televangelists who make bold promises, but not Jesus. If it’s the way to wealth through no-money-down real estate that you’re seeking, or the way to marriage without risk, or the way to world domination through terrorism or military conquest, Jesus is not your man. Nor does he want to be.

But if you are asking about the *kingdom of God* coming to earth, what that means, how that can happen, and how we can participate in it, Buddha, Mohammed, and all the others will step back and Jesus will step forward. This amazing metaphor of the *kingdom of God* ... this was Jesus’ specialty, and frankly, his pre-eminence in that field is far more secure than Michael Jordan’s in the game of basketball, Bill Gates’ in the computer industry, or Osama bin Laden’s in terrorism. (This is the topic of my book *The Secret Message of Jesus*, W Publishing Group, 2006.) True, the religions associated with Jesus have often had a pretty poor track record of seeking the kingdom of God (or even speaking about it meaningfully), but that’s another subject for another time.


One reason for the bad track record, I believe, is this: Many of us try to answer the first question without first answering the second, based on the assumption that the question means, “Is Jesus the only way to get to heaven after you die?” Teasing out some of the other assumptions that lie beneath the question, one might rephrase it like this: “Is personally hearing about and believing in certain statements or concepts about Jesus Christ the only way

to avoid burning forever in hell?" This is often posed as a kind of multiple-choice examination, so that one must answer:

a.) ☐ No

b.) ☐ Yes

Although many of us Christians are secretly uncomfortable with answer b), we feel that we are being unfaithful unless we choose it, largely because of *John 14:6*, where Jesus says, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*



This is the verse that is frequently quoted to defend an idea called the “exclusivity of Christ,” namely, that all who do not consciously and decisively accept Jesus as their personal savior will burn forever in hell. That phrase raises concerns for me, because based on the Scriptures, I believe Jesus primarily came not to proclaim a way out of hell for some after death, but rather a way into a better life for all before death. His message was not about going to heaven after history, but about the kingdom of heaven coming to earth in history. His goal – made clear in word and deed, day after day during his three years of public ministry – was not to constrict but rather to expand the dimensions of who could be welcomed into the kingdom of God, of who could be accepted in the people of God. So my understanding of Jesus’ essential message tells me that “exclusivity of” should generally precede “the Pharisees” or “the judgmental” or “the hypocrites,” and never “Christ.” But if I try to avoid checking the blank before answer b.), some ask, how am I being faithful to Jesus’ words in *John 14:6*?

I believe we need to look more closely at this important passage so we stop quoting it to answer a question it was never intended to answer.

One of the most basic and widely-accepted principles of biblical interpretation says that to interpret a text out of context is a pretext. In other words, if you pull a verse out of its setting, you may unwittingly (or intentionally) twist it to make it say things it was never intended to say. Another way to say nearly the same thing: a statement should have made some degree of sense to its original hearers, so we should favor interpretations that would have come to mind for those who first heard that statement. Scripture-twisting – failing to allow the meaning of a passage of Scripture to arise from its original literary

and social context – has a long history – regarding slavery, racism, the treatment of women, justification for various wars, hunting and burning women accused of being witches, torture of heretics, predictions about the end of the world, fights about evolution, and so on.

With our time-tested propensity to twist Scripture in mind, I have noticed that *John 14:6* is often quoted out of context so that it seems to say, “I am in the way of your getting to truth and life. I will keep everyone from getting to the Father unless they get by me first.” One would think that the context reads like this:

**You should be very troubled, because if you believe in God, but not me, you will be shut out of my Father’s house in heaven, where there are a few small rooms for the few who get it right.... Then Thomas said to him, “Lord, what about people who have never even heard of you? Will they go to heaven after they die?” Jesus said to him, “I am the only way to heaven, and the truth about me is the only truth that will get you to life after death. Not one person will go to heaven unless they personally understand and believe a clearly-defined message about me and personally and consciously ask me to come into their heart.” (Not *John 14:1-6*)**

Is this close to what *John 14:6* means? To find out, we need to go back to the actual text, read carefully, and take the context very seriously – both the immediate context, and the larger context of Jesus’ life and mission. We have to try to hear the words of this verse in the context of the conversation of which they are part. We have to refuse all interpretations that we could not imagine as part of Jesus’ communication process with his original conversation partners. For immediate context, let’s begin midway through the previous chapter. As we read, we have to put ourselves into the disciples’ sandals and hear through their ears; the sense we make of the text today should have made sense to them.

It’s a dramatic time. Jesus has just washed the disciples’ feet – expressing the fact that in his kingdom, things are scandalously





different from among “the leaders of the Gentiles.” For Jesus, leadership means servanthood, not domination. Shortly after setting this example of servanthood in this dramatic way, Judas has been identified as the betrayer. Then the narrative continues:

**When he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ”**  
(13:31-33)

This statement – *that Jesus is going somewhere, but his disciples can’t follow*, forms the common thread that the conversation will follow and to which it will keep returning. (Jesus said something strikingly similar to the Pharisees and priests in 7:33-36, an important passage that gives additional background for this scene.) It’s understandable that the disciples would be troubled by this; after all, their identity is wrapped up in being his followers, but they’re being told he is going somewhere they cannot follow. Where is it that Jesus is going? Heaven? Then he would be saying nobody can go to heaven. It’s far more likely that he’s saying something like this, “I’ve just been betrayed by one of my own friends. This betrayal begins my glorification. God is about to glorify me in a way even more shocking than my reversal of the master playing the role of servant, washing your feet. I am going to be glorified by willingly accepting suffering and death on a cross. You cannot go there with me, as this is my unique calling, the cup of shame and suffering I must drink alone.”

This is just a prelude, though. Jesus is building up to make another point, so he moves from what they *cannot do* to telling them what they *must do*:

**I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**  
(13:34-35)

Now all the gospels seem to take delight in pointing out how the disciples (my friend Len Sweet calls them the “duh-siples”) just don’t get it, and here’s a great case in point. Jesus has just said to love one another, and he has



highlighted these words dramatically by suggesting that they are among his last words to them before departing from them. In addition, he has used the provocative phrase “new commandment” – which seems to suggest he’s mirroring Moses in inaugurating a new era as lawgiver with one overarching commandment in place of ten, or hundreds. He has demonstrated his love for them in deed (by washing their feet, taking the role of a humble servant) and now translates his teaching by example into a clear verbal command to those who will stay with him, those who have not “gone out” to betray him: “Love one another.”

But Peter treats all this as a distraction and returns to Jesus’ previous words about going somewhere they cannot go. It’s as if a man creates suspense for his sweetheart by saying, “I went to a jewelry store the other day and bought something for you. I have a very important question to ask you. Your answer will change both of our lives forever. Would you be my...” But the woman interrupts, “Just a minute. Which jewelry store did you go to? And which car did you drive to get there? And what route did you take?” – oblivious to the fact that he’s about to propose to her. She just doesn’t get it, and neither does Peter.

**Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, where are you going?’ Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards.” Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.” (13:36-38)**

It becomes clear almost beyond question here: Jesus is not talking about going to heaven. He’s talking about going to suffering and death. Let’s paraphrase it in that light:

**“Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will suffer for you to the point of death.” Jesus answered, “Someday you will follow me into suffering, but not now. Now you will deny me.”**

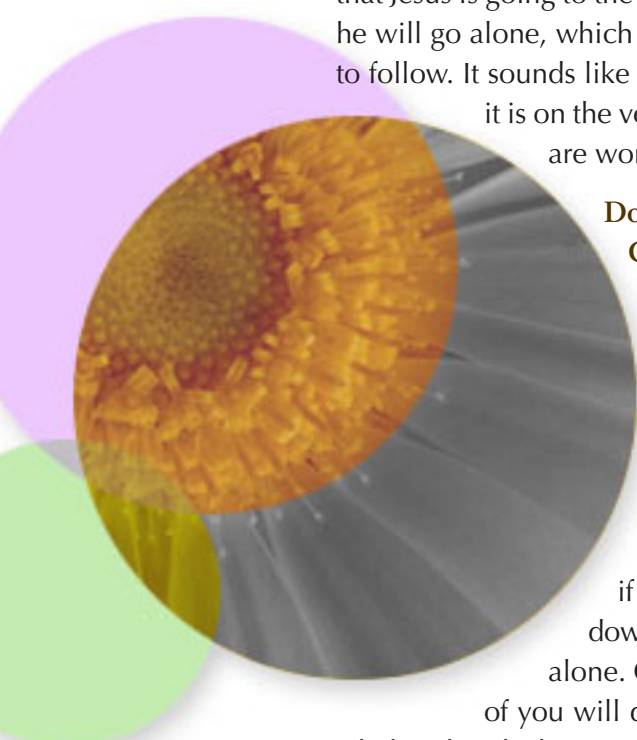
This, by the way, perfectly parallels a conversation Jesus had with James and John when their mother asked for seats to Jesus’ right and left in his kingdom (*Matthew 20:20*). There, instead of using the language of “going where I go,” Jesus uses the phrase “drink the cup I drink.” Like Peter, they claim great

loyalty, and Jesus similarly affirms that someday indeed, they will suffer for him – but not now.

Now, tonight, Jesus says, “You won’t even be able to withstand being asked if you know me. You will deny that you are my acquaintance, much less my disciple or my friend. So it’s clear: I’m heading to suffering and death, but you aren’t strong or brave enough to go with me.”

Now that’s a troubling statement! It’s bad enough that one of Jesus’ disciples has just left to betray him, and now the most outspoken disciple has just been identified as being grossly cowardly and unfaithful. It’s worse still that Jesus is going to the strange glorification of suffering and death – and that he will go alone, which will leave his followers temporarily without a leader to follow. It sounds like the wheels are falling off their whole adventure, like

it is on the verge of crashing in ruin. No wonder Jesus’ next words are words of reassurance.



**Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (14:1-3)**

Do you feel the flow of the conversation? It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Listen, you can’t accompany me down the bitter path to suffering and death I must take alone. One of you has just left me to betray me, and another of you will deny you even know me. But it’s OK. Don’t be overwhelmed with discouragement. Love one another. Keep faith in God. Keep faith in me. I will go alone into suffering and death. But beyond the suffering and death, I will arrive home – home in my Father’s house. And you’ll be with me there.”

Now before we assume that “my Father’s house” means “heaven” – which it may, but I doubt it – we should at least be open to the possibility that this phrase actually refers to the overall message of Jesus. What Matthew, Mark, and Luke call “the Kingdom of God,” John generally translates into the terms “life,” “eternal life,” or “life to the full.” So let’s consider the possibility that “kingdom of God” is here rendered in yet another kind of parallel language – “house of God” or perhaps “family of God.” (This, by the way, is the line of interpretation followed by Leslie Newbigin in his commentary on John,



called *The Light Has Come* [Eerdman's, 1982]). All of these phrases would suggest the same reality: in God's presence, in God's territory, in a place where God's will is joyfully done.

Either way, the force of Jesus' words seem to go like this: "Don't worry. I am going somewhere you cannot go, but the purpose of my going on ahead without you is so that I can prepare a place where we can be together again. I will return to you and bring you to be with me. You can't go with me now, but be assured, you'll be with me soon in that place, that territory, that home or kingdom of God – and there will be a place for you there. You will be welcome there because of what I'm about to do."

In this reading, "I will come again" means Jesus' resurrection and all it entails. "You have been with me every step of the way, but I am going to go alone to suffering and death. But after my suffering and death, I will come back and will bring you into my Father's house or kingdom so we can be together again." Although I think the "heaven" reading is possible, where "I will come again" would refer to what theologians and preachers call "the second coming of Christ," I think the kingdom reading is more likely, as it more closely resonates with Jesus' statements in the other gospels and better fits the immediate context. As well, Jesus will shortly say "I am ... the life," and again, "the life" is one of Jesus' ways (in John's gospel) of saying "the kingdom of God" – life lived in an interactive relationship with God.

Now Jesus returns to his earlier point, preparing them for the shock of his suffering and death: "You know that for me to reach my glory, and for me to go to prepare a new place for you, I have to suffer and die first." But Thomas, like Peter, has a chronically low "get-it factor," and so he asks a question, and it is a thousand miles away from "What about people who never heard about you? Will they go to heaven?"

**[Jesus said,] "And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'" (14:4-5)**

What is Thomas asking here? If we don't properly understand his question, it's highly likely that we'll miss the meaning of Jesus' answer. But here's the problem. It's clear he is not asking anything like "Will people who have never heard of you go to heaven?" It's clear he's *not* thinking about Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Zoroastrians, followers of tribalism in Africa or South America, much less modern secular atheists or skeptics of modern or postmodern bent. He and his fellow disciples are thinking





about themselves, the disciples, and only *themselves* – in their dismay that Jesus their leader will now go somewhere they can't follow, that Jesus has said they know the way to meet him beyond their separation, but they haven't a clue as to what he's talking about.

So, although it's clear what Thomas is not asking, it's not entirely clear what he *is* asking. As I read the passage, he's saying, "Lord, we're confused. We have no idea what you're talking about. We don't know what destination you're talking about, so how can we know what the route is to that destination?" I read Thomas' question as an expression of frustration as much as a plea for some specific information. He can't ask for specific information because he is too confused even know what to ask! What if we read Jesus' answer, then, not as an explanation or answer – certainly not an answer to a question about the eternal destiny of people who never heard of or believe in Jesus – but as a repetition and reinforcement of what Jesus has just given them: *reassurance*? He has just said, "Don't be troubled. Trust God. Trust me." Now he repeats the reassurance:

**Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."  
(14:6-7)**

In this light, Jesus is saying, "Listen, you don't need to understand all this. You simply need to trust me. Don't look for a way apart from me. Don't look for a route or destination – some concept or technique or system of thought that is separate from me. I'm not trying to give you information or instructions so you no longer need me and can instead depend on the information or instructions. No – just trust me. Everything you need is in me. I will bring you to my Father's house [whether that means heaven after death or the kingdom of God on earth]. 'The way' or 'the truth' or 'the life' aren't things separate from me. *I am these things, so you'll find them in me!* Whether or not you know what I've been talking about, if you know me, you know the Father, you know the way, you know the truth, you know the life."

As I read the passage, Jesus is saying, "Don't ask me to show you something apart from me. All you are looking for is found in me. I have spoken to you about the way to live. I have spoken to you of a truth to which many are blind. I have spoken to you of life, life of the ages, life to the full. Don't you realize it? The way is the truth, and the truth is the life, and the life is the truth, and the life is the way ... and all of these are found in me."

But what of “No one comes to the Father except through me?” Clearly, taken in context, these words are not intended as an insult to followers of Mohammed, the Buddha, Lao Tsu, Enlightenment rationalism, or anybody or anything else. Rather, the “no one” here refers to Jesus’ own disciples, who seem to want to trust some information – a plan, a diagram, a map, instructions, technique – so they can get to God or the kingdom of God without or apart from Jesus, since he has just told them he is leaving them for a while at least.

Stretch your imagination and put yourself in the disciples’ situation. Jesus just told you he is going away and you can’t come with him. Then he says you know how to get where he is going. You don’t understand what he’s talking about. You have no idea where he is going, so how can you know the way to get there? Maybe you assume that since he’s going, you need detailed information on how to meet up with him later on. So you want the missing information so you can get yourself to wherever it is you’re supposed to go. But he tells you to trust him, because he will work everything out. He’ll get you to where you need to be. What a far cry from asking about the eternal destiny of people from other religions or periods in history who had no access to belief in Jesus!


To repeat, putting *John 14:6* in context, Jesus’ meaning becomes clear: “Guys,” he’s saying, “it’s not about knowing information, techniques, directions, or instructions: it’s about knowing me, trusting me! Stay in relationship with me, abide in me, and I’ll get you to the place where you belong – the kingdom of God, knowing God, living in dynamic interactive relationship with God – the place that I’ve been telling you about from the beginning!” In this way, “I am the way ... there’s no other way apart from me” is a restatement of reassurance: “Trust in God, trust also in me. Don’t let your hearts be troubled – trust me!”

This reading takes seriously the play on the word “know.” Thomas is saying, “How can we have intellectual clarity on where you’re going or the route or technique to get there?” Jesus replies, “You don’t need intellectual clarity: you need personal knowledge. It’s not a matter of ‘knowing about,’ but rather, ‘knowing.’” Remember, this theme of personal knowing as interactive relationship is strong through all of John’s gospel – and in just two chapters, Jesus will say, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” “I am the life” in *John 14*, then, has a powerful resonance in *John 17* with “Eternal life is to know God and to know me.”



But the “non-get-it-factor” continues, and now, following in the clueless tradition of Peter and Thomas, Philip speaks up. Notice again the theme of knowing.

**Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.” (14:8-11)**



To me, the dynamic core of this passage is found not in verse 6, but in verse 9: *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*. Here the irony becomes nearly unbearable (to me), as we contrast this statement with the conventional interpretation of verse 6. Jesus says in verse 9 that the invisible God has been made visible in his life. “If you want to know what God is like,” Jesus says, “look at me, my life, my way, my deeds, my character.” And what has that character been? One of exclusion, rejection, constriction, elitism, favoritism, and condemnation? Of course not! Jesus’ way has been compassion, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, inclusion, and love from beginning to end. But our conventional interpretation of verse 6 seems to say, “Forget all that. Forget everything you’ve seen in me ... the way I’ve lived and treated people, the way I’ve accepted prostitutes and tax collectors, the way I’ve welcomed a Roman centurion and a Samaritan woman. Forget all that. Believe instead that God will reject everyone except people who share your doctrinal viewpoints about me, because I won’t let anyone get to the Father unless they get by me first.” It makes me want to scream.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By the way, it would also make me want to scream if you misread what I’m saying to mean, “It doesn’t matter what you believe. Anything goes. God doesn’t care.” That would be equally ridiculous! By looking at what Jesus cares about, we see what God cares about, including what makes God angry: carelessness towards the poor and vulnerable, putting religious rules over relationships, complacency, a lack of compassion, and so much more.



Like us, in this time of uncertainty the disciples want to fall back on conclusive data (“Show us the Father. That’s all we ask!”), clarity, intellectual knowledge, something they can grasp with or without Jesus. But Jesus keeps turning them forward, toward trust. He keeps wanting to lead them ahead to trust even when he will not be physically present; he calls them to continuing obedience and love – to how they should live. They want a roadmap but he gives them a promise, a promise of his continuing presence, which he will soon elucidate in his words about the Comforter and in his powerful image of a branch abiding in a vine. In fact, if they will trust him through this uncertain time when he will leave them and go somewhere they cannot follow, they will discover not an end to their adventure, but an exciting new chapter. He will still be available to them, empowering them to do even greater works than they’ve seen him do so far:

**Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.**  
(14:12-14)

Then Jesus comes back to the theme of knowing – personal knowing in an interactive relationship. Another reason I prefer the kingdom-focused reading of this passage comes in this paragraph, where the destination, the future beyond the immediate future when Jesus will go where they cannot go, involves the Spirit being not just with them (presumably embodied in Jesus) but also in them, embodied in them. When they are in this new place, the house of the Father (or kingdom of God), the Spirit will actually be in them. Interestingly, at this point he brings them back to his new commandment which they had brushed aside with their other questions and concerns:


**If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it**



**neither sees him nor knows him. You know him,  
because he abides with you, and he will be in you.  
(14:15-17)**

Once again, Jesus comes to the consistent theme that he began with back in chapter 13: *I am leaving, going where you cannot come. But trust me: you'll get through this, and you'll be with me – and even more, I will be in you, and you in me:*

**I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In  
a little while the world will no longer see me, but you  
will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that  
day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in  
me, and I in you. (14:18-20)**



I don't know if the irony strikes you again as it does me, but the conventional approach to *John 14:6* – giving us information on who will be in heaven and who won't – is perfectly in synch with the general cluelessness of the disciples. We show ourselves to be their descendents, wanting clarity, technique, intellectual knowledge – apart from personal confidence in Christ. We want to know with clarity exactly who's "in" and who's "out." Our preoccupation gives rise to the uncomfortable suspicion that some of us won't be as happy being "in" unless sufficient numbers of people are "out." But Jesus gives us not the in-and-out information we may want, but what we actually need: he reassures us that we don't have to understand everything as long as we trust him, and the vision of the Father we receive through him.

If we trust him, then, we will have what we need, even though we may not have all the answers. That includes conclusive answers to our persistent curiosity about who is in and who is out. This kind of question, by the way, may receive the same answer Jesus gives to Peter seven chapters ahead: *What is that to you? You follow me!* If we stop looking for information apart from Jesus and instead focus on trusting Jesus, we will obey his commandment to love one another, and we will do great things – even greater things (we wouldn't dare to say this if Jesus' hadn't said it himself) than Jesus, and we will be at home with the Father, living in the Father's territory (God's house, kingdom), and even more: we will experience God (Father, Son, Spirit) living in us.

There are other passages in Scripture you can go to if you want to further explore the question of how God deals with people who have never heard about Jesus, or Judaism, or Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Taken in its original and proper context, *John 14:6*, I hope it is clear, isn't addressing that question at all, not even close. The backdrop for any speculation is the awareness that God is exactly like Jesus in his perfect integration of compassion and justice, perfectly wise and completely dependable to make good judgments, and we (obviously!) are not. That's where I think it best to leave things.

Is Jesus the only way? It depends on where we're trying to go. If we want to abandon the earth as a lost cause and evacuate upward to heaven as soon as possible, I suspect we're going in a different direction than Jesus. His movement has been downward, and as the Father sent him, so he has sent us. Paul said it well:

**In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:**

**Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**  
*(Philippians 2:5-11)*

Jesus' movement is downward. Heaven to earth, earth to humanity, humanity to servanthood, servanthood to suffering and death. He doesn't teach us to pray, "May we go to heaven where your will is done, unlike earth," but rather, "May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as

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<sup>2</sup> For example, I'd look at *Romans 2:1-29, 5:12-21, 11:25-36*. I'd also follow the theme of the "righteous outsider" in the Old Testament – with characters like Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, etc. I would also take into account passages like *Amos 9:7* and *Acts 17:24-28*. But even in considering these texts, it will be essential to examine the pre-critical assumptions we bring to our reading, including the assumption that the Bible is primarily concerned with who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. That's a subject I explored in *The Last Word and the Word After That* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), and to which I hope to return in the future.

in heaven.” If that’s where we want to go, to get earthy and to manifest the kingdom of heaven on earth, then you won’t find anyone else leading you there. Only Jesus. May we shift our direction so that we seek to move down with him, in the direction of incarnation not abandonment, in the direction of involvement and identification not elitism and escape, to go where he went for the reason he went, in love and service to the worst of sinners, sinners like you and me. Amen.



# A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO BRIAN MCLAREN'S READING OF JOHN 14:6

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What if the questions we're asking aren't the ones that Jesus is interested in answering? What then?

I live and work in a city of 100,000 people in the metropolitan region between Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland. The area is incredibly diverse, and everyone I know has relationships with people who are not Christians. Members of my congregation have close friendships with their Muslim neighbors and deep respect for their Buddhist or Hindu co-workers. They have attended a number of interfaith weddings (sometimes for their own children) and have gathered at the homes of neighbors for a Passover Seder.

In a community like this, questions about the saving power of religion (my own or somebody else's) are an inevitable by-product of our daily lives. We're not asking these questions to trap theological adversaries. We're trying to figure out how to live as people who both love Jesus and seek to follow his commandment to love our neighbors.

What if, as McLaren suggests, the questions we're asking aren't ones that Jesus is interested in answering? Certainly, it's important to notice this disconnection, and placing scripture in context helps us do this. We spend a lot of time doing this in my congregation. We put verses back into chapters; chapters into books; and books back into the social, political, and religious climate in which they were written.

But what then? When we learn that Jesus is talking about something other than the questions that are on the forefront of our minds, it is tempting to just shrug and walk away, looking for another teacher who will address our questions more directly. Is there another way to respond? Is there any way to bring ourselves to a place where we're asking the questions that Jesus is answering?

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In my mind, this is where Christian communities come in. Our questions arise from our experiences, and so it is the church's job not just to answer questions, but to shape and direct our experience. We seek to live lives together that will help us to explore and wonder about the things that Jesus most cared about. This is one of the main reasons why I think Christians need communities, and why the most important work Emergent does is not training leaders or scholars or even posing important questions, but rather supporting faith communities.

I am convinced, as McLaren is, that the Kingdom of God is at the heart of Jesus' teaching and ministry – it's what he cares about. And it's clear to me that the Kingdom of God he's talking about is not just a promise or a dream, but something that has been planted in this world and is growing right in our midst. We can experience the Kingdom of God – notice it in surprising places and get involved and invested in it. That's an experience churches can help people have, especially when we are rooted in the practices that were central to Jesus' life and ministry: sitting at tables with people who are "outsiders" in our culture, reaching out to those who are sick or hurting, fighting against injustice, taking time to step back and pray in silence.

When our congregations are rooted in the language and the experience of the Kingdom, we stop seeing ourselves as guards and gatekeepers and start seeing ourselves as roving gardeners. We're propelled to notice the tender shoots of God's Kingdom wherever they are growing. We devote ourselves to tending, weeding and watering those sprouts in ourselves, in our church community, and in the wider world, and we point them out to others so they don't get stomped on.

Our experience of the Kingdom of God provokes questions too, but I believe they are more like the questions that Jesus seeks to answer. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, is a model for me here. As a priest in the temple in Jerusalem, he is stunned when an angel tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, will soon become pregnant. Shouldn't the temple be the stage for divine activity? Why the womb of a woman, far away from the sacred places and priests? But the angel strikes Zechariah dumb, and nine months of silence makes him see things differently. When he acknowledges that God is active in the world, in surprising ways, he sings about God's amazing promise "to guide our feet in the way of peace."

His song leaves everyone wondering – how will God do this? But the shift has happened. The story is no longer driven by people who lecture God about what the rules are. Now, the story is about people who wonder and delight in the amazing ways in which God surpasses even our expectations for what God can do.