

The Alpha & Omega

— By Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola —



Photo by Millan Knapik

Christians have always held to the eternal mystery that God is triune: Father, Son, and Spirit—one God, three persons, one substance.

From the beginning, God eternally poured all of himself into his Son by the Spirit, and the Son eternally poured

himself into his Father by the Spirit. Immanuel Kant could not have been more wrong when he wrote dismissively of the Trinity in the eighteenth century, “The Trinity has got no relevance to practical living.”

The eternal dance of divine life, love, communion, par-

ticipation, and self-emptying within the triune God is central to the Christian life, to ministry, to the community of faith, and to the faithfulness of its mission. Most of all, it teaches us that just as God is not alone even when God is alone, so you are not alone even when you are alone. We don't have to go down to the "valley of the shadow" all alone.

It is only through Jesus Christ that we enter into this eternal dance. And it is only through Christ that we come to know the triune God and the loving fellowship of the Father, Son, and Spirit. As John tells us, the incarnate Son is the Father's self-utterance and self-expression. As Paul tells us, the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ. All the fullness, the sum total, the full supply and reservoir of Godhood is concentrated in Jesus.

For this reason Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who conceived of his life as a "witness to Jesus Christ," said, "In Jesus Christ the reality of God entered into the reality of this world... Henceforward one can speak neither of God nor of the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality which do not take account of him are abstractions."

A false dichotomy

There is a disturbing trend today. Many Christians have separated the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. Those who promote this disconnect fall off one side of the horse or the other. They either focus on the Jesus of the Gospels to the neglect of the Christ that Paul presented in his letters, or they focus on Paul's revelation of Christ (usually as Savior in both Romans and Galatians) and make the Jesus of the Gospels an end-note.

Neither view lands us in the saddle. Both make the fundamental flaw of turning the Jesus of the Gospels into something different from the Jesus revealed in Paul's letters.

But the truth is that the Jesus who walked the shores of Galilee is the same person who indwells the church today. There is no disconnect between the Jesus of Mark's Gospel and the incredible, all-sufficient, cosmic Christ of Colossians. The Christ who lived in the first century had a pre-existence before time, and a post-existence, after time as we know it has ended. He is Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, A and Z all at the same moment. He stands in the future and at the end of time at the same second that he exists within every child of God. Failure to embrace these paradoxical truths has created monumental problems and

generated divisive debates (open versus classical theism, election versus free will, and so on), and has diminished Christ's greatness in the eyes of God's people.

Looking unto Jesus

Let's go back to the first century and take another look at our Lord. "Come and behold him." We bless and are blessed as we simply "behold him," not as we boast of talents or do "great things," but as "we look full in his wonderful face." Everyday "beholding" releases Jesus, especially when that beholding is done by a community.

Watch him at a wedding in Cana. According to the custom of that day, the bridegroom was responsible for supplying the food and wine. You know the story. The wine ran out. This represented a social disgrace—a grave oversight on the part of the bridegroom.

Behold our Lord's first miracle. He turns water into wine—but no ordinary wine. He creates a wine that is finer than the wine that had run out. In one brilliant stroke of compassion, Jesus Christ removes the bridegroom's shame. He supplies the lack. He covers the mistake. He removes the disgrace. He reverses the failure. And he makes the bridegroom look

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What a Christ.

Watch him as he encounters a battered, abused, shamed, and forgotten woman. She's a Samaritan of ill repute—a five-time divorcée. Our Lord breaks all social conventions by talking to her in public. But that's not all. He shares with her one of the greatest truths that a human being can know. In addition, he breaks Jewish custom by using her utensils and eating with her friends in a Samaritan village (something Jews were forbidden to do). Here is a Lord who embraces a dejected woman and woos her and her friends to himself.

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Watch him as he allows a working girl to love him in the house of a Pharisee. She pours expensive perfume on his feet, unbinds her hair, and uses it as a towel to anoint his feet. Such an act is scandalous (for a woman to unbind her hair in that day was akin to publicly removing her bra in our day). The Pharisees move into high-octane-judgment mode toward Jesus and the woman. And what does the Lord do? He accepts this woman's extravagant act of love and adoration and rebukes the finger-pointing Pharisee for his self-righteousness, saying, "Her sins, which are many, are

forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.” To the woman he said, “Your faith has saved you, go in peace.”

What a Christ.

Watch him as he sits before a woman caught in the act of adultery. See her with bleeding cuts on her body, dragged like a rag doll before a hungry mob of judgmental men, waiting for the first stone to crush her head and bring her to a death that she justly deserves. Behold our glorious Lord. He asks one question, a question that pierces the heart of every man who is ready to send this woman to her grave. Mesmerized by the Lord’s words, each man drops his stone and walks away. Christ’s parting words to the guilty woman? “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

What a Christ!

As we read the Gospel accounts, we cannot help but be awestruck by the wonderful person they present. Yet the startling reality is that this same radiance that we marvel at in the pages of our New Testaments has come to continue his life in and through us.

Genuine Christianity is learning to live by an indwelling Christ. Consequently, the Christian life should be reframed as God’s life come to earth and displayed visibly through human beings. The Christian life is the outflow of “Christ in you,” the breaking forth of God’s uncreated, indwelling life—the radiating of God’s own energy in fallen, human vessels: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Seeing Christianity from this perspective changes everything.

It’s his time

We live in a day when what sells best in the Christian world are books, sermons, and television programs that are aimed directly at you—*This Is Your Day*, *You Are the Reason for the Season*, *Become a Better You*, *It’s Your Time*, *The Me I Want to Be*, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, and similar titles orbiting around the Youiverse. We would now like to take all the arrows that point to you and bend them back to our Lord.

Behold the ill-starred Nazarene who went about “doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38).

Behold the artisan from Galilee, the one who called himself the “Son of Man” (which means, “son of Adam”—“the human being”).

Watch him as he is taken before Rome’s delegates in the city of Jerusalem. See him standing before Pilate—rejected, dejected, bludgeoned, beaten, spat upon. Behold him who created the heavens, the Lord of the universe, suffering the most horrific, gruesome form of torture that was ever invented by the human imagination.

Observe him hanging on a wooden stake, dying a slow, hideous death, covered with blood—naked, mocked, and shamed. The Messiah has become a public spectacle that elicits the spine-chilling, gleeful laughter of satan himself.

Watch death, the child of sin, emerge from the pit. With open arms, it darkens the wood of the cross and takes the Prince of heaven into its silent, hopeless domain.

The powers of Rome may have defeated the suffering artisan two thousand years ago, but in the end, he shall triumph. Christ shall subdue all things and put them under his feet, for upon that bloody hill, Jesus of Nazareth—the spotless, sinless man—defeated the powers of darkness and won for himself the keys of death, hell, and the grave. He is a Savior to the uttermost for our “guttermost.” He saves in every situation and at all times. There is no circumstance too hard for him.

By Jesus’ resurrection, God the Father vindicated him before angels, demons, and the human race to be the universally triumphant, sovereign Lord. This same Jesus now sits at the right hand of power, as a faithful high priest, tirelessly interceding for his own in the presence of God. He lives by the power of an endless life, and he never fails.

And one day, every kingdom, every ruler, every principality and power shall bow its mortal knees to the rejected Nazarene. He, the Lamb of God, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, shall reign in regal glory over everything both in, below, and above the earth, in heaven. He shall be the judge of all creation, and his kingdom shall never end.

In that day, Jesus the Nazarene shall be universally vindicated as the ruler of the kings of the earth. Humanity will meet the power of glory face-to-face, for when he appears, the world will see his divinity, his beauty, his majestic splendor, his perfect righteousness, and his complete holiness. He shall make all crooked lines straight as the earth’s right-

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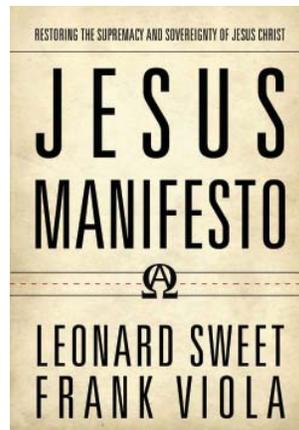




Photo by Chris Knorr

ful judge. But more, all who follow him today will share in the unveiled, unapproachable, indescribable radiance of God's Son tomorrow—a greater glory than this world could ever comprehend.

Indeed, it shall be his time, and he will have the last word.

“Look, he is coming with clouds, and every eye will see him, even they who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him” (Revelation 1:7).

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever!” (Revelation 11:15).

“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even the 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 2:10-11).

How can you not love a Lord like that? How can you not bow the knee to a God like that? How can you not allow this radiant Lord to capture your heart and ravish your soul? How can you not make him your life's pursuit

for the rest of your days on this earth?

And how can you preach and teach anything else?

Look again at the craftsman from Nazareth. Bow before him, embrace him, adore him, and seek to know him. He is available and closer to you than you can imagine. Jesus is your new tabernacle and temple. If you really want to see God present, dwelling among you, if you genuinely want to worship God in all of his glory, if you truly want to receive that gift of wonder and see glimpses of divine glory, then come to him. Take your chances with the God of second chances. Jesus didn't die just to take you out of hell and into heaven. He died to take himself out of heaven and deposit himself in you.

Standing on a new frontier

Today we stand on the edge of a new frontier—one of exploration, not fortification; one of discovery, not contentment. In this new frontier, we will navigate the uncharted waters of Jesus Christ, our all-sufficient Lord. There is so much more of Christ to sail than we could ever imagine.

But if the truth be told, we have been handed a shrink-wrapped Jesus. Christ has become our once-a-week mascot. We rally around him on Sunday mornings, selfishly reaching for all we can get from him—goodies and gifts, all for



Photo by Leah Warkentin

us. But then we push him off to the sidelines the rest of the week.

But the game has never been about us, it's always been about him.

The gospel that's so often preached today lacks a revelation of Jesus Christ. The contemporary gospel boils down to a fire-insurance policy, a Santa Claus God, or a performance-based religion. As long as we stay on that plane, we'll never see or comprehend the staggering enormity of our Lord.

Paul of Tarsus was a man who caught a glimpse of the excellencies of Jesus Christ. He preached such a high gospel that it turned illiterate, immoral pagans into full-pledged followers of Jesus who learned to live in authentic commu-

nity—all in just a few months.

What Paul did is something that our modern gospel could never pull off.

Only a recovery of the greatness, supremacy, sovereignty, brilliance, and “allness” of Christ will lead us to restoration and even revival. The wonder of Jesus as “all in all” is the only hope for igniting the flame of a new reformation and resuscitating a church that's presently on life support.

The body of Christ is in dire need of a reconversion to Jesus, not as Savior and Lord, but as the awe-inspiring, all-inclusive person that he is. To say that he is our Savior and Lord is correct, of course, but it's inadequate. He is so much more. Christ is your Shepherd, your Advocate, your Mediator, your Bridegroom, your Conqueror, your Lion, your Lamb, your sacrifice, your manna, your smitten Rock, your living water, your food, your drink, your good and abundant land, your dwelling place, your Sabbath, your new moon, your Jubilee, your new wine, your feast, your aroma, your anchor, your wisdom, your peace, your comfort, your Healer, your joy, your glory, your power, your strength, your wealth, your victory, your redemption, your Prophet, your Priest, your kinsman redeemer, your teacher, your guide, your liberator, your deliverer, your Prince, your Captain, your vision, your sight, your beloved, your way, your truth, your life, your author, your finisher, your beginning, your end, your eternity—your all in all.

He is the same yesterday, today, and forever; yet he is new every morning. But beyond all of this, he is your King, your judge, and the True Witness.

May God have a people on this earth who are of Christ, through Christ, and for Christ.

A people of the cross.

A people consumed with an unvarnished vision of God's eternal passion: to make Christ preeminent, supreme, and the head over all things visible and invisible.

A people who have discovered the touch of the Almighty in the face of his glorious Son, Jesus.

A people who wish to know only Christ and him crucified, and to let everything else fall by the wayside.

A people who are searching his immeasurable depths,

exploring his unfathomable heights, discovering his unsearchable riches, encountering his abundant life, receiving for his infinite love, and making him known to others.

In a world that sings, “Oh, who is this Jesus?” and a church that sings, “Oh, let’s all be like Jesus,” may we be a people who will sing with lungs of leather, “Oh, how we love Jesus!”

Though we may disagree about many things—ecclesiology, eschatology, soteriology, economics, globalism, or politics, let us say in unison, “One thing [we] know...” (John 9:25) and that “one thing” is Jesus the Christ. He is the root and essence of Christianity. For that reason:

Christians don’t follow Christianity; we follow Christ.

Christians don’t preach themselves; we proclaim Christ.

Christians don’t preach about Christ: we simply preach Christ.

Christians don’t shout from the rooftops, “Come to church;” we shout from the mountains, “Jesus Christ is born—come to Christ!”

Christians don’t point people to core values; we point them to the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, ascended, enthroned, exalted, triumphant, glorified, reigning Lord—Jesus of Nazareth, the King, the Messiah—the Christ beyond the tomb.

We believe there is a stanza that comes as close as is humanly possible to capturing the splendor of who Jesus is. It was written by Charles Wesley in 1739, with the music provided a century later by Felix Mendelssohn in a composition celebrating Johannes Gutenberg’s gift of the printing press to planet Earth:

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! / Hail the Son of Righteousness! / Light and life to all He brings / Risen with healing in His wings / Mild He lays His glory by / Born that man no more may die / Born to raise the sons of earth / Born to give them second birth / Hark! The herald angels



Photo by Don Hammond

sing / Glory to the newborn King!

This glorious One, Jesus the Christ, is our pursuit, our passion, and our pleasure. May he be so to you also.

Leonard Sweet occupies the Chair of Evangelism at Drew University in New Jersey, is the author of numerous books, and contributes weekly to Sermons.com and a podcast, “Napkin Scribbles.” Frank Viola is a best-selling author and international conference speaker. His books include *Revise Us Again*, *Reimagining Church*, and *From Eternity to Here*. This excerpt is adapted from *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* by Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola (Thomas Nelson). This adaptation is run with permission from Thomas Nelson, Inc.