



real church
in a social-network world

from facebook to
face-to-face faith

Leonard Sweet

author of *The Gospel According to Starbucks*

Real Church in a Social-Network World

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WaterBrook Press

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Bonus Content: A preview of Leonard Sweet's next book, *Viral*

Introduction

What's More Real: Sunday Church or Virtual Community?

Traditional Christian teaching says we learn about human nature and identity by studying God. God's character shows us what to strive for, and God's Spirit searches our hearts to reveal the ways in which we resist God's love, guidance, and correction. All of that is true.

However, it is also true that an accurate understanding of the deepest longings of the human heart tells us much about who God is and what God desires for us and from us. After all, if we are created in God's image, it follows that there are undeniable reflections of God's nature visible in us.

In this e-book exclusive, *Real Church in a Social-Network World*, Christian visionary Leonard Sweet applies his keen analysis to both the church and the individual. He looks at the changing culture and the people who migrate from the old to what is replacing it. He points out the lessons that the church needs to learn from those who are drawn to a relational approach to life.

We can't deny our need for oxygen, food, and water. Likewise, there are spiritual and relational absolutes that cannot be denied. And it turns out that the natives of the new culture are passionately pursuing the core longings and requirements of the human soul. In fact, more than anything else, the unrelenting pursuit of connection and relationship is their identifying trait.

There is great opportunity for the church to reevaluate its approach to relationship. While preaching the gospel, which promises a relationship with God, has the church lost sight of the centrality of human relationships in the body of Christ? Will the church learn from the social-media generation and do some soul-searching?

In this collection, Sweet asks the questions, how does God speak to us, and how can we most faithfully live out Christian faith? In answering those questions, he looks at two worlds: the church and the broader culture—especially the world of young adults. The church world tends to be attracted to the mind, placing confidence in conclusions that arise from a careful examination of the available evidence. The broader culture is more geared to direct experience and the relational aspects of life. The latter world resonates with God's practice of sending a personal representative, while the church puts more confidence in the idea of a prepared statement from on high.

Sweet sees in the social-networking generation a passion for connection, community, knowing others, and being known by others. This untiring pursuit of belonging and relationship calls to mind the body of Christ—diverse members connecting in unexpected ways. (Sweet explores the social-networking generation more fully in his new book *Viral* [WaterBrook, 2012].)

Sweet notes that the church seems to be preoccupied with measurements and statistics, comparisons and definitions, doctrinal precision and organizational concerns. Will the body of Christ realize that much can be learned from the lives of younger members of the culture at large, those who seek connection and relationship? Can the church reclaim the values of knowing and being known, and take the risks necessary to live out Christian faith in everyday life?

HISTORIAN AND FUTURIST

Leonard Sweet has been posting status updates on Christian faith for decades. He is an educator, speaker, and preacher who is trained as a historian but specializes in a new field called semiotics. Over the past fifteen years, all of us have noticed that the future now arrives with such speed that we need a futurist or a semiotician to keep us aimed in the right direction.

Sweet compiled this topical collection from some of his best thinking on these subjects: the difference between faith and belief; why storytelling is crucial to the gospel; what a real relationship looks like in everyday life; and the difference between Jesus as doctrine and Jesus as discovery. If you have not read his books, you have missed some of the most incisive analysis available of cultural upheaval and the church's mission in the twenty-first century.

This collection is drawn from three of Sweet's most important books: *What Matters Most*, *The Three Hardest Words*, and *The Gospel According to Starbucks* (all available from WaterBrook Multnomah Publishing Group). In all his visionary thinking, Sweet returns again and again to Jesus. If Jesus's followers do not embody the life of their Savior, then Christianity will decline to the level of interesting idea, good discussion topic, or hotly debated doctrinal statement.

Reading *Real Church in a Social-Network World* is likely to raise questions and prompt ideas of your own. It is an excellent resource to use as the basis for discussion with friends and ministry partners. And it's possible you will want to interact with the author regarding his assessment of the life of faith. You can follow Leonard Sweet on Twitter (at @lensweet) and on Facebook (<http://snipurl.com/skyxp>). You can read his weekly contributions on www.sermons.com, subscribe to his weekly podcasts ("Napkin Scribbles") on iTunes U, and contact him through his website: www.leonardsweet.com.

A bonus that is available only as part of this collection is the introduction and chapter 1 from Sweet's next book, *Viral*, due to be released in spring 2012 by WaterBrook Press.

Faith Versus Belief

Faith moves. In contrast, belief can be settled. Faith requires full commitment, whereas belief implies intellectual assent to a set of required teachings. Faith demands all of you; belief might claim no more than your careful consideration.

NO ONE TALKS ABOUT “THE LIFE OF BELIEF”

The Reformation paradigm, which tempts us to replace relationship with reason, is captured in the word *belief*. It is concerned with right thinking and adherence to a particular way of articulating biblical teaching. It involves systematizing and assenting—and excluding those who don’t fully subscribe to the current fashion in creedal statements. Belief is inert. It is intellectual, defensible, and typically irrelevant.

In contrast, the missional paradigm is a way of life—the life of *faith*. It is a quest for discovery. It is nothing less than the pursuit of the GodLife relationship. Faith is kinetic and transformational. It is described in Scripture as following, forgiving, seeking, rejoicing, sharing. It is the life of relating to God, to others, and to God’s creation. To the Western mind it can appear sloppy and unpredictable and meandering. Yes, it is all of those things, and much more!

Belief is Plato; faith is Jesus.

As we consider God’s reorientation of Christianity, bear in mind that it is movement, not statement. It is more about exploring than about enconcing.

Jesus asked his closest followers: “Who do you say I am?”¹ Each of us, if we are to follow him today, must answer this same question. And as we seek the answer, we find that it is less a question than a quest.

The yoking of relationship and quest is deliberate. In the Bible, it is more that God seeks us out for relationship than that we seek God out. In fact, the more we insulate, the more God insinuates. The more we hide, the more God hounds.

FAITH IS NOT BELIEF

In the ancient world, faith did not mean subscribing to the convictions of theology; it meant living in the confidence of relationships. Whether it is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; or Sarah, Elizabeth, and Mary; or Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the Bible defines faith in more than cognitive terms. Faith in God is a relationship involving all of who you are and all that is around you. Faith is a lived encounter, a relationship of truth with the Divine.

Jesus came to make possible new kinds of relationships with God, with people, and with the world. When Jesus used the intimate Aramaic word *Abba* in his prayers, never before had God been addressed in such a way. Only Jesus broaches this intimacy with God. Only Jesus opens the door to this approach to God.

And this new understanding of faith goes beyond the example set by Jesus. It is seen first in the nature of God. Is not relationship the essence of the Trinity? We do not sing “God in three thesis points, blessed Trinity” but “God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.” The Trinity does not deal with time, space, matter, doctrine, or reason, but relationships. God is “Communion” and invites us into that same communion.² At the core of who we are as humans is an inner drive for relationship with God and with one another.

ARE YOU WILLING TO COMMIT, OR MERELY ADMIT?

Most Christians use the words *belief* and *faith* interchangeably. But to admit (believe) falls far short of to commit (faith). To become a Christian is not to adopt a different belief system. To become a Christian is to experience a transformation into the image of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Admitting is useless without committing.

The psalmist’s chief delight was in “the law of the LORD”³; our delight is in the “new law” of the Lord, which is the love of the Lord. Christianity is more than an intellectual assent to certain propositions about God, Jesus, and the Bible. Indeed, Jesus demonstrated this in his own ministry. He was crucified because he insisted on relationship over adherence to a set of laws or a moral system of behavior. Jesus died an outlaw, showing with his body the supremacy of love. The greatest “law,” Jesus said, was the law of love, a law that wasn’t a law at all but a relationship. One of the problems of the church is its forceful insistence on intellectual adherence to certain beliefs, in the relative absence of a holy passion for the incarnational practice of those same beliefs.

The purpose of Christianity is to help people come to faith, which means to establish a relationship with God. Faith is not salvation per se, or liberation per se, or correct belief about the Godhead per se. Faith is the willing acceptance of Jesus’s invitation, “Follow me.”

LETTER OF THE LAW, OR LIFE OF THE SPIRIT?

How can “belief” in all the right things produce such a lifeless church? Shouldn’t it produce just the opposite?

Paul put his finger on the connection between sterile orthodoxy and spiritual lifelessness: “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”⁴ To be sure, the modern church would deny any reliance on law or legalism for the life of faith.

But by their fruit we know them. Where is the fruit, and what kind of fruit is there for the picking? The modern church has a propositional attitude rather than a relational attitude. The letter has taken the upper hand, choking off the life of the Spirit in the life of faith. We have even managed to make Jesus into a principle, an answer to a question: “Christ is the answer.”

What does God want from you and me? Does God want us to think the right thoughts or to do the right things? Of course. But above all God wants us to be involved in right relationships. When the Bible says, “God is love,” it is saying that God is a relationship. Love has no value or meaning in a vacuum. Right relationships are not produced by right thoughts or right actions. Just the opposite. Right thoughts and right actions are produced by right relationships.

If right teaching supplied the complete answer to the life of faith, then why hasn’t our society sold out to God? No other generation has had as much access to so much Christian teaching via radio, television, the Internet, and print sources. Our society is bombarded with Christian propositions like never before. We’re practically buried in Christian “information.” Yet, at the same time, our society is less enamored of Christian orthodoxy today than ever before.

What's missing is the right relationship, a deepening relationship with God. The modern world made asking questions the highest task. The lifelong quest for answers was the highest journey. Now it's time to acknowledge that faith is not a problem to be solved or a question to be answered but a mystery to be lived—the mystery of a real, live relationship with God: the GodLife relationship.

THE REAL EXPERIENCE OF FAITH

The product is no longer king; it's the experience that surrounds the product that brings people in the door. It can't be just any experience, though. People shun a manufactured, forced, commercial experience. But deliver an authentic experience of emotional strength, spontaneity, and simultaneity, and they'll stand in line for it.

That's why people crowd your local Starbucks. Coffee as a beverage might be worth only fifty cents. But coffee as an experience is easily worth several dollars. And not just today but several times a week.

When was the last time you saw people lined up on a Sunday morning to get into a church? It has probably been a while, and keep in mind that people don't have to pay to get the full treatment at church. What's missing, and what can individual Christians and the church at large learn about authentic experience from Starbucks? With the middle dropping out and the extremes growing, what does that tell us about faith and its connection to life for those seeking the ultimate authentic experience?

FAITH REQUIRES PARTICIPATION

An old General Electric commercial became one of the most successful advertising campaigns in history. The appeal was captured in just six words: "We Bring Good Things to Life."

If Jesus launched an advertising campaign, he might use this slogan: "I Bring Things Good, True, and Beautiful to Life."

The Incarnation—God taking on human flesh—is a participatory event. But we have made it representational. God did not send a representative to earth. Neither did God dispatch some prophetic plenipotentiary to have a meeting with us. God sent "very God of very God" to be one of us. Even in the Incarnation, God invites participation; Mary had to say yes: "May it be to me as you have said." Jesus was God in the flesh, summoning us to be sent and spent in mission in the world, in partnership with our Creator.⁵ We are participants in Jesus's resurrection life and partners in creation. We, too, bring things to life by participating in the divine life.

This is what *missional* means: to participate in the mission of Jesus in the world, to incarnate in the experiences of our lives and our communities the good news of God's love for the world. We must become a GOOD church, which stands for "get out of doors." We must get out of the church building and venture into the world to join the God who fills "the hungry with good things."⁶

When celebrity architect Frank Gehry insists on a participatory, collaborative methodology in his creations,⁷ he is taking a cue from his Creator, who built into the universe a participationist structure to divine creation and human creating. In fact, the church's greatest teacher, Thomas Aquinas, defined human *esse* as "participation in divine *esse*." In other words, the essence of a human being is participation in the essence of the divine being.

For premodern Christian thinkers such as Aquinas, as well as Augustine or Anselm, *reason (logos)* was understood and experienced less as mental thought and more as something "radically participant in the divine and the cosmos."⁸ To be created in the image of God, to live *imago Dei*, is to

participate in the divine life and the divine creativity. God the Architect compels an architecture of participation for the Spirit's ongoing architecture of creation, re-creation, and final creation.

ORTHODOXY AND PARADOXY

For Christians, paradox is the midwife of truth.⁹ Where did we ever get this notion that truth is clear and singular? Truth is better described as misty and multiple: it comes to those who are good at both standing still and journeying on.

Every time Jesus was finished talking, the disciples turned to one another and whispered, "Did you get that? Does anyone have any idea what he is talking about?" Or they turned to Jesus and said, "Master, what did you just say?" Jesus's goal was not that everyone understand him but that everyone experience him. In fact, Jesus didn't expect everyone to get his revolutionary message.¹⁰ He did invite everyone, however, to hear God's story, to become part of God's story, and to learn about others who joined God's story or were seeking God's presence. If you can put totally into words what you really mean, it's not Jesus talking. Jesus creates space in which we can enter into divine mystery and dangerous grace.

In fact, the essence of orthodoxy is what I call paradoxy. Biblical truth marries orthodoxy and orthopraxy into a union that Dwight Friesen calls orthoparadox.¹¹ In fact, the word *heresy* derives from the Greek word *choice*: choosing one truth to the exclusion of other truths. Heresy is the cross uncrossed: when the vertical and the horizontal no longer connect. Truth is when a body holds together its various parts in conversation and harmony. Truth is when opposites become not a battleground but a playground. That's why people of faith have such sharp noses for incongruities, ironies, and oxymora.

The resurrected Christ is both dead and alive. By taking scar tissue with him into eternity, Jesus announced that he is our dead and resurrected Lord. We like to talk about Jesus as our risen and regnant Lord, but that doesn't get it quite right. Better to speak of our crucified and risen Lord. But best of all, Jesus is our dead and resurrected Lord, our crucified and crowned Lord.¹²

Søren Kierkegaard calls spiritual paradox the "passion of the infinite." Passion comes from the tug and tension of truth, the two infinite opposites pulling at one another: the objective and the subjective, intellect and emotion, solitude and communion, the past and the future, intimacy and distance, the on-the-way but not-there-yet journey of faith.¹³

FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS GOING SOMEWHERE

Jesus didn't call the disciples to regular discipleship. Regular disciples would have stayed in Jerusalem, founded a school, studied the words and works of their master, carefully screened and admitted only the most promising students. But Jesus wasn't regular. He commanded his disciples to scatter, to go to the ends of the earth, preaching and teaching the good news, healing the sick, casting out demons, witnessing about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus's command ensured that the disciples would go out to the people, not sit and wait for an interested few to come to them. Jesus's command called his disciples to be witnesses, not students, not caretakers, not sages. The disciples saw with their own eyes the miracle of the Resurrection, the glory of the Ascension, and they knew the significance of those acts. Their witness was to nothing less than the salvation of the world.

The calling that shaped the lives and work of the disciples reflects direct experience more than distanced intellect, action more than erudition, boldness and chutzpah more than careful planning and deliberation.