

Praise for the Work of Leonard Sweet

Praise for *Out of the Question...Into the Mystery* (retitled *What Matters Most* in 2012)

“Len Sweet has really done it this time! In true midrash form, Len exposes the beauty of a relationship with our Creator. He asks all the hard questions and leads us to a place of grace beyond the formulaic answers. Throw all your self-help books in the trash and immerse yourself in a book that will help you see your faith journey in a whole new way.”

—CHRIS SEAY, pastor, author of *The Gospel According to Jesus* and *The Gospel According to Tony Soprano*

“No charts, no boxes, no to-do lists. Just everything we thought we knew about faith but didn’t. This is the book we should be reading in our small groups.”

—SALLY MORGENTHALER, author of *Worship Evangelism*, founder of sacramentis.com and Digital Glass Videos

“Way back in the 1970s, some thoughtful Christian leaders began talking about a *relational theology*. The term held intrigue and promise. Now, Leonard Sweet has given us a great gift. Here is a panoramic view of what a relational theology can mean for Christians today. Whether you’re a spiritual seeker trying to get the lay of the land, or a seasoned traveler trying to make sense of what you’ve experienced, or even a disillusioned leader who feels it’s all gone stale, this book will help you see in a fresh, inspiring, profound, and invigorating way.”

—BRIAN MCLAREN, author of *A New Kind of Christianity* and *Naked Spirituality*

Praise for *The Three Hardest Words*

“This book demonstrates that one of the seminal Christian thinkers in the postmodern era can also be a pastor. Leonard Sweet gets us to examine what it takes to live out love in this world, and he does it beautifully.”

—TONY CAMPOLO, author of *Red Letter Christians* and *Choose Love Not Power*

“Len Sweet has, in his inimitable style, tackled the three easiest-hardest words in the English language, wrestled them to the ground, hugged them, and then let them fly again. His imagination takes us on a journey, his mind is an encyclopedia of wonderful references, and his language is captivating. This book is a joy...and a challenge.”

—TONY JONES, author of *The Sacred Way*, *The New Christians*, and *The Teaching of the Twelve*

“Leonard Sweet plumbs the depths of Christianity to explore the richness of God’s story, one that is abundant in love. As usual, Sweet’s work is thought provoking, insightful, and a must read for any postmodern thinker.”

—MARGARET FEINBERG, speaker, author of *Hungry for God*, *The Sacred Echo*, and *Scouting the Divine*

“It turns out that Jesus’s simplest and most basic command—that we are to love one another—is the hardest one for us to live out. Leonard Sweet’s book is a tremendous help in guiding us not only to say the words ‘I love you’ with greater understanding of what they really mean but also to live them with greater integrity and intention.”

—RUTH HALEY BARTON, cofounder of the Transforming Center and author of *Sacred Rhythms* and *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*

“As corny as the song lyrics are, it’s true that the world does need ‘love sweet love.’ But we need love the way Jesus expressed it. Len Sweet shows how to lose the cliché and make love a reality.”

—DAN KIMBALL, pastor, author of *The Emerging Church* and *Emerging Worship*

“Leonard Sweet takes you on a journey out of yourself and into the transforming power of God’s love. His fresh take on love can change your life and your community. Read, live, and breathe this provocative book.”

—BEN YOUNG, pastor, author of *The One* and coauthor of *Out of Control*

“Leonard Sweet has explored each of the ‘three hardest words’ in light of Scripture and God’s kingdom. Journey with him to find out how God defines each of the words that sum up the Christian life: *I*, *love*, and *you*.”

—KIRBYJON CALDWELL, pastor, coauthor of *Entrepreneurial Faith* and author of *The Gospel of Good Success*

Praise for *The Gospel According to Starbucks*

“*The Gospel According to Starbucks* inspires us to quit playing safe and mediocre lives and to fulfill our God-given potential. Leonard Sweet uncovers God’s purpose for people not just as individuals but also as communities. An outstanding and thought-provoking book.”

—PAUL MCGEE, international speaker and best-selling author of *S.U.M.O. (Shut Up, Move On)*

“Cultural barista Leonard Sweet serves up a triple venti cup of relevant insights to wake up decaffeinated Christians. Careful, the book you’re about to enjoy is extremely hot.”

—BEN YOUNG, author of *Common Grounds* and *Why Mike’s Not a Christian*

“Reading this book is a caffeine jolt. Get ready to be accelerated into the future, with Jesus a central part of the experience.”

—DAN KIMBALL, author of *They Like Jesus, but Not the Church*

“I have a massive passion for passion. It’s my favorite spiritual topic. And I have a nominal coffee obsession, Starbucks being my ritual more often than not. So what a treat to read Leonard Sweet’s extra-shot weaving together of the two—all in the hope that each of us will drink in the meaningful and passion-filled life we were designed for.”

—MARK OESTREICHER, founder of the Youth Cartel

Real Church in a Social-Network World

From Facebook to Face-to-Face Faith

Leonard Sweet

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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 ensconcing.

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 orthoparadoxy.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.

Following Jesus

You can't follow Jesus and stay where you are, or remain the same person you are. Following denotes movement, leaving where you were and always finding yourself in a new location—the place where Jesus wants you to be. The life of faith is the life of following, with Jesus always in front of you. This is real life, and there is no other experience like it.

BEING ROOTED MEANS GETTING DIRTY

We have yanked ourselves from the soil of relationship with God so we can do the work of tidying things up. We are now sanitized and correct, factual and precise, but tragically bereft of relationship. We are disconnected from our Source so that we have become sterile. We may be doctrinally correct, but we have become spiritual cadavers.

We don't need more time off to meditate and conference and "reimagine." We don't need to search out a new solution or a reengineered vision for the church. We have the answer already, but we're working hard to silence it. Thankfully, Jesus won't be silenced. So we might as well shut up and learn something.

We need to replant the faith in the rich biblical soil from which it has been uprooted.¹

JESUS'S DEFINITION OF A FOLLOWER

For many years I found Matthew 7:22 utterly incomprehensible: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not...in your name...perform many miracles?'" Or, as the NRSV reads: "Many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'" Here you have people confessing Jesus and calling him rightly "Lord." Here you also have leaders who are successful in their ministries and doing great things for God. Not just a few people, and not just a sporadic good deed. But "many" people doing "many" incredible miracles in Jesus's name.

But Jesus doesn't praise them or bless them or even thank them. He *rejects* them. He doesn't criticize what they did. But he does say: "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"² Why were they ushered out of his presence? Because they didn't "know" him. Because they weren't in a relationship with him. Because they possessed the right principles but weren't possessed by the Truth. They chose the cushy world of cardboard maxims and creedal diagrams in place of the terrifying world of revealed mysteries and unpredictable relationships. This is why Jesus says: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom."³ A technical, dutiful, obedient righteousness is not enough. Jesus wants his disciples to engage him in a *relational* righteousness.

LOVING THOSE WHOM GOD LOVES

God's invitation to us isn't, "Shut up and listen!" but, "Walk with me and help me serve others." God's greatest desire is to love us so that we can love God and others. God's greatest hope is that we will join God in a relationship that turns others around, that turns people who are "accidents waiting to happen" into "people who make things happen."

"I want final say and sway in your life," God says, "but talk to me, wrestle with me, be my friend as we wake up this world with some really good news."

Christian mystic Leanne Payne says faith is walking alongside God. But it's so much easier just to walk alongside myself. Walking alongside Jesus demands that I make others the focus of my relationship with the Divine. In contrast, when *I* am the focus of my relationship with God, then I can relax and just concentrate on attending to my own needs. It's so much simpler when others aren't involved.

At the memorial service for country singer June Carter Cash, Johnny Cash's daughter Rosanne celebrated her stepmother as someone who knew only two kinds of people: "Those she knew and loved, and those she didn't know...and loved."⁴ The purpose of love is to love others. My guess for the open-sesame question at the Pearly Gates? "Who have you brought with you?"

LOVING THOSE WHO AREN'T LIKE YOU

The classic passage of welcoming the stranger is Abraham's hospitality to the three strangers at Mamre.⁵ Immersed in prayer with God when the strangers appeared, Abraham interrupted his prayer to prepare a meal. He later found that the strangers were angels bearing a message of a future far different from the one Abraham and Sarah dreamed possible. It was this meeting that the writer of Hebrews had in mind when he counseled, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."⁶

God came to Abraham in the guise of a stranger, ate at his table, and called him his friend. God appeared to Abraham through strangers, which reminds us that dignity must be extended to the "other." As the praying Abraham discovered, prayer doesn't plunge us deeper into ourselves but deeper into others. The early church looked at prayer as a conversation⁷ with God that brings us into greater intimacy with God and others. Prayer is not what you do to get God's attention. Prayer is what you do to bring yourself to attend to God and to pay attention to others.⁸

BEING RIGHT OR DOING RIGHT?

Not only did Jesus dislike eating alone, but he also ate with just about anybody. He was an equal-opportunity relationship builder. It was in his DNA to invite the strange as well as the stranger into a table relationship. This makes sense when you consider Jesus's actual DNA. A Moabite woman (Ruth), a forbidden foreigner, stands at the start of the Davidic line of Jesus. The book of Ruth ends with the genealogy of David, where there is not just Jew, but Moabite. And when Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me,"⁹ he was instructing us to do the same: share table companionship with Moabites and Levites, with idolatrous outsiders like Ruth and adulterous insiders like David.

Toward the end of the twelfth century, a prudish monk known as Richard of Devizes issued a stern warning to those unwary innocents who might be contemplating a visit to London.

Do not associate with the crowds of pimps; do not mingle with the throngs in the eating-houses; avoid the dice and gambling, the theatre and the tavern. You will meet with more braggarts there than in all France; the number of parasites is infinite. Actors, jesters, smooth-skinned lads, Moors,

flatterers, pretty boys, effeminate, pederasts, singing and dancing girls, quacks, belly-dancers, sorceresses, extortionists, night-wanderers, magicians, mimes, beggars, buffoons: all this tribe fill all the houses.¹⁰

These were precisely the types of people Jesus chose to invite to his table. British preacher J. H. Jowett called Jesus a “receiver of wrecks.”¹¹ He gathered around him all the pariahs. What triumph is it to love the lovable? Jesus asked. What success is it to heal the healthy? Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier claimed that Christianity is the only religion that states that God loves the unrighteous more than the righteous. Christianity has much less to do with being “right” than it has to do with building right relationships—the strong protecting the weak, the rich serving the poor, the insiders making room for the outcasts.

Our choices determine whether we come to dinner with Jesus or refuse relationship. But the invitation is open to everyone—even to us. Jesus is most often gentle with those who are living rebellious, disobedient lives. He was accused of being a soft-on-crime Messiah. Jesus was most often harsh with those law-and-order types whose righteousness blinded them to right relationships with God and those outside the “right” group.

DO YOU HAVE A LIFE?

The notion that non-Christians have no meaning, and that everyone outside the faith needs to “get a life,” is a prevailing assumption among Christians. But it is wrongheaded and self-serving for Christians to assume that they are the only people on the planet who have meaning.

The USAmerican Dream, revered even by most Christians, contradicts the notion that the religions of the ancient gods reap a harvest of nothing more than loneliness and a louche life. The *old* USAmerican Dream of a good job, a nice house, two-point-five kids, and two cars has morphed into the *new* USAmerican Dream where joy and fulfillment come from work you can play at, play that works for a lifetime, and two places to live that are filled with family and friends with whom you can share experiences of fine dining, travel, entertainment, and personal health. Buying satisfaction in life is no longer a process of accumulating the most things but a journey of seeking the best and most meaningful experiences.

When many outsiders look at the “lifestyle choice” of Christians, who spend their lives sitting in the same pew, singing the same songs, reciting the same words, smiling at the same people, listening to the same thoughts, and building bigger barns that all look the same, they scratch their heads in wonderment that anyone in her right mind would choose that kind of “life.”

It is not that people (and even Christian people) don’t have a life. It’s that they don’t have a true life, an abundant life as Jesus defined both “abundance” and “life.” They have not allowed God to stretch their human imagination beyond conventional categories.

MOVING TOWARD THE FUTURE

The essence of vocation is “call,” which implies a future orientation. To be “called” is to be drawn forward, away from where you are and toward where God wants you to be, toward “the hope to which [God] has called you.”¹²

One of Paul’s key words is *prothumos*, which we translate as “eager” or “ready” or “prepared.” But the word also means “to think with a future mind.”¹³ Paul learned to think with a future mind after the Damascus Road experience, where he was not given a road map to the future or a blueprint for his “calling.” Rather, he was told to “get up” and face the future head-on, with all its uncertainty and unknowns, for only then “you will be told what you are to do.”¹⁴

In the master-narratives of Christian history, precedence is given to the future over the past. They carry with them what poet Tom Paulin calls, in a title to one of his poems, “nostalgia for the future.”¹⁵ In the biblical metanarrative, the expression “you’re history” needs to mean not “you’re toast” but “you’re a part of making history, of forging the future, of shaping the Presence on earth.” The future is made from the facts of history, and there is no bigger fact than *you*. God has given you a calling, and the direction of your calling is always into the future.

GOD’S KINGDOM IS NOT THE USAMERICAN DREAM

Jules Glanzer was the dean of George Fox Evangelical Seminary. During a conversation about the biblical understanding of the kingdom, Jules reported on some fascinating research he had conducted. He compared the verbs we usually use with the noun “kingdom,” and the verbs the Scriptures use. The contrast is striking.

We use verbs like “build” the kingdom, or “bring in” the kingdom, or “advance” or “establish” the kingdom. Many books have been written on how to “achieve” the kingdom of God. But the verbs the Bible uses are very different. The kingdom is something we “enter” or “find” and then “cherish.” The kingdom is “given”; it’s a gift that is “received.” We can live a “no fear” life because “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”¹⁶

In other words, the kingdom of God is not something we “build” or “promote” or “push forward.” The kingdom is not something we “bring in” but something we “enter” and “receive.” The kingdom is even something that “comes,” and sometimes only comes “close,”¹⁷ with the cells of our consciousness too weak to pick up its signals. It is good to know that “close” now counts in horseshoes, hand grenades, and holiness.

The language of the kingdom has drawn around itself a whole tangle of theological and cultural attachments that has turned Christianity’s “grand stories” into stereotypes that can be more heinous than luminous. That’s why there is much fusing and confusing of the kingdom of God with the USAmerican Dream, or the gross national product, or a social agenda, or a political strategy of liberation. That’s also why all too often the kingdom of God can get co-opted by the “kingdom of self,”¹⁸ which is based on the self-fashioning and self-fulfillment of “looking out for number one.”

JOINING YOUR LIFE WITH GOD’S LIFE AND WORK

When Jesus preached the kingdom of God, he was showing us how the Presence is among us, around us, and in us. Jesus wants to live his resurrected life among us, and around us, and in us. To talk about “accepting Jesus into your heart” or “letting God into your life” is problematic for precisely this reason. Your heart is a pretty small package to stuff Jesus into. We are being called to become part of the body of Christ and to join in Jesus’s ongoing ministry in the world. God wants *us* to join the divine life, to join in what God is doing in the world, to become part of God’s life. The promise of the gospel is not only that we can “practice the Presence” but that we can join in the Presence and become the Presence. Together, we are the body of Christ. And in and through his body, the church, Christ is physically present in the world. The grand stories of Christianity are the ways in which we become Christ’s “presences” in the world today.

The kingdom of God is the Presence of God in the world. “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is *among* you.”¹⁹ Some translations say “within” or “inside” you. We are invited to enter the Presence, to receive the gift of Presence, to live in the Presence and let the Presence live in us.

LIVING OUT “I LOVE YOU”

Christians are many things. Christians are people who love beauty and truth and goodness; people who welcome strangers, confront danger with a light heart, and, in the face of death, choose life. They are people who, in the face of violence and hatred, choose hope. And they are much more.

But above and beyond everything else, Christians are people whose presence speaks the three words of the Presence: “I love you.” The problem is that these three monosyllabic sounds are the three hardest words in the English language to get right.

FOLLOWING JESUS WITH YOUR WHOLE BEING

Ironically, as the church has sold itself out to a culture of self-absorption and consumption—presenting the gospel as a benefits package—there are approaches in consumer culture that reveal an understanding of the power of “losing oneself.” The “losing oneself” shopping experience is built around “the Gruen transfer,” named after the Los Angeles–based architect Victor Gruen, who gave us the first design of a new breed of mazelike malls. The Southdale Center, a mall that opened in 1956 outside Minneapolis, was designed in such a way that it delivered a key moment in the shopping-mall experience—the point where you “get lost” in shopping. You forget what you came to the mall to buy and submit to a barrage of shopping appeals.

But the point of “getting lost” in the shopping maze is still self-indulgence, not community betterment. The antidote to self-obsession and “therapism” is not “Algerism”²⁰ but altruism; not self-reliance but self-transcendence. Christian spirituality is a self-transcending experience of God through Christ by the gift of the Holy Spirit.²¹ Rituals, the arts, retreats (I prefer to call them advances), spiritual disciplines—these are not means of discovering the self but of transcending the self.²² The Christian metanarrative seeks self-transcendence, not self-fulfillment. Rather than seeking fulfillment, why aren’t we seeking God?

We do have issues, but not the issues that readily come to mind:

- Our issue is not “What do I want?” but “What is wanted of me?”
- Our issue is not “How can you meet my needs?” but rather “How am I meeting the world’s needs?”
- Our issue is not “What are my needs?” but “What is God needing of me?”
- Our issue is not “Am I on top?” but “Am I on tap?” Am I available for God to use?
- Our issue is not “How can I chart my own path?” but “How can I find and follow God’s path?”
- Our issue is not “Take charge of your life” but “Let God take charge of your life.”
- Our issue is not “See how special I am!” but “How Great Thou Art!”

Life is not “go Google yourself.” Life is “go Google God.” The I gets into trouble when it tries to be “like gods”—when the I pushes itself upward, not downward. The spiritual journey is one that starts with the baby cry of the self as the center of the universe but then avoids moving to the crybaby self as the center of the universe. Instead, it moves to the experience of others and of God. The course of biblical spirituality is away from the self.

CHRIST TOGETHER WITH US

This three-dimensional detailing of the lives of God's people appears everywhere in the Scriptures. The rabbis taught that "if two sit together, and words of the law pass between them, the divine presence abides between them."²³ When two people come together to study and learn, learning happens only when a third party, the Presence, enters into the process.

Jesus expanded that rabbinic saying, giving it new life, in his promise that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."²⁴ What makes the church the church? The Presence. There will never be just two when Christians gather. There will always be three.

DISCIPLESHIP IS NOT BORING

Do you think Jesus ever got bored? If he did, it's not mentioned in Scripture. I tend to think he was so engaged in life that he never had a chance to taste boredom. In fact, a case could be made that the ultimate spiritual taboo for a disciple of Jesus is boredom, especially boredom brought on by a didactic approach to faith. Jesus practiced a way of living that was visceral, vibrant, and vigilant with meaning. His way of truth was a way of living. And his way of living is one that you or I would gladly stand in line for and ultimately give our lives for.

Jesus did not endure his days on earth out of a sense of obligation. His life was characterized by joy and energy; it was spent in relationship with others. Today, too many Christians line up to follow God out of duty or guilt, or even hoping to win a ticket to heaven. They completely miss the warmth and richness of the experience of living with God. They fail to pick up the aroma of what God is doing in their part of town.

Here's the truth: God has set up shop where you live. The doors are open, and the coffee is brewing. God is serving the refreshing antidote to the conventional, unsatisfying, arm's-length spiritual life—and God invites you in.

TURN CURSING INTO CURING

One of the most heartbreaking stories that came out of the civil rights movement involved an eight-year-old named Thelma. She was the first student to integrate the Mississippi public school system. Before she left for school on the first day, her mother dressed her in a cute pink dress. When Thelma showed up at school, the teacher said, "Thelma, I want you to stand right there by your seat. You are not to sit yet."

Thelma did as she was told. She stood as the rest of the third-grade class marched past and spat in her seat. After the other children reached their seats, the teacher instructed Thelma, "You can sit down now."²⁵

Spitting is the ultimate symbol of insult. But what did Jesus do when he wanted to heal a blind man? He spat and then scooped up some dirt. He used his spittle in that earth to make a healing compound and transformed an activity of cursing and insult into an EPIC-tivity of healing and redemption.

Over and over again in the Bible, God turns cursing into curing; God turns belittling into blessing; God turns burrs into spurs. The curse of being hanged on a tree was transformed into the miraculous act of forgiveness and salvation.

A Longing for Love

The Scriptures refer to God as love, and God’s decision to take on human flesh and live among us is proof of this. We learn love from God, and the social-networking culture proves that people are so hungry for it that they invest untold hours seeking it out. God does a similar thing, untiring in God’s pursuit of us.

LOVE IS AT THE CENTER

When people are facing the end of their lives, there are eleven words they most want to hear. According to a physician who has been present at the bedsides of too many dying patients to number, these are the words they most yearn for:

- “I’ll miss you.”
- “Thank you.”
- “I forgive you.”
- “I love you.”

But if they could hear only one of these statements, they would choose “I love you.”

INDIVIDUALS SEEKING CONNECTION

Unlike a lot of the literature currently being written, where “community” is the new golden calf, Jesus does not let the community be the be-all and end-all. He elevates the individual in significant and telling ways. Even the sparrows that fly eventually fall, Jesus said. But every sparrow’s fall does not go without the Father’s notice. How much more, Jesus said, does the Father’s love shadow each one of you?¹

In fact, Jesus refused to let the community define either himself or his disciples. Jesus expected his disciples to define themselves in terms larger than their families and communities defined them (“who are my mother and my brothers?”).² They weren’t to ask permission of their families before following Jesus (“No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”).³ They were told not to let the traditions and expectations of the community determine their actions (“Let the dead bury their own dead”).⁴ To those who said, “Put family first,” Jesus said, “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother.”⁵ To those who said, “Put tradition first,” Jesus said, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”⁶ Unless you are prepared to separate yourself from the community—from family, tradition, and even your very life—you can’t carry the cross.

To be born into the world and to walk into the unknown, we have to risk separating ourselves from others. Jesus turned his back on family and friends and established his identity in light of the Presence. The result was a strong sense of self that was “self-ish” (secure of self) but not “selfish” (full of self).⁷ A strong sense of self and a strong sense of community are not mutually exclusive.⁸

Human beings set themselves apart from the animal kingdom by revealing the I in their faces. Humans are unique in the animal kingdom—there are *no* exceptions—in that humans make love face to face. And that face—with its mouth that smiles, its skin that blushes, its eyes that twinkle—is a window to the inimitable soul that grows within.

FILLING BY EMPTYING

Before the ritual we know as baptism, there were many cleansing rituals that were mandated of the devout Jew. One of these required the use of “cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop.”⁹ Each one of these ingredients was symbolically important to the rabbis. Cedar comes from the tallest of trees. Hyssop comes from the lowliest of bushes. The scarlet dye (Hebrew *tolaat*) comes from a worm. Since many of our physical and spiritual ailments come from pride (the lofty superiority of the cedar), healing comes only when we learn the humility of the hyssop and the abasement of the worm.¹⁰ The “cedar, scarlet, and hyssop” is what led Jewish teachers to recommend that we think of every person we meet as our superior.¹¹

The Presence says to our self-absorbed culture: You can’t know “love” until you first lay down the perpendicular, until you first cross out the perpendicular, until you surrender and sacrifice the ego, until you keep your egos¹² under wraps. You can’t be full of the Presence until you’re empty of I. Pride is our greatest enemy, and humility is our greatest friend. To get the word *I* right, to be a “success” in the Presence, we first need to cross out the *I*. And when we cross it out, we make the *I* into a †, a cross that we take up as we follow the Christ in whom we live.

GOD IS NOT LOVING; GOD IS LOVE

Whenever I see a list that includes love as one virtue among many, I freak out. There is no justifiable list that lumps together wisdom, beauty, duty, and love. There is really *only love*, which Paul makes clear in some of the most famous words ever written: “and the greatest of these is *love*.”¹³ Love is an ontological reality: God’s love is what makes things real and alive. When the Bible says, “God is love,” it means that where Love is, there is God. It doesn’t say, “God is loving,” that the chief characteristic of a “Being” is love, but that Being itself is Love. And in living a life of love, we also are living a life of truth, because the One who is Love is also Truth.

LOVE IS ALWAYS IN SEASON

God’s love goes to the greatest lengths, far exceeding the limitations we take for granted. Some have called Michael Jordan the greatest basketball player who ever lived. He scored more than thirty-two thousand points and won five MVP awards and six NBA championships. But he also set a higher standard for love, at least as it applies to basketball. Until Jordan arrived on the scene, the standard contract for an NBA player included a clause that prevented any off-season basketball participation without approval from team management. Jordan refused to sign any contract that prevented him from playing the game he loved. So Jordan’s contract was written differently. His was the first to include what is called the “love of the game” clause. It gave him the freedom to play basketball whenever he wanted, even during the off-season. In the same way God cedes no part of life to an “off-season for love,” the length of God’s love has no limit.

LOVE THAT IS OUT OF CONTROL

“My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God.”¹⁴ Or as Jesus put it, if you love only those who love you, what’s the big deal?¹⁵ And if, through the power of the Spirit, you can find it in your heart to love those who reject you and revile you, how much more so can God? You can’t outlove the Lord.

The needle of our inner compass needs to point in the direction of true north: Jesus the Christ. But if you look closely at any needle that’s pointing true north, it trembles. Love trembles because intimacy hurts. Love is painful. The preciousness of love is matched by the precariousness of love. Love can’t be controlled, only cultivated.

There is no love without loss of self and loss of control. Love is the hardest thing in the world to get right, because when you give up control, you consent to uncertainty and unpredictable outcomes. Yet losing yourself to find yourself is the way of love.

It’s also the way of life. Google’s success is based on sending people away from its website, not toward it. By relinquishing control and empowering others, by letting go and letting users control their own experiences, Google has become one of the greatest success stories in the history of business.

Likewise, love lets its lover hold the reins. As any farmer can tell you, fence in farm animals in tight enclosures and they become nervous. Give them a wide range, though, and they relax and settle down. People are the same way. We need the fresh air and exercise of free will. Think about the best adventures of your life, the greatest excitement you have experienced. Do these things come about as a result of your insistence on tight control? The phrase *mission control* is an oxymoron. To be “in mission” is to be “out of control.”

LOVE THAT SUFFERS

The strongest heartbeat in the Presence is a sensitivity to suffering. Intimacy hurts, and love demands that we lose ourselves before we can find ourselves. The metanarrative of suffering love is one of the strongest in the Scriptures. Suffering is not to be avoided or even endured but appropriated as a means of bringing us closer to God, to ourselves, and to one another. By embracing our suffering, the I embraces dignity and grace and enhances human integrity. And when it comes to love, this is the hardest thing to get right.

LOVE LETTERS, NOT A REFERENCE BOOK

The Scriptures are many things—letters, parables, sermons, poems, histories, biographies, liturgies, songs. But behind all these multiple literary genres, the backdrop of everything is the greatest love story ever told. What if God means for all of Scripture to be God’s love story to us? What if God never intended the Bible to be strip-mined for propositions, or dissected and analyzed like a stiff leopard frog pulled from a bottle of formaldehyde? What if God never wanted the Bible to be turned into an interesting library of varied and profound literature or a stringent code of conduct?

What if the Bible instead is our shoebox full of love letters, our living library of family scrapbooks and diaries that connect us to our ancestors, helping us know them so we can know ourselves and understand what our family names stand for? What if it’s our storyboard of relationships from which we learn how to form friendships and deal with the people and problems we encounter?

The Bible is best read as a love letter from God,¹⁶ not a question book or an answer book, not a systematic theology or a scientific textbook or a dogmatics dictionary. The main subject of the Bible is God's relationship with what God most loves—God's creation and creatures. The Scriptures are the story of God's relationship with us—the covenant of relationships established between the Creator and those God created. For Jews the story centers on a covenant. For Christians the story centers on a Person. The source of our identity as Christians is a love story—or more accurately, a collection of love stories simple enough to be read by children, complex enough to elude total human comprehension.

Living as a Christian, or claiming membership in the family of faith, is not a matter of being bad or good, or right or wrong. It's a matter of being dead or alive. The Christian message is not a timeless tablet of moral principles or a code of metaphysics. The Christian message is the greatest love story ever told of Love come down from heaven to earth, a love so vast and victorious that even hatred could not keep it down.

THE UNDENIABLE THIRST FOR CONNECTION

What is it people want most? What is it we all are searching for most desperately? The answer is one word with a million meanings: *connectedness*. If you question that all people are seeking connection, all you need to do is log on to the Internet, the most important medium in the world. Use of the World Wide Web exploded not because of fascination with bells-and-whistles technology or because of online pornography but because people discovered a new way to connect with others. The Internet may be a virtual community, but still it's a community that's readily available in a disconnected world. It delivers connectedness right to your laptop.

CHRIST RESTORES BROKEN CONNECTIONS

The number one source of stress in life is the feeling of isolation— isolation from God, from yourself, from others, and from creation. In fact, Esther de Waal finds each of these bad connections in the original Adam and Eve garden story. Yet saving us from despair is the truth that Jesus, the Second Adam, came to heal these broken relationships. And by so doing, he restores us to the Garden.¹⁷

Adam and Eve hid from the God who looked for them when they didn't show up for their daily walk. In their hiding we find the root of our broken relationship with God. They hid their nakedness with clothing, even though no one else was around. This is the root of each person's broken relationship with oneself. In their blaming of each other and the serpent for their disobedience, we find the root of our broken relationships with others. And finally, in the banishment from Eden, there is the root of our broken relationship with creation. Hence, Adam and Eve show us the four bad connections that dog our lives.

Paul gave the Christians living in Colossae the key to restoring bad connections. "In Christ all things cohere," he wrote.¹⁸ Only Christ's healing power returns us to God, to each other, to ourselves, and to creation. In Christ all things connect.

Person or Proposition?

The influence of the Enlightenment is still much in evidence throughout the Western church. Christians seem to be more interested in developing a better argument to defend God than in living lives that are more devoted to God. Statements of faith get more attention than consistent lives of faith. Jesus came to seek and to save those who were lost, and his solution to the problem of sin was to sacrifice himself. God didn't send us a symposium; God sent God's Son.

FAITH ROOTED IN JESUS

Over a two-thousand-year period, but especially in the last two hundred years, we have jerked and tugged the Christian faith out of its original soil, its life-giving source, which is an honest relationship with God through Jesus the Christ. After uprooting the faith, we have entombed it in a declaration of adherence to a set of beliefs. The shift has left us with casual doctrinal assent that exists independent of a changed life. We have made the Cross into a crossword puzzle, spending our time diagramming byzantine theories of atonement. How did the beauty of Jesus's atoning work get isolated from the wonder of restoring an authentic relationship between God and humanity?

It's time to replant the Christian faith back into the ground from whence it first grew. Henry David Thoreau once warned that words, when derived properly, come with the earth still clinging to their roots. In the case of Christian faith, the soil has been scrubbed off the roots until much of the fruit of the Christian life has lost its juice—leaving it dry and sour and distasteful.

What else would explain why the broader culture now understands Christianity to be tacky and tactless? How else to explain the Christian faith becoming so graceless, artless, joyless, intellectually impoverished, and fearful of the future? Why are Christians the ones who like to hover around the Tree of Knowledge, as pastor and theologian John Baker-Batsel puts it, baiting the serpent and battling each other, rather than being the people who like to play in the garden?¹

The church may clutch Jesus to its side, but it no longer clutches Jesus to its insides. For the Jews, the unique place where God encountered humans was the temple and (before that) the tent or tabernacle. For Jesus, the unique place where God encounters humans is the human heart. But the church has embalmed Jesus in rules, codes, canonicities, and traditions that have everything to do with the church's saving itself and nothing to do with the church's saving the world.

PROPOSITIONS THAT ARE PASSED OFF AS TRUTH

Mother Teresa once was asked about the worst disease she had ever seen. Was it leprosy or smallpox? Was it AIDS or Alzheimer's? "No," she said, "the worst disease I've ever seen is loneliness."

In spite of, or perhaps due to, the digital revolution, relationships have become the most valuable, most important form of cultural capital in our globalized world. That's one reason the rediscovery of a relation-based spirituality is crucial to ministry in the twenty-first century. With

Christians now largely indistinguishable from non-Christians in how they live and think, there is no longer a startling freshness to the proclamation of biblical truth when it is presented as principles and propositions. How a person lives speaks much more loudly than what he or she asserts, now as always. Relationship is foundational to *all* evangelization, and people find and experience biblical truth in relationship.

The worst thing you can do to Christianity is to turn it into a philosophical endeavor. Faith is more than beliefs to be learned; it is bonds to be lived. Faith is more than holding the “right” beliefs; it is holding the “right” (that is, the “least of these”) hands. We are judged by the world not on the basis of how “right” we’ve gotten what we believe but on how well we’re living it—on how we love God and people.

PROPOSITION OR PROPOSAL?

Abraham Lincoln claimed that America was founded on a proposition and that Thomas Jefferson wrote it: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” Unlike USAmerica, Christianity wasn’t founded on a statement or even a rational argument. God didn’t send Jesus to deliver a proposition. God sent Jesus to deliver a proposal: “Will you love me? Will you let me love you?” In fact, Jesus not only got on his knees to deliver this proposal, Jesus was nailed to a cross to deliver God’s proposal.

BEING RIGHT OR LIVING RIGHT?

When he was practicing law, Abraham Lincoln was hired to sue someone over a \$2.50 debt. He didn’t want to do it, but his client insisted that it was a matter of principle, even though the person being sued was a friend.

So Lincoln asked for a fee of \$10.00, to be paid in advance. He then gave half to the defendant, who promptly paid his debt.

And what about Christians as a group? Does the church lack credibility with the culture because Christians would rather be right than be in relationship with one another? We’d rather be right about our positions, right about our condemnations, right about having the “right” interpretation of Scripture. We’d rather score points than secure relationships with others who share the Christian faith.²

I see sobering parallels between the church in the West and managed health care—an institution that is almost universally reviled. Rush your bleeding three-year-old to the emergency room, and the first thing you hear is not “What’s wrong?” but “Where’s your insurance card?” Likewise, a visitor’s experience with the church often is less one of relationship (“How can we love you?”) than one of being in the right (“Do you believe in the deity of Christ? Do you stand up for the inerrancy of Scripture? Do you hold to a premillennial view of the end times?”). The church has deep convictions, but do the convictions crowd out friendships?

THE GOSPEL TRUTH ABOUT SHARING THE GOSPEL

The church has taught evangelism as a meeting of two antagonists—one righteous and right, the other dead wrong. The point of evangelism, according to this school of thought, is to win an argument. Evangelism also has been taught as a spiritual sales pitch, more nuanced perhaps than a religious argument but still relying on high pressure and ultimately committed to closing the deal. And if not an argument or a sales pitch, the gospel is neutered and reduced to an objective, nonrelational exercise in logic. The strategy is to convince others, not to appeal to them.

Somehow, the church lost touch with the meaning of *good news*. And why wouldn't Christians lose touch with the heart of the gospel? I've never met anyone who was energized by cliché one-liners and subcultural kitsch. But offer people a meaningful, earth-changing mission and then just *try* to hold them back!

A BETTER PROCLAMATION OF THE BEST NEWS

An evangelist, in a biblical setting, is a bearer of the gospel, a “story catcher”³ of good news, a storyteller of the glory of God. The evangelists of the corporate world are proclaiming the gospel of the bottom line. The evangelists of the biblical world proclaim the gospel of the “morning line”—Jesus, the Bright and Morning Star. The evangelists of the corporate world announce, “I’m the center of the experience.” The evangelists of the biblical world announce that Jesus is the center of the experience.

If you're a Christian and you're looking for a working definition of *evangelist* that has meaning for today, you need look no further than Jesus. He set the standard not just for passion and meaning but also for delivering arresting images and irresistible experiences. He is Light, Living Water, the Path to God, a Shepherd seeking lost sheep. He is Life itself. He told compelling stories, and he is the Story. Jesus did not call us to the static posture of intellectual assent; he did not die so that we could choose to agree to a statement of faith. He called us to follow, to experience life like never before, to share with others in the life of faith. Passion, meaning, imagery, experience. Each of those has tremendous meaning for an evangelist; each one is part of the good news of the gospel.

If the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were here, they would tell you that faith is not primarily a matter of belief. They would emphasize instead aspects of life that are closer to what we would call passion. They would describe faith as immersion and engagement, a full-on experience of life that is far bigger than everyday existence.

ARGUMENTS DON'T WIN A PERSON'S HEART

A better argument might batter your opponent into surrender, but it won't win anyone's heart. That's why the first element of authentic passion is provenance: the process of growing a soul that radiates such beauty that it bears the Maker's mark and bares the Creator's signature.

Most people today don't fret over whether Christianity can get them to heaven. They want to know: “Will it make me a better person?” Jesus did not call disciples so they could become Christlike. He called them so they could become “little Christs,”⁴ or what I like to call spittin' images. Some linguists argue that the phrase *spittin' image* derives from the Southern dialect where *spirit* and *image* were contracted (some say corrupted) into one. To say that you are the spittin' image of your father is to say that you bear both his spirit and image. You bring together the visible and invisible, the tangible and intangible, of your parent. Jesus enables us to be his spittin' image in both body and character.

The passion of Christian faith is the ability to say, “Yes, Christianity can make you a better person. That better person is Jesus.” Christianity promises a provenance that can be certifiably Jesus. Authenticity is not about being more relevant but about being more Jesus. Do you speak with a Jesus voice? Do you see with Jesus eyes? Do you listen with Jesus ears? Do you touch with a Jesus touch?

The Right Relationship

The social-networking generation is sold out to relationships. Previous generations sacrificed family, friends, time, and health to work harder at getting ahead in the world. The social-networking generation is fully invested in connecting with others, without trying to sell anything or to recruit them into a multilevel marketing scheme. Relationships drive us, and the best thing in life is to find a relationship with God.

RULES OR RELATIONSHIP: WHICH WILL YOU CHOOSE?

The way to save the world is not through more rules to live by but through right relationships to live for. People are fast losing the art of being with one another. So it's not surprising that the number one problem in the world is people living disconnected lives. They are detached from God, from others, and from creation. People are losing the art of living with one another.

Relationship is the soul of the universe. And the soul is sick.

To save the world we need something more biblical than higher standards. We need higher relationships. We need less to be "true to our principles" and much more to be true to our relationships. To save the world we don't need the courage of our convictions. We need the courage of our relationships...especially the courage of a right relationship with the Creator, the creation, and our fellow creatures. Our problem in reaching the world is that we've made rules more important than relationship.

The inherent tension that exists between rules and relationship is of interest not only when we're talking about Christian witness. This same tension lies at the heart of the church's struggle for identity in an increasingly hostile culture. And a misguided allegiance to rules over relationship also has impoverished the pursuit of the life of faith for every one of us.

GOD IS LOOKING FOR AN ARGUMENT

God is a relational God starting not only with Jesus but with Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, even Jacob. There is nothing more face to face, body to body than wrestling. Jacob's wrestling match symbolized a relationship with the Divine that was tough enough for hand-to-hand combat and tender enough for holding each person in God's loving arms. When Jacob wrestled with God and refused to let go, his name was turned to Israel, which means "struggler with God." God honored Jacob's impertinence by using a word to name God's chosen people that identifies them as the ones who importuned, interacted with, or "wrestled with God."¹

Indeed, the final test of a prophet seems to have been whether he had the courage to argue with God.² In the midrash traditions, Moses three times argued with God. All three times his objections not only altered God's plans but even elicited God's praise. On one occasion, when Yahweh pledged to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, in the midrash, Moses rose to protest God's

words and was rewarded with a reversal.³ On another occasion, Moses changed God's mind about making war with Sihon.⁴

The most famous instance of Moses's interceding for Israel, however, was in the golden-calf episode. In fact, God was so angry with the dancing Israelites circling the golden idol that God fended off his friend Moses with these words: "Don't start on me." Or in the exact language of the Hebrew, "Let Me alone that My wrath may wax hot against them."⁵

In his wonderful book *Jesus Asked*, biblical scholar Conrad Gempf contends,

The God of the Jews and Christians is unlike any other god. Dispute with Jupiter and you'll have one of those yellow-painted wooden lightning bolts shoved down your throat. Talking back to Allah is likely to get you into even more trouble than talking back to my sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Davidovitch. Try arguing with Buddha and he'll laugh at you derisively for treating any conversation as if it referred to something real. But when you start arguing with Yahweh, he smiles, rolls up his anthropocentric sleeves, and starts to look interested. The strangest thing is that he likes losing the arguments even more than he likes winning them. Jacob, the trickster, is beloved of God. And Abraham didn't just get away with asking, "What about if there are only twenty righteous men in the city?" The God of the Jews and Christians is the only God that allows his followers to hear him say, "Oh, all right, you win."⁶

What does this bring to mind if not good friends who get together for dinner and engage in a spirited and compelling discussion of their differences? One wins over the other, and they part better friends than before. In other words, a "relationship."

DON'T LET MORALISM KILL RELATIONSHIP

To speak the truth about God, you must know God. And to know God you must love God. And to love God you must be in a relationship with God. Christians are relational fundamentalists: We put the primary relationship at the beginning, making it the foundation of all else we do and say. The primary relationship of life is a relationship with the one true and holy God. Everything else follows.

Faith in God is less "do I believe this or that about God?" than "can I accept that God loves me and chooses me?" Faith is not a discovery of something higher than I, but being discovered by a power higher than I and being caught up in that higher-power relationship. The truth of Christianity defies argument because it defines argument in nonphilosophical terms. The truth of Christianity is not a metaphysics of reason (which requires statements) but a metaphysics of relationship (which requires embodiment).

Many documentary films have been made about Mother Teresa of Calcutta. In one, an interviewer for the BBC went on a walkabout with Mother Teresa through homes for abandoned babies, children, orphans, and the dying. At a certain point Mother Teresa stopped and became the interviewer: "Why are you asking me all about my work, and asking me nothing about my Employer?"

HOW RELATIONSHIPS GROW DEEP

Deepening relationships go downward, and when you go deeper you get dirty. Pastor John Ambrose Wood was the father of author Catherine Marshall. He spent his entire ministry serving rural congregations. One day he called on a new member in Keyser, West Virginia. When the pastor extended his hand in greeting, the man, a worker on the B&O Railroad, apologized: "Can't shake hands with you, Reverend. They're too grimy."

With that the pastor bent to rub his hands in the coal dust and then offered his blackened hand to the worker. “How about it now?”⁷

James Hillman defines deepening growth as “work in the dirt.”⁸ Plants can’t grow heavenward without first growing downward. Colorful blossoms are the by-product of bland, down-and-dirty roots. Relationships that blossom are knee-bending, hands-dirtying digs into the bedrock issues.

It is sometimes hard to see this downward direction as positive. We like to think of God as being above us, not beneath us, a God “overarching” not “underlying” us. But if our relationships are to bear fruit, they first must become rooted in the soil of the Spirit. Any growth, whether inner or outward, doesn’t mean taking charge by ripping the roots out of the dirt. It’s just the opposite. It means constantly returning to the roots for their nutrients and energy. Fruits come from roots.

RELATIONSHIPS AND CHAOS

In our relationships we crave order and shun chaos. But we should prize chaos more than order. Ordered relationships are stable and comfortable, but they aren’t growing relationships. Only chaos brings forth new ideas, new experiences, and new energies, because only chaos is open and receiving, ready for change.

How many times have you said or heard said, “I only wish things could return to normal.” Normalcy is never good. In fact, what some relationships need more than anything is stirring sticks that can upset the normal, empty the predictable, and bring some chaos.

See chaos in your kid’s room? See positive, not negative.

See chaos on your desk at work? See positive, not negative.

See chaos in your relationships? See potential and possibility and creativity.

Order is what already is; it’s status quo. Chaos is what can be; it’s phase transition. There is no healing without the waters being stirred up, emptied of their stillness. Seek the order within the chaos, not the order imposed on the chaos.

RELATIONSHIPS THAT STIR YOU

Margaret Mead was married to an equally renowned anthropologist, Gregory Bateson. One of my favorite Bateson stories comes from his consulting contract with a zoo. The otters were in trouble. Their physical health was fine. But these animals that loved to frolic were sitting around all day, lifeless and lethargic. Bateson was brought in to diagnose the situation and offer recommendations. He spent several days observing the sleepy otters. It seemed to him they were depressed.

So he took matters into his own hands. He took the paper on which he was prepared to write his report, hooked a long string at one end of it, and dangled the paper above the area where the otters were slumbering. Soon one of the otters noticed the paper, began playing with it, and caused it to sway in the air. This awakened the curiosity in another otter, who also started pawing it, and the two otters started competing. By now the entire otter population joined in the frolic.

When Bateson retrieved the paper, the otters kept playing. They were “cured” and never went back to their listless lives.⁹

The magic of a dangling piece of paper was not the paper but the stirring stick that shook up the otters’ environment and introduced some novelty that energized their interactions. When relationships get too comfortable and predictable, the intervention of stirring sticks is imperative if growth is to take place.

YOU AND OTHER PRODIGALS

“There was a man who had two sons...”¹⁰ Many have called this simple story the greatest short story ever told, or most commonly the Evangelism in Evangelio (the gospel in a gospel). The story has inspired some of our greatest artists—from painter Rembrandt, to composer Claude Debussy, to poet John Masefield, to choreographer Sadler Wells, to writer Charles Dickens, whose *A Christmas Carol* is a variation on the story of prodigals. Coldhearted even to crutches, Scrooge eventually gets welcomed back into the human fold.

There is a heart of the gospel and permanent essence of Christianity that is found in the parable of the prodigal child.¹¹ It is a pattern of salvation that involves sin, repentance, and free forgiveness without any conditions other than repentance itself. In fact, the father doesn’t bother to wait for any pleas for forgiveness; he runs to meet his son and hugs and kisses him. If more beautiful words than these have ever been written in a story line—“His father, when he saw him coming, ran out to meet him”—I don’t know what they are.

Who is the real prodigal in this story? Is it the prodigal elder brother? Is it the prodigal father? Is it the prodigal younger son, who is probably the most preached about character in the Bible? Or maybe it’s the prodigal God?

Or maybe every character in this story illuminates a different feature of the word *prodigal*. In fact, maybe we are, each one of us, those two sons. Perhaps these two types of individuals do not exist as two separate people but as two persons who reside inside each one of us.

It has become fashionable to see the elder brother as the true prodigal. Coming in from his field, he heard all the ruckus and demanded: “What’s all this music and dancing?” When told his younger brother had returned and their father had rolled out the red carpet and killed a calf for a megaparty, he went ballistic.

It was hurtful for the younger son to ask his father for his inheritance ahead of time, a request that some scholars have interpreted as amounting to wishing his father’s death (“Why don’t you hurry up and die?”). What actually was the younger brother’s sin? Not “loose living” but *nonliving* in relationship with his father. He valued more highly what he could get from his father than friendship with his father. In fact, the Greek text never uses the words “riotous living” or “loose living.” In the words of Herbert McCabe, “English translators have been conned by the vindictive slanders of the elder brother later in the story. Here we are just told that he spent his money... ‘without hanging on to it’—as though there were no tomorrow. His sin does *not* lie in sensuality and harlots. His *sin* is much more serious. It is in the abandonment of *his father’s house*.”¹²

Besides, how did the elder brother know that his younger brother visited prostitutes? The elder brother made it his self-righteous duty to volunteer this information to his father—that this wastrel son of his had devoured his living with harlots. Even after his younger brother asked for forgiveness, the elder brother couldn’t resist an opportunity to make himself look good. So he tore his brother down. But beware. Listen to what people are criticizing others for. It tells you a lot about what the critics themselves are up to. When you throw a stone at someone, you wound yourself.

The younger brother’s request to “divide the living” was an extraordinary private insult to his father, but even more extraordinary was the elder brother’s public insult when he refused to participate in the father’s feast. All the prominent people of the village were there. For the elder brother to refuse to “come in” and join the party was a grave public insult. In fact, the agony of this rejected love created a rupture between father and elder son as severe as between father and younger son.

What kept the elder son away? What made him so problematic? He'd been obedient. He'd been faithful. He was dutiful and submissive. What more could any parent ask?

But his father wanted more. He wanted the companionship of a loving son. And when the younger son came home and said, "I want to be in a relationship with you once more," and the father got excited, the elder son went bonkers. From the principled position of the elder brother, it was the younger brother's own fault that he was homeless and penniless. He made his choice, so let him suffer the consequences. The elder brother worked like a slave for his father. And what did he get? The elder brother's self-righteousness and jealousy kept him from enjoying the party. He was the type of person who couldn't understand a Savior who said he didn't want servants. He wanted friends.¹³

JOINING WITH GOD

The next three decades may well be the most epochal in human history. For the kind of world being born will depend on us—our grasp of where we have come from and our reach for where we are going. How does the church respond to such a time as this? How does the church lead in such a time as this? How can we help the church have twenty-twenty vision...and beyond? It will be up to us—both individually and collectively, both as leaders and as followers—to hear God and see what God is doing and then to join in.

The Bible is less a book about what we are to do than a book about what God has already done and is now doing, and how we can join in God's "doings."

TRUTH IS RELATIONAL

The modern-era metanarrative relied on reason, offering the world a Christian "belief system." It was all about creating the right worldview. Just as modernity aimed to eradicate the mysteries of the world and substitute the encyclopedic certainties of a new science called applied reason, so Christianity sought to reinvent itself as a rational faith and set out to conquer mystery. It came to look at the scientific method as the preferred framework for tracking the truths of God. Even if it wasn't possible to achieve complete certainty or have everything bolted down, explained, and tidied up, mystery was at best unhelpful.

Show me where in the Bible Jesus desired, or designed, to construct a system of truth in rational forms rather than relational forms? For Jesus, truth is not a philosophy or a matter of thought. Truth is a matter of relationships and realities. Jesus didn't offer the world a new belief system. He offered the world a new heart—a new heart for God, a new heart for yourself, a new heart for truth, a new heart for life, a new heart for others. This is the divine story of relationships, a far cry from the rational or scientific proof of God.

HEAD OR HEART?

Jesus didn't lift up Plato or any other philosopher and say, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus lifted up a child; some say it was most likely Peter's child. And if the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, it was a rebellious, impetuous, high-strung, and hyperactive but simple child. With this child serving as metaphor, Jesus said, "Of such is the kingdom." Jesus even warned, "Do not despise one of these little ones."¹⁴

The icon of Christianity is not a thinker sitting down with his head in his hand.¹⁵ The Icon of Christianity is a Savior nailed to a cross with the world in his hands.

The defining characteristic of Christianity is the metanarrative of God reconciling the world to God through Christ. The Christian metanarrative is a metaperson: Jesus the Christ.

LIFE IN GOD'S PRESENCE

The psalmist could think of nothing better than to “sit down in the High God’s presence.”¹⁶ Earlier names for the Presence include:

- Shalom (practicing the Presence of peace)
- Shekhinah (allowing the Presence to dwell within us)
- Selah (pausing in praise and hanging in this moment of Presence)
- Hosanna (celebrating the Presence)
- Shabbat (sabbathing the Presence)
- Schema (discerning the voice of the Presence)
- Torah (living the Presence)

But with Jesus came the fullness of the Presence, not just “fullness of joy,”¹⁷ but “fullness of life.” It is one thing to talk about a “relationship with Jesus” and understand it propositionally. To understand it relationally, you enter a whole new world of Presence living and dying.

GOD AND NOTHING ELSE

An old story tells about the ascent into heaven of a great spiritual teacher who knocked at the gates of paradise for admission. After some time, God came to the door and inquired, “Who is there? Who knocks?”

“It is I,” came the confident response.

“Sorry, very sorry. There is no room in heaven. Go away. You will have to come back some other time.”

The good man, surprised at the rebuff, went away puzzled. After several years, which he spent in meditation and pondering over this strange reception, the man returned and knocked again at the gate. He was met with the same question and gave a similar response. Once again he was told that there was no room in heaven; it was completely filled at that time. Try again later.

In the years that passed, the teacher soaked his soul deeper and deeper in the Scriptures, pondering in his heart the truth of life. After a long period of time had elapsed, he knocked at the gates of heaven for the third time.

Again God asked, “Who is there?”

This time the man’s answer was, “Thou art.”

The gates opened wide as God said, “Come in. There never was room for Me and thee.”¹⁸

THE DUCT TAPE OF CHRISTIANITY

For all its potential for abuse, misuse, and God-denying self-obsession, we still can’t simply obliterate the I as if we’re just not that important. Nor can we pretend that the world could function quite nicely without us. The I is essential.

In point of fact, the I is the duct tape of Christianity. It may not be pretty or elegant, but the I begins every “I love you.” It’s not a random afterthought, not a disposable subject, not a polite obligatory mention. Love *begins* with I.

The I may have been defined differently in the past, but it was always there. Those of us within the Protestant tradition owe much to Martin Luther’s “Here I stand.” Yet the blatant egotism of the reformer’s first-person singular stance is inescapable. One monk standing alone, picking a fight with the whole of the church’s teaching authority? That’s I writ big.

“Every man is obliged to say,” observed the rabbi, “for my sake the world was created.”¹⁹ One of my spiritual disciplines is to laboriously read every name in the Bible’s many torture lists of begats. Each list of names is a protest against all totalitarian attempts to efface individuality. There are no undocumented aliens in God’s economy. We are strangers on earth, to be sure. But God knows the name of each one of us.²⁰

THE TRUTH THAT HAS TO BE EXPERIENCED

The basic question of life is this: Is God a reality to be experienced or a belief to be remembered? The basic question of the Christian life is this: Is Christ a living force to be experienced or a historical figure to be reckoned with?

The Bible is less a book about how people thought about God than it is a book about the religious experiences of individuals and communities. Experience is the engine room of the biblical and spiritual enterprise. At least the Westminster Catechism thinks so. Since 1647, the first question that every Calvinist child has learned to answer is this one: “What is the chief and highest end of man?” The answer is equally famous: “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.”

The EPIC life of faith begins with authentic experience. Do you honor the experiences of life God gives you by enjoying them? Can you sing praises for that bag of beans, that pot of Robusto, or that vanilla latte shampooed with latte art? Can you cry hosannas for intimate conversations over coffee? God is at work and at play in your life, sending you experiences of God. The stuff of divine revelation is experience—experiences that form themselves into story and story into theology.

The “Experience God!” story is not the end of the story, certainly, or the complete story. But without the experience of delight and enjoyment, the life of faith is not a life but a theory. It is a deadening doctrine, not an enlivening discipline. It is a faint memory of something in the distant past and not a living reality of one’s daily life today. You can have intellectual belief but be without EPIC faith.

People are starved for experiences that ring true, not just ring cash registers. Authentic experience is the starting point for a lived faith that not only transforms the individual but also changes the world.

Telling a Better Story

Compelling stories move us to action and to personal change much more readily than persuasive arguments or heated debates. A metaphor that rings true is more powerful than logic or a mathematical proof. God reveals God's love for us in songs, stories, poetry, and histories. God's plans and desires for us are revealed in an unfolding narrative that shows us our place in God's kingdom. We find hope and a future in God's metanarrative, the one story that gives meaning to our lives and to everything else in the world.

YOUR PLACE IN GOD'S STORY

Communication, especially fresh communication, keeps a relationship alive.

We like to define disciples of Jesus as people who live "by the book." The phrase "by the book" suggests people who know the correct procedures, who have mastered the policy manual. It should mean people who are living masters of relationships and experiences and interactions. "By the book" means a relationship with Scripture in which you talk to it and you hear it talk to you.

Read every word as if it is spoken to you. Because it is. As you listen to God's story, put yourself in the story. Instead of asking, "What life lessons can I learn from the text?" explore the life you can encounter while being in the text. Instead of asking, "What answers can I find in this text?" ask, "What voices of truth can I hear today?" You're not seeking abstract meaning. You hunger instead for the transforming power of an encounter with Christ.

Standing on a London street corner, G. K. Chesterton was approached by a newspaper reporter. "Sir, I understand that you recently became a Christian. May I ask you one question?"

"Certainly," replied Chesterton.

"If the risen Christ suddenly appeared at this very moment and stood behind you, what would you do?"

Chesterton looked the reporter squarely in the eye and said, "He is."¹

A STORY TO BE LIVED

Martin Buber liked to tell the story of a grandfather who was paralyzed. One day one of the man's grandchildren asked him to tell about an incident in the life of his teacher, the great Baal Shem. So the grandfather began telling how Baal Shem, when he was at prayer, used to leap about and dance. The more into the story the old man got, the more he became Baal Shem until he stood up from his wheelchair and, to show how the master had done it, began leaping and dancing. From that moment the grandfather was cured.

Buber went on to say: "That's the way to tell a story."² You become what you tell.

When you tell the story of Jesus's forgiving his enemies, you become someone who forgives his or her enemies. When you tell the story of Jesus's crossing the street to help an outcast, you cross the street to help the nearest outcast.

Christians live the story of Jesus. Christians don't just tell the story of Jesus.

A NEW VIEW OF MEANING

The idea of a metanarrative has fallen out of fashion. It is thought that no one story can give meaning to the world's vast variety of people, tribes, beliefs, and preferences. Better to allow each group—and even each individual—its own narrative, so that meaning is found much closer to home, much closer to one's own experience.

But to opt for a narrative du jour or narrative à la mode is a life-cheating exchange. To live as Jesus lived, and as God dreams we will live today, we need nothing else more than we need a metanarrative that situates our own story within the Big Story. Some people are born early risers. Others rise to the occasion. We need both. Some people write their life stories in prose, others in poetry. We need both. Some people bring less peace than they do the sword. We need both. But all stories need to stew together in the same pot.

When we lose the stories that give life coherence, we have lost everything. The world that is emerging today needs a master narrative more than ever; the great need is for something that offers people more than “lifestyle choices.”

THE GOSPEL IS GOD'S STORY

The gospel essence of Christianity is “good news.” In cultures where there is no concept of “news,” the *euangelion* is more effectively translated as “good stories.” The language of story is the language of the gospels. And the “good stories” are not ideas about God but activities of God, especially God's act of smashing death's dominion through a rolled-away stone. Each of the four gospels generates “good stories” of God raising the dead, with each gospel writer using his own language and images and idiosyncrasies (John's “I am,” Matthew's “the kingdom of heaven is like,” Mark's duh-ciples, Luke's fetish for detail). But within the great diversity of imagery and language and styles of expression, the good stories all revolve around the same grand narrative. The shape of Scripture is narrative, not philosophy, and any metanarrative that is shaped by Scripture ought to take the shape of Scripture.

THE STORY OF WHAT GOD IS DOING

The story of the Scriptures is the grand story of who God is and what God is doing in the world through Jesus the Christ.

This begs the question: “So who is God, and what is God doing?” The Christian story of everything is the story of a loving God who “so loved the world”³ that God is doing everything God can do to pursue a relationship with all that God made, a relationship that ushers us into the kingdom of God—the new heaven and new earth of a redeemed creation and a reformed humanity. Whether you are young, old, or middle-aged; Jewish, Muslim, or Christian; African, Asian, or Anglo; the truth is universal: the “secret place of the Most High”⁴ is now dwelling among us and within us.

IMAGES YOU CAN'T RESIST

Have you ever had a dream in which you sat for an extended period of time and read something? I haven't.

Dreams aren't like that. They are far closer to going to a movie, and as soon as you enter the theater, you are on-screen, playing a role in the scene. But it's not a projection of light on a flat screen. It's 3-D, with plot and action unfolding as you are carried along by the story.

A dream is not text, not verbal inscriptions on paper. It's CinemaScope, Technicolor, in surround sound with Dolby. We dream in images—sights, sounds, smells, motion. But why images and not words? In fact, research shows that while we're asleep, the portion of our brains that comprehends written language is dormant. We are effectively *unable* to read in our dreams. Perhaps that should tell us something about the nature of dreamers and how one might grab hold of a dreaming world's attention.

Chances are you were born in the television generation. And if you're younger than that, you were born to parents who were part of the television generation. Prior to the early 1950s, people got their news and entertainment primarily from reading or from the radio (after the mid-1920s). Movie theaters showed newsreels—short films carrying news of the day. But for most US Americans, the standard mode of information was words. Words were the common currency of communication—either words printed on paper or words carried on radio waves. The words left the reader or listener to form his or her own pictures—mental pictures elicited by what was read or heard. It wasn't a bad system.

But then came television, and to say merely that television triggered a revolution is to say the sun is a little bit warm. This was a revolution of a magnitude that no one could have imagined. Television added both sound and pictures to words, and the combination was irresistible. Leonardo da Vinci predicted the tellyverse when he said that image and sound were the two perfect media, one conveying signals from the visible world, the other the invisible world, and that when the world truly brought them together, nothing would be the same again.⁵

I have a friend who grew up in a small town in the Midwest. He was talking to an older man, a member of the Korean War generation, who was describing one of the first television sets to arrive in that town in the early 1950s. A shopkeeper set up the television in the display window of a Western Auto store, and it was such a novelty that townspeople would gather in front of the store after work just to watch the pictures on the television set.

Studies have been conducted to try to measure the impact of television on our culture. Findings from various studies have blamed television for everything from childhood obesity to attention deficit disorder to the decline in neighbors getting to know one another to sleep deprivation.

Can such a simple thing as television truly have brought about such a cataclysmic shift in society? Yes, it did. But how, and why? Primarily for one reason: television yokes images to words and sound. It's the images that make the difference. J. K. Rowling (pronounced "Rolling") is one of the most successful writers in all of history. But why? When kids are asked why her Harry Potter books appeal to them, the same response is heard over and over again: she writes in such a way that kids feel they are "*watching* them like a movie instead of *reading* them."⁶

JESUS AND THE IMAGES OF TRUTH

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn concluded his 1970 Nobel lecture on literature by quoting a Russian proverb: "One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world."⁷ In our culture, it's more true that one image of truth, and especially one Person of truth, tilts the balance of history. People today are like the Israelites in the desert: they'll follow a cloud or a pillar of fire but not abstract commands and disembodied voices. We want music, not math; poetry, not polemics. Once, God became fire and cloud. Then God became flesh. God did not become a PowerPoint presentation in the sky.

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is perhaps the most famous sermon in US American history. If people outside the church know about one sermon, it’s this one. Why do we remember it? It’s not the content or the theology. It’s Jonathan Edwards’s unforgettable imagery of people as spiders dangling by a thread over the flames of hell. Once you see that image in your mind, it’s hard to discard it. Or think about a searing image from this century. One television image, the Twin Towers falling into dust and rubble, can make an isolated terrorist group hiding out in mountain caves look pretty impressive. Try to dismiss the mental picture of a commercial jetliner crashing into the second tower. You can’t.

Lest you fear that I’m minimizing the centrality of God’s self-revelation through the words of Scripture, let me put the idea of rich imagery in context. A Christian’s faith is not impassioned by the correctness of a carefully constructed dogma or the logic of an unassailable verbal argument. But faith is set on fire by the images that the words of Scripture present.

The power of the Word to move people from rote religion to full-life immersion is not in the words themselves. It’s in the images, the stories, the music of Scripture. Before there was any matter, there was God. The universe existed as an image in God’s passion before the universe existed as a creation.

Genesis tells us that God made “every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew.”⁸ Since the mind is made of metaphors (remember, we dream in pictures, not in text), the greatest power over others is the power held by those who choose the metaphors. Jesus was history’s greatest master of metaphor. In his metaphors lie metamorphosis. The metaphors we live in become the reality we live out.⁹

METAPHORS THAT IGNITE PASSION FOR GOD

It’s correct to consider the image-rich Scriptures as the mind of God made available to us. The Bible “thinks,” not in propositions and bullet points, but in images, metaphors, narratives, symbols, and song. Poetry is more the language of biblical faith than prose or philosophy. The church’s failure of imagination is directly attributable to its failure to take up the poet’s tools: image and imagination, metaphor and story, and metaphor stories known as parables.

When you read the Bible, do you look for the thesis statement, the main principle, or the key idea? Or do you look for the image that will change your life, the leading or controlling metaphor that reframes the conversation or story? This metaphor can be a character, a key moment in the story, an artifact (prop) or artifice, even a word that functions as an image. Metaphor is not simply an adornment to critical insight but a method of perception in itself. Metaphors are not life’s seasoning; they’re the very meat of life.

Just like every computer is simply hardware until it is formatted by software, metaphors format life. The question is whether we will choose metaphorical software that will format our lives on a soul-growing or a soul-destroying grid. The controlling metaphors control life, either toward the passion of God or away from it.

We live in a visual culture that speaks in images more than words. Advertisers spend billions of dollars a year, not to bombard us with words, but to surround us with images. Christianity begins and ends in an image: Jesus is the image of God, the logo of the Logos. In the beginning was the Logos, which became Logo. In the end we will be nothing but logos that become Logos, human images that become spittin’ images of God. Image is potentially much more redemptive than word.

Read on for bonus content from Leonard Sweet's next book, *Viral*, to be released spring 2012 by WaterBrook Press, a division of Random House Inc.

Viral

by Leonard Sweet

Release Date: Spring 2012

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from *Viral* by Leonard Sweet (Spring 2012)

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Introduction
from Viral by Leonard Sweet (Spring 2012)

The Anatomy of Human Longing

The Christian life is neither Christian nor any kind of life unless we are living out our faith. And faith is not static or regimented. It is viral, and as dynamic and organic as life itself.

Your life and your experience of God will differ from mine in significant ways. But like every human on earth, we share the basic needs of nourishment, shelter, and a network of companions. These longings and pursuits shape us, even when we are not consciously aware of them. Incubating within us is the desire to reach out in order to fill our biological and relational needs. We gather food, find shelter, and do all we can to avoid being alone.

We may laugh at the Delbert McClinton song “If You Don’t Leave Me Alone (I’ll Find Somebody That Will),” but no one truly wants to be left alone. We sense that alone means lonely, and loners are losers in the lottery of life. Beyond that, something inside us pushes us to connect with others. We know that being alone means being miserable. The great poet W. H. Auden predicted the feared manner of his death: “alone at midnight, in a hotel, to the great annoyance of the management.”¹ He died of a heart attack in a hotel in Vienna, on September 28, 1973. Alone.

Connection is one of the absolutes of life. We don’t choose it; it is hardwired within us. Just as neurons that are unable to connect with other neurons will die, so abandoned souls will atrophy and die. Our well-being depends on our ability to connect with other humans. This drive pushes us with as much force as the longing for self-expression, our attraction to stories and storytelling, and the core human urge to know others and to be known. These are not all the things that make us human, but taken together they go a long way toward defining a human being as God created us.

Nature and nurture, destiny and design, shape the way we approach God and the way we live our faith. But it is not only who we are that determines the default setting of our lives (the ways we act and react, how we think). Also shaping us is the culture in which we live. In fact, the theory of neuroplasticity argues that the structure of the human brain is somehow shaped by our experiences, technologies, and cultures.

Admittedly, the word *culture* is one of the most slippery terms used in the social sciences. In fact, a founder of the field of culture studies, Raymond Williams, called the word *culture* one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. When I refer to culture, I mean primarily the unvarnished vernacular of a place or period. In the 1960s, when middle-class youth wanted to rebel, they grew beards and smashed stereos. When Amish youth wanted to protest in the 1960s, they shaved their beards and bought stereos. Culture shapes behavior and how we express our beliefs. Faith is not just a matter of logic and learning but of imagination and emotion and culture.

LIFE, FAITH, AND THE DIGITAL AGE

If you are reading this, you almost certainly are a holdover from the twentieth century. You were born toward the end of the last millennium and, without even trying, you bring into this new era

some of the trappings of the previous era. For purposes of this discussion, we will refer to two families (or tribes, if you prefer) that populate the twenty-first century. Both arrived here from the last century, but one group is rooted in the past and the other is fully at home in the new world, which encompasses the present as well as what can be seen on the horizon.

We know time is constant, but in recent years it seems time started moving much more quickly. Here is a simple example from just a decade ago. Back then, when travelers were waiting for a flight, they would occupy themselves with people watching, talking, reading a book or magazine, staring into space, or relaxing. Now think about the last time you were waiting for a flight. What were other travelers doing to fill the time? They were watching Hulu, sending pictures to friends, perfecting PowerPoints, creating photoshopped photos, texting, tweeting, on Facebook, and checking e-mail.

The culture has gone digital, but as recently as 1979, the then-current edition of *The Chambers Dictionary* (TCD) defined “digital” only as “pertaining to the fingers, or to arithmetical digits.” If you are native to the Digital Age, think about this: the word *digital* had an entirely different meaning when your parents were in college, or getting married, or starting to think about adding you to the family.

The tribe that feels most at home in the twenty-first-century Digital Age is what we will call the Googlers—the digitized, globalized group that spends much of its life getting to know one another in a virtual world. The tribe that immediately precedes the Googlers we will refer to as the Gutenbergers—those who arrived from the twentieth century bringing with them influences and assumptions launched long before, in the fifteenth century. Gutenbergers believe they were shaped primarily by the space race, John Kennedy, the Cold War, and the Beatles. They are largely unaware of a more basic influence that determines their approach to life and faith. They are the product of the movable-type technology perfected by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1400s.²

If Gutenbergers still prefer to read a book that is printed on paper, rather than on an iPad, at least credit them with being loyal to the namesake.

WHY GUTENBERG IS SUCH A BIG ICEBERG

When the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls became widely known in the late 1940s, biblical scholars were eager to examine what grew to be a library of very early, hand-copied biblical texts. Comparisons of the scrolls’ hand-lettered words with modern translations of the Hebrew Scriptures showed remarkable consistency. Painstaking copying by hand had preserved the integrity of the biblical text over millennia. Christians can be thankful that Essenes and others who honored the words of Scripture used more than just their thumbs in copying the texts.

For nearly fifteen hundred years the Scriptures (Jewish and Christian) were preserved by the time-consuming process of hand copying. This served to keep the sacred text in circulation, but it was a very limited circulation. The laborious copying process meant there simply were not enough scrolls or codex produced for mass distribution. The available copies were read aloud and listened to, a system well-suited to a largely illiterate population.

That began to change in the 1400s, when technology took a breathtaking leap. Johannes Gutenberg came up with a way to produce books by hand, but through a process that avoided hand copying. Instead, movable type was used to reproduce words, sentences, entire books. His printing press introduced a radical advance in the mass production of books.

The first book created on the first movable-type printing press was the Bible. Gutenberg’s technology eventually resulted in the wide availability of affordable editions of the Scriptures. If any invention deserves the accolade “revolutionary,” give it to the printing press of Johannes Gutenberg.

The first Bible came off press around the year 1439, and the Protestant Reformation followed some eighty years later. Launched by Augustinian monk Martin Luther's list of ninety-five points issued in Wittenburg, Germany, the Reformation owes more than a little of its success to printing and the technological advances of Gutenberg and the Italian printer Aldus Manutius, who in 1501 introduced the pocket-sized octavo format. This miniaturized the book and brought reading out of libraries into everyday lives.

Think how omnipresent printing has become. Just about every home has its own printing press hooked up to a laptop or desktop computer. But with more and faster ways to circulate written data electronically, most of us don't bother to print documents. We still are wed to words, but we access them in ways we couldn't have imagined at the turn of the twenty-first century.

When Technology Changed the World

Why all the talk about text, printing, Gutenberg, and movable type? The first printing technology in the West is critical for one reason: the ability to print books on a mass scale reoriented the world, including the Christian world. And it wasn't just by producing pamphlets that advanced the teachings of Luther and Calvin and Zwingli, although that didn't hurt. But the impact was more far-reaching and sustained. Printing fueled the spread of Christianity and helped form its character and practice by underscoring the power and importance of words over images. Cartoonist James Thurber would complain of this dominance of word over image in these words: "A drawing is always dragged down to the level of its caption."

The Gutenberg tribe is unapologetically grounded in text, and I use *text* here as a noun. Long ago they accepted as a primary mission the task of getting the printed Word of God into the hands of members of every language group on the planet. Preachers love to hold a thick Bible aloft and shout that the words in this book are the source of life. Gutenbergers love words printed on paper and books bound between covers sitting on shelves. In Gutenberg Christianity, the text that backs up belief (the Bible) tends to receive as much emphasis (if not more) as the daily life of faith. Words are on a par with living out one's beliefs.

GOOGLERS OF THE WORLD, CONNECT

The other tribal culture, the Googlers, would be hard-pressed to pick Johannes Gutenberg out of a police lineup. But they have taken his invention and extended it to uses and applications that changed not only the way people read and access information but the way people relate to one another. I have far more friends whom I've never met than I have friends in face-to-face relationships. Even if you're a Gutenberger, I would imagine the same is true for you. Googlers have rewritten the rules of forming networks, connections, and relationships. In the hands of Googlers, technology has been bent to the purposes of core human longings: knowing, being known, belonging, perception. A primary way these things happen in Googler Culture is through the use of metaphors for storytelling, story catching, and story sharing. The technology of Googler Culture, advancing at a faster rate than any other in history, takes its cues more from premodern times than from the movable-type technology that helped launch the modern era. Googlers harken back to the era of Jesus. And it's no accident that Jesus serves as the world's leading storyteller. He excelled at connecting people to one another, to himself, to creation, and to God.

Are You More Googler or Gutenberger?

We're all part of a tribe, and the two we'll be looking at in this book are Googlers and Gutenbergers. There is a loose tribal correlation to your age, but a much higher correlation between tribe and your worldview, daily habits and practices, assumptions, and values. Use these questions to determine which culture you're most comfortable in:

1. Have you sent a handwritten note to someone in the past six months?
2. Have you mastered enough acronyms for quick and efficient texting?
3. Have you written a check to pay a bill in the past two months?
4. Have you used a postage stamp in the last six months?
5. In the last month, have you written in cursive beyond just your signature?
6. If you misplaced your cell phone, could you still send e-mail and cruise the Internet?
7. When you're at home, does an incoming phone call require use of your cell?
8. Have you been listed in a phone book in the last three years?
9. If the battery in your mobile device went dead, could you read the most recent book you purchased?
10. Do you watch television programs when they are first shown and on a conventional television set (not a laptop screen or mobile device)?
11. Have you looked up a number or address using a telephone book in the last three years?
12. Do you use a pencil or pen to keep a journal?

Scoring: Count your yes answers to questions 2 and 7 and your no answers to 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. Multiply the sum by two. Total score A = _____.

Count your yes answers on questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and your no answers on 2 and 7. Divide the sum by two. Total score B = _____.
Now add A and B. Combined score = _____.

The higher your score, the less Gutenberg you are in your everyday habits. And it is likely that changing your habits also is changing the way you think about life, faith, and relationships. So just how Googler or Gutenberg are you? A score of six rivals Johannes Gutenberg himself. A score between six and twelve puts you in transition mode, adopting some Googler practices. A score of thirteen to twenty-four is full-on Googler. You must be a Digital Age native.

We are all singing with Johnny Cash "I'm Bound for the Promised Land,"³ but you can't be eternity-bound without being earth-based and time-bound. And the bindings of our time are more Googler than Gutenberg. This transition to a new culture has created a myriad of problems. Gutenbergers criticize Googlers for being shallow, obsessed with games, narcissistic, and irresponsible. They like to characterize Digital Age natives as perpetual adolescents who confuse status updates with authentic, legitimate human relationships.

But is that an accurate assessment? As I look at the waning of Gutenberg Culture and the arrival of Google Culture, I have to wonder if Jesus wouldn't be more at home with the Googlers. In fact, as the Western church built by Gutenbergs continues to lose ground in a world of Googlers, I am convinced that Christians need to start taking cues from the Googlers. Even more, I sense a Googler inside many a Gutenberg, crying to get out and pursue relationship with others. But the inner Googler in too many cases is held back by fear and uncertainty.

Humans are driven to belong, find acceptance, connect with others, and share life. This is true of Gutenbergs and Googlers alike, but Googlers freely admit it. How many cultures in history have devoted so much effort, invention, time, and passion to building networks that offered no payoff beyond engaging with other people? This is getting pretty close to pure relationship, when connecting is its own reward. No one is trying to sell me a timeshare or recruit me into their multilevel marketing program.

Googlers talk about their day and ask others about their lives. Maybe they talk about music or ideas, or they play chess via the Internet. These things used to occur over the backyard fence or in the family rec room. Now they occur across national borders and create bonds among people who will never meet face to face. If "necessity knows no law" (Aquinas), desire for connection knows no bounds.

IF "GOOGLE IS GOD," IS GOD GOOGLE?

I don't knock Gutenbergs; I was born into that culture. In many ways it still feels familiar and comfortable to me, like walking through an airport terminal and overhearing an accent that reminds me of home. I used to dream of what it would be like to have a collection of one hundred record albums (called LPs for "long-playing"). Now Googlers have ten thousand "favorite" songs on an iPod. I'm still learning the language and links of Googler Culture: I was no sooner transported by the blue line of hyperheaven than I crashed from the blue screen of death. I am so Gutenberg in background that I still believe that to write well is to make a better world.

Gutenbergs have held sway in the world—and in the Christian world—for hundreds of years. They launched the modern missions movement and recast the Bible in more languages (and multiple versions of the English language) than ever before. They put the gospel on radio and television and in the movies. They built churches that resemble college campuses with an indoor minmall. The contributions of Gutenbergs to a global civilization? Religious tolerance, rule of law, freedom of speech and press. Humanity leaves these behind at its peril.

Gutenbergs figured out how to apply the practices of USAmerican business (the most advanced form of capitalism) to the operation of the church, and introduced an allegiance to bigger and better as the most reliable measure of effective ministry. Gutenberg churches became citadels of command and control. No one would accuse Gutenbergs of lacking resourcefulness, devotion to the cause, single-mindedness, or confidence. I could take you to fifty churches around USAmerica with which any community college would gladly trade facilities. You don't build a state-of-the-art church on 120 acres if you're not sold out to the vision of providing a niche for every person. A gym for the athletes, art classes for the artsy, coffee bar for the Javalujahs!, kids' programs cradle roll through high school, singles, seniors, bikers, runners, crafters, skateboarders, and fans of Bible study.

In a niche-or-be-niched world, what better way to help people belong than to offer them multiple options tailor-made to fit their hobby, athletic inclination, taste in pastries, or yearning to scrapbook?

Googlers are doing a similar thing, but starting from the other end of the equation. They first create a community and invite everyone in. Once people are interacting in the community (most often online or by Twitter or text message), they are invited to share who and what they are. Passions, interests, areas of knowledge and expertise, likes and dislikes, questions, needs, joys. It all comes out as the longings of being human come to the fore. If you want to shoot a round of golf, you can do that too. But Googlers won't build a golf course just so you'll have a place to belong.

In my experience, Googlers lack the Gutenberger drive to make it on your own, to be dependent on no one else, to stand tall and make your own way in the world and succeed or fail completely on your own. Charlie Chaplin, when asked the secret of his success, replied that it was "sheer perseverance to the point of madness."⁴ The John Wayne gene doesn't seem to have carried over to the Googlers. Instead, they are drawn to 140-character updates from friends and strangers who talk about a great movie they saw, or present an idea worth considering, or toss out a question to ponder or a reason to celebrate. To Gutenbergers, this seems way too surfacey and even useless. Why waste time, technology, and your battery on such drivel?

God promised that anyone who seeks God with their whole heart will find God.⁵ Gutenbergers are wholehearted about a lot of things, and history records their accomplishments. No one surpasses Gutenberg Culture when it comes to applying yourself and accomplishing goals. But somehow, relationships were relegated to a different category—the nice-to-have-but-not-crucial category. Building something or improving it or advertising it or promoting it took priority. In the words of Walter Gropius, in his *Baubaus Manifesto*, "The ultimate aim of all creative activity is a building!" Creativity issues in artifacts and achievements, not relationships. Gutenbergers have been far more concerned about rectitude of thoughts about God than they have on rectitude of relationship with God.

Googlers, as well, are creative, innovative, passionate, committed, and productive. They are not against progress. Witness the iPad 2, full-color e-readers that link to video clips and sound effects, phones that do everything but wash your laundry. Technology is the holy handmaiden of Google Culture and they excel in it.

But the motivation and driving force for Googlers is not to build something huge and expensive that the masses will admire. Instead, they are driven to develop and use technology in ways that improve lives. A Googler would not think it wise to build a church that is so large it requires the installation of an escalator. They have no desire to bask in the reflected glory of a multimillion-dollar artifact. To them, artifactual is the artificial without more and better relationships, defined as networking, sharing, connecting, belonging, and letting others get to know you.

Is bigger really better, or is smaller and more convenient the way to go when it enhances relationships and connection? What lies at the core of our humanness—the grandiose or the simple? Don't we all long to return to the direct simplicity of God walking in the dew of the day with Adam and Eve? I'm not saying that all Googlers, or even most of them, pursue connections because they are pursuing God. For many, it is not intentional. But a wise Scripture writer mentioned that God put eternity into every person's heart.⁶ Every culture bears the "seeds of the Word"—the Spirit of God keeps alive in humanity the innate desire to be united with God. That desire of union with God is true of Googlers and Gutenbergers alike.

But Googlers are the ones who have made relationships a life mission. Googlers are the ones more likely to trust that the common good in the long run is the personal good. And Googlers are most ready to take seriously what any scientist, when pinned to the wall to say what anything is—whether a gland or a galaxy, a lepton or a lemur—ends up saying: a system of relationships.

GOD AND RELATIONSHIPS AND BEING HUMAN

The teenage granddaughter of a minister friend reported to her grandparents that she'd prefer going to the traditional worship service with them because they sang out of books and she could see the music and not just the words. A hymnbook enabled her to sing notes other than the melody line. My research assistant, Betty O'Brien, was in conversation with the youthful praise team leader at her home church in California. A powerful organ offertory moved him profoundly. He is a fan of new sounds, and he wanted to hear more.

So what keeps Googlers and Gutenbergers from finding common ground? We have seen that being human means we share the same longings, and those longings drive us toward relationship with others and ultimately toward God. So why the disconnect between these two cultures?

Fear does its dishonorable work, creating maladaptive responses instead of metabolic ones. Never underestimate the power of fear geared up and egged on by ego to keep us from moving forward. There is an old saying that some people are so fearful of change had they been present at creation they would have voted for chaos. Fear causes us to hide in the face of change, and it leads to living a reactive rather than constructive life. The choice is to be an active part of positive change, which already is upon us, or to passively and grudgingly tolerate inevitable change. This "such-a-time" moment has a right to expect that we won't be satisfied to sit on the sidelines but that we will initiate and participate in change. The future cannot afford an AWOL church. Jesus gave us a love we can trust, even in the face of our fears.

Al Caldwell is a friend of a friend. He was scheduled to preach one Sunday and called the church in advance to talk to someone about details. The person's cell phone kept cutting out. Finally, the person at the other end of the line apologized: "Sorry, sir, this is a dead zone!"

How many of us live in a dead zone? How many churches are dead zones to the future? Al's response was immediate: "Someone get me a trumpet, a bugle, an alarm clock, and an electronic Bible so we can move out of the dead zone and bring some life and energy to this place."⁷

This book is a tale of two tribes: Gutenbergers and Googlers. I will tell a bit about each tribe, both the pros and the cons, and will trace some tracks of how they intersect in our world. Each tribe has its promises, perils, potentials, and problems. Each tribe has some baggage we could lose and some we should hold on to. Clearly the future belongs to the Googlers, but not for long. The world of Google and its contemporary technologies will have its day, and then another culture will be born. But for the next two decades, the primary missional challenge of the church will be to incarnate the gospel in a Google world.

Of all the pictures in the National Gallery of London, more than one-third are religious, and more than half of them portray the face of Christ in various times and climes.⁸ This is where we begin: imagining the face of Christ in the Digital Age, the world of the Googlers.

Logos and Logo

*Is the gospel personal connection or heated argument?
Your answer will tell you something.*

All the mischief of the world is done by one thing; the inability to remain at rest within one's own room.

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

I entered the world as a Gutenberg, and I share a deep devotion to the written and spoken word. But I wrestle with the Gutenberg Culture's use of words, and sometimes even its use of the Word. Gutenbergs proceed from a fixed point, which helps explain why they are drawn to objective facts, unimpeachable research, and hard statistics. For them, words serve much the same purpose as a mathematical proof. There is a feeling of certainty that comes with precise words and piercing definitions.

Googlers also are big fans of words, but they approach them differently. To a Googler, words are important because they help a person express ideas, share news, and tell stories. Words can establish common ground and reveal shared interests. Instead of serving as a tether or anchor to a fixed point, for Googlers words are agents of change, experiments in conversation, small change in the coinage of the new realm of unmediated, interactive, unscripted connection.

Words can be signposts erected to mark the location of incontrovertible truths. They also can be messengers and emissaries. They can be mile markers to show you where you are or vehicles that take you to the place you've been striving to reach. Words can show you where you are or where you are going. They can tether you to an unvarying point of reference or move you into unmarked territory.

Googlers are not as interested in proving a point as they are in making connections. Trust me, 520 million-plus human beings from around the world do not log on to Facebook so they can get into an argument. They do it to be connected to other people.

LOGOS THAT LEAD TO LOGOS

I playfully date the origin of Googler Culture to 1973, the year the mobile phone was invented. I was an early adopter. My first mobile device was a bag phone, so named because it was so big it came with its own body bag. When I would meet someone for lunch, the phone required its own chair at the table. (*Mobile* was used loosely when it came to this monstrosity.) Still, the invention of a telephone that was not dependent on a wall plug, not fixed to a location, and small enough to be

taken with you throughout the day accomplished much more than convenience in communicating. It ushered in a new era, what I am calling the TGIF era (more on this later). The connected generation was born when inventor Martin Cooper called up his AT&T rival on an unplugged telephone from the streets of New York City.

While I was an early adopter, I'm still an immigrant in Googler Culture. I earn my keep with words, hence I am logocentric. But Googler Culture has allowed me to expand and multiply the venues and voices. Like most of us, I am a micro-blogging, social-networking, apps-loving, tweeting USAmerican. I'm never happier than when I'm virtually present in multiple places at one time.

More important than all that, I am a Christian whose life is defined by the witness and words of Jesus. God revealed himself to us in the words of sacred Scripture and in the Word, Jesus the Christ. Words are important. They reveal God, inspire faith, form lives, impart wisdom, give direction, and much more.

Christians of the first century did not have access to the full canon of Scripture. They had the same Bible Jesus had, the Hebrew Scriptures. And followers of "The Way" in various churches had a letter (or letters) from Paul, James, Peter, John, and the writer to the Hebrews. They were people of the word, but they also were people of The-Word-Made-Flesh and knew that they formed the body of Christ on earth. The members were interdependent, of "one accord in prayer"—not in politics, propositions, or programs, but prayer.¹ Gatherings of Christians were communities of prayer, practice, participation, knowing, and being known.

This is a fairly accurate description of the Googler world as well, both the believing and nonbelieving segments. Googlers tend to live by values that early Christians would recognize. They believe there is more truth in relationships than in propositions. They yearn to do more than interact and stay in touch with others. They want to *share life* with others. They do not seek a spirituality that escapes flesh and blood. They understand that to be "incorporated" in a body is to be enfleshed, but an enfleshment that is not corporate but corporal. While Gutenberger Christians keep busy parsing a Greek root to uncover the exact meaning of "submit" in Ephesians 5, the Googlers of the world are friending another two hundred people, reading the twenty text messages that came in during the last ten minutes, and meeting someone for coffee. The Gutenberger church might think of Googlers as superficial and bent on wasting time, but what is superficial about devotion to relationships?

We were missionaries, disciples, Jesuits.

—Keith Richards, *describing what it was like
to start the Rolling Stones with Mick Jagger*²

CLIFFSNOTES TO TGIF CULTURE

As with any culture, there are natives and immigrants. Natives were born into the culture and, as a result, the culture's identifying characteristics are largely invisible. You don't think about oxygen; you just breathe it. If you're a native English speaker, you don't lie awake at night parsing *pare*, *pear*, *pair*, and *père*. But immigrants do. To them, the culture is exotic and often confusing. It's interesting but unsettling. To Gutenbergers (but not Googlers), TGIF Culture is an odd thing that has happened in the world.

Meanwhile, TGIF Culture is invisible to Googlers. They operate within it without thinking about it. Googlers couldn't imagine living any other way.

So what is this new culture? As we use it here, TGIF does not stand for Thank Goodness It's Friday, nor is it the acronym for a chain of family restaurants. TGIF is the Googler Culture that is built on Twitter, Google, iPhone, and Facebook—the most visible and relied-upon tools of relationship and life.

Every Gutenberg is right now undergoing a brain transplant. Cognitive scientists credit the rise of TGIF Culture not only with changing the way we access information and communicate with one another but also with reformatting our brains. Researchers have found that surfing the Internet and having an overabundance of data at our fingertips recalibrates brain synapses.³ It is called brain “plasticity.” An onslaught of tweet-length messages plus thirty-five hundred “sermons” (advertisements) a day selling us everything from hamburgers to Hampton Inns, plus texting while we're Facebooking and IM-ing and checking e-mail and looking up movie times and doing a little online banking—all of this is taking its toll. Sorry, that last sentence exceeded the maximum allowable character count. (Perhaps an Oscar should be awarded to the opposable thumb for Best Supporting Actor.)

Your brain is being short-circuited and maybe even shorted by sound storms and data avalanches. Everybody is only too eager to share, and now they have multiple venues for instant self-expression. The prospect of sitting alone in a quiet room, pondering or ruminating or praying, is most people's idea of torture. The prevailing ethos is to be connected 24/7, even if you hardly ever see one another in a physical sense.

Long gone are the days when a friend would send you a postcard from some faraway location and then return home before the postcard landed in your mailbox. Now we expect a moment-by-moment account of the friend's travel adventure. (As with most things, being connected 24/7 is a two-edged sword. This could be considered an invasion when your parents want to get involved. Who wants to Skype with Mom and Dad when it involves sitting at your computer just so your parents can see you when you're half-asleep and wearing a wrinkled T-shirt and pajama bottoms? Plus, they want you to keep sending them photos and clever videos, and even the GPS coordinates of your new apartment. You know if you give in, they'll be at their desktop taking a street-level look at your building and calling to see if they can stop by for a visit.)

How did they miss the point that communication in TGIF Culture is largely virtual?

And again, there is another side to this. I have found no empirical evidence that thumbing your way through life has advanced the scientific enterprise, or furthered art and culture, or done even one thing to enrich the use of language. Much of human contact has been reduced to acronyms, misspelled words, emoticons, missing punctuation, and mindless replies to meaningless revelations. (I don't care what is on your grocery list and whether you took a nap this afternoon.) These things pass for conversation, a thing that used to thread the fabric of society. For many in TGIF Culture, it's more like stitches to close a wound, and we're wondering if it will leave a scar.

Distance is no obstacle to getting in touch—but getting
in touch is no obstacle to staying apart.

—Zygmunt Bauman on the cell-phone generation⁴

Educators wonder if children will soon stop learning the mechanics of printing the alphabet by hand. That skill is called upon so rarely, it's almost vestigial. (Already, cursive writing is in danger. How long is hand printing likely to survive?)

FOR GOD SO LOVED A GOOGLER WORLD

If we had any doubts that God wants a relationship with us, Jesus's life on earth supplies the final proof. God didn't send us a treatise; God sent a Person. And in our culture, either Googler or Gutenberg, it's often hard to find Jesus amid the clutter of words. While it might seem that Googlers (the thumb-texting acronym crowd) treat words too lightly, they are driven to find and maintain connection with one another.

In their dogged tweeting, blogging, Facebooking, and IM-ing, Googlers have stumbled onto the heart of Christian faith and meaning. Oddly, they have arrived at a place that echoes the earliest Christians and their faith communities. I'm not saying that TGIF Culture is more consciously in tune with God than are the Gutenbergs. But I am saying that Googlers (of any age) recognize a need in their lives and they act on it. Repeatedly. Some would even say constantly.

While Googlers cannot be thrown off the relational scent, it can be argued that Gutenberg Christians never picked up the trail to begin with. Sure, if you go to church on Sunday you might hear talk about a personal relationship with Christ. And you might notice announcements of the meetings of small groups with the purpose of encouraging deeper relationships. But too often these are programmed and ultimately ineffective.

Gutenbergs might be more adept at describing in words what a relationship is and why it is needed. But Googlers are light-years ahead when it comes to the practicum. They pursue connection with a tenacity not seen since Elizabeth Taylor's sixth wedding. Googlers are driven to find meaning and touchpoints with others. I don't endorse the narcissistic sharing of personal minutiae, but I support sharing for the purpose of connecting. And so does God. There is nothing more boring than reading the memoirs and minutia of someone you don't care about. But there is nothing more exciting than reading the memoirs and minutia of someone you honestly care about.

I believe it is more natural to incarnate the gospel in TGIF Culture than in the world of the Gutenbergs. In other words, Googlers (be they disciples or not) are better positioned to encounter and engage with the Jesus of Scripture than Gutenbergs have been, since Gutenbergs were inclined to refashion the Jesus of Palestine into a Western-size-fits-all Savior. The church may wake up to find that Jesus's time has come in TGIF Culture because it is more organic than linear, more kinesis than stasis, more circle than square. For this reason, Googlers may be the best hope for the future of the church in the West.

Gutenbergs suited their times well. But in the Googler world—the age of experience, participation, image, and connection—Gutenbergs have proven to be unwilling to let go of their fixed position. Meanwhile Googlers, for a variety of reasons, are more adaptive to the future while being anchored in the past. To add to the sadness, many Gutenbergs are putting more and more distance between themselves and what God is doing in the world.

While Googlers expend enormous amounts of energy seeking to satisfy their urge to connect, Gutenberg Christians continue to pursue their fascination with terminologies, definitions, formulas, and what Sigmund Freud called “the narcissism of small differences.” While Googlers are getting by with acronyms and finding friends everywhere, Gutenbergs are delving into words about words that have been written about God's words. It's an overstatement, but in place of vulnerable, transparent, biblical relationships, Gutenbergs often choose a spiritual path that leads away from the practical outworking of life and faith and people.

LET'S ASK A BIGGER QUESTION

Is Jesus a person or an assertion? Is he personal connection or heated argument? Several years ago I wrote a book that posed one central question: “How did Christians get the point and miss the Person?”⁵ Now more than ever, the question needs to be answered because it captures the divide that exists between Christian cultures. At the same time, it reveals the elemental search for meaning and connection that drives Googlers in just about every area of life.

Neither Gutenberg nor Googler Culture is defined by demographics (age, income level, educational attainment, career or profession, ethnicity). Rather, we are looking at two cultures of very different psychographics. Gutenbergs are oriented toward clarity and certainty, which require finding answers to questions and solutions to mysteries. They gain confidence from rectitude and exactitude. As a result, they value the texts of Scripture for the authoritative words and their apps.

The other culture, the one we're calling TGIF, uses the word *text* as a verb more than a noun. They text to keep in touch with other people. Texting is connection, belonging, self-expression, friendship, and community. It is a way to get to know others and to help them get to know you. Life and faith are best lived out when they invite others to join in. Life is at its best when it involves other people. Beliefs that are isolating or distancing from everyday experience might be interesting to think about, but as a way of life they are useless. Why would anyone think Christian faith should or could be divorced from relationships?

In later chapters we will look more closely at the contrasts between Gutenbergs and Googlers, and we will attempt to identify what each culture brings to the life of faith. Here are a few of the contrasts in summary.

WORDS AND THE WORD

Gutenbergs value precision and rationality. In many ways their faith is the pursuit of details that explain the ways of God and the reasonableness of belief. They value the meaning of words and are confident that words serve to clarify truth and make God knowable.

It's not surprising that Gutenbergs are so attached to words. The printing revolution that was launched by Johannes Gutenberg rewrote the book on communication, information dispersal, education, rhetoric, and the propagation of religion. With the invention of movable type, the printed word became as central to the training of Christians as hand-lettered Torah scrolls had been to the ancient Jews.

I'll quote Marshall McLuhan here, since to not do so would make everyone wonder why. He is famous for saying that “the medium is the message.”⁶ He wrote a celebrated book using that phrase as the title, pointing out that the meaning of a message (what is communicated by words) is unavoidably shaped, altered, biased, and “massaged” by the delivery system—the medium. This is akin to the phenomenon of a laboratory researcher muddying the results of his research simply by being present as an observer. The researcher's body temperature affects the ambient room temperature. His breathing adds carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. His physical presence causes lab rats to behave in ways that vary from their activities when they are isolated from humans. Amazingly, science moved forward for generations without realizing that a neutral observer was in truth an active participant in any experiment. The research data and resulting conclusions were automatically “massaged” by a researcher who thought he was doing nothing more than standing idly by.

Likewise, Gutenberg's movable type and the bound volumes it produced had the unplanned effect of intensifying the tendency among Christians to place their confidence in words. More than ever before, Christian ministries focused on the propagation and distribution of words. Proclaimed

words had always held sway, as the Scriptures were read aloud whenever Christians gathered. But with the ability to mass-produce Bibles and books and to obtain them at affordable prices, Christians could study God's Word as well as words written about the Word. Depending on the stature and reputation of the commentator, words used to convey ideas about the words that God spoke could take on an authority of their own. If you don't believe me, talk to a Methodist about John Wesley, a Presbyterian about John Calvin, an Anabaptist about Menno Simons, an Episcopalian about Thomas Cranmer. Or read five current, popular-level Christian books and notice how many of the authors quote C. S. Lewis, Oswald Chambers, Augustine, or Billy Graham.

It is not wrong for monotheists to hold words in high regard, and especially the words of God. I will never argue against the power of words. I am, after all, a writer, speaker, and educator. But something—or, I should say, Someone—can get lost amid a multitude of words. God's most perfect, most glorious, most human, and yet most divine communication to us is Jesus, the Word made flesh. It is possible for the Word to be obscured by words. Emmanuel, God in human flesh, God with us! How can sheets of paper covered with type do justice to God's Son, the God-Human, Lord of the universe and the living Expression of Three-in-One?

Printed text can never hope to capture the full meaning or the inexpressible glory of "the Word [who] became flesh and dwelt among us."⁷ Is it possible that the Gutenberg fixation on precision and exactitude delivered by words might be preventing people from connecting with Christ and following his example in loving people?

GOOGLERS AND DEPENDENCE ON TEXT

Googlers love words because words are expressive. They lie at the heart of communication and lead to connection. But Googlers also are sensitive to the abuse of words, knowing how words are manipulated to advance agendas and causes that contradict the plain teaching of Christ. Words are written and spoken and preached in ways that twist God's truth to support a fund-raising campaign or promote a cause or defend a theological system. There is no question that words are powerful, influential, emotive, and dangerous. Words are useful tools, but words are not truth.

Jesus told us, using words, that he is the Truth. He is also the Word become flesh. You might have seen the bumper sticker that says, "I was looking for Jesus but got mugged by one of his followers." Googlers, while not poster children for "God, save me from your people," can document how the Gutenberg church has been getting it wrong for a long time.

In being able to read and write, Jesus traveled the Information Superhighway of his day. But he never departed from the way of connection and community. Even when he unleashed his harshest criticisms of temple leaders and teachers of the law, he met them on common ground, quoting Moses and Isaiah. He said, in essence, we spring from the same Source, the history of God and the prophets, the story of God's people, but you guys have been getting the story all wrong.

So as we take a fresh look at the church in the Age of Google, we realize that too many Christians for far too long have been propping up the culture of Gutenberg. Rather than rooting the practice of Christian faith in the timeless, timely, and time-full ways of the Founder, the church in the West clings desperately to the canons of the Age of Reason. As we look at Googlers and their practice of Christianity, we see clear contrasts from the ways things have been done since Gutenberg's famous invention.

Googlers are drawn to relationships as much as they are to ideas, which gives them a head start in the heart-first (not head-first) practice of Christianity. It is easier to talk to Googlers about Jesus

than about five points of Calvinism or whether Israel still enjoys most-favored-nation status with God. The person of Jesus is more attractive than thoughts and teachings about Jesus.

If you are a Gutenberg, you might argue that what I'm saying can't stand up to a strongly analytical approach to Christian belief and practice. I would agree. Hard analysis can cast doubt on just about anything. But I'm not advancing a new proof. I'm advocating a new view of Jesus that takes his personhood more seriously than the theological positions that read a lot like a job description for the Son of God. Let me suggest a series of contrasts:

Jesus is message more than manuscript.

He is story more than instruction manual.

He is a personal letter, not the envelope it comes in.

He is a launching pad, not a storage locker.

He is self-defining, not an entry in a Bible dictionary.

He is mystery, not equation.

He is the Transcendent made immanent, not systematic made simulation.

He is miracle more than logic and reason.

He is personal experience and direct reality, not a syllabus or lesson plan.

Jesus did not come to earth so that later generations of his followers could prove a point. He *is* the Point. He is time spent together, not a list of seven rules for success. He is intimacy, not statistical analysis. He brings unimaginable riches and spiritual wealth but never adds up on a balance sheet. Following him is messy yet holy.

Googlers intuitively are drawn to the real Jesus, the One who is not mediated by Gutenberg attempts to impose formulas and propositions and structure. The mess we call church has the greatest message in the world. But when the message is modified to emphasize the church and not to introduce Christ, the world can't hear our message for our mess.

TALKING WITH YOUR THUMBS

Typesetting went digital not long before the wired culture went wireless. Wireless went to Cloud, and it won't be long before Skype will give way to avatars and holograms and teleporters. My concern is not the effect that evolving technology has on faith, but how culture (of which technology is a part) shapes Christian beliefs and forms biases, and the way Christianity is practiced in the context of culture.

Something unknown is doing we don't know what.

—*Werner Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle"*
as explained by Sir Arthur Eddington⁸

Much is made of orthodox belief, and rightly so. Orthodoxy is crucial. But where in open-source culture is there a similar emphasis on the practice of our faith being open to the Source? The Gutenberg world has shaped the beliefs and practice of Western Christianity within the influence of the Enlightenment. In fact, "modern Christianity" is arguably more modern, more Gutenberg, than it is Christian. The life of the Spirit largely got lost amid facts and functionalities. Words

became weapons and a means to score points against an opponent, leaving behind a bombed-out, barren, infertile Christian landscape.

Whereas Jesus was fond of asking questions to draw out his listeners, words in the hands of Enlightenment Christians became a way to level accusations, to solidify positions, and to clarify who was and was not a member in good standing. These things went largely unchallenged in the Gutenberg church. Sadly, Gutenbergs failed to grasp the practical, relational, lived-out meaning behind all the right words. There are a lot of pastors out there with the right words and with the right theology but with no people. If you have the right theology but aren't reaching people and aren't in relationship with your culture, what does it profit a pastor or a church?

Meanwhile, Googlers recognize the reality of something inside them that has for too long gone unanswered, and the private pain of living under mushroom clouds of fear and despair that contaminate their daily life. What is the truth about truth? Googlers ask. Is there such a thing as "absolute truth"? If so, is absolute truth the same as abstract truth? Is truth primarily something known to the intellect, or is truth something known to the soul? Is truth an intellectual assertion or a soul moment, or both? Why was one of Jesus's signature phrases "I tell you the truth"? Are there different kinds of truth? And what does it mean to live "untruthful" lives?

The heartbreak of broadened brokenness makes Googlers yearn for a living relationship with Christ. "But," Gutenbergs counter, "Googler Culture is so narcissistic. And it takes a cavalier attitude toward absolute truth, the authority of Scripture, and the creeds of Christianity." Perhaps. Perhaps not. But in my experience Googlers are not cavalier about the things that matter most. They are interested in the core, the heart, the elemental matters of life and faith. That is how so many of them end up finding the Word, the Person who is relationship and meaning.

Only Jesus can satisfy the persistent longing at the heart of us all. There will be time later on for formulations and words that are creedal and descriptive, enlightening and reformational. Even Arminian and Reformed, Anabaptist and Anglican, Pentecostal and dispensational.

I have no axe to grind against Gutenbergs. I was born one, was bred as one, and spent much of my adult life eating bread from its table. In fact, I was a Gutenberg among Gutenbergs. In the early days of my coming up through the ranks, I held the jackets and clerical collars of particularly zealous Gutenbergs as they threw brickbats at the digitized, globalized culture on the horizon.

That was then. I have repented publicly and privately. Now we live in a TGIF world. Gutenberg Culture is the fringe culture, and the Gutenberg church has moved far from the heart of life, closer to edges of the ledge. Googlers are culture makers, and I am convinced they hold the secret to ministry and mission. So if you're ready to throw a brickbat, don't hand me your jacket. I'll be standing over there, alongside the ones you'll hit, learning how Googlers create community and live their love for Jesus.

Interactives

1. What is your text-to-voice call ratio? Describe the differences and why you prefer the one you do.
2. Why do you think 87 percent of African Americans and Hispanics own a cell phone, compared to 80 percent of whites? Why are Hispanic and African American adults more likely than whites to be wireless-only?
3. T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" is available from Touch Press in an interactive iPad edition.⁹ What poems or stories would you like to see in this interactive form? How might the church use this form of interactivity to tell its story?

4. Is the digital book taking us back to scrolling? Google books scroll, but Kindle, iPad, and Nook seem uncertain. Are you a page turner or a scroller?
5. Marianne Sawicki defined doctrinal theology in this way: “the selection and abstraction of certain elements from Christian Scripture, the refinement of those elements by philosophical means into declarative statements, and the arrangement of those statements into a systematic presentation that is asserted to be true in itself and also representative of its scriptural source.”¹⁰ How interested in “doctrinal theology” should your church be? How do you respond to Sawicki’s definition?

Notes

Chapter 1: Faith Versus Belief

1. Matthew 16:15.
2. “That God invites our friendship, our participation in God’s own peaceable life, is the most astounding, extravagant, but wonderfully remarkable fact of salvation.” Jim Fodor, “Christian Discipleship as Participative Imitation: Theological Reflections on Girardian Themes,” in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies and Peacemaking*, Studies in Peace and Scripture 4, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora, 2000), 257.
3. Psalm 19:7.
4. 2 Corinthians 3:6.
5. Luke 1:38; see John 1:1–15; see Colossians 2:9.
6. This is from “Mary’s Song,” found in Luke 1:46–55. The quote is from verse 53.
7. Frank Gehry has said, “I’ll only work with clients who are willing to work closely with me, to be a part of the process from the beginning until the end,” in Gehry, “The AD 100: The International Directory of Interior Designers and Architects,” *Architectural Digest*, January 2004, 61.
8. For more on the way in which modernity reduced thought to a system and a formula, making “rational” representational, whereas in premodern culture it was participational, see the work of theologian David Tracy, “Public Theology, Hope, and the Mass Media: Can the Muses Still Inspire?” Max L. Stackhouse with Peter J. Paris, eds., *Religion and the Powers of the Common Life*, vol. 1 of *God and Globalization* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000), 246–47.
9. This is the crux of the problem of Islam in postmodern culture: it is structurally not set up as a religion to tolerate contradictory ideas. It is too easy to say that Al Qaeda is to Islam what KKK is to Christianity. What is going on is more complex and worrisome than that. Intrinsic to Christianity is the celebration of difference; intrinsic to Judaism is debate and discourse over interpretations of the Talmud; intrinsic to Islam is the inability to abide difference.
10. See Matthew 13:13–15.
11. For more on this, see the website of Dwight Friesen, www.dwightfriesen.com.
12. Christ is sprezzaturish. He is an endless combination of many things at once: divine and human, crucified and resurrected, earthly and eternal, abased and victorious, wounded and whole.
13. “The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.” David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 182.

Chapter 2: Following Jesus

1. “The recovery of relationality in Christian teaching and preaching is not a concession to modernity or to postmodernity; it is a recovery of the original Hebraic and early Christian ontology, and in the end it may be as critical of contemporary views of human nature and destiny as it should always have been in the tradition of Athens.” Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 105.
2. Matthew 7:23.
3. Matthew 5:20.

4. Erin Curry, “June Carter Cash’s Christian Faith, Love for Family Remembered,” *Baptist Press* (May 19, 2003), www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=15930.
5. See Genesis 18:1–15.
6. Hebrews 13:2.
7. The metaphor of “conversation” is that of Evagrius of Pontus, quoted in Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Text and Commentary* (New York: New City Press, 2000), 181.
8. This is a reworking of a Robert Benson phrasing.
9. Luke 22:19.
10. John T. Appleby, ed., *The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes of the Time of King Richard the First* (New York: Nelson, 1963), 65.
11. J. H. Jowett, *The Friend on the Road and Other Studies in the Gospels* (New York: Doran, 1922), 116–18.
12. Ephesians 1:18, NRSV.
13. See for example, Romans 1:15, TNIV: “I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.”
14. Acts 9:6, NRSV.
15. Tom Paulin, “Nostalgia for the Future?” *The Invasion Handbook* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 133.
16. Luke 12:32, NRSV.
17. Matthew 4:17, NRSV—“The kingdom of heaven has come near”; Luke 10:9, NRSV—“The kingdom of God has come near to you”; Mark 12:34, NRSV—“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”
18. For more on this “heavily fortified kingdom of self,” see Rick Barger, *A New and Right Spirit: Creating an Authentic Church in a Consumer Culture* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), 22.
19. Luke 17:20–21, NRSV.
20. For this approach see Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel, *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture Is Eroding Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2005). In this book the authors coin the word *therapism* to describe our tendency to “valorize openness, emotional self-absorption and the sharing of feelings.” They call for an emotional temperance movement and a return to self-reliance, which unfortunately is but another form of self-obsession.
21. Joann Wolski Conn, *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 3.
22. Thomas Moore, “Will We Take the Moral Values Challenge?” *Spirituality and Health: The Soul/Body Connection*, January/February 2005.
23. Rabbi Chananiah, quoted in *Pirke Aboth: Sayings of the Fathers*, ed. Isaac Unterman (New York: Twayne, 1964), 160.
24. Matthew 18:20, NRSV.
25. Leonard Sweet, “Trash Cans or Treasure Chests,” a sermon preached at Ginghamburg United Methodist Church, 28–29 August, 1999. The original source for this story cannot be found. If you are aware of the original source, please let me know at lenisweet@aol.com.

Chapter 3: A Longing for Love

1. See Matthew 10:29, 31, NRSV; Luke 12:6, NRSV.

2. Mark 3:33, NRSV; cf. Matthew 12:48, NRSV.
3. Luke 9:62, NRSV.
4. Luke 9:60, NRSV.
5. Matthew 10:35, NRSV.
6. Luke 12:49, NRSV.
7. Edwin Friedman, "Leadership Through Self-Differentiation: A Series of Talks Presented by the Seven Oaks Foundation," *Dr. Friedman Speaks*, audiocassette (Silver Spring, MD: Seven Oaks Foundation, 1980–1989).
8. Everyone needs a discrete sense of self, and without this cummerbund of consciousness, we bleed to death. Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov made "discreteness" into a constituent characteristic of life itself: "Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space-traveller's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego." Quoted by C. D. C. Reeve, *Love's Confusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 8.
9. Leviticus 14:4, KJV. This was the one for infectious skin diseases, including leprosy.
10. Louis Jacobs, "Metzora," *Jewish Preaching: Homilies and Sermons* (Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004), 118.
11. The following words of advice were given to his son from the Jewish rabbi/philosopher Nahmanides (1194–1270): "If the man you meet is clearly your better in learning, in character, or in achievement, there is no room for pride. But even if you are superior to him in these things, reflect that your responsibilities are thereby the greater. God has been more lavish in His gifts to you and more is demanded of you." Quoted in Jacobs, "Metzora," *Jewish Preaching*, 118.
12. With apologies to Yale professor Harold J. Morowitz for mangling his categories. *Ego Niches: An Ecological View of Organizational Behavior* (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow, 1977), 30–84.
13. 1 Corinthians 13:13, NRSV.
14. 1 John 4:7, MSG.
15. "Do you expect a pat on the back?" Luke 6:32, MSG.
16. For this metaphor I thank Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody, 1991). Also see the metaphor appearing again in John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire: Searching for the Life We've Only Dreamed Of* (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 130.
17. For more on this idea, see Esther de Waal, *Living with Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1989), 13–15.
18. Paraphrase of Colossians 1:17, NRSV and TNIV: "In him all things hold together."

Chapter 4: Person or Proposition?

1. With thanks for this metaphor to John Baker-Batsel, United Methodist minister and former theological librarian.
2. This was first published in my "Being Right or Being in Relationship," *REV!* magazine, September–October 2003.
3. I borrow this phrase from Mari Sandoz, *Story Catcher* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

4. “I don’t have it in me to imitate the Son of God. I can’t even imitate the sons and daughters of greatness. I’m not even going to try to be a Monet or a Mozart or a Georgia O’Keefe ‘wannabee.’ But what if Monet could paint his picture through me? What if O’Keefe could use my life as her brush? What if Jesus were to live his life through me? What if my life could become an instrument in God’s hands?” Leonard Sweet, *Jesus Drives Me Crazy: Lose Your Mind, Find Your Soul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 53.

Chapter 5: The Right Relationship

1. For the insistence that what Jacob fought with was not merely an “angel” but God, see James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 30–31.
2. Old Testament professor at Brite Divinity School, John Stewart, used to say this. With thanks to Clifford E. McLain for this reference.
3. Hence the divine promise of Deuteronomy 24:16 (NRSV): “Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents.”
4. All three instances are discussed in chapter 19:33 in *Midrash Rabba*, trans. Judah J. Slotki (London: Soncino, 1983), 782–85.
5. See Exodus 32:7–14; Deuteronomy 9:14.
6. Conrad Gempf, *Jesus Asked: What He Wanted to Know* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 109.
7. Catherine Marshall, *Meeting God at Every Turn: A Personal Family Story* (Lincoln, VA: Chosen, 1980), 26–27. This story is used in Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First-Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 70.
8. James Hillman, *Kinds of Power: A Guide to Its Intelligent Uses* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 52.
9. I owe this story to Michele Weiner-Davis, *Divorce Busting: A Revolutionary and Rapid Program for Staying Together* (New York: Summit, 1992), 145–46.
10. See Luke 15:11–32.
11. John J. Shepherd, “The Essence of Christian Belief,” *Religious Studies* 12 (June 1976): 231–37, especially 234–36.
12. Herbert McCabe, “The Prodigal Son,” in *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Continuum, 2002), 239.
13. See John 15:15–16.
14. Matthew 18:10, TNIV.
15. Reminiscent of Rodin’s *The Thinker*.
16. Psalm 91:1, MSG.
17. Psalm 16:11, NRSV.
18. Joel S. Goldsmith, *Practicing the Presence* (New York: Harper, 1958), 54–55.
19. Louis Jacobs, “Ethics 2,” *Jewish Preaching: Homilies and Sermons* (Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004), 217.
20. In the words of Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, “Perhaps ‘I’ is not the most honorable pronoun. But there is no ‘you’ that does not come from or direct itself toward the ‘I,’ nor is there a ‘you’ and ‘I’ that can be extricable from the ‘we.’ Yet at the same time, can there be a ‘we’ that expels the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ from its dangerous community without also becoming a

perilous political abstraction?” *This I Believe: An A to Z of a Life* (New York: Random House, 2005), 304.

Chapter 6: Telling a Better Story

1. Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 99.
2. See Martin Buber, in the preface to his *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), v–vi.
3. John 3:16, NRSV.
4. Psalm 91:1, NKJV.
5. Quoted in David Martin, “Holy Matrimony I,” *Christian Language in the Secular City* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 200.
6. As explained by a youngster on CBS’s *48 Hours* (3 February, 2002) and later published in John Killinger, *God, the Devil, and Harry Potter: A Christian Minister’s Defense of the Beloved Novels* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2002), 7.
7. Tore Frängsmyr and Sture Allen, eds., *Nobel Lectures, Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates’ Biographies: Literature, 1969–1980* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1993), 46. Also Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn lecture, “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1970,” http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html/.
8. Genesis 2:5, KJV.
9. What came first: the image or the reality? Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek noted four days after 9/11 how America imagined a 9/11 attack in films such as *Independence Day* and *Escape from New York*. See Slavoj Žižek, “Welcome to the Desert of the Real,” *Re:Constructions: Reflections on Humanity and Media After Tragedy*, 15 September, 2001, <http://web.mit.edu/cms/reconstructions/interpretations/desertreal.html>.

Introduction to Viral

1. W. H. Auden, as quoted in Josephine Hart, ed., *Catching Life by the Throat: How to Read Poetry and Why: Poems from Eight Great Poets* (New York: Norton, 2008), 11.
2. It should be noted, however, that China’s woodblock printing industry antedates Gutenberg’s technological advances by five hundred years.
3. Samuel Stennett, “I’m Bound for the Promised Land,” 1787, public domain.
4. Charlie Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), 211.
5. See Jeremiah 29:11–13.
6. Ecclesiastes 3:11: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”
7. This story came from Al Caldwell, a retired librarian at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and a longtime friend of my friend Elmer O’Brien.
8. See Eamon Duffy, *Walking to Emmaus* (New York: Burns & Oates, 2006), 52.

Chapter 1 to Viral

The chapter epigraph is taken from a variation of Blaise Pascal, *Pensées: The Provincial Letters* (New York: Modern Library, 1941), 48: “All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber.”

1. Acts 1:14, NKJV.
2. Keith Richards, quoted in Stanley Booth, *Keith: Standing in the Shadows* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 38. The statement first appeared in an interview published in *Playboy* magazine, October 1989.
3. “The Net reroutes our vital [neural] paths and diminishes our capacity for contemplation...altering the depth of our emotions as well as our thoughts.” Thus Nicholas Carr summarizes the literature in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2011), 221. See also *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think? The Net's Impact on Our Minds and Future*, ed. John Brockman (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011).
4. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003), 62.
5. The actual question is, “Where did we miss the Person and get the point instead?” See Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question...Into the Mystery: Getting Lost in the Godlife Relationship* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2004).
6. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967).
7. John 1:14, ESV.
8. Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 291.
9. Check out <http://touchpress.com/titles/thewasteland>.
10. Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 310.

About the Author

In his more than fifty published books, Leonard Sweet, PhD, has always posted insightful—often challenging—status updates on Christian faith. He monitors the intersection of faith and life, belief and practice. He offers needed direction on the involvement of Christians with the needs of the world. Sweet is an educator, speaker, and preacher who is trained as a historian. But his specialty is faith, mission, and the future.

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