

# LEONARD SWEET

*Author of The Gospel According to Starbucks*

# VIRAL

**How Social Networking  
Is Poised to Ignite Revival**



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Is Poised to Ignite Revival



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P R E S S

VIRAL

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# A TALE OF TWO CULTURES

## Why Googlers Will Save the World, and Why They Might Not

A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify;  
A never-dying soul to save, and fit it for the sky.

—CHARLES WESLEY

**N**o one gets to pick their birth date. Unfortunately. If I could have chosen any time in history in which to live, I would not have picked this one. My academic training is as a historian. History is my home. This gives me the advantage of time travel of a sort. In my mind I can live anywhere. And when I'm considering a favorable era, I don't pick the teenage years of the twenty-first century. I much prefer high Victorian culture and the late nineteenth century.

This fascination goes way beyond the occasional mental excursion. Visit my home at Orcas Island, Washington, and you'll enter a time warp. My small house is stuffed with heavily carved furniture that the arts and crafts movement of the early twentieth century rebelled against. Wherever you go in our two-thousand-square-foot home, you find yourself transported at least one hundred years into the past. Even more, you will be greeted with high Victorian rituals of courtesy and hospitality—one of the most

important being two desserts (or “two puddings,” as the Brits liked to say). A good Victorian meal begins with multiple appetizers and always ends with two desserts.

You and I get to choose how we will furnish our homes, but we can't choose our moment for ministry—for one simple reason. You can't pick your birthday.

In the Marx Brothers' movie *Animal Crackers*, Groucho asks, “Where are we?” Chico replies, “You can't fool me, we're right here.” God put us “right here.” And like it or not, “right here” is our unchosen responsibility. As an old Stephen Stills song had it, “If you can't be with the one you love, honey, love the one you're with.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise when you can't get the world you'd prefer, love the world you've got. I might prefer to live in a world of gracious manners and elegant accoutrement, but I'm more than one hundred years too young. You and I can have two desserts if we choose, but the world we minister to has been chosen for us. And it doesn't look or sound or respond like any world that preceded it.

If you are native to the TGIF world, the unprecedented contrasts with what went before will be largely invisible. If you are an immigrant from another era, as I am, you'll need to plug in your GPS.

## NO MORE SECRETS

We live in a kiss-and-tell world in which celebrities are famous for being famous, and it's not unusual for even ordinary citizens to have thousands of fans and followers. The rapid proliferation of social media—including Twitter, blogging, Facebook, texting, and live chats—seems to prevent people from keeping anything private. Who knew that the ever-present opportunity to share things about oneself would be so effective in convincing people they should share everything? Forget privacy and good taste—follow the tweets of certain people and you'll be better versed on their sleeping, eating, and bathroom habits than you are on your own.

To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill,  
O may it all my powers engage, to do my master's will.

—CHARLES WESLEY<sup>2</sup>

With all this public sharing of personal stories, where does that leave Christians and the proclamation of the gospel? The mass media have never been more democratic. We all have equal access, and anyone with an opinion, a story, a rant, or an urge to show

photos of their grandchildren (or their pug) to the world can do so. You can reveal what you're preparing for dinner tonight and make it available to a potential audience of millions. The opportunity to gain exposure for a message has never been greater, and that should hold an irresistible attraction for Christians, Christian ministries, and the church at large. Micro media is now mass media, but how is it being used for God's kingdom?

In the world of media, every journalist wants an "IWT" tag: I Was There. Each of us is here, but too many signs point to Christians who wish they could be somewhere else—or at least occupying space in a different time. Each one of us gets a thousand months on earth, and God chose you to live yours here and now. When you stand before your Maker, will you get your IWT tag, or will you receive an MIA or AWOL tag instead?

### NOAH, ESTHER, AND YOU

"A Charge to Keep I Have, a God to Glorify" is how Charles Wesley put it in the first hymn listed in every index of every Methodist hymnal. The song goes on: "to serve the present age, my calling to fulfill."<sup>3</sup> In order to fulfill and be faithful to our calling, we need to be in a state of "here-ness" and faithful to the time and place and people to whom we have been divinely assigned. We are to love the ones we're with, knowing that these are the ones God chose for us to love. Like the biblical Esther, we have been raised up "for just such a time as this."<sup>4</sup> We have been entrusted with preserving the past, "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."<sup>5</sup> But we also have been entrusted with shaping the future, which comes only from feeling the texture of the times we're in.

This "such a time" world has a right to expect a kiss-and-tell default setting from disciples of Jesus. The TGIF world demands that, as Christians of the early twenty-first century, we make sure the old, old story is new and hot...and that we bring the promise home again, in a way our current world can understand.

The Bible says Noah was "a righteous man...in his generation."<sup>6</sup> If he showed up today he would frighten more people than he would intrigue. A seafaring desert dweller, smelling of multiple species of cooped-up animal dung, and work hardened after decades of building a ship far from a significant body of water. Uncivilized and premodern and physically embodying the epithet "tool user." Who would know what to do with a man like Noah? He would be given a 1950s-era gospel tract that he couldn't read and sent to the homeless shelter for a shower, a change of clothes, and a hot meal.



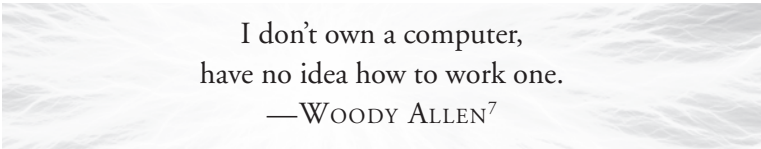
Noah answered the call and preserved humanity. He is a hero for all time, but his mission was for his generation. What is our call today, and how eager are we to answer? It is easy to be faithful or pious in a generation that has passed. But who will be a Noah or an Esther in the TGIF world? Will we be devout, not in another time, but in our generation?

Augustine liked to say that God is younger than us all. If Jesus is always the youngest person around, can we be as young as Jesus, who never finishes saying what there is to say because his words are truly apocalyptic—a continuous unveiling?

### POP CHRISTIANITY OR BAD BUDDHISM?

Here is the problem with much of the “spirituality” that is making the rounds. Too much of today’s pop Christianity sounds like bad Buddhism or pseudo Islam. Christianity is not a vague, amorphous, ethereal religion; nor is it a prescribed set of ritual practices, whether they be liturgical or litigious, religious or political. You can try to get rid of flesh and blood and make Christianity into a religion of excarnation, but you will fail. Christianity is and always has been a religion of incarnation. It puts on flesh and blood. As a living and breathing faith, it is inescapably material, physical, and cultural. Christianity speaks in the locative case.

Jesus was an immigrant on earth. Abraham became one as soon as he walked out of Ur. Jacob took his family to Egypt to survive a famine. We all are from somewhere else, it seems. Some of the most successful websites are those promising to help you trace your ancestry and claim your ethnic pedigree. It seems that everybody loves to probe and parade their immigrant story. But when it comes to living as immigrants, there is far less ardor. We’re glad our ancestors did the immigrant thing so we can live off their sacrifice. We are far less eager to make similar sacrifices.



I don't own a computer,  
have no idea how to work one.  
—WOODY ALLEN<sup>7</sup>

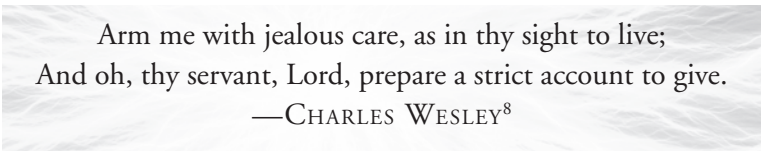
But life on earth is an immigrant experience. If you were born before 1973, you are an immigrant in the current culture whether you want to be or not. Perhaps you’ve heard the joke about watching reruns of *Seinfeld* on your iPhone, wondering why Jerry uses a telephone the size of a gym shoe. Ten years ago no one would have

believed that a cell phone would be the clearinghouse for everything in a person's life short of cooking dinner. And now that we have centralized the daily duties of life in one handheld device, no one wants to go back to a landline life. Except, it seems, the church.

Immigrants settle in. They start speaking the language and enjoying the fruit of the land. And why not? Familiarity is comfortable, undemanding. Finally, you feel as though you can relax. But you can't, because the world does not stop or even slow down. In fact, today's world evolves faster than Google spins out a new upgrade. No longer is staying put an option. If you're not willing to move with it, the world will move without you.

I know this because my life has been a three-act play: Analog Childhood, Digital Youth, Google Adulthood. I am convinced that the potential of Googlers (those born since 1973, although Googler status is more a psychographic than a demographic thing) to stay in tune with Jesus while in touch with their culture is greater than anything the Gutenbergs were able to accomplish.

Christians may be fascinated with the future, but too many of us don't want to live in it. The problem is that Gutenbergs act in the same way that every group of immigrants has acted: when finding oneself in a new world, immigrants circle the wagons and protect their familiar ways. Immigrants huddle in ghettos to preserve the old language and rituals. No wonder more and more of us suffer from border syndromes: as people living with identities in both worlds, we are confused, uncertain, afraid, disoriented, on edge.



Arm me with jealous care, as in thy sight to live;  
And oh, thy servant, Lord, prepare a strict account to give.

—CHARLES WESLEY<sup>8</sup>

Any culture will demand this of us: that we not hide or be hidebound. Most of us hide out of fear of change or anger at the range of change required of us. To be sure, fear is a normal protective response to changes that threaten our comfort, convenience, and security. But fear also can be an adaptive response. Healthy doses of fear can serve to propel us out of binding circumstances and into positive action. Riven with fear, we can be driven to resist life-sustaining change or we can be dynamically driven to embrace a new and exciting future. Christians need to find ways to transform disabling fear into an impetus for innovative and life-giving change.

GET TO KNOW  
YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD  
GUTENBERGER AND GOOGLER

The nature of the church is cross-cultural. At Christmas, we celebrate baby Jesus's birthday in Bethlehem. At Pentecost, we celebrate the body of Christ's birthday in Jerusalem. A missionary church requires fresh adaptations of the faith as it spreads across space and spans through time. There is no such thing as an untranslated version of Christianity. God crossed cultures when God became human and lived on earth.

Here is a playful glossary of cross-cultural perspectives that can be found in every church:

Gutenbergers: It's necessary to be right.

Googlers: It's necessary to be in relationship.

Gutenbergers: God is in charge.

Googlers: God chose to be among us.

Gutenbergers: Need a good light for reading.

Googlers: Need to recharge their reader.

Gutenbergers: Theology explains God.

Googlers: Jesus explains life.

Gutenbergers: Capital campaign.

Googlers: Homeless campaign.

Gutenbergers: Statement of faith.

Googlers: Life of faith.

Gutenbergers: Build something.

Googlers: Meet someone.

Gutenbergers: Water-tight arguments.

Googlers: Fluid apps.

Gutenbergers: Fit in.  
 Googlers: Fit together.

Gutenbergers: Church history informs belief.  
 Googlers: Everyday life requires faith.

Gutenbergers' top temptation: Make Individual our god.  
 Googlers' top temptation: Make Community our god.

Gutenbergers' top challenge: A culture of words and  
 individualism that has lost its ability to propagate.  
 Googlers' top opportunity: A culture of images and relationships  
 that breed virality, the petri dish of revival.

### Interactives

1. In Alan Hirsch's *The Forgotten Ways*, he distinguishes between Hellenistic and Hebraic approaches to life. In the Hellenistic approach you give people the right ideas and expect they will change their behavior. Hirsch refers to it as thinking "our way into a new way of acting." In the Hebraic model of knowledge, you educate whole people in the context "of life and for life," or what Hirsch calls acting "our way into a new way of thinking."<sup>9</sup> Was Jesus more Hellenistic or Hebraic? In light of Hirsch's examples, which way do you think Jesus formed his disciples? Give examples.
2. Discuss this affirmation by Albert Einstein: "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science.... To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man."<sup>10</sup> Does Einstein sound more Gutenberg or Google?
3. In one of the final interviews of novelist Graham Greene, John Cornwell concluded with the question of what Greene's Catholicism meant to him.

The author replied: “It’s a mystery...which can’t be destroyed...even by the Church.”<sup>11</sup> What are some of the mysteries that “can’t be destroyed... even by the Church”?

4. Stockholm Syndrome takes effect when a kidnap victim becomes emotionally attached to his kidnapper. The name is taken from a 1973 bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden, when the robbers held bank employees hostage for six days. When the employees finally were freed, they defended their captors. When people have Stockholm Syndrome, the abuse warps them so that being held captive seems preferable to being free. They forget the benefits and the promise of freedom and cling to captivity.
5. Is it possible to contract Spiritual Stockholm Syndrome? For instance, is it possible to forget who we are and fall in love with the things that capture us? What are some of the things we fall in love with? How do we fall out of love with the things that hold us hostage?
6. Have you ever been a slave to something? What freed you from the influence, person, habit, or force that held you?