

With God, the Relationship Is Never Optional

A bonus interview with Leonard Sweet, author of *What Matters Most*

With the release in paperback of Leonard Sweet's pivotal book *What Matters Most*, WaterBrook Press felt that additional background from the author might be of interest. Sweet is not known for parroting the conventional North American view of Christian faith and practice. The value he brings lies largely in his readiness to hold the magnifying glass of Scripture over the generally accepted—but rarely challenged—practices of the church. Not surprisingly, he often finds some of the most common traditions and assumptions to be wanting.

In his book *What Matters Most*, Sweet takes a careful look at what God is hoping for as we engage with him in a personal relationship. The author concludes, in part, that God must be wondering why so few of his people are eager to plunge into an honest and energetic give-and-take relationship. Sweet's reading of Scripture, as well as rabbinic Judaism and historic Christianity; lead him to argue that a staid, overly polite relationship is far from what God wants. Read on to see what else Sweet had to say on the subject.

Q: It seems that most Christians in US America are more comfortable with a well-reasoned argument that defends Christian belief than they are with engaging in an honest, give-and-take relationship with Jesus. What do you think makes the more rational approach so attractive?

A: Statements are fixed and static and predictable, while a relationship is unpredictable, uncontrollable, even a roller-coaster-ride. No wonder a verbal defense of Christian faith seems more attractive and less threatening. But Jesus doesn't promise anyone a smooth ride or a life of convenience. He calls us not to the safety of a predetermined route but to the exciting adventure of a day-to-day relationship, with all its surprises and challenges. Since when did we hear Jesus say, "Come, follow me, and I'll lead you into a risk-free life?"

By the way, the depersonalization of God has proceeded apace with the modernization of culture. (God is a Person, and God from the beginning has met us in a relationship, not primarily in an intellectual exchange.) That's why I'm so adamant that we are not called to impersonate Jesus, but to *personate* him. The Bible does not call us to imitate Jesus, but to impart his resurrection presence. To have him live in us, so that his life is visible in our lives. We are not shown in the Bible how to mimic Jesus, but to manifest him on earth.

Q: You have written that faithful, biblical Christianity involves two necessary strands: truth and relationship. It is never just one of these at the expense of the other. Can you sketch out what this looks like in the everyday life of a Christian?

A: Some say religion is a form of art. Some say it's a form of philosophy. Some say it is a form of social ethics, and others that it's a form of morality. But Jesus and the testimony of the Bible agree that religion is relationship. Or as Jesus put it, "I am the Truth" (see John 14:6). By claiming to *be* the truth, not just to teach the truth, Jesus was making the matter of following and knowing God a relationship, not just a system of belief or ethics and morality.

For disciples of Jesus, “Truth” is a person. God didn’t send us a statement, God sent us a Savior. God didn’t send us more rules, regulations, and commandments. God sent us a Redeemer.

William J. Locke was an early 20th Century British novelist whose books became best-sellers in US America. One features a character who has a vast amount of money—the most money imaginable. With all this money at her disposal, she has spent half a lifetime touring the globe to take in the world’s greatest art. After all those years, she becomes bored and weary. Then she meets a Frenchman who has no money but a love for beauty and a self-acquired knowledge of art. In his company, things suddenly become different. In her words, “I never knew what things were like until you taught me how to look at them.”

Life in Christ is like that. When we see life in the light of Jesus’ light, we hear, see, taste, touch, smell new things and think new thoughts. We also need to remember that faith in God, who is a Person—meaning faith that is relational—is a community hermeneutic. There are no solitary Christians. The gospel is social by its very definition.

Q: In chapter 3 of *What Matters Most*, you look at the classic Abraham-Isaac story and reach a conclusion that varies from what most Christians are familiar with. You say that Abraham blew it when he set off to obey God’s command to sacrifice Isaac without first digging in and challenging God on the matter. (You point out that in another setting, Abraham had not hesitated to bargain with God to spare Lot’s life. But when his son’s life was in the balance, he failed to mount a similar campaign to try to spare him.) What is the primary application to the life of a believer today who wants to engage in an honest, face-to-face relationship with God?

A: This may be the book’s most challenging chapter for most readers, although I am just bringing to life an ancient rabbinic interpretation of the text. The Abraham-Isaac story has inspired almost every theologian and philosopher to grapple with it, including the postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, who took a fresh look at Soren Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the story in *Donner la Mort* (1992).

Let’s look at the story by asking, “What matters most?” What God wants most from us is not our intellectual assent to certain propositions, but a relationship. Not our cognition but our commitment to relate to God. Why did God create Adam and Eve? For relationship. God exists by nature in relationship (hence the Trinity), and the Creator created *homo sapiens* to make possible a relationship with creation.

You see this also in the story of Adam naming the animals. God created the animals, but they didn’t “come into being” until Adam named them, thereby entering into relationship. This elevating of relationship is seen in Abraham’s naming, which refers to “exalted father,” a name heretofore reserved for God alone. The essence of the sacrificial system was the embodiment of right relationship between Creator and creature. Since Jesus was the fulfillment of the Temple and its system of sacrifice, he restored the shattered relationship between Creator and creature.

God wants above all to be in a relationship with us, and every relationship has its peaks and troughs, its respect and its rebellion. God expected full engagement from Abraham over the question of sacrificing Isaac. And just as Jesus honored Thomas’s doubting, God honors our

debates and talk-backs. God expected heads-up honesty from Abraham, and instead God saw head-down suppression of all thoughts and emotions from Abraham. There is no doubt from the text that Abraham intended to kill his son.

Virtue does not derive from rules and regulations or slavish submission to the Rules of Order from St. Robert. Virtue is from relationships. In the 19th Century, George Matheson wrote a song that we still sing today, in spite of its stilted language. It is called “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.” Notice it’s the “love” that won’t let me go. Propositions and principles will let you go. Rules will let you go. Only “love” will hold onto you forever.

Q: There is much concern among pastors and other church leaders about a drop in the number of baptisms, a drop in church membership, and the growing trend among young adults to be religiously unaffiliated. Do you feel that the western church’s overreliance on arguments and propositions at the expense of relationship accounts somewhat for the decline in commitment to the church? And if so, in what ways?

A: Let me answer this with two “what matters most” stories and images, or narratives and metaphors—what I now call “narraphors”. (Narrative+metaphor=narraphor.)

1) When the Marx brothers were in the early stages of their career, the family home was heavily mortgaged to the Greenbaum banking firm. Often the payments were hard to come by. When the Marx brothers were on stage, their mother would stand in the wings. When her zany sons began to improvise too much, she worried that they were departing too far from the script. So she would snap them back with a loud stage whisper: “Greenbaum! Remember Greenbaum!”

Remember Christ. Improvise but stay on script. Don’t ever forget the reality of Christ.

2) One of my favorite stories is of the child who comes home from the first day of Sunday school. His parents are curious about how things went, and begin by asking what the teacher’s name was.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember her name.”

“Well, do you remember anything about her?”

“I think she is Jesus’ grandmother.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because all she did was hold up his picture and brag on him.”

If churches would spend their time lifting up Christ and bragging about him as much as they do lifting up all sorts of other good things (leadership, justice, growth), I think we would have far different stories to tell.

Q: What do you hope readers will gain from reading *What Matters Most*? How will they benefit most from your book?

A: When I started out in ministry, I fretted that we knew the meaning, but missed the experience. Now I fret that we have the experience, but miss the meaning.

The meaning is Jesus the Christ, the Way, the Truth, the Life.