

Bonus Readers Guide to *What Matters Most*

The print and digital editions of *What Matters Most* (WaterBrook, 2012), by Leonard Sweet, include an in-depth study and discussion guide, useful for groups interested in a deep engagement with the book's content. This bonus online reader's guide offers an alternative, for readers who want to look in particular at the book's broad themes. Following are questions for conversation and discussion. The guide is easily adaptable, so you can focus on the topics that interest you most.

Discussion 1: Unassailable argument or honest relationship?

Which of the following would you choose: a watertight argument proving God's existence or a daily path to knowing God like you know your best friend? Chief among the longings of the human soul is the desire for connection and relationship. We seek acceptance and belonging. But relationships tend to be convoluted and impossible to control, so often we find ourselves settling for something that is more concrete and static. Many of us focus on defending God's honor through the study of prophecy, theology, or apologetics. There is nothing wrong with this, except when intellectual pursuits take the place of knowing God face-to-face.

For discussion:

1. In the past, how has God spoken to you? (Consider the biblical text, other people, circumstances, creation, miracles, inner nudges, and others.) How does God speak to you with the most clarity, and why do you think that channel has the greatest impact on you?
2. Consider this: In Jesus, God sent a personal Representative to earth. St. John called Jesus the Word made flesh (see John 1:1-2, 14), saying in effect that Jesus was both message and Messenger, the full embodiment of God. Why, then, is the practice of following Jesus often considered less important than learning more and more facts about God?
3. Leonard Sweet sees in people an undeniable passion for connection, community, knowing others, and being known by others. What does this reality share in common with St. Paul's description of the church as the Body of Christ, a living organism with widely varied but interdependent parts (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-14)?

Discussion 2: Are you ready to commit, or merely to admit?

Faith is not the same as belief. Faith moves, but belief can be stationary. Faith requires full commitment, whereas belief can require little more than intellectual assent. Faith demands all of who you are; belief might claim no more than your careful consideration and agreement. Christians don't talk about the "life of belief," but we do emphasize the "life of faith".

For discussion:

1. How would you characterize Christian faith as a way of life? How would you compare and contrast faith with belief?

2. Leonard Sweet writes: "To become a Christian is not to adopt a different belief system.... Faith is the willing acceptance of Jesus' invitation, 'Follow me'" (23). What makes a person a Christian? Some say that reciting a certain prayer is required. Others say confession of sin and repentance, and others say the proof is in the person's life—evidence of spiritual regeneration (see Matthew 7:15-20). How do you define a Christian, and what makes that a reliable definition?

3. Leonard Sweet once again: "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" (30-31). What do you believe God wants most from you—to think the right thoughts or to live the most faithful life? As you discuss this, think also about God's desire for you to be involved in right relationships.

4. Quoting Leonard Sweet: "When the Bible says, 'God is love,' it is saying that God is a relationship...." (31). Is God more fact or more Person? Is he more statement or relationship? How would you base a life of faith on the biblical assertion that "God is love"?

Discussion 3: Walking behind Jesus for life

Abraham was a pagan who one day decided to believe God. He left his homeland to relocate to a place that God had not yet identified. In the process, Abraham became an expert at following. Following requires movement, leaving where you were and finding yourself in a new location—the place where God wants you to be (even if you are still en route).

For discussion:

1. Jesus gave us a surprising definition of “follower” in Matthew 7:22-23. Read it as part of this discussion. Leonard Sweet characterizes those whom Jesus refused in this way: “...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’ name. But Jesus doesn’t praise them or bless them or even thank them. He rejects them” (71). Sweet maintains that the religious luminaries were ushered out of Jesus’ presence because “they weren’t in a relationship with him. Because they possessed the right principles, but they weren’t possessed by the Truth” (71). How do you react to his statement?
2. Jesus leads his followers to love those who are different, often those who live on the far side of what is considered “acceptable.” Leonard Sweet: “God came to Abraham in the guise of a stranger (see Genesis 18:1-15), ate at his table, and called [Abraham] his friend. God appeared to Abraham through strangers, which reminds us that dignity must be extended to the ‘other’” (126). What are some of the ways that you have seen God in people who are very different from you?
3. Christians are tempted to think that being right (using the right words, holding the correct beliefs) is what God values most. But is God more interested in your being right or your doing right? Have you ever hesitated to do what you know is right when you realized that doing so would likely offend someone you respect, or might cause other Christians to judge you or misread your motives? Discuss.

Discussion 4: What does a longing for love tell you and the world?

Would God's work on earth be just as effective if Christians stopped trying to justify his actions and instead started trusting his love? Think about a major shift in the church, in which God's people concentrated on living in God's love above all other things.

For discussion:

1. The author maintains that the Word of God is much closer to a collection of love letters than a sacred reference book. He asks: "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?" (73). How would you answer the author's questions?
2. Consider that a shoebox full of love letters—even when they are from God—would seem to present a flimsy foundation for anyone's system of belief, especially when the beliefs in question have eternal consequences. How do you react to the author's characterization of the Bible as divine love story more than sacred encyclopedia?
3. Sweet comments on the witness of a Christian's words versus the story told by his/her life. "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" (21). How do you respond to this? Should the world's judgment be of particular concern to believers? Why or why not?
4. The author tosses out a disturbing comparison "between the church in the West and managed health care. . . . 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?')" (92). What do you think of this characterization?

[Footnote: This comparison first appeared in Leonard Sweet, "Being Right or Being in Relationship," REV. magazine, September-October 2003, <http://www.revmagazine.com/current/len.htm/>.]

Discussion 5: Living in the right relationship

The author maintains that the Bible, as God's love story, seeks to move us in the direction of a life of love—for God and for others. God wants us to follow him in loving the world, and as we do so, he desires that we will live in an honest, forthright, give-and-take relationship with him.

For discussion:

1. Sweet believes that “people are fast losing the art of being with one another... They are detached from God, from others, and from creation” (1). Do you agree or disagree, and why?
2. God defines “relationship” as up-close, face-to-face engagement, not a casual, arm's length acquaintance. When was the last time you argued with God? When did you last express your anger and disappointment toward him? What issues have prompted you to question him, demanding an answer to your struggles? What was the outcome?
3. Leonard Sweet maintains that moralism presents a threat to honest relationships. What do you believe is more important: being right and proving it, or being in right relationship and living it?
4. Leonard Sweet suggests that many people prefer to argue propositions over engaging with other people because propositions are orderly and static. Once in place, they aren't likely to cause any further trouble. In contrast, relationships tend to be chaotic and uncontrollable. Which are you more comfortable with: clear rules that, once articulated, are in place for good; or growing relationships, which are guaranteed to be disorderly and head off in directions you could never predict? Why?

About the Author

The quoted matter in this readers guide is taken from Leonard Sweet, *What Matters Most* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: WaterBrook Press, 2004, 2012). You can follow Leonard Sweet on Twitter (at @lensweet) and on Facebook (<http://snipurl.com/skyxp>). Read his weekly contributions on www.sermons.com, subscribe to his weekly podcasts (“Napkin Scribbles”) on iTunes U. You can find books by Leonard Sweet, as well as books written by other faith-provoking authors, at www.waterbrookmultnomah.com/.

