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JESUS MANIFESTO

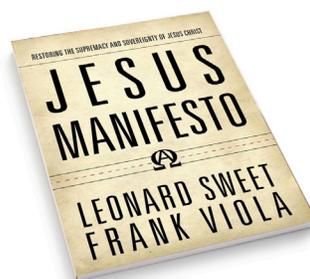
JESUS MANIFESTO LEONARD SWEET & FRANK VIOLA

Christians have made the gospel about so many things other than Jesus that the church today is in dire need of reconversion, say authors Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola. The book expands upon the manifesto that Sweet and Viola posted online in 2009, which was viewed half a million times in just eight weeks.

Christianity is, simply, Christ. Nothing more, nothing less. It is not an ideology, a philosophy, a social ethic, a cause, a core value or a worldview. Christianity is “the ‘good news’ that beauty, truth and goodness are found in a Person—a real and living Person who can be known, loved, and experienced—and that true humanity and community are founded on connection to that Person,” write Sweet and Viola.

Christians have lost sight of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, replacing the gospel with the language of justice, values, self-help and leadership.

With this fresh glimpse of Jesus, Sweet and Viola challenge their fellow believers to reject the “bestseller Christianity” that wraps up self-centeredness in spirituality, and to start living as “walking, breathing Jesus Manifestos.”



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JESUS MANIFESTO



CHAPTER 4

A VIOLIN CALLED MESSIAH

The Old Testament teaches us that if you seek God, you will find Him.¹ Jesus went one better: He said that God seeks *you*. Jesus Christ, God the Son, knocks at your door and asks if you can come out and play.²

God is nearer to me
than I am to myself.

God doesn't wait for us to come to Him. God comes to us in Jesus, making Himself at home with us. Jesus is the dramatic pitching of God's tent, wherein God is with us, making beautiful music for us to dance to—if we only will.⁴

—Meister Eckhart³

PLAYING THE MESSIAH'S MUSIC

The name Stradivarius is synonymous with the most expensive, most famous, most desirable violins in the world—even if they are three-hundred-year-old instruments.

Antonio Stradivari set up his workshop in the small Italian town of Cremona in the 1600s. During this time the best violins in the world were being made by the Amati family. But the Amati violins were made for the drawing room or the court, and music-making was changing. It was moving from the drawing room to the concert hall, where it would have to be heard clearly in the back reaches of the room. Stradivari both reflected and reinforced this metamorphosis. He chose bigger and better pieces of maple, experimented with stronger varnishes, and arched the belly of the violin differently.⁵

'Tis God gives skill
But not without men's
hands: He could
not make Antonio
Stradivari's violins
without Antonio. Get
thee to thy easel.

—George Eliot⁶

These changes gave Stradivari's violins a distinctive sound, unlike any before their time. (If Stradivari were alive today, he would no doubt trademark the sound of his violins, just as Harley-Davidson trademarked the "Hog Call," the rev of a Harley, which has become one of the most recognized sounds in the world today.)

When Stradivari died in 1737, a particular violin was found in his studio. It had never been played. This violin, called "the Messiah," had an incredible tiger-striped pattern on its back. It was said to be the "perfect violin." Today the Messiah is in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and it is the only known instrument to have its own showcase.⁷

But wait a minute. The "perfect violin" is one that has *never been played*? Not according to Ivry Gitlis, a violinist who plays his Stradivari every day. He says of his perfect violin, "I have a violin

that was born in 1713. I don't consider it my violin. Rather, I am its violinist; I am passing through its life."⁸

Indeed, life is like the gift of a Messiah violin. We don't own the instrument. For a time, we get to play on it our original song and sounds, and in our own way. But our lives are not our own. We are in *the* Messiah's symphony, where each instrument, no matter how different, brings itself into accord with the Composer and the Conductor.

CALL IT LIKE YOU SEE IT

The beginning of wisdom, advises a Chinese proverb, is to call things by their right names. The "New" King James Version of the Bible was not an advance when it changed the 1611 language from "follow" to "imitate," as in "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."⁹ The American Standard Version is even worse. It changes the word from "follow" to "imitate" virtually everywhere.¹⁰

But being a follower of Jesus does not involve imitation as much as it does implantation and impartation. Failure to understand the difference between "imitation" and "implantation" reveals a failure to understand the nature of "incarnation."

Incarnation—the notion that God connects to us in baby form and human touch—is the most shocking doctrine of the Christian religion. It is the mystery of God's self-emptying in Jesus Christ so that we could one day be indwelt by the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Or, as Augustine put it in one of his most striking phrases, "The deformity of Christ forms in you." He explained, "If [Christ] had not been willing to be deformed, you would not have recovered the form you lost."¹² God, in the form of Jesus, became a human.

He was then deformed by becoming sin, so that by His deformation we might find re-formation into the image of God.

In the incarnation, the beating heart of the universe became a human heart.¹³ God became a participant in the human spillage of resentment, vanity, selfishness, and death so that we might become participants in the divine nature of love and life. In other words, God the Divine became God in human skin—living, dying, and rising. He “emptied” Himself so that He could experience all that we would—and then be reborn again to eternal life so that we could too. But because Christ was willing to “empty” Himself, He expects the same of us—today. If we are to be reborn to everlasting life, then we must willingly empty *ourselves*—of our wants, our dreams, and our agendas. We are not in control of our lives; *He* is. In fact, here is God’s version of “self”-control, in a nutshell: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”¹⁴

“Breathe on Me, Breath of God” is more than a metaphor and a hymn. It’s a testimony to the risen Christ who breathes in you and me. Christ dwells in us. Why don’t we also let Him breathe through us by living our lives as an offering to Him? Singer/songwriter Maria McKee has a song called “Breathe” in which she does exactly that: she presents an offering of herself to Christ:

*I will let you breathe through me
I will let you be with me . . .
My heart beats your blood;
your breath fills my lungs.*¹⁵

But the doctrine of implantation/impartation has perhaps never been better expressed than in the words of Symeon the New

Theologian (949–1022), one of only three saints of the Orthodox church to have been granted the title “theologian”:

*We awaken in Christ’s body
as Christ awakens our bodies . . .
and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in him transformed,
recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in his light.”¹⁶*

LIFE’S “GOTCHA” MOMENT

In faith, there is a “gotcha” moment, when Jesus gets you for life. The gotcha moment may take millions of minutes or just one. But when Jesus gets you for life, you begin to live out of Jesus-love. When we present ourselves as “living offerings” to Christ, suddenly questions of what to do and what not to do take on a whole new meaning. Once we are truly sharing our lives with Christ and learning to live in His love, then truly *Charitas Christi urget nos*: “The love of Christ constrains us.”¹⁷

It is not the commandments and the laws that control our behavior. It is the presence of the indwelling Christ and Jesus-love that both restrains and releases us. A relational Christ ethic is why Paul said Christians don’t have sex with prostitutes. Since Christ is living His resurrected life in and through you, would you want Jesus to share that purchase of lust with you?¹⁸ Would Jesus treat any woman like a purchase? The commandments are paper

handcuffs compared to Jesus' love strands. It is "the love of Christ" that impels, compels, and propels us—a love that is so captivating we become free to do it all . . . in love, with love, for love.

Of the millions of words dictated by the gifted Latin-speaking Christian Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354–430), these are perhaps the most important but also the most misread: *Dilige, et quod vis fac*, "Love God, and do what you will."¹⁹ If you love God, or love another, the one thing you cannot do is what you will, for love bends the will. To live in God's love is not license for hedonism, but liberty for sacrificial living where we're all working

No one can know God
who does not first
know him/herself.

—Meister Eckhart ²²

off the same brief, which reads, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another"²⁰ and "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."²¹

To live the "incarnate life" is to do little large. God does little large. That is the story of the incarnation, and that is the metanarrative of the Bible. At the heart of orthodoxy is paradox: the paradox of the littlest revealing the largest and the finite revealing the infinite. The incarnation is both once-and-for-all and ongoing, as the One who "was and who is to come"²³ now is, and lives His resurrection life in and through us. An "already now" participates in the "still not yet."

A DIVINE APERTURE

An "aperture" is an opening through which light travels. The narrower the hole, the more focused the image becomes. The wider the aperture, the less clearly defined the image you are trying to

capture will be. You can have all the light in the night sky coming through a wide aperture and have very little usable image. You can have everything present in every space, but it will be entirely useless as a dependable, definable image.

Christ is the Aperture of God. In the small opening of this one life, the clearest image of the whole can be seen. In Christ, God the infinite became finite. All the rays of truth in the universe focus through him: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”²⁴

It all began with one person in one place . . . until the local was made the universal, the little made large, by the power of God’s Spirit. At the height of the universal, when Jesus was dying on the cross to show God’s love for the world, He attended to the particular. He showed His love for two of the people He loved most—His mother and His best friend.

THE TWO SIDES OF INCARNATION

There are two sides of incarnation. One is “God sent His Son” and thus “abased Himself.” On the other side, God raised humanity and pulled us into something bigger than we are—a trinitarian vortex that we get to be part of.²⁵ Incarnation doesn’t just apply to Jesus; it applies to every one of us. Of course, not in the same redemptive way. But close.

Whether in alliance or in defiance, the question of Mary is also our question: How can this be? How can Jesus be born in me and grow in me? How can the Messiah be bodily present with us today?

We have been given God’s “Spirit,” which makes Christ “real” in our lives. We can actually now, as Peter puts it, “participate in the divine nature.”²⁶ How, then, in the face of so great a truth, can

There were moments
when Our Lord’s
divinity slipped from
him into the world
which he created.

—Keble College Warden
Austin Farrer²⁷

we ask for toys and trinkets? How can we lust after lesser gifts and itch for religious and spiritual “things”? We’ve been touched from on high by the fires of the Almighty and given divine life, a life that has passed through death—the very resurrection life of the Son of God Himself. How can we not be fired up?

IMITATION VS. IMPLANTATION

There is a vast ocean of difference between trying to compel Christians to imitate Jesus and learning how to impart an implanted Christ. The former only ends up in failure and frustration. The latter is the gateway to life and joy in our daying and our dying. We stand with Paul—“Christ lives in me”²⁸—and we aspire with him to “have the mind of Christ.”²⁹ Our life is Christ. In Him we live, breathe, and have our being.³⁰ “What would Jesus do?” is not Christianity. Christianity asks, “What is Christ doing *through me* . . . through *us*? And how is He doing it?” Following Jesus means to “trust and obey,” as the old hymn goes. But faith and obedience to Christ isn’t self-effort. It’s responding to God’s will and living by His indwelling life through the power of the Spirit.

Doing life together with Jesus is a coauthored narrative

process filled with many points of crisis. But the imaginative, tension-filled process of engaging the crisis is what makes a story interesting.

Every crisis raises relational issues: Will you try it and handle it yourself? Will you find a new partner? Or will you and Jesus tackle the crisis together? In tackling the stuff of life together, you'll see that your relationship with God will deepen.

In pondering Christ, you find that you are in fact living His life, and God is living yours. Christ in you and you in Christ. God doesn't lead you through phases or steps. He draws you to Himself in continuous motion. What we often have viewed as stages or phases may be a change in music. But the point is never the music. It is the dance. The music is often part of the dance. But sometimes the most beautiful dance is the one where you and your partner make up the music as you dance together.

A THEOLOGY OF LIKENESS

There is a pervasive theology of "likeness"—"O God, make me more Christlike"—that cheapens the gospel and depresses the spirit. Christlikeness is too small a dream, too shallow an ambition, for a Christian. The call to Christlikeness is also not "good news."

First of all, too much of the "like Jesus" talk smacks of an "as if" faith. Take Christian "nonrealist" Don Cupitt, who doesn't believe there are actual "entities" of God or Christ. Still, if we accept Jesus' stories "as if they are true," he argues, then we can "live like Christ."³¹ But the stories and metaphors of Jesus, and of the faith, should elicit more in us than "I shall strive to live *as if* these things were true." Christian faith is more than having

superior stories. To be His follower means more than admiring His courage and gleaning lessons from His teachings. In an “as if” faith, there is no difference between following Jesus and following ethical behavior. (More on this later.)

Second, we want a “like-Christ” relationship with God on our terms. But a loving, living relationship with Christ begins on God’s terms. In other words, it begins with the cross, or more precisely, a “dying with Christ.” It begins with a “death” to all those parts of us that are damping and hampering the Spirit’s work and preventing us from being “liberated from the controlling powers of [the] world,”³² the destructive, dehumanizing, controlling forces, like addictions, selfism, consumerism, hedonism, and others.

Third, to be “like Christ” often implies that you don’t really need Christ, since you already have the ideas and teachings of Christ.

Here is a posted response on Facebook to our attempts at refocusing on Jesus:

i really think it doesn't matter that much to god if we are christ-centered or not . . . in fact, i don't believe the gospel is about being christ-centered at all . . . jesus himself is not christ-centered . . . so why should we insist that the gospel is christ-centered . . . the son points all of God's creation to his father, the one and only true god . . . by putting the emphasis on even a “christ-centered way,” we are making the being of jesus a narcissistic figure . . . true, he was a major actor because it is his life that is being played out . . . but lest we forget . . . the creator sen[t] us a redeemer to bring us back to the creator!!! i don't read any ”christ-centered-ness” here nor do we need to

be cautioned that not everything is “christ-centered” . . . that’s because this term that evangelicals have constructed is not even a biblically correct concept.

This comment misses the point on so many levels. One of them is that what the Father was to Jesus, Jesus is now to us (see chapter 8).

Fourth, as Martin Luther said, if you read the Law, you will see that you can never hope to keep it. Similarly, try to be like Christ, and you will quickly realize that you don’t have a prayer of becoming like Him. If you were a musician, and you were told that the goal of your life was to be like Mozart, would this be good news to you? If you were an artist, and you were told that your life ambition was to be like Michelangelo, would you jump up and down in excitement? Most of you could sit at a piano every waking moment, or stand at an easel for twelve hours a day, or sculpt a stone without stopping except to eat and sleep, and you could still never be like Michelangelo or Mozart.

So be “like” Christ? Hmm . . .

Always turn the other cheek?

Always walk the second mile?

Always love your enemies?

Never think an unsanctified thought?

Never have even a hint of a pity party?

Always be prepared to give a “word in season”?

Pay attention to the words “always” and “never.”

The fact is, Jesus was the greatest human being who ever lived, and if all we have to look forward to in life is the frustration of

trying to be someone we are not, then we've got better ways of enjoying the interval between birth and death.

But the "good news" is that Jesus *doesn't* want us to be "like" Him. He wants to share His resurrection life with us. He doesn't want us to imitate Him; instead, Christ, the Unspeakable Gift,³³ wants to live in and through us.

The gospel is not the imitation of Christ; it is the implantation and impartation of Christ. We are called to do more than mediate truth. We are called to manifest Jesus' presence.

That "we" means *you*.

Contrast the designations "Paul of Tarsus" with "Jesus of Nazareth." Tarsus was the capital city of Cilicia, a place proud of its Greek culture. The title "Paul of Tarsus" was like saying "Paul of London" or "Paul of New York City." There are at least twenty-five references to Jesus as "Jesus of Nazareth." This is our equivalent of saying, "Jesus of the slums" or "Jesus of the ghetto" or "Jesus of the *favelas*" or "Jesus of the squatter camps." Nazareth was the armpit of Galilee that stunk worse from the stench of nearby Samaritans. Every nation has a Nazareth. Every person has a Nazareth.

Where's your Nazareth? Where's that written-off place, that written-off person, that written-off part of your life? God can take a nobody person from a nowhere place and make "a Jesus of [fill in the blank]" out of him or her.

I've found a Friend; O such a Friend!

He bled, He died to save me;

And not alone the gift of life,

But His own self He gave me.

Naught that I have mine own I'll call,

*I'll hold it for the Giver;
My heart, my strength, my life, my all,
Are His, and His for ever.³⁴*

JESUS IS NO VENEER

Does anyone really like veneered furniture? Yes, it saves wood. Yes, it is cheaper. Yes, it is easier to work with. But Jesus is *not* a veneer that covers up inferior wood.³⁵ Jesus works all the way down and through until, as Paul put it, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”³⁶ It should be said of you, “In [insert your name], something of Christ lives. The Jesus story continues in his/her life.”

A French pastor was called to serve in a small French community. At one of the first homes he visited, the wife was away, so he could only talk with the husband. When the wife returned, she probed her husband about the nature of the new pastor’s visit:

“What did he say?” she asked.

“He asked, ‘Does Christ live here?’” the husband replied. “He didn’t really ask anything else. Just, ‘Does Christ live here?’”

“Well, surely you told him that we are the church’s biggest supporters.”

“He didn’t ask that,” the husband repeated. “He only asked, ‘Does Christ live here?’”

“Well, you must have told him that we read our Bible and say our prayers every day.”

“He didn’t ask about that either. He only asked, ‘Does Christ live here?’”

“Well, did you tell him that we attend his services every Sunday and sit in the front?” the wife persisted.

“He *didn’t* ask about *that*. He only wanted to know, ‘Does Christ live here?’”

And that’s all God wants to know.

Christ wants to be born in you and to live in and through you. It’s as if you were that budding musician who was told, “Give your life to music, and Mozart will so come to life in you that when you sit down at the piano and play, it will not be you alone playing, but you and Mozart together.” Or as if you were an aspiring artist who was promised, “Give your life to painting, and Michelangelo will so come to life in you that when you stand at that easel, it will be you *and* Michelangelo wielding the brush.”

Cecilia Siqueria (Uruguay) and Fernando Lima (Brazil) met in the Brazilian town of Cruzeiro-do-Sul in July 2001, where the master guitarist and young prodigy shared the first prize at the International Acoustic Guitar Competition. Since then, they have sometimes appeared together, playing the same guitar.³⁷ Wouldn’t it be awesome for Christ to be manifested with you, no matter what you’re doing?



Love is giving something one doesn’t have to someone who doesn’t want it.”

—Slovenian philosopher and sociologist Slavoj Žižek³⁸

The good news is as scary as it is good. It is safe to be “like” Jesus; it is scary to “be” and “do” Jesus. Yet, wrote Archibald MacLeish, “A poem should not mean / but be.”³⁸ Likewise, a Christian should not mean, but be. Be what? The living Christ for a dying world. But to “be” is to give up control and ownership and to

share life with the Word made flesh,⁴⁰ the very image of the invisible God.⁴¹ The truth is that if we all fully understood what it means that the very being of God wants to take residence in us and share our life, we would all be reluctant incarnations.

Yet, “Let it be,” Mary said to the angel, never knowing what the “it” would be.

THE CULT OF CUTENESS

Disciples of Jesus, beware of cute. Christians are on high alert for cute. We love cuteness. This is a cute-driven culture. It turns everything it touches into glitz and attractiveness and gets rid of anything that isn't “cute.”

But the story of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection doesn't compute with cute:

- The Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to the virgin Mary to tell her she was pregnant, wasn't cute.
- Admitting to Joseph that she was pregnant wasn't cute.
- The Magnificat wasn't cute.⁴²
- The little town of Bethlehem wasn't cute.
- The killing of the innocents wasn't cute.
- Jesus' genealogy is not cute. (His lineage includes a rape victim, an adulteress, and a prostitute.)
- The kiss in the garden wasn't cute.
- Golgotha wasn't cute.

The word *crux* in Latin means “cross.” The crux of Christianity is the cross. And the cross certainly isn't cute. The old Christian

calendar had ways of resisting this cultural drift into cuteness even at the “cute” moment of Jesus’ birth.

Christ wants to be conceived anew in your heart, in your hopes, in your family, in your community—but not as a cutesy little baby who’s still in the manger. Jesus Christ is the author and perfecter of our faith,⁴³ not a babe wrapped in swaddling clothing. So for Him to be conceived anew in *you*, you must enter into a faith-filled, dynamic, life-giving *relationship* with Him through the Spirit of God⁴⁴ so that He radiates from you in all you do.

But what kind of journey might the “Radiance of God’s glory”⁴⁵ put you on? It could be a hard one; not all journeys are easy. When Mary affirmed, “Let it be with me according to Your word,” she could not foresee all that the little word *it* would bring to her life. “It” was definitely not easy—or cute.

“It” would mean a pregnancy out of wedlock.

“It” would include giving birth far from her home.

“It” would be a death sentence on her child’s life, and a night flight into Egypt.

“It” would be long years of a simple, ordinary life in a no-name village.

“It” would be three years of trying to understand the transformation of her son into the Son of God, and . . .

“It” would be the horror of the cross, and a mother’s heart-break at the tomb.

But “it” was worth it all when it became, finally, the glory of the resurrection. Then we beheld the glory of the bright Morning Star.⁴⁶

There is always an “it” that brings faith out of “cuteness” and into acuteness of mission and ministry. But “it” is never what it

appears to be with a “hope of glory”⁴⁷ who trades in promises and possibilities. When we can say with Paul, “In the cross of Christ I glory,”⁴⁸ we are claiming impossibility as the element in which we live and move and have our being.

BAD DAYS—BUT A BETTER VIOLIN

There is an old Chinese parable about an elderly man and his only son who live together in a small rural community. One night, the father’s horse wanders off, and his neighbors come to express their sympathy for his loss. But the old man says to them, “How do you know this is ill fortune?”

A few days later, the horse returns, followed by an entire herd of wild horses. Now the neighbors come to congratulate the old man on his good luck. But the old man says, “How do you know this is good fortune?”

Time passes, during which the son takes to riding the wild horses—until one of them throws him, and he breaks a leg. Again the neighbors come, this time to express sorrow for the old man’s bad luck. “How do you know it is bad luck?” asks the old man.

A short time later, a Chinese warlord comes into the town to recruit all able-bodied young men for his next little war, but the son escapes the draft because of his broken leg. This time the neighbors tell the old man how pleased they are at his good fortune. And one more time the old man replies, “How do you know this is good fortune?”

And here the story ends—although it could, of course, go on and on.



There is mystery to life. Sure, it seemed like a bad day when the old man lost his horse. And sure, it seems like a bad day when some tragic moment intrudes into our lives. But the Christian withholds final judgment of whether it's a “good day” or a “bad day” until all the days are in.

It seemed like a bad day when Jesus hung on a cross. But that “bad day” was quickly followed by a good day—the one that we still live in now: the day when a certain violin began to play its tune through a resurrected human.