

Sunday - January 16, 2011  
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook  
Sermon - **Jesus Manifesto I**

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What does it mean to be a Christian? Is it easy? Is it hard? Is it simple? Is it complicated? Is it a matter of agreeing to a set of beliefs? Is it a matter of doing things a certain way?

What is demanded of us? Is there a short cut? What does church membership have to do with it? Does perfect attendance help? How much money does Jesus require from us for us to call ourselves Christian?

Over the next few Sundays, we'll be looking at scriptural answers to these sort of questions. We'll look at the nature of Christ and what it means to be an authentic follower of Christ.

I'll be using as my primary source the book *Jesus Manifesto* by Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola. This book is so full of insights and startling revelations, I knew it would preach before I finished the Introduction. By the time I finished reading it and marking it up, I knew it would take more than one sermon to do it justice. So, here we go:

The world is a mess because the Church is a mess. If the two billion people in this world who call themselves Christians regained their focus, the Church would be a much more influential and powerful force for good in the world. But, the Church has lost its focus, as it scatters its attention all over the place, trying to control what people say and do and think, how they dress, what they read, and so on.

So, what should the Church's focus be? Christ. It's that simple. The Church is the body of Christ. That means the Church IS Christ. And if we are not focused on being Christ, we lose our way.

Christianity is not a philosophy or ideology. It is not a collection of rules to live by. It is not a moral or ethical system. It is not a worldview. Christianity is the Good News that truth, goodness and beauty are found in one person: Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 16:15 Jesus asks the Big Question: **“Who do you say that I am?”** That question was not just for the disciples there with him. It is the question for every Christian and every congregation. Who do we think Jesus is? And who do we SAY he is? And how often do we say it? And to whom?

We need to understand in our own minds who we say Jesus is. I mean, that sounds pretty basic to being a Christian, don't you think? And we need more than some snappy rote answer. If you have answered this question in your head already, I would suggest you need to set that answer aside and go deeper. Our answer to this question needs to be sound and deeply rooted in scripture - built on rock, not sand.

Why is this so important? Because once we've answered this question, then Jesus asks the *Ultimate* Question. Now, what could that question be? How can it be bigger than the Big Question of “Who do you say that I am?”

Let's take a look at John 21. In this chapter, Jesus, having been crucified and resurrected, returns to have breakfast on the beach with a few of the disciples. So, the Ultimate Question comes from the Risen Christ. It is the first question he asks, and he asks it of Peter: **“Do you love me?”** He asks Peter this same question three times. It must be very important.

Now, what does Jesus want from us? He isn't asking what we've done lately for the Kingdom. He's not asking for a financial report or a chart of attendance or membership gain or loss. He's not

inspecting the building. He isn't taking notes on how creative worship is or how many Bible studies we have going. He's not asking for evaluations of the staff or the lay leadership of the church. He's not checking how correct our doctrine is.

He is asking, "Do you love me?" ...Do we? How important is he in our lives? What does it mean to love him? How can people tell if we love him? Can we even answer his question?

We show Jesus how much we love him by how much time we spend with him, how central he is in our lives. How obedient we are. For too many people, Jesus is the Sunday morning mascot - we pull him out, play with him, then put him back until next Sunday. And, brothers and sisters, that's not love.

If we love Jesus Christ, we would love God with all our heart/soul/mind/strength and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We'd love our enemies. We'd love one another in the church. But, none of this happens if we don't love Christ first and passionately.

When we love Christ and place him at the center of our lives, rather than leaving him at the fringes, where he's convenient if we need him but not in the way, then our hearts will be filled to bursting with love. Love will be perfected in us. And we shall be sent out as love letters to the world - **"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."**

(II Corinthians 3:2-3)

You and I are supposed to be Jesus Manifestos. People will read us and discover Jesus Christ if we are carrying him with us as we take the love God has loved us with first, then perfected in us, out to the

people who live in darkness. Being a Christian is not something to be taken lightly. It's not a hobby. It's a life.

The authors state that the chief pursuit of the Christian life is "knowing Christ profoundly and in reality." (p. 2) We need to know Christ with our heart and mind before we can even begin to call ourselves Christians.

Do we need to regroup? Do we need to pause long enough to re-evaluate who we are and where Christ is in our lives? Do we need to get back on track? If we do, that's what I'm here to address.

Let's start with who Christ is. Christ is called "the Word" in John 1- **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ..And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."**

God the Father speaks Christ into the world. Now, let me say something that will be contrary to something most of us take for granted. Jesus Christ is the Word of God. The Bible is not. It is focused on the Word of God, but it is words about the Word, not the Word itself. God's *living* Word is a person who has revealed God to us.

So, the Word becomes a human being and gathers a community around him. When Christ is resurrected and the Holy Spirit blows in, the disciples begin preaching, starting the movement that will become the Church. Notice that they are not preaching a plan of salvation or a new theology or a better set of rules. The message they preach is Christ:

**"Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the**

**presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is Jesus.” (Acts 3:19-20)**

**And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. (Acts 5:42)**

**Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. (Acts 8:5)**

**For several days (Paul) was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” (Acts 9:20)**

**(Paul was) explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.” (Acts 17:3)**

Today, what the Church needs is not more rules or stricter laws. What it needs is a full revelation of Christ. Our Christ is too small, and that’s why we go chasing after other things that seem deeper or more mature or just more interesting.

But, if we truly understand the amazing immensity of Jesus Christ, we’ll see there is nowhere else to go. Once, when many of his followers were falling away, Jesus asked his disciples, **“Do you also wish to go away?”** And Peter answered, **“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”** (John 6:67-69)

The Mystery of God is that God, in Christ, chose to live inside us - **To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this *mystery*, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:27)**

But wait, there's more. God also invites us to share life with Him, the Creator and Sustainer of the entire Universe. We are complete in Him, here and now.

Think of it this way. Christ is a great, vast, immeasurable ocean. You are like a bottle. The most amazing thing in the entire gospel is that the bottle is in the ocean, but the ocean is also in the bottle. This is truly the Good News.

Everything that could distract us is beneath Jesus Christ. He is your Law, your Commandments, your Sabbath, your mystical vision, your angelic visitation. He is above and beyond the Church, not bound by it. He has defeated all the powers of darkness that beckon, tempting us away from Him. He has crucified the Law and brought with him the Law of Love. Christ is huge, but He is also in the smallest details. Paul told the Colossians, **“Christ is all and in all.”** (Col. 3:11)

What is Christianity then? It's not a set of beliefs or rules or laws or doctrines or dogmas. Christianity is the relationship with Christ. Period. And if we remain blissfully unaware of his vastness, we won't learn Christ, and we'll preach and teach something else: principles, rules, regulations, religious duty, fear, shame, guilt.

It takes a church to raise a Christian. We'll never fully develop our relationship with Christ without a loving, supportive community. We are Jesus Manifestos, love letters from Christ to the world. People need to read us, all of us. Let's pray that Christ will inspire us to do everything we can to develop our relationship with Him, so when people read us, they learn about Him.