

A Body with No Head

Have churches and small groups replaced the incomparable Christ with something safer and smaller? [Interview with Frank Viola](#), a bestselling author and international conference speaker. Viola has authored numerous books, including [From Eternity to Here](#) and [Reimagining Church](#). [SmallGroups.com](#) spoke to Frank regarding his newest book, [The Jesus Manifesto](#), co-authored with Leonard Sweet.

SmallGroups.com: In a nutshell, what is the message of *The Jesus Manifesto*?

Frank Viola: I think the message of the book can be summarized by four key points:

1. That the Lord Jesus Christ far more incredible, incomparable, and amazing than most of us have ever imagined. He's so much more than Lord and Savior. By contrast, our Christ is just too small. So we're seeking to exalt and unveil him beyond the stratosphere.
2. That in many respects we have supplanted the primacy of Christ with something else—often good and biblical things. It's possible to become excited, enamored, and enthralled with a thing "about" Jesus and yet lose him in the temple (so to speak). It's possible to put a spiritual/religious "thing" on the throne and dethrone Jesus from his rightful place.
3. That we are living in a unique time right now where many Christians are frozen when they look to the left and to the right. Both the Christian left and the Christian right make Christianity a matter of ethics. They just cut the ethical line differently (the left cuts it at social justice and the right cuts it at personal holiness). In *Jesus Manifesto*, we present a third path that combines Person with praxis, act and being, justice and justification, social action, and personal piety. We present a way forward that's not left or right, but one that is beyond space, time, and matter, yet in space, time, and matter. The third way is one of exploration rather than fortification. And that way is Jesus Christ as the Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, A to Z.
4. That the Christian life is not WWJD ("What would Jesus do"), but CLM ("Christ lives in me"). A lot of the book goes into the difference between living by the tree of life vs. living by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Jesus Christ embodies the tree of life today. Consequently, Christianity is not trying to mimic Jesus; it's learning to partake of Christ and then manifest him. It's not trying to be a good Christian; it's learning to live by the Christ who indwells every true believer.

You say in your book that Jesus has been replaced as the primary focus in many churches. What has replaced him?

Here's a list of the things that have been identified by some of the readers of the book: Leadership principles, the gifts of the Spirit, mission, evangelism, eschatology, the power of God, healing, miracles, speaking in tongues, a certain theological system, Bible study, church multiplication, and apologetics. There are many more of course. Len and I receive frequent emails from people who tell us that the Spirit of God put his finger on one of these "things," showing them that they were putting "it" on the throne instead of Christ.

It's all-too possible to swim in a tributary (an aspect of Christ) and miss the River (Christ himself).

Do you feel that the recent popularity of community ministries (including small groups and house churches) has helped or harmed the church when it comes to focusing on Jesus?

It depends. Unfortunately, Jesus Christ is not the centrality of some house churches and some small groups. He is, however, the life-blood, center, foundation, and mainstay of the organic expression of the church the way I've defined and described it in my other books.

For me, what makes a church truly "organic" is whether or not Christ is the living, breathing, and functional Head of that body of believers. I've defined an organic church as a group of people who are learning to live by Divine life together. The organic expression of the *ekklesia* naturally emerges when a group of Christians are enthralled with their Lord and are learning to live by him together.

A great many Bible studies and curriculum options used in small groups and Sunday schools seem to focus on topics or segments of Scripture, rather than Jesus. How can this be combated and corrected?

Paul said that he was called to preach "the unsearchable riches of Christ." How often have we seen this done today? The only way I know how to combat it is for those who know the unsearchable riches of Christ in experience, who can mine Christ out of all the Scriptures, and who know him in the depths by revelation and suffering to declare him in a way that absolutely intoxicates others with their Lord.

To my mind, this is the role of those who are called to plant churches. It gets close to the meaning of laying no other foundation but Jesus Christ (see [1 Corinthians 3](#)).

You say Christians shouldn't try to "mimic Jesus." Isn't it the goal of Christians to be "like Christ"?

I believe the goal of every Christian should be to fulfill God's eternal purpose. That purpose centers on God obtaining a bride for himself, a house for himself, a family for himself, and a body for himself.

Each of the above (bride, house, family, body) is a corporate expression of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This means that the Divine goal is not individualistic; it's corporate and collective. God wants a corporate people who are conformed to the image of his Son and who manifest him in the earth.

So the goal is not "trying" to "be like" Jesus the way it's commonly taught. To use the language of Galatians, the goal is to reveal Christ *in us* ([1:16](#)), to have Christ live out his life *in us* ([2:20](#)), and to have Christ formed *in us* ([4:19](#)). Notice the common word "in" there. All of this is corporate, as well, though it contains individual dimensions, of course.

You say in the book that Christians need to "get a fresh glimpse of your incomparable Lord, and you will be emboldened to stop spending your life on yourself." What does that actually look like?

It's when our spiritual eyes are opened to "behold" Jesus Christ in a way that wrecks us. Everything else doesn't seem so important anymore. They're all eclipsed by the sight of his stunning beauty and staggering glory. We are undone and left hungry and thirsty to love him and to know him in reality.

As the old hymn goes, "The look that melted Peter, the face that Stephen saw, the heart that wept with Mary, can alone from idols draw."

What specific changes do you hope to see in the contemporary church that would recover the revelation of Jesus Christ and result in the shaping of Christians into "walking, breathing Jesus Manifestos"?

If I can summarize, it hinges on the ministry of God's Word, which unveils the unsearchable riches of Christ to God's people and then shows them how to practically partake of Christ individually and corporately (see [John 6:57](#)).

This progresses into: 1) Churches having meetings where the members are equipped to function by sharing Christ with one another, so that he is put on display. 2) Churches having community life where the members are taking care of one another and being built together into the Head, who is Christ. And 3) Churches finding creative ways of manifesting Jesus to their communities as the Spirit leads.

How can small groups and community ministries participate?

As one who both plants and works with organic believing communities, I've found that community-life that is centered on Christ comes easier with a smaller group than with a large one. So when a group is too large, it's best to have it broke up into smaller groups for shared-life community to take place. We see this done with the large churches of Jerusalem and Ephesus during the New Testament era.

My book *Finding Organic Church* discusses various practical ways in which new churches and seasoned churches can be founded upon Christ and Christ alone—knowing him together, living by him together, loving him together, and manifesting him together as best as possible amid the Fall that has affected us all.

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Our Identity In Christ

Tami Rudkin | posted 9/11/2000

Take a few minutes and let your group look over this list. Explain that each describes our identity in Christ. As a part of worship have your group randomly pray thanksgiving using these descriptions. (See the one sentence prayer below.) Encourage them to pray "popcorn" style, praying short phrases several different times. Be sure, as the leader, to model what you expect.

Who Am I?

"Father, thank you that because of your son Jesus ..."

- I am the salt of the earth. Matt. 5:13
- I am the light of the world. Matt. 5:14
- I am a child of God. John 1:12
- I am a child of God. Rom. 8:14, 15
- I am a child of God and am one in Christ. Gal 3:26
- I am part of the true vine, a channel of Christ's life. John 15:16
- I am Christ's friend. John 15:15
- I am chosen and appointed by Christ to bear his fruit. John 15:16
- I am a slave of righteousness. Rom. 6:18
- I am enslaved to God. Rom. 6:22
- I am a joint heir with Christ. Rom. 8:17
- I am an heir of God. Gal. 4:6, 7
- I am a temple, a dwelling place, of God. I Cor. 3:16; 6:19
- I am united to the Lord. I Cor. 6:17
- I am a member of Christ's body. I Cor. 12:27; Eph. 5:30
- I am a new creation. 2 Cor. 5:17
- I am reconciled to God and am a minister of reconciliation. 2 Cor. 5:18, 19
- I am a saint. Eph. 1:1, I Cor. 1:2, Phil. 1:1, Col. 1:2
- I am God's workmanship, his handiwork, made to do his work. Eph. 2:10
- I am a prisoner of Christ. Eph. 3:1, 4:1
- I am righteous and holy. Eph. 4:24
- I am a citizen of heaven. Phil. 3:20, Eph. 2:6
- I am hidden with Christ in God. Col. 3:3
- I am chosen of God, holy and dearly loved. Col. 3:12, I Thess. 1:4
- I am a child of the light and not darkness. I Thess. 5:5
- I am one of God's living stones, being built up in Christ as a spiritual house. I Peter 2:5
- I am a member of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession. I Peter 2:9, 10
- I am an alien and stranger to this world in which I temporarily live. I Peter 2:11
- I am an enemy of the devil. I Peter 5:8
- I am a child of God and I will resemble Christ when he returns. I John 3:1, 2
- I am born of God, and the evil one cannot touch me. I John 5:18