

# “Before Bethlehem, Part 1”

Colossians 1:15-20 <sup>1</sup>

Her name was Patty Pinkerton, and I suppose she’s part of the reason that I’m a pastor and not a minister of music. While the truth of the matter is that I did poorly in freshman music theory quite on my own, Patty made my misery a good bit worse than it might have otherwise been.

You see, Patty had perfect pitch. That means that she never made a mistake in identifying what note or what chord or what tonal progression was being played, and that perfection meant that none of our grades in freshman theory ever got scaled. The standard was perfection.

Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola began their recent book, *Jesus Manifesto*, with the affirmation that “Jesus is God’s perfect pitch—the divine tuning fork to the eternal. Every tuning fork needs to be struck to be heard. The striking of the eternal, unchanging tuning fork of heaven took place when a young virgin gave birth to God’s only Son in an obscure village in first-century Israel. It struck again on a never-forgotten Friday, with the pounding of six-inch nails. The fork struck a third time—on the third day—when a meek and lowly Nazarene split a tomb wide open and came forth in resurrection life. Heaven’s tuning fork continues to strike today; [and] when we Christians fail to hear it, we lose our way.”<sup>2</sup>

To use a different image, the more technical in the room will recognize this small metal box as an external disk drive of the sort commonly used to back up computer data. Because so much of the information I use to do ministry and to manage my life is digital, I routinely keep backups of my laptop hard drive in at least three different locations.

The software I use to create these backups promises to “create exact images of your entire hard disk on various removable media.” These backups include files that are visible to all users of the computer as well as files that are invisible to any users except me.

Like those visible and invisible files on my computer, Paul wrote that “*Christ is the visible image of the invisible God*” (Colossians 1:15, NLT); and when Paul wrote in this morning’s text that “*God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ]*” (Colossians 1:19), he used the word πληρωμα (playROAMah) to describe that “fullness.” Πληρωμα means “the full and exact copy,” just like the backup copies I make of my laptop hard drive, but infinitely more significant. Jesus Himself told us that “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!*” (John 14:9), and even more amazingly, “*I and the Father are one*” (John 10:30).

Perhaps all this will help us to remember that it’s really pretty easy for us to read Jesus’ words in the Gospels without realizing how cosmically significant they are. We regular churchgoers can fall into reading Jesus’ words somewhat absentmindedly, hearing them as the familiar teachings of a long-ago Galilean carpenter rather than as the words of the eternal and victorious, reigning and returning Lord Christ.

You and I do well to remember that the “red words” in our Bibles were spoken by One Who “*is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on December 1, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy & Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. xv.

authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:15-17).<sup>3</sup>

Something else we frequently fail to fully appreciate is the Bible’s affirmation that “**Jesus is Lord**” (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3). Dr. Duane Litfin, former President of Wheaton College, wrote of these familiar words that “human language can scarcely craft a more profound declaration than this one, that *Jesus is Lord*. . . . What do we mean by the Lordship of Christ? We mean that He is the Creator of all things, the Sustainer of all things, the Goal of all things, the Redeemer of all things, and the Judge of all things.”

“These are outrageous claims,” Dr. Litfin wrote, “unless they are true. But if they are true, as Christians affirm, then this means that . . . Jesus is utterly central to all that humans can know or experience. There is nothing imaginable that is irrelevant to Him or to which He is irrelevant. There is no quarter of human learning in which He is not the central figure.”<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand what really happened at Bethlehem, we need to have a robust understanding of Who it is that lies in that manger. We need to know what the real situation was *before Bethlehem*. **And we need to realize that if Jesus is Who He says He is, then what He did and what He said while He lived among us matters more than anything else in the universe.**

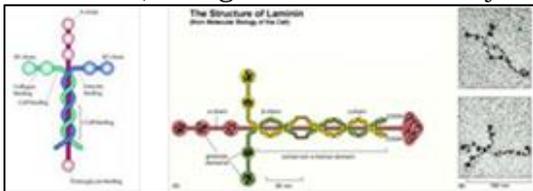
Our trouble is that we’ve begun to misspell “universe” these days. Our usual spelling has now functionally become “YOUiverse,” which you can easily verify for yourself this very afternoon by considering the meaning of nearly any advertisement in any media. The *Jesus Manifesto* rightly points out that “Self-centeredness wrapped up as ‘spirituality’ has become the latest fashion accessory for the person who has everything. . . . [But] You are not the point. And we are not the point. Jesus Christ always has been and always will be the point. All the arrows point to Him and not to us.”<sup>5</sup>

My friends, Jesus is not just another cause among many, one more thing or group or celebrity to like on *Facebook*.<sup>6</sup> Jesus is not the chaplain of “the American Dream,” or of the Democratic or Republican parties. Nor are you and your interests and causes the center of the universe. You’re not even the main character in your own story. Jesus is.<sup>7</sup>

The *Jesus Manifesto* notes that “If the truth be told, we’ve been handed a shrink-wrapped Jesus [not the Lord of creation]. [Jesus] has become our once-a-week Mascot. We rally around Him on Sunday mornings, selfishly reaching for all we can get from Him—goodies and gifts, all for us. Then we push Him off to the sidelines the rest of the week. But the game has never been about us; it’s always been about Him.”<sup>8</sup>

The *Jesus Manifesto* reminds us that “To know the suffering Nazarene is to know the Almighty, the one true Creator—He who was, is, and is to come. But that’s not all.

<sup>3</sup> With respect to “holding all creation together,” see <http://www.snopes.com/glurge/laminin.asp> on laminin, the “glue” that holds every cell in our bodies together.



<sup>4</sup> Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 38-44).

<sup>5</sup> Sweet & Viola, pp. 100-101.

<sup>6</sup> Sweet & Viola, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Sweet & Viola, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Sweet & Viola, p. 170.

“This [Jesus] is the firstborn of the entire cosmos, the first person to appear in creation, and He is preeminent in all of it. . . . but that’s still not all.

Before Bethlehem, “This [Jesus] existed before time as the eternal Son. He is above time and outside of time. He is the beginning. In fact, He was before the beginning. . . . He is the cohesive force, the glue and gravitational pull that holds all created elements together. . . . Remove [Jesus], and the entire universe disintegrates. . . . But there’s still more. . . .”<sup>9</sup>

“Where there was hostility, He brought peace. Where there was separation, He brought union. Where there was death, He brought life. . . . because of that hill, because of that blood, and because of that cross, you stand holy, spotless, blameless, without reproach and accusation in the sight of a holy God. Yet that’s not all.

“This [Jesus] created a new humanity, a new creation, a new race like Himself. That new humanity is His own body, a multi-membered creature we call the church . . . . It is bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh . . . . And this [Jesus] is the head, the authority, the source of that body. But wait. There is more.

“This [Jesus] triumphed over . . . death, the offspring of sin. He conquered its power, extinguished its sting, and dismantled the fear that was attached to it. Jesus Christ passed through death and came out in resurrection—and He is the first to return from the dead to never taste mortality again. But that’s not all.

“In His resurrection, this [Jesus]—the only begotten Son—shook off His chains, no longer bound by time and space. He became a ‘life-giving Spirit,’ the firstborn among many sisters and brothers—all of whom will be raised from the dead after Him.

“This glorious [Jesus] defeated death, the grave, the curse, the entire world system; He defeated sin, Satan, and all condemnation; He slew shame, He conquered guilt, and He shared His everlasting victory and towering triumph with you.

“Here is a [Savior] so grand and glorious that He is beyond the reaches of human comprehension. All things are in this Christ. All things are through this Christ. All things are for this Christ. And He has been given the first place in everything. . . . And this is the same Jesus you have today.”<sup>10</sup>

One of the best summaries I’ve ever heard that gathers all this together is the song, *He IS*, sung by the father-son duo Jeffrey and Aaron Benward:<sup>11</sup>

In Genesis, He’s the Breath of Life,  
 In Exodus, the Passover Lamb.  
 In Leviticus, He’s our High Priest,  
 In Numbers, the Fire by Night.  
 In Deuteronomy, He’s Moses’ Voice,

In Joshua, He’s Salvation’s Choice.  
 In Judges, He’s Law Giver,  
 In Ruth, Kinsman-Redeemer.  
 In Samuel, Our Trusted Prophet,  
 In Kings and Chronicles, Our Sovereign.

<sup>9</sup> Sweet & Viola, pp. 28-29.

<sup>10</sup> Sweet & Viola, pp. 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> Lyrics by Jeffrey Benward and Jeff Silvey, © Star Song, 1994;

<http://www.cmo.com/cmo/cmo/starsong/aj/aj.htm>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron\\_Jeffrey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron_Jeffrey).

In Ezra, True and Faithful Scribe,  
 In Nehemiah, Rebuilder of Broken Walls and Lives.  
 In Esther, He's Mordecai's Courage.  
 In Job, He's Timeless Redeemer.

In Psalms, He's Our Morning Song.  
 In Proverbs, He's Wisdom's Cry,  
 In Ecclesiastes, Our Time and Season;  
 In the Song of Songs, He's The Lover's Dream.

He is [in the Past], He Is [in the Present], HE IS [Our Risen Lord & Coming King]!

In Isaiah, He's Prince of Peace,  
 In Jeremiah, The Weeping Prophet.  
 In Lamentations, The Cry for Israel,  
 In Ezekiel, He's the Call from Sin;

In Daniel, He's the Stranger in the Fire.  
 In Hosea, He's Forever Faithful,  
 In Joel, He's the Spirit's Power.  
 In Amos, He's the Arms That Carry Us,  
 In Obadiah, He's the Lord our Savior.

In Jonah, He's The Great Missionary,  
 In Micah, The Promise of Our Peace.  
 In Nahum, He's Our Strength and Shield,  
 In Habakkuk and Zephaniah, He's a Call to Revival.

In Haggai, He Restores a Lost Heritage;  
 In Zechariah, He's Our Fountain.  
 In Malachi, He's the Son of Righteousness with Healing in His Wings.

### **He is, He Is, HE IS!**

In Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, He's God and Man, Messiah.  
 In Acts, He's Fire from Heaven.  
 In Romans, He's the Grace of God,  
 In Corinthians, He's the Power of Love.

In Galatians, He's Freedom from the Curse of Sin.  
 In Ephesians, He's Our Glorious Treasure,  
 In Philippians, The Servant's Heart.  
 In Colossians, He's the Glorious Trinity,  
 In Thessalonians, Our Coming King!

In Timothy, Titus, and Philemon He's Our Faithful Pastor,  
 In Hebrews, The Everlasting Covenant.  
 In James, He's The One Who Heals the Sick.  
 In Peter, He's Our Shepherd;  
 In John and Jude, He's the Lover Coming for His Bride.  
 In Revelation, He's King of kings and Lord of lords!

### **He is, He Is, HE IS!**

The Prince of Peace,  
The Son of Man,  
The Lamb of God,  
The great I AM!

He's the Alpha and Omega,  
Our God and our Savior,  
He is Jesus Christ the Lord.  
And when time is no more,  
**He is, He Is, HE IS!**

Here, then, is the conclusion of the matter: Jesus of Nazareth, "God's only Son, our Lord, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead."<sup>12</sup>

"May God [raise up] a people on this earth who are of Christ, through Christ, and for Christ: a people of the cross; a people consumed with an unvarnished [commitment] to make Christ preeminent, supreme, and the head over all things visible and invisible; a people who have discovered the touch of the Almighty in the face of His glorious Son, Jesus; a people who wish to know only Christ and Him crucified, and to let everything else fall [away]."<sup>13</sup>

"May God give us more people who have had a head-on collision with Jesus, who have caught a glimpse of His radiance, and who, as a result, can meld a group of people together with a living knowledge of their God in the face of Jesus Christ. May He raise up countless servants who can faithfully steward the divine mystery and turn it loose on the world."<sup>14</sup>

And this is the point from which we begin our journey with Jesus, the Lord Christ, in the weeks, months, and years that lie ahead. The Way of Jesus is a challenging Way, a perplexing Way, a Way much harder than we would prefer, a Way that judges our normal ways of doing things just as painfully as it judged the vendors in the Court of the Gentiles. But The Way of Jesus is also an encouraging Way, a Way of wonders, a Way of Hope; and He Himself will journey with us. Thanks be to God for this unspeakable Gift!

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<sup>12</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, A.D. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Sweet & Viola, p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> Sweet & Viola, p. 144.