

*"A clear and compelling vision to help us recapture our
call to center Jesus in all things."*

RICH VILLODAS

CENTERING JESUS

How the Lamb of God Transforms
Our Communities, Ethics & Spiritual Lives



DEREK VREELAND

To be a Christian is, literally, to be *of Christ*. But as every longtime Christian knows, our lives are not automatically oriented around Jesus, particularly in a culture, like ours, obsessed with self, dismissive of virtue, and liable to forget God entirely. Derek Vreeland's *Centering Jesus* is a timely and cogent call to refocus our eyes on Christ as the Lamb of God who calls us to witness to his peaceable Kingdom in faith, hope, and love. "Life is hard and humanity continues to invent new ways to compound the difficulties," Vreeland writes, "but I remain hopeful." In *Centering Jesus*, he ably invites readers to share in that hope.

BONNIE KRISTIAN, columnist at *Christianity Today* and author of *Untrustworthy* and *A Flexible Faith*

Living an authentic Christian life within the milieu of consumerism, militarism, and individualism so characteristic of Western culture is among the greatest spiritual challenges of modernity. It's not entirely unlike the challenge faced by the first Christians living in the context of the Roman Empire. Though the challenge is real, the Christian life should always be understood as the thrilling alternative to the world that it is. And this is what makes Derek Vreeland's new book so exciting and timely. *Centering Jesus* provides a series of trail markers for Christian pilgrims who seek to follow the Lamb in the way of life. This book will be an enormous help to all who are yearning for genuine spiritual transformation.

BRIAN ZAHND, author of *When Everything's on Fire*

I've seen Jesus paraded through political arenas like a warhorse. I've watched his name sparkle and fade on screens when celebrities take center stage and peddle his principles. But I've rarely seen Jesus like this—centered, unadorned, except with the glory that is due to the Lamb who sits on the throne. Vreeland cuts through the clutter and helps us catch a glimpse of the Jesus for whom we truly long—the Jesus who can center our lives in grace and peace.

TOMMY BROWN, author of *The Seven Money Types* and *The Ache for Meaning*

Derek Vreeland has named an important truth: Jesus has not been centered in the church's witness. Consequently, the credibility of the church has been severely compromised. But Vreeland doesn't just name this reality. He offers a way forward to help us recapture the beauty of life in Christ. The three-layered framework of spiritual formation, ethics, and our shared life together is a clear and compelling vision to help us recapture our call to center Jesus in all things. I highly recommend this book.

RICH VILLODAS, lead pastor of New Life Fellowship and author of *Good and Beautiful and Kind*

Who would worship a *lamb*? Understandably, we prefer stronger symbols to represent and shape our destinies: strength, power, and victory, not weakness, vulnerability, and sacrifice. Yet in *Centering Jesus*, Derek Vreeland reminds us that the Christian faith envisions a lamb at the center of the throne. Will we follow a God who comes to us not as a fighter but as a lamb? Vreeland writes winsomely, drawing from Scripture, theology, and church tradition to show us how we can behold and bow before the Lamb of God.

CATHERINE McNIEL, author of *Fearing Bravely*

When society finally bottoms out on self-defeating polarization and escalating violence, perhaps it will stop dismissing the reign of a lamb enthroned on a cross as naive and impracticable. Derek Vreeland believes some hearts have had enough and been plowed so deeply as to receive at last the one who sows peace for a harvest of justice. Counterintuitive, yes—but we've tried every alternative to death (literally). Where donkeys, elephants, and eagles inevitably fail, Derek offers us the Lamb who is the Light and Life of the world.

BRADLEY JERSAK, author of the More Christlike trilogy and dean of Theology & Culture at St. Stephen's University

The world is noisy and chaotic. It provokes competition instead of collaboration and hoarding rather than sharing. We constantly need help so that we can love God and others well. Derek Vreeland offers some assistance for living and loving as he weaves together theological ideas, biblical and historical lessons, and personal experiences, all with an astute awareness of contemporary culture, to put a spotlight on Jesus, the Lamb of God. Vreeland's wise, accessible, and thoughtful work gives readers practical guidance for living with Jesus as the center of all of life. *Centering Jesus* decreases the world's background noise and points out ways that we can establish some order from chaos.

DENNIS R. EDWARDS, dean of North Park Theological Seminary

In this politically charged moment marked by hostility, outrage, and division, the church often presents little more than an echo chamber of society. Derek helps the body of Christ retrieve a deeper and more centered allegiance—not in the shape of donkeys or elephants, but with a lamb at the center. He is a guide who has discovered life from the past and is passing it on to better our futures.

AJ SHERRILL, Anglican priest and author of *Being with God*

CENTERING JESUS

How the Lamb of God Transforms
Our Communities, Ethics & Spiritual Lives



DEREK VREELAND



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For Leo

May you grow to love and follow the Lamb

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FOREWORD



EARLY IN OUR MARRIAGE, my husband and I lived in a house serving as caretakers for the owners. The home was enormous and beautiful, with soaring glass windows that overlooked a private lake. We often joked that it was the nicest home we would ever live in (it was!), and its crowning jewel, displayed proudly in the center of the first floor, was an antique Steinway grand piano.

The piano was a classic black with real ivory keys. Whenever I slid onto the bench, I half expected Frank Sinatra to materialize beside me and croon. The piano was like a time capsule and a work of art all bound up in one, save for one notable exception: *the sound*. Although this piano was capable of producing transcendent notes, it had not been tuned in years. In its neglected state, the sound came out tinny, dissonant, and harsh.

This is the problem with musical instruments. No matter the quality of their materials, no matter the genius of the masters who crafted them, no matter how conscientiously they are stored, instruments drift. Without regular attention and care, their sound wanders, which is why they require constant retuning.

I occasionally think back on that piano because the human soul is so much the same. The early theologian Saint Augustine understood that every one of us is born *incurvatus in se*—“curved in on

ourselves”—until Jesus intervenes in our lives and unbends us, pointing our souls back toward our created end in him. Unfortunately, this is not a one-time fix. If we are left to ourselves, our souls will inevitably drift back to this inward-facing position. That is why we—like a fine musical instrument—must constantly be retuned to, and by, Christ.

However, it's not just our souls that need retuning. When I survey the state of the church right now—the division in our communities, the corruption in our leadership, the individualism in our theology, and the gleeful indulgence of our outrage—there is a jarring dissonance. It is clear to me that our discipleship needs retuning. Christlikeness is not, after all, the sort of thing one stumbles into. Without intentionality, without consistency, and without eyes fixed squarely on the Lamb of God, our souls, our methods, and our institutions will all naturally . . . *drift*.

That is why this book is so important. The message of *Centering Jesus* is a clarion call to radically and dramatically recenter our lives—and our churches—around Jesus, not because we have abandoned him, but because we have crowded him. We cannot possibly tune our souls to Christ amid a cacophony of competing allegiances.

When we fail to center Jesus, we *will* center something or someone else, and I have lived the anxiety and insecurity of that misplaced focus. But I have also experienced the chain-breaking freedom of centering my gaze on Christ alone, which is why I was so eager to write this foreword. Both Derek and I desperately want the same freedom for you.

Sharon Hodde Miller
pastor and author of *The Cost of Control*

PRELUDE



I RECENTLY WATCHED *ReMastered: Tricky Dick and the Man in Black*, the 2018 documentary about Richard Nixon’s invitation to Johnny Cash to perform at the White House in 1970. Nixon wanted to endear himself to white, middle-class America, and he saw Johnny Cash as a way to do that. Cash had released his popular live album *At Folsom Prison* in 1968, and middle America was watching *The Johnny Cash Show* on television. Cash was experiencing a surge in national popularity. Nixon asked Cash to sing familiar country-western songs, but the ever-unpredictable Johnny Cash chose to sing the socially provocative song “What Is Truth,” which expressed sympathy for a younger generation asking questions about war. America had closed the door on the 1960s, but civil unrest lingered into the 1970s. War protesters still filled the streets. The war in Vietnam had split the country in two. Governmental leaders, including the president of the United States, were being questioned. The implementation of civil rights policies, including desegregation, was still experiencing backlash. People were angry. Movements of women seeking equal treatment in the workplace and at home continued to challenge social norms. An unsettled tension filled the air. While Johnny Cash stood in the White House prophetically singing about the “lonely voice of youth,”¹ America was experiencing a time of unrest.

The fracture America experienced around the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s continues to creak and crack today. America is still divided. Political leaders are still being held in suspicion. We are still questioning the proper response to racial injustice. The voices of women experiencing abuse continue to fight to be heard. Life in post-pandemic America feels even more uncertain and divided than it did before. Civil discord about legislative policies and public health continues. Vitriol has become the accepted norm, and a clamoring to express our opinions by subjugating and lampooning the views of the other side is now considered acceptable public discourse. Our culture prizes moral outrage over the common good and slanderous rhetoric over common sense. Many of us feel bewildered and exhausted. The illusive silent majority has become the worn-down, weary majority, and we don't know whom to trust. Civic leaders have shown themselves untrustworthy. Business leaders with their eyes on the financial bottom line cannot be trusted. Christian leaders in both evangelical megachurches and established traditional churches continue to disappoint us, leading to a loss of their credibility. Our educational system produces highly educated people whose moral compass is set and reset by social-media trends. Where are we to turn?

I feel somewhat like the disciples of Jesus when, like the crowd around them, they felt bewildered after Jesus talked about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Many of the crowd turned their backs on Jesus and walked away. Jesus asked his disciples if they wanted to walk away too. Peter responded, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). My instinct during times of confusion and uncertainty has not been so much to push away from Jesus as to draw near to him. I agree with Peter. Where else are we to go? My earliest memories of religion and talk about God were about Jesus. I have been captivated by Jesus since I was a teenager, and amid our uncertainty and division, I am convinced that centering our attention on Jesus is the anchor our souls need.

My desire to write about Jesus comes from the sense of wonder that I still feel in my bones when I reflect on his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. In my pursuit of him, I have been an avid Bible reader, though my consistency in daily Bible reading has ebbed and flowed. Nevertheless, I have lived my adult Christian life close to the words of Scripture. The Bible is, after all, our sacred and inspired text. The Bible is best read as an overarching story with Jesus as the main character. It's inspired truth telling, and it's the most trusted written source we have to see who Jesus is. We do encounter Jesus through prayer and through our participation in the sacraments, but none of those experiences diminish our encounters with Jesus when we open the sacred text.

A few years ago, my daily Bible reading had me in Revelation, perhaps the trickiest New Testament book to read and interpret. As I have taught this book in small groups and in sermons, I often advise people to keep their eyes on Jesus as they are reading through what feels like a stream of consciousness with its moving and fantastic visions and sounds unfolding throughout the text. The opening lines describe the purpose of the book: “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1). The book at the end of the New Testament is doing what all Scripture is intended to do—reveal Jesus to us.

My habit over the last few years has been to read through the two-year Daily Office Lectionary readings in a particular translation and then start reading through a new translation when a new two-year cycle begins. One day in late fall before the start of the season of Advent, I was reading from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) in Revelation when I encountered these words: “The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd” (Revelation 7:17). I paused after reading these words because this seemed like fresh language to me. Other translations (such as the KJV, CEB, and ESV) describe the Lamb as being “in the midst of the throne,” but the NRSV describes the Lamb as seated in the *center*.

That image lingered in my imagination.

The center.

The Lamb at the center.

As I continued to dwell on that image, I thought, *That is what we need in these unsettled days—the Lamb at the center.* With all the hostility boiling just under the surface of our world, we need a renewed vision of Jesus as the Lamb of God who can lead us in the peaceable ways of the Kingdom. We need renewed practices of centering Jesus in our hearts and minds. With the deep divide in American culture and the polarization that continues to grow, we need a renewed focus on the Lamb, that we might blaze a path forward into civility and kindness.

That next January, I led an online small group entitled “The Lamb at the Center,” where I fleshed out these ideas with a few people over nine or ten weeks. This group met during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, while many people were homebound. Conversations in that small group formed the structure of this book.

In the following pages, we will imagine together what it looks like to keep Jesus as the Lamb of God at the center of three key areas of our lives—our spiritual formation, our moral lives, and our common life together. Spiritual formation is the work the Holy Spirit does to form us into the image of Jesus. We participate with the Spirit by walking down certain spiritual pathways; particularly for evangelical Christians, those pathways have been Scripture reading and prayer. Centering Jesus in our reading of Scripture and in our life of prayer has become indispensable to healthy Christian spirituality and growth. Our moral lives form the foundation from which we make ethical decisions. We choose what we do and what we say (both in person and on social media) based on who we are. If we are to be Christlike people, then we need a moral center endowed by the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Our common life together underscores God’s design for us to live in community—both Christian community and civic society. We need Jesus at the center of our life of congregational

worship if the church is to be an alternative society distinct from the division we see in the world. Additionally, if we are to advocate for justice and participate in the topsy-turvy world of political discourse, we need a perspective grounded and centered on King Jesus. This book offers a process for centering Jesus.

Chapter 1 describes the problems we experience when the Lamb is obscured from our view. Chapter 2 walks us through some of the key biblical descriptions of the Lamb. From there we envision the Lamb at the center of those three key areas of our lives mentioned previously. Chapters 3 through 5 walk us through imagining the Lamb at the center of our life of spiritual formation, whereby we discover the Lamb at the center of our prayer life, our devotion to Scripture, and our lived spirituality. Chapters 6 through 8 describe a Lamb-shaped and Jesus-centered approach to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love, the foundation of our moral lives. Chapters 9 through 11 lead us through an exploration of the Lamb at the center of our common life together, specifically our worship life, our participation in acts of justice, and our political life. Chapter 12 returns to where we started by envisioning the reigning Lamb in John's revelation.

Each chapter opens with a prayer from *The Book of Common Prayer*. Most of these prayers are collects (pronounced “call-ects”). These are traditional prayers prayed on Sunday mornings during worship gatherings. They are prayers I have grown to appreciate and incorporate in my daily prayers. Before you begin reading a new chapter, I invite you to pray the corresponding prayer out loud. As you read, I pray that you rediscover this ancient and central image of Jesus as the Lamb of God and that in following the Lamb together, we might embody the ways of the Lamb. I believe Jesus is still the hope of the world. He is the reigning Lamb of God who has conquered sin, evil, and death itself. In the words of the Moravian hymn:

*Our Lamb has conquered: let us follow him.*²

The church in North America continues to face criticism and a loss of credibility at a time of deep division and cultural instability. One way to rebuild the church's reputation is by devoting ourselves to centering Jesus in all we do. This book is dedicated to that aim. May the God of peace grant you peace as you read.

Derek Vreeland

GOOD FRIDAY 2022

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE DIMINISHING LAMB

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

A COLLECT, FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT,
THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

I'LL BE HONEST. I have very little firsthand experience with lambs, sheep, or any livestock, for that matter. I grew up in a suburban neighborhood in the 1980s and early 1990s with pickup games of basketball, cable TV, and mixtapes. The only farm animals I remember seeing were on TV. The closest I ever came to farm life was in high school when I would go with my then girlfriend, now wife, to her grandparents' farm on a breezy hill in northwest Missouri. Visits to the farm brought up childhood nostalgia for my wife. She has such fond memories of her grandparents. Her grandfather had been a hog farmer, but he had long been retired by the time I made my first visit to the farm. The hogs were long gone, but the pungent smell they left behind still filled the midwestern air when we visited. On our way there, we would often pass cows and horses but never sheep or goats.

It wasn't until I grew up and became a pastor that I had the opportunity to experience livestock up close. Every year at our Christmas Eve candlelight service, our church has a live nativity with animals. We have camels, sheep, and if we are lucky, a newborn lamb. One year the family who brings the animals from Oklahoma to our church in Missouri brought a little lamb with them. During the service, costume-clad shepherds led real sheep onto the platform, and a young teenage shepherd carried the lamb in her arms. She sat near the stable on our small set with the lamb on her lap, cuddled in her arms.

Backstage before the service began, the lively lamb innocently and inquisitively explored. On the platform during the service, the lamb, still ever lively, tried to wiggle free from the arms of its teenage shepherd very much like a toddler who was ready to get down and play. As I watched from the front row, I imagined what would happen if that little lamb started running up and down the platform. My heart started to race as I feared the distraction this little lamb could create in the middle of our sacred Christmas Eve service.

My oldest son, all six feet four inches of him, served as one of the shepherds that year and was on the platform when all this was happening. Seeing that the lamb was about to wiggle free from the unsuspecting teenage shepherd, he reached down to take control of our rambunctious little lamb, right as the wise men walked up the platform to present their gifts to baby Jesus. He took hold of the lamb, tucking its miniature legs under its body and holding it close to his chest. Had my son not intervened, my worst fear may have come true. It didn't take much effort for my son to keep the lamb still. He just needed to employ the proper leg-tucking technique. Up against my son and held within his grip, the lamb surrendered and was completely powerless. The suddenly docile lamb looked cute and cuddly. Under a restrictive grip, our little lamb was an unassuming character in our live nativity.

The image of a lamb doesn't evoke feelings of confidence or strength. Sports fans will never hear an announcer say, "Ladies and

gentlemen, put your hands together to welcome the mighty Fighting Lambs!” Sports teams want mascots who portray a triumphant persona to form a rallying point for their teams. Plenty of teams proudly go with rams as their mascot, conveying a kind of rugged strength and determination, but none have lamb mascots. Schools and universities want an image to excite their fan base and create a competitive edge. We see bulls, mustangs, broncos, razorbacks, gamecocks, and even ducks (I don’t understand that one, University of Oregon fans!), but we never see lambs. Little lambs are simply too harmless and cute to be a team mascot. Despite the cultural aversion to lambs as a symbol of strength and honor, Christians have been given that very image as one of the primary descriptions of Jesus, our reigning Savior and King.

Christians have proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God from the beginning. Images of the Lamb have appeared in Christian art since at least the sixth century. The Lamb of God (Latin: *Agnus Dei*) served as an ancient Christian symbol proclaiming the reigning King of kings and Lord of lords in the most humble and unassuming way. Artisans have crafted versions of Jesus as a lamb in stonework, paintings, mosaics, and stained glass. One of the oldest Lamb of God mosaics remaining today flies high above the heads of onlookers at the Italian Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, north of Rome along the Adriatic Sea.¹



This mosaic appears on the vaulted ceiling, centered above the altar. Ancient craftsmen encircled the lamb mosaic with a wreath denoting the victory of the Lamb. Four angels surround the wreath with hands extending as if they are holding up the Lamb of God. While a victory wreath encircles the Lamb of God in San Vitale, later versions depict the Lamb of God holding a banner bearing a cross. The Moravian Church uses that version of the Lamb of God as their official emblem. Surrounding the banner-bearing lamb is the phrase “Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.”²



The church has included the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God in Christian worship at least since the seventh century, when the liturgical chant “Agnus Dei” was added to Roman Catholic worship. Liturgical churches, such as Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and others, include prayers and hymns to the Lamb of God. The Great Litany in the Anglican tradition ends with these words:

O Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;

Have mercy upon us.

O Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;

Grant us your peace.

O Christ, hear us.

O Christ, hear us.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Christ, have mercy upon us.

*Lord, have mercy upon us.*³

Liturgical congregations are not the only churches incorporating the imagery of the Lamb in their prayers and worship. Evangelical, nondenominational, and Pentecostal/charismatic Christians have been singing “Revelation Song” since Kari Jobe made it popular in 2009. Inspired by images of the Lamb in the book of Revelation, the song opens by praising God using lines from John’s vision: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain.”⁴ Christians in both traditional and contemporary churches have worshiped Jesus as the Lamb of God, but sadly, a culture that prizes power and pragmatism has dimmed the light on this central image of Jesus. Too many followers of Jesus have lost sight of the Lamb, and in doing so have forgotten the peaceable nature of God’s Kingdom.

The church has been inflicted with several diseases. We are divided and unhealthy, unable to be a viable agent of healing to our society. The symptoms are multiple, but I will outline four that I see:

1. The autonomous thinking self pervades the church as a result of people absorbing the enlightenment ideals of America’s founders.
2. Militant masculinity has created toxic church cultures led by men who are more shaped by Hollywood violence than the slain Lamb of God.

3. The church's addiction to antagonism has turned the robust body of Christ into a raving and sickly body plagued by infighting.
4. These divisions in the church leave us without a credible witness in the restless culture.

We need to understand these symptoms and why they're happening if we are to have hope for healing. So let's look at each of them here. As we do, we'll better see what kind of cure we need and what the hope of Jesus really looks like.

THE AUTONOMOUS THINKING SELF

The American founders fashioned the American experiment using the framework of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, where “enlightened” Europeans elevated the individual's ability to reason on their own for the sake of their own interests. This orientation toward the self—toward prioritizing one's own comfort and happiness—occupies a sacred place in American culture, and unfortunately, it has infiltrated the church. Elevation of the individual's ability to think on their own is called the *autonomous thinking self*. This fusion of American-Enlightenment ideals with the values of God's Kingdom is an example of syncretism, a blending of ideas and values from different sources. Syncretism pollutes God's message with falsehoods and causes us to lose our way in our pursuit of God's Kingdom. And it's nothing new.

The silent seduction of syncretism has always been a temptation for the people of God. When we merge the values of the culture around us with the values of God's Kingdom, we look less like God's people and more like the people of a particular culture. The story of Israel reveals our tendency to allow the values of the surrounding culture to seep in and distort our identity as people who worship the one

true living God. Resisting the pagan values of nearby people remained a generation-after-generation challenge for the children of Abraham. The God of Israel gave them the law because they were to be a distinct people who belonged to the one true Creator, “a people for his treasured possession” (Deuteronomy 26:18, *ESV*). God intended the law to form his people into a unique community marked by proper worship and acts of justice—that is, if the Israelites complied.

Yet repeatedly the story of Israel records how often they were influenced by other tribes and nations to worship foreign gods. Their idolatry inevitably led to injustice and immorality as they began to take on the posture and practices of their pagan neighbors. As the Israelites conformed to the image of the peoples around them, they ceased to look like the peculiar people of the God who led them out of slavery in Egypt. Eventually, because of their disobedience, God allowed them to be carried off into exile. Yet that wasn’t the end of Israel’s story. Many of Abraham’s descendants, looking to build a new home in Babylon, kept their distinctiveness as the people of God by remaining Jewish and resisting the cultural pressure to become Babylonian. They worshiped the God of Israel as the creator of all things, and they allowed the law of Moses to shape them. They maintained their unique identity as the holy people of God as they built houses, planted vineyards, got married, and had children in Babylon.

For the church today, as the new-covenant people of God made up of Jews and Gentiles, we are a multiethnic “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9, *ESV*). And we face a similar temptation as ancient Israel. The temptation to absorb the cultural values around us deforms us from people who look like Jesus to people who look like secular, twenty-first-century Americans. We who love God and are called according to God’s purposes are being conformed into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28-29). But without Jesus as the Lamb of God at the center of lives, we become more individualistic, more consumeristic, and more

interested in the pursuit of happiness than the principles of biblical justice. Without centering Jesus, we embolden the autonomous thinking self. *We* rule our lives instead of Jesus.

With the autonomous thinking self displacing the Lamb at the center of life and faith, we Christians trust ourselves instead of the Spirit. We lean into the desires of our hearts more than the desires God has for us. We pursue the agendas *we* devise to build the kind of lives that we believe will make us happy. We let the Lamb out to pasture while we stay in the kitchen cooking up what we want. We quickly develop a me-centered approach to Bible reading, where we look to apply select verses to our individual lives. When we do pray, we ask God for what we want. How would people overwhelmed by the influence of individualism and consumerism know anything different? Self-centered people pray self-centered prayers. Our entire spirituality becomes driven *by* the self and *for* the self. We choose which spiritual practices we want to engage in based on how they make us feel. In the end, without the Lamb at the center of our Christian imagination, we find ourselves in a spirituality that uses Christian imagery but works for each isolated individual, one that the modern secular world finds sensible. This kind of pragmatic spirituality replaces faith, hope, and love with me, myself, and I. Centering ourselves on Jesus as the Lamb causes us to bow the knee of our self-understanding to the knowledge of God revealed in the beauty and brightness of King Jesus. With Jesus exalted, we humble ourselves that we may be lifted up (see James 4:10, NLT).

A MILITANT MASCULINITY

A few years ago I led a two-day retreat for some Christian men. We withdrew from our families after work on Friday and took a twenty-four-hour break from our normal day-to-day activities. We met at a Christian retreat center for prayer, conversations, and moments of reflection on living as men echoing the teachings of Jesus. We had

great discussions about what it looks like to understand our own sense of masculinity in light of the way of Jesus.

We agreed that we don't want to be a bunch of *dudes*, allowing American cultural images of masculinity to shape our hearts. Neither do we want to take up the convoluted attempts of “biblical masculinity” (because, honestly, there are plenty of men in the Bible we do not want to emulate). We talked about what it would look like to be men like Jesus. *Christian* masculinity was our collective aim. We wanted a masculinity forged in strength, but we wanted to experience a lamb-like strength, the kind of strength marked by self-sacrifice, humility, meekness, and the courage to stand up to bullies in the power of non-retaliation, like Jesus on the cross. I walked away from that retreat realizing that the lack of the Lamb of God in our discipleship makes it far too easy for toxic forms of masculinity to find their way into our churches. Large segments of Christian men—particularly white men within American evangelicalism—have prized what historian Kristin Du Mez calls a “militant masculinity” by idolizing rugged male heroes from television shows and movies. In her book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, she explains:

Although [John] Wayne occupies a prominent place in the pantheon of evangelical heroes, he is but one of many rugged and even ruthless icons of masculinity that evangelicals imbued with religious significance. Like Wayne, the heroes who best embodied militant Christian masculinity were those unencumbered by traditional Christian virtues. In this way, militant masculinity linked religious and secular conservatism, helping to secure an alliance with profound political ramifications. For many evangelicals, these militant heroes would come to define not only Christian manhood but Christianity itself.⁵

As a white Christian man who was raised within American evangelicalism, I understand the draw of militant masculinity. I grew up on action movies from the 1980s, and characters portrayed by Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger shaped my masculine imagination around images of violence and power. Regrettably I have too easily allowed these action-movie stars to overtake my understanding of Christian manhood, eclipsing the standard of Christian masculinity—Christ Jesus himself!

Men in the church in North America need to have conversations like the one from our two-day retreat because masculinity is being questioned and reimagined these days. The cultural emergence of the abuse and pain caused by toxic masculinity has brought needed scrutiny to not only manhood in general but also Christian manhood. Sexual abuse scandals among leaders in the Catholic church and various evangelical churches have crushed lives and tarnished the beauty of the gospel.

Sadly, in pockets of the church, too many discussions regarding masculinity have echoed the cartoonish and brutish forms of militant masculinity. A few years ago I saw a men's conference video ad featuring fast-moving images of MMA fighters, men shooting automatic weapons, and monster trucks crushing cars. I understand the thinking behind the marketing ploy, and I'm sure they had an arena full of men. I just wondered about the Christian men who weren't attracted to such images of masculinity. Did they attend but feel unseen? Or did they look for a men's conference that better aligned with the kind of masculinity Jesus displayed? I also questioned whether violent imagery allows toxic masculinity to creep into our understanding of what it means to be a Christian man. I'm afraid it does.

The image of Jesus as the Lamb of God reshapes our Christian understanding of masculinity and resists the tough-guy, street-fighter, militant image that so many Christian men have flocked to over the last fifty years. Christian masculinity is forged in strength and struggle, but not the kind of strength that lacks emotional health or empathy.

It's the kind of strength that rejects violence and oppression. Jesus told his disciples: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But *it is not so among you*" (Mark 10:42-43, emphasis added). Worldly male leaders then and now know how to use their authority to accomplish tasks. They shut down compassion and vulnerability; put on tough, unflinching faces; and use their authority to push people around. Jesus rejected those kinds of toxic leadership practices. If we collectively forget that Jesus reigns and rules as a slaughtered lamb, we too easily adopt toxic forms of leadership and masculinity. When we work on centering Jesus as the Lamb of God, the stain of militant masculinity is washed clean, freeing men to become more Christlike.

AN ADDICTION TO ANTAGONISM

At the heart of militant masculinity is not a lamb but a lust for power. Without the image of the Lamb, our vision of Jesus easily gets distorted by our attraction to power and control. The idolatry of power corrupts us by causing us to believe the false assumption that the rich and powerful win the game of life. With a power-centric life, Jesus too easily becomes the means by which we secure the power to do what we want. Economic, political, or social power as an idol produces enough moral pollution of its own, but there is a deeper problem.

The haunting truth is that behind the worship of power lies an addiction to antagonism, a multifaceted hostility that seems to rumble and reverberate throughout American culture. According to theologian David Fitch, "Social political life in autonomy from God runs on antagonism."⁶ Far from the idealistic dreams of a society held together by "unalienable Rights," "the pursuit of Happiness," and "liberty and justice for all," American democracy is currently driven by the antagonism formed between rich and poor, urban dwellers and country

folks, blue states and red states—antagonisms formed by competing views of freedom, justice, and opportunity.⁷ Meaningless slogans try to hide the antagonisms, but they remain just below the surface of American life.⁸ Political campaigns promote “change,” “better days,” or “greatness,” but these tawdry slogans cover up the truth—in the broken American political system, political gains are secured by cut-throat competition that involves demonizing the other to promote one’s own political ideals.

While antagonisms can regrettably spill over into physical violence, they are normally expressed in angry rhetoric, with words chosen as weapons. Both violence and hostile words reveal the sickness of this present age. Jesus radically extended the moral imperative from “You shall not murder” to “if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22). Words intended to harm others remain off the table for followers of Jesus just as much as physical weapons used to inflict physical harm. The great influence of Jesus and the church’s witness to his life-affirming teachings have suppressed this addiction to antagonism. But domination, exploitation, and acts of rhetorical violence remain with us. We may not literally kill our enemies, but our modern world—particularly our dicey political world—is hooked on the high that comes from slandering our enemies.

Renewing our vision of Jesus as the Lamb rescues us from the addiction to antagonism because as we focus our attention on the peaceable Lamb, we are conformed to that image. We become like that which we behold. We grow into the image we gaze on. We are formed into the person we focus on. We desperately need Jesus as the Lamb at the center of our lives if we are going to preserve the faith and pass it on to the next generation. But we need the real Jesus. We need Immanuel, God with us. We don’t need a reinterpreted Jesus, but the one born of the Virgin Mary, the one who suffered under Pontius Pilate. We need the Jesus who was crucified, died, and was buried. We need the Jesus who rose on the third day and ascended

to the right hand of the Father.⁹ We need Jesus, specifically as the Lamb of God.

Jesus rules and reigns but not in the way of modern rulers. Jesus does not rule by stirring up more antagonism but by flipping the table on hostility. Jesus rules as a lamb not by coercive and manipulative power, but by love. David Fitch adds, “Jesus does not create enemies, but he does disrupt the enemy-making machine and, by doing so, reveals those who love being enemies.”¹⁰ Jesus renders useless the enemy-making apparatus and rescues us from the antagonisms that fuel our world. Without the predominance of the Lamb in our churches, antagonisms have room to breathe and can take root in the lives of God’s people. With the Lamb at the center, we can truly love one another within the church and practice a kind of love and civility that brings healing and peace to our broken and hostile world.

A DIVIDED CHURCH

Jesus has been building the church into a community of healing where mercy is cultivated for the sake of the world, but when we give antagonisms a foothold in our churches, we become a tribal, enemy-making machine. Sadly this kind of tribalism has taken over congregations in the US. Americans have created divided tribes identified by whom they are against. Jesus came as our peaceable, lamb-like Shepherd, breaking down “the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Ephesians 2:14), but the church itself has rebuilt that wall and restored the hostility Jesus came to save us from. When we lose sight of the Lamb, we lose our peace, and then local churches entrench themselves in a tribal warfare where they are known more for what they are against than for what they are for.

The Protestant Reformation, which began in the sixteenth century, was inevitable. The church in Western Europe had become corrupt, so Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door

of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, marking a watershed moment in the history of the Protestant church. Luther wanted a theological debate; what he got was a revolution. The movement sparked by Luther in Germany spread throughout Europe, erupting in new protest movements. These new Protestant traditions, including the Anabaptist radical reformers, brought new life to the church, elevating the sacred nature of Scripture and restoring King Jesus to the throne. But what began as one fracture in the Western church turned into thousands of fractures, particularly as the gospel spread through North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So while we rejoice in the attempts at reformation, we also lament the ongoing fracturing of the church.

Today churches in the US divide over not only doctrine, like in the Reformation, but also ethnicity, worship styles, politics, methodology, leadership, traditions, and, at times, ego and pride. Fitch describes how warring church tribes wave metaphorical banners. Slogans like “biblical truth” and “biblical values” get waved around, but they are often little more than empty slogans that sound Christian but are vacant of meaning.¹¹ The truth and values we derive from the Bible must be clearly defined, otherwise our sacred Scriptures get weaponized. Verses are removed from their respective contexts and launched as missiles to destroy tribes who are “obviously” wrong and violating “biblical truth.” Holy Scripture is too sacred to be reduced to bullets in our theological guns. Scanning the Bible for a verse or two that helps prove our point of view undermines the purpose of Scripture: to bear witness to Jesus, the living and reigning Word of God. Without the Lamb as our Shepherd, we sheep go to war with one another, fueling the “us versus them” mentality in present-day American culture.

When the Lamb disappears from our eyes, the light of Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17 grows dim. For the disciples then and for us now, Jesus prayed, “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that

you have sent me” (John 17:21). Jesus wants the church to experience a oneness similar to the unity the Holy Trinity experiences. But our contentious spirit delays Jesus’ prayerful vision from becoming actualized on earth. With Jesus back at the center, we have hope for a united church where we love one another with brotherly affection despite our denominational differences.

In the face of radical individualism, militant masculinity, rapidly spreading antagonisms, and a fractured church, we need King Jesus who rules and reigns as the Lamb of God. We desperately need the Lamb of God at the center of our lives. We need an overhauled imagination where we begin to imagine Jesus conquering not by slaying his enemies but by being slain. We need to see Jesus with fresh eyes, envisioning him as “the Lamb who was slaughtered before the world was made” (Revelation 13:8, NLT). When we catch a glimpse of this Lamb of God, we will begin to see all these symptoms—our autonomy, our view of masculinity, our antagonisms, our division—in a new light. When we see the Lamb who was slain, all these things will be put in their rightful place. And we will find ourselves becoming the people God has created us to be. So we turn our eyes now to behold the Lamb.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your experience with farm animals?
2. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you imagine Jesus as a lamb?
3. What do we lose if we lose sight of Jesus as the Lamb of God?
4. What damage can happen to our faith if we place ourselves instead of Jesus at the center of our lives?
5. How can Jesus serve as the remedy to militant masculinity?
6. Have you personally experienced the hostility and antagonisms in our world? If so, what was that experience like?
7. Have you experienced a church conflict? How was that situation resolved?
8. What is one thing you can do to center your faith on Jesus as the Lamb of God?