

For the One

Voices from The One Project



one project

Edited by Nathan Brown with Alex Bryan and Japhet De Oliveira

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Jesus. All.

Introducing The One Project

Japhet De Oliveira

Everything in my life was called into question. My dreams shattered. My hopes squashed. My energy depleted. I had lost my “super powers” of invincibility. I really never thought I would have had to face the dreaded C-word—“cancer.” I had surgery to remove my thyroid, followed by a blast of radiation that re-set my clock. If I do not die within the next 50 years from something else, the cancer will come back and wipe me out.

This experience threw me into a spiral of complex questions and scenarios. What if you knew you would die tomorrow? What video messages would you record for your family? Who are your friends? What did you not do? Of course, bubbling underneath was the hardest questions we all crave answers to when we’re faced with a crisis: Why? and Why me?

Recovery was slower than I hoped. A month after my treatment, I had barely enough energy to show up at Pioneer Memorial Church for Thursday Chapel and watch Alex Bryan speak for the Week of Prayer at Andrews University. This turned out to be one in a series of miracles that changed my life. I heard the voice of Jesus through Alex.

Alex and I connected and formed an instant friendship, talking about all kinds of things related to faith. Nine months later, after several of these conversations, we called five friends to join us for a two-day “retreat” in room 602 of the Holiday Inn in Denver, Colorado. Tim Gillespie, Sam Leonor, and Terry Swenson all flew in. Dany Hernandez (in Florida) and Eddie Hypolite (in London) joined us by Skype and phone, as their respective time zones permitted.

We read the Bible together. We read the same books. We prayed. We

fasted. We met for fellowship and honest conversation about the issues that mattered most to us—primarily our profound need for more.

I honestly can't remember the exact moment that the significance of our conversations sank in for all of us. Maybe it was when Terry asked us to share the stories that had brought us together. Maybe it was when Alex lifted us in song with "Jesus Loves Me This I Know." Perhaps when we laughed or cried like little children, when the red-lettered words of Jesus leapt out of the Bible like live embers into our dry wooden hearts and ignited once again the relentless passion for Jesus. But everything came together when Tim stopped the rapid-fire conversation suddenly and said, "Jesus (period) All (period)."

Jesus. All.

We realized in that moment—as Gabe Lyons in his book, *The Next Christians*, challenges readers—that we must, "recover the Gospel, . . . relearn and fall in love again with that historic, beautiful, redemptive, faithful, demanding, reconciling, all-powerful, restorative, atoning, grace-abounding, soul-quenching, spiritually fulfilling good news of God's love,"¹ as expressed in Jesus.

Herein is the clincher for me: The Father sends us the Holy Spirit (see John 14). The Holy Spirit points us to Jesus (see John 15). And Jesus points us to the Father (see John 14). Do you see that endless circle in the Trinity? Father lifts up the Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit lifts up Jesus, Jesus lifts up the Father, Father to Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit to Jesus, Jesus to Father. When we see Jesus, it is because of the Holy Spirit. Then, by seeing Jesus we actually see the Father.

Jesus. All.

Jesus is in the whole Bible—Old and New Testaments. Every story teaches us about the nature of Jesus through His love and mercy. Even the genealogies teach us about the progression of humanity and the intervention of Jesus in our future.

My personal theology for The One Project, for my local church

community “One Place,” and for my life, is embedded in the stories of Jesus found in Luke 15: everyone matters! But the breadth and depth of this truth are found in the entirety of Scripture. Hope, joy community—all in Jesus. They lead to the beauty that we are not alone.

I believe we all wish to hear the voice of Jesus in our lives. I cannot tell you enough how I know that is possible, real, palpable and tangible for all. That it is seen when you fall in love with Jesus because there is no other name that saves (see Acts 4).

Jesus. All.

It was with this re-kindled love for Jesus, this all-consuming reliance on Jesus, this indescribable quest to know more of Jesus, that we set up The One Project. Our mantra is “Jesus. All.” and our mission is to “celebrate the supremacy of Jesus within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” We vowed to meet at least once a year for a “gathering.” It would not be a summit, a conference, a symposium or a retreat. Rather, focusing on our experience in Denver, we felt we had found a void in our journey and the “gathering” would provide the much-needed space for us to hear the voice of Jesus.

These gatherings have grown and developed to include three essential elements:

1. Reflection: Our messages—such as those collected in this book—are limited to 18 minutes to articulate one stimulating reflection on Jesus.

2. Response: A live opportunity to question and engage for extra clarity with the Reflection.

3. Recalibrate: Most of our time is spent in dialogue with each other. It is here that we wrestle with application for ourselves, as well as for our local and global community. It is here that we have the hard, honest conversations about our heritage, legacy and trajectory.

These three elements mingled with physical and mental space help us to embrace “Jesus. All.” Jesus still talks to us today.

I honestly, believe that the desire for these gatherings all over the world is—as Tim Gillespie shared with me once—“a sacred echo” that has been heard. We are all inextricably linked together in Jesus. We might have

once believed that we were like Elijah, all alone, until Jesus reminded us that He has “thousands” more of us out there. Our joy is to “gather” together and build networks that make a difference.

What follows in these pages are the first messages from men and women who honestly, want nothing more than to lift up Jesus.

Jesus. All.

1. Gabe Lyons (2010), *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America*, Doubleday Books, page 192.

For the One

Introducing this book

Nathan Brown

The One Project changed my life,” she said bluntly. “I was thinking the church thing just wasn’t for me but that was turned around and now I am involved again, with new enthusiasm and focus.”

We were sharing a meal in a restaurant on the other side of the country, two friends of mine from different cities who had only just met each other—but had quickly found something, Some One, in common.

The second friend had a similar story. “A group of us from my church went to The One Project last year and came home wanting to share this with our church community,” she said. “This has re-oriented our whole church. The young people who were part of our group have stepped up into leadership roles and the older people have been so supportive, as well as appreciating what we have added to our church life.”

When people ask me what The One Project is about, I used to try to give a brief overview of the history, theology and format of The One Project gatherings. If you ask me that question today, I would introduce you to my friends Lidia and Lesleigh—or, at least, tell you a little of their stories. I could also tell you stories of other friends and the initiatives they have taken in response to the call to make Jesus all, to celebrate His supremacy in the Adventist church and to serve Him in their communities.

Similar stories were my first connection to The One Project. In mid-2011, a number of friends who had been part of the first gathering in Atlanta urged me to connect with The One Project as a new and important thing happening within the church. What I found was a song that resonated in my heart and mind, calling our church to re-focus on the Jesus to whom the church and our lives rightly belong.

The One Project is one of the best and most important conversations

happening in the Adventist church today. Because it is about Jesus. Because it draws on the best of our Adventist history and heritage. Because it grows out of a passion for our church, its progress and its vitality. Because it models a kind of conversation that moves beyond polarization and politicking. Because it is prompting people to serve others in real and practical ways. Because it is making a difference in the life of our church and the lives of many of my friends.

And these are all good reasons for this book, collecting some key pieces of this conversation over the past three years. But the pre-eminent reason and motivation must always be Jesus Himself.

Jesus . . .

Familiar Friend but always and surprisingly unfamiliar.

Son of God who preferred to describe Himself as Son of Man.

Suffering Servant, crucified Criminal and kingdom's King.

An actual, verifiable historical figure who calls us to His certain future.

An ancient myth—in resurrected reality, alive and true today.

His name a swear word that “will be the hope of all the world” (Matthew 12:21, NLT).

Founder of a movement He would barely recognize, likely criticize, but love nonetheless.

Ever-present “God with us,” but so often achingly, disappointingly absent.

Blessed hope that transforms today.

Beginning with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, subject of countless books, with this another—important, inadequate and incomplete though it be.

Jesus. All. But by no means is this all of Jesus.

For some readers, this book might read like a “Greatest Hits” album from your favourite musicians. For others, this might be your first introduction to The One Project conversations. Wherever you are with this, we hope this book encourages you to connect and re-connect with Jesus, shining in and through, on and sometimes despite the context of Seventh-day Adventist faith.

As a collection of edited sermons given at different times by a number of presenters in various places, there are some inevitable overlaps and gaps, differences of perspective, style and tone, residual elements of spoken delivery, and a limited capacity to trace the growth of ideas over time. The selection of chapters has been made to represent the breadth of The One Project to this point in time, although some presentations are more easily adapted to a written format and this has influenced some selections.

Of course, the ideas and theology are important—that’s why we’ve collected some of them in this book. “Jesus. All.” is a profound theological statement and invites serious thought and engagement. But, as modelled at The One Project gatherings, this is best done in a community and in a context. One of the risks of collecting these presentations in book form is that we take them away from the context but we do so in hope of them finding other contexts and communities in which they can also speak—and in which Jesus can speak through them.

Of course, when a friend tells me The One Project has changed her life, I know she really means that Jesus changed her life. But The One Project helped her and Jesus to re-connect. As Jesus said, “If I am lifted up . . .” (see John 12:32).

When a friend tells me about the difference The One Project has made in her local church, I know that together they have re-focussed on Jesus. After all, Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:20). And with Jesus among them, things will be different.

In similar ways, may this book help you and Jesus spend some time together and—working together—may you and He change your life, your church and your world.

For the One.

Jesus

Our identity, our mission and our song

Tim Gillespie

I don't know what you have been called in your time in ministry or your involvement in church life. But let me tell you some of the labels I've been given at different times: a progressive Adventist, an emerging Adventist, an emergent Adventist, a historic Adventist, a missional Adventist, a conservative Adventist, a heretic, a social justice Adventist, an evangelical Adventist, a secular Adventist, a cultural Adventist, a true Adventist, an apostatized Adventist, a Christian Adventist, an Adventist Christian, a coffee drinker, lost, found, saved, saint, sinner, forgiven, a traditionalist, a non-traditionalist, a foundationalist, a non-foundationalist, a fundamentalist, liberal, compromiser, a creeping compromiser—and sometimes just “creep.”

I've been accused of being a Jesuit. I am not a Jesuit. I'm not even sure how one would become a Jesuit. It seems like a lot of work. It isn't one of my hobbies.

I've been accused of being too academic, too silly, too funny, too boring, too fake, too authentic, too shallow, too deep, too theological, and not theological enough. I have been threatened with censure and even prayer. We've all had those conversations when someone says, “I'm going to pray for you.” I never know how to respond. Perhaps “Well, I'm going to pray for you, too.”

And I suppose at some time or another, the majority of these things have

been true of me, even if only in a passing thought—except I’m not a Jesuit.

A new identity

Such labels have become part of our experience in church. Our church expresses its fears with political and faction-based rhetoric. These labels become a mark of identity. Are you progressive, liberal, conservative or historic?

Unfortunately, these marks place an identity that somehow—at least in our limited and intertwining circles—supersedes the identity that Christ has given us. Jürgen Moltmann says this about Christian identity: “Christian identity can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ, to the extent to which one has accepted the proclamation that in Him God has identified Himself with the godless and those abandoned by God, to whom one belongs oneself.”¹ When you pick an identity beyond yourself, there is always movement in the life of faith.

So, what if we refused the labels? What if there was a group of people within this church that decided people couldn’t call them anything because their identity was found in one thing: Jesus? Would this be the point where our interpretation of the Fundamental Beliefs became our expression of faith, rather than the mark and measure of our faithfulness? The supremacy of Christ should be our mark and measure of faith. But at what place do we put Jesus? I don’t ask this question lightly. When you encounter Jesus, He becomes a priority. However, when you abide in Jesus, He becomes your elemental impulse.

Luke 6:45 tells us that your mouth speaks from the overflow of your heart. Is the overflow of your heart Jesus or have you spent the majority of your time talking about the church and its ecclesiology? Do you talk about your frustrations with the church, where it’s heading and where you want it to go? That’s what I’ve spent much of my time talking about. I have found myself fretting and worrying about my faith tradition. At first, I believe I was worried about my faith. However, it was my faith tradition that I was concerned for. I have found time and time again that the discussions on my lips have been about policy and quality of the church. My ecclesiology and what I thought of the church had greatly overshadowed my Christology. In the end, it was messing with my

missiology.

The order of these things is important. My Christology had to come first: Who is Jesus? And who is Jesus to me? While I thought I had settled this question a long time ago, it seemed that it needed revisiting. It was time to re-establish the supremacy of Jesus Christ in my life.

I was drawn to the book of Colossians and Paul's clear thinking on the issue:

The Son 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 authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant (Colossians 1:15–23, NIV).

What a stunningly elegant vision of Christ. He is exalted, glorious and lifted up. Paul used this revelation of how Christ is in hope that the Colossians would find their way back to the One. Paul bet that Christ would heal them and show them the way. He was the only thing that could bind them together. Christ is the image of the invisible God—and God was content to put the fullness of Himself right into Jesus.

Paul went on to say that the thing that holds the universe together, let alone my faith tradition, is Jesus. Without Christ, my universe, my faith and my church fall apart.

In Colossians, we find that the Judaizers—another identity tag—had caused problems for the church. The church was primarily made up of Christians from gentile backgrounds. Some were saying that Jesus wasn't enough. The old law was just a shadow. In Ephesus, we find Paul saying the same thing, giving Timothy warnings about people who add emphasis to endless genealogy. It was also a problem on the island of Crete. In the region of Galatia, men came from Jerusalem and even persuaded Peter for a time to look somewhere else.

Re-discovering Christology

In this journey, I began to understand the blessing that I have in holding my faith tradition high when it comes to Jesus because a high Christology is the elemental impulse of the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. But I'm trying to explain Jesus in the church today. Ultimately, this is a question of Christology in its rightful place within the Seventh-day Adventist context. As we see today, does that Christology influence our missiology? And does that Christology inform our ecclesiology as well?

In Frost and Hirsch's book *The Shaping of Things to Come*, they make a case that our Christology informs our missiology, which determines our ecclesiology.² This is imperative for our understanding of today's church. It seems that perhaps our Christology is assumed: "You've got Jesus? Good, I'd like to talk about some weightier things now." On one occasion, I had somebody come up to me and tell me that I talk about Jesus a lot. They asked me when I was going to move on. Well, I'm not. They asked me when I was going to talk about the heavy theological things. I said, "Oh, you mean those heavy theological things that only gain weight when they are embodied by Jesus Christ? Are those the things you are talking about?"

Our missiology has always been clearly defined for us and our ecclesiology has been inherited, healthy or not. I think that has led us to become wrapped up in discussions about the church. We talk about the church. We label those in church as "good" or "bad." We spend time wondering if we are really doing God's work as defined by the church. We see our Christ through the lens of the church, rather than seeing our church through the lens of Jesus Christ.

Let me be clear: I don't deny the power of the fellowship of believers. However, just as our identity is found in Christ alone, so must our mission be identified by who we believe Christ to be. And our fellowship and church is identified with its connection to Christ and how it expresses that connection in the world.

To have the church define Christ is dangerous. The bride did not ask the groom for the relationship, it was the groom who asked. The church is the bride of Christ only because He asked us to be, not because we have any place or title from which to attract Him. We are misbehaved, ungrateful, ungracious and unflatteringly ugly. Yet in our proper place underneath His supremacy, we are loved and even sacrificed for. The Bridegroom has deemed us worthy of relationship.

But rather than spending time doting on the Bridegroom, we are spending our time concerned about the wedding dress. We are in danger of becoming obsessed with looking at ourselves in the mirror. And when narcissism leads to excluding those we deem unworthy of the grace of God, we are in danger of telling the Bridegroom whom He can and cannot love. That is not our place. Christology—missiology—ecclesiology: this is the order that assumes a high place for Jesus in our experience and in our church.

Re-discovering present truth

How many of us know people who feel they have left the church to maintain their connection with Christ? This is a sobering question and the statistics on this are staggering in North America. While there are certainly developmental issues within churches that send people away, the term “cultural Adventist” is not foreign to us. You can grow up in this church and not know Jesus. I graduated with 55 people from a Seventh-day Adventist high school; today, only three of us claim Adventism.

And I want to declare my appreciation for my church-tribe, because this is the place I met Jesus. I met Him through a strong grace-centered upbringing. I was surrounded by such wonderful Christians, theologians, teachers, pastors and people who understood the supremacy of Christ. So many people in our church do and there's a hum that comes with a high Christology.

However, I fear that our faith has become defensive. As it becomes defensive, it begins to choke down its own songs. Moltmann once again says,

Faith is fearful and defensive when it begins to die inwardly, struggling to maintain itself and reaching out for security and guarantees. In so doing, it removes itself from the hand of the One who has promised to maintain it. And its own manipulations bring it to ruin. The pugilistic faith usually occurs in the form of an orthodoxy that feels threatened and is therefore more rigid than ever.³

Before the group of us met in Denver, I was questioning my place within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. But we have a rich history of being open. The preamble of our statement of beliefs gives us hope:

Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church's understanding and expression of the teachings of scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language to express the teachings of God's Holy Word.⁴

We are open to change. We are open to a reorientation. The only reason we can say this in the preamble is because it aligns with the words Ellen White says in her take on "present truth":

There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation. . . . As real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God's word, and discourage any further investigation of the Scriptures.

They become conservative, and seek to avoid discussion.⁵

These quotes give me hope. They let me see that from early in our history, Adventists have dealt with some of the same issues we do today. But honestly, sometimes I feel out of place.

On one occasion, I was on a panel in a discussion at Loma Linda, and it seemed to be set up with the very conservative on the right and then gradually more liberal. I was late so they ended up sitting me on the very left.

The moderator kept referring to what the conservatives wanted to discuss as “the settled truth.” Finally, I said, “Excuse me, but I have no idea what you mean by ‘settled truth.’”

And he just looked at me as if to say, “You don’t get it? Like, it’s the word settled. It’s done.”

So I said, “Yeah, that’s not Adventist. Actually, that’s the most un-Adventist phrase I’ve ever heard.”

And I loved it because everyone on the other side of the table agreed with me. It was interesting because during the discussion, each side wanted to talk about their agenda, but I just wanted to engage the discussion about Jesus. I thought everyone could agree on that.

I wanted to talk about Jesus because I didn’t want to fight. I wanted to lift Him up. That’s my calling. My job is not to be right; it is to be in Christ. My job is to explore the wonders of His mercy and His grace together, in community.

We will live different lifestyles. We will prioritize different things because we are different people, built differently from the DNA up. But we have this tie that binds us and His name is Jesus. You can’t argue about the truth of Jesus, you can only argue about the truth of how we speak of Jesus. However, Jesus supersedes even how we explain Him. Jesus transcends our foolish and awkward words and is this beautiful mystery we can all enjoy—and all be challenged by.

Another song

For me, our initial meeting in Denver was an incarnation of the hope that I am not alone in this. And The One Project is an incarnation of this same hope on a much broader scale. In Denver, it was just a small group of us

humming this resonant tone.

It seemed to me at the time that I was being left out of all the songs being sung from all the hills in our Seventh-day Adventist context—be those mountains or molehills. The songs of the “right” were too rigid and fearful for my taste, with little opportunity to improvise or be playful. The songs on the “left” were at times incoherent and melody-less. How I longed for the song that would be the very resonant tone of my heart. I longed for it to burst forward, out of me because of its very nature. I was listening.

As a songwriter, you realize that there are songs deep within you. There are songs that you don’t so much write, but they write themselves. The gentleman who made my guitar used to say, “You know, that guitar has a lot of songs in it.” That was just another way of saying that it has a tone that could stir something deep within.

In my church conversations and interactions, there was this longing and desire for a song that made sense to me. I longed for a melody that somehow both included and transcended the folk tunes of our faith, those peculiar melodies that cradled me as my faith matured, but ultimately left me longing for more. Where was the common line or the resonating tone that would bring this cacophony together?

I was not expecting the type of melody that would make everyone lockstep into formation. Instead, I’m interested in a dynamic unity. I’m interested in people with different beliefs and worldviews going toward the same goal and knowing we need each other. It’s like when you hear an orchestra as they begin to tune up. You hear the noise begin to grow. It’s not really music, more of a welling of this feeling that something is about to happen. There’s a feeling that there are people from different places, with different instruments, beginning to prepare.

I love when the violins begin to tune because the sound rises above everything. Then it’s silent for a moment—and you know it’s about to happen. You know that this multitude of musicians with different instruments are all going to come under the headship of the conductor. He is about to give them the song that will bring them together.

And the music that’s made brings tears to your eyes. You are so moved by people who aren’t conformed to the same thing but, in unity, are going

End of product sample

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