

Praise for BEING THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

This book is food for all who are hungry for an inner transformation in their lives. Tapping into the ancient spiritual practices, Daniel Vestal connects biblically based mysticism with evangelism and social justice.

—TONY CAMPOLO
Eastern University

The most precious gifts often come in deceptively small packages. *Being the Presence of Christ* is such a precious gift. Drawing on a lifetime of visionary church leadership, Daniel Vestal provides us with this simple yet profoundly wise guide to being the presence of Christ to one another. Vestal's powerful little book cuts to the heart of the Christian good news and challenges us and then shows us the way to embody—not just believe—the teachings of Jesus.

—DIANA GARLAND, PHD
Dean, Baylor University
School of Social Work

In this much needed and easy-to-read primer on the good news of the Christian gospel, Daniel Vestal extends a warm invitation to experience—as he has—the transforming presence of Christ. “As we are redeemed and transformed, we become better able to be the life-changing presence of Christ in our world.” Truly good news!

—MARGARET CAMPBELL
Chair, Renovaré Ministry Team

Daniel Vestal's book is one of the most accessible and winsome introductions to the spiritual formation paradigm for Christian living and for leading the church that I've read in quite a while. Daniel's vision of Christian spirituality and the path of transformation is authentic and sound, and he presents it in a personal way that will bless anyone seeking a deeper life with God.

What makes this book uniquely valuable, however, is Daniel's grasp of Christian spiritual formation combined with his great knowledge of congregational life and pastoral leadership. He sets the agenda for a new vision and way of being church and leading church: guiding people to receive and to practice and to be the presence of Christ in the world.

—STEPHEN BRYANT
World Editor and Publisher
The Upper Room

Each section of this book adds another element to the challenge of living as a Christian in the world. Daniel Vestal offers a comprehensive view on the being and doing of faith. Having worked with the author for several years, I see his life and work in the principles on these pages. This book has integrity because Daniel Vestal has struggled with the challenges he lays before us.

—DAVID L. ODOM
Executive Director
Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School

Being the Presence of Christ

A VISION FOR TRANSFORMATION

Daniel Vestal



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INTRODUCTION

*As human beings, we can be dwellings for the living Christ.
We can be a continuous embodiment and incarnation of
Jesus Christ in the world.*

We can be the presence of Christ to one another and the world. It's a simple yet profound truth that could revolutionize our lives and our world. It's the concept that each of us can be a sanctuary where Jesus Christ lives. Our spirits can be in communion with the eternal Spirit. Our bodies can be a temple of the Holy. Our daily existence can reflect and radiate the beauty and truth of the Incarnate Son of God.

To be and act as Christ's presence is the clarifying and unifying vision I wish to set forth in this book. It is a vision that has captured me and consumes me. The sheer wonder of being Christ's presence humbles and overwhelms me. At times I can hardly believe it is possible. At other times I can hardly believe anything else matters. This is not a new vision, of course, but one shared by the very first followers of Christ.

Those first Christians lived in a world dominated by idolatry, totalitarian rule, and the practice of magical arts. Greek philosophy and Roman paganism shaped the cultural context, as did belief in

demons and the supernatural. It was a time of political unrest and social ferment. The world order and the established Jewish religion were hostile to the Christians' new way. Christians were few in numbers, and even fewer could be called rich or powerful.

Yet in such an environment Christians boldly proclaimed that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead, was reigning as the Lord of all, and would return soon. They believed that his living presence was real by the gift of the Holy Spirit and that they somehow were a part of what God was doing in the world because Christ was among them and within them.

Today we live in a very different world from that of the first Christians. Ours is a global village bound together by technology and rapid communication. A belief in demons has been replaced by psychology and belief in human capability. Greek philosophy has given way to other world views: scientism, secularism, relativism. Roman paganism is not popular but different kinds of paganism are, such as the unbridled pursuit of sexual gratification and the quest for material possessions.

Political unrest and social ferment persist. Some consider the past century the most violent in human history. Our global village is deeply divided by walls of religion, race and politics. And with all of our technological and economic advances, there is an inexcusable divide between rich and poor as well as an environmental threat to human existence on our planet.

Yet, we live in a world of increased and intensified interest in spirituality, the mysterious, the transcendent, the supernatural, and the paranormal. More and more people watch television shows and movies with spiritual themes. More and more books deal with religion, the occult, New Age topics, metaphysics, and inspiration. For all our fascination with entertainment and money, we still search for meaning in life; and the deepest yearnings of the human spirit are unsatisfied. The explosion of technology has given us instant access to greater amounts of information. It has made opportunities once reserved for a few available to many. But

the availability of information does not guarantee moral clarity, personal fulfillment, or spiritual illumination. It doesn't necessarily create community, passion for justice, or capacity for sacrifice.

The Christian Gospel

Even in a world like ours, the Christian gospel is still powerful, changing more lives than we can know. It still offers a profound intellectual and philosophical framework for life, a compelling worldview, and a coherent ethic for moral decision making. But even beyond all this is a profound experience both personal and communal. The Christian experience encompasses the total human personality and the total human family. It is an experience evidenced by joy, peace, and love grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Christian gospel boldly celebrates and proclaims that Jesus Christ is alive. He lives not just as a memory among those who follow his teachings, but he himself lives. The very one who walked on this earth as a prophet, teacher, and miracle-worker was raised from the dead after his cruel crucifixion. The Christian gospel proclaims and celebrates that, but it doesn't end there. On the day of Pentecost, a Spirit was given to live among and within all who confess Jesus as Lord, and that Spirit is none other than the Spirit of Jesus Christ. So the Christian gospel further affirms the amazing fact that Jesus is not limited to one time and one place as he was during his earthly ministry. Now as the risen, reigning Lord of the cosmos, Jesus lives by his spirit in all who believe in him, love him, and follow him. Christ lives in us.

As human beings, we can be dwellings for the living Christ. We can be a continuous embodiment and incarnation of Jesus Christ in the world. As individuals and as members of a community, we can be the presence of Christ. For me, this is what it means to be a Christian. But it is also, for me, what it takes to transform ourselves, our society, and our world.

In this book I want to set forth an incredibly wonderful message that is both challenging and hopeful. The challenge in becoming the presence of Christ is that many of our prejudices and patterns of living need to be altered. The hope is knowing such transformation is possible. The challenge is that our segregated, gentrified, hostile, and at times violent society is declared unacceptable to the God who created us and loves us. But the hope is that it is possible for all this to change. Not suddenly and surely not without great upheaval, but by the presence and power of Jesus Christ working in and through us, all this can change.

Being the presence of Christ is the way of transformation—physical, spiritual, individual, social, and cosmic. As human beings, we cannot be divided up neatly into categories. We cannot be transformed by just changing parts of our life. We are too mysteriously and beautifully woven together for transformation to occur only in part.

Transforming the whole is what matters. That transformation makes the presence of Christ powerful not only to individuals but to the entire human community. We are woven together as a human family, which means that my personal transformation is tied to the transformation of others. I can never be fully whole until all are whole. Sometimes transformation happens from the inside out, that is, the individual influences the community. And sometimes it happens from outside in, that is, the community acts on the individual. But in either case, the goal is always the same—transformation of the human character and human culture.

Deep within us we yearn to be a part of the transformation of the world and to participate in our own transformation. Yet most of us will not discover the AIDS vaccine, have millions to give to charity, or be a celebrity. We will live our lives within limited confines of family, friends, and community; but we long and yearn and sometimes even ache for a new world order. That yearning may ebb and flow but lives within us. Being the presence of Christ fulfills that yearning and is the means by which it can be fulfilled.

Scope and Structure

This book is written by a Christian for Christians. At the same time, I intend it to be an apologetic and an appeal for non-Christians. It is an effort to interpret the Christian gospel in ways that can be appreciated and understood by both people in the church and those outside the church. I hope people of other faiths and people of goodwill might consider how the Christian vision speaks to them.

I realize that I often use language and Bible references in ways that may be confusing to some. I'm not trying to hide my reasoning behind a "code language" of theology. But it is simply impossible for me to present the meaning of the Christian gospel without using language and references that the gospel itself creates.

This book can be read from beginning to end, from the end to the beginning, or from the middle in either direction. Its message resembles a circle with several entry points more than a straight line from one point to the next. With this in mind, let me offer a brief preview of each chapter.

- Chapter 1 is about beginnings. The Christian gospel begins with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. All the documents that Christians call the New Testament were written from the perspective of the risen Christ. They each bear the stamp of conviction that Jesus has risen from the dead and lives by his Spirit in all who receive him.
- Chapter 2 considers the basics. What is absolutely essential to the lifelong experience of being the presence of Christ? What is central to this vision and core to this way of living?
- Chapters 3 and 4 discuss prayer. God is always present to us and always pursuing us, blessing us, and loving us. Prayer is then living in response to God's presence and engaging in actions that keep us responsive and attentive. It is literally "practicing the presence of Christ."

- Chapter 5 concerns personal transformation. The root of the world's problems lies in the human heart, which means that the most needed changes are internal and spiritual. The presence of Christ transforms us as persons.
- Chapter 6 examines Christian community. All who experience the presence of Christ are inextricably bound together. We are Christ's body and must learn how to live out this reality with others.
- Chapter 7 explores the mystery of human suffering. The defining symbol of Christianity is the cross, and we are invited not only to believe in the cross for our own salvation but to embrace it as a way of life.
- Chapter 8 explains Christlikeness through service, especially as it has to do with practical involvement with people. To be the presence of Christ means we will be servant to others, ministering to their needs and helping them in the same way Christ did.
- Chapter 9 investigates a Christian social ethic. The transformation of society is one of the goals of the Christian vision. We cannot ignore the great injustices and inequities in the world by living privately, comfortably, and selfishly.

If you would like a study guide to accompany your own reading or to use in a small group, there is one available online. You may access it at www.thefellowship.info/beingthepresenceofchrist.

I write this book as one who has lived most of my life as Christian. Though I have had my intellectual struggles and personal disappointments, I have never left the Christian faith. My understanding of others' doubts, dilemmas, and despair regarding the Christian faith is limited. However, my experience has created an opportunity to explore the Christian faith from the inside and ask the question, "What is the really good news that the Christian Gospel claims to possess and proclaim?" Of course, there are many

answers to that question, but I seek to offer my own in this book. It has come out of a life enriched by many mentors and teachers. I have seen this faith lived out in simple souls, in sophisticated scholars, and in ardent activists. I have observed individuals whose profound expressions of Christian faith have been forged in suffering and struggle. I owe so much to so many who have been the presence of Christ to me and before me, and now I seek to offer my voice as a witness to this Gospel as I understand it.



CHAPTER 1

Beginnings
Receiving
the Presence of Christ

Receiving the presence of Christ is receiving Christ himself—the selfsame one who lived, died, and rose again. But now his presence is invisible to our natural eyes because these eyes can see only what is finite. Christ is now infinite, unlimited, eternal, and cosmic. Such reality cannot be contained, controlled, or confined. But such reality can be received.

First Steps

How do we receive Christ's presence today? We choose it. We respond to our life experiences, and we ask for Christ's presence in our lives. Christ never coerces us but waits for our consent. When we give it, no matter how tentative or faulty, he communicates and

communes with us in very personal yet profound ways. Christ comes to us with love, acceptance, grace, and goodness.

An epiphany or experience of the presence, power, and reality of Jesus Christ surpasses an emotional or intellectual experience, although emotions and intellect may be involved. The experience lies outside the bounds of sensory perception, although the senses may be involved. It is spiritual and it is mystery. To receive the presence of Christ is more akin to being known than to knowing, to being apprehended than apprehending. This is the experience of pure gift. It cannot be forced or faked—only “faithed.”

Receiving the presence of Christ is like illumination or inspiration. However frail or fallen we may be, if we desire the presence of Christ, we need only say yes, and it comes. Christ comes.

Like fire
 Like water
 Like light
 Like morning after the dark night
 Like a friend you’ve always known but never known
 Like a lover that has found a beloved
 Like a parent welcoming a wayward child
 Like a mother embracing a baby

Christ comes in surprising ways—amazing ways. John Wesley described his heart being “strangely warmed.” Blaise Pascal, French mathematician and philosopher, referred to his dramatic spiritual experience with the words, “Fire, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, not the God of the philosophers and scribes. Certainty, certainty and emotion, joy, peace, God of Jesus Christ.”

Mystics and martyrs, philosophers and poets, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated have given common testimony to the experience of receiving Christ. Some have had dreams and visions, and others have laughed and wept—at the same time. Some have trembled or shaken, while still others have sat absolutely still with nothing but quiet confidence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DANIEL VESTAL has been a voice for Christian discipleship for over forty years. He is a leader within the Baptist denomination and has been involved in ecumenical efforts and interfaith dialogue. Since 1996 he has been executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Daniel and his wife, Earlene, have three children and five grandchildren. They live in Atlanta, Georgia.