LESSON ONE
Unwavering Christocentrism

For this first lesson, we are going to focus on what we might consider a ‘hinge’ or cardinal principle. The principle on which the other seven stand, that is: Unwavering Christocentrism.

As Bishop Barron states in his book, *The Priority of Christ*, “What must stand at the center of the activity that is Christianity cannot be an abstraction, a principle, a sensibility, or a conviction, but rather Christ Himself.”

Christocentrism places Jesus Christ at the center of everything. He is the Lord of all creation and therefore we must center our lives around him.

This principle can be explained in three points:

• Jesus is the foundational principle on which everything else stands.
• Jesus is not one prophet or guru among many, he is the living God Incarnate.
• Jesus desires a personal relationship with each of us, and therefore we must know him as he really is.

In order to properly center our lives around Jesus, we must be able to express these three points.
1. JESUS IS THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE ON WHICH EVERYTHING ELSE STANDS.

Jesus boldly proclaimed, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). In order to be his disciple, one must make Jesus Christ the foundation of life and proclaim his Lordship in every area of life. Much like the north rose window at Notre Dame, a well-ordered soul revolves around the great center, which is Christ.

So, the well-ordered soul as well as the well-ordered society is one whose predominant foundation is Jesus. He is the principle around which everything revolves. This includes the culture, politics, our personal lives, our public lives, everything. What the rose window shows is what St. Thomas Aquinas defined as the principles of beauty: wholeness, harmony, and radiance, all hanging in the balance around the Center, which is Christ. The saint is one whose entire life is about one thing: Jesus, the Son of God.

So often we try to neatly position Jesus in a place that makes us comfortable. Somewhere on the periphery. We might pick and choose how we want him to affect our lives. However, in order to properly center our lives around that which will make us whole, harmonious, and radiant, we must allow him to position everything in our lives around him. This requires much more than a basic intellectual acquiescence to an abstraction, but rather, what John Henry Newman calls the ‘real assent’ of meeting Christ himself.

As Bishop Barron puts it in *The Priority of Christ*, “When the particularity of Jesus is read through the interpretive lens of abstract religion, conversion and mission are compromised. No one will give her life for the feeling of absolute dependency or for the sustenance of ultimate concern; but she might be willing to give her whole self to this Christ, this crucified and risen Lord.”

When Jesus becomes the foundational principle on which everything else stands, we live a well-ordered and beautiful life.

Now, to the second point.

2. JESUS IS NOT ONE PROPHET OR GURU AMONG MANY; HE IS THE LIVING GOD INCARNATE.

In the course of the last three centuries, Jesus has been presented as, exclusively, an eschatological prophet, an itinerant preacher of the kingdom, a wonder-worker, a magician, a social revolutionary, an avatar of enlightened ethics, a cynic philosopher, etc. Jesus was simply a ‘nice’ guy who taught some ‘nice’ principles.
But as Bishop Barron once stated, “If your Christology makes Christ sound like my grandmother, you’re off.” In order to truly express the centrality of Christ, we must never present him as less than he is or less than he claimed to be. Strange, often frightening, yet keenly aware of the human condition and willing to embrace and redeem all of humanity.

Recall the famous scene at Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus turns to his Apostles and asks, “Who do people say that I am?” He doesn’t ask what people are saying about his preaching or his miracle-working or his impact on the culture; rather, his question focuses on his personal identity.

St. John’s Gospel commences with a magnificent assertion regarding, not the teaching of the Lord, but rather his being: “In the beginning was the Word [the divine Logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God … And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul writes, “though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard equality with God something to be grasped,” implying thereby an ontological identity between Jesus and the God of Israel.

The New Testament states over and over that Jesus is the Son of God. There is a centrality to Jesus that cannot be compromised. Therefore, if Jesus is the center of your life, then everything else must revolve around that center.

What implications does this have for our lives, that Jesus was much more than just a simple, moral teacher?

In the Gospel of Luke, we hear that a man said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.”? And Jesus responds, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head” In this rather shocking statement, Christ challenges our notions of what it means to truly follow him. Are we really prepared for the life altering change that is bound up in making Christ the center of our life?

In placing Christ at the center, we must then be prepared to suppress our own ego. Suppress our own selfish desires. Suppress that part of us that wants to place ourselves in the center of the universe.

Yet, we do not claim that Christ comes in as a competitor to human flourishing. One claim of modernity is that God is a competitive entity set over and against our freedom. But Christ demolishes this notion. And this is precisely why Christ throws everything off. Through the incarnation, we see God and humanity meet in a non-competitive, nonviolent way.
What is it that Christ so often repeats to those who meet him? Shalom. Peace be to you. He offers a peace that allows the human person to flourish in a rightly ordered manner, a peace of soul that we so often seek in the pleasures of this world. However, in Christ, we properly place those pleasures, those desires, around the very Person that will rightly order them.

In other words, what Christ is doing is grabbing us by the lapels and calling us to something greater. Something more fulfilling. Something beyond our immediate understanding. He’s calling us to an adventure.

The Divine Logos has come into the world so that the \textit{logoi spermatacoi}, the “seeds of the Word,” philosophy, math, science, art, politics, family life, etc., might find their purpose and fulfilment in that which is ingredient to the exercise of real liberty. He drenches the virtuous life with the living water that causes growth of the human person.

Where other prophets pointed outside of themselves, to their teaching, or a way of life, Jesus shockingly points to his person. This sets him apart from each and every other person who has claimed to be from God.

Now, in knowing what Christ claimed to be, in order to accept that personal relationship, in order to make him the center of our lives, we must know Him as he really is.

\textbf{3. JESUS DESIRES A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH OF US, AND THEREFORE WE MUST KNOW HIM AS HE REALLY IS.}

The way in which we express Christ as the center of our lives, especially as evangelists, it is of profound importance. In today’s climate, increasingly hostile to religion, we must be keenly aware that presenting Christ as anything less than he is hurts the mission.

If we look back at the first century Christians, we see a recurring phrase: \textit{Kyrios Christos}. Christ is Lord. These were revolutionary words. Christ’s victory over sin and death was a taunt to the powers of this world. In other words, to proclaim Christ as the center of their life was dangerous. Christ himself was a strange and dangerous figure—he did not advocate a violent overthrow of material existence, but rather a revolution for the hearts and minds of humanity that would also have a material consequence: the transformation of culture. Christ gathers in every \textit{logoi} of our life and calls us to proclaim his kingship over all. Christ as the Lord of my life, through whom I find real freedom.

One intensely powerful artistic depiction of this is found in Caravaggio’s “Incredulity of Saint Thomas.” In this gritty depiction, we see the Apostle Thomas, who vehemently challenged the reality of Christ’s resurrection. And yet, in an invitation to believe, Christ plunges Thomas’
finger into His side, thereby awakening Thomas’ senses to the real Jesus. Not a figurative abstraction, not as a competitor to human flourishing, but God Incarnate, who desires a personal relationship, a centering of your life around himself. Jesus desires to shock us out of the monotony of a life without him.

Christianity is not a club to join or an association of like-minded people with a similar view of morality. Christianity is not a gathering of people who desire to be ‘nice’ like their ‘nice’ founder. No, Jesus was anything but ‘nice.’ Christianity is an encounter. An encounter with the true figure of the Gospels. If we dilute him to nothing more than a flattened out, reductionist distortion, then we lose the central basis of the project: the real Jesus. If we seek to conform Christ to a preconceived idea, then we have begun controlling him.

Throughout the centuries, we see those who have devoted their lives to the Christ who throws everything off. Men and women who have devoted their lives to making Christ the center and proclaiming him as Lord. These souls would not have given such honor and devotion—even their own blood!—if they did not experience an encounter with the true Jesus.

What then is the way we seek this encounter? Prayer. Prayer is the intentional act of finding the center.

As members of the Word on Fire Movement, we must heed the words of St. John Paul the Second in his encyclical Redemptoris Missio: “An essential characteristic of missionary spirituality is intimate communion with Christ” (RM no. 88)

A Word on Fire Evangelist ought to be able to express their faith, engage in apologetics, offer cultural appraisals, and order their family life in accordance with the real Jesus which comes from a life devoted to a personal relationship with him in prayer. Jesus is the foundation of Christianity. Not shying away from the strange and quite frightening reality of who he was, the Word on Fire member expresses Jesus in an authentically scriptural way.

Jesus is the foundational principle on which everything else stands. Jesus is not one prophet or guru among many, he is the living God Incarnate. And he desires a personal relationship with each of us, so we must know him as he really is.

This hinge principle is one that must guide each and every facet of our evangelical zeal. We need missionaries whose lives are about one thing.

Are you prepared to embrace Jesus as the center?