

WHAT TEENS ACTUALLY BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS  
BASED ON NATIONAL RESEARCH



THE  
JESUS  
GAP

JEN BRADBURY  
FOREWORD BY ANDREW ROOT



Eye-opening. Blood-chilling. Galvanizing. These were my reactions as I read the results of Jen Bradbury's research on the Jesus gap in youth ministries. Her findings regarding what teenagers and their parents believe about Jesus call upon us as youth workers to deeply reflect on our ministries, and they should provoke us to action. Jen does an excellent job of laying out the issues, as well as providing practical steps to address those issues and implement change in our ministries and churches. This should be required reading for every youth pastor, seminary student, senior pastor, and Christian parent.

**Ginny Olson**

**Youth Ministry Author, Advocate, Advisor, and Adjunct Professor**

**Director of Youth Ministries for the Northwest Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church**

Jen Bradbury is seasoned, wise, and warm, as might be expected of a youth minister. She's also a tenacious researcher with mad writing skills and a desperately important problem to dissect. That's why *The Jesus Gap* managed to exceed my expectations. This book needs serious attention from anyone who loves Jesus, loves kids, and loves the church. There's hope in these pages!

**Dave Rahn**

**Sr. VP, Youth for Christ/USA**

**Director, MA in Youth Ministry Leadership at Huntington University**

What we think teens know about Jesus and what they actually know are often two very different things. In *The Jesus Gap*, Jen Bradbury sets out to discover what her students are learning, which spurs a much larger exploration of the Christologies of teenagers across the church. This book doesn't stop there, however. Through her own research findings, stories from years in youth ministry, and numerous creative teaching ideas, Jen offers practical ways for youth ministers to help young people meet Jesus. Yes, the gap is significant, but these pages are packed with wisdom, grace, and hope for anyone who loves Jesus and cares about teens.

**Bethany Stolle**

**Designer, Educator, and the Curriculum Developer Behind Sparkhouse Youth Ministry Resources (re:form, Connect)**

*The Jesus Gap* is a must-read book for four reasons. First, it discovers, critiques, and champions the place of Christology in youth ministry. Second, it is a rare gem: National research done with rigor that helps us find a confident way forward. Third, it was written by a veteran youth pastor with a proven and current record of fruitful leadership. Finally, Jen Bradbury is a gifted thinker and leader in youth ministry who leads, teaches, and nurtures as well as any I've seen. You can be confident of the quality of the data, the theological wisdom, the practical application, and the integrity and Christ-centeredness of the one who writes.

**Terry Linhart, PhD**

**Author and Educator at Bethel College – Indiana**

**[TerryLinhart.com](http://TerryLinhart.com)**

In *The Jesus Gap*, Jen Bradbury offers deep insight into the way teenagers view Jesus. Full of important questions and a critical look at what we are telling teens about him, Jen offers a wealth of practical ways we can positively impact what our youth believe about Jesus. Regardless of your denomination or the size of your ministry, this book is filled with valuable wisdom for how pastors or parents can play a key role in strengthening the faith of our youth. I am left feeling hopeful that when we introduce teenagers to the true Jesus, we will open the door to a faith that will last a lifetime.

**Doug Fields**

**Author of *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* and *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry***

**Co-Founder of [DownloadYouthMinistry.com](http://DownloadYouthMinistry.com)**

*The Jesus Gap* is thoughtful and compelling. With great skill and deep love, Jen grieves the loss of Jesus in the spirituality of teenagers and offers a hopeful vision of how the whole church can embrace a more robust Christology alongside students. It's time to invite Jesus back to youth group, and *The Jesus Gap* is preparing the way.

**Morgan Schmidt**

**Youth Pastor and Author of *Woo***

*The Jesus Gap* is a powerful exposé on the perspectives of American “Christian” teens regarding the person of Jesus Christ. This is a must-read for anyone who is passionate about leading teenagers into a deep relationship with Jesus.

**Dr. Steve Gerali**

**Award-Winning Author and Internationally Recognized Expert in Adolescent Development and Youth Ministry**



# **The Jesus Gap**

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Publisher: Mark Oestreicher

Managing Editor: Laura Gross

Editor: Tamara Rice

Cover Design: Adam McLane

Layout: Adam McLane

Creative Director: Alfred E. Neuman

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ISBN-13: 978-1-942145-02-8

ISBN-10: 1942145020

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Born in San Diego

Printed in the U.S.A.



To Doug, who takes vacation time to go on mission trips,  
encourages me when I'm down, and believes in me even when  
I don't. I love you with all of me.



# CONTENTS

Foreword by Andrew Root	13
Introduction	17
Section 1: Who Is Jesus?	
Chapter 1: The Jesus Teens Believe In	27
Chapter 2: Jesus: Not God, Not Human	37
Chapter 3: Jesus: An Imperfect Human	57
Chapter 4: Jesus: The Good News	77
Chapter 5: Jesus: An Optional Part of Christianity	93
Chapter 6: Jesus: The World's Greatest Teacher	111
Section 2: Keys for Strengthening the Christology of Teens	
Chapter 7: Prioritize Faith	129
Chapter 8: Strengthen the Christology of Parents	145
Chapter 9: Share Your Faith	165
Section 3: What's the Point?	
Chapter 10: The Difference Jesus Makes	181
Chapter 11: Jesus: Our Hope	197
Chapter 12: Jesus: The Foundation of Our Faith	205
Appendix A	213
Appendix B	219
Acknowledgments	231



# FOREWORD

I'm a major history buff. I love it. But here is a confession I'd be smart to deny: Almost always, my first intrigue toward some historical period or event comes from TV. As a scholar I'm ashamed to say it, but it's true; I love to watch any period piece TV show or movie I can.

Yet, one historical period I'm still waiting to see made into an HBO series is the early christological conflicts of the fourth century that arose around the Middle East and Egypt. (And truth be told, I may be waiting forever.) There are amazing stories about exiles, riots, and political engagements that surrounded the early church as it came to its understanding of who truly is this Jesus of Nazareth who was dead and now is alive.

I'm particularly a fan boy of Athanasius who, even as a young man, was led into fights with Arius and his Arians. In my fantasy HBO show, I imagine a young Athanasius played by Daniel Radcliffe.

The Arians I imagine as some cross between the villain in *The Da Vinci Code* and stormtroopers. The Arians were actually more intellectual and learned than those who would become known as the Nicene Christians. Athanasius was a young secretary to the great bishop, Alexander. Alexander opposed Arius for his claim that Jesus was not fully one with God but was made by God—and a deity, sure—but not made of the same substance and therefore not equal to God. Alexander the pastor opposed the pinheaded intellectuals—not for theoretical reasons, really, but for pastoral ones. In the experiences of his people, Bishop Alexander had seen something different. Together in worship, service, and prayer, they had experienced

a living Jesus that came to them with the power to take what is dead and make it alive—and only God of sure God could do this resurrecting work.

Athanasius (again, portrayed in my mind by a young Daniel Radcliffe) stood alongside his old, loving mentor Alexander (Morgan Freeman) as the Nicene Creed was written and accepted. As Athanasius moved from secretary to Alexander's post as bishop, he would give his whole life to upholding the Nicene commitment that Jesus is sure God, begotten but not made, true God of true God. I can imagine a now-made-to-look-older Radcliffe pushing for his commitment because of his love for his mentor Alexander and his devotion to his people, even as the Arians mobilize political favors to remove him, and then Athanasius (a now out-of-shape and bearded Radcliffe) barely escapes into the darkness from the rioters who come seeking his death.

I think it would be a pretty awesome TV series! But I may be alone in that ...

Jen Bradbury has offered youth ministry something very important in this book, *The Jesus Gap*. She has waded into a conversation that has been going on for two millennia and, at least since the fourth century, has been the single distinguishing mark of these people called Christians: our understanding of who this person is, called Jesus.

Jen has so nicely laid out what young people think, drawing from both her own and others' research. And she has taken that research and offered you a truckload of practical ideas, inviting you to move your young people into a more robust Christology.

But here is the hidden gem that Jen offers in the book: In the end, it really isn't about Christology at all.

Of course, *it is*. As Athanasius and the drama of the fourth century show, it really matters what you think about Jesus. But Jen's book asserts what we often miss: In the end, the Christian faith cannot be sustained solely by the cold stone of doctrinal information. This would be as Arian and heretical as stating that Jesus is not equal with God, for Jesus is only a man. Arius made his plea in this direction because it made the most philosophical sense. But Alexander and Athanasius denied it because ultimately Christianity is not about what works intellectually but about what is experienced existentially. The pastoral always has privilege over the intellectual in the Christian faith.

So it is not Christology alone that we want our young people to know, but rather an experience, like Paul's own, of the living Christ who encounters us even today. And these experiences of the living Christ, I believe, happen today; our young people hear Jesus call to them. Alexander and Athanasius knew this because they were pastors, and we know it too if only we'd stop fetishizing knowledge and create the space for our young people to narrate their experiences and share their questions. Too often we've been too busy trying to prove a doctrine to them to stop and let them speak of how this living Jesus has been coming to them, impacting them in disturbing and exciting ways.

Jen reminds us that this is of utmost importance. We cannot, in the end, call ourselves Christians if we freeze Christianity in ideas about Jesus. Rather, like Alexander and Athanasius, we must seek the very living Jesus who comes to us.

So when Jen speaks of the "Jesus gap," she doesn't mean young people have a gap solely in their knowledge about Jesus, but something deeper. They have a gap in connecting their experience of Jesus' presence and absence in their lives with any form of reflection.

In the fourth century, confusion about Jesus was just as ramped up as it is today. But the gap we face in youth ministry is very different than it was in Athanasius' day, when most people lived with no misguided assumptions that they knew anything about Jesus. In our time, people's ignorance about Jesus is clothed in assumptions that they understand Jesus. But over and over again, Jen and the research reveal this isn't the case.

So here we stand, needing not simply to help our young people possess information about Jesus, but rather to invite them to experience the living Christ. We are asking them to take these experiences of Jesus' presence and absence in their lives and reflect on them through Scripture and church tradition—not in order to know information, but to give testimony to the depth of their experience. And this, in my mind, is the gap—the gap between young people's experience of the living Jesus and their ability to give coherent and thoughtful reflection upon it. If we can help them do this kind of reflection, it might transform their lives and be a rich blessing to the church.

Reading Jen's book will prove helpful to bridging this gap. It will make you think; and most importantly, it will move you into the depth of ministry where the living Jesus is always present, taking what is dead and bringing it back to life.

**Andrew Root, PhD**

**Olson Baalson Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary and author of *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker* and *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry***

# INTRODUCTION

Less than two years into my youth ministry career, I read Donald Miller's *Searching for God Knows What*. In this book, Miller tells the story of teaching a class at a Bible college. During it, he presents the gospel to his class but leaves out a key element. He tells his students about man's sinfulness, the depravity of culture, and how the wages of sin is death. He shares the Good News that they can be saved from all of this and one day experience the joy of heaven. He then asks his students to identify the critical element of the gospel he left out.

The result?

In Miller's words: "I presented a gospel to Christian Bible college students and left out Jesus. Nobody noticed."<sup>1</sup>

At the time, this intrigued me. I remember thinking, if this is true of Bible college students, is it also true of *my* students?

Of course, at the time, I was also pretty arrogant. I knew what and how often I taught my teens about Jesus. So while I was convinced this might be true for *other* youth ministries, I knew it wasn't true of the teens involved in mine. Jesus was, after all, at the heart of my ministry, infused in all we did.

Fast-forward seven years.

After nearly a decade in youth ministry, I'm now working in my third congregation. I've bounced from a mainline congregation to the evangelical world and back to a mainline denomination. I'm also in school, pursuing a master's degree in youth ministry. My classes have made me increasingly aware

of youth ministry research that suggests Miller's anecdote in *Searching for God Knows What* is indicative of something more widespread than I want to believe.

Consider, for a moment, the findings from two studies completed over the past decade. The National Study of Youth and Religion found today's teens are adherents of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a "*de facto* dominant religion" with very little to do with Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Another study, Fuller's College Transition Project, asked 168 youth group graduates to define what it means to be a Christian. Overall, 35 percent of the teenagers who responded "gave an answer that didn't mention Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

With information like this beginning to shape my perception of what teens believe about Jesus, I was eager to take a christological foundations class with author, professor, and global expert, David Livermore. As its name suggests, this class explored Christology, the branch of theology dealing with the nature, person, and deeds of Jesus. The final project for this class was to conduct a small research study on our own youth ministries in order to determine what teens believed about Jesus.

My results floored me.

Based on what I knew I'd spent the previous three and a half years teaching my youth group about Jesus, I assumed they'd know at least the basics of our Christian faith.

They didn't.

By and large, they didn't even know Jesus was God, let alone that he was sinless, or that our Christian faith is entirely dependent on him. To my horror, they also didn't understand what Jesus' crucifixion had to do with our sins.

My findings from this small study revealed a very large gap between what I thought I'd taught my youth about Jesus and what they actually knew and believed about him.

As a Christian, this Jesus gap deeply saddened me.

As a youth worker, this Jesus gap greatly alarmed me.

It propelled me to want to learn more, to see if what I'd found was limited to my youth group or if it was more widespread.

My exposure to other research made me hypothesize the latter was true—that this phenomenon was not unique to my youth ministry. Yet, because these other studies focused on the religiosity of teenagers (their piety and religious devotion) and not specifically on their Christologies (their beliefs about Jesus), I couldn't know this for sure.

So I decided to find out.

My growing interest in this subject area compelled me to study the Christology of high school teens for my culmination research project. During this yearlong study, I surveyed 369 teenagers from 16 different states who were active in their congregations' youth ministries. I also visited four representative congregations of various sizes located all across the country, from the Rocky Mountains to the East Coast. Because of my context, all congregations were part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). They included congregations in the Bible Belt, suburbs, small towns, and rural America. Not all congregations had full-time youth workers.

At each congregation I visited, I observed a program to see firsthand how, if at all, Jesus was being taught. I then interviewed adolescents, their parents, pastors, and youth

workers about their beliefs in Jesus.

After doing so, I analyzed the results from both the surveys and interviews in order to answer the question, “*What’s the nature of the christological understanding of high school youth in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA)?*”

## A NOTE TO EVANGELICALS

I know it’s tempting to see a modest sample size located within a particular context that’s not yours and disregard its findings as irrelevant. I urge you not to do that.

These findings *are* relevant to you. I know because I, too, am an evangelical.

In college, I was part of an evangelical campus ministry that profoundly shaped my faith and theology. I learned how to do youth ministry at a Bible church. I served as the youth pastor at a multisite, multiethnic, nondenominational church for five years. In graduate school, I further developed my philosophy of ministry at the feet of some of the most prominent and widely respected youth workers in the evangelical world. I know your doctrine, your beliefs, and your churches. And what I appreciate most about you *is* your love for Jesus.

Even so, the major research studies on teens and religion suggest mainline teens aren’t the only ones who struggle with their beliefs in Jesus. Yours do too. There’s likely a gap—every bit as real as the one I found in the ELCA—between what you think you’ve taught your teens about Jesus and what they actually know and believe. This was certainly true of the nondenominational church where I was a youth pastor.

## A NOTE TO MAINLINERS

I know it's equally tempting for you to see this study's focus and disregard it. Once again, I urge you not to.

These findings *are* relevant to you. I know because I, too, am a mainliner.

I grew up in a Methodist church that formed my faith. I've also spent more than half my career working for mainline churches. You have both challenged and anchored my theology. I know your doctrine, your beliefs, and your churches. What I appreciate most about you is your emphasis on grace.

That said, I know all the "Jesus talk" from evangelicals makes you nervous. I know you fear it gives Christianity a bad reputation, one that makes people label it "hypocritical" or "intolerant." But, like it or not, the foundation of our faith is Jesus of Nazareth, and my research shows our teenagers don't know him.

## WHY IT MATTERS

To be clear, my research is not the end-all, be-all on this subject. No single study ever is. However, *it is* important. It gets to the heart of our faith and helps explain what teenagers actually believe about Jesus, something most other studies have only alluded to.

The truth is, what teens know about Jesus isn't much. Their Christologies are, in a word, poor.

And that's a problem not just for the evangelical or mainline world, but for the church as whole.

After all, the Christian faith is rooted in Christ. As theologian

Carl Braaten has said, the faith “stands or falls with what it knows about Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of your denominational affiliation, I invite you to join me as we explore what teenagers believe about Jesus and what has contributed to their beliefs. Think of this book as a case study that will show you those things. As you read, search the pages for your teens. Even though the youth groups I studied weren’t mine, I often found my own youth—from both evangelical and mainline congregations—there. I’m quite confident you’ll find yours reflected in these pages as well.

The pages that follow are divided into three sections. In the first (**Who Is Jesus?**), you’ll meet the Jesus teens believe in. The second section (**Keys for Strengthening the Christology of Teens**) will explore three of the major takeaways from this study. In the third and final section (**What’s the Point?**), we’ll wrestle with what the consequences of a church without Jesus are.

Throughout it all, I’ll inundate you with data from my research and stories from my journey in ministry. I’ll also challenge you to make changes to your ministry that in light of this research, I believe will strengthen your teens’ Christologies. My hope and prayer is that stronger Christologies will, in turn, profoundly impact our congregations, the church as a whole, and the world around us.

## NOTES

1. Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 159.
2. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162.
3. Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith, Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2011), 29.
4. Carl E. Braaten, *Who Is Jesus? Disputed Questions and Answers* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 5.



# **SECTION 1**

## **WHO IS JESUS?**



# CHAPTER 1

## THE JESUS TEENS BELIEVE IN

From kindergarten through my senior year in high school, every school day included a religion class. Through these classes, along with my Sunday school experience in my own church, I learned early on that Jesus is critical to the Christian faith.

Even with all of these religion classes, if you'd asked me as a child to describe Jesus, I would have said he was nice—an expected answer given the picture of Jesus I looked at for 13 years.

I'm sure you've seen it.

It's Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* (1941), which I like to call "Swedish Jesus."<sup>1</sup> In it, Jesus is looking off to the right. He's wearing a white cloak. He's white, with perfect skin and long, flowing, wavy brown hair. The way the light hits him makes him appear otherworldly. He looks peaceful and serene, incapable of ever getting angry or truthfully, doing anything at all.

My image of Nice Jesus was shattered my sophomore year in high school when, during a school-wide church service, a visiting group unveiled a cross. Unlike the crosses I'd traditionally seen, this one wasn't empty. Jesus was still on it. And he no longer looked perfect. He was badly beaten with blood dripping from every possible orifice. Rather than looking serene, his face—which I still vividly remember nearly 20 years later—was pain-ridden, his mouth frozen in a perpetual grimace.

Though neither Nice Jesus nor Bloody Jesus is a complete picture of him, both greatly contributed to my understanding of who Jesus is. Nice Jesus showed me God's love: His kindness and gentleness taught me he wasn't something to be feared. Bloody Jesus turned the abstract notion that Jesus died for my sins into something concrete. Before meeting him, I couldn't understand the extent of Jesus' sacrifice for me. After meeting him, I could hardly forget it. From that day forward, whenever someone talked of Jesus, I pictured Bloody Jesus. His blood was a constant reminder of my sin and my need for a Savior.

Just as Nice Jesus and Bloody Jesus profoundly impacted my adolescent understanding of Jesus, how teens picture Jesus reflects and shapes their understanding of him as well. The truth is, for many high school teens today, Jesus is a very one-dimensional character.

## WHAT THE JESUS OUR TEENS BELIEVE IN LOOKS LIKE

Consider, first of all, how teens picture Jesus. At some of my focus groups, I asked teens: *What does Jesus look like?* Some of the descriptions of Jesus were:

- He is a “white male.”
- He has a “holy face.”
- He has brown hair that’s “long and wavy.”
- He has a beard. (“It’s the only way we’ve ever seen him.”)
- He has brown eyes.
- He has a “perfectly symmetrical face—one eye is not bigger than the other.”
- He wore “a white robe” and sandals.
- He is “a little dirty because he’s been in the sand.”
- He “had a glow that followed him.”
- He is “young and healthy.”

- He is strong. (“He could do anything. He could help people lift things they can’t lift.”)
- He is “perfect in body, perfect in strength.”

Even the teenagers’ parents said Jesus was a “young white male” who’s “skinny.”

For the most part, this picture of Jesus matches the 1940s representation of him I described earlier. It also mirrors us. For example, white teens describe Jesus as white, even though some admit knowing that “historically, he would have technically been Middle Eastern.”

Jesus was “just like the average Afghani person; but if I’m thinking of him in a time of trouble, I see the Jesus I want to see: a white male about mid-20s with a beard, long hair, and a white robe.”

What this young person confessed reflects a phenomenon New Testament scholar and professor Scot McKnight has observed in many of his classes. He wrote on it for *Christianity Today* in 2010, saying: “We all think Jesus is like us. Introverts think Jesus is introverted, for example, and extroverts think Jesus is extroverted. To one degree or another, we all conform Jesus to our own image.”<sup>2</sup>

## ARCHETYPES OF JESUS

To further understand the Jesus teens believe in, when I surveyed teens, I asked them the quintessential question of our faith. It’s the one Jesus asks Peter in Matthew 16:15 after hearing Peter recount a litany of how other people saw him.

“Who do you say I am?”

Our faith rests on our answer to this question on the survey, which I specifically asked as a short-answer question in order

to give young people the freedom to respond without any sort of constraint placed upon them. I then analyzed their responses in several ways, one of which was to group similar responses under a descriptive heading that depicts Jesus as an archetype, a pattern of thought or image that's universally present. As with any classification, these archetypes are not all-encompassing. Each one generally portrays only one facet of Jesus' character. Even though the archetypes may at times seem fanciful, none are fiction. All contain at least some attributes of Jesus found in Scripture.

### ***SUPERHERO JESUS***

From 2012 to 2014, 19 superhero movies were released. No wonder more teens' descriptions of Jesus fall into this category than any other. Young people describe Superhero Jesus in the same way they do Spider-Man: "Amazing."

Like all superheroes, Superhero Jesus is otherworldly, having been sent to our world to save it from destruction. He benefits humankind by courageously fighting his nemesis, Satan, and in the process, freeing the world from darkness. Superhero Jesus has supernatural powers including superhuman strength and invisibility, which bring him fame and notoriety. Though Superhero Jesus is willing to sacrifice himself to redeem the world, death cannot defeat him. Ultimately, he emerges victorious.

### ***MR. ROGERS JESUS***

The second largest archetype I found in my research is Mr. Rogers Jesus. This Jesus—not all that different from Nice Jesus, to whom I was introduced as a child—is a kind teacher who models the good behavior he desires from his followers. Such behavior includes acceptance, devotion, generosity, honesty, love, truthfulness, selflessness, and respect. He's someone incredibly nice who constantly does good. He's one-dimensional, never struggling with anger or any complex

emotions.

In fact, in another part of the survey, the youth were given a series of word pairs and asked to choose the one from each pair that best described Jesus. While 89 percent of the adolescents described Jesus as calm, only 5 percent described him as angry. When combined, Jesus' niceness plus his calmness makes him downright wimpy.

### ***GODLIKE JESUS***

The third largest archetype of Jesus is Godlike Jesus. Godlike Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and is capable of performing miracles. He's a higher power described by various "God" language including the personification of God, the Son of God, the Son of Man, and the Spirit of God. He is godlike, but not necessarily God himself.

### ***SPIRITUAL GURU JESUS***

The next largest archetype present in my research is Spiritual Guru Jesus. Spiritual Guru Jesus is not God himself, but rather someone who has a special relationship with God and can, therefore, serve as a bridge between humans and God. Spiritual Guru Jesus believes in God and has the ability and authority to forgive sins, in much the same way pastors in various traditions do. Like pastors, Spiritual Guru Jesus' job is to spread God's Word.

### ***JOE JESUS***

Another archetype found in my research is Joe Jesus. This Jesus is the guy next door; he's an everyman. In fact, it's this archetype that most directly deals with Jesus' humanness. Joe Jesus is a physical man who was a Jerusalem resident and the son of Mary. He's realistic, relatable, and a friend.

Joe Jesus was also reflected in young people's responses to the word pairs found on the survey. The youth were evenly divided

in their responses to one of those word pairs. Though 47 percent of young people surveyed thought Jesus was obedient, 46 percent thought he was rebellious. In another word pair, 57 percent described Jesus as talkative, while 32 percent described him as quiet. That these adolescents were so divided in their responses to the questions suggests they see Jesus in a very human way. Perhaps more than anything else, such an even division also supports the conclusion of McKnight's *Christianity Today* article, which was that we all conform Jesus to our own image.<sup>3</sup>

One final place Joe Jesus appeared in my research was in my conversations with young people. One youth described him as the “average Joe.” Another as “a normal person.” According to another: “He’s everyone. You can’t really distinguish who he is. In every person’s eyes he can look different.”

## **KING JESUS**

Another archetype found in my research is King Jesus. He is the Lord of Lords and the Prince of Peace. He is, in every way, a leader who rules by power.

## **LESS FREQUENTLY CITED ARCHETYPES**

Other, less frequently cited archetypes found in my research include Martyr Jesus. This Jesus is a revolutionary Messiah who was crucified. Academic Jesus is brilliant and wise. Alien Jesus is not human. Hipster Jesus is cool. CEO Jesus is the founder of Christianity. Artist Jesus is passionately creative.

Tour Guide Jesus shows us the way.

## **HISTORICAL JESUS**

To varying degrees, I found each of these archetypes present in the way youth workers, pastors, and parents described Jesus. Additionally, one other familiar archetype—that of Historical Jesus—was evident with the adults but wasn’t evident in the answers from teenagers. This view of Jesus is prominent in the

writings of people like Marcus Borg, who divides Jesus into two different entities: the Pre- and Post-Easter Jesus. Pre-Easter Jesus refers to Historical Jesus: a “Galilean Jewish peasant of the first century” who (in Borg’s words) is “dead and gone.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Post-Easter Jesus refers to the person his followers “continued to experience after his death as a living, spiritual, and ultimately divine reality.”<sup>5</sup> According to Borg, though Jesus eventually became God, he was never both fully human and fully God.

Though most Christians view this understanding of Jesus as an incomplete archetype, I did encounter it in one pastor I interviewed. He intentionally distinguished between Jesus the human and Jesus the Christ, saying the latter was “the official crowning of the divinity.” According to him, Jesus was an ordinary human until he became the Christ at his crucifixion, something this pastor argued was “more realistic to us than a divinity story that says he was this miraculous baby, as though he could walk and talk from birth.”

### **ORTHODOX JESUS**

Even though the archetypes of Jesus found in my research all contain attributes of the Jesus found in Scripture, none accurately represent the entire Orthodox Jesus.

Orthodox Jesus is not only godlike, but God himself. According to Jesus, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). At the same time, Orthodox Jesus is fully human. He was born of a woman (Galatians 4:4). Luke 8:23 tells us he slept. During his time on earth, he experienced the full range of human emotions, as evidenced in stories throughout the Gospels. He flipped over temple tables in anger (Matthew 21:12). And, according to John 11:35, he even wept.

During the three years of his public ministry, Jesus performed many miracles and—like God himself—he had the authority

to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6). He also taught, according to Matthew 7:29, as “one who had authority.” What’s more, he called and equipped his followers to participate in God’s kingdom work here and now.

Eventually, he died a physical death, after which he rose from the dead. And through that death and resurrection, he conquered death and Satan. He is now the foundation on which all of Christianity is based. Through him and only him, we receive the gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23).

## THE REAL JESUS

As a teenager, encountering Bloody Jesus forever changed how I saw Jesus. Unfortunately, because Bloody Jesus contradicted so much with Nice Jesus—in whom I’d previously believed—I couldn’t hold the two in tandem. Rather than expanding my view of Jesus to a more complete one, my answer to Jesus’ important question (“Who do you say I am?”) simply changed from one incomplete image to another. Unless we’re careful, I fear the same will be true of our teens today. We’ll simply replace one incomplete or false archetype of Jesus for another.

I know that’s not what I want for my teens.

I’m guessing it’s not what you want either.

Instead, I want our young people, like Peter in Matthew 16:16, to be able to confidently say to Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

For that to happen, teens must know and understand the real, multidimensional, Orthodox Jesus found in the pages of Scripture.

## CHAPTER NOTES

1. The Warner Sallman Collection, *Head of Christ* (1941), [www.warnersallman.com/collection/images/head-of-christ/](http://www.warnersallman.com/collection/images/head-of-christ/).
2. Scot McKnight, “The Jesus We’ll Never Know: Why Scholarly Attempts to Discover the ‘Real’ Jesus Have Failed. And Why That’s a Good Thing,” *Christianity Today*, April 9, 2010, [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/april/15.22.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/april/15.22.html).
3. Ibid.
4. Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 7.
5. Ibid.

