

# The Jesus of “He Gets Us”: Sorting Our Christology

The logo for the Evangelical Missiological Society (ems) is displayed in orange lowercase letters within a dark blue circular background.

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## Introduction

In a 1927 interview with the *Harvard Crimson*, John Holmes recounts a conversation with Mohandas Gandhi. Known both as a political and religious advocate for the marginalized and dispossessed, among other things, Holmes reported his often-quoted words, “I like your Christ, but not your Christianity.” In context, Gandhi continued:

I believe in the teachings of Christ, but you on the other side of the world do not. I read the Bible faithfully and see little in Christendom that those who profess faith pretend to see. The Christians above all others are seeking after wealth. Their aim is to be rich at the expense of their neighbors. They come among aliens to exploit them for their own good and cheat them to do so. Their prosperity is far more essential to them than the life, liberty, and happiness of others. The Christians are the most warlike people (Harvard Crimson 1927).

While Gandhi no doubt correctly portrayed Christianity in all its colonial darkness, he ultimately rejected Jesus Christ as presented in the pages of the New Testament. Instead, he opted for a Jesus who understood him as he wanted to be understood. His Jesus was a Jesus of convenience, even one of opportunity. For Gandhi, Jesus was a non-violent resistor of evil and a model for all of humanity who were equally children of God, just like Jesus was simply another son of God. In essence, Gandhi formed a Jesus who was a remarkable political and religious advocate for the marginalized and disenfranchised.

Gandhi’s portrait of Jesus is not unfamiliar to missiologists articulating proper methods for contextualizing the Savior of the world in contemporary cultures. Numerous examples such as Robert de Nobili’s divine guru, the “Missionary Christology” exported from the West, Canaan Banana’s guerilla Christology, even the

divergent Christologies of the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, demonstrate how efforts to make Jesus relevant often betray the New Testament portrait of "the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb 1:3). Even Jesus himself did not mince words, "whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). So, the manner in which we relate Jesus to contemporary culture matters. An inaccurate presentation of him will likely lead to a Jesus created in our likeness and, in effect, a following devoted to a graven image formed in the minds of well-intentioned people.

A recent example of a contemporary attempt to contextualize Jesus in the United States is the multi-million-dollar advertising campaign of "He Gets Us." Expected to compete with the marketing budgets of brands such as Chick-fil-a and Mercedes, "He Gets Us" is a limited liability corporation formed in the state of Missouri with its principle office in Overland Park, Kansas. The business is managed by the Servant Foundation, "a global Christian grant-making educational foundation" whose end of fiscal year 2019 fund balance was \$699,516,453.

This article will examine the Jesus presented on the "He Gets Us" website, a part of the hugely popular marketing campaign designed to "raise the respect and relevance of Jesus" and "call on Christians to best reflect Jesus' love in their interactions with others." Before this examination, we will briefly survey the Jesus of Gandhi by observing how he made Jesus relevant to his situation and even raised his Jesus to a level of respect on a global scale. Such awareness of Jesus even attracted the attention of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote to Gandhi in 1934, "The healing power for all human distress and need, namely Christ's message, is disappointing more and more [western] thinking people on account of its present organization [the church]" (in Green, 2021:119).

Then, we will focus attention on the New Testament letter of Hebrews and the Jesus who truly "gets us" in the fulness of his divinity and humanity (Heb 4:15). To tell his story, we will argue, is to remain faithful to Jesus' own self-description as we will see in the Gospel of John. Finally, we must consider the consequences of a respected and relevant Jesus that is reinforced by what the majority of culture already believes about him, namely that he is a created being and great teacher but not God (Earls 2022b).

## **The Jesus of Gandhi**

There is little doubt that the most famous non-Christian follower of Jesus was the Indian statesman and non-violent civil protester, Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948). On

two separate occasions, one of the lead marketers for “He Gets Us” spoke of Gandhi’s oft-quoted quip, “I like your Christ, but not your Christianity.” For the marketer, Gandhi represented the sentiment for many in contemporary culture. While there is little doubt that the marketer’s intuitive sense is correct—people in US culture like Jesus, but not his church—understanding Gandhi’s frame of reference is important.

Raised in a devout family—particularly his mother—Gandhi worshipped Vishnu, the Hindu god who incarnates as Krishna. He grew up in an environment that valued worshipping many other gods and goddesses while also valuing other expressions of faith. His mother belonged to a small *bhakti* movement on the west coast of India focused on openness toward all religious traditions. For her and her teacher Swami Prannath, all faiths led to the divine (Schouten 2008). Characteristic of *Pranami sampradaya*, the *bhakti* movement led by Prannath, was this frequently referenced statement, “They all gave different names to God and all adopted different rituals. But everything consists of Soul and Universe ‘Allah’ and ‘Brahman’ are one” (Khulasa 12:38 in Schouten 2008). As Harold Netland writes,

Gandhi embraced a pluralistic perspective on the religions, and it is often assumed that this pluralism is simply the product of his Hindu worldview . . . [H]owever, although Gandhi always claimed to be a Hindu, his views are eclectic and reflect many influences apart from ancient Hindu teaching (2015:116).

Comparably noted by one biographer, Gandhi believed that “Religions must therefore esteem one another” (Schouten 2008:147). Gandhi himself remarked, “Just as a tree has many branches but one root, similarly the various religions are the leaves and branches of the same tree” (1946:31). This so-called *sarvadharam samanatva* was a synthesis of all religious teachings held equally and harmoniously as expressions of true religion. Schouten records,

Even though the Mahatma radically rejected conversion, he rejoiced when people were affected by aspects of another religion and wanted to adopt them into their own religious experience. He himself integrated many elements—from Christianity in particular—into his own religion (Schouten 2008:154).

It is no secret that Gandhi liked the Christ of Christianity, but did not appreciate his followers very well, namely British colonialists and white South Africans. In fact, Gandhi held that their example of colonial aggression resulting in wars and pestilence,

as well as unfettered materialism and cultural exploitation, was testimony that they did not understand Jesus appropriately. Indeed, the influence of the Sermon on the Mount and the cross of Christ on Gandhi's understanding of Jesus only confirmed that institutional Christianity was out of touch with the "Prince of *satyagrahis*," that is, the Prince of non-violent resistance (Netland 2015: 123).

In a short essay about "What Jesus Means to Me" written in 1941, Gandhi sketches his understanding of Jesus:

What, then, does Jesus mean to me? To me He was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had. To His believers He was God's only begotten Son. Could the fact that I do or do not accept this belief make Jesus have any more or less influence in my life? Is all the grandeur of His teaching and of His doctrine to be forbidden to me? I cannot believe so.

Undeniably, what became popular in Gandhi's line of thinking was the notion that Jesus is for everyone, not simply for the Christian. Gandhi continues, "I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a god inherited from their ancestors" (1941). For Gandhi, Jesus is the "spark of the divine" and an example of what humanity might achieve if they were to truly follow his teaching. Writing to his friend Milton Newberry Frantz in 1926, Gandhi is clear about his belief in Jesus,

I am afraid it is not possible for me to subscribe to the creed you have sent me. The subscriber is made to believe that the highest manifestation of the unseen reality was Jesus Christ. In spite of all my efforts, I have not been able to feel the truth of that statement. I have not been able to move beyond the belief that Jesus was one of the great teachers of mankind (XXXV:23).

## Bonhoeffer and Gandhi

A contemporary and admirer of Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer hoped to find in a visit to India what he did not find in a one-year stint in the United States. Clifford Green notes that while studying at Union Theological Seminary in 1930-31, Bonhoeffer was in search of a new *modus vivendi* for the church which he hoped to discover in America. Instead, he discovered a theologically impotent church and was "bitterly disappointed"

by his visit (2021:118). Writing to Gandhi while he pastored in London from 1933-1935, Bonhoeffer reflects his hope, “I feel we western Christians should try to learn from you, what realisation of faith means, what a life devoted to political and racial peace can attain” (Green 2021:119).

Bonhoeffer appreciated Gandhi’s non-violent activism along with his application of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, especially in regards to living in community which was the focus of Bonhoeffer’s first dissertation as well as his later pioneering seminary effort at Finkenwalde. In his letter, Bonhoeffer acknowledged, “I know, of course, you are not a baptized Christian, but the people whose faith Jesus praised mostly did not belong to the official Church at that time either” (in Green 2020:119). Whether or not this was his motivation to send Gandhi an article he had written entitled, “Concerning the Christian Idea of God” (1932:177-185) we do not know. However, Bonhoeffer is absolutely clear that the only way that we can know God is because of his own self-revelation in Jesus Christ. He writes, “God entered history in Jesus, and so entirely that he can be recognized in his hiddenness only by faith. God gives an amazing proof of his sole authority in the cross of Christ” (1932:184).

In spite of his admiration for Gandhi, there was a well-defined divergence in their understanding of Jesus. Bonhoeffer’s Christology was clear. In his prophetic voice, he noted the importance of a proper view of Jesus for his day:

Whether or not we want to see it, whether or not we think it is right, the churches are caught up in a struggle for their faith such as we have not seen for hundreds of years. This is a struggle—whether or not we agree—over our confession of Jesus Christ alone as Lord and Redeemer of this world (Bonhoeffer, 2007:376).

Gandhi, on the other hand, believed that Jesus was simply a human example of our ability to become divinely animated. The manifestation of such animation revealed itself in the application of the Sermon of the Mount as well as in other religious expressions which taught the possibility for the Kingdom of God to manifest on earth. So, it is true. Gandhi liked Jesus as created in Gandhi’s image of non-violent resistance to the oppression of humanity. He recognized Christians did not always model this characteristic of Jesus. Understandably, he did not like institutional Christianity. Neither was he a fan of missionaries as they sought to convert people away from their traditional religions.



Unlike Bonhoeffer, Gandhi's Jesus was not offensive. He was not a stumbling block. He was a Jesus who was respected and relevant for Gandhi's cultural context and for millions of others who might be offended by the Jesus of the New Testament. This seems to be what Darrell Whiteman described as "bad contextualization":

Another function of contextualization in mission is to offend-but only for the right reasons, not the wrong ones. Good contextualization offends people for the right reasons. Bad contextualization, or the lack of it altogether, offends them for the wrong reasons (Whiteman, 1997:3).

The classic missiological mistake of over-contextualizing Jesus is what we observe in the Jesus of Gandhi and seems to be the trajectory, as we will see, of "He Gets Us." While we must remove the offenses that keep people from coming to Jesus, even if that means the church, we must not clear away the stumbling block of Jesus himself. He must be confronted for who he is. Even so, out of an admirable motivation to distinguish Jesus from his followers, "He Gets Us" presents Jesus in likeable and relatable scenarios connected to the felt needs of its marketing sample.

## The Jesus of "He Gets Us"<sup>1</sup>

Touted as the largest media outreach campaign in the history of Christianity, the wildly successful "He Gets Us" has raised more than a half a billion dollars for marketing Jesus to skeptical audiences in the United States. With an expectation of future marketing dollars heading north of a billion, the goal is to impact the manner in which culture thinks about Jesus. Additionally, the goal is not to convert the skeptic. Rather, it is to tell a valuable story of Jesus in a winsome manner even if one would never arrive at the conclusion that he is a prophet or God. According to the campaign, "Jesus was not exclusive. He was radically inclusive."

### Background

Backed by market research indicating that people still like the idea of Jesus, "He Gets Us" presents him to audiences who are often on the margins of faith and unwelcomed by Christians. The campaign emphasizes the radical love Jesus expresses towards those exact types of people in the pages of the New Testament gospels. Most certainly, the campaign is challenging us to answer the question, *How did the world's greatest love*

<sup>1</sup> Information regarding "He Gets Us" is pulled from multiple sources including and interviews with campaign marketers from Haven | A Creative Hub and Lerma. Due to the social media nature of the campaign, the website frequently changes.

*story become known as a hate group?* Outlining fifteen touchpoints with culture such as anger, anxiety, etc. the marketers behind the campaign want people to connect to the stories about Jesus without having the trappings of his divinity. As one marketer stated, “Our goal is to open the door. Provide an on-ramp for people who want to explore Jesus.”

After six months of market research at an estimated cost of over one million dollars, the campaign determined four key communication points:

1. Highlight Jesus’ relatable life and non-judgmental love;
2. Create a fresh and compelling understanding of Jesus’ love, compassion, and forgiveness without condition or prerequisite;
3. Change misconceptions our culture has about Jesus, often related to hurt or bitterness of his followers’ actions or inactions;
4. Remind our culture that Jesus is not defined by human frailties or failures, but by his sacrifice, response, and grace.

With concise and clever advertising, “He Gets Us” lets people in Las Vegas know that “Jesus went all in” while at Pittsburgh Pirates baseball games, it wants people to know that “Jesus still believes with two outs in the 9th.” Certainly, with no ill intent, in St. Louis, Cardinals’ fans read “Jesus forgave errors.” The simple and relatable phrases are a part of the brilliance of the campaign. The beautiful videography, photography, and storylines of the “He Gets Us” televised commercials are impactful and eye-catching, causing people to genuinely think that Jesus really does get us. Now with more than 300 million YouTube views, the most relatable videos highlight how Jesus connects with those experiencing anxiety, loneliness, and thirteen other ostensible social challenges.

In a manner reminiscent of Gandhi, the campaign communicated: “What if we told you that Christians don’t own Jesus. He’s for everybody.” According to qualitative data from the marketing study, people responded positively to the idea that they did not need to be a Christian. All one simply needed to do was to follow Jesus and his ways. Nevertheless, the campaign is not without its critics (Capstone Report 2022; Crain 2022; Chelva 2022; Porter 2022). One need only go to its Facebook page and see the numerous and varied reactions to its advertising. Even Christians are among those who criticize the campaign primarily due to its clear lack of reference to Jesus’ lordship. In defense of the goals of the campaign, one marketer commented, “They just rush to

judgment and they say your ad sucks. And basically because you're ignoring that he is Lord and not just a guy. And it's like, 'Yeah, we know that. But we're the on-ramp. It's people like you that need to set people straight when you become their friend.'"

## Jesus in "He Gets Us"

It is admittedly difficult to derive a clear picture of Jesus simply through television commercials, social media posts, or spot advertising at sporting events. And that's the point. "He Gets Us" provides just enough provocative statements about Jesus that it drives people to explore further. With millions of impressions on the Internet and 100,000 visits per day to the website,<sup>2</sup> "He Gets Us" paints a portrait of Jesus as one who has been tempted in every way and therefore connects with what people are going through: anxiety and stress, injustice, judgment, politics, criticism, hostility, mourning, teenage pregnancy, immigration, stress, loneliness, poverty.

According to "He Gets Us," Jesus dealt with attacks of anxiety and worry. In fact, Jesus addressed his anxiety with coping strategies familiar to everyone. In one instance, for example, "He retreated to a favorite quiet place—a garden of old growth olive trees on the side of a mountain." Bringing along friends for emotional support, Jesus spent the night wrestling with his emotions. Yet, "He'd tried to cope with the anxiety as best he knew how, and just like many of us, his coping mechanism proved insufficient." Those coping mechanisms included friends and prayer. In conclusion, "He Gets Us" asserts, "Yet, despite his inability to find solace, Jesus found the strength to face his accusers and submit to them willingly and without violence, knowing that his death would further spread his message of radical love."

Such a portrait of Jesus is affirmed throughout the "He Gets Us" website. His stories reminded the content creators of His humanity, "a man who lived 2,000 years ago." Simply to model ourselves after Jesus when we are trolled or tested appears to be part of the appeal. In the face of a first century AD form of cancel culture, Jesus was not deterred from delivering his radical truth. Likewise, we also can follow Jesus' example and stand up for our truth, whatever that truth might be. Jesus, in the words of the content creators, "set a high bar for himself and for others" even though "it must have not been easy for him to practice what he'd preached."

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<sup>2</sup> The website is in at least its second iteration. The focus has shifted to a first-person voice where the content creators take center stage in their "musings" over how to present a "true and complete picture" of a Jesus who gets us. This article presents data from the website accessed on 1 October 2022.



Overall, “He Gets Us” correctly identifies cultural touchpoints often left undiscussed in the church today. The manner in which these touchpoints are addressed certainly act as on-ramps for further conversations about Jesus. The message of “He Gets Us” is clear. Jesus does get us and all we need to do is emulate his life; a message familiar to that of Gandhi’s Jesus. Yet, who actually is this Jesus and does the message of “He Gets Us” properly portray him as he spoke about himself?

Granted, “He Gets Us” admittedly is not presenting Jesus as God or savior and they have been successful.<sup>3</sup> In fact, there are only three explicit references to God and one to savior among the various cultural touchpoints.

1. [Jesus] “pleaded with God to make his problems go away. But this was a petition he knew wasn’t going to be answered.”
2. The man [Jesus] who prayed to God, “Give us this day our daily bread,” experienced hunger.
3. “The pandemic even made many question the existence of a god or ask why an all-loving, all-powerful being would allow this to happen.”
4. The Sadducees did not believe in the coming of a savior king.

Even so, we are left to our imagination regarding Jesus’ relationship to God. If anything, Jesus does not appear to be reliant on anyone except his own inspired message of radically inclusive love. So, the message frequently communicated by “He Gets Us” appears as a Pelagian one (Rees 1988); namely, a message that Jesus is an example and if we simply follow his model of radical love our lives can also be sorted out like his.

In marketing, as we were reminded by one of the “He Gets Us” promoters, “frequency wins.” The more often a message about a product is communicated, that is the message retained by the consumer. The ubiquitous presence of “He Gets Us” on television commercials, sporting events, social media, even in Times Square, communicates a message about Jesus. “He Gets Us” paints a portrait of a Jesus who preached a radical message of inclusive love. Indeed, “Jesus set a pretty good example of peace and love” as a promoter iterated. Yet, a reductionistic view of Jesus as simply

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<sup>3</sup> As of 16 January 2023, the “About Us” page included the following two additions: 1) “Jesus is the son of God, who came to Earth, died, and was resurrected, then returned to heaven and is alive today;” 2) “Though we believe he was what Christians call fully God and fully man, that may not be what you believe. We’re simply inviting you to explore with us at He Gets Us how might things be different if more people followed his example.”

a model for one to emulate leaves his portrait lacking the full pallet of his self-description. Indeed, the frequency of his own self-identification as we see in the Gospel of John as well as the manner in which others identified him in the synoptic accounts makes us wonder if “He Gets Us” is answering the wrong question. For example, in Matthew 16:13-17 (NIV)<sup>4</sup> Jesus himself asks two very important identity questions:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples,  
“*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “*Who do you say I am?*”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (emphasis added).

Who is it, exactly, that “gets us?” In critiquing the Christology of “He Gets Us,” might it be helpful to suggest that an incomplete portrait of Jesus is an inaccurate portrait of Jesus, and thus an inaccurate portrait of the God whom he came to reveal? Given Jesus’ response to Peter’s proclamation that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, there are elements of who Jesus is that simply cannot be left out if any compelling portrait of Jesus is to be accurate. It seems, though, that “He Gets Us” does exactly this. After all, *who Jesus is*, is equally important (if not more so) than *what he is like*. Undeniably, this question of his identity precedes not only the question of what he’s like, but even the question of *what he’s done for humanity*. Unlike the author of Hebrews, this is another vital element that “He Gets Us” leaves out.

## The Jesus of Hebrews and “He Gets Us”

Key to the Christology of Hebrews is the superiority—the preeminence—of Jesus over and above all things. The author, writing to a mixed Jewish-Gentile audience apparently confused about Jesus, begins his treatment with an astounding description of Jesus as the one who has been “appointed heir of all thing,” through whom the entire universe was made (1:2). Jesus, he says, “is the radiance of God’s glory” and is not merely an

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

image or reflection of God, but “the exact representation of his being,” who sustains “all things by his powerful word, and having provided purification for sins, is now enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (1:3) as the actively ruling Christ, the Messiah, the Lord of all.

The writer goes on to explain in detail Jesus’ superiority over the Angels (1:5-2:18) and over earthly deliverers like Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13) as well as earthly priests (4:14-7:28). He explains the superiority of Jesus’ covenant over the old, Jesus’ sacrifice over the Jewish system, and more (Chs.7-13) And it is this Jesus who the author later insists “is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8). In light of such a high Christology, it is a markedly lopsided view of Jesus that emphasizes his humanity while making no mention whatsoever of his preeminence, his divinity, his Lordship, the significance of his death on the cross, his resurrection, ascension, or session.

However, in chapter four the writer balances a high Christology with the humanity of Jesus:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16).

It is clear that “He Gets Us” aims to present a well-defined truth about Jesus who empathizes with our weaknesses. Yet while the radically inclusive and tolerant Jesus of “He Gets Us” may certainly be compelling to those who might consider him irrelevant to contemporary life, the end of Heb 4:15 cannot be ignored, “but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet *he did not sin*” (emphasis added). Bonhoeffer notes, “Jesus’ being human embodies therefore a double judgment on human beings—the absolute condemnation of sin and the relative condemnation of human orders” (1943[2015a]:91-92). The reality of human sinfulness—whether their own sin, or the sins of others—as the reason *why* people experience all of these things that even Jesus experienced (or at least “gets”), simply is not addressed by “He Gets Us.” And while the reality of Jesus’ genuine humanity cannot be forgotten in any true and accurate depiction of who he is, the “relevance” and *significance* of Jesus’ humanity goes far beyond his simply “getting us,” and being rightly concerned with issues of justice and equality.

In Hebrews as in the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is presented as he is. He is indeed our great high priest, an advocate who intercedes with authority on our behalf, that we might receive mercy and find help in times of existential need (Heb 4:14,16; Rom 8:34; 1 Jn 2:1). While he indeed did come to offer humanity a pattern of the fullness of human life (1 Pet 2:21; 1 Jn 2:6), he is more than just a teacher providing wonderful inspiration with a message of radical inclusion, love, and acceptance. He came to reveal God to humanity (John 1:18; 14:7-11), to provide the perfect atoning, substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of humanity (Heb 10:1-10; 1 John 2:2), to defeat demonic powers (1 John 3:8) and even death itself (2 Tim 1:10). As Bonhoeffer writes, Jesus is “the personal presence of God in the world” (1932:181).

## The Stories of Jesus in John

It was suggested above that an incomplete portrait of Jesus, is in the end an inaccurate portrait of Jesus, and thus an inaccurate portrait of the God who he came to reveal. And as we read his words in John 14:8-11, it is clear that he indeed does reveal the Father:

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. “Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves (NIV).

Where the book of Hebrews offers something of a systematic Christology, in the gospel of John we find a Christology in narrative form. The prologue of John’s gospel (John 1:1-18) undoubtedly delivers the most explicit exposition of his Christology, culminating with verse 14,

The Word [Gr. Logos – the cosmic, governing principle of all things] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NIV)

However, in the stories of Christ that John relays, when Jesus is speaking specifically of his own identity, we find the repeated phrase “I am,” as in 14:11 above, or upon his

arrest in 18:6, (“When Jesus said, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground”). Such a common phrase is easily overlooked, but when coming from the lips of Jesus, there is a unique significance. The seven so-called “I AM” statements<sup>5</sup> of Jesus occurring throughout John’s gospel narrative and are perhaps most compelling in this regard. As Nicholas Perrin states:

As a set of seven statements (seven being the number of fullness or completion), they promise to provide a comprehensive Christological account. Grasp the meaning of these I AMs, John seems to hint, and you will start to get your head around the very core of who Jesus is, especially as he functions in relation to humanity (2019:120).

Each of Jesus’ statements begins with the Greek phrase *egō eimi* (“I am”), which undoubtedly recalls Exodus 3:14 linking himself to Yahweh’s famous self-revelation to Moses: “I AM WHO I AM.” Again, Perrin: “In repeating his status as “I AM,” John’s Jesus identifies himself with Yahweh, the eternal and covenant-keeping God. To be the “I AM”—for Yahweh and Jesus—is to be the great king and the ruler of the kingdom of God” (2019:121).

John states that his purpose in relaying such stories of Jesus is that we, just like Peter in Matthew 16:16-17, might believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name (John 20:31). It is by believing in who he is, not merely by appreciating, no matter how profoundly, what he is like—a response the Jesus of “He Gets Us” seems to elicit—that we may have life in his name. As Perrin states, for Jesus to be the “I AM” is to be the great king and ruler of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, over all. It is very good news that it is the Lord himself that gets us. And what response should this news of Jesus elicit from us? The proper response is repentance—that is, a change of allegiance—and a recognition that Jesus is who he says he is. As Matthew Bates writes, “It is a call to salvation and discipleship into the ways of King Jesus” (2021:98).

There is much to say about a life of genuine discipleship to Jesus, and the true hope that comes in following him. Consider Jesus’ statement:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because

<sup>5</sup> These “I AM” statements are: 1. “I am the bread of life.” (6:35) 2. “I am the light of the world.” (8:12) 3. “I am the gate” (10:7, 9) 4. “I am the good shepherd.” (10:11, 14) 5. “I am the resurrection and the life.” (11:25) 6. “I am the way and the truth and the life.” (14:6) 7. “I am the true vine.” (15:1, 5).



of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:1-8).

Jesus is the vine and his followers, once they are committed to remaining in Him, are the branches (John 15:1-8). There is a mystical, life-giving union that his followers enjoy as a benefit of true change of allegiance. It is not just that “he gets us,” but we get him in a very real sense through the indwelling Holy Spirit that he has sent to empower his people. The Spirit empowers and equips those in Christ to endure and overcome the trials and troubles life brings, and to live a fruitful life. Branches that do not produce fruit, Jesus says, will be cut off, and productive branches will be *pruned* in order to be more fruitful (15:2). Bonhoeffer catches the depth of such discipleship:

It now becomes understandable that the New Testament calls us again and again to be “like Christ.” We are to be like Christ because we have already been shaped into the image of Christ. Only because we bear Christ’s image already can Christ be the “example” whom we follow. Only because he himself already lives his true life in us can we “walk just as he walked” (1 John 2:6), “act as he acted” (John 13:15), “love as he loved” (Eph 5:2; John 13:34; 15:12), “forgive as he forgave” (Col 3:13), “have the same mind that was in Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:5), follow the example he left for us (1 Peter 2:21), and lose our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters, just as he lost his life for our sake (1 John 3:16). Only because he was as we are can we be as he was (1937 [2015b]:272).

To their credit, “He Gets Us” rightly explains that Jesus understands the existential suffering, alienation, abuse, and all of the realities and situations that people experience. But Perrin rightly reminds us that all of these things,

[H]ave occurred, will occur, and are occurring even now (more than ever in fact) simply because some have chosen to testify to Jesus as King . . . . Wherever Jesus is proclaimed as king, trials are the norm. We should not expect a branch to be exempt from the sap of the vine. Jesus never promised that it would be “cool” to be part of the kingdom. In fact, he promised just the opposite: he promised exclusion and resistance. Yet through such things, mysteriously and paradoxically, the people of the kingdom stand to be revitalized as they abide in him (2019:144).

While Jesus is the way of deliverance from trials and troubles, his deliverance often comes by way of endurance, with the knowledge that we are not alone. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the ultimate suffering (Heb 12:2). And for the joy set before us, we can endure the existential threats of this life, knowing that the Good Shepherd has promised us a fearless and painless future, *upon his return*. This indeed is the Christian hope. In the meantime, we endure, enabled by the Holy Spirit and “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2 NIV). The cross comes before the crown, but if we endure the cross, the crown does come. Equally true, the crib comes before the cross and Bonhoeffer captures its significance:

Then the miracle of all miracles takes place. The Son of God becomes a human being. The Word became flesh. The One who had dwelled from all eternity in the Father’s glory, the One who was in the form of God, who in the beginning had been the mediator of creation so that the created world can only be known through him and in him, the One who was very God—this One takes on humanity and comes to earth (1937 [2015b]:194).

## Conclusion

The manner in which Jesus speaks about himself in John’s gospel and what the book of Hebrews reiterates is the reality of *who* it is that “gets us.” All of this is wrapped up in Peter’s response to Jesus’ question in Matt 16:16. While it is true that the watching world will judge Jesus by his followers (John 13:35), and “He Gets Us” is surely seeking to reveal his love and compassion that the church has often failed to reflect, an incomplete portrait of Jesus, nevertheless, is an inaccurate portrait of Jesus, and thus an inaccurate portrait of the God who he came to reveal.

The “He Gets Us” promoters are concerned with “raising the respect and relevancy of Jesus in our culture.” Statistics seem to indicate that Americans do respect Jesus in like fashion to Gandhi’s famous quip, “I like your Jesus, I don’t like your Christianity” (Earls 2022a; see Barna 2015). If this kind of respect is already there, it may be that “He Gets Us” is reinforcing a wrong understanding of Jesus—a Jesus in the image of Gandhi, perhaps. In the midst of their concern with raising the respect and relevancy of Jesus, there is a failure to reflect the *reality* of Jesus. How much more compelling might this whole initiative be if it were understood that when we see this Jesus we see God himself?

In a twelve-year observational study conducted by Lifeway Research and Ligonier, evangelicals consistently demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the New Testament Jesus (State of Theology 2022; Lifeway Research 2022). When asked to respond to the statement, “Jesus was a great teacher, but not God,” 30 percent of evangelicals agreed. Similarly, when asked to respond to the statement, “Jesus was the first created being of God,” a surprising 53 percent of evangelicals agreed. There is a Christ in crisis and it is an identity crisis: the fundamental truth of Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation. It is a struggle for the one true faith passed down from the apostles to us today.

The difference between the Jesus of “He Gets Us” and the Jesus of the apostles and his early followers ultimately lies in the response that each portrait elicits from its hearers. Jesus asks Peter – and each of us by extension – “Who do *you* say that I am?” (Matt16:15). Does the portrait of Jesus that “He Gets Us” paints elicit from us a response like Peter’s – “you are the Messiah, the son of the living God” – or, rather like Gandhi’s, “To me He was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had”?

While “He Gets Us” is an on-ramp to more conversations about Jesus, the frequency in which Jesus is portrayed as a human example to follow betrays his two natures as fully God and fully human. People are teased to believe that Jesus gets us without ever being told that for us to get him requires intellectual assent to who he truly is. Instead, the Pelagian message of “He Gets Us” makes one believe that all that is needed is to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and be more like Jesus. In essence, the Jesus of “He Gets Us” is not offensive. In other words, it is bad contextualization.

Bonhoeffer was correct. It is difficult for people to come to faith, but not because they cannot relate to a Jesus who gets them. Rather, coming to faith requires something more than mere conformity to the human Jesus. He writes,

We can make it hard for ourselves and others to come to faith. It is hard for those thrust into extreme disgrace, desolation, poverty, and helplessness to believe in God’s justice and goodness. It becomes hard for those whose lives have fallen into disorder and a lack of discipline to hear the commandments of God in faith. It is hard for the well-fed and the powerful to comprehend God’s judgment and God’s grace. It is hard for those who are disappointed by a false faith and who have lost self-control to find the simplicity of surrendering their hearts to Jesus Christ (1943 [2015a]:96).

Gandhi did not find it in himself to surrender his heart to Christ. However, he did find it in himself to like him and to attempt to emulate his life which made him the most famous non-Christian follower of Christ. Was it enough that Gandhi followed Jesus' example? Is it enough for those inspired by "He Gets Us" to do the same? Not if Bonhoeffer's reminder is true: "Thus, Christ becomes not the teacher of mankind, the example of religious and moral life for all time, but the personal revelation, the personal presence of God in the world" (1932:181).

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