

MOVING FROM JESUS-PLUS TO JESUS-ONLY



J.

JESUS CENTERED
YOUTH MINISTRY

RICK LAWRENCE

FOREWORD BY
CARL MEDEARIS

Group



“Yes, yes, yes! I want to be invested in the kind of youth ministry that Rick writes about, where the only thing that matters in my heart and on my schedule is being thoroughly attached to Jesus and helping kids establish this same life-defining connection. If all I did for the next 10 years was pass along this book to hungry youth leaders, I would have a fruitful decade.”

—DAVE RAHN, Senior Vice President and Chief Ministry Officer for Youth For Christ, and Director of the MA Program in Youth Ministry Leadership at Huntington University

“My college students have read and reread this book so often that their copies have worn covers. That’s a potent indicator of a book that is meaningful. Rick Lawrence has captured the essence of why we get involved in youth ministry in the first place—to faithfully follow Jesus and help others to do the same. I am excited for this update of one of youth ministry’s best books.”

—TERRY LINHART, Chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Bethel College, Indiana

“Well past halfway through the chapters of my life, I’m still trying to dislodge from my brain the flannelgraph childhood images of Jesus hovercrafting in his pretty blue robe across a glassy bit o’ blue. The longer I walk with Jesus, the more wonderful and mysterious he gets. In this book, Rick calls us to run arm-in-arm with teenagers—to the epicenter of that mystery, that person, that incarnate child, that troublemaker, that up-ender, that ultimate rescuer.”

—MARK OESTREICHER, Partner, The Youth Cartel

“JCYM is an emboldening wakeup call to youth ministries and churches to root deeply into the raw and powerful person of Jesus Christ. Drawing from a vast resource of personal experience and honest reflection, as well as the sharp insights of several leading voices in youth ministry today, Rick Lawrence reminds us that the best ministry techniques are ineffective without the centrality of Jesus. Anyone who cares about transferring faith and leadership to the next generations needs to learn from the metaphors, the practices, and the simple truths of this important book.”

—KEN CASTOR, D.MIN., Assistant Professor of
Youth Ministry, Crown College

“A classic that re-pivoted youth ministry eight years ago promises to continue its explosive revolution in this totally rewritten and unleashed release. Rick Lawrence yokes a solid biblical focus to theological sophistication which is then distilled into simple truths and creative apps that show what happens when Jesus is in first place—all of life falls into place and no youth any longer need feel misplaced, displaced, or out of place.”

—LEONARD SWEET, Bestselling Author, Professor at Drew University and George Fox University, and Chief Contributor to sermons.com

“Since September 16 of 2006, my life mission has been to join Father in calling youth ministry to a singular focus on his beloved Son. My specific focus, though incomprehensively important, is incomplete. My focus on the ascended, enthroned, and all-glorious Son needs the other strand of a double helix—a focus on the incomprehensively important life of Christ in the flesh. More than anyone, Rick Lawrence embodies that other strand. Father has raised Rick up in our day to spread the aroma of the Son among teenagers and the adults in their lives. I cannot exaggerate the importance of *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*. It will be required reading for every class I teach in youth ministry. Its message clearly is at the heart of what the Spirit presently is revealing to youth leaders—for the glory of God.”


—RICHARD ROSS, PH.D., Professor of Student Ministry, Southwestern Seminary (RichardARoss.com)

“This book is the youth ministry equivalent of Vince Lombardi’s famous locker room back-to-the-basics speech, where he reintroduced his players to ‘a football.’ With insightful theological framing, Rick invites youth workers to start with what really matters—not a bad idea given the dearth of theological thoughtfulness that seems to exist at the frontlines of youth ministry these days. And just for the record—it’s amazing how practical a book can be when it is anchored in unshakeable truth.”

—MARV PENNER, Executive Director of All About Youth, Head of the Canadian Center for Adolescent Research, and Associate Staffer at The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding



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DEDICATION

To the thousands of youth workers who've journeyed with me through the eight-hour Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry experience, and have floored me and encouraged me and brought me to tears because of your insights. Thank you. The greatest treasure in life is a kindred spirit.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many have contributed so much for so long to make this work a reality that it's next-to-impossible to list them all. But some must not be missed...

- My youth ministry team at Group/Simply Youth Ministry is amazing—every one of them. This rewrite of *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry* would never have happened without Andy Brazelton's ridiculous suggestion (and passionate advocacy), Jason Ostrander's unguarded support and leadership, Rob Cunningham's deft editing, Jeff Storm's brilliant reworking of the cover, Veronica Preston's expert touch on the interior design, Stephanie Krajec's determined shepherding of the production schedule, Stephanie Martin's rapid-fire copy editing, and Brian Fuglestad's high-RPM production work. So many moving parts, so little time...
- My life and perspective have been profoundly impacted by the leadership of Thom and Joani Schultz over my almost three-decade trajectory at Group Publishing—thank you for “ruining me for the ordinary.”
- My wife and kids are used to my sometimes-cloistered life as a writer, but this extraordinary effort included a good chunk of the holiday season of 2013, when I was out of commission and unavailable. Because

they believe in who I am and what I'm about, they sacrificed to make this happen.

- Carl Medearis graciously agreed to write the Foreword to this book before we knew each other very well—through this collaboration, we've become friends. And that's one of the real treasures of this season in my life, one that I'll continue to relish.
- Every single ministry leader who offered their endorsement for this book did so on very short notice, with grace, humility, and conviction.
- To the youth workers from all over the world who serve on our In The Trenches team, your friendship and love have fueled my ongoing passion for the “divine conspiracy” that is youth ministry.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Carl Medearis VII

Introduction. XI

PART ONE: BEELINE IMPERATIVES

Chapter One—Responding to the Bat-Signal 5

Chapter Two—The Inexorable Power of Environment. 21

Chapter Three—The Discipleship Fallacies. 35

Chapter Four—Jesus and His Botanical Bent 53

Chapter Five—Answering the Only Two Questions
That Matter. 71

PART TWO: BEELINE PRACTICES

Chapter Six—Beeline the Bible 95

Chapter Seven—Create Dependent Experiences 103

Chapter Eight—Tell the Truth About Jesus. 123

Chapter Nine—Focus on the Red Stuff. 135

Chapter Ten—Question Strategies 153

Chapter Eleven—The Jesus Push-Back 169

Chapter Twelve—Use Parables 185

Chapter Thirteen—Help Students Embrace Their
“True Name”. 201

A CLOSING IMPERATIVE

Determined to Know Nothing. 221

Bonus Ideas 225

Endnotes. 230

FOREWORD

By Carl Medearis

I grew up with Jesus. My dad was and is a pastor. My mom played the piano, led women's ministry and Sunday school and, yes, had a bouffant hairdo. I was a PK. I knew the Bible. I understood that "going to church" meant (by definition) Sunday morning at 10, Sunday night at 6, Wednesday midweek at 7, and youth group on Fridays. Throw in some picnics, baptisms (in the park), retreats, and summer camp—and there you have it. The life of a PK. And I loved it. Didn't rebel against it. Thought my dad was both cool and important. Thought my mom was the best cook and the best everything I knew. And I was a Christian.

I then traveled off to YWAM for a year of missions. Came back and started a singles group at my church in Colorado Springs. Was a part-time pastor. Got married to the lovely and amazing Christine Lymberopoulos (that's right, she's as Greek as the Acropolis). Had kids and moved to Beirut, Lebanon, as a Christian missionary sent by our local church. Joined the best mission agency in that part of the world: Frontiers. By the age of 30, I had started several youth and singles ministries. I had led small groups that multiplied faster than a pile of wild rabbits. I had started and led homeless ministries, men's ministries, and prison ministries. I was trained. I had preached. Knew the Bible better than about anyone I knew. A true servant of God—and, oh, very, very humble.

In Beirut we were surrounded by wonderful and loving Arabs, mostly Muslims. And it was then and there that I met Jesus.

Rick takes us on a similar journey in this book—from knowing about Christianity to actually practicing Jesus. We might be Bible whiz-kids, but do we actually know the biblical Jesus from Nazareth? The passionate Jewish leader, teacher, communicator, healer, and friend from the region called Palestine? Not the version from Tulsa (no offense if you're from Oklahoma), but the real Jesus. The one who mystifies. The one who speaks in parables so we “won't fully understand.” The one who never answers questions and teases us with bits of truth at a time, never divulging the whole story. The one who both personifies an even kinder and gentler version of Mr. Rogers and his friendly neighborhood and then, WHAM, calls people names that if translated into modern English wouldn't be fit to write. Again and again they asked, Who is this man?

And do we follow his model today? Oh yes, Jesus had a model. A style. A way of doing things. Just because he was God in blue jeans—I mean, in a robe—doesn't mean he didn't have strategies. When we think of ways and means, we think of Paul. But what about Jesus? Why did he send his disciples out in twos? Why ahead of him? Why the specific instructions? Why didn't he answer questions? (I think he knew the answers.) Why, after Jesus confused them, didn't he explain himself, but instead turned to the others still hanging around and asked if they wanted to leave, too? Why? And do our lives and the ministries we lead look like that?

I know for myself the answer to that last question is a painful and resounding “NO.” My life looks like Carl. My style doesn’t typically emulate that of Jesus. Maybe a bit of Paul or Peter. But not Jesus, the one I say I follow and want to be like. Not sure why, but... it’s true.

Rick has done an amazing job of cleverly compelling us back into the arena of Jesus’ style and way. The questions he raises and the answers he suggests are right out of Jesus 101. You’ll feel horrible one second, because you’re not sure how you missed that—and then redeemed the next second as he gently leads you back to the One we all want so desperately to follow. The specific suggestions Rick poses for doing ministry in the way of Jesus are worth the book alone.

This isn’t just a call for youth workers to be more like Jesus; it’s more specifically a call to do ministry the way Jesus did. It’s a book of ideas, strategies, and thoughts that will change the way you think about everything. There aren’t many books like that today. This one is!

—Carl Medearis (carlmedearis.com) is author of *Speaking of Jesus: The Art of Not-Evangelism*, *Tea With Hezbollah*, and *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships*. He founded and leads the Simply Jesus Gathering (simplyjesusgathering.com).



JESUS CENTERED
YOUTH MINISTRY

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of this Jesus-centered journey, a series of apparently random and disconnected cliffhangers will help set the context...

Cliffhanger #1: In her 10-week devotional prayer resource *Whispers of Hope*, venerated Bible teacher Beth Moore wrestles with the tension Christian people feel as we try to reconcile the static claims of the Bible with the fire hose of information blasted at us by a know-it-all culture:

“As the information whirlwind swirls around us, we have an anchor in the Word of God. All the peace seekers in the world can’t write a better thesis on community living than the Ten Commandments. All the psychiatrists in the yellow pages can’t write a better emotional health plan than biblical forgiveness and divine healing. All the financial advisers on Wall Street can’t suggest wiser money management than the book of Proverbs. Marital advice? Sexual fulfillment? Guidelines on business partnerships? How to be single and happy? It’s all there. Better yet, it never needs an upgrade.”¹

Here Moore is making a case for the Bible as a sort of “user’s manual for life”—not at all an unreasonable argument in the Christian community. But this conventional understanding of *what the Bible is for* has brought us to the cliff’s edge. This widely embraced tips-and-techniques posture toward



the story of God is like a Trojan horse in the church. It has insinuated itself inside our “gates” and released an enemy that has undermined and gutted our commitment to Christ. It not only fails to resonate with young people but, more than that, it’s partially responsible for the mass exodus of Millennials and NetGens from the church. Hang with me...

Cliffhanger #2: Donald Miller, author of *Searching for God Knows What*, says he once conducted an experiment in a Bible college class he was teaching—he told his students he was going to explain the basics of the gospel message to them, but leave out one crucial truth. He challenged them to find and identify the missing truth:

“I told them man was sinful, and this was obvious when we looked at the culture we lived in. I pointed out specific examples of depravity [in our culture]. Then I told the class that man must repent, and showed the Scriptures that spoke firmly of this idea. I used the true-life example I heard from a preacher about a man in Missouri who, warning people of a bridge that had collapsed, shot a flare gun directly at oncoming cars so they would stop before they drove over the bridge to their deaths. I said I was like that man, shooting flares at cars, and they could be mad at me and frustrated, but I was saving their lives, because the wages of sin is death, and they had to repent in order to see heaven. I then pointed to Scripture about the wages of sin being death, and talked at length about how sin separates us from God.”

Miller continued on, describing in detail the beauty of morality and the great hope of heaven, and all the incredible things we can experience once we're saved from the consequences of our sin. When he finished, Miller asked his classroom of upperclassmen, all of them well into their journey at Bible college, to identify the missing "crucial truth." And Miller writes: "I presented a gospel to Christian Bible college students and left out Jesus. Nobody noticed..." Hang with me again...

Cliffhanger #3: I was in the room while a nationally known youth ministry expert led a large gathering of training-hungry youth workers through his workshop. After our mid-afternoon break, he told us a guy had come up to him and asked: "You know, all your strategies are fine, but aren't we supposed to be focusing on Jesus in youth ministry?" The ministry expert smiled as he related this encounter, then spread his arms toward the crowd and told us how he'd responded: "Of course youth ministry is about Jesus—c'mon, that's a given!" And a couple-hundred youth workers chuckled and nodded their heads in agreement, affirming and even underscoring the ridiculous underpinnings of the guy's question, eager to move on to more pressing concerns...

Over the Cliff

I know it sounds oversimplified—but the question that seemed so unnecessary to that ministry expert, and to that roomful of youth workers, is actually the most crucial question of our time:

“Aren’t we supposed to be focusing on Jesus?”

Well, of course, we say... That’s like asking us if it’s important for us to breathe. We’re already doing that, for Pete’s sake. And what’s wrong with all that Beth Moore stuff about the Bible having all the answers we need for every area of concern? The Bible is a fantastic “user’s manual”! And big deal, so a Bible college class didn’t immediately recognize the artful way Donald Miller left Jesus out of his gospel narrative—if I’d been there, I wouldn’t have been fooled by that. Whatever this “Jesus-centered” approach to ministry is, it sounds like an unnecessary reiteration. We already have that covered.

At the core of this book is the certain diagnosis that we clearly don’t “already have that covered”—that ministry people, by and large, have simply and subtly forgotten that Jesus is at the center of everything. Seven years ago, when the first version of this book was published, one reviewer wrote: “The book is essentially about what the title suggests, building a youth ministry that is focused on Jesus. At first glance this seemed a little trivial and obvious...”

We’d never admit that we’ve forgotten Jesus in our commonly accepted approaches to ministry and discipleship and Bible study, but our actions are drowning out our words. We need this cliffhanger context because we have unwittingly, even unconsciously, taken Jesus for granted in the rich excess of Western Christian culture. We have functionally moved on to bigger, better things that seem more relevant to the challenges facing the church: new and innovative church structures, ministry approaches that appeal to postmodern

and even post-Christian young people, and social concerns that resonate with a globally aware constituency.

If our focus on Jesus is really akin to breathing, then the evidence suggests that most churches, and most youth ministries, are using a ventilator to stay alive. They don't *breathe Jesus* with the force of their own passionate impetus. We'll explore the truth about this impossible reality from many vantage points, because there's plenty of evidence that the impossible has happened in the American church. But more importantly, we'll explore together what a *Jesus-centered ministry* actually looks and sounds and tastes like.

Bored by Everything but Jesus

Almost a decade ago, I was invited to speak at a youth ministry conference hosted by a very large church in the Midwest. The organizers asked me to lead a two-hour pre-conference session for youth workers who wanted something a little deeper, a little more revolutionary. At the time, I was experimenting with a training idea that focused every aspect of youth ministry on a deepening attachment to Jesus. As we explored the possibilities together, a subtle shift of atmosphere grew in the room. By the end of those two hours, that little gathering of 30 or so youth workers had become a runaway worship-train. We were crying and laughing and hungry for more of Jesus. Some people in the room, with many long years of ministry on their résumé, waited in line to tell me a sobering revelation: that they'd never really tasted deeply of Jesus and had never appreciated his height and depth and breadth. I understood exactly what they were trying to say.

So when I emerged from that two-hour training session that had morphed into something much bigger and better, my appetite for Jesus was voracious. What happened during those two hours was messy and unpredictable and... beautiful. Though the session was focused on learning a new way of doing ministry, it had morphed into one of the most powerful worship experiences of my adult life. And with my leadership responsibilities completed, I was free to roam the rest of the conference, popping into as many workshops and general sessions as I could cram in. I listened to many of the best experts in youth ministry that day, all of them brilliant and many of them longtime friends. But by the end of that day, I felt a growing restlessness—a reaction to a *deadening* in my soul as I tried to process the onslaught of ministry “tips and techniques.”

As evening settled in, that deadness had spread into a kind of depression, so I found an empty, overstuffed chair in the huge and bustling atrium. I needed to pray, and it was easy to isolate myself in the middle of the throng. In my “cone of silence,” I asked a simple question: “Why, why, why, Jesus, am I feeling this way?” Tears streamed down my face, and pain was in my eyes. And then, in one of those moments when the voice of Jesus is crystal clear, he said this to me:

“You’re bored by everything but me now.”

I knew it was true as soon as I heard it. Great strategies and tested principles for ministry are fine; they just can’t replace the intoxicating presence of Jesus. If you showed

up at a cooking class and discovered Oprah was teaching it, you'd probably be less impressed with her recipes and more interested in... *her*. I'd always defined discipleship as a progression that looked a lot like doing well in school—studying hard, growing in knowledge, doing well on “tests.” But those things, I realized, now paled in comparison to the undeniable truth: True disciples are captured and carried away by Jesus. They are so “stuck” on him that the natural outcome of their attachment to him is a perpetual willingness to give over their life to him.

It's not that all the tips and techniques I'd been hearing were somehow contrary to a Jesus-centered youth ministry, any more than the cup holders in my Honda CR-V are contrary to its drivetrain. The cup holders are nice, needed accessories, but the car won't move without an engine and transmission. At the time of this unexpected revelation, I'd spent almost two decades as editor of Group Magazine, the world's most popular youth ministry resource. I'd been pointing leaders toward the “cool cup holders” of youth ministry for a long time, and when I was asked to speak, I had a long menu of well-crafted cup-holder strategies to choose from. But that was all over in a moment. From that teary moment in an overcrowded atrium until now, I've never spoken about anything other than Jesus-centered ministry again.

But if a youth ministry of brilliant tips and techniques must now take a back seat to a youth ministry that's inexorably centered around Jesus, what far-reaching implications will this have on what we *do and say and emphasize*? I now have

eight years of practice and conversation and experimentation under my belt. I've led thousands of youth workers through an eight-hour Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry experience, and many of them have told me how this fundamental change in focus has first upended and then super-charged everything they do in ministry. In those eight years, my own children have grown up in a Jesus-centered household, and I've seen firsthand the fruits of this focus in their lives. My teenage daughter Lucy must cope with an adolescent challenge that is unusual among her peers: She, like her parents, is also bored by everything but Jesus. And her passion for him has already driven her into a life of mission and outreach to "the least of these."

When Jesus is the center of everything, and when people are drawn into closer orbit around him, fruit happens. That's just the way things work. The rest of this book serves as a welcome mat into a whole new reality. Walk through this door and you'll discover a new way of leading your ministry to students that feels simpler and more purposeful. And along the way, you'll find what your soul has always craved.



Part One

Beeline Imperatives

During the heyday of the “What Would Jesus Do?” fad, I started to doubt the foundations of the movement. The central question of the book the WWJD frenzy was based on, Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps*,³ is simple: “If Christians are supposed to be following Jesus, why aren’t they making more of an impact in their daily lives?” The book’s answer was to imagine what everyday life might be like if all of us simply talked and acted more like Jesus. Well, that *would* change everything—especially if we took some kid’s Taco Bell burrito, blessed it, and fed a stadium full of people with it. But as far as I could tell from my perch as editor of Group Magazine, the WWJD movement *hadn’t* changed everything.

Maybe, I pondered, the Christ-following lives we think we’re living are actually disconnected from the real Jesus of the prophets and the Gospels and the Epistles. It’s fine to work up my imagined Jesus-response when someone cuts me off on the freeway, but really the whole thing desperately depends on my own intimacy with Christ. I realized something profound: I could miss Jesus entirely by arrogantly assuming that my imagined responses to a partially understood Jesus meant that I was really following Jesus.

“What does ‘follow Jesus’ mean anyway?” I asked myself. Have I really soaked in the personality of Jesus—pursued him as the most fascinating, enigmatic, lightning-bolt person who ever lived? Am I as passionately interested in him as I’m “supposed to be”? And if he’s really all that incredible, why are “supposed-to’s” necessary? People who are caught up in a romantic relationship don’t have to be told to focus on their

beloved; it's hard to stop thinking about the person, actually. No matter what we're doing or who we're doing it with, our thoughts stray to the object of our passion. To use the language of C.H. Spurgeon (more on him in Chapter 5), our life is "beelined" to our beloved. But it isn't the momentum of a "should"; it's that attraction of a lover. There's an enormous distinction between the two.

Teenagers today are staying away from church—or leaving it altogether—because so many of them have been "shoulded" into a relationship with God or the church. If they, instead, had a kind of romantic attachment to Jesus—a passion for him that created a beeline momentum in their life—they'd not only stay connected to the church, they'd also bring a bunch of their friends with them. This book is an exploration of a needed, even a desperate, shift away from conventional youth ministry toward something more transformative. But this journey doesn't start or end with "shoulds." It starts and ends with a continual re-introduction to the Great Love of our lives.



CHAPTER ONE

RESPONDING TO THE BAT-SIGNAL

“Holy Bat-Signal, Batman!”—Robin

When I was growing up in the fuzzy recesses of American history, I’d get off the school bus every day and rush home so I could catch that afternoon’s episode of *Batman*—a campy, stilted, over-the-top precursor to the dark and brooding film franchise of today. I can still remember the siren call of the blaring, syncopated theme song: “*Duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, Batman!*” Of course, central to many of that show’s storylines was the moment when Police Commissioner Gordon decided to switch on the Bat-Signal, a specially modified klieg searchlight that projected a stylized symbol of a bat on the skies above Gotham City. The police used the signal to contact and summon Batman when they were facing an emergency.

If the church is a stand-in for Gotham City, we’re at the point now where we need Commissioner Gordon (Billy Graham? Rick Warren? Pope Francis?) to flip on that Bat-Signal, because the body of Christ in Western culture is facing an emergency. More than 200,000 churches in the United States are in decline. Every year, more than 4,000 of them close their doors for good. The people who’ve stuck with the church have a higher average age than the general population, and if you

backtrack through the generations you'll find that the younger people are, the less likely they are to be connected with a church.

Of course, the United States continues to be a “Christian nation,” with 95 percent of Americans believing in God. But the most generous estimate of the percentage of people who still attend church regularly is 40 percent, and the real weekly attendance figure is almost certainly closer to 17 percent (the number pegged by researchers who actually count Sunday attenders). And here's the real kick in the gut: In the space of just five years, the percentage of teenagers attending church every week has plummeted by 25 percent (from 20 percent to 15 percent).⁴

All our conventional responses to this steamrolling crisis have missed the mark. We've tried to become more relevant, more glitzy, more tolerant, more technologically savvy, more flexible, more professional, more sophisticated, more purpose-driven, more comprehensive, more socially aware, more... more. But all our “mores” have done nothing to reverse the trend of disengagement. Even though there are more highly trained, fully resourced youth workers than at any other time in the church's history, the youth ministry landscape looks bleaker than ever before. The evidence is telling us that, despite our best efforts, today's teenagers just aren't getting who Jesus *really* is. And that's the biggest problem facing us, because it's the disconnect that's forming the “cliffhanger” context I described in this book's Introduction.

- The Bible is not, fundamentally, a “user’s manual for life,” as so many populist Bible teachers assert. It’s the story of God, and God has made the point of that narrative (in *both* Testaments) his Son, Jesus.
- The reason Donald Miller could present a Jesus-less gospel to Bible college students without a single person picking up on it is because we’ve already conditioned young people to embrace a version of the “good news” that’s fundamentally about making life work better, not about a grateful, passionate pursuit of the “Scandalon.”
- And the reason youth ministry experts, and so many ministry leaders, *assume* we’re already focusing on Jesus when we’re not is that we’re home-blind. We believe we’ve talked about Jesus so much already that it’s time to move on to more interesting, unexplored territory.

The Disappearing Jesus

I was talking with a junior high girl who’d just served as a leader in a churchwide worship experience during Holy Week. She’d spent several days leading people from her congregation into a deeper relationship with Jesus through an interactive devotional experience. The girl was giddy with excitement about the whole thing. I told her I like to ask teenagers to describe Jesus to me—just because I’m curious about how they see him.

“So,” I asked, “what are some words you’d use to describe Jesus to someone who’s never heard of him?”

She scrunched her forehead and tried to wrestle that question to the ground. Finally, she offered this hopeful response: “Well, I’d have to say he’s really, really nice.”

She was ready to leave it right there, so I asked: “Remember that time Jesus made a whip and chased all the money changers out of the Temple? Does that story change the way you’d describe Jesus?”

She scrunched her forehead again. The smile disappeared from her face. I’d created a kind of intolerable dissonance in her. Finally, with a tone of desperation, she landed on this: “Well, I know Jesus is nice, so what he did must have been nice.”

I nodded politely and thanked her for thinking through her response. And then I got an idea. What if I asked teenagers all over the country the same question? Maybe I could find some common threads in their responses. So I turned it into a Group Magazine project and hired video crews in five major metropolitan areas to stop teenagers randomly on the street and ask them a simple question: “How would you describe Jesus?”

When I got all the raw footage back, I quickly discovered my experience with the junior high girl wasn’t an aberration. Without fail, teenagers’ first and favorite descriptive word for Jesus was always *nice*. Here’s a sliver-sampler of their comments:

- “I’d describe Jesus as a nice, friendly guy.”
- “[He’s] a very nice, caring guy.”
- “He’s, um, nice.”
- “Umm... [he’s] very nice?”
- “He was a good person.”
- “He’s a nice, friendly person.”⁵

These comments were profoundly sad for me. Sure, Jesus was “nice” to the people he healed or fed or rescued. But he would never be voted Mr. Congeniality. He definitely wasn’t nice when he was blasting (over and over) religious leaders or calling his lead disciple “Satan” or an innocent Canaanite woman a “dog” or telling the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and follow him if that ruler wanted to “inherit eternal life.” In Matthew 23, in The Message paraphrase, Jesus told the Pharisees they were “hopeless”—not once, but *seven times* in a row—and then he planted three exclamation marks at the end of that diatribe, calling them “manicured grave plots,” “total frauds,” and “snakes.” In Luke 11:37-45, the good doctor Luke relates this often-overlooked awkward encounter involving Jesus. As you read, think how you’d feel if you were a church leader who’d graciously invited an itinerant preacher to have dinner with your family:

“When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at

the table. But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you. Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it.’ One of the experts in the law answered him, ‘Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.’ ”

I can just imagine this scene: You’re not even eating dinner yet when your invited guest suddenly wipes the polite smile off your face by repeatedly insulting you. Then, still managing to respond politely and trying to give your guest the benefit of the doubt, you innocently ask him if he’s aware that he’s insulting you. Jesus picks up after verse 45 by effectively saying, “Yes, I’m aware I’m insulting you, and I’m just getting started....”

The point is that a *merely* nice Jesus is no Jesus at all; he’s like a declawed version of Narnia’s Aslan. And if Jesus isn’t really

Jesus to you, your connection to the church will devolve into a fragile cultural commitment, not a real relationship with a real person. My pastor, Tom Melton, once told me: “We don’t really believe Jesus is beautiful; otherwise, we wouldn’t describe our relationship with him as so much work.” We “work at” our relationship with Jesus, and urge our teenagers to do the same, because the declawed Jesus we’ve settled for *requires us to work* if we want to maintain a connection to him, or worship him, or serve him. The false Jesus of our conventional narratives arouses no passion in students. Their passivity toward him is a natural result of the descriptions they’ve heard of him—the tips-and-techniques bastardizations of the things he said and did.

A declawed Jesus isn’t strong and fierce and *big* enough to walk with students (or us) into the fiery furnaces of everyday life. They’re facing big challenges and struggles, and they’re looking for someone or something to help them through or give them the courage they need to survive the blows they’ve endured. Jimmy Fallon landed the best gig in late-night television because he’s a nice, likeable, relentlessly upbeat guy, but you wouldn’t choose him as your “wingman” if you were walking into a dark alley in a bad part of town. “Nice Jesus” isn’t hard enough or tough enough or real enough to walk with teenagers into their own dark alleys of life—and that’s exactly why they’re asking us to have a deeper, more real conversation about him. Because the only Jesus they’ve experienced in the church is a Mr. Rogers knockoff, they’ve naturally turned to “lesser gods” that promise better results, including:

- humanism
- social justice
- drugs and alcohol
- affluence
- video games
- social networking
- sexual experimentation
- spirituality
- sports
- academic achievement

It's clear that despite our best efforts—all our training, commitment, resources, and creativity—today's teenagers just aren't getting who Jesus really is, or they aren't getting *enough* of who he really is, or they're getting, literally, a fake Jesus. As a result, few of them are living passionately with Christ in their everyday lives. According to Dr. Christian Smith's research for the *National Study of Youth and Religion* (youthandreligion.org), nine out of 10 American young people (and their parents) don't have what social researchers call a "devoted" faith. That means:

- their faith in Christ isn't central to their life;
- they don't know the basics of their faith (our own research finds that four out of 10 Christian teenagers say "a good person can earn eternal salvation through good deeds," and almost a quarter of them say Jesus "committed sins while he lived on earth"); and

- they don't see Jesus making an impact in their everyday life—he's merely a church thing.⁶

The Onset of Apathy

Without the passion of a “devoted faith” in Jesus, all that’s left is a cultural commitment to churchgoing. And we all know *that* cultural norm is quickly evaporating. The so-called “dropout rate” of regular-attending teenagers is 45 percent.⁷ That means almost half of our “regulars” stop going to church once they graduate from high school. We’ve seen this kind of slide-into-the-abyss before, in post-war Britain. Just after World War II, it was culturally common to attend church in Britain. But today, weekly church attendance is 6 percent, and in many counties it’s less than 1 percent. Fewer than 10 percent of British children attend Sunday school. And there are far more “de-churched” people (33 percent) than monthly attenders (15 percent). The biggest declines are among men, young people, and the poor. And here’s the final kicker: British pollsters have removed the following census question because it no longer garners a statistically significant percentage: “Do you profess a specific faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord?” Church, and an everyday relationship with Jesus, is “off the radar” for Brits.⁸

It’s bad enough when there’s a populist backlash against the church; what’s worse is a church that doesn’t even show up as something worthy of backlash. At Group’s Future of the Church summit, I was recently with Michael Lindsay, president of Gordon College and former lead consultant for religion and culture for the George H. Gallup International

Institute. In one of his presentations, he made a stunning declaration. It's the first time I've heard a respected American religious researcher describe the church, and a committed relationship with Jesus, as "off the radar" in our culture. During a break, just to make sure he was serious, I asked Lindsay if this was a throwaway line, or if "off the radar" was a carefully chosen descriptor. Our relationship with the church, he affirmed, has devolved from a discipline of loyalty into a quagmire of apathy.

We are following the Brits down a cultural Slip 'N Slide™ into a secularized reality. And they followed the French before them. Lindsay told me: "Charles Taylor at Notre Dame wrote a book called *The Secular Age*—as levels of education rise, we begin to lose our sense of the supernatural. We no longer attribute to God things we can explain. A full-fledged social movement is advancing the cause of secularization in our culture; America is turning into France. The academy and the arts are now setting the cultural agenda. We reward the avant-garde in both of these institutions."

An "off the radar" church that is overshadowed by a growing secularization means that an "all-in" relationship with Jesus is far down the list of teenagers' priorities. Instead, the *National Study of Youth and Religion* found that kids essentially see God as a "divine butler" or a "cosmic therapist." Jesus' job is to be all-in with their needs and their problems, while making no demands on their time, their talent, or their passions. He exists to help them do what they want, make them happy, and solve their problems.

Tim McTague, lead guitarist for the critically acclaimed Christian metalcore band Underoath, sums up this “divine butler” mentality well in a piece he wrote for CCM Magazine:

“I believe that we... have lost sight of what Christ intended our lives to be and the purpose and faith He gave His life to teach us. As long as we give our 39 cents a day and make it to church on Wednesday and Sunday, we’re all good... Whatever happened to the church of Acts, where people would sell all they had and give to the poor and join a body of thousands of people, living a life of prayer, community and servanthood? We now sit, 2,000 years later, in our comfortable homes and Lexuses and mega-church youth groups watching the rest of the world rot away and starve to death. Where is Christ in our watered down, self-serving hybrid of faith and hypocrisy? God exists to pay our mortgages and heal our families, but, when it comes time to sacrifice something of our own, we look away... Somewhere along the way, we decided that being a Christian wasn’t a life of serving but a life of being served. God is real and is waiting for a few real Christians to step up and let Him work through them the way He worked through the disciples. But it will cost everything....”⁹

It’s easy to “rush to judgment” about this apathetic, self-centered approach to faith in Christ. But the hard truth is that this entrenched attitude is the natural byproduct of the church environment teenagers have been exposed to. Our

research pegs the number of kids who say their church has helped them learn that “Jesus is God” at an overwhelming 99 percent.¹⁰ But that’s a semantic panacea. The truth is that too few of them are getting a healthy exposure to the barefaced Jesus of the Bible, and too many of them have heard what *we think* about Jesus. But they’re not experiencing his raw presence for themselves. According to the NSYR, most American young people believe that:

- God exists, and that this being created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- this God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other—as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.
- God doesn’t need to be particularly involved in your life, except when you need him to resolve a problem.
- good people go to heaven when they die.
- church is just another thing on a to-do list; it isn’t a context where they enjoy their closest friendships.

This list of functional beliefs offers no evidence that young people have had a close encounter with the Jesus described by the Gospel writers. In his foreword to Mark Galli’s book *Jesus Mean and Wild*, Eugene Peterson writes: “Every omitted detail

of Jesus, so carefully conveyed to us by the Gospel writers, reduces Jesus. We need the whole Jesus. The complete Jesus. Everything he said. Every detail of what he did.”¹¹

For almost all teenagers, Jesus isn't the hub of their life; he's either a "spoke" on their life's wheel (just a church thing) or not even part of the wheel. They have no firm idea of who Jesus really is, why he came, what he actually said, what he actually did, or what he's doing now. And when something happens in their "real" world, they struggle to understand how Jesus is a part of it.

Many likely reasons exist for this crisis of discipleship in the church, but the conventional explanations I hear most often (tied to the "mores" I've listed on page 6) aren't THE REASON. I'd like to suggest this:

Life is draining out of the Western church, and most youth ministries, because we're not setting the kind of growth environment that is conducive for disciples.

Be the Pig

Our challenge is to make the pursuit of Jesus the central, consuming, desperate focus of our ministry with teenagers. This is what an environment dominated by the momentum of an all-in relationship with him promotes and facilitates. The French Laundry in Napa Valley is one of the world's top-rated restaurants. If you work there, the highest honor you can receive is a T-shirt given by the owners to a select few. The

T-shirt slogan “Be the Pig” refers to the difference between pigs and chickens. A chicken might offer up an egg for the meal, but the pig gives his life for it. All-in disciples of Jesus are pigs, not chickens.

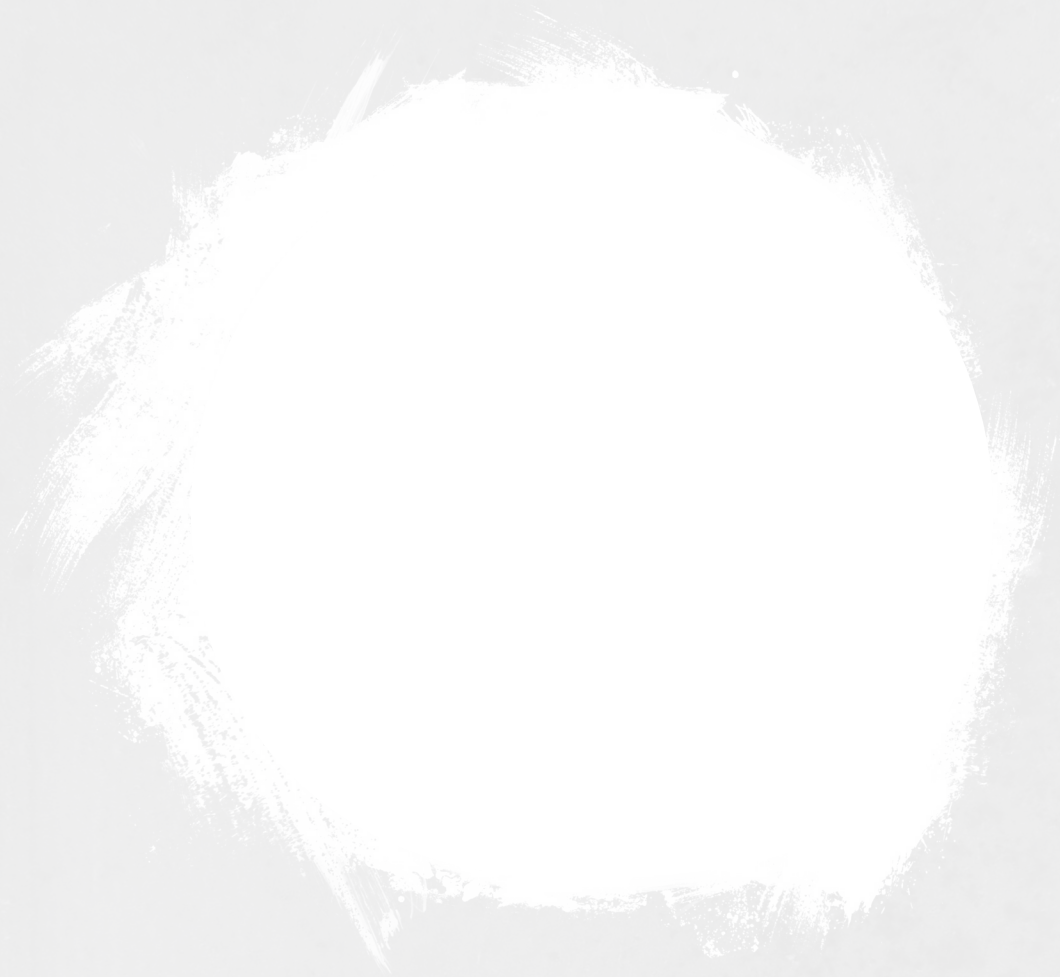
The clearest biblical translation of this kind of “be the pig” discipleship is described in John 6. It happened 2,000 years ago on a lonely Capernaum beachfront. When the massive crowds who are following the rock-star Jesus—those who’ve been captured by his miracles, healings, and teachings—hear him say, seven times in a row, that they must “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood” or they’ll have “no life in yourselves,” they’re disgusted and disoriented enough to escape him en masse. And after the dust and noise from their retreat has cleared, Jesus looks at his remaining 12 disciples—also likely disgusted and disoriented—and asks this incredible question: “You do not want to leave too, do you?” And, here, Peter steps to the plate and answers like a pig, so to speak: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Peter, like the masses who’ve just stampeded down the hill, scrambling to get away from Jesus, would likely escape him if he could. But he just can’t. He so identifies himself with Jesus that he can’t imagine leaving him. He is all-in, a pig not a chicken, and this is what discipleship *really* looks like. Later Paul, another all-in disciple—one of the greatest thinkers and apologists in history—describes his orientation to Jesus this way: “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

That declaration would make a great tagline to reorient every catchy youth ministry name in the Western world.

I believe youth ministries, and churches in general, have been using a flawed strategy for discipleship that produces chickens, not pigs. I call it the “understand and apply” strategy. It assumes people grow deeper in their faith when they understand biblical principles and apply them to their lives. As we’ll explore in Chapter 3, I think “understand and apply” has proven to be a marginal strategy, at best, and has weak biblical support. The ultimate reason teenagers stop following Christ after high school is that *they can*. I mean, they’re not “ruined” for him, as Peter was when Jesus asked if he was going to leave, too. A disciple’s answer to that question is something like: “I don’t understand a lot of what you’re saying, and I can’t comprehend the things you do, but I know I have nowhere else to go. You’ve ruined me for you.” Disciples answer this way because of the depth of their attachment to Jesus.

Because of the vast number of other environmental forces that are shaping teenagers today, *only* a deeper attachment to Jesus has any chance of stopping the church’s slide toward the abyss. But before we move into a deeper exploration of what this means, and what it might look like in your ministry, we must first assess the power of those other environmental forces in teenagers’ lives to discover why our current strategies to reach them have little or no hope of succeeding.



There's a surging hunger among teenagers for Jesus. New research shows that they want a clearer understanding of what Jesus really said and did, and how faith in him matters in their lives. In fact, that desire is so deep, it's #1 on their "wish list" for what they'd like to talk about at church.

But are we doing that? Even though we assume that everything we do in youth ministry is about Jesus, the evidence is clear: That's not what our students say they're experiencing. So what would a youth ministry look like if it shifted toward a passionate, persistent, and permeating focus on drawing students into a closer orbit around Jesus?

Inside the pages of *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*, you'll discover the foundation for a ministry that is Jesus-centered, along with the bricks for building it. You'll discover that not only is it possible to create this kind of ministry, it's also essential that you pursue this path.

Eight years after his book was first published, introducing the language and structure of a new way of doing youth ministry, author and longtime Group Magazine editor Rick Lawrence has completely rewritten and revised *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*. It's packed with new insight, new research, and dozens of field-tested ideas for planting and nurturing a ministry environment that is Jesus-magnetic.

Help satisfy teenagers' hunger for Jesus in richly nourishing and sustaining ways by shifting the orbit of your ministry.



RICK LAWRENCE has been editor of Group Magazine for 26 years, and serves on the leadership team for the Simply Youth Ministry Conference. He's the author, co-author, or editor of 34 books, including the small-group curriculum *In Pursuit of Jesus* and the books *99 Thoughts on Jesus-Centered Living*, *Shrewd: Daring to Obey the Startling Command of Jesus*, *Sifted: God's Scandalous Response to Satan's Outrageous Demand*, and *Skin in the Game*.

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"In this book, Rick calls us to run arm-in-arm with teenagers—to the epicenter of that mystery, that person, that incarnate child, that troublemaker, that up-ender, that ultimate rescuer."

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