

Endorsements

This is simply an outstanding book! With so many false christs lurking in the world and in our churches today, Pastor Richard deftly gets to the heart of such idolatry. Written with superb narrative wit and great pastoral care, he provides a brilliant tool for the diagnosis, prescription, and curative treatment of such pervasive idolatries. Capturing the plight of multiple misbeliefs with clear and accessible language, Pastor Richard faithfully presents the real Jesus Christ, bloodied and crucified for you, and regularly given to you through His Word and Sacrament. This is a gem for our time!

Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford
Senior Pastor, Zion Lutheran Church and School, Mayer, Minnesota

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Matt Richard has given us a wonderful read, filled with real-life situations that are clear and understandable. His kind and pastoral writing style gives the reader sound biblical theology in a very user-friendly format. He helps us see the many false “christs” around us, pointing out the spiritual dangers of each. Then, he gently shares the real Jesus and therefore the real Gospel in each chapter. I highly recommend this book!

Rev. Dr. Mark J. Buchhop
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Warren, Minnesota
Retired Campus Pastor, University of North Dakota

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Have you ever wondered why Christians seem to believe such different things about Jesus? It’s clear that Matt Richard has, using every tool in his considerable arsenal to bring good order to the chaos. His writing style is highly conversational and relational, applying theological precision to everyday scenarios so that the reader can learn to recognize how each “false christ” impacts a person’s practices and views. His patient “learning by listening” approach to dialogue is a great model for us all.

Heather Choate Davis
Author, Speaker, Theologian

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Timely, engaging, and accessibly written, Richard helps ground and orient his readers in a climate that treats Jesus more as an idea, something for us to imagine and shape, than a real, historical person and the Savior. This is a worthwhile read for pastors hoping to better reach their flock. Moreover, it is an extremely helpful book for laypeople who want to better know the true Jesus and recognize the false christs Jesus Himself warned would sprout up and be proclaimed after His Ascension.

*Wade Johnston, PhD
Assistant Professor of Theology
Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

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It's hard to sell people a dead man on a cross. It's not easy to worship a God you don't get to choose. But it does little good to find a Jesus who doesn't really exist. With real-life narratives and passionate focus, Pastor Richard shares how easy it is to craft a "better" Jesus, one made after our own image, an idol to which we plaster the name "Jesus." More important, he reminds us why it's better to be a doorkeeper in the house of the true God than to reign in the halls of gods that can't help us. The real Jesus has stood up. He is risen, and Pastor Richard will leave you feeling confident that the real Jesus has done this great thing precisely for you.

*Rev. Jonathan Fisk
Host and Producer at KFYO Radio, Creative Director of
Worldview Everlasting, podcaster at RevFisk Raw, and author of the book
BROKEN: Seven Christian Rules that Every Christian Ought to Break*

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Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard provides a series of highly relatable examples of the false christs that American culture has enticed ordinary Christians with. Specifically, these christs offer salvation either through an antinomian rejection of the Law or a legalist rejection of the Gospel. Such false christs are ultimately a byproduct of fallen humanity's compulsion to reject God's objective Word in favor of the individual's inner thoughts and feelings (enthusiasm). In a most excellent manner, Richard gives the reader tools for identifying these false christs and helpful responses to those who devote themselves to such idols.

*Jack D. Kilcrease, PhD
Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology
Institute of Lutheran Theology, Brookings, South Dakota*

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Jesus is an object of fascination for believers and unbelievers alike. But the question remains: “which Jesus?” Is He the Jesus of whom the Scriptures testify and the creeds confess, or is it a plastic Jesus molded by human impulses and imagination? Pastor Matthew Richard has provided a crisp and conversational apologetic for critiquing faulty images of Jesus while inviting both Christians and non-Christians to engage the One whom the Scriptures present as Lord. An added bonus is the discussion questions, making *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* an excellent book to use with an adult study group.

Rev. John T. Pless
Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

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It should be easy to help people understand Jesus—simply read the New Testament! But with so many views of “Jesus” floating around in the media, the news, and classrooms, and so many interpretations of the Bible, it can be a challenge to help people see Jesus, revealed in His Word, and crucified, risen, and ascended for all. Pastor Richard will not only help you talk about Jesus with people you meet every day, but also help steer you through all the noise so that you can listen to—and find hope in—the real Jesus.

Jeffrey Kloha, STM, PhD
Provost Professor of Exegetical Theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

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This is a very timely and well-organized book, perfectly written for the lay person to not only identify the false christs that we, sinners, often inadvertently create for ourselves, but to better understand why people do so. Pastor Richards brilliantly provides his readers with a detailed education in contemporary Christology. More important, he presents us with the true Jesus and constant instruction and encouragement to respond with the true Gospel in genuine empathy and love to those caught up by false christs.

Sandra Ostapowich
Higher Things Conferences Executive, Plano, Texas

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Matthew Richard writes with a pastoral heart. With each counterfeit christ he encounters, he responds with compassion, clarity, and most of all, faithfulness to God’s Word. In this book, Dr. Richard identifies philosophical concepts, cultural landmines, and deep theological truths, and yet he writes in a simple conversational tone that connects with every reader. This book is a “must-have” for our conversations with those holding onto their false christs and when we ourselves slip into these same errors. Above all else, this book is all about Jesus—the real One!

*Rev. Dr. James A. Baneck
Executive Director of Pastoral Education, LCMS*

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Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” Pastor Richard surveys the answers of our time, identifying twelve false christs, all fashioned to suit our sinful desires. With theological tact and pastoral skill, he dismantles these idols, all while tending to the main thing: confessing the true Christ, the Savior of the world. This book will challenge, equip, and most especially comfort you. God be praised for this book!

*Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller
Hope Lutheran Church, Aurora, Colorado
Host of Table Talk Radio; author of Has American Christianity Failed?*

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“That is not the Jesus I know!” How many times have we heard this? Pastor Richard takes us on an enlightening and structured journey of identifying twelve common false christs encountered in Christianity. He does this by providing the reader with easy-to-understand and theologically rich discernment tools. From start to finish, the reader will walk away with a better understanding of who the “real Jesus” is and how He alone stands for poor wretched sinners. Pastor Richard writes with depth, insight, and experience. A definite must for any Christian seeking to faithfully follow Jesus.

*Rev. Eric Ekong
Trinity Lutheran Ministries
Trinity Lutheran Church, Jackson, Michigan*

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With one eye on the truth of Scripture and the other on our changing culture, Dr. Richard separates the real biblical Jesus from our culture's many attempts to re-make Him in its own image. He identifies the tendency of fallen humans, inflamed by relativistic views of truth, to recreate the person of Jesus into a soothing salve that can be spread over false ideologies. Drawing upon a holistic reading of Scripture, Dr. Richard presents us with the real biblical Jesus, who came not to justify sin, but to justify sinners through His substitutionary death and life-giving resurrection.

*Rev. Brad J. Soenksen
Grace Lutheran Church
Erhard, Minnesota*

.....

An everyday guide to Christology. Pastor Richard both unmask the identity of many "false christ" and shows how the devil, the world, and our own sinfulness lead us to worship these idols. Extremely accessible, and yet also full of solid theology, this little book teaches how to evangelically engage the people we meet in our everyday life, recognize when a "false christ" is being proclaimed, and offers Christians a useful guide for engaging our erring neighbor with humility, all the while looking for the opportunity to confess the real Jesus, in whom alone we have real salvation.

*Pastor David Warner
LCMS Church Planter in Spain*

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Everyone seems a bit too eager to answer Jesus' old question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" This book will help take some of the subtlety out of the devil's craft. With compassion and detail, Pastor Matt Richard exposes twelve deadly twists that *flesh and blood* have put on Jesus (and therefore the Gospel) so that you can confess Him truthfully as the *Father in heaven has revealed* Him.

*Rev. Sean Daenzer
Trinity Lutheran, Great Bend, North Dakota
Peace Lutheran, Barney, North Dakota*

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Rev. Richard shows us who the genuine Jesus is by exposing a dozen popular false christs that compete with Him in today's religious marketplace. Good theology well written is always a pleasure to read, especially when the topic is the person and work of our Savior, Jesus Christ. This is an excellent book, written in a conversational and easy-to-read style. Rev. Richard refutes false conceptions about who Jesus is, what He has done for us, and what He says to us. He does so clearly and pastorally.

*Pastor Rolf D. Preus
Trinity Lutheran Church, Sidney, Montana;
St. John Lutheran Church, Fairview, Montana*

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The landscape of life in the twenty-first century is filled with a confusing number of “customized christs.” Matthew Richard handily summarizes how to recognize these manufactured messiahs who might sway some of us, but cannot save any of us, so that we might stand up for the real Jesus.

*The Rev. John Arthur Nunes, PhD
President, Concordia College—New York*

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False idols and fake christs are everywhere. This book is a bold and engaging critique of the many false christs in the twenty-first century. It depicts twelve false christs and reveals how they are nothing more than shams, counterfeits, and falsifications of Jesus. Pastor Richard has written a winsome book that points out not only the failures of false christs but also the firm truth of the real Christ Jesus.

*Rev. A. Trevor Sutton
Associate Pastor, St. Luke Lutheran Church, Lansing, Michigan
Author of Being Lutheran*

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In C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, an angel offered to kill the red lizard perched on a man's shoulder and so set him free from a comfortably cherished substitute savior along with its lies and false comfort. Reluctantly he allowed the angel to kill his whispering lizard and so was delivered from its tyranny and destruction. With the insight of that angel and the skill of a surgeon, Dr. Richard wields the sword of God's Word to diagnose and remove the red lizards in false christ's clothing that people have embraced rather than the real Jesus revealed in Holy Scripture. Will the real Jesus stand up? Indeed, not only does the real Jesus stand up throughout the pages of Dr. Richard's book, but the real Jesus also slays the lizards and dragons who try to take His place and lead His people astray.

*Rev. Joshua D. Reimche, Pastor
Our Savior Lutheran, Bottineau, North Dakota
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WILL THE
Real Jesus
please stand up?

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12 FALSE CHRISTS

Matthew Richard





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Finally, I want to thank Laura and Barbara, my editors. Your professionalism and editorial understanding have been most beneficial to this project, as well as to me personally as a writer.

Sub Cruce.

Introduction

Free Will, Idolatry, and Postmodern Relativism

I have met a lot of Jesus Christs in my life. I have met them on the Delta 5849 flight to St. Louis. I have met them at coffee shops, at college, on social media, and on the streets. I have even met them in the church, on mission trips, at assisted-living apartments, at church picnics, at small-group home Bible studies, at weddings, and at my office. Indeed, in my short life, I have met a lot of Jesuses. All of them different; all of them unique.

But wait a minute, how can there be more than one Jesus? Does not the Bible and history clearly show us that there is only one Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph? Yes, the Bible teaches there is only one Jesus Christ. There is only one authentic and real Jesus Christ. As we confess in the Apostles' Creed, there is one Jesus Christ "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead." However, despite there being only one Jesus, we find an overabundance of forgeries in North America.

There is no shortage of false christs in the twenty-first century.

These false christs are portrayed, talked about, and beloved within our large North American culture. Like all the Santa Clauses scattered across our malls during the Christmas season, there are dozens upon dozens of look-alike false christs scattered across America's churches and in homes. Like all the Elvises roaming the streets of Vegas, these look-alike christs roam in and out of our spiritual conversations and lives and beliefs. These christs may look like Jesus and sound like Jesus, but they are nothing more than counterfeits. They are pseudo christs. They are false christs. Like the mall Santa Clauses and the

Vegas Elvises, they are not real, even though they are embraced, loved, promoted, revered, and sometimes even taught by well-meaning, yet misinformed Christians.

Who exactly are these false christs? Do you know them? Do you worship them? You might be surprised at the answers. In the upcoming chapters of this book, we will meet twelve of them. The chances are good you have already met some of these false christs, most likely in different places and within different circumstances. But before we meet these twelve false christs, we must pause and ask ourselves a question. How did these false christs come to be in the first place? I have several theories about why this is.

For starters, we live in a culture that offers an abundance of choices and exalts everyone's personal free will—we are encouraged to do what we want, whenever we want. We are told that we are masters and commanders of our lives. This leads us to try and individualize everything to suit our fancy. For example, we personalize our social

If we can personalize our music, movies, and food, why can't we customize Jesus the way we want?

circles by friending people on Facebook and unfriending others. We personalize our feeds on Twitter to see only what we want to see, allowing us to ignore that which we find irrelevant. We also personalize our cable channel

listings, our radio channels on music apps, our sub sandwiches, our fantasy football teams, and our smartphones—just to name a few of the many things which we personalize to suit our preferences. If we can personalize our music, movies, and food, why can't we customize Jesus the way we want?

There is a second reason why I believe there are so many false christs. To explain this second reason, let us consider Peter, one of Jesus' disciples. Peter is best known for his remarkable confession about Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (see Matthew 16:13–20). After Peter's confession of whom Jesus is, Jesus goes on to explain what it means for Him to be the Son of the Living God. Jesus

revealed that He, as the real Christ, must go to Jerusalem to suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised (16:21). Peter, though, had a hard time accepting this explanation, especially the suffering and dying part. As a result, Peter ultimately chewed Jesus out (well, Bibles use the word “rebuked”) because he didn’t like what he was hearing. Peter took Jesus aside and began to scold Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (16:22). On the surface, we might just

THE MYTH OF FREE WILL

Free will exalts mankind’s ability to “choose.” While it is true that mankind is free to choose things such as what kind of food to eat or what kind of car to drive, it is not true that mankind can choose salvation, choose Jesus, choose whom we will serve, choose to surrender, choose to be obedient, and so on. In a nutshell, free will theology teaches that mankind can choose good over evil. Considering this, we need to ask ourselves: if our wills are free, then why do we continue to sin and choose evil? It seems to me that if our wills are free, it would be simple for us to say “no” to sin and “yes” to righteousness—problem solved. However, as we look at history, we see that this was not the case for millions of people (Christians included) over the last several thousand years.

Furthermore, if our wills are so free, what is stopping us from implementing all the principles and helpful tips in self-help books? Why the lack of success? Let me take this a step further: if our wills are free, why would we even need self-help books or books aiding and encouraging us how to become a better or a more righteously driven person? Doesn’t the very presence of improvement books showing us how to become better validate that we are not free? Ultimately, the reason for the importance of this discussion about free will is that the very Gospel is at stake. In other words, the more a person believes in a free will, the less they will believe in their need for a Savior. The more they will see themselves as bound, the more they will cry out for a Savior. The more perceived freedom, the less the need; the greater the realization of bondage, the greater the need.

assume Peter is scared for his friend. What is wrong with that? Well, what went wrong with Peter is what goes wrong with our culture. When individuals—like Peter—do not like who Jesus really is, they reject what Jesus says about Himself. However, they don't stop with rejecting Jesus; rather, they redefine Him. Yes, when the real Jesus does not fit into a person's narrative and when He does not agree with the way a person figures things should be, He is changed so that He can be supportive of that individual's wants, desires, values, and worldview.

This temptation to redefine Jesus is not only prevalent in our culture today, but it certainly was during the Early Church as well. If I were in Peter's shoes, I am pretty sure that I would have recoiled in horror at Jesus' talk of suffering and death. Like Peter, I would have said something like, "Jesus, if You have power over creation, death, and the devil, let all this silly talk of suffering and death stop! It is depressing! You are God. This despairing talk should not concern us." Tragically, we Christians—with the culture—commandeer this great confession and then redefine who Jesus is according to our hopes and our dreams and our desires. We do this because it is this way with our idolatrous hearts.

I have heard it said that idolatry occurs anytime a person thinks about the Lord in ways that are unworthy of Him. Otherwise stated, idolatry is essentially creating a false image of the Lord. That seems

Our mind works like a hammer and chisel, forming the real Jesus into a creature of our making—carving out that which is uncomfortable and adding enhancements to please our desires.

simple enough; however, we must take note that there is something rather sneaky with idolatry. Idolatry allows the opportunity to not entirely reject the Lord, but an opportunity to redefine

the Lord according to a particular, desired perspective. Idolatry takes the real Jesus captive in the imagination and then chisels away that which is offensive and then glues on extra things that are wanted. Our mind works like a hammer and chisel, forming the real Jesus into a

creature of our making—carving out that which is uncomfortable and adding enhancements to please our desires. (See the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32.)

More specifically, this tactic of not completely rejecting the Lord but redefining Him according to our personal agendas is the result of the sinful nature at work. Keep in mind that the sinful nature—that is, mankind’s corrupt and evil nature everyone has inherited from Adam’s fall into sin—does not believe the Gospel, never has believed the Gospel, and never will believe the Gospel. The sinful nature operates from the context of unbelief. This sinful nature wants independence, not dependence. This sinful nature wants to have everything, including the Lord, underneath its thumb. This freedom and control can be cleverly attained through the means of idolatry. (To learn more about the impact of original sin and

We typically reshape and reform the Lord into the image of ourselves. Life is easier when Jesus is redefined to fit our own agenda and dreams.

IDOLATRY

When we think about the topic of idolatry, it is easy to imagine primitive people groups worshiping and showing their devotion to false deities carved out of stone or wood. While there may be some truth to this general characterization of idolatry, we need to be on guard from such an oversimplification of the subject. This harmless generalization can actually obstruct us from understanding the heart of idolatry. In the words of Martin Luther in his Large Catechism, “[Idolatry] happens not merely by erecting an image and worshiping it, but rather it happens in the heart” (I 20–21). This means that idolatry is so much bigger than worshiping simple wood carvings. Idolatry can happen when we take the Lord and carve Him out in our imaginations to the way we think He should be (i.e., we create a different god) and then we attach our hearts to the false god that we have created in our imaginations. Anytime our fear, love, and trust of the real Jesus is transferred to an imposter christ, we have broken the First Commandment by idolatry.

the sinful nature, there is a beneficial section in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the second article. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession is the Lutheran response to the debates in the sixteenth century about original sin and the sinful nature.) Succinctly stated, the sinful nature is sly in that it will not boldly reject Jesus and the Gospel for fear of being exposed. Rather, the old sinful nature will attempt to redefine Jesus into its image, desires, dreams, hopes, and aspirations. Indeed, idolatry allows a person to redefine and reconstruct the Lord into an image of the one who is committing idolatry. We typically reshape and reform the Lord into the image of ourselves. Life is easier when Jesus is redefined to fit our own agenda and dreams. That is to say, things do not go well when Jesus disagrees with our outlooks on life—for we cannot live with ongoing cognitive dissonance.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

If you have ever been to a junior high school band concert, you have experienced dissonance, though maybe not intentionally. Dissonance happens when band members play the wrong notes. Maybe an F-sharp is to be played, but half the band plays a G, which results in a sound that makes you cringe. You might even want to plug your ears and slam your head against the chair in front of you. Cognitive dissonance is much like this, but instead of musical notes colliding, conflicting thoughts, ideas, and beliefs are crashing into one another.

In regard to Christianity, a person cannot embrace the Christian faith without Jesus. However, if the Jesus as proclaimed in the Bible does not agree with a person's desires, dreams, hopes, and aspirations, there will be cognitive dissonance. A person with cognitive dissonance cannot endure such dissonance for a long period of time. The dissonance in the mind must be resolved. It can be resolved in one of two ways: either the person repents of their wrong desires, dreams, hopes, and aspirations, bringing them into harmony with Jesus, or the person attempts to change the person, work, teaching, and words of Jesus. In regard to cognitive dissonance, it can only be neutralized by repentance or by creating an idol.

The third and final reason for all these false christs is that our current culture is suspicious of claims of objective truth (an objective fixed standard). Our current culture is embedded in a mind-set called postmodern relativism.

Don't let this long philosophical word scare you! Simply put, postmodern relativism says there are no such things as objective standards

Our current culture is suspicious of claims of objective truth (an objective fixed standard).

of truth—truth is what a person believes it to be. Postmodern relativism also says what is true for one person might not be true for another person—truth is relative because it varies from person to person. Therefore, if there is no such thing as objective truth, then truth is up to the individual person, which means nobody can definitively say who Jesus is. Any attempt to definitively and objectively define who Jesus is, such as through the ancient Holy Scriptures, is often met with harsh criticism. Practically speaking, in postmodern relativism, everyone can have whatever view of Jesus they want; everyone is right, for there are no objective rules. However, if a person points out differences, they are immediately told they are not being very loving and should stop judging. Furthermore, postmodernists may ask: “What gives you the right to religiously control *my* personal spirituality?”

POSTMODERN RELATIVISM

Thousands of years ago, there were people called Sophists. The Sophists basically believed that mankind was the measuring stick of all things—each person could judge for him or herself what was good, bad, and beautiful. Furthermore, Sophists were skeptical of anything that expressed itself as an objective universal truth.

Fast forward to the 1970s, and we see that the ancient ideology of the Sophists has emerged in the North American culture through postmodern relativism. Postmodern relativism basically teaches that there is no such thing as objective and universal truths and that what is true for one person may not be true for another.

Our culture is used to choices—and lots of them. Our culture allows the sinful heart to go the way of idolatry. Therefore, our culture rejects a really important objective truth (that is, a rejection of the Holy Scripture’s testimony about Jesus). Our culture also believes that truth varies from person to person. All of this is what allows for such a great diversity of false christs in North America. Choice, idolatry, a rejection of truth: this is the landscape that we find ourselves in, and this is the landscape through which this book attempts to maneuver.

As we journey through the following pages, I introduce you to twelve false christs I have personally encountered over the past twenty years of my life. As previously mentioned, these false christs have been made known to me through individuals I have crossed paths with in various contexts and places. Therefore, these people will be introduced to you as well. As a pastor, I assure you I am not revealing confidential information nor sharing any stories that occurred within the private context of personal confession. I have kept real identities secret by changing names and circumstances. (Think of the people, places, and conversations as works of fiction based upon real life events.) Specifically, you will hear the stories of how these individuals have gone the way of idolatry and in what way various Western cultural ideologies have influenced them.

As you are introduced to the various people in the upcoming chapters of this book, you may find them to be quite familiar. Perhaps the way they talk about life and their view of who Jesus is will remind you of yourself or your own interactions with acquaintances in your life. Or, your friends and family members might hold views similar to those you will meet in this book. If you have not already, then you most likely will in the future. When you do have encounters and conversations, you may wonder how you can respond. Therefore, at the end of each chapter, I will include a brief section titled “How to Respond.” Think of this section as a Christian apologetic and evangelism approach—a way of bolstering our defense of the Christian faith and an encouragement

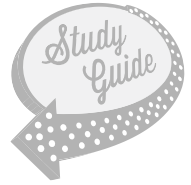
to confess the real Jesus in our everyday conversations. This section will give you ideas of how to respond not only to the people in this book but also to those in your life who subscribe to a false christ.

By the end of this book, we are going to desperately want the real Jesus to please stand up in the midst of all the false christs, telling us for Himself who He really is. As we ponder the last chapter of this book and hear about the real Jesus Christ, we will then be able to contrast the real Jesus with all the false christs. We can then clearly answer who Jesus is, for this is the most important answer and confession the Christian can give. Why? Because who we say Jesus is not only reveals the identity of Jesus but also influences how we understand the Church, how we read the Bible, how we live, and how we know the truth. Who Jesus is has lasting ramifications in this life and the next.

So, join me as we encounter:

The Mascot
 The Option among Many
 The Good Teacher
 The Therapist
 The Giver of Bling
 The National Patriot
 The Social Justice Warrior
 The Moral Example
 The New Moses
 The Mystical Friend
 The Feminized
 The Teddy Bear

Join me in asking, “Will the real Jesus please stand up?”



Let's discuss the Introduction

Read Matthew 16:13–28. The following questions are going to force you to consider the topic of Jesus' identity and what happens when people set their minds on the things of man.

1. During the time of Jesus, what were people saying about His identity? Did everybody agree? (See Matthew 16:13–14.) Who do people say Jesus is today?

2. As we look at Matthew 16:15–19, what was Peter's confession about Jesus' identity? According to Jesus, how was this confession revealed to Peter? What does this revelation mean regarding the Church and the gates of hell?

3. In verse 21, how did Jesus further expound on Peter's confession? In verse 22 how did Peter respond to Jesus' further explanation of His identity? Did he accept it or reject it? Why do you think Peter responded the way that he did?

4. What was Jesus' response to Peter in Matthew 16:23? Why did Jesus respond the way that He did? Does Jesus' response surprise you? Why or why not?

5. What happens when we set our mind on things of man and not the things of God when attempting to define Jesus? What happens when our minds are set on the things of God (i.e., the Scriptures) when trying to identify Jesus?

6. Before you read the rest of the book, write down some of the examples of false christs you have experienced in your life. What context did you experience these idols in? After you finish the book, look back at your list and see if you can match any of them to a specific chapter.



Meet Jillian, the Ethical Hedonist

Our plane was cruising at an altitude of thirty-one thousand feet, and the flight attendants were passing out drinks. My neighbor Jillian, a typical Midwestern woman in her late twenties or early thirties, was pouring her small bottle of wine into a small, red, plastic airline cup as we were talking. Since take off, I had learned she is married and a mother of three. After the flight attendant had moved to the next row, she continued our conversation, saying, “Lately, I have had all sorts of issues with Jesus. I don’t want to. But I do. And I don’t care for that, and I don’t like what I feel are contradictions, and I don’t believe some of it, and I feel bad about all of those feelings.”

Jillian had grown up in a small rural town, attended the local church, participated in youth group, and was homeschooled. In her early twenties, though, she had drifted away from consistent church attendance. The busyness of life, college, marriage, and three kids had brought about her uneven church attendance, and she had never seemed to recover the consistency that she once had.

Although Jillian grew up in a fairly small conservative Midwestern town and in what appeared to be a very stable family, she found great conflict with her family upbringing and some of the teachings of Jesus. Her parents’ values and beliefs had not changed—they still attended Jillian’s childhood church faithfully each week, where her dad was on

the board of trustees and her mom was very active in the altar guild. Needless to say, she was experiencing cognitive dissonance. Jillian was unable to reconcile how she got to the point where she and her family were on different sides of the aisle on so many things—things like sexual ethics, God’s Law, and the doctrine of hell. Furthermore, she was unable to understand why she was at odds with Jesus. When Jillian’s parents and childhood pastor talked about Jesus, it seemed that Jesus was too stern, too critical, and talked about hell too much for her liking. Not only was Jillian a bit offended by this but she also felt disenchanting and confused. Why had Jillian become so different from her parents and those around her if she was raised with the same values and taught the same things? Why did she struggle with Jesus when she once felt so comfortable with Him?

We obviously have a lot to unpack and understand with Jillian; therefore, why don’t we start with the conflict that she was having with her upbringing, family, and Jesus.

To understand the conflict Jillian is experiencing, we must conclude that there are only three plausible reasons for the disunion: Jillian’s family and Jesus had changed, Jillian had changed, or all three had changed to some degree. In our conversation, I learned the church she attended still had the same pastor, and I gathered the church was not one that was easily tossed to and fro by the waves of culture and carried about by every wind of man-made doctrine. Therefore, we can conclude with a fair amount of certainty that her childhood congregation and its teachings about Jesus had not changed. Furthermore, it sounded like Jillian’s family was and is a hardworking and proud Midwestern family that sticks to their guns. That means the most likely scenario is that Jillian herself had changed.

But had Jillian really changed? According to Jillian, she had not officially left the church, she had not renounced her Baptism, and she still attended church services several times a year with her family around Christmas and Easter.

So, what is going on with Jillian? After talking with her a little more, it became apparent that even though Jillian's circumstances and context had not changed, her worldview had. In other words, the only thing that had drastically altered in Jillian's life from the time of her childhood to the time of her conversation with me was that her perspective on life had shifted. The way that Jillian viewed the world, considered the Christian faith, and understood Jesus, had all changed since childhood, moving away from both her family's and her church's perspective. Indeed, for many years, the way she saw life, reality, and herself, had been changing, even though she was relatively unaware of the slow transformation that had been occurring to her worldview for some time.

Very simply stated, Jillian's presuppositions about life, the world, and Jesus were now different. But what caused her worldview to change? It is important to pause and think through what has happened to Jillian, for her story will be a consistent pattern with many of the other individuals in this book. Let's pull back the layers to investigate what is going on beneath the surface.

As we already know, the younger Jillian viewed things one way; however, as she got older, she began to view the same things differently. This change, which we will learn about in the upcoming paragraphs, is what is causing her confusion and making her uncomfortable. People

WORLDVIEW

The way people view or think about the world and themselves is what we call a worldview. A worldview is a person's perception of reality. It is the lens through which they view his or her life. For example, we have heard it said before that some people view life through rose-colored glasses. This is an idiom that is used to show that some people will always view life from an optimistic perspective. Their lens (i.e., worldview) causes them to see all of life's events—the good, the bad, and the ugly—from a positive perspective. Because of their rose-colored worldview, they do not see the glass as half empty, but will always see it as half full.

are relatively unaware of their own worldview and even more so unaware of changes to their worldview until they come into conflict with other individuals who hold worldviews contrary to their own. For example, Jillian's circumstances and context had remained consistent (she didn't renounce the Christian faith, she did not disconnect her family ties, and she still lived in the community she grew up in); however, as she engaged her family, friends, and her church, it was evident there were differing views over sexuality, God's Law, the doctrine of hell, and the Jesus from her childhood. But what changed her worldview? The change in her worldview was caused by an adjustment in her presuppositions—that is to say, assumptions. In other words, one, two, three, or more fundamental presuppositions in Jillian's life changed, which

PRESUPPOSITIONS

Think about an eye exam. A patient's face is pressed against a mechanism with all sorts of dials, knobs, and lenses attached to it. The doctor makes several adjustments to the mechanism to bring forth a lens for the person to look through. Depending on the settings, the patient will see through a blurry lens or a clear lens. Presuppositions are similar to the dials and knobs the doctor uses to choose various lenses. Presuppositions (i.e., assumptions that might be true or might be false) function to determine the kind of worldview a person looks through. True presuppositions help a person see reality clearly, whereas false presuppositions distort reality.

These presuppositions come from a lot of different places and circumstances such as political allegiance, emotional state, religious experiences, psychological dysfunctions, physical environment, theological heritage, language, social conditioning, gender, intelligence, and culture values—to name a few. For example, if a person presupposes that good and evil are tied solely to pleasure and pain, then a person would view things in life that produce pain as evil and things that produce pleasure as good. In summary, presuppositions shape and determine a person's worldview.

subconsciously were forcing her to see things differently with Jesus and the Christian faith, which then brought about the uncomfortable divisions she was experiencing with her family and her upbringing. So what presuppositions changed?

After a couple more sips of her drink, Jillian looked out the airplane window for a moment and then said, “You know what I’ve come to really hate lately—and I hate the word *hate*? I hate when people are judged, because it is so sad to be judged. It just hurts me and makes me feel tense, gloomy, and kind of angry. But, I also know when something is right and when people should not be judged. Okay, so here is how I know what is right and what is wrong. When something is good, I just know with every fiber of my being that it is not sinful. Yes, when something is good—truly good—I’m 100 percent passionate about it, and my heart and soul and mind are in a really positive and good place.”

It may seem odd to be having a theological conversation over Jesus, sin, and theology while traveling at 31,000 feet on a plane, but for pastors, this seems to be a rather typical occurrence—at least in my experience. Pastors can be safe spaces for people to discuss issues of a spiritual nature when there is no long-term commitment to an ongoing relationship. Furthermore, people often share their theological and spiritual insights with pastors, either as a way to connect with a “man of the cloth” or to spiritually validate themselves before a clergy person—perhaps even to validate themselves before God.

Regardless of Jillian’s motives, she paused, took another sip of wine, swallowed, and continued, “But then there is a problem. Some of my Christian family members and longtime friends will talk about Jesus and talk about the Bible and morals and stuff . . . and in my heart and mind of my own ideas, what they are telling me is the farthest thing from Christ I could imagine. We used to agree on everything. Now I don’t know what to think about this totally, and I don’t want to stop wrestling with this, but I just know that there are certain things I can no longer believe. There are certain things that I know

Jesus would never support. The Jesus I know is not like these other people's Jesus."

At this point, it would be easy for us to aggressively jump on Jillian's authentic admission in believing in a false christ. It would be easy to

We may be able to see ways in which we have followed Jillian's false christ, which will lead us to repentance and asking for forgiveness from the real Jesus.

militantly strip her views apart and prove her wrong. It is always tempting to point out another person's logical inconsistencies and then celebrate in victory our sound logic and rightness. However, we must be prudent, gentle,

and compassionate. Our goal in examining Jillian's thoughts, and others in this book, is not to prove her wrong and us readers right so that we can tally up brownie points before God, but rather our goal is to examine where Jillian has been tragically ensnared into believing in a false christ. Indeed, by studying Jillian's reflections and comments, we will not only learn a little about her idolatry, but we may be able to see our own errors as well. We may be able to see ways in which we have followed Jillian's false christ, which will lead us to repentance and asking for forgiveness from the real Jesus.

What can we learn from Jillian's comments? Looking a bit closer at her remarks, we can clearly see an emerging presupposition in Jillian, a presupposition that is at work in her worldview. Jillian is very averse to anything that is negative and very favorable to anything that is positive, which rationally makes sense. However, it is important to

Good and evil have become pleasure and pain.

note that Jillian takes this a step further; she ties her moral judgments of right and wrong to that which gives her pleasure and pain. To

rephrase this, that which causes her discomfort and pain is evil, and that which grants her comfort and pleasure is good. And how does she discern pleasure and pain? She understands pleasure and pain by the fiber of her being—she knows pleasure and pain by what she feels. For Jillian, good and evil have become pleasure and pain.

For example, one issue Jillian mentioned was how she was upset with her parents and childhood church for their stance on sex being reserved for marriage only. In other words, when the church taught that sex was a gift reserved “only” for a husband and wife within the blessed estate of marriage (the Sixth Commandment), she deemed this as repressive and wrong because it caused her to feel judged and feel emotional pain for her past premarital sex with her now husband. For Jillian, sex before marriage made her happy, so it can’t be that bad. Hearing that her premarital sex was wrong caused her unhappiness and emotional pain; therefore, she believed that this teaching was wrong and evil. This belief is not unique to Jillian; it is prevalent in our culture, a culture that believes the key to happiness is total and unlimited sex, much like how the Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud, taught. Therefore, any restraint to the goal of sexual happiness, such as reserving the happy gift of sex for a husband and wife in marriage, is deemed as repressive, judgmental, and mean—it causes unhappiness. And as we already know, this way of thinking equates unhappiness and emotional pain automatically with the categorical term *evil*.

ETHICAL HEDONISM

Hedonism teaches that the ultimate goal of mankind is the pursuit of pleasure. Therefore, that which is pleasurable is good; that which is painful is bad. The ethical component of hedonism is that the pursuit of pleasure is the ultimate goal, only insofar as others are not being hurt.

When ethical hedonism infiltrates Christianity, it sounds something like this, “God wants my life to be about success and happiness. As long as I do not hurt anyone, my choices are my choices.” However, when ethical hedonism takes a firm root in a person, it might sound something like this, “Everyone has the right to be happy without feeling guilty. Furthermore, I would far rather be happy than right any day.”

Regarding pleasure and pain, Jillian also does something else. She places pleasure, not pain, at the center of her life as the ultimate goal and the ultimate good. Therefore, pleasure as the “ultimate” is the presupposition that permeates her worldview. In other words, Jillian’s worldview is not linked to an objective standard but linked to her individualized feelings, with the ultimate goal being the pursuit of pleasure. She is what we would call an ethical hedonist.

Jillian’s worldview is not linked to an objective standard but linked to her individualized feelings, with the ultimate goal being the pursuit of pleasure.

Hedonism is nothing new. It is as old as humanity. Consider Adam and Eve. In Genesis, God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree in the midst of the garden. However, after the devil tempted Adam and Eve, Eve saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to her eyes. Instead of trusting God’s Word not to eat from the tree, Eve was tempted by the idea of immediate pleasure and ate the fruit. Eve tragically exchanged God’s Word for pleasure, which resulted in havoc being wreaked upon humanity. (See Genesis 3:1–7.)

Jillian’s lens has been tainted by ethical hedonism. Not only is her vision for her life tainted by ethical hedonism, but it has also tainted the way she understands Jesus. She has manipulated and changed Jesus into an idol of her choice. (Keep in mind that this false christ is an idol; it does not exist, except in the minds of people like Jillian.) Indeed, since Jillian is subconsciously an ethical hedonist, she has also concluded that Jesus is too, or that He supports the ideology of ethical hedonists, at the least.

He won’t boo; he is a loyal fan, who never gets angry or upset with his followers.

Meet our first false christ: the Mascot. This false christ is nothing more than a hedonistic idol with pom-poms. With his pom-poms, this idol stands on the sidelines of life encouraging people in their pursuit of happiness. He always cheers and always supports. Since this false christ goes the way of hedonism, he will never bring

about any pain for the individual. He won't boo; he is a loyal fan, who never gets angry or upset with his followers. He will even defend them from criticism. This means that the Mascot will never confront the sinful nature with God's Ten Commandments; he will never call for repentance, and he will never talk about hell and damnation. Indeed, he will never condemn, correct, or criticize, which means that he waters down the Word of God to avoid unnecessary conflicts. He is an all-around nice guy who encourages his followers in their pursuits of pleasure and happiness. If the follower is happy and finding pleasure, this false christ is even happier. If the follower is experiencing pain, this false christ is sad as well and says to his follower, "You deserve to be happy! Do whatever it takes to find happiness."

Looking a bit more specifically at the Mascot, we must take note of three crucial characteristics of this false christ: (1) he accepts ethical hedonism (which we have already covered), (2) he avoids the Law, and (3) he avoids the doctrine of hell. But what are the implications of avoiding these last two subjects?

IS IT WRONG FOR A CHRISTIAN TO PURSUE HAPPINESS?

Joy must be distinguished from our culture's understanding of happiness and pleasure. Cultural happiness and pleasure tend to be seen within an individual's power—something people can attempt to force and manipulate and conjure up. Christian joy, though, is not the same. That is to say, joy does not anchor a person in joy itself, but rather biblical joy is a mental state or emotional gratitude for good things received. That's right, joy points to something else, something outside of us; it points to and longs for something grand that is given. In a word, joy is not fixed to an artificial feeling or an emotion; it does not chase after itself. Joy desires, anticipates, and receives gifts. But what are these gifts and who is the giver of these gifts? The Gift-Giver is none other than the Lord Himself. And the gifts He gives are Himself, His name upon our head and heart in Baptism, and His Word in the Bible and in the Sacraments. All gifts, all for us, so that we might have everlasting joy.