

Marketing an “Almost” Jesus – Evaluating the “He Gets Us” Campaign

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Marketing Jesus is a perilous project. As Tom Gilson points out in his book *Too Good to Be False*, Jesus was someone who “never learned anything from experience, especially from his own mistakes....never even admitted to making a mistake....never showed even a trace of character growth....rarely gave a straight answer when you asked him a question....[demanded] that it was ‘his way or the highway,’ no exceptions....and wouldn’t be friends with anyone who didn’t do what he ‘commanded.’ Yes, he actually does use that word.”¹

That’s a tough sell. After all, Jesus didn’t even attempt to market Himself. When a large group of His followers turned away “and would no longer walk with Him” (John 6:66 NASB), His response was not to woo them back. Instead, He turned to His closest disciples and asked them if they wanted to hit the road too. Jesus spoke the truth with grace and let the chips fall where they fell. He was on a mission. It was a mission grounded in the reality that the greatest way to love someone is to tell them the truth.

Getting to the truth is a matter of discernment. And, as has been well said, “Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is knowing the difference between right and almost right.”² When a modern marketing team takes on the project of promoting Jesus to an antagonistic, post-Christian culture, you have to give them credit for their courage, compassion, and boldness. But when the product they’re selling is Jesus, discernment requires they are also very careful about getting Him right. Like the actual Jesus, they must be willing to let some prospective customers walk away.

I think the “He Gets Us” (HGU) campaign doesn’t want to take that risk. As a result, it isn’t marketing the Jesus of Scripture. It is marketing an “almost Jesus” that it hopes the culture will find more compelling.

Backing “He Gets Us.” According to *Christianity Today*’s Maria Baer, the \$100 Million HGU ad campaign was directed by a Michigan-based ad agency, Haven, and underwritten by “a small group of wealthy anonymous families.”³ These donors include billionaire David Green, co-founder of Hobby Lobby, and a variety of other Christians from various denominational contexts.⁴

In 2023, a new, very small, non-profit marketing organization, Come Near, was founded that fully manages the HGU campaign. This organization states that its leaders are “committed to sharing the life and love of Jesus in thought-provoking new ways.”⁵ It would be unfair to judge any project based solely on the identities of those who fund it. In this case, that is especially true. And it’s by design. HGU does not list donors on its website for purposes of anonymity and authenticity. As the website once explained, “Funding for He Gets Us comes from a diverse group of individuals and entities with a common goal of sharing Jesus’ story authentically. Most of the people driving He Gets Us, including our donors, choose to remain anonymous because the story isn’t about them, and they don’t want the credit.”⁶

As a result, the campaign has been maligned by those on the ideological right for its use of “woke” themes and slogans and from those on the ideological left for its ties to both groups and individuals who have been labeled “anti-LGBTQ.”⁷ That said, we most certainly *can* judge the project by its self-proclaimed goals and an assessment of how it goes about achieving them.

Defining the Mission. According to HGU, its mission is to “to move beyond the mess of our current cultural moment to a place where all of us are invited to rediscover the love story of Jesus. Christians, non-Christians, and everybody in between. All of us.”⁸ If that seems nebulous, the campaign’s website gets more specific. In its own words,

He Gets Us is not against the church, but we are not a back-to-church campaign. We are hoping to help people consider who Jesus is and why that matters.⁹

Jesus loves gay people and Jesus loves trans people. The LGBTQ+ community, like all people, is invited to explore the story of Jesus and consider his example of unconditional love, grace, and forgiveness of others. No matter who you are, YOU are invited to explore the story of Jesus and consider what it means for your life.¹⁰ (emphasis in original)

[He Gets Us is] certainly affiliated with Christianity, but our point is that the story of Jesus doesn’t belong to anyone. It has something to offer to everyone — inviting Christians, non-Christians, and those who aren’t sure what they believe to consider Jesus. The example of his life can inspire all of us to pursue unconditional love for

ourselves and for others, and that can encourage us to learn more about Jesus and his mission.¹¹

Given these clarifications, it's fair to conclude that HGU aims to 1) resonate with those apathetic toward Christian spirituality; 2) pre-evangelize unchurched skeptics; and 3) reconcile with the disaffected masses who have walked away from church altogether. In short, HGU wants to overcome the common cultural obstacles that have driven many to secularism by reminding them both of Jesus' character and of His unconditional love for them.

These are laudable goals. But does the campaign hope to achieve them by an appeal to follow a Jesus who delivers truth with grace but demands repentance? Or does the campaign promote a Jesus who accepts all of us just the way we are? Those are two very different views of Jesus. The former is the Jesus of Scripture, while the latter is a Jesus constructed by a post-Christian culture.

#Hashtag Jesus. In October 2022, Natasha Crain highlighted the importance of identifying which Jesus we're talking about here when she said, "The fact that Jesus 'gets us,' stripped from the context of His identity, is meaningless....The campaign reinforces what culture *wants* to believe about Jesus while leaving out what culture *doesn't* want to believe" (emphasis in original).¹²

For HGU, the Jesus the culture wants us to believe in is anything but judgmental. Though the campaign's website does list "judgment" as one of its hashtags, following the link takes a visitor to an article about how Jesus faced criticism from the culture.¹³ There is no article to be found about His role in judging human beings for their lack of repentance for sin. This is no accident. HGU is operating in a culture where judging is the ultimate sin. In that kind of climate, a "judgy Jesus" wouldn't market well at all. Instead, HGU highlights the kind of Jesus it knows people would like to meet.

On the "He Gets Us Has an Agenda" page of the campaign's website, readers are told that HGU "[looks] at the biography of Jesus through a modern lens to find new relevance in often overlooked moments and themes from his life."¹⁴ And the modern lens it is looking through takes visitors to a list of hash-tagged terms that reveal HGU's posture. They include #Love, #Relationships, #Activist, #Hope, #Struggle, #Justice, #Forgiveness, #Outrage, #Reaction, #Refugee, #Inclusive, #RealLife, and #Women.

A couple of things stand out here. First, there is no denying that there is a social justice slant baked into the HGU mission. The repeated references to those considered "marginalized" by the culture reveal the fact that the language, hashtags, and tone of each of these ads are aimed at attracting both political and

theological progressives to a movement they will find accepting. There is nothing wrong with that, of course. But it is instructive that nearly every one of these emphasis items aligns perfectly with the rallying cries of the social justice movement.

Second, and along those lines, it is notable that the only specific audience mentioned in the frequently asked questions on the campaign's "About Us" page is the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁵ Again, there is nothing wrong with emphasizing Jesus' love for every human being made in His image. The problem many traditional Christians have with this approach is that there are no expectations attached to their behavior. And that brings us to what I would call the most problematic aspect of HGU — the *missing metanoia*.

Missing Metanoia. Looking back at the campaign's "About Us" page, there is a hint that the HGU Jesus is not the Jesus of historic, biblical Christianity. There, we are told that "[Jesus] can inspire all of us to *pursue unconditional love for ourselves and for others*" (emphasis added).¹⁶

But does the gospel message really encourage us to pursue unconditional love for *ourselves*? Every human being is valuable to God simply because they are made in His image. Being an "imager" of God is a very good reason to love ourselves. And it's important that we understand that fact. But loving ourselves does not entail accepting the sinful human inclinations we all succumb to in our rebellion *against* God.

HGU is all about the former. It never mentions the latter. HGU's goals are laudable as far as they go.

There is no denying that Jesus welcomed the marginalized, dined with sinners, and dialogued with prostitutes. But that isn't why He inserted Himself into history and took on human form.

Jesus' primary mission was to rescue us — because we need rescuing. This is a point that gets made repeatedly throughout the Gospels, beginning before Jesus was even born, when God tells Joseph that Mary "will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because *he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21 NIV, emphasis added).

This is not to say that loving and caring for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized is not part of the story. It is. But it's not the most important thing. And this is what the progressive promoters of social justice get wrong about Jesus. They don't just make His care for the oppressed and marginalized the most important thing. They make it the *only* thing.

HGU elevates Jesus' care for the marginalized to the pinnacle of His mission, then defines who is marginalized through a cultural lens. But in doing so, it remains silent about the atonement and all that goes with it. It doesn't just relegate Jesus' primary mission to the back burner. It ignores it altogether.

No one disputes the biblical command to love and care for our neighbors. But the biblical story includes the exhortation that Jesus calls *both us and our neighbors* to recognize that we are sinners in need of forgiveness. We're called to repent. To repent (Greek: *metanoia*) is to "change your mind." The act of repentance allows us to be transformed by the Spirit. And part of the fruit of that transformation is the recognition that we need to love and care for the poor and oppressed. Caring for the poor and oppressed is, and always will be, part of the program. But it's an effect, not a cause in and of itself.

This exposes the fatal flaw in the HGU campaign. It spends all its effort telling its viewers to love who they are "unconditionally" but never mentions their need to repent. It's missing the *metanoia*. The Jesus it's marketing never asks anyone to change their mind.

Kingdom Impact. As I stated at the outset, I admire HGU for its willingness to engage the culture boldly and creatively. According to Ed Stetzer, Dean of Biola University's Talbot School of Theology, the campaign has become a huge initiator of conversations about Jesus. Advertising trackers report that the HGU ads were the most talked-about advertisements that came out of 2024 Super Bowl, for instance. In addition to that, the campaign has resulted in more than 600,000 subscribers to HGU's Bible reading plans on the YouVersion Bible APP and more than 300,000 referrals to churches.¹⁷

There is no denying that HGU is generating Jesus-centered conversations. That sounds good on the surface. But if those conversations are taking place in reference to an almost-gospel Bible commentary at a similarly enculturated church, and those conversations are about a non-judgy, social justice, "almost Jesus," what has been gained?

Instead of helping to grow the kingdom, HGU may be helping to grow a counterfeit version of the kingdom where the real Jesus has no home.

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NOTES

1. Tom Gilson, *Too Good to Be False: How Jesus' Incomparable Character Reveals His Reality* (Tampa, FL: Deward Publishing: 2020), 51.
2. Often attributed to Charles Spurgeon, but this attribution seems unlikely. See the interesting Logos Forums discussion at <https://community.logos.com/forums/t/217128.aspx>.

3. Maria Baer, “\$100M Ad Campaign Aims to Make Jesus the ‘Biggest Brand in Your City,’” Christianity Today, March 11, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/march/he-gets-us-ad-campaign-branding-jesus-church-marketing.html>.
4. Bob Smietana, “‘He Gets Us’ Organizers Hope to Spend \$1 Billion to Promote Jesus. Will Anyone Care?,” Religious News Service, January 26, 2023, <https://religionnews.com/2023/01/26/he-gets-us-organizers-hope-to-spend-1-billion-to-promote-jesus-will-anyone-care/>.
5. “Who Are We,” Come Near, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://comenear.org/>.
6. “Who Is Paying for All of This?,” He Gets Us, Internet Archive, captured February 4, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230204201700/https://hegetsus.com/en/who-is-paying-for-all-of-this>. See also A. J. Willingham, “The Truth Behind the ‘He Gets Us’ Ads for Jesus Airing at the Super Bowl,” CNN, updated February 13, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/11/us/he-gets-us-super-bowl-commercials-cec/index.html>.
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12. Natasha Crain, “7 Problems with the ‘He Gets Us’ Campaign,” October 27, 2022, <https://natashacrain.com/7-problems-with-the-he-gets-us-campaign/>.
13. “Did Jesus Face Criticism?,” He Gets Us, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/did-jesus-face-criticism>.
14. “He Gets Us Has an Agenda,” He Gets Us, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/he-gets-us-has-an-agenda>.
15. See “About Us,” He Gets Us, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://hegetsus.com/en/about-us>.
16. “Is He Gets Us Affiliated with a Certain Religion?,” About Us, He Gets Us, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://hegetsus.com/en/about-us>.
17. Sean McDowell and Scott Rae, “‘He Gets Us’ at the Super Bowl, with Ed Stetzer,” Think Biblically Podcast, February 6, 2024, <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/think-biblically/2024/he-gets-us-at-the-super-bowl>. Statistics are derived from the transcript of Stetzer’s interview with McDowell and Rae.