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A Jesus for Generation X

A Place for Faith
in a Post-Christian Age



A DARE BOOKLET

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Revised 1998
Second printing 2001

Designed by Julia Soong

Published by Digory Designs
#2-5311 Lackner Crescent
Richmond, BC
Canada V7E 6B7

Printed by Lulu Island Printing Ltd, Richmond BC

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In the film *Reality Bites*, Wynona Rider plays a bright journalism student, chosen valedictorian of her class. After she documents the huge problems facing our world, she announces—'and I believe the answer to these problems is...'. Then she fumbles with the pages of her manuscript. There's a long uncomfortable silence. '...the answer is *I don't know*.' At that point her graduating class breaks into wild applause!

It's an attempt by Hollywood to capture the spirit of this generation—gifted but not conformist, full of questions but skeptical about answers. I've heard Xers eloquently debate how well *Reality Bites* has risen to the challenge it set for itself,

but as I write this booklet, I face my own challenge—to explore the issue of whether the questions and longings of Generation X might in any sense be answered by Jesus of Nazareth, a seemingly remote figure who lived 2,000 years ago.

As you know, it's always perilous to offer a sketch or profile of a generation. For one thing I'm not an Xer. I can't see things from the inside out. I also know that even the term itself is a contentious issue. I just met a student this week who told me how much he hated the term Generation X and what was being said about his generation. All that to say I am aware of the hazards of describing a generation. So much of what is said may not be true of a particular Xer. That's a point I'll gladly concede. But in my conversations with members of Generation X they largely have felt that if the particulars of their sketch were not true of them as individuals it did resonate with their perceptions of where their friends were at.

Let's take a look at Generation X.

First, Xers are emotionally broken

Fifty percent of Xers come from broken homes. They are the first generation of latch key kids, many in two-job families, and in some cases parents were simply not around a lot. A frighteningly high percentage of this generation, perhaps one in three, has been physically or sexually abused—often by step-parents or other authority figures.

Even if these factors are not true of particular Xers, you can bet they have many friends who come from these situations. They have felt the weight of their friends' pain, and may share their struggle to learn to trust others in relationships.

I have worked with university students for fourteen years, and I believe that in the last five or so years I've been working

with a different kind of student—a generation with an increasing and alarming degree of emotional woundedness and fragility. As one Xer put it, 'We are brittle.'

Second, they are economically disadvantaged

They are the first generation in North America in a long time who will have a lower standard of living than their parents. A high percentage of Xers (in fact disproportionately high) are unemployed. Even though they are the most highly educated generation ever, many struggle from one job to another, often working at menial positions known as 'McJobs'. For economic reasons Xers live with their parents well into their mid to late twenties.

Xers haven't had the luxury of planning careers. They're too busy thinking about getting a job. They've had to think less about succeeding and more about simply surviving.

Third, Xers are profoundly skeptical about institutions

That's no surprise when you've grown up in the wake of Watergate and the many scandals around political, economic and religious leaders. In fact, on a deep level, Xers are skeptical about the whole project of modernity. They have grown up with a sense of its decay and demise.

Xers may have sharper intuition than the rest of us that the modern world is ending, giving way to the uncertainties of postmodernity.

Xers are skeptical about the older generation, especially 'boomers'. They might put it this way:

Boomers had free love; we have AIDS. Boomers had a robust economy, we have down-sizing and restruc -

turing. Boomers had the social generosity of the Just Society, we have billions of dollars of debt and face harsh government cutbacks.

In this increasingly pluralistic age most Xers are skeptical about the possibility of absolute values. It is no surprise that their humour is usually ironic and cynical. To cast it in a better and perhaps a truer light, we could call this skepticism a strong dose of realism and honesty. In any case, there is a nihilistic streak in Generation X. Perhaps Kurt Cobain has become a symbol of the ever-lurking despair that can haunt Xers.

Fourth, Xers believe in friendship

In one of the songs of *Soul Asylum*, the lead singer screams out, 'I'm homesick for the home I've never had.' Coming out of the brokenness of their own family many Xer's place a high value on friendship and community. Friends are the bottom line value of this generation. Friends—no wonder it's such a popular sitcom.

My observation is that this generation of students has a special genius for friendship. I admire the way friendships are created naturally across gender lines. But I don't want to imply that friendships, real friendships, come easily. Many Xers feel profoundly alone, and there is a lot of fear about trusting someone else on a deep level when there's so much hurt from the past.

Finally, Generation X has been called the first post-Christian generation

Douglas Coupland is the young Canadian writer who first popularized the term Generation X. It was the title of his first

novel. Interestingly enough, his most recent collection of short stories is entitled *Life After God*. He suggests that his is the first generation raised without religion.

Some observers have criticized Coupland for being pretentious. What about Nietzsche, the existentialists and other generations that rejected Christian faith? But I believe Coupland is onto something important. Other generations, whether the 'lost generation of WWI' or the hippies of the sixties, may have consciously rejected Christianity but they knew the Christian world view. They grew up surrounded by it and they chose to knowingly reject it. If Christian truth was north on the compass, they chose to go south. They defined themselves in antithesis to the prevailing Christian world view.

Many Xers, by contrast, have grown up with no spiritual compass. Many have no church experience and are not familiar with the literature of the Bible that is so critical to an understanding of the Christian faith. If they have rejected Christianity, and of course many have, they have little idea of what they have rejected. They certainly do not define their rebellion in contrast to Christian truth claims. They have grown up in a kind of spiritual vacuum.

Whatever contact they have had with the Christian church, it generally has not left a good impression. Janet Bernardi writes,

The idea of a God who loves unconditionally, who can be trusted and cares about our actions has been lost in recent years. My generation no longer believes in anything. The notion of God the father has little meaning to large numbers of people who grew up without a father (Mahedy and Bernardi 56).

The first post-Christian generation!

Giving Jesus a chance

If we were to stop here the picture looks bleak. Maybe there's no hope of accomplishing my task; maybe there's no way to meaningfully connect the questions and longings of Generation X with Jesus of Nazareth.

But it's too easy to give up. I believe that Jesus has shown himself to be a remarkably resilient and enduring figure through the ages. A widely diverse group of figures from our own age—Bruce Cockburn, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Bono of U2, and Martin Luther King Jr—have found Jesus to be a compelling figure. Maybe we shouldn't write him off so quickly.

But how can Jesus of Nazareth connect with Generation X? Let's review those five characteristics again and see if there's any resonance between the longing of Generation X and what we know about Jesus from the earliest biographical sketches written about him.

Emotionally broken? Yes.

Jesus knew all about suffering and rejection. He grew up in a small town and lived on the margins of his culture. He knew what it was like to be hurt and misunderstood by those he loved most, as best friends and family members betrayed him. He offered hope to the heavy of heart when he said, 'Come to me all you who are tired and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'

Jesus offered no quick fix solutions to life. Knowing what it was like to suffer, he knew the strength suffering can bring. He called people to a hard but joyous life of learning—learning to make sacrifices for others and God but all in the hope of discovering a deep joy and love in relationship with his father, God, and with fellow human beings.

Economically disadvantaged? Yes.

Jesus was in his early 30s when he began his public work. He had no career path. He had no luxurious home. Jesus was counter-cultural. He announced that the poor and disadvantaged were given a spiritual clarity of vision that wealth could easily obscure. He said, 'Life does not consist in the abundance of things you possess.'

Jesus spoke out against injustice. In one striking scene in the film *Jesus of Montreal*, a modern Jesus goes into the temple of the media and trashes TV equipment to protest the objectification of women. It is a brilliant scene, true to the spirit of the real Jesus of Nazareth who had a heart for the underdog, the oppressed.

Skeptical of institutions? Yes.

Jesus of Nazareth existed on the fringe of the religious and political structures of his day. He threw over tables in the temple when it was clear that religious pretense masked materialistic greed. He showed little confidence in institutions and their rules and conventions, including religious institutions. The powers of Jesus' day were deeply suspicious of him. Jesus saved his harshest words for religious hypocrites. The observation of the old comedian Lenny Bruce, 'People are leaving the churches and returning to God!' would have met with a sympathetic hearing from Jesus.

Drawn to friendship and community? Yes.

Xers have a profound hunger to connect with people. But if we're to be fair, Xers also have deep levels of fear. Many bear wounds from relational hurts in the past from those they loved. As a result there is an instinctive wariness about

trusting anyone too much, giving away too much, becoming too vulnerable.

How can I learn to trust—an indispensable discipline in real friendships—when I’ve been hurt so badly in the past? How can I find my way to the ‘C’ word? Commitment? I long for it but I’m afraid of it.

In her song ‘I Need Love’, Sam Phillips sings about the pain and brokenness in her past that leaves her helpless. She confesses her need of love, not sentimentality. She needs God, not ‘the political church’. Together they might spark a fire that could ‘melt the frozen sea inside’.

The song mirrors tensions that tear at the hearts of many Xers. It expresses a longing for the warmth of human and divine love and yet it also is honest about wounds from the past that can leave us emotionally frozen and cautious.

Jesus has much to say to a generation longing for friendship, yet wary of real trust and commitment. Jesus’ life was centred in friends. He spent most of his time with a small group of friends. He stuck with them when they failed him miserably. Sharing his heart with them he told them that while he was their Lord, their Master, in intimacy they were no longer his servants, they were his friends.

After his life, suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus’ friends came to see all he had done as the supreme expression of God’s love—a God willing to sacrifice everything—one man in the name of love, who revealed that at the center of this universe is God’s heart of love for his world. God has come to our rescue in the person of Jesus. Not only did Jesus model that love profoundly, he gave his friends the strength to move out of their loneliness and fear to trust God, and experience there a quality of friendship that would give them the strength to truly love one another.

A Jesus for the post-Christian generation? Yes.

I believe that in a remarkably compelling way Jesus of Nazareth addresses the deepest yearning of Generation X. It may well be that Generation X is uniquely suited to hear the call of Jesus. Remember Wynona Ryder in the opening scene of *Reality Bites*. The answer is ‘I don’t know.’ As one Xer put it, ‘All we have is our humility.’ Didn’t Jesus say, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven?’¹

Yes, you say, that’s all fine. But aren’t you forgetting that Generation X is the first post-Christian generation? Maybe Xers are not even interested in how their longings resonate with the figure of Jesus.

I’m not so sure about that. In Alanis Morissette’s song, ‘All I Really Want’, she voices her disillusionment with ‘the ways of this land’. If there is hope, it’s in the possibility that she could ‘meet the Maker’. She longs for someone to connect with, someone to catch her drift.

Maybe Jesus can be the ‘spiritual man’, the ‘soulmate’ and ‘kindred’ that Alanis Morissette and so many of her generation long for.

In Douglas Coupland’s book, *Life After God*, the narrator, a member of Generation X, chronicles the lives of the friends he grew up with in suburban Vancouver. There is little hope in their stories. The narrator is jaded, emotionally exhausted, on the edge of despair. At the end of the book Coupland writes:

Now here is my secret. I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of

kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love (Coupland 359).

Maybe it was Augustine who said it best for a restless generation, 'You have made us for yourself [O Lord], and our hearts are restless until they rest in you' (Augustine 3). Jesus said, 'Come to me, you who are tired and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'²

Notes

1. Matthew 5:3.
2. Matthew 11:28.

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