

un christian

WHAT A NEW GENERATION REALLY
THINKS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

... AND WHY IT MATTERS

DAVID KINNAMAN

AND GABE LYONS



© 2007 by David Kinnaman and Fermi Project

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Second printing, December 2007

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kinnaman, David, 1973–

UnChristian : what a new generation really thinks about Christianity . . . and why it matters / David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 10: 0-8010-1300-3 (cloth)

ISBN 978-0-8010-1300-3 (cloth)

ISBN 10: 0-8010-7066-X (intl. pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-8010-7066-2 (intl. pbk.)

1. Generation Y—Religious Life. 2. Young adults—Religious life. 3. Youth—Religious life. 4. Church work with young adults. 5. Church work with youth. I. Lyons, Gabe, 1975– II. Title.

BV4529.2.K545 2007

277.3'083—dc22

2007022852

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture is taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked NIV is taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ®. NIV ®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked Message is taken from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Published in association with Yates & Yates, LLP, Attorneys and Counselors, Orange, California.

The participation of contributors in this book does not imply their endorsement of research interpretations or statements made by the authors and other contributors.

CONTENTS

Foreword	7
1. The Backstory	11
2. Discovering <i>unChristian</i> Faith	21
3. Hypocritical	41
4. Get Saved!	67
5. Antihomosexual	91
6. Sheltered	121
7. Too Political	153
8. Judgmental	181
9. From <i>unChristian</i> to Christian	205
Afterword	221
Acknowledgments	247
The Research	249
Notes	252

FOREWORD

About twelve years ago we had an intern from Biola University start working with us. I didn't think much about it. We'd had other interns, and they were usually nice kids seeking some college credit while doing as little as they could possibly get away with. If they learned something along the way, they seemed to perceive it as a bonus.

But there's always the exception to the rule. David Kinnaman was ours.

David was a tall, skinny, quiet kid who asked a lot of questions—good ones—and worked hard. He was clearly intelligent and a team player. He seemed genuinely interested in learning how marketing research was done and how such information could advance meaningful ministry. He was committed to making a viable contribution to our efforts.

By the time his graduation approached, we realized he could be a significant asset to our team, so we offered him a job. Since that time, he has done practically every function in the business, from grunt work to high-level presentations with major business and ministry clients. He has managed hundreds of national research studies, generated new business opportunities, created syndicated reports, interacted with the media to describe our research results, spoken at conferences, developed internal systems, hired and fired staff—you name it; he's done it all. He has worked his way up to become the president of The Barna Group. Yet despite having written hundreds of client reports and dozens of published articles, David had never felt led to write a book.

But there's always an exception to the rule. *UnChristian* is his.

This is his first book, but it is an important book—for you, for the church, and for our nation. I encourage you to do four things in response to reading this volume.

FOREWORD

First, appreciate David Kinnaman as one of a handful of young adults who are emerging today who understand the church, our nation's culture, and how to bless people with truth and wisdom. This is a rare combination of gifts and talents. I expect David to be one of the people who will help the Christian community find its way through the maze of challenges and opportunities that await it. Such leadership is a huge gift from God, but we must appreciate that gift if we are to reap the benefit it represents.

Second, understand the depth and breadth of the objective research that forms the foundation of this book. Most of the books published about culture and faith are based on the author's personal opinions and a few idiosyncratic anecdotes. Such a basis for cultural evaluation is of limited value. David, on the other hand, has spent years collecting and studying reams of national survey data in an effort to truly grasp the big picture and its nuances. *UnChristian* is based on research, even though he has gone to great lengths to write the book in such a way that your eyes will not glaze over in response to an overload of statistics, charts, and tables. But that effort to make the research more digestible does not mean he has taken shortcuts. His effort is based on rigorous research and the difficult process of communicating statistics in everyday language.

Third, learn from the expert analysis and interpretation that David provides in relation to the perspective that our society has of American Christians and their faith. He has gone way beyond mere reporting of the data to dig deeper into the meaning and context of the findings. He has also interacted with numerous people to glean their insights into what the facts mean from their vantage point. What you are reading is a logical, carefully reasoned narrative about the past, present, and future state of society and the Christian faith.

Finally, I encourage you to pray. Pray that you will understand and be touched by the wisdom imparted in these pages. Pray for the Christian church, in all of its varieties, in America. Pray for your role in being the church to a culture that is gospel-ignorant, if not gospel-resistant. Pray for the leaders of the church, who must understand the arguments David has set forth in this book if they are to be strategic agents for the kingdom of God. And pray for your own influence for that kingdom in times that are changing, uncertain, and challenging.

One of the discussions that David and I have shared over the years is that God does not call leaders to be popular but only to be obedient to

FOREWORD

him. In that vein, I should warn you that David has written some things you will not like. So be it. Your job is not to anesthetize yourself with congratulatory prose about the state of the world or the church, but to deal with reality, even when it is embarrassing or hurtful. You don't have to like what he has written, but you do have to deal with it.

So I give my thanks to David for writing the truth, as best we can understand it. And I send my thanks to you for considering how these perspectives must affect your contribution to the kingdom of God and the world in which we serve him.

*George Barna
Founder, The Barna Group
Chairman, Good News Holdings
May 2007*

1

THE BACKSTORY

SEEING CHRISTIANITY FROM THE OUTSIDE

Christianity has an image problem.

If you've lived in America for very long, I doubt this surprises you. But it brings up important questions. Just what exactly do people think about Christians and Christianity? Why do these perceptions exist? Obviously, people believe their views are accurate (otherwise they would disavow them), but do their perceptions reflect reality? And why do people's perceptions matter—should they matter—to Christ followers?

I have spent the last three years studying these questions through extensive interviews and research. You may be astonished to learn just how significant the dilemma is—and how the negative perceptions that your friends, neighbors, and colleagues have of Christianity will shape your life and our culture in the years to come. Our research shows that many of those outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians. I will describe how and why this is happening later in this book, but for the moment think about what this means. It changes the tenor of people's discussions about Christianity. It alters their willingness to commit their lives to Jesus.

If you are interested in communicating and expressing Christ to new generations, you must understand the intensity with which they hold these views. As Christians, we cannot just throw up our hands in disgust or defensiveness. We have a responsibility to our friends and neighbors to have a sober, reasonable understanding of their perspectives.

For some time I have had a sense of this image problem, yet I never fully realized its depth, not until an unlikely source pointed me in the right direction. The telephone call that began this adventure is still lodged in my memory. Let me explain.

“David, I am quitting my job.”

I couldn’t mistake my friend Gabe Lyons’s self-assured voice. “Really? Are you crazy?” I blurted out.

“Probably,” he said, with the rounded edges of his slight Southern accent. “But I am sure it’s the right time, and I have a clear sense that it’s now or never. And God has given me a vision for what I am supposed to be doing.” He paused and then said matter-of-factly, “I can’t do it here.”

“Well, what are you going to do, Gabe? Where are you going to work? You must have a plan. Do you have a company in mind?” (As a professional researcher, rarely do I have trouble coming up with questions. This moment was no exception.)

“I am not going to work for another company. I am going to *start* my own organization. It’s going to be a nonprofit. I know I’ll have to raise funds to make it work, but I want—”

I interrupted him. “But you’re leaving a great job! You’re being mentored by a widely respected Christian leader. It pays well. You have a chance of really helping a lot of people spiritually.” Trying to persuade my friend to reevaluate, I urged, “You should really think about this before you make such a big change.”

When I finished, Gabe was quiet. *Good*, I thought. *He’s thinking about my advice*. I felt a glimmer of pride. *It was solid feedback*, I reasoned. Then after a few moments, I broke the silence, “Gabe? You there?”

“David.” He spoke my name slowly. I could hear the frustration. “I have thought and prayed about this more than you know. My family is behind this. I am going to do this. I don’t look back once I make a decision.” He paused. “Will you let me explain what I feel God has been leading me to do?”

I couldn’t think of much to say. “Yes, of course . . . sorry.”

“I am gonna sound crazy, I know, but I want to help a new generation of leaders understand the perceptions and images that young people have of Christianity—what people really think of us.” He spoke thoughtfully and deliberately. “People have a lot of opinions about our faith, and every time I strike up a conversation with a friend or neighbor, it seems like those perceptions are incredibly negative. Let’s face it—what people think becomes their reality, and although we may not deserve all those images, some of their thoughts about us may be accurate.”

“Well, you’re right about the negative perceptions,” I said, mentioning some research my company had done on the subject. “But what do you think you can do?”

“I am still trying to get my head around this,” Gabe replied. “I believe that the image young people have of the Christian faith is in real trouble. They hold stereotypes of Christians, and we make assumptions about them. I don’t understand what all that looks like, how that happened, or even whether it’s something that can, or should, be fixed. But I want to help start conversations and lead people to start thinking about how to bridge this divide between us and them.”

Then my friend Gabe spent some time describing his ideas in greater detail.

“Wow,” was all I could muster. “That’s a big vision. You know me; I hate to see you leave a great career, but this new direction sounds like something you should consider.”

Gabe laughed. “I already told you, David. I *am* doing it, not considering it.”

I laughed too, as I thought about our different personalities bouncing off each other again, as they had so many times in our friendship.

“But *how* I do it is another thing. There is lots to do,” he said, his voice trailing off. “Oh, and I have an important question for you.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” I asked, oblivious to how his request would shape the next few years of my life.

“I am going to raise some money to fund a major research project on this.” He paused to let the moment hang out there. “And I would like *you* to do that research.”

That’s how this book began.

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

I get a chance to learn something with every research study our firm, The Barna Group, conducts. Yet I could not have imagined how much God would use this research to open my eyes. At first, I took on the project because I felt we would learn how Christians could connect more effectively with people outside the faith. If we understood outsiders' objections, I reasoned, perhaps we could better communicate with them. But what we found was their perceptions are more than superficial image problems. Often outsiders' perceptions of Christianity reflect a church infatuated with itself. We discovered that many Christians have lost their heart for those outside the faith. The negative perceptions are not just "images" conjured up to debase Christianity. Yes, the issues are complex. No, it is not always "our" fault.

However, if we do not deal with our part of the problem, we will fail to connect with a new generation. We are not responsible for outsiders' decisions, but we are accountable when our actions and attitudes—misrepresenting a holy, just, and loving God—have pushed outsiders away. Often Christianity's negative image reflects real problems, issues that Christians need to own and be accountable to change. My purpose in writing this book is to pry open the hearts and minds of Christians, to prepare us to deal with a future where people will be increasingly hostile and skeptical toward us. A new generation is waiting for us to respond.

Three years ago, when Gabe first called to describe his job change, the research excited me. But the Barna team has the privilege of doing a wide range of fascinating research, so, frankly, I had no unusually high expectations for the project. For the most part, it just represented more deadlines!

Along the way, Gabe and I found that this project deeply shifted our perspectives about those outside of Christianity. We felt compelled to share these findings with you in this book. The things we were learning in this research started to spill out in other projects, writing, and conversations. Artists will tell you that, after a long creative session, they start to perceive the world through the lens of their medium. Research is like that for me. I don't see reality clearly until I have a chance to analyze it thoroughly through carefully constructed research.

What began as a three-month project has turned into a three-year study to grasp the picture God was revealing through the data. In that process, I have examined more than a dozen nationally representative surveys (reflecting thousands of interviews) and listened attentively to the stories of people who are on the outside of Christianity. A major component of the study was a series of interviews we did with a representative sample of sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds. We also interviewed hundreds of pastors and church leaders. And we probed the views of Christians to understand their thoughts on the issues and how much they are in tune with the image problem and the deeply rooted issues it represents. Through these surveys and interviews, the Lord has graciously helped me understand the experiences and in many cases the very real offenses, confusions, questions, discouragements, and disappointments that people have had when interacting with Christianity.

It's not a pretty picture.

WHY UNCHRISTIAN?

Using the lens of the careful, scientific research we conducted, I invite you to see what Christianity looks like from the outside. In fact, the title of this book, *unChristian*, reflects outsiders' most common reaction to the faith: they think Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind, that Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be. I will describe this in greater detail in chapter 2, but for many people the Christian faith looks weary and threadbare. They admit they have a hard time actually seeing Jesus because of all the negative baggage that now surrounds him.

One outsider from Mississippi made this blunt observation: "Christianity has become bloated with blind followers who would rather repeat slogans than actually feel true compassion and care. Christianity has become marketed and streamlined into a juggernaut of fearmongering that has lost its own heart."

After thousands of interviews and countless hours studying non-Christians, I believe outsiders would want this book titled *unChristian*. Young people today are incredibly candid. They do not hold back their opinions. I want to capture outsiders' expressions and views in these pages. I don't agree with everything they say. Yet if I am going to be your guide to the hearts and minds of people outside Christianity—if you are

going to really understand them—I feel compelled to represent their viewpoint fairly and candidly, even if it is uncomfortable for those of us who are Christians. To engage nonChristians and point them to Jesus, we have to understand and approach them based on what they really think, not what we assume about them. We can't overcome their hostility by ignoring it. We need to understand their unvarnished views of us. Therefore this book reflects outsiders' unfiltered reactions to Christianity.

So *unChristian* it is.

Even though some of the realities are uncomfortable, I have no intention of picking on Christ followers. Far from it. My purpose is not to berate Christians. You won't find here the names of any Christian leaders who have done wrong things. From time to time, I will use an anonymous illustration to show why some of the negative perceptions exist. Yet the point is not to pick on any particular person. Every Christ follower bears some degree of responsibility for the image problem (I'll explain that later); it is not helpful to assign blame to those who have made mistakes.

Still, for the things we can influence—our lives, our churches, the way we express Christianity to others—I hope that by helping you better understand people's skepticism, your capacity to love people will increase, offering them genuine hope and real compassion through Jesus Christ. Paul, the most prominent writer of the New Testament, says, "While knowledge may make us feel important, it is love that really builds up the church" (1 Cor. 8:1).

NEW DIRECTIONS

Along with describing the data and experiences of outsiders, this book includes the reactions from over two dozen Christian leaders and pastors, some well-known and others less so. As Gabe and I talked about the direction of this book, we felt that you should hear from these leaders. They are on the front lines of dealing with the hostility that Christianity faces, and you should understand what they are doing and how they are thinking. These men and women, in action and attitude, are helping to reshape the negative images. They are helping to articulate a "kinder, gentler" faith—one that engages people but does not compromise its passion for Jesus or its theological understanding of him.

I hope you will be challenged and inspired through the research and the contributors' thoughts.¹ The church desperately needs more people who facilitate a deeper, more authentic vision of the Christian faith in our pluralistic, sophisticated culture.

Before we dig in, allow me to describe some important details about this book. First, let me clarify some of the language. The main group we studied is “outsiders,” those looking at the Christian faith from the outside. This group includes atheists, agnostics, those affiliated with a faith other than Christianity (such as Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Mormonism, and so on), and other unchurched adults who are not born-again Christians.² According to the research, part of the problem is we often describe these people with derogatory labels and terms, which they find offensive. Christians use terms like “pagans” or “the lost” or worse. Other phrases are also inadequate, such as “nonChristians” (which defines them simply by what they are not) as well as “nonbelievers” or “seekers” (labels that are not necessarily true of all outsiders).

Labeling people can undermine our ability to see them as human beings and as individuals. I am not entirely comfortable using the term “outsiders,” since it seems to classify people by where they are not, but for the sake of discussing perceptions, we have to use something. And I do not believe that, in the sense we are using it, most outsiders would take offense.

I will also use two terms that relate to the primary generations we studied, Mosaics (born between 1984 and 2002) and Busters (born between 1965 and 1983). This book will focus primarily on the oldest Mosaics, those in their late teens up through age twenty-two, and the youngest Busters, primarily describing those under thirty. For the sake of clarity, unless I specifically describe otherwise, when I mention Mosaics and Busters, I am referring to the sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-old set. Keep in mind that identifying a “generation” is an analytical tool for understanding our culture and the people within it. It simply reflects the idea that people who are born over a certain period of time are influenced by a unique set of circumstances and global events, moral and social values, technologies, and cultural and behavioral norms. The result is that every generation has a different way of seeing life. Recognizing the generational concept as a tool, rather than as definitive for every person, means that exceptions are to be expected.³

Second, this book is based on the belief that God wants us to pay attention to outsiders because he cares about them. The Bible says he patiently gives everyone time to turn to him (see 2 Peter 3:9). He is described as a father who waits for the safe homecoming of his children, even if they have disappointed him (see Luke 15:11–32). As Christians, we should have this mindset toward outsiders.

And because of the sheer number of outsiders, we need to recognize their concerns. There are about twenty-four million outsiders in this country who are ages sixteen to twenty-nine. It is significant to note that outsiders are becoming less and less a “fringe” segment of American society. Each generation contains more than the last, which helps explain their growing influence. For instance, outsiders make up about one-quarter of Boomers (ages forty-two to sixty) and Elders (ages sixty-one-plus). But among adult Mosaics and Busters, more than one-third are part of this category, a number that increases to two-fifths of sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds.

If we want to influence new generations, we have to pay attention to the swelling group of outsiders.

The Outsiders—A Growing Part of Our Society

Generation	Age (in 2007)	Percent of generation who are outsiders to Christianity	Size of this segment in the United States
Adult Mosaics and Busters	ages 18–41	37 %	34 million
<i>Older Mosaics and young Busters*</i>	<i>ages 16–29</i>	<i>40 %</i>	<i>24 million</i>
Boomers	ages 42–60	27 %	21 million
Elders	ages 61+	23 %	12 million

*This book focuses on the sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-old segment, that is, the leading edge of the Mosaic generation and the trailing half of the Buster cohort.

Third, Christianity’s image problem is not merely the perception of young outsiders. Those inside the church see it as well—especially Christians in their twenties and thirties. I was unprepared for the research showing that Mosaic and Buster Christians are skeptical of present-day Christianity. There are a number of reasons for this, which we will explore in the chapters to follow, but we must grasp the idea that young people in our churches are also feeling the heat of these negative perceptions.

They are bringing up some of the same challenges, questions, and doubts facing those outside the church.

A fourth detail is to remember the size and scope of Christianity in America. Yes, there are many “flavors” of the Christian faith, and it may not dominate society, as some secularists declare. Yet everyone has to deal with the massive numbers of people who are part of the Christian tradition: the vast majority of Americans identify themselves as Christians; most adults in this country say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life; and nearly half are relatively active churchgoers. Of course, the depth of most Christians’ faith leaves much to be desired, but the fact is Christianity leaves an enormous footprint in America.

You have to keep the overwhelming size of American Christianity in mind because part of the reason that people agitate against the Christian faith is due to the real—and perceived—position of influence it has had. It is not a good time to be the favored team. It’s in vogue to be different, under the radar, and independent. Christianity feels like none of these things.

As Christians, we have to avoid being defensive about the culture’s push to remove Christianity’s power in society. This book never advocates that we try to become more popular. Our task is to be effective agents of spiritual transformation in people’s lives, whatever that may cost in time, comfort, or image. Yet we have to realize that if the enormous number of Christians in this country has not achieved the level of positive influence hoped for, it’s not the fault of a skeptical culture.

Finally, this book is designed to be a mirror for you to see yourself and your faith reflected more clearly. Through this process, God rolled up the blinds so I could see my own capacity for spiritual pride and how often self-absorption inhibits my ability to see people for who and what they really are. My prayer is that God will reveal your attitudes and stereotypes as you ponder this research. I hope you will more carefully consider how firmly people reject—and feel rejected by—Christians, and that you come away feeling inspired with ways you can make a difference.

While I expect most readers will be Christians, I also hope that those outside of Christianity will find this book to be positive, affirming, and representative of their perspectives. If this describes you, my goal is to help you reconsider the person of Jesus Christ. Christians make a lot of mistakes, and often those costly errors and arrogant attitudes undermine

a deep desire that Jesus would become vividly real to you. (I can think of conversations I've had that stole a part of God's reputation because I reduced the Christian message to a "who-is-more-right" argument.)

Jesus is so much more than a logical proof. His life is the starting point where our lives can really begin. Perhaps as you read this book, you will discover a more complete picture of Jesus, a transcendent yet personal God who loves and accepts you perfectly, who wants to shape you and give your life deep meaning and purpose. This is the Jesus I want to describe, even if the actions and attitudes of Christ followers have not always represented this to you.

Still, whether insider or outsider, you need to understand just what the Mosaic and Buster generations think about Christianity. Are you ready to take a look?

2

DISCOVERING *UNCHRISTIAN FAITH*

Several months ago, I was browsing the religious section at a bookstore. As I stood there, checking out the titles, two young men and a young woman wandered into the same section. It was obvious that the three twentysomethings were not searching for books. They were hanging out, discussing life, and joking as friends do.

I was not particularly tuned in to their conversation, not really aware of what they were discussing until one of them said, “Oh, check this out. It’s a Bible with a metal cover!” That caught my attention.

The young woman said, “What? What are you talking about?”

“Yeah, look. It’s a Bible encased in metal.”

“Huh? What’s that for?”

“How the heck should I know? Maybe it’s supposed to be indestructible. Let’s see if it is.” Then I heard the Bible hit the floor.

“I guess not!” They laughed, stuffing the battered book back on the shelf. I saw them shuffle off to another part of the store. Their conversation had already moved to a new topic.

My bookstore experience illustrates that Christianity’s image problem is partly fueled by the unique characteristics of two new generations of Americans: Mosaics and Busters. Young adults enjoy challenging the rules. They are extremely—you might say innately—skeptical. Today’s

young people are the target of more advertising, media, and marketing than any generation before. And their mindset is both incredibly savvy and unusually jaded.

I draw these conclusions not simply based on personal experiences but through my vantage point as a researcher. During my time at The Barna Group, our firm has studied social trends, lifestyles, and public opinion among more than two hundred thousand Americans.¹ In this substantial amount of information, one of the most consistent findings is the gap between generations, and specifically the divide between those in their twenties and thirties and older adults. Clearly some generational differences are life-stage issues—natural chronological differences that affect virtually every generation at the same time during their development and maturation (such as the way parenting changes a person's perspectives and lifestyle).

Yet I would caution you not to underestimate the widening gap between young people and their predecessors. Those who think that in due time Mosaics and Busters will “grow up” and look like everyone else should prepare to have unfulfilled expectations.

Rather than looking for an end to the generation gap, it is important to recognize its existence, because it can help us understand the thoughts that Mosaics and Busters have about Christianity. Let me describe the contours and complexities of emerging generations.

In many ways, young people perceive the world in very different terms than people ever have before. For example, the lifestyles of Mosaics and Busters are more diverse than those of their parents' generation, including education, career, family, values, and leisure. Young people do not want to be defined by a “normal” lifestyle. They favor a unique and personal journey. Many young people do not expect to be married or to begin a family as a young adult (if at all), though this may have been the expectation in the past.

For both Mosaics and Busters, relationships are the driving force. Being loyal to friends is one of their highest values. They have a strong need to belong, usually to a tribe of other loyal people who know them well and appreciate them. Still, under their relational connectedness lies fierce individualism.

Even though they esteem fair-mindedness and diversity, they are irreverent and blunt. Finding ways to express themselves and their rage is an endless pursuit. Being skeptical of leaders, products, and

institutions is part of their generational coding (Busters tend to express skepticism layered with cynicism, and Mosaics do so with extreme self-confidence). They do not trust things that seem too perfect, accepting that life comes with its share of messiness and off-the-wall experiences and people.

Americans of all ages are inundated with media and entertainment options. Yet Mosaics and Busters consume more hours of media from more sources than do older generations. Many enjoy immensely the latest hot movie, music, website, or pop culture buzz. Technologies connect young people to information and each other—and power their self-expression and creativity—in ways older adults do not fully appreciate.

Young people engage in a nearly constant search for fresh experiences and new sources of motivation. They want to try things out themselves, disdaining self-proclaimed experts and “talking head” presentations. If something doesn’t work for them, or if they are not permitted to participate in the process, they quickly move on to something that grabs them. They prefer casual and comfortable to stuffy and stilted. They view life in a nonlinear, chaotic way, which means they don’t mind contradiction and ambiguity. They may tell someone what that person wants to hear, but then do whatever they desire.

Spirituality is important to young adults, but many consider it just one element of a successful, eclectic life. Fewer than one out of ten young adults mention faith as their top priority, despite the fact that the vast majority of Busters and Mosaics attended a Christian church during their high school years. Most young people who were involved in a church as a teenager disengage from church life and often from Christianity at some point during early adulthood, creating a deficit of young talent, energy, and leadership in many congregations. While this is not a uniquely Buster or Mosaic phenomenon—many Boomers did this too—our tracking research suggests that today young people are less likely to return to church later, even when they become parents.

I could go on (and I will explore generational differences throughout the book), but this provides a snapshot, the context in which the new generations think about and interact with Christianity.

HOSTILE TAKEOVER

One of the generational differences is a growing tide of hostility and resentment toward Christianity. In 1996, our firm released the report “Christianity Has a Strong Positive Image Despite Fewer Active Participants.” The study showed that Americans, even those on the outside looking in, possessed widespread respect for Christians. Among outsiders—atheists or agnostics, those of a faith other than Christianity, or unchurched individuals with no firm religious convictions—we discovered that 85 percent were favorable toward Christianity’s role in society. And the perceptions of the youngest generations mirrored this finding.

That was then.

Now, a decade later, the image of the Christian faith has suffered a major setback. Our most recent data show that young outsiders have lost much of their respect for the Christian faith. These days nearly two out of every five young outsiders (38 percent) claim to have a “bad impression of present-day Christianity.”² Beyond this, one-third of young outsiders said that Christianity represents a negative image with which they would not want to be associated. Furthermore, one out of every six young outsiders (17 percent) indicates that he or she maintains “very bad” perceptions of the Christian faith. Though these hard-core critics represent a minority of young outsiders, this group is at least three times larger than it was just a decade ago.

Outsiders direct their skepticism toward all things Christian: the faith itself, the people who profess it, the Bible, *and* Jesus Christ. Frankly, their feelings toward all of these are interwoven. Still, don’t assume that each of these four elements is perceived on equal footing—young outsiders are most likely to be frustrated with present-day expressions of Christianity, followed by their aggravation with Christians.

Their impressions of the Bible are mixed: most think it has good values, but only three out of ten believe that it is accurate in all the principles it teaches. And Jesus draws an interesting set of reactions. Jesus receives outsiders’ most favorable feelings, but even the clarity of his image has eroded among young people. They are more likely than previous generations to believe he committed sins; they are also more likely to believe that people can live a meaningful life without him.

Since Christianity is such a diverse community, our research zeroed in on various “slices” of the Christian faith in America. Christians come in

a variety of shapes, so we wanted to examine a few of the most significant and recognizable segments. In particular, do Mosaic and Buster outsiders possess unique reactions to “born-again” and “evangelical” groups?

We learned that outsiders are more familiar with the phrase “born-again Christians” than they are with the term “evangelicals.” People perceive born-again in about the same way as they think of Christianity itself—most say their impressions are indifferent or neutral, but among those who expressed an opinion, negative outnumbered positive perceptions of born-again by more than a three-to-one ratio (35 percent to 10 percent).

We discovered that outsiders express the most opposition toward evangelicals. Among those aware of the term “evangelical,” the views are extraordinarily negative (49 percent to 3 percent). Disdain for evangelicals among the younger set is overwhelming and definitive. Think of it this way: there are roughly twenty-four million outsiders in America who are ages sixteen to twenty-nine. Of these, nearly seven million have a negative impression of evangelicals; another seven million said they have no opinion; and ten million have never heard the term “evangelical.” That leaves less than a half million young outsiders—out of the twenty-four million—who see evangelicals in a positive light.

How Outsiders Perceive Evangelicals and Born-Again Christians

percent of outsiders, ages 16 to 29 (N* = 440)

	Christianity	Evangelical Christians	Born-Again Christians
Know of/aware of	NA	57 %	86 %
Have bad impression**	38 %	49 %	35 %
Have neutral impression**	45 %	48 %	55 %
Have good impression**	16 %	3 %	10 %

*sample size **percent of those aware of each group

We did not define “evangelical” or “born again” for respondents; we simply asked if they had ever heard of the groups and, if so, to describe their opinions. As we probed these young peoples’ perceptions, we encountered a great deal of confusion. For instance, many outsiders thought born-again Christians were former believers who had left the church and subsequently returned, hence, born again. Evangelicals were

often thought to be Christians who are political activists. But beyond misunderstanding the terms, most young outsiders pay little attention to the specific theological perspectives that comprise the evangelical or born-again groups. Don't get me wrong. Most outsiders are familiar with the story of Christianity—that Jesus was God's Son who came to die to take away our sins if we believe in him. As you will see later in this book, the premise of Christianity is not a mystery because the vast majority of outsiders have been to Christian churches and have heard the message of Christ.

The primary reason outsiders feel hostile toward Christians, and especially conservative Christians, is not because of any specific theological perspective. What they react negatively to is our “swagger,” how we go about things and the sense of self-importance we project. Outsiders say that Christians possess bark—and bite. Christians may not normally operate in attack mode, but it happens frequently enough that others have learned to watch their step around us. Outsiders feel they can't let Christians walk over them.

One of the surprising insights from our research is that the growing hostility toward Christians is very much a reflection of what outsiders feel they receive from believers. They say their aggression simply matches the oversized opinions and egos of Christians. One outsider put it this way: “Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe.”

WHY SO NEGATIVE?

Why would present-day Christianity inspire such unfavorable reactions? Our studies explored the nature of the perceptions about Christianity—not just pro or con but the *substance* of how people feel about Christians and Christianity. The central goal was not just to determine *if* people feel negatively but *why*. What are we known for?

One crucial insight kept popping up in our exploration. In studying thousands of outsiders' impressions, it is clear that Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. *We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than who we are for.*

Think back to the outsider's comment. What is her image of Christians? Entrenched-thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire-building, convert-focused people who cannot live peacefully with others. We are known for having an us-versus-them mentality. Outsiders believe Christians do not like them because of what they do, how they look, or what they believe. They feel minimized—or worse, demonized—by those who love Jesus.

How common are these perceptions? It is one thing to encounter a person on the street who says audacious, brash things about Christianity, but quite another if these perceptions broadly define the Christian faith among young people.³ In our national surveys we found the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are antihomosexual⁴ (an image held by 91 percent of young outsiders), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent). These “big three” are followed by the following negative perceptions, embraced by a majority of young adults: old-fashioned, too involved in politics, out of touch with reality, insensitive to others, boring, not accepting of other faiths, and confusing. When they think of the Christian faith, these are the images that come to mind. *This is what a new generation really thinks about Christianity.*

Yet not all reactions are negative. As part of our research, we found that many outsiders embrace favorable perceptions of present-day Christianity as well. They express conflicted attitudes about the faith—maintaining significant doubts, negative images, and concerns while experiencing positive associations. The most common “favorable” impression is that Christianity teaches the same basic idea as other religions; more than four out of every five young outsiders embrace this description. Three-quarters believe that Christianity has “good values and principles,” and most outsiders indicate that present-day Christianity is “friendly.” Outsiders were split down the middle when it came to the following images: a faith they respect, a faith that shows love for others, something that offers hope for the future, and people they trust. Only a small percentage of outsiders strongly believe that the labels “respect, love, hope, and trust” describe Christianity. A minority of outsiders perceives Christianity as genuine and real, as something that makes sense, and as relevant to their life.

Outsiders' Perceptions of Christianity

Question: Here are some words or phrases that people could use to describe a religious faith. Please indicate if you think each of these phrases describes present-day Christianity.

(N = 440)

	Outsiders, ages 16 to 29	
	a lot	a lot or some
Unfavorable Image		
antihomosexual	66 %	91 %
judgmental	57	87
hypocritical—saying one thing, doing another	54	85
too involved in politics	46	75
out of touch with reality	37	72
old-fashioned	28	78
insensitive to others	27	70
boring	27	68
not accepting of other faiths	22	64
confusing	19	61
Favorable Image		
teaches same basic idea as other religions	28	82
has good values and principles	26	76
friendly	18	71
a faith you respect	16	55
consistently shows love for other people	16	55
offers hope for the future	19	54
people you trust	9	52
seems genuine and real	11	41
something that makes sense	9	41
relevant to your life	10	30

How can people hold both positive and negative images at the same time? On balance, young people possess deeply ambivalent feelings about Christians and Christianity. Their reactions to the faith are widely divergent. What people say about Christianity depends on their experiences and when and where you talk with them. Their aversion is punctuated as often by indifference as it is by hostility. While some young adults are openly hostile to Christians, an equally common reaction is to blow us off.

When outsiders claim that we are unChristian, it is a reflection of this jumbled (and predominantly negative) set of perceptions. When they see Christians not acting like Jesus, they quickly conclude that the group deserves an unChristian label. Like a corrupted computer file or a bad photocopy, Christianity, they say, is no longer in pure form, and so they reject it. One-quarter of outsiders say that their foremost perception of Christianity is that the faith has changed for the worse. It has gotten off track and is not what Christ intended. *Modern-day Christianity no longer seems Christian.*

SIX BROAD THEMES

Do the negative images that people have of Christians get your blood pumping? Keep in mind, the terms and concepts that outsiders throw at us are loaded. Sometimes the criticism is meant to push our buttons, but that is not always the case.

These are important issues because often they reflect very real ways in which the Christian community has mistakenly portrayed itself to a skeptical generation. This book explores our research in six broad themes—the most common points of skepticism and objections raised by outsiders. Those six themes are as follows:

1. *Hypocritical.* Outsiders consider us hypocritical—saying one thing and doing another—and they are skeptical of our morally superior attitudes. They say Christians pretend to be something unreal, conveying a polished image that is not accurate. Christians think the church is only a place for virtuous and morally pure people.
2. *Too focused on getting converts.* Outsiders wonder if we genuinely care about them. They feel like targets rather than people. They question our motives when we try to help them “get saved,” despite the fact that many of them have already “tried” Jesus and experienced church before.
3. *Antihomosexual.* Outsiders say that Christians are bigoted and show disdain for gays and lesbians. They say Christians are fixated on curing homosexuals and on leveraging political solutions against them.
4. *Sheltered.* Christians are thought of as old-fashioned, boring, and out of touch with reality. Outsiders say we do not respond

to reality in appropriately complex ways, preferring simplistic solutions and answers. We are not willing to deal with the grit and grime of people's lives.

5. *Too political.* Another common perception of Christians is that we are overly motivated by a political agenda, that we promote and represent politically conservative interests and issues. Conservative Christians are often thought of as right-wingers.
6. *Judgmental.* Outsiders think of Christians as quick to judge others. They say we are not honest about our attitudes and perspectives about other people. They doubt that we really love people as we say we do.

The next six chapters of this book explore these six critical perceptions, describing how outsiders arrive at these points and how these perspectives affect their understanding of Jesus. Each chapter also articulates a desirable new perception—a biblical vision for how Christians should be known. This desirable perception is not an effort to be popular or merely to accommodate outsiders, but to engage them with the life-changing Jesus rather than an unChristian version of him.

Let me reiterate that you may not agree with the views of outsiders, but you should not ignore them. We have to deal with Mosaics and Busters as they are—candid, irreverent, and brazen. If we do not, it makes their criticism even more forceful because it goes unanswered.

COMPLEX BACKGROUND

One of the responses to this research that we often encounter is blaming the negative perceptions of Christianity on people's spiritual denial. But Christianity's image problem with a new generation is not due merely to spiritual resistance on the part of outsiders, although sometimes this plays a role. Certainly it's easier for people to rationalize their rejection of Christ if they believe Christianity doesn't deserve respect. But you would be dead wrong to conclude that people discard Christ for a simple set of factors or just to avoid feelings of spiritual guilt. You will be surprised to learn, as I was throughout this research, how often someone's aversion is based on a complex set of background factors that include the following elements.

- Perceptions are not formed in a vacuum or based on limited exposure. Most Mosaics and Busters in America have an enormous amount of firsthand experience with Christians and the Christian faith. The vast majority of outsiders within the Mosaic and Buster generations have been to churches before; most have attended at least one church for several months; and nearly nine out of every ten say they know Christians personally, having about five friends who are believers.
- People's impressions have been forged through a wide range of inputs: experiences at churches (59 percent of young outsiders said this influenced their views) and relationships (50 percent) are the most common ways their views are shaped, followed by the input they receive from other religions (48 percent) and what their parents have told them about Christianity (40 percent). At the core of this, young people said they formed their views of Christians based on conversations with others, often with Christians. This is significant because not only does it mean we have a great deal of responsibility in developing many of the perceptions that people hold, but it also suggests the possibility that our words and our lives can change these negative images.
- The “secular” media certainly do affect how outsiders view Christianity, but less than you might think. Books were mentioned by slightly less than half (44 percent), followed by visual media (movies and television—31 percent) and music (16 percent). On the subject of Christians being portrayed inaccurately in the media, only 9 percent of young outsiders and only one-fifth of young churchgoers (22 percent) said that Christianity has received a bad reputation from television and movies. Realize that young people are unaware of the “silent” shaping of media in their lives. People often underestimate the role of media in their thinking and behavior. Yet it is important to realize that young outsiders attribute their image of Christianity primarily to conversations and firsthand experiences.
- Painful encounters with the faith also have a strong influence on what a person thinks of Christianity. In fact, we discovered that one-fifth of all outsiders, regardless of age, admitted they “have

had a bad experience in a church or with a Christian that gave them a negative image of Jesus Christ.” This represents nearly fifty million adult residents of this country—including about nine million young outsiders—who admit they have significant emotional or spiritual baggage from past experiences with so-called Christ followers. Church leaders are not unaware of this issue. Among pastors of Protestant churches, three-quarters said they often encounter people whose negative experiences create major barriers to their openness to Jesus.

- Being hurt by Christianity is far more common among the young than among older outsiders. Three out of every ten young outsiders said they have undergone negative experiences in churches and with Christians. Such hurtful experiences are part of the stories of nearly one out of every two young people who are atheists, agnostics, or of some other faith. To put this in perspective, outsiders who are Moslems and Busters are two and a half times more likely than older outsiders to say bad experiences have degraded their picture of Jesus. Whatever the reasons, compared to their predecessors, younger adults are forming greater resistance to Christianity in less time.

What’s the point in focusing on these complex factors that shape outsiders’ perceptions? I hope to shed light on critical reasons why young people are at odds with Christianity. They have had very personal experiences, frustrations, and hurts, as well as devastating conversations or confrontations. You probably know people who have gone through something like this. You may have had such an experience yourself, when people were so unChristian that you doubted Jesus. You will encounter such stories throughout this book. The important thing to remember is these experiences have deeply affected outsiders, and the scars often prevent them from seeing Jesus for who he really is. This should inspire our compassion for those outside our churches. We should be motivated not by a sense of guilt but by a passion to see their hurts healed.

HIJACKING JESUS

As we work to change the negative perceptions of outsiders, we need to avoid an opposite and equally dangerous extreme. Some Chris-

tians respond to outsiders' negativity by promoting a less offensive faith. The unpopular parts of Christian teaching are omitted or deemphasized. They hijack the image of Jesus by portraying him as an open-minded, big-hearted, and never-offended-anyone moral teacher. That is an entirely wrong idea of Jesus. He taught remarkably tough truths about human beings and about sin. You cannot read a passage like Revelation 19 (when his second coming is equal parts glorious and dangerous) or his time on earth (where he opposed religious leaders and spoke bluntly of people's spiritual fractures) and not see the strong, righteous side of Jesus. Softening or reshaping the gospel is an utterly wrong response to the objections people raise.

Consider two important reasons why hijacking Jesus happens in today's culture. First, theologically conservative people are increasingly perceived to be aloof. This causes them to seem isolated from dealing with a new generation's concerns, doubts, questions, and objections. Mosaics and Busters are the ultimate "conversation generations." They want to discuss, debate, and question everything. This can be either a source of frustration or an interest we use to facilitate new and lasting levels of spiritual depth in young people. Young outsiders want to have discussions, but they perceive Christians as unwilling to engage in genuine dialogue. They think of conversations as "persuasion" sessions, in which the Christian downloads as many arguments as possible.

Outsiders told us that the underlying concern of Christians often seems more about being right than about listening. There is an undercurrent of arrogance that outsiders perceive. This raises the implication that even the "correct" answers, if expressed in an unChristian way, are totally out of tune with a skeptical generation. If Christians are perceived as difficult to live with—and if they do not respond in godly, appropriate, and humble ways to people's questions and doubts—we permit the hijacking of Jesus, simply by leaving our voice out of the conversation.

Second, in the years to come, without major alterations to the unChristian faith, we expect that the hijacking of Jesus—this create-your-own-savior mindset—will become even more popular with young adults. That's because young Christians are also experiencing significant skepticism about unChristian ways of expressing the faith.

Among young adults who participate regularly in a Christian church, *many share some of the same negative perceptions as outsiders*. For instance, four out of five young churchgoers say that Christianity is

antihomosexual; half describe it as judgmental, too involved in politics, hypocritical, and confusing; one-third believe their faith is old-fashioned and out of touch with reality; and one-quarter of young Christians believe it is boring and insensitive to others. These are significant proportions of young people *in Christian churches* who raise objections to the motivation, attitudes, and image of modern Christianity.

The Struggle of Young Churchgoers

Question: Here are some words or phrases that people could use to describe a religious faith. Please indicate if you think each of these phrases describes present-day Christianity.

(outsiders, N = 440; Christian churchgoers, N = 305;
percent who say each term describes Christianity "a lot" or "some")

	Among Americans ages 16–29	
	Outsiders	Churchgoers
antihomosexual	91 %	80 %
judgmental	87	52
hypocritical—saying one thing, doing another	85	47
old-fashioned	78	36
too involved in politics	75	50
out of touch with reality	72	32
insensitive to others	70	29
boring	68	27
not accepting of other faiths	64	39
confusing	61	44

Even though young Christians are wrestling with the unChristian faith, many are trying to make the best of it. A cadre of Mosaics and Busters are feeling the brunt of the hostility toward Christianity, but they continue to work diligently to connect their peers with Jesus. Their realism is both sobering and encouraging. Consider the mindset of born-again Christians who are sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds:

- A majority said that when deciding how to spend their time, they try to choose activities that will help bring people closer to Christ. Most young Christians indicate that they intentionally build friendships with other people so they might get a chance to explain their faith in Jesus.

- Young born-again Christians realize that the negative image of Christianity actually affects their relationships with peers. Two-thirds of young born-again Christians say they believe that most outsiders have a negative image of Christianity. Another one-third admit that the way Christians act and the things they say make them embarrassed to be a Christian.
- They are also sensitive to the way in which Christians engage a broken world and are often frustrated by the poor image that Christianity has. We heard many young believers say that in some circumstances they are reluctant to admit they are Christians. They don't fear being unpopular, but they feel that raising the Christian flag would actually undermine their ability to connect with people and to maintain credibility with them. This is a major indictment of unChristian faith, that to bring those around them closer to Christ, they must distance themselves from the current "branding" of Christianity. They have to put aside unChristian ways of doing things to connect people with the depth and power of the Christian message.

Despite the challenges facing Christianity, there is good news. This research project led Gabe and me to discover thousands of young people who want nothing more than to elevate the relevance of Jesus to our culture. These young believers are very concerned about how Christianity looks to outsiders. They see holes in present-day Christianity, but they do not want Jesus to be hijacked, either by reinventing him or by those whose lives and words do not adequately represent a holy, just, compassionate, and loving God. These young Christians feel disconnection between their lives today and the way Jesus lived—a mission to bring the kingdom of God into sharp focus for all people, especially those who have the deepest needs. These young adults worry that the unChristian message has become one of self-preservation rather than one of world restoration.

One thirty-five-year-old believer from California put it this way: "Christians have become political, judgmental, intolerant, weak, religious, angry, and without balance. Christianity has become a nice Sunday drive. Where is the living God, the Holy Spirit, an amazing Jesus, the love, the compassion, the holiness? This type of life, how I yearn for that."

Jesus was called a friend of sinners, relentlessly pursuing the down-trodden. What an irony that today his followers are seen in the opposite light! How can people love God, whom they can't see, if those of us who claim to represent him don't respond to outsiders with love?

Young Christians are asking questions like this because their desire to connect with outsiders conflicts with the us-versus-them mentality.

DO PERCEPTIONS MATTER?

Gabe and I frequently encounter the idea that Christians should not care what outsiders think about us. After all, Jesus warned that the “world” would hate us. Scripture even promises persecution for those who follow Christ.⁵

Keep in mind that part of the reason Christians possess a bad reputation is because our faith perspectives grate against a morally relativistic culture. Mosaics and Busters find that Christian perspectives run counter to their anything-goes mindset. Although outsiders don't always understand us, we have to be very careful about not tossing aside the biblical motivations that contribute to these perceptions. For instance, Christians are known as judgmental because we address sin and its consequences. Christians should be involved in politics because faith weaves itself into every aspect of our lives. Christians should identify homosexual behavior as morally unacceptable because that is what Scripture teaches. Christians should be pursuing conversations and opportunities that point people to Christ because we are representatives of life's most important message. And Christians should strive for purity and integrity even if that makes us appear sheltered.

As Christ's representatives, we have to articulate the reality that there is a holy Creator who holds us to a standard that exists beyond our finite, cracked lives. Our awareness of a transcendent being should alter who we are and how we think.

However, before you dismiss the unChristian perception as “just Christians doing their duty,” realize that the challenge runs much deeper. The real problem comes when we recognize God's holiness but fail to articulate the other side of his character: grace. Jesus represents truth *plus* grace (see John 1:14). Embracing truth without holding grace in tension leads to harsh legalism, just as grace without truth devolves to compromise. Still, the important insight based on our research is that

Mosaics and Busters rarely see Christians who embody service, compassion, humility, forgiveness, patience, kindness, peace, joy, goodness, and love.

Should we care what people think? Gabe and I began to realize that the more important question was *What if young outsiders are right about us?* What is missing in our portrayal of the Christian faith to new generations? If we have failed to represent the grace that Jesus offers—if we have been poor representatives of a holy and loving God—then, absolutely, what they think about us matters. If we have been unChristian, then we bear responsibility for the problem—and the solution.

In trying to understand people's reactions to Christianity, there are four reasons why perceptions matter.

1. *What people think about Christians influences how they respond to us.* Many people make a conscious choice to reject the message of Christianity, or to avoid churches, because of their views about the faith. *People's attitudes drive their actions.* For instance, our firm has done community-based research for hundreds of churches. Many congregations are perceived in the same negative terms: judgmental, boring, insincere, arrogant, old-fashioned, irrelevant, and so forth. Typically these images are based on specific experiences that outsiders have had in that particular church. So the negative images are not just “made up” or “out there.” Young outsiders are choosing to avoid churches and reject allegiance to Christianity because the faith seems at odds with the type of people they want to associate with.
2. *What people think about Christians should help us be objective.* Outsiders kept telling us that Christians are not realistic or transparent about themselves. An important perspective we should embrace is “You are what you are, not what you tell people you are.” As Christians, however, we need to make continual, honest evaluations of ourselves so that we can uncover the ways in which our lives do not accurately reflect what we profess. Then we might be more discerning about the things we say and how we say them. We might realize that people don't change their perceptions just because we disagree.
3. *What people think of Christians can change.* Another reason Christians should care about the image of their faith is that people's

attitudes are constantly in flux, particularly in a society that is as fluid and dynamic as ours. Just a decade ago the Christian faith was not generating the intense hostility it is today. If the Christian faith has image problems today, the ever-changing environment means we will have opportunities tomorrow to change those perceptions. This won't happen if we try simply to make ourselves look good. The reputation of the Christian faith should never be managed or spin-doctored, but we can change how we're known by becoming more Christlike.

4. *What people think about Christians reflects personal stories.* The unChristian faith affects your life, perhaps more than you realize. As you interact with your friends, the labels "hypocritical," "conversion-happy," "antihomosexual," "sheltered," "too political," and "judgmental" are welded to what many people think about you. You do not have to like this, but it's a fact of our complex world.

If you are a pastor, your church has to deal with the image of Christianity each time you send a mailing, in each instance of interacting with city officials, and every time you invite unchurched individuals to your church. If you are a professional working in other industries, such as science, education, the media, and so on, your job and your witness are affected by the image that people conjure up when they hear you are a Christian. This is important because, as much as I want to help you understand the national patterns, it is ultimately your task to interpret those trends for your context and for the decisions you make each day about how you represent Christianity to others. Is there an appropriate balance between grace and truth in your life? Jesus was concerned about the reputation of his Father in heaven. Are you? Your life shows other people what God is like.

If I have still not convinced you to care about unChristian faith, I wish you could read and hear the thousands of interviews we did. Some of the stories will appear in this book, but the brief written excerpts give you only a glimpse of their potency. It is easy to say you don't care that Christians are known as judgmental, but then you hear a kind, soft-spoken single mother describe what Christians said to her about her parenting abilities. You can biblically defend the fact that Christians should be against homosexuality; then you interview a young person who describes

how her experience in churches led her to believe that Christians have absolutely no compassion or answers for her gay friend.

If you are skeptical that perceptions matter, my request is that you read these pages prayerfully. Then spend time listening to outsiders in your life. What have they experienced? What do they think of *you*? The depth and force of unChristian faith will start to hit you, as it did Gabe and me.

A WAKE-UP CALL

Are you starting to wrap your heart and mind around all of this? Millions of young outsiders are mentally and emotionally disengaging from Christianity. The nation's population is increasingly resistant to Christianity, especially to the theologically conservative expressions of that faith. Of course we have always had detractors, but now the critics of the faith are becoming bolder and more vocal. And the aversion and hostility are, for the first time, crystallizing in the attitudes of millions of young Americans. A huge chunk of a new generation has concluded they want nothing to do with us. As Christians, we are widely mistrusted by a skeptical generation.

This is difficult to take. Our research findings are a punch in the gut to Christians, and they are particularly challenging to theologically conservative Christians. Are you feeling defensive, dismissive, angry, challenged?

I urge you to stick with me here. There is much more we have to understand about outsiders if we want to represent Christ effectively to this culture. We are at a turning point for Christianity in America. If we do not wake up to these realities and respond in appropriate, godly ways, we risk being increasingly marginalized and losing further credibility with millions of people.

Perhaps you wonder if things are really so bad. Perhaps you rarely interact with young people who seem so negative. First, realize that one person's experiences are a poor "sample" for describing a generation. The skeleton of this book is based on careful, scientific polling, which makes it representative of the nation's population. Second, your experience may include a disproportionate number of Christian young people, who, despite their own frustrations, are still working hard to believe the best about the faith.

RESPONDING TO *UNCHRISTIAN* FAITH

Young outsiders and Christians alike do not want a cheap, ordinary, or insignificant life, but their vision of present-day Christianity is just that—superficial, antagonistic, depressing. The Christian life looks so simplified and constricted that a new generation no longer recognizes it as a sophisticated, livable response to a complex world. Young outsiders are exposed to and can choose from virtually limitless options in life; from their perspective, why would they need Jesus?

Mosaics and Busters deserve better than the unChristian faith, and they won't put up with anything less. And, unlike any previous generation, they will not give us time to get our act together. If we do not deal with unChristian faith, we will have missed our chance to bring a deep spiritual awakening to a new generation.

It would be easy for Christians to dismiss outsiders' critiques by quoting the Bible: "Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News" (2 Cor. 4:4).

But if unbelievers can lose sight of Jesus, isn't it possible—likely, in fact—that Satan would try to degrade Christians' efforts to portray Christ? Wouldn't it be in his interest to undermine our lifestyles and even our very methods of representing Jesus, so that outsiders do not really see a compassionate Savior? Paul, the writer of the New Testament letters to the Corinthian church, even alludes to this: "I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted, just as Eve was deceived by the cunning ways of the serpent" (2 Cor. 11:3).

You have choices. You can deny the hostility, you can refute its causes, you can harass those Christians who are trying their best to represent Jesus in a completely new context, or you can deal with the increasing hostility of outsiders in ways that honor God. Jesus pioneered this approach. He listened to the Holy Spirit so he could point people to his Father. He engaged his culture and its people with respect and love. He was *in* but not *of* the world.

That doesn't sound like unChristian faith at all.



Download the research summary of the perceptions of Christianity presented in this chapter at www.unchristian.com/fermi