

# **UNCHRISTIAN: WHAT A NEW GENERATION REALLY THINKS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

According to a recent Barna Research study, the perception of Christians by outsiders (non-Christians) is shockingly low. Disdain for evangelicals by young outsiders is overwhelming and negative (49 percent). According to David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Research Group, and author of *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*, “Only a small percentage of outsiders strongly believe that 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” (27). Young outsiders have largely lost their respect for the Christian faith. And it’s not primarily due to our beliefs, but to our words and actions.

You might be thinking, “So what? Who cares what outsiders think of us? Jesus was persecuted for standing up for the truth and so will we.” While there is certainly some truth to this, it misses a huge point: if we have failed to accurately represent the grace that Jesus offers us—if we have been poor ambassadors of a holy and loving God—then we should care deeply what others think of us. Kinnaman says that if we do not deal with our part of this problem then we will fail to connect with a new generation of young people. Personally, as someone who works with young people and sees the reasons many reject Christ, I could not agree more.

## **HOW OUTSIDERS VIEW CHRISTIANITY**

Kinnaman lists the six most common perceptions outsiders have of Christianity. These findings are deeply sobering to me. It saddens me to think that Christians are viewed so negatively by younger generations today, because I know that many times these perceptions act as stumbling blocks preventing them from considering the claims of Christ.

1. **Hypocritical**—Outsiders largely think that Christians say one thing and do another. They believe we do not act consistently with our beliefs. They claim that Christians pretend to be something on the outside that is not real. Christians are simply not known for being transparent, real, and authentic. As far as studies go, this claim rings true. There is little difference in the behaviors of born-again Christians compared to outsiders on issues such as gambling, visiting pornographic sites, gossiping, visiting a psychic, or to steal.

2. ***Too focused on getting converts***—Outsiders often feel more like targets. They feel as if we merely want to get them “saved” and then move on to another accomplishment. Few report feeling genuinely loved by Christians. According to most outsiders, we are not good listeners. The majority of young outsiders do not feel that Christians show genuine interest in them as people. In fact, the reputation of Christians, says Kinnaman, is similar to Mormons evangelists! Most outsiders report having a time of spiritual openness when they were searching for faith, but they couldn’t get past the mental, emotional, spiritual, or relational barriers, so they gave up.
3. ***Anti-homosexual***—Young outsiders largely view Christians as hateful, bigoted, and non-compassionate in their dealings with homosexuals. They tend to view Christians as focused on “curing” homosexuals and using political means to silence them. In fact, Kinnaman puts it this way, “The perception that Christians are ‘against’ gays and lesbians—not only objecting to their lifestyles but also harboring irrational fears and unmerited scorn toward them—has reached critical mass” (92). According to many young outsiders, hostility toward gays is synonymous with Christianity (91% agree with this). Christians are often viewed as self-righteous and arrogant in their dealings with homosexuals, the opposite of how Jesus was perceived.
4. ***Sheltered***—Outsiders largely think that Christians have simplistic answers to the deep complexities of life. We are viewed as old-fashioned, boring, behind the times, and not in touch with reality. Many think that we live in our own world, isolated from the real problems and complexities of life. Christians are largely viewed as ignorant and uninformed, especially by intellectuals.
5. ***Too political***—Christians are often viewed as synonymous with right-wing Republican conservatives. The majority of young outsiders think we are largely motivated by political interests. Kinnaman is not trying to get Christians to disengage in politics—in fact *just the opposite*. I fully agree; we *should* be involved in politics as a culture-shaping institution. But his point is to make us aware of our reputation in this arena because it can affect our ability to connect with a new generation.
6. ***Judgmental***—Nearly 90% of outsiders say that the term *judgmental* accurately describes Christians today. Only 20% of outsiders view the church as a place where people are accepted and loved unconditionally (185). We are known much more for our criticism than for our love. In fact, Christians are more known for what they are against than what they are for. We are so fixated on sin, says Kinnaman, that it impedes our ability to genuinely love broken people. To be sure, taking a stand for Christ today inevitably warrants being viewed as judgmental. But, sadly, much of our reputation comes not from what we believe (although this is partially true), but how convey our beliefs, and ultimately, how we treat people.

## CONCLUSION: SOME REFLECTIONS

With the release of *UnChristian*, David Kinnaman has established himself as a leading voice among young evangelical Christians (and probably beyond). This is one of the most important recent books for all Christians—whether in “professional ministry” or not—to come to terms with. If his findings are right—and I would bet that they are—the church is going to look radically different over the next few decades. And *all of us* have a responsibility to do something about it. A few reflections on what we can do.

**First, we must teach our young people a biblical worldview.** Kinnaman pointed out that Christian youth largely have the same questions, challenges, doubts, and perceptions as outsiders (19). According to this research only 9 percent of adults and 3 percent of youth have a biblical worldview. Those with a biblical worldview *do* act differently from outsiders and are far more likely to stick with their faith. Kinnaman says that the majority of young people who call themselves Christians will walk away from their faith within a decade—and most will *not* come back. One reason we have failed is because we have not taught kids to truly think and to develop more than a superficial faith.

**Second, we need to learn to have genuine conversations with outsiders.** The Barna Research has consistently shown that real conversations open up avenues for spiritual influence. This does not mean compromising our principles, but it does mean learning to have genuine give-and-take discussions with people. Just asking people what they think, and truly listening to their thoughts, can often change their perceptions of you and of Christians in general. Humility and respect can go a long way. Busters and Mosaics are truly “conversation generations.” They like to discuss and debate everything. Many want to engage Christians, but we are often viewed as inflexible and unwilling to engage in genuine dialogue, and hence are a turnoff to many in this generation.

Francis Schaeffer was a master at this. He was tough on intellectual ideas, but had grace with people. Although he was a true intellectual apologist for the faith, he was a deeply sensitive and compassionate man. In fact, Francis Schaeffer used to say, “It isn’t what you say to someone that matters, as much as the fact that you are listening. Knowing how to listen to people is what helps them” (Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God*, 2007, p. 79). Francis loved people, even when he disagreed with them vehemently.

**Third, we need a kinder and gentler faith**—one that engages people and culture with deep passion for Jesus and theological commitment, yet dosed with grace and humility. Yes, we are to defend our faith with zeal and earnestness, but we must do it with “gentleness and respect” as Peter instructed (1 Peter 3:15). One of the clear implications of Kinnaman’s research is that the negative perceptions of Christians can largely be overcome, and this often happens through meaningful, genuine relationships.