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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 connect 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 often 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