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Book Review: UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters by David Kinnaman

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Kinnaman, David. *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007, 255pp. \$14.99.

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David Kinnaman is president of the Barna Group. It is one of the leading research groups focused on faith and culture with the intent to facilitate spiritual growth and transformation in people's lives. Since joining the Barna group in 1995 he has designed and analyzed hundreds of projects and overseen studies polling hundreds of thousands of individuals.

In his book, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why it Matters*, he engaged in three years of research and interviews with individuals to find out exactly what people think about Christians and Christianity. His research and interviews reveal that how individuals perceive themselves is not always how others perceive them, thereby inhibiting their ability to communicate with others.

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To summarize the book, Kinnaman begins by defining the people groups that he researched so that readers can understand the data gathered (17). The groups he identifies fit under two categories, "outsiders" or "Christians." The term "outsiders" refers to atheists, agnostics, those belonging to faith groups other than Christianity, and unchurched adults. The term "Christians" refers to three subsets: those who are born again, those who are evangelicals, or those who have a biblical worldview (249–250).

Kinnaman spends the majority of the book addressing the six major descriptions of Christianity that surfaced in the research: anti-homosexual, judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned or sheltered, too political, and too focused on getting converts rather than caring for the individual (29–30). He explains that these perceptions were based on first-hand experiences, people's impressions, TV and media, painful encounters, and hurtful situations (30–32). Each chapter explains one of these descriptors and then discusses the biblical action Christians should take in response.

Unchristian reminds Christians that all are under God's authority and called to conform their lives to that of Christ (111), to not be hypersensitive or compromising in their faith (136), to show their faith by their works (143), and to get out of the church and go to the unchurched (146). Christians are also

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 16 encouraged to participate in politics (178) but never to compromise the teachings of Jesus Christ (180). In essence, the book calls Christians to radical discipleship (150–152).

Kinnaman's purpose for writing this book is to awaken the church to the perceptions that the secular world has toward Christians, based on the fact that if Christians want to engage non-Christians, then it is important that they know how others perceive them. Kinnaman gathered research from a group of young people he refers to as Mosaics (born between 1984 and 2002) and Busters (born between 1965 and 1983). His main focus within these two groups are people that are sixteen to twenty-nine (17).

The consensus of those surveyed (outsiders and churchgoers) is that the church no longer represents what Jesus had in mind for Christians (15, 34). Christians should care about those outside Christianity, some twenty-four million people, because Christ cared for them (17). While not responsible for the outsiders' decisions about Christ, Christians are responsible and accountable when their own actions and attitudes toward others misrepresent a holy, just, and loving God (14). Using 1 Corinthians 8:1, Kinnaman explains that his desire is to help Christians better understand outsiders' skepticism so that their love for outsiders would increase (16).

The Christian community's lack of ability to engage the unchurched cannot go unnoticed or be taken lightly. Kinnaman's research was not based on opinion or personal perspective, but on "in-depth objective research data" (8) and biblical principles (45, 83, 131, 213). In addition to statistical information, the book includes interviews, comments, and reflections from thirty Christian leaders.

Kinnaman makes a great effort to avoid being judgmental toward any individual or group. He refrains from using names of Christian leaders who have been unchristian in their leadership and personal behavior (16). While He continues throughout the book to stress the negative attitudes and behaviors of Christians, he maintains that people can change (31).

Despite the fact that conservative Christians may oppose his research (39) or the solutions to the problems he proposes, Kinnaman encourages readers to continue with open minds. He goes to great lengths to communicate an unbiased portrait of what Christianity should be and how Christians should maintain their devotion to Christ without compromise. His articulation of current problems and issues within the Christian faith draw Christians to pursue further his claims of Christianity, which compel Christians to balance grace and truth (103, 104), and purity and proximity (133). For example, "It is one thing to be against

Costner: Book Review: *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About* homosexuality, to affirm that the Bible rejects the practice of same sex lifestyles, but it is another to be against homosexuals” (96).

One weakness reflects, not the content of the material or how it was addressed, but how the reader might process this information. Some Christian readers might allow their fear of not relating to people be what guides their life rather than biblical principles. Unfortunately, this would greatly intensify Christians’ inability to maintain their credibility in the world. However, Kinnaman addresses this potential problem as he warns the reader against what he calls “hijacking Jesus” (32–33) and watering down the gospel message just to fit worldly views. He challenges Christians to live their lives consistent with the faith they claim to believe, that God is love.

The greatest weakness of the book is with the usage of the word “Christianity.” Kinnaman tells us how to be Christian; however, the majority of the book makes it sound as though Christianity is about a group of passive, unrepentant, and unChristlike individuals. Kinnaman does give some attention to the data gathered on favorable images of Christians, and, while the percentages were lower, the descriptions included “friendly,” “consistently shows love for other people,” “has good values and principles,” and “offers hope for the future.” (26)

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Indicating that there are “unchristian Christians” is to use an oxymoron. An individual is either like Christ or not. There could be a more appropriate term, “wannabe” Christian or “fan” of Christ, to describe the unchristian person. Kinnaman’s definition of the word “Christian” seems to be based upon one extreme of the word. It is important to remember that all groups have at least two extremes within their group. No definition of any group should be based upon any extreme. Doing so would eliminate any and all others that identify with that particular group but not with the extremity of any particular sect within the group.

Kinnaman does a great job at pointing out that “the church needs more people who facilitate a deeper, more authentic vision of the Christian faith in our pluralistic, sophisticated culture” (17). He alludes to the inconsistencies between what Christians say and what they do, and he even takes readers on an introspective journey of finding their own reality within their Christian belief. This journey helped me, as a pastor, to realize my own responsibility to disciple the people in my congregation so that we are sensitive to outsiders.

This book has taught me that evangelism is no longer just an approach to sharing the gospel with those who have never heard; rather, it is about engaging with those who have been a part of the church but, because of various reasons, have become cold and indifferent to Christianity and the church. As a pastor it is

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obvious that Christians are more comfortable being in their own community and secluding themselves from others (121); thus, I plan to continue to lead my church into radical discipleship (150) by incorporating this information in my sermons and lay training (133).

In conclusion, *UnChristian* is a must read for pastors, staff, and other leaders in a church. It will change their attitude and approach to evangelism for it gives insight into how Christians might better engage outsiders. While it is true that all who hear the gospel of Jesus will not accept it, Christians should not be the reason for their rejection.

Christianity is a process of growth, a journey so to speak. Christians did not get in their current state overnight. By observing the data and testimonies, all Christians are able to see the past, visualize the reality of the present, and predict the future based on their responses to the information provided. I am confident that as I incorporate this information into my church context we will become a more loving church. Like Rick Warren, my dream for our congregation is “that thirty years from now, the church will be known more by what it is *for* than what it is *against*” (245).

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Frost, Michael, and Alan Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003, 236 pp., \$21.99.

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Michael Frost is the Vice Principal of Morling College located in Sydney, Australia; the Director of the Tinsley Institute; and the founder of the Forge Mission Training Network. He wrote *Freedom to Explore* and *Exiles*, among others. Alan Hirsch is a strategist of mission, a missionary, a poet, and a visionary. He has written *The Forgotten Ways* and *ReJesus* (with Michael Frost).

The Shaping of Things to Come suggests a biblical church that is incarnational in its ecclesiology, messianic in its spirituality, and apostolic in its leadership. These are key elements so that the contemporary church can overcome the traditions of Christendom. The authors assert that a reader cannot easily accept this shift because it is radical. However, their ideas in this book are radical in order to change and improve the concept of the church. Therefore, this book is good for