

Christianity Has an Image Problem

By Bob Young

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All of us know deep down inside that Christians are supposed to represent Christ in this world. But according to some recent research, something has gone terribly wrong, especially among the young adults in our society. Using descriptions like “hypocritical,” “insensitive,” and “judgmental,” young Americans share an impression of Christianity that is nothing short of . . . well, the word that comes to mind is “unChristian”. Groundbreaking research into the perceptions of sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds reveals that Christians have taken several giant steps backward with this group. The surprising details of the study, commissioned by Fermi Project and conducted by The Barna Group, are presented in the book, *unChristian*. Here is information about why these negative perceptions exist and how to reverse them, with practical examples of how Christians can positively contribute to the contemporary culture.

The entire title (because subtitles say a lot about an author’s message) is *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Baker, 2007). The authors are David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, and Gabe Lyons. If you care about the impotence of the modern church and have a heart for evangelism, get this book. You will read the results of interviews conducted with thousands of young people regarding why they have distanced themselves from church. The book shows mistaken moves on our part and what we can do to correct these errors.

One place where Christianity has disconnected from the younger generation: Christianity is paying a price for its typical, strongly evangelistic, "get saved" message. The authors point out that, while revivals and crusades may tally souls "won", those who have been driven away are never considered. The “in-your-face-make-your-decision-now” approach has delivered a few, but served as a wedge for many more. The problem is not enthusiastic outreach; the problem is technique. The authors call us back to genuine discipleship. Research shows that the "save'em, drop'em and on-to-the-next-'un" process has actually widened the gap of those yet remaining on the outside, since many of those “saved” do not remain on the inside.

When you're talking dollars, there is no price too high for a soul. But the problem isn't just cost. In our research with some of the leading "mass evangelism" efforts, we found that often these measures create three to ten times as much negative response as positive. In other words, imagine your church is considering mailing Bibles or videos or other Christian materials to homes in your community. Our research shows that the "collateral damage" of doing so---those whose impressions of your church and of Christianity would be more negative as a result---is significantly greater than the positive impact on those who will respond favorably to these efforts. Moreover, such mass evangelism efforts are most effective with marginally churched adults, while outsiders are usually the ones who respond most negatively.

The point is not that some are simply going to reject Jesus. That is not the point. Our approaches are unnecessarily damaging when we are on a mission to reach out without the

slow, and sometimes tedious, relationship building and caring it takes to let our neighbors know we love them, stand by them, and believe in them. We show our love for God to others by loving them. We must value friends more than rehearsed evangelistic mini-messages.

As Christians, we have to keep in mind that response rates are not the ultimate goal but rather the wise and careful stewardship of the image of God.....If you create more barriers with outsiders because of your tactics; you have not been a good steward of the gospel. How we choose to share Christ is as important as our actually doing it.

The authors make good points. The book is well-balanced with honest evaluation of our mistakes coupled with corrective possibilities which will eventually draw more outsiders into the transforming nature of Jesus.