

## book reviews

### **Unchristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity ... And Why It Matters.**

**David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons.**

Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007.

Those of us who have spent more than a few years in the church world may quickly find ourselves losing touch with the outside. This dangerous trend leaves us struggling to meet the needs of people we can't quite relate to anymore. Authors David Kinnaman, of The Barna Group, and Gabe Lyons took on a research study based on the belief that "God wants us to pay attention to outsiders because he cares about them." The result is *Unchristian*.

There are so many books out there written for those of us in the trenches of ministry. This one stands out. Rather than talking down to the reader from an expert position, *Unchristian* meets me right where I'm at, right on the front lines. I was challenged by what I read and impressed by authors who were well researched, well read, passionate, and admirably curious. It is Kinnaman's and Lyons' curiosity, concern and passionate desire to spread the Gospel that come through the pages of *Unchristian*.

"Christianity has an image problem." These simple words sum up the thrust of this book. The authors seek to define this image problem, to understand "the outsiders" who hold this negative view, and to consider solutions to change those perceptions for the sake of the Gospel. In particular the book concentrates on those in the 16-29-year-old age category, asking: "What do they think of Christianity? What do they think of the church? How do we reach out to them in effective ways?"

Kinnaman's research, in true Barna Group style, provides some painful information with which the reader must grapple. In short, Christians have a bad reputation. Some of that reputation we have earned ourselves, some has been earned for us by other Christians, some has been pasted on us by secular media, and some is simply a result of the sinful world in which we live. The authors share the research in a straightforward way and then take aim at six broad themes which were the "most common points of skepticism and objections raised by outsiders."

1. Hypocritical
2. Too focused on getting converts
3. Antihomosexual
4. Sheltered
5. Too political
6. Judgmental

The authors remind us that while we may not agree with the perceptions of outsiders, we should not ignore them. What people think about Christianity influences how they respond to us. "As you interact with your friends, the labels...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." With this, the reader is reminded that it is not our reputations that are at stake here, but God's.

So the question is: "Should you bother reading it?" Absolutely. *Unchristian* is a book that provides quality research and facts as well as commentary that is productive—not just in forcing us to be honest about the "failures" of the Church—but in facilitating a conversation to look for answers, new directions, and opportunities. The authors detail the current perceptions and then offer a "new perception" for consideration in a well thought-out chapter-by-chapter approach.

The research is solid; the authors are earnest. The book is sprinkled with a few well-placed anecdotes which remind us that these "outsiders" are real people who had encounters with Christianity that shaped their perceptions and therefore their reactions to the Gospel. Each chapter includes a section called "Changing Perceptions" which includes insights and experiences from a wide variety of pastors, Christian leaders, authors, and speakers who are dealing day-to-day with the negative perceptions that plague Christianity. These "real life" examples of those attempting to change perceptions provide valuable encouragement and application.

*Unchristian* is a book well worth any reader's time. It is a book which contains hard facts that we need to hear to better reach out to our current culture. This is a book written not just to "the church," but also to the individual. It is written to ask us to examine our role in forming and facilitating the existing unchristian perception. It is written to challenge us to get outside the doors of our churches, our classrooms, or our offices and truly get to know those who are still on the outside. *Unchristian* challenges the reader to do all of these things because there is a God that we represent and a world that needs to meet Him.

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### **Disconnected.**

**Chap Clark and Dee Clark.**

Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007.

The intended audience for this book is the parent of today's postmodern adolescent. It serves as a practical, follow-up guide to the author's published research (Hurt, 2002). The Clarks have subtitled this book *Parenting Teens in a MySpace® World*. To underscore the rapidity of change in our world, when the Clarks were preparing their manuscript in late 2006, MySpace® was the most used networking site at that time. As this review is being written, MySpace® has fallen in popularity to social networking sites such as Facebook®, BlogSpot® and Twitter®.

The Clarks combine their research findings with personal stories written in the first person, as they have raised three children through adolescence to emerging adulthood. The book is well organized in two major parts. The first deals with the fast changing world of childhood and adolescence. The second part, more pragmatic, outlines why and how parents should respond to their child in this changing culture.

The authors launch into the body of the book by describing the total call of life training which includes spiritual, psychological and social development. These are not three individual components but are the major parts of a single process. This portion of the book is informative and is good preparation for parents raising their first child. The Clarks use a writing style that is encouraging and motivating.

The authors shape their viewpoint on parenting by stating "your child isn't a problem to be solved, but a creative, talented and unique gift to be understood, embraced, and ultimately set free." The world in which the reader of this review grew up is long gone. This now is a MySpace® world that is increasingly superficial, politicized and performance-driven. Change is our kids' one constant in life.

The Clarks challenge the reader to examine their ultimate goal of parenting by answering the question, "Is how I parent providing my child with the very best chance to see and experience the Jesus who died to redeem them?" Most teens in America would agree that their parents "care" for them. That is not true when the same teens are asked if their parents "love" them.

The book introduces a new term to those who study the processes involved in adolescence. The new term, individuation, is used to define the path toward becoming a unique individual. Chapter 6 introduces the thesis of this volume. The authors assert that there has been a systemic abandonment of the young as they experience individuation, and that this phenomenon has appeared over the last several decades. Three basic interrelated tasks are taken on in this time of individuation: the discovery of identity, the acceptance of healthy autonomy, and the ability and willingness to connect to others in community.

The second part of the book introduces "The Five Tasks of Parenting." They are:

- Understanding
- Showing compassion
- Boundarying
- Charting/guiding
- Launching into adulthood

This discussion is followed by a chapter on parenting in each of four seasons: childhood, early adolescence, mid-adolescence and late adolescence. The authors assert that as the season of childhood has been compressed, the period of mid-adolescence has been lengthened.

This reviewer would invite the reader to picture the parents your ministry touches on a regular basis. Then think of all the technological changes that have happened since those parents were teens. Even "sexting" is so new that people haven't found their moral compass when dealing with this latest mid-adolescent activity.

The conclusion of the book begins with a discussion of what the authors call the "6 Longings of Mid-Adolescence." A chapter is devoted to the three levels of partnership parents provide. The book closes with the authors explaining their "Circles of Relationship" model that they present in their ParenTeen™ Seminars.

This book can serve as a great resource for church workers who haven't updated their knowledge base of today's adolescent in the last five years. It could also serve as a good text for a parenting class. The authors come from a Reformed theology tradition that the class leader would need to address (there is no mention of the daily drowning of the Old Adam by remembering our Baptism or the faith strengthening received through regular reception of the Lord's Supper). This writer also can recommend its reading to parents for individual use without many reservations.

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## **Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church.**

**Michael Horton.**

Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008.

In Michael Horton's newest book, the author, seminary professor, and radio host poses a challenge to ministry leaders to examine the methods and mindsets we use when presenting the Gospel message. He believes that the efforts to be relevant and practical in ministry have taken us away from a "grace alone, Christ as a Savior of sinners" message to a "try harder, Christ as an example for our lives" message.

In the first chapter, he lays out the concern he has for the church and the objectives he hopes to accomplish in writing this book. Most are excellent points and good things for all of us to ponder. However, in the closing paragraphs of this first chapter, he makes a statement that really threw this reader off. Professor Horton states: "I do not expect to get everything right....I admit from the outset that on balance it is not a cheerful missive. I am counting on the indulgence of readers to wait for this book's more constructive sequel. If this book will have only raised questions that provoke us to deeper analysis of our witness in the world today, it will be sufficient" (27). At that point I was a bit confused about Horton's motivation in writing this book, and what he wanted to accomplish.

In the next chapters, "Naming Our Captivity," "Smooth Talking and Christless Christianity," "How We Turn Good News into Good Advice," "Your Own Personal Jesus," and "Delivering Christ," the author uses published research, personal experience, and others' experiences to walk us through the struggles he sees in American churches. Issues he identifies in the book are: moralism, therapeutic deism, the lack of use of the law in preaching, the reduction of Christianity to the best methods of self-improvement, modern Gnosticism, and a role confusion of the American church. Like the first chapter, each of these chapters contained excellent points, but they also included what I would describe as some long-winded diatribes and ill-placed personal attacks on certain public ministry leaders.

In the final chapter, "A Call to the Resistance," Dr. Horton exhorts his

readers to return to expository preaching, regular celebration and observation of the sacraments, and a ministry of both law and gospel. These practices will return God to the place and role of the main speaker in the church. These are excellent points which provide a pretty good finish to the author's original intentions for the book.

However, having reflected on the totality of the thoughts and ideas presented, I would make the following recommendation: take the time you might have invested in reading this book and apply it in the continuation of your own faith and ministry journey through Scripture reading, a study of the Lutheran Confessions, and the reading of classic Christian apologists such as Bonhoeffer and Lewis. This approach will ground us in Scripture and theology so that we can make applications to our congregations, ministries, and vocations.

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