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A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity

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(Ventura, CA) - As the nation's culture changes in diverse ways, one of the most significant shifts is the declining reputation of Christianity, especially among young Americans. A new study by The Barna Group conducted among 16- to 29-year-olds shows that a new generation is more skeptical of and resistant to Christianity than were people of the same age just a decade ago.

The study of Christianity's slipping image is explored in a new book, entitled ***unChristian***, by David Kinnaman, the president of The Barna Group. The study is a result of collaboration between Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons of the Fermi Project.

Rising Reactions

The study shows that 16- to 29-year-olds exhibit a greater degree of criticism toward Christianity than did previous generations when they were at the same stage of life. In fact, in just a decade, many of the Barna measures of the Christian image have shifted substantially downward, fueled in part by a growing sense of disengagement and disillusionment among young people. For instance, a decade ago the vast majority of Americans outside the Christian faith, including young people, felt favorably toward Christianity's role in society. Currently, however, just 16% of non-Christians in their late teens and twenties said they have a "good impression" of Christianity.

One of the groups hit hardest by the criticism is evangelicals. Such believers have always been viewed with skepticism in the broader culture. However, those negative views are crystallizing and intensifying among young non-Christians. The new study shows that only 3% of 16 - to 29-year-old non-Christians express favorable views of evangelicals. This means that today's young non-Christians are eight times less likely to experience positive associations toward evangelicals than were non-Christians of the Boomer generation (25%).

The research shows that many Christians are innately aware of this shift in people's perceptions of Christianity: 91% of the nation's evangelicals believe that "Americans are becoming more

hostile and negative toward Christianity." Among senior pastors, half contend that "ministry is more difficult than ever before because people are increasingly hostile and negative toward Christianity."

The Set of Perceptions

While Christianity has typically generated an uneven reputation, the research shows that many of the most common critiques are becoming more concentrated. The study explored twenty specific images related to Christianity, including ten favorable and ten unfavorable perceptions. Among young non-Christians, nine out of the top 12 perceptions were negative. Common negative perceptions include that present-day Christianity is judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), old-fashioned (78%), and too involved in politics (75%) - representing large proportions of young outsiders who attach these negative labels to Christians. The most common favorable perceptions were that Christianity teaches the same basic ideas as other religions (82%), has good values and principles (76%), is friendly (71%), and is a faith they respect (55%).

Even among young Christians, many of the negative images generated significant traction. Half of young churchgoers said they perceive Christianity to be judgmental, hypocritical, and too political. One-third said it was old-fashioned and out of touch with reality.

Interestingly, the study discovered a new image that has steadily grown in prominence over the last decade. Today, the most common perception is that present-day Christianity is "anti-homosexual." Overall, 91% of young non-Christians and 80% of young churchgoers say this phrase describes Christianity. As the research probed this perception, non-Christians and Christians explained that beyond their recognition that Christians oppose homosexuality, they believe that Christians show excessive contempt and unloving attitudes towards gays and lesbians. One of the most frequent criticisms of young Christians was that they believe the church has made homosexuality a "bigger sin" than anything else. Moreover, they claim that the church has not helped them apply the biblical teaching on homosexuality to their friendships with gays and lesbians.

The 'UnChristian' Label

When young people were asked to identify their impressions of Christianity, one of the common themes was "Christianity is changed from what it used to be" and "Christianity in today's society no longer looks like Jesus." These comments were the most frequent unprompted images that young people called to mind, mentioned by one-quarter of both young non-Christians (23%) and born again Christians (22%).

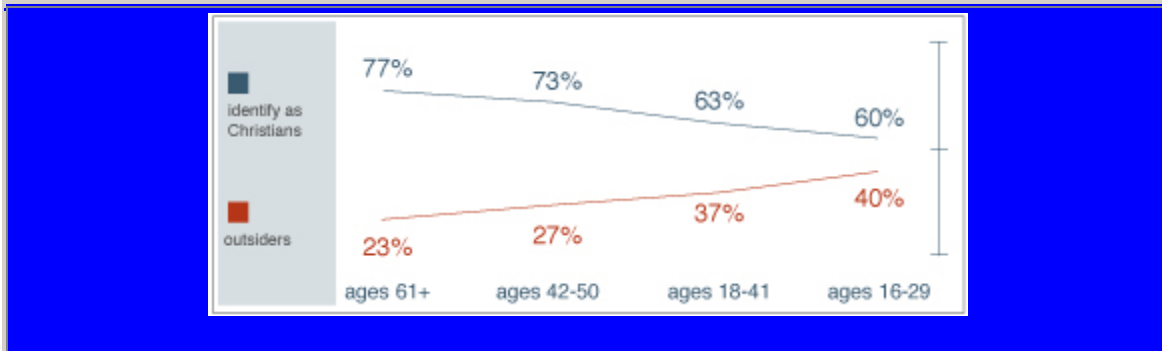
Kinnaman explained, "That's where the term 'unChristian' came from. Young people are very candid. In our interviews, we kept encountering young people - both those inside the church and outside of it - who said that something was broken in the present-day expression of Christianity. Their perceptions about Christianity were not always accurate, but what surprised me was not only the severity of their frustration with Christians, but also how frequently young born again Christians expressed some of the very same comments as young non-Christians."

Changing Allegiances

One reason that Christianity's image is changing is due to the shifting faith allegiances of Americans. Simply put, each new generation has a larger share of people who are not Christians (that is, atheists, agnostics, people associated with another faith, or those who have essentially no faith orientation). The new book refers to this group as "outsiders" because they are describing what Christianity looks like from an outsider's perspective. Among adults over the age of 40, only about one-quarter qualify as outsiders, while among the 16 to 29 segment, two-fifths are

outsiders. This represents a significant migration away from the dominant role that Christianity has had in America.

The Proportion of those "Outside" Christianity is Growing with Each Generation



Source: The Barna Group, Ltd. 2007

As pointed out in the Barna Update related to **atheists and agnostics**, this is not a passing fad wherein young people will become "more Christian" as they grow up. While Christianity remains the typical experience and most common faith in America, a fundamental recalibration is occurring within the spiritual allegiance of America's upcoming generations.

Yet, the research shows that millions of young outsiders have significant experience with Christians and Christian churches. The typical young outsider says they have five friends who are Christians; more than four out of five have attended a Christian church for a period of at least six months in the past; and half have previously considered becoming a Christian.

"Older generations more easily dismiss the criticism of those who are outsiders," Kinnaman said. "But we discovered that young leaders and young Christians are more aware of and concerned about the views of outsiders, because they are more likely to interact closely with such people. Their life is more deeply affected by the negative image of Christianity. For them, what Christianity looks like from an outsider's perspective has greater relevance, because outsiders are more likely to be schoolmates, colleagues, and friends."

Responding to the Research

David Kinnaman, who is a 12-year-veteran of the Barna team, pointed out some of the unexpected findings of the research. "Going into this three-year project, I assumed that people's perceptions were generally soft, based on misinformation, and would gradually morph into more traditional views. But then, as we probed why young people had come to such conclusions, I was surprised how much their perceptions were rooted in specific stories and personal interactions with Christians and in churches. When they labeled Christians as judgmental this was not merely spiritual defensiveness. It was frequently the result of truly 'unChristian' experiences. We discovered that the descriptions that young people offered of Christianity were more thoughtful, nuanced, and experiential than expected."

"Some Christians fear the changing reputation of Christianity and it certainly represents an uncomfortable future. Yet, rather than being defensive or dismissive, we should learn from critics, especially those young Christians who are expressing consternation about the state of faith in America. Jesus told us to expect hostility and negative reactions. That is certainly nothing new. But the issue is what we do with it. Is it a chance to defend yourself and demand your rights? Or is it an opportunity to show people grace and truth? Common ground is becoming more difficult to

find between Christians and those outside the faith. When the Apostle Paul advises believers to 'live wisely among those who are not Christians' and to 'let your conversation be gracious and effective,' (Colossians 4:5-6, NLT) he could be writing no better advice to committed Christians in America."

The book also includes exclusive perspective from 30 Christian leaders, including Mark Batterson, Chuck Colson, Louie Giglio, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, Kevin Palau, John Stott, and Rick Warren. Kinnaman described their contribution as an effort "to make sense of the complex and challenging project - both why the problems exist as well as what Christians ought to do in response to the information. We looked for the biblical space in order to respond to the sharpest criticism. Beyond simply reporting the problems that we discovered among a skeptical generation, my partner Gabe Lyons and I want the book to help Christians find a way forward, to read positive examples and find hope that their life can provide a clearer picture of Jesus to skeptical people around them."

***unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks
About Christianity ... and Why It Matters***
[place orders here](#)
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Research Details

The Barna Group, Ltd. (which includes its research division, The Barna Research Group) is a privately held, for-profit corporation that conducts primary research, produces audio, visual and print media, and facilitates the healthy development of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries. Located in Ventura, California, Barna has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984. If you would like to receive free e-mail notification of the release of each new, bi-weekly update on the latest research findings from The Barna Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna web site **www.barna.org**.

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