

THE
OUTSIDER
INTERVIEWS

A New Generation
Speaks Out on Christianity

Jim Henderson, Todd Hunter, and Craig Spinks



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CONTENTS

- Watch This Book! 9
- Foreword by David Kinnaman 11
- Acknowledgments 15
1. The Backstory: *The Why, Where, Who, and How*
(Jim Henderson) 17
2. Kansas City Outsiders: *Christianity Has an Image
Problem* (Jim Henderson) 29
3. Things Change: *Billy Graham's Socks and the Threat
of Postmodernity* (Todd Hunter) 49
4. Phoenix Outsiders: *Beliefs and Blinders* (Jim
Henderson) 63
5. The Big Question: *How Did You Get Outsiders to
Agree to Do This?* (Jim Henderson) 83
6. Denver Outsiders: *Diversity and Difference* (Jim
Henderson) 97

Contents

7. Getting Past Gay: *Climbing the Mountain of Difference with Dad* (Craig Spinks) 117
 8. Seattle Outsiders: *The Great Agreement* (Jim Henderson) 135
 9. Six Lessons Learned: *The Things That Moved Us Most* 155
- Appendix: A Reading Guide for Groups and Individuals 175
- Notes 197

WATCH THIS BOOK!

This is a DVD/Book—a DVB.

The DVD lets you see and hear people—their faces, gestures, and tone of voice. The book takes you behind the scenes to the authors' thoughts, dialogue, and disagreements. We placed the DVD inside the front of the book to send a message: you choose where to start.

It's up to you.

The book and DVD are different. Both contain compelling stories, thoughtful analysis, and practical ideas. Together they tell a story we hope will have an impact.

Think of it like seeing a movie with a few friends and then going out for coffee to talk about it. That is similar to what the three of us did. We facilitated the conversations, which you'll watch on the DVD, and then we went out and talked about what we learned, what surprised us, and so on, which you'll read about in the book.

You'll meet people you feel like you already know: friends, strangers, even your own kids. You'll meet some new people too.

Enjoy.

FOREWORD

I am excited about *The Outsider Interviews*.

As a survey researcher and a generational analyst, people often ask me where we actually find the people we interview. Our firm, the Barna Group, conducts telephone, online, and in-person interviews with tens of thousands of people every year. We employ sophisticated survey techniques and high-quality, nationwide samples. But if someone reads the data from our research and it does not fit their experiences, it is easy for them to wonder about the so-called science of survey research.

This happened frequently as a result of *unChristian*, the book Gabe Lyons and I collaborated on, which describes the next generation's growing disenchantment with Christianity. When the book was released, a lot of people had a hard time imagining that real people embraced such hostile—yet often very nuanced—views about the Christian faith. *Where did you find these people to interview? Why don't I know anyone like this? Do young people really perceive Christianity in such negative ways? None of the young people I know actually understand that much about the Christian faith. Don't young people just think whatever media tells them to think?*

I am enthusiastic about this book and DVD because I think this project begins to answer questions like these.

Actually, I understand why people are skeptical about research. There is no shortage of data available these days; most of it is not particularly good or reliable. And it is not easy to hear people critiquing the faith many of us follow.

Yet I think this resource from my friends Jim Henderson, Todd Hunter, and Craig Spinks is a fantastic way to get a “street-level” view of what young people think about the Christian faith. I have personally put in loads of hours trying to understand what Christianity looks like from an outsider’s perspective. Yet this tool helped me remember the very human side of the thousands of interviews we have done. The video interviews put flesh and bones to the data—they made the stories come to life *because they involve real lives*.

Beyond the video segments with young people, I think you will be challenged by the conversations between Jim, Todd, and Craig recorded in the book. I participated in many of the live events during which the outsider interviews were filmed. I had a close-up look as Jim, Todd, and Craig worked their way from Phoenix to Seattle, Denver to Kansas City, trying to make sense of what they were learning. This book offers their observations filtered with a passion to help people see the real Jesus. I believe many of these conversations will stretch you as they did me.

Before letting you loose into reading the book or viewing the DVD (you choose where to start!), let me offer one last observation: isn’t it ironic that one of the things that makes us human—our ability to hear and understand subtle inflections of complex sounds known as language—is also something we struggle with the most? Translation: for all our

communication abilities, we don't listen very well. I suppose that makes some sense because our ability to communicate is deeply affected by our fallen natures. Just think about the common listening gaps: men versus women; wives against husbands; parents face off with children; employers agitate workers and vice versa; immigrants versus citizens; Christians against non-Christians. No matter what side of the fence you're on, we all struggle to understand others.

That was part of the reason I decided to use the terms "insiders" and "outsiders" in the book *unChristian*: they actually fit the way most of us think. For the most part we really do consider people "in" or "out," us versus them, Christians and everyone else. Don't get me wrong—I am more convinced than ever that we need to help people understand why they need Jesus. But this takes harder work than ever, and better, deeper reservoirs for hearing and perceiving the perspectives of those around us.

Ultimately this resource, like good research itself, should help us become better listeners. It will certainly make it harder to put people into neat little boxes.

Listen in on *The Outsider Interviews* with Jim, Todd, and Craig—three people I admire for their courage and transparency. They have let us in on their conversations and interactions with the next generation in hopes that all of us will grow into better people—more human, better listeners.

I am grateful to these three observers. And I hope they can help me find our next set of survey respondents!

David Kinnaman
Coauthor, *unChristian*
President, Barna Group

1

THE BACKSTORY

The Why, Where, Who, and How

Jim Henderson

This chapter correlates with the video titled
“The Backstory”
on the Main Menu of your DVD.

No one likes to be called names, but that doesn't seem to stop us from coming up with new ones every day.

I lead Off The Map, an organization that helps Christians “see themselves through the eyes of outsiders.” For the past ten years we've been researching the origins of the “us and them” mentality many Christians have and helping Christians bridge the insider-outsider divide. For some mysterious reason, evangelical Christians (my spiritual tribe) have devoted an unusual amount of energy toward developing a

sophisticated linguistic system for identifying who's in and who's out.

What's more, as a result of our successful campaign to become America's civic religion, two interesting things have happened: "they" (outsiders) know we're here, and they have well-formed opinions about our habits and practices.

My first book was originally titled *A.K.A. Lost* because I wanted to take on the iconic status the word *lost* has gained in the Christian culture. Having been a pastor for twenty-five years, I had plenty of opportunities to observe how I and others used the word. After reflecting on my experiences, I came to the conclusion that for the most part, using *lost* as much as we did generally made us meaner people. It made it harder for us to connect with "lost" people. Frankly, it sounded like we were calling them a name. Perhaps what's most revealing is that we rarely use this word in the presence of actual lost people; we normally only use it *behind their backs*.

Cultures and social groups that create names to identify those who don't belong often become the most dangerous and meanest people on the planet. Think of racial slurs and the histories associated with them, for example. That's why we eventually came up with a new name to replace "lost": *the people Jesus misses most*.

When I read *unChristian* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, I discovered a word that I felt honestly described this divide.¹ I'm not saying I like this word, but it's certainly accurate. That word is *outsiders*. When we say *outsiders* out loud, particularly in the presence of people we label that way, we are held accountable. My contention is that if Christians want to create these divides, we at least should own

up to them and say the word to outsiders' faces. Words are like mirrors; they reflect the images we hold in our minds back to us and confront us with them. In this book we will be holding this mirror up to Christians and asking them if they like what they see.

Blurring the Lines

What made *unChristian* even more important and provocative is that Kinnaman and Lyons not only queried outsiders but also asked *insiders* for their opinions about Christianity. The common denominator wasn't religion; it was age. Everyone they polled was between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine. Focusing on this demographic allowed them to discover deep differences but also profound similarities.

Those experienced in sailing say that it is all about how you *angle into the wind*. By choosing to sail into this age group, Kinnaman and Lyons uncovered some surprising similarities between Christians and non-Christians, such as a high commitment to service, tolerance, and diversity, for example. They also uncovered this little-known fact: not only is there a divide between insiders and outsiders, but there is a divide between insiders and *insiders*. Thousands of young Christians are staying under the big tent of Christianity but refusing to toe the party line. They're resisting the more militant, doctrinaire, and strident elements of their host faith culture, particularly when identifying with these elements would marginalize those who don't hold the same views they do.

This is a significant shift. For example, when my generation (Boomers) discovered the inconsistencies of religion, we

walked away from church, God, and Christianity. But this pragmatic, postmodern bunch is staying home and fighting for a new kind of Christianity. They're too committed to be pushed out of the house by those who think they're too soft on homosexuality, immigration, or abortion. They're on a mission to redefine what it means to be followers of Jesus in the real world and do it without becoming mean people.

After reflecting on the research, I was compelled to connect personally with some outsiders and insiders. I wanted to hear their voices and look them in the eye. I wanted to feel what it was like to call people outsiders to their faces and hear how they felt about our attempts to reach them, convert them, and (sadly) marginalize them. I wanted to let them know they were more than a number, more than a statistic or a demographic category. Besides calling them a name, I wanted to tell them that millions of other insiders and outsiders are struggling with the very same issues.

Three Amigos

Todd Hunter is one of the finest leaders I've ever worked with. He doesn't use leadership to work out his personal insecurities, and he actually develops people as leaders, not just as employees. But for the purposes of this project Todd brought one other important skill: curiosity. Todd likes outsiders and loves hearing their viewpoints. That's why I needed him on this team.

I hope you can keep this next bit a secret so I can continue relating to young people as well as I do for at least a few more years. Sometimes when I'm in a serious conversation with a twentysomething, I'm thinking to myself, *When is she going*

to realize I'm as old as her grandparents? Anyway, Todd and I are honored to have a significant number of young leaders who relate to us. We both knew we needed one of these young leaders to be part of this project, so off we went to find Craig.

I met Craig Spinks when he was eighteen and I was fifty-one. That was almost ten years ago, when Craig was leading the video production team in the six-thousand-member church where we both worked at the time. Craig is a master storyteller with the video camera. He knows how to speak the visual vernacular, and at twenty-eight he falls inside the demographic Kinnaman and Lyons researched. Craig was raised in church and knows the insider stuff from a young person's point of view. I think you'll enjoy hearing his perspective throughout the book.

The People Jesus Misses Most

The three of us hit the road in the fall of 2008. We wanted to interview some outsiders and insiders in four different cities in America. Truth be told, we were just as interested in hearing from insiders, particularly about where they find points of agreement with outsiders. We also wanted to know what enabled them to call themselves Christians while still disagreeing with some of the main cultural ideas their spiritual elders fought so hard to establish over the past thirty-five years.

Even though we talked with both groups, we decided to call this *The Outsider Interviews* as a way of erring on the side of the people Jesus misses most. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The church is the church only when it exists for others."²

We think the church has much to learn about connecting with outsiders. We have not sought them out for their opinions or asked them to help us become a better church. Instead we have often marginalized them and, worse, objectified them. We only need to look to our own lexicon for evidence of this trait. Here are a few of the names we've come up with to keep them in their place: *lost*, *unbelievers*, *unsaved*, *unrepentant*, *unregenerate*, *heathens*, and *reprobate*.

We wanted to change this bad habit. We wanted to let outsiders know we really do value their opinions and insights. We also wanted to model to the church the ancient practice of honoring the outsider. The Old Testament is filled with the stories of one famous outsider after another becoming central to the story of God—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the entire city of Nineveh, and many Gentiles (like me), just to name a few.

As you will experience, this ancient approach continues to make an impression in the twenty-first century. More than one outsider told us they were shocked Christians were actually listening to them. Klarisa, an outsider in Kansas City, tore our hearts out when she said, “If Christians would listen and show some interest *in me*, I would be very open to their story.” What if evangelism in our time is more about listening than speaking?

Cards on the Table

The three of us believe we're living in tumultuous times. For many young people, 9/11 is the controlling metaphor for the dramatic changes we find ourselves adjusting to every day. Financial markets are unpredictable, major world reli-

gions, including Christianity, are competing head-to-head for global market share, and it's commonly assumed that India and China will supersede the United States in terms of global influence (China is currently financing America's debt) sometime in the next fifty years.

The renowned strategic thinker Peter Drucker said, "Every few hundred years in Western society there occurs a sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself."³ The three of us are betting that we are currently living in that window of time and that some things, some big things, are never going back to the way they were. *Leave It to Beaver* has left the building. *Family Guy* has moved in, dirty laundry and all.

When Gutenberg introduced the printing press in the West, he had no idea what he was unleashing on the world. He was swinging a door on what Phyllis Tickle in *The Great Emergence* calls a "hinge time."⁴ Many of us have never considered what the world must have felt like when Gutenberg was doing his thing. He was living in and helping to create a world caught between the times. Think about the experimentation, the uncertainty, the innovations, and the excitement that must have been taking place in such an environment. Fast-forward five hundred years and replace the printing press with the internet. Now think about this: the commercial use of the internet is only a little over fifteen years old. Most people in the world have yet to benefit from this incredible technology. Now think about the experimentation, uncertainty, and innovation that mark our time: MySpace, Facebook, Google, Twitter, the iPhone. How are followers of Jesus supposed to navigate these changes? How are we

supposed to keep our spiritual equilibrium in a world caught between the times?

From Charts to Hearts

Being spiritual anthropologists we had to go see for ourselves if what Kinnaman and Lyons had to say was true. That's what motivated us to schlep our cameras, our support staff, and ourselves onto one plane after another. *We wanted to hear the stories behind the stats.* To use an exploration metaphor, we weren't satisfied with the view from the ship; we wanted to get in our canoes, row right up onto shore, beach our boats, and ask the natives what life looked like from their campfire.

A few years ago I had a speaking tour back east, so my wife, Barb, and I decided to drive between several of the events. Being members of AAA, we availed ourselves of their services and asked them to produce a detailed map of the routes from one city to another. They call this a TripTik. A TripTik is a very detailed and informative map. The only thing it does not provide is videos of where you're going. I can hear you saying, "But Jim, it isn't possible for a video to play inside a map, is it?" No, it isn't yet, though we're getting closer all the time. You get the idea. The reason we think a video map would be cool is because we are hardwired to want to *see* stuff. Just today I was watching yet another cooking show on TV with my wife. I asked her why she watched so many cooking shows. She said, "I like to see what they are doing; books don't provide enough of the details." Given the choice between words and pictures, most human beings, like my wife, will choose pictures.

UnChristian is like a TripTik for Christians. It provides information to help us navigate the road less traveled between ourselves and others. *UnChristian* provides the statistical information that explains how we got from where we were (the dominant religious voice in America) to where we are today (marginalized and mistrusted). What it doesn't show us is the faces behind these statistics. We can't see the people who are doing the talking. We can't see the hearts behind the charts.

Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, emphasizes the emotional power of the face. "Empathy depends on emotion and since emotion is conveyed nonverbally, *to enter another's heart, you must begin the journey by looking into the face.*"⁵

In this book you will see the faces and look into the eyes of outsiders.

Creating New Maps

We don't expect you to become spiritual anthropologists. However, because you are reading this book, we assume you like to travel to new places in your thinking. Our hope is that those who say they follow Jesus have an inclination to travel and see new things that expand their understanding of how he operates in the world.

The world Gutenberg inhabited over five hundred years ago is exactly the same earth you and I live on today. Same size, same continents—everything was as we find it today, more or less. Nevertheless, Gutenberg's world *felt much smaller than it actually was*. Here's why: the most popular maps in Gutenberg's time showed a world that dropped off the edge

at the equator. Their maps showed a flat earth surrounded on all sides by giant waterfalls that spilled into the abyss. Consequently, almost every explorer stayed away from the edges and margins.

But Prince Henry was different.

Prince Henry the Navigator ruled Portugal fifty years before Columbus discovered America. He regularly dispatched mariners down the west coast of Africa until one returned and reported they had successfully crossed the equator and lived to talk about it.

When geopolitics change, we create new maps, like when the former USSR became a host of new countries ending in *-stan*. When boundaries change due to war, money, or negotiations, we create new maps, like when Rhodesia became Zimbabwe or Bombay became Mumbai.

The maps had to be redrawn. The world as they imagined it was turned upside down.

Just like in Prince Henry's time and ours, sometimes things happen that have never happened before. For example, here's a snapshot of what's been happening to the Southern Baptist Convention over the past seventy years:

1940–1960: enrollment in Sunday school grew from 3,590,038 to 7,382,550—an increase of over one hundred percent in twenty years

1960–2007: enrollment in Sunday school grew from 7,382,550 to 7,876,610—a 7 percent increase in forty-seven years

The Southern Baptist Convention isn't the only denomination in decline. Episcopalians are losing the equivalent of a

diocese per year. Most if not all established denominations are going through a lot of upheaval these days.

We discovered in our interviews that a significant reshuffling is taking place in the socio-spiritual world in which Christianity is currently the dominant player. New players are emerging, new opportunities are opening up, and we need a new map.

Prince Henry's explorers proved the world people lived in was actually much larger than the one they *believed in*. Their discovery of *what had always been* laid the groundwork for new explorers and travelers. The funny thing is that the whole time they were arguing about the world being flat, they were doing it hanging upside down. The flat earthers were right about one thing: the lands around the equator *were* different—but these lands were not as dangerous as they'd been led to believe.

When it comes to understanding what outsiders think and feel, the church has inherited a map that is no longer accurate. Our map has too many equators and too few beaches. We need a map that properly represents the opportunities to meet new people and learn new languages. *We need a map that encourages us to travel to new places in our spiritual imaginations.* We need the kind of map the founder of our movement used to navigate his world.

Blaming Jesus

Let's face it: Jesus had several bad habits. Besides his penchant for claiming equality with God and his casual demonstrations of supernatural power, what *really* bugged his enemies was his habit of hanging out with sinners.

In fact, a simple reading of the Gospels reveals a clear fact: Jesus played favorites. He went easy on outsiders while raising the bar on insiders. He went out of his way to give sinners the benefit of the doubt but warned his followers to be careful around the religious.

Not only was Jesus liked and admired by outsiders, but he liked them back. We hear that Jesus loved people all the time, but our overuse of the word *love* can obscure things. A better word might be *like*. When I say I *like* someone, I'm basically saying I enjoy them, like their style, and respect their ideas. I am curious about what makes them tick and want to spend time with them. I'm relaxed with them, and they're relaxed with me.

What if we explained the gospel this way: *Jesus is the God who likes people!* I think most people would call that good news without us even telling them.

What We Hope For

I once heard Andy Groves, former CEO of Intel, say, "Leaders create experiences that move people to take action." In this project we've combined print and film to do exactly that. And what action do we want you to take?

Simply put, we hope *The Outsider Interviews* will inspire you to walk down to your local coffee shop and meet some of the people Jesus misses most. Notice them, pray for them (silently), and if one of them ends up trusting you, ask them this question, "How are you?"

Then put something in your mouth and listen.