

THE
OUTSIDER
INTERVIEWS

What Young People Think about Faith
and How to Connect with Them

Jim Henderson, Todd Hunter, and Craig Spinks



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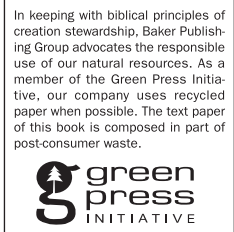
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For the people Jesus misses most

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HALF YOUR BOOK IS MISSING!

Shortly after opening this book, you'll start to feel as though you're missing something.

That's because you are! This book wouldn't be complete without watching the video footage that the book was based on. The videos capture details and nuances the text can't, so we didn't even try! You can watch the videos all at once or individually alongside their corresponding chapters, but keep in mind that we wrote this book with the assumption that you've watched or will be watching the videos.

To access all of the videos for free, go to OutsiderInterviews.com.

FOREWORD

I am excited about *The Outsider Interviews*.

As a survey researcher and a generational analyst, I am often asked 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 people read 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 the media tells them to think?*

I am enthusiastic about this book and the video footage that can be found online 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, but 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 make 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 insight Jim, Todd, and Craig offer 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 their observations and insights will stretch you as they did me.

Before letting you loose into reading the book, 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 nature. 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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our editor, Chad Allen, is the person most responsible for this book seeing the light of day. He pursued us, put up with us, and pummeled us with questions that kept making the book better and better. He deserves a great deal of the credit for this unique product.

We are also grateful to the people who agreed to participate in this project. The outsiders and insiders who opened their hearts to us fearlessly voiced their opinions and helped us become more authentic followers of Jesus.

Special thanks go to Kathy Escobar, Karl Wheeler, Beth Fitch, and Kirk Wulff. They are the people who spent some of their hard-earned relational capital on this project by recruiting their outsider friends to participate in these interviews. Thanks also go to Mountain View Lutheran Church in Phoenix; Christ Church Anglican in Overland Park, Kansas; Calvary Assembly in Seattle; The Refuge in Denver; and Alpha for providing venues and generous partnership.

It takes a village to write a book. Each one of our families has absorbed our attitudes, late night talks, and strange ideas. Consequently, special thanks go to Todd's wife, Debbie, and

Acknowledgments

his children, Jonathon and Carol Hunter; Craig's wife, Sara, and his dad, Bob Spinks; and Jim's wife, Barbara, his three children, Joshua, Sarah, and Judah, and his first grandson, Huxley (aka "The Huckster") George Henderson.

Finally, it is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that *The Outsider Interviews* would have never transpired without the research and inspiration of David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons's seminal work *unChristian*.

1

THE BACKSTORY

The Why, Where, Who, and How

Craig Spinks

The book *unChristian* quantified something that Jim, Todd, and I had instinctively felt for a long time: a divide between Christians and “outsiders,” as well as an internal divide among Christian “insiders.”¹ What bothered us more than the divide itself was how entrenched the various sides appear to be in their views. With entrenchment comes name-calling and demonization. Christians become known as hatemongers; everyone else is a hedonistic rebel. Personally, I’ve found it challenging to not use stereotypes and assumptions as shortcuts in relationships. Listening and trying to understand someone’s perspective is time consuming and often challenging. Perhaps you can relate. Maybe you have a son, daughter, parent, grandparent, or friend you find difficult to relate to. Perhaps they are gay, pro-life, liberal, fundamentalist,

or part of the tea party movement. Maybe some topics are off-limits or only discussed behind each other's backs. Often we'd like the other person to change, but it's not very often that positive change results from such deep polarization. Trying to better understand another's perspective doesn't come naturally for a lot of us, but the three of us believe that it's one of the best skills we can employ as we encounter difficult situations. Agreement may never come, but we can find ways to navigate difference. This book aims to build bridges, not eliminate divides.

Capturing Stories behind the Statistics

While I love the bird's-eye perspective that statistics offer, they also reduce nuance and complexity down to mere numbers. Behind every stat in *unChristian* there are hundreds of stories. The three of us wanted to tell some of the stories behind these stats, to capture some of the hearts behind the charts. We don't present these stories as an attempt to shift your views or beliefs but rather to help you better listen to those views, especially the ones you disagree with. Perhaps it will even help in your own challenging relationships.

As you begin *The Outsider Interviews*, it might be helpful to understand the methods we used in our interview and writing process. We traveled to four cities and interviewed sixteen young adults between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine. Some identify themselves as Christian; others don't. Each person was interviewed twice: once as part of a group in front of a room of Christians attending an evangelism conference, then in a more private setting backstage. We referenced the video footage from these interviews as we

wrote the book. The book and video footage (which can be seen at OutsiderInterviews.com) work together and are not mutually exclusive. To get the complete picture, read the book and watch the videos.

This project started with Jim Henderson. Jim is an entrepreneur in so many ways, but most notably in his work helping Christians to see themselves through the eyes of outsiders. He started conducting Outsider Interviews even before they were called Outsider Interviews. Todd Hunter and I have known and worked with Jim for over a decade and were obvious choices when Jim had the idea to include several perspectives in the book. Todd has the most theological training of the three of us. His extensive and diverse experience as a leader and pastor give him a unique perspective that grounds our content. On the other hand, I come with more practical experience. When we first started working on this project, I was twenty-eight, which made me part of the demographics Kinnaman and Lyons used in their research. I also brought my experience as a video producer to the project, allowing us to deeply integrate the written content with the video content. But my most meaningful contribution didn't become apparent until after we started writing. The writing process challenged me to work on some of my own difficult relationships, which has helped us capture some of the complexities of dialogue at the street level. But let's not get ahead of ourselves—more on that later.

An Opportunity to Practice

If we did our job correctly, at some point in this book you'll read something that will agitate or upset you. Your mouth will

drop open, and you may find yourself yelling at an inanimate object called a book. Ask yourself *why* before rushing through those sections. Try to put yourself in the shoes of the person speaking. Resist the urge to think of counterarguments, and simply focus on the person and their story. Consider why you responded so strongly; what about their story triggered you inside? When we're provoked in real life, our reactions are often clouded by emotion, personal history with the other person, and past experience. There's also often relational equity on the line. As you read this book and watch the interviews, think of it as an opportunity to practice empathy without risk. Notice the moments that agitate you, and lean into those moments. On that note, let's get to it!

2

KANSAS CITY OUTSIDERS

Christianity Has an Image Problem

Jim Henderson

This chapter is based on our Kansas City interview.
To get the complete story, be sure to watch the videos
online (for free!) at OutsiderInterviews.com/KansasCity.



I've never had anybody say they want to save me
and felt like they truly loved me.

Klarisa

Whenever you and I get serious about change, psychotherapists, personal trainers, football coaches, piano teachers, and premarital counselors become our new best friends. They measure, probe, inspire, and even insult us. And we pay them to do it! A great example of this is the Body-for-LIFE weight

loss program. Before you can begin, they require that you submit a “before” photo of you in your swimsuit for all to see. They know that seeing what you really look like in the mirror is the first step to real change.

But programs like Body-for-LIFE provide something else that’s needed for real change to happen: a plan, a mental map that can lead us out of the past and into the future. Sometimes this map comes in the form of a person; sometimes it’s a story; and sometimes it’s three, seven, or twelve steps. Often, it’s a combination of all three.

Our Outsider Interviews provide both experiences. On one hand, they’re a mirror for Christians to see their reflection through the eyes of outsiders. On the other, they’re a map to help insiders understand how to connect with outsiders.

In these interviews we’re hoping to inspire Christians to pursue new relationships with outsiders. We want to provide Christians with what we think of as an updated map of the cultural terrain as described by the people who are native to the area. For our purposes, those natives are often young people. Here’s why.

If you’ve had the privilege of living in proximity to an immigrant community, you’ve likely noticed that the children often translate for the parents. That’s because, as psychologist Ken Robinson once said at a conference I attended, “In immigrant communities *the children . . . teach their parents the culture*, the language, and the ideas.” We think the same is true for Christians. When it comes to understanding the socio-spiritual terrain we now find ourselves living in, Christians over forty are the immigrants who ignore their children at their own peril. That’s why we focused our attention on young people.

Christianity has an image problem. We can deny it, disdain it, and decry it, but the fact remains: in our culture, those of us in the church are currently perceived as caring more about ourselves than about others.

We've brought this on ourselves largely as a result of evangelicalism's successful campaign to become America's leading purveyor of religious goods and services. This means that even for Christians, *perception is reality*. And the way we're perceived, particularly by young people, is nothing short of alarming.

In each Outsider Interview we highlight something we gleaned from the book *unChristian*. In this first interview we focused on what we see as the mother of all problems—the image problem. We wanted to learn how Christians come across to non-Christians and what we can do about it. And our guests were candid with us.



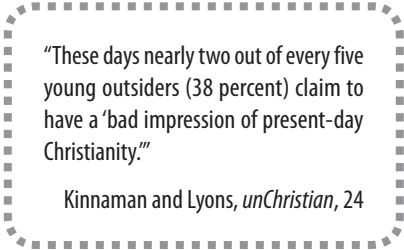
The young adults we interviewed openly shared their perceptions of Christianity.

Watch the video
“Perception or Reality”
at OutsiderInterviews.com/KansasCity.



We're Going to Kansas City

Situated near Kansas City in the leafy suburb of Overland Park, Christ Church Anglican is not what you'd call funky, but it is definitely a church committed to connecting with outsiders. For several years they've used the Alpha program to provide outsiders a place at the table, and when I say table, I mean it quite literally. Alpha is an evangelism



“These days nearly two out of every five young outsiders (38 percent) claim to have a ‘bad impression of present-day Christianity.’”

Kinnaman and Lyons, *unChristian*, 24

program based on food, friendship, and authenticity. Each week small groups of friendly Christians and curious outsiders meet for dinner to discuss the meaning of Scripture and the doubts of outsiders. Alpha is one of the few evangelism programs based more on listening than talking.

The leader of the Alpha program at Christ Church is Kirk Wulff. We asked Kirk to find the guests for this interview. Amazingly, Kirk managed to get four people to agree to sit on a stage with two strangers (Todd and me) and share some of their deepest feelings about spirituality, religion, and Christianity.

Showtime

Most Christians have never seen an interview like this done in church. Of course, we've all watched Oprah, Dr. Phil, and Leno do it, but for some reason we hardly ever think of using this format in church. That fact alone can create a sense of expectation, and Christ Church Anglican was buzzing.

“Please help me welcome our guests Tony, Sarah, Klarisa, and Dan.”

I asked each guest to give us a little background and playfully added, “Who talked you into doing this interview anyway?”

Sarah is a flight attendant with Southwest Airlines. Her childhood religion, Roman Catholicism, didn't stick, but after coming to Alpha with her sister, she'd become a regular attendee at Christ Church. Ironically, she is still uncomfortable with the label “Christian” for some of the same reasons outsiders talk about.

Dan is also an ex-Catholic and now identifies himself as an atheist. He is a friend of a friend of Kirk who agreed to do the interview at the last minute as a favor to him. Tony is a special education teacher who came to faith. In spite of his determination to never become a Christian, Tony's good friend in high school invited him to youth group, where Tony connected with Jesus in a serious way. The power of one interested person never ceases to amaze me. We're all suckers for love, kindness, and goodness. All it took was one good person, and Tony became a follower of Jesus.

Klarisa graduated from a university with a degree in nursing but soon decided that that line of work wasn't for her and took a job at Starbucks. She had been born into a Jewish home. Her parents divorced and her mom remarried. Klarisa soon found herself being raised by a hyper-religious Christian stepfather who didn't do much to engender a love for the church in her. The quote that begins this chapter belongs to her.

Wanting to help our guests get comfortable, Todd tossed what interviewers call a softball.

“Do you guys agree with Kinnaman and Lyons that when it comes to Christians' image problem, swagger is among our biggest issues?”

Tony jumped on Todd's pitch. “They think they're better than everybody else.”

This wasn't coming from an outsider. Tony is a serious Christian who was talking about his perception of Christians. And that wasn't the worst of it. As the interview gained steam, we heard awful words to describe Christians. *Rude. Judgmental. Anti. Smug.*

And the statement about Christians that struck us as the most stinging of all: “They don’t listen.”

Our guests painted a vivid picture of what *swagger* looks like when it’s dressed in religion. Unfortunately, all of us insiders knew exactly what they were talking about.

I once read about a business that stopped hiring consultants and switched to *insultants*. As we listened to Klarisa explain how much she longed to have a Christian listen to

“The primary reason outsiders feel hostile toward Christians, and especially conservative Christians, is not because of any specific theological perspective. What they react negatively to is our ‘swagger,’ how we go about things and the sense of self-importance we project.”

Kinnaman and Lyons, *unChristian*, 26

her, I understood how we could benefit from that kind of shift. Outsiders not only hold up mirrors, they also show us a map—a way forward for those who might be interested in traveling to new places in their spiritual imaginations. If we “stay in the room” long enough, they eventually tell us how to go about fixing our image problem. We often close

our interviews with this question: “If you thought Christians would listen to you, what would you tell them?”

Basically we were asking them to help us become better listeners. After some nervous glances to make sure we *really wanted to know* what they thought, our outsider and insider guests told us.

“Respect *my* views.”

Klarisa was obviously deeply wounded and hypersensitive to the slightest hint of judgment. But she was also quite open to anyone who would take the time to understand and respect her views, which included her Jewish heritage.

“Make a friend.”

Sarah works with gay people. She loves them. She told us we should make a friend without having an agenda. Just love them, she said.

“Be *for* something.”

Tony is a Christian, just not the politically correct kind. He understood that for many people being a Christian meant being against abortion, against the Democratic Party, against stem cell research, against immigration, and against same-sex marriage. He wanted to know what they were *for*.

“Read the Bible.”

Dan is an atheist who assumes that a fair reading of the Bible would solve the problem for most Christians. Dan believes the most important idea in the Bible is loving others the way you would like to be loved. He thinks that if Christians learned how to read Scripture accurately, they would see this and stop being judgmental.

“One outsider put it this way: ‘Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe.’”

Kinnaman and Lyons, *unChristian*, 26

KEY LEARNINGS: Turning Mirrors into Maps

While listening to what outsiders have to say about Christianity, it’s easy to get bogged down. They can sometimes come across as being as intolerant as they accuse us of being. But if you listen and *look* carefully, a map emerges.

Here are some key learnings the three of us discovered.

Wash Your Own Face First (Todd Hunter)

On the platform at Christ Church Anglican, Tony confirmed out loud what the research in the land of outsiders uncovered: “[Christians] think they’re better than everybody else.” Indeed, after doing many more Outsider Interviews since Kansas City, I’ve heard us Christians described as bad-mannered, condemnatory, and self-righteous. “No news there,” you might think. True. Here’s the news: Christians do not believe they actually act in judgmental ways.

In seminary classrooms, undergraduate courses, conferences, seminars, and church congregations, I’ve asked crowds of Christian people a simple question. “Call to mind your Christian friends and family members. Now, do you think most of them are hypocritical judges of others?” Consistently these groups say “No!” They say that most of their friends would never judge other people. In fact, they tell me they are more worried that Christians as a whole are losing the ability to know right from wrong and thus the impetus to judge at all.

What then are we to make of both the research and the anecdotal comments I receive? When in doubt, ask Jesus. Here, from the Sermon on the Mount, is Jesus’s take on the matter:

Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It’s easy to see a smudge on your neighbor’s face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, “Let me wash your face for you,” when your own face is distorted by contempt? It’s this whole traveling road-show mentality all

over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor. (Matt. 7:1–5)

With his characteristic brilliance, Jesus gets to a core issue I believe lies at the heart of evangelism today: *outsiders are observing their way into faith and followership of Jesus*. What is it exactly that they are scrutinizing? Our lives. The lives of individual Christians, small group Bible studies in the workplace, Christians who talk on cable news shows, Christian neighbors, and those who host Christian radio shows. Sadly, when outsiders see “faces distorted by contempt,” they come away with the conclusion that as a group we are hypocritical and judgmental.

But this current predicament is not the end of the game. There is hope. In fact, I have seen change happening in the last few years. Christians have heard the message. They have looked in the mirror held up by the wider culture.

As I write, all over America, Christians—especially young Christians—are taking Jesus at his word. These young people did not live during the more Christian era of the 1940s to the 1980s. Nevertheless, because they are in tune with popular media, they feel the rejection of the church and Christianity by the wider culture. In response, many young followers of Jesus are practicing the self-evaluation and spiritual growth on which Jesus insists. As we Christians begin to wash our hearts, so to speak, and to focus on living lives of goodness, our faces and tone of voice will come into line. The smug contempt will disappear, having been replaced by authentic love. When that happens, evangelism comes alive. We wash

our faces to pursue Christlikeness. We do not wash our faces for any utilitarian reason—like to win an argument or as a tactic to get people to come to church. That would defeat the whole purpose. Rather, we apprentices of Jesus wash our faces because it is the right thing to do according to Jesus, our Master. But we can hope that when those observing their way into faith see such washed, self-giving lives, they might be more apt to receive the washcloth held out in our hands.

Do Not Confuse Acceptance with Endorsement
(*Craig Spinks*)

After each city's main stage interview, I guided our guests to a more private setting where I interviewed them individually (edited segments from these interviews can be found at OutsiderInterviews.com). These interviews were often more in-depth and sometimes revealed surprising twists. That was certainly the case in my interview with Klarisa. As I sought to better understand her negative perceptions of Christianity, she told me about a time when she felt abandoned by some Christian friends.

A few years back she'd become pregnant by a man she'd been dating only a short period of time. Finding herself in a moral dilemma, she asked some friends whether or not she should get an abortion. Interestingly, the friends she chose to talk with about this were Christians. As you might guess, her Christian friends told her getting an abortion was out of the question. This troubled Klarisa, because for her the decision was not as clear-cut, and she felt as though her friends were willing to put their friendship on the line if she chose to get an abortion. However, one friend was different. This friend, also a Christian, shared that she didn't think abortion

was the best option but also recognized the complexity of Klarisa’s decision. She said she would be there for Klarisa no matter what she chose. Klarisa ended up deciding to have an abortion, and her friend stayed true to her word; she even took Klarisa to the clinic. Klarisa’s other Christian friends stopped associating with her.

I think one of the trickiest aspects of interacting with outsiders is navigating difference. Many times we’re afraid that disagreement will be confused with judgment or that if we don’t disagree strongly enough, our love and acceptance might be confused with endorsement. Of course, there are no simple, easy formulas for how to disagree respectfully, but as I listen to stories like Klarisa’s, I wonder how much we really have to worry about love and acceptance being misunderstood as endorsement. It was clear that Klarisa understood that her friend didn’t agree with her decision, yet Klarisa still chose this friend to support her during this time in her life. Klarisa’s friend was somehow able to separate her difference in opinion from her love and acceptance of Klarisa. Klarisa even said that this friend’s actions are the only reason why she might still be open to Christianity in the future.

We might not be able to anticipate appropriate responses to differences we encounter, and those responses may be different from situation to situation, but what we can do is try to keep in mind that love and acceptance are not forms of endorsement—they are basic human behaviors that every person deserves.



How to Get Hired as a Christian Consultant
(Jim Henderson)

You may already have someone in your life who has “hired” you to be his or her Christian consultant. Here’s how you can tell: they approach you privately and say something like, “Hey, did you see that TV preacher the other night? What was that all about?” or “Did you read what Pat Robertson said in the paper about the hurricane?” or “Wasn’t it cool that the Dalai Lama came to town?” They’re basically looking to you to explain spirituality or Christianity.

For some reason, they’ve decided to trust you. Maybe it’s because you don’t swear, or maybe it’s because you do (just a little). Maybe you once let slip something about God or Jesus that sounded authentic, and they overheard you. Maybe they’ve been watching you for years and finally decided they would take the risk of revealing a personal struggle, or perhaps they’re so lonely that they ignore the fact that you’re a “fundamentalist” and talk to you anyway.

Whatever their motive, they’re trying to hire you to be their Christian consultant. Here are ten things you can do to land the job.

Top Ten Practices of a Christian Consultant

1. Ask them about *their* spiritual interests.
2. Ask them what they think of Christians.
3. Ask them what they think of Jesus.
4. Ask *them* to pray for *you*.
5. Ask them what their needs are.
6. Offer to read the Bible with them (if appropriate).
7. Don’t invite them to church (right away).

8. Find a way to have coffee with them.
9. Ask lots of questions.
10. Resist the urge to spiritually fix them.

In the Old Testament, God told the Israelites to take a small piece of leather and wrap the written law on their arms and around their heads (see Deut. 6:8). I'd like to suggest that you do something similar. No, not an actual piece of paper or a rubber band; that's too easy, not to mention too eccentric. Instead, choose one of the practices on this list and memorize it. Just one. As you go through each day, periodically recite that practice *out loud* to yourself. I think you'll be surprised at how the Holy Spirit will use that simple practice to increase your connections with the outsiders who surround you right where you live and work.