

**D-mail for the week of October 1, 2009**

**Scripture:** Romans 9: 15, 16, 20, 21 ; I Corinthians 8:1

## **What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christians**

*Christianity has an image problem. If you've lived in America for very long, I doubt this surprises you. Just what exactly do people think about Christians and Christianity? Why do those perceptions exist? Obviously people believe their views are accurate but do their perceptions reflect reality?*

This is the opening paragraph from the book *Unchristian*. They are the words of David Kinnaman of the Barna Group, which provides research and resources that facilitate spiritual transformation in people's lives and has designed and analyzed over 500 studies for churches, non-profits, and corporations. He goes on to say that their research shows that many of those outside Christianity, especially young adults, have little trust in the Christian faith (and little, if any, respect for the Bible) and that esteem for the lifestyle of Christian followers is quickly fading among outsiders. These outsiders admit that their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians. They report that they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians. Think about what this means. It changes our discussions with them about Christianity and it alters their willingness to commit their lives to Jesus.

As Christians, we cannot just throw up our hands in defensiveness and crawl back behind the safety of our church walls. We have a responsibility to gain an understanding of the outsiders' perspectives if we are truly interested in communicating and expressing Christ to this new generation of "post-Christian" thinkers. If they think we no longer represent what Jesus had in mind nor believe Christianity in our society is what it was meant to be, then they have a hard time actually seeing Jesus because of all the negative baggage that surrounds Him. Young people today are incredibly candid; they do not hold back their opinions. If you want examples, just read any college or university newspaper. Here is an example I took from an article from a junior student writing in the Iowa State University student newspaper from the February 2, 2009 edition. She writes,

*I need to meet more Christians. When I sat with the congregation at Cornerstone Church for the weekly Salt Company meeting on Thursday, it suddenly occurred to me I had been holding onto a stereotypical and unrealistic image of what a Christian is. I looked around*

*and I saw nearly every category of people imaginable. There were blacks, whites, Asians, Latinos, people with disabilities, people with tattoos and people with piercings. And here I thought all the Christian boys wore long-sleeve blue button-up dress shirts and khakis, while all the Christian girls wore full-length plaid skirts and plain blouses, which wasn't the case at all. Had you asked me to describe a Christian several weeks ago, I can tell you these attributes would not have come to mind. But let's rewind, shall we?*

*What was I doing at Salt Company. as a politically left-leaning transgender girl and adamant non-Christian? Due to my increased exposure on campus, one member from the congregation by the name of Samantha requested to meet with me so we could hold a respectful dialogue. Sipping away at my strawberry smoothie while she drank her tea, we constructively discussed our differences in perspective, our pasts and more.*

*Samantha didn't pass judgment on me. She didn't tell me I was wrong and she would pray for me to leave my heathen ways. She didn't threaten me and say I must come to know Jesus before I burn forever in a lake of fire. This isn't to say she agreed with or even understood my life, but she was trying to and I appreciated that. When all was said and done, she didn't ask me to come to Salt Company. And interestingly enough, that's why I came. My experiences with Christians in the past hadn't been anything like meeting and chatting with Samantha. If anything, they had been the antithesis of Samantha:*

*judgmental, damning and completely unwilling to so much listen to another's point of view, let alone try to understand or accept it. I think I had some justification in my anxiety. And then I saw those people who challenged my conceptions of Christians. Mr. Purple Shirt, Ms. Septum Piercing, and Mr. God Is My Ecstasy, hands raised high as he sang from the bottom of his heart and top of his lungs. I don't think I've ever seen anyone as genuinely happy as I saw him and others in the crowd that night. Not only that, but when Alex Tuckness, associate professor of political science and speaker for Salt Company, recited lines not of condemnation but of humility, my curiosity roused. He said, "God told Moses, 'I am in charge of mercy, I'm in charge of compassion.' Compassion doesn't originate in our bleeding hearts or moral sweat, but in God's mercy." **Romans 9: 15-16***

*“Who in the world do you think you are to second-guess God? Do you for one moment suppose any of us knows enough to call God into question? Clay doesn’t talk back to the fingers that mold it, saying ‘Why did you shape me like this?’ Isn’t it obvious that a potter has a perfect right to shape one lump of clay into a vase for holding flowers and another into a pot for cooking beans?” **Romans 9:20-21** Tuckness went on to discuss the meaning and impact of the passage, asking the crowd, “Why should we think that we can comprehend all of God’s creations?” What strikes me is just how differently people can interpret this passage and Tuckness’ question. As I sat there pondering what it all meant for me, it crossed my mind that if God exists, I am indeed one of his creations. In fact, if he exists, we would all be his creations, regardless of any categorization we could possibly conceive as humans. And who are we to say that we understand his creations? Who are we to pass judgment? I don’t know why I am the way I am, but I know I don’t feel any condemnation when trying to pluck answers from the mystical pool of knowledge lying just beyond our human perception. I know that’s something I can’t rationally explain, just like I can’t rationally explain why the one time Samantha didn’t ask if the person she was talking to would like to join her for worship was the time she spoke to me. The lack of that question was a main reason for my attendance. I still don’t believe in God with a capital G, I still find a lot of Christian teachings to be somewhat self-deprecating. I’ve seen a lot of Christian hypocrisy and I’m still unsure about Yeshua being the Savior. But even under the shadow of so much doubt, I think I’ll keep going to Salt Company for now. We may disagree, we may not understand each other, we may even think of each other as pretty weird or even lowly at times, but there’s something I’ve found I need to start acknowledging: Just because Christians believe in a supposedly higher standard of morality, that doesn’t make them perfect. Yes, they should still perpetually work to be better people, as should we all. Love thy neighbor as thyself, treat others as you would like to be treated, live and let live, encourage people to be happy, et cetera. But people make mistakes.”*

In the book *Unchristian*, Mr. Kinnaman says that even though some of the realities he uncovered about how the young generation feels towards Christians, may feel uncomfortable, publishing the results of his research is not meant to berate Christians. The point is to compel us to really understand outsiders’ skepticism so that we can be sensitive in the things we can influence –our lives, our churches, and the way we express Christianity to others. Outsiders, Kinnaman says, have a negative image of Christians. One outsider he spoke to said, “Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders who only want to convert everyone and cannot live peacefully with others who don’t believe what they believe.” (I highly recommend reading *Unchristian*)

The church today desperately needs more people who facilitate a deeper, more authentic vision of the Christian faith, one which seeks to serve with real compassion and genuine hope, in our pluralistic, sophisticated culture.

Outsiders have made it clear (according to the Barna study) that Christians are primarily perceived for what we stand against rather than what we are for. If we do not deal with our part of this 21st century problem of the church, we will fail to connect with a new generation. The Apostle Paul said,

*“While knowledge may make us feel important, it is love that really builds up the church.”* **I Corinthians 8:1**

We are not responsible for outsiders' decisions, but we are accountable when our actions and attitudes misrepresent a holy, just, and loving God and push the skeptics away. What will you and I do to prepare ourselves to deal with a future where people will be increasingly hostile and skeptical toward us and our God? How can we show more love?

### **Prayer**

Lord God,

When I try to share your message with “outsiders”, so often I feel defensive and rejected . Therefore, way too often, I just don't try. I want you to use me to lead others to the saving knowledge and joy of Jesus Christ. Please help me to understand what is standing in the way and how, with your wisdom, I can overcome it. I pray for Christian pastors, priests, and leaders who find themselves in the public eye. Help them to choose their words with care, to show compassion on all people while preaching what is right with courage and clarity. And help them to lead righteous personal lives so that they cannot be made sources of derision for the whole church. Help all of us to do the same. Amen

**p.s.** My goodness, I didn't realize I had so much to say about this topic! It could have been fewer pages if I used smaller font, but readers have asked that I use larger soas to make it easier to read. So, thanks for hanging in there to the end. Last week I mentioned that you could send comments to the response site of my blog, but I gave you the wrong address. **Correction:** send comments to [cathycongerblog@gmail.com](mailto:cathycongerblog@gmail.com) God bless you, Cathy