

TONY WOODLIEF

Going negative

Are Christians unChristian?

THE BARNIA GROUP, A RESPECTED CHRISTIAN SURVEY organization, recently asked young people to identify which perceptions they most strongly associate with Christianity. The three most commonly agreed-upon were: anti-homosexual, judgmental, and hypocritical.

Barna president David Kinnaman and co-author Gabe Lyons conclude in *UnChristian* (Baker, 2007) that Christians "have become famous for what we oppose, rather than who we are for."

One can't dismiss these findings as the result of biased media or ignorant respondents. Most of those polled report knowing Christians personally, and a considerable percentage have spent significant time in churches themselves. What's more, large portions of young Christians agree, and worry, explain the authors, "that the unChristian message has become one of self-preservation rather than one of world restoration."

According to *UnChristian*, six negative themes infuse young people's perceptions of the modern Christian church: hypocrisy, treatment of outsiders as conversion targets, hatred of homosexuals, seclusion from the real world, over-politicization, and condemnation.

The authors show that more Christians disapprove of homosexuality than divorce, and that many are unlikely to assist AIDS orphans despite Christian generosity to other causes. They also delve into the interviews that accompanied their surveys, revealing wounds that young non-Christians have received at the hands of those who call themselves Christian. Jeff, a 25-year-old interviewed for the project, put it bluntly: "Christians talk about hating sin and loving sinners, but the way they go about things, they might as well call it what it is. They hate the sin and the sinner."

While the message of *UnChristian* is tough, it arguably could be tougher.

Not only do the behaviors Kinnaman and Lyons document wrongly "brand" Christianity, it's equally true that hypocrisy and unforgiveness are wicked. Likewise, while Christian political activism sometimes spells, for outsiders, an interest in political power that doesn't seem matched by mercy toward the weak, it also leads Christians to support some political candidates whose views are clearly at odds with Christianity.

In response to this woeful state of affairs, the authors exhort Christian readers to return to the biblical messages of love and mercy toward outsiders. "Would we be that different," they ask, "if it were not for God's grace?" ❊

