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TIMOTHY KELLER, AUTHOR OF *THE REASON FOR GOD*

THE



CHRISTIANS

SEVEN WAYS YOU CAN
LIVE THE GOSPEL AND
RESTORE THE WORLD

G A B E L Y O N S

Coauthor of the Best-Selling *UnChristian*

The
NEXT CHRISTIANS

The Good News About
the End of Christian America

Gabe Lyons

DOUBLEDAY

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To my wife, Rebekah Rose Lyons,
your courage is remarkable.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I BEGIN BY APOLOGIZING IF THIS BOOK'S TITLE MISLED YOU. You might have assumed that a book about the next Christians would be irrelevant for you—a current Christian—but the opposite is true. The work you hold in your hands was written for all who believe.

Every kind of Jesus follower—young and old, city dweller and suburbanite, low-church protestant and high-church Catholic—lives in a time when following Jesus in the West isn't easy. Negative perceptions about our faith are rising even as the cultural influence levied by many Christians now fades. Worse still, the Christian Gospel seems to be thriving in every other region on earth except ours. The stakes are high. If we don't understand our times and respond correctly, entire generations may be lost.

But even in the midst of this seemingly dire outlook, I have reason to convey great hope! The faithful are finding their way through this new malaise. Not by adding or subtracting from the truth of the Gospel, but by rediscovering it.

Which leads to the point of why I wrote this book.

Unlike other writers, I remain hopeful about the future of our faith. I've met too many impassioned Jesus followers who are achieving the incredible, and I know too much about the One they serve. It is my prayer that when you see how others are doing it, you will be informed, equipped, and inspired for how you can do the same.

But whatever you do, do not read this book alone. God is stirring his people in this seemingly dark moment, waking them to new Kingdom possibilities. My prayer is that God will also awaken you, your friends, and the faith community of which you are a part to the enormous opportunities that lie ahead.

GABE LYONS

February, 2012

Manhattan, New York

PART I
THE WORLD IS
CHANGING

ONE

A Fading Reality

SEVEN YEARS AGO, I WAS TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OLD AND embarrassed to call myself *Christian*. This was especially odd because I was raised in a Christian home, graduated from a Christian college, and then served as vice president of a prominent Christian organization. By all accounts, I should have been one of Christianity's biggest fans.

Unfortunately, I began to notice that the perceptions my friends and neighbors had about Christians were incredibly negative. In fact, their past experiences with anything labeled *Christian* had sent them running in the opposite direction. Ironically, I came to empathize with their views. Having grown up in a Christian bubble myself, I witnessed countless instances when the lives of Christ followers were incongruent with Jesus's call to be loving, engaged, sacrificial, unselfish, and compassionate contributors to culture. The angst these experiences created would scare anyone from taking a second look at Jesus.

I was deeply burdened by this trend and about the loss of Christian influence in our culture. So, with just a few months of savings in the bank and our second child on the way, my wife, Rebekah, and I decided I should quit my job and pursue a new vocation. We resolved to launch a nonprofit organization and

make our first project the commissioning of research that would help us understand the perceptions that sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds have about Christians.

The study confirmed many of our fears about the negative perceptions I had experienced. An overwhelming percentage of non-Christians sampled said they perceived Christians as judgmental, hypocritical, too political, and antihomosexual, among other things.

In the truest sense, the research revealed what happens when Christians act *unchristian*. The study was released in a book by the same name. It soon became a bestseller, confirming that our findings resonated with the general public.

But it also exposed something bigger that has been going on. The Christian faith is quickly losing traction in Western culture, not only as a result of unchristian behavior, as significant as that is, but because we haven't recognized our new reality and adapted.

In years since, our nonprofit has convened rising Christian leaders at various locations across America to have conversations about what they see occurring in the Christian movement and how they are uniquely living out their faith. We began to ask important questions about the role Christians should play in society:

What does mission look like in America in the twenty-first century?

How should the message of the Gospel go forward?

*What does it mean to be a Christian in a world that is
disenchanted with our movement?*

Every generation must ask these questions as they seek to confront the unique challenges of their own eras. In modern

times, thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr, C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, and Lesslie Newbigin have reflected on the relationship between Christians and culture in the twentieth century. Even now, a diverse group of future-thinking leaders are offering insight into how the next generation might navigate our current cultural waters.

Research shows that over 76 percent of Americans self-identify as Christian.¹ Yet I wonder how many of us are proud to carry that label. Are we hiding our faith in our back pockets? My guess is that many feel much like I did at twenty-seven when they encounter non-Christians at work, in coffee shops, on campus, in their neighborhoods, at weekend parties, or working out at the gym. You may be dumbfounded that there are 76 percent of “us” and yet little unity in what we collectively represent.

After observing cultural trends, collecting data, and having hundreds of conversations with Christian leaders, I see a new way forward. There is a whole movement of Christians—evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Pentecostals, and others—asking these same questions and offering meaningful answers. They want to be a force for restoration in a broken world even as we proclaim the Christian Gospel. They want the label *Christian* to mean something good, intelligent, authentic, true, and beautiful.

* * *

DURING A GATHERING convened by our nonprofit, we were offered a rare invitation to visit the home of Billy Graham in nearby Montreat, North Carolina. Typically, it’s best to keep an experience like that to yourself, where its magnitude will never tarnish, but I feel compelled to share it with you here because of the significance of what took place.

The slow ascent up the winding mountain driveway in Montreat mirrored my rising anticipation. Going to meet with this great evangelist in his storied log cabin home nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains didn't feel real—I was rapt with expectation.

The leaves were changing color and produced a kaleidoscope of hues—from green to brown, yellow, orange, and red—on the surrounding mountain faces. After passing through the entry gate protecting his mountaintop home, we were greeted by an older woman, a caretaker of sorts. That day, she had taken it upon herself to care for us as well. Her kind but weathered hands served up one of my favorites—chocolate chip cookies and an old-fashioned bottle of Coke. It felt surprisingly warm and hospitable, like a weekend trip to Grandma's house.

While waiting to be led back to Mr. Graham's study on this crisp autumn day in September, we sat in old rocking chairs on the back porch. (I later learned these chairs had been gifts from President Lyndon Johnson from his ranch in Texas.)

Taking in the picturesque view, I could understand why Montreat had been the place this man chose to call home for more than fifty years. The quiet, pastoral scene was splendid. With no other man-made structure in sight, it was an ideal place of respite for the family of a world figure. The simplicity of his log cabin, meadowlike backyard, well-worn antique furniture, and pictures of family and friends playing together gave me a glimpse into this beloved saint's humanity.

I couldn't help considering the countless accolades assigned to his life. He had audience with the world's most powerful leaders, providing spiritual counsel to seven U.S. presidents. His generous tone and compelling life have marked everyone

who's known him. He shaped our world very personally by leading tens of millions of everyday people to Christ. Having traveled the world many times over, the eighty-nine-year-old evangelist had witnessed what God was up to in the world. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity to converse with one of the most sought-after, respected, and revered leaders of the twentieth century. Our time together didn't disappoint.

As we walked back to his study, his companions—five dogs that kept him company day and night—greeted us. Though his body was undeniably old, his mind was sharp. Hearing had become a chore for him, so we raised our voices to introduce ourselves. I sat down in front of Mr. Graham in a chair whose previous occupants included world leaders, famous entertainers, and—just two weeks prior—a presidential candidate hoping to gain his support.

I came prepared to learn. I had no intention of saying much, planning instead to glean his wisdom. For what must have been thirty minutes or so, I quietly listened until I finally gained the courage to speak.

I carefully explained our work to educate and expose church and cultural leaders to the changes in our world, and more important, what opportunities lay ahead. Mr. Graham seemed genuinely curious to hear about what we do. I continued by telling him about some of the leaders our organization convened regularly, innovators within every sphere of society. From the arts to medicine and education, I explained that they were young and the best at what they did. I described how these leaders were leveraging their talent for the benefit of others—creating microfinance banks that were lending hundreds of millions of dollars to the poor, building wells throughout the third world, developing media campaigns to increase awareness

about adoption—and were serious about restoring culture. I had a hunch that these remarkably likeminded individuals were the next wave of Christians in the world, but I wanted to know if he agreed.

He reflected on everything I had been sharing with him before a smile walked the sides of his face. “Back when we did these big crusades in football stadiums and arenas, the Holy Spirit was really moving—and people were coming to Christ as we preached the Word of God,” the evangelist said. “But today, I sense something different is happening. I see evidence that the Holy Spirit is working in a new way. He’s moving through people where they work and through one-on-one relationships to accomplish great things. They are demonstrating God’s love to those around them, not just with words, but in deed.”

As he spoke, something began to crystallize inside me. It was as if all the observations I’d collected over a decade were being summed up in the sage words of this iconic figure. He had seen the best of what twentieth-century Christianity had to offer, yet was in tune with something new.

I left Montreat with a quiet confidence that day—not only because I had been in the presence of a great and godly man, but also because he had confirmed in succinct terms the things I’d been observing. Reflecting on his words challenged me to continue cultivating this mind-set throughout the body of believers across our developing landscape.

* * *

NOT LONG AFTER my conversation with Graham, Rebekah and I celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary with a trip to Europe. Since it was the off season, we were braced for the wet, dreary weather typical of London and Paris at that time of year.

However, to our amazement, the region experienced a run of the warmest days on their calendar in a century. Instead of being wet, bundled up, and longing for the warmth of the cozy Hôtel du Louvre, we enjoyed long walks in the cool breeze—wearing sweaters and scarves, leaving the coats behind. It was enchanting. The architecture, museums, and cafés were brimming with energy. Experiencing millennium-old culture that was still full of life refreshed my soul.

One portion of our travels that I was particularly excited about was our rail trip from London to Paris on the famed EuroStar. I had read about its top speeds of 190 miles per hour as it glides under the English Channel and through the French countryside en route to Paris's Gare du Nord. When we boarded the train, I knew we were in for a great experience.

As I leaned back in my seat, the headrest curved perfectly around my neck—like an apparatus designed for intense flight, somehow befitting such a modernized tour of these storied countries. The ride across Britain was routine and somewhat metropolitan. Then as the train entered the Channel Tunnel, it picked up speed. The blur of lights gave the impression of flying through space. By the time we emerged in France, I felt transported. Leaning back in my seat, I stared out at the countryside as it sped past me like an abbreviated survey of French history. I'd flown *over* this landscape at high speed before, but never *through* it.

The foreground was an imperceptible blur of vegetation broken only by the occasional buildings and bridges. My eyes were drawn to the horizon as a steady succession of towns and villages rose into view along the way. We passed through Calais, then Lille, as we made our way toward Paris.

A pattern seemed to be emerging. In each community I saw

a town center surrounded by trees and an occasional cottage. And at the heart of every town I could see a church steeple appear among the treetops and above the storefronts. It was consistent with what I knew of ancient urban architecture, that the steeple was designed to be the tallest structure in a city, representing the sacred belief that the church should be the closest point between heaven and earth, God and humanity.

Miles apart, those communities now seemed lined up almost side by side, as if to make a collective statement for my observation: *The church used to occupy the center of culture in the West*. For a brief moment, I reminisced about what once was. Not too long ago, children would frequent their church for much-needed education and moral training. In this prime location, new families were welcomed to town and volunteer needs were addressed before singing and prayer meetings would resume. Houses of worship were also places of great artistic and musical innovation. Many of history's greatest creative minds birthed their monolithic works within these hallowed confines.

Indeed, where the church in Europe once held a place of significant influence, by the end of the twentieth century it was almost completely irrelevant.² Even the design of their communities bore evidence to it. The steeples that once stood for spiritual enlightenment have been reduced to minor tourist attractions. They better serve the needs of visiting amateur photographers than the lost souls of the people in their own communities.

Some culture watchers say that when we survey the contours of Europe's religious landscape, we are staring America's future in the face. While there is no way to verify these predictions, from my experience and all the evidence I've collected

surrounding the church and citizens of our country, America isn't far behind.

What began as a creeping intuition that led me to launch a new organization had become a nagging reality that significant changes were under way. My trip to Europe and Montreat seemed to represent the two ends of our current situation. In Montreat, I met with an icon from Christianity's past who recognizes how the faith is presently shifting. In Europe, I seemingly caught a glimpse of America's more secular future. Positioned between these poles was the empirical research we had commissioned and the hundreds of conversations with a new generation of Christian leaders. Each situation echoed the sentiment that many Christians have lost confidence in their faith. Our movement, as a whole, was quickly declining in the West.

I believe this moment is unlike any other time in history. Its uniqueness demands an original response. If we fail to offer a different way forward, we risk losing entire generations to apathy and cynicism. Our friends will continue to drift away, meeting their need for spiritual transcendence through other forms of worship and communities of faith that may be less true but more authentic and appealing.

Maybe you know someone like my friend Dan. He grew up around the church and considers himself a Christian. At the age of thirty-four, he finds himself at the center of huge international business deals. Dan's a rainmaker type, and when his complex transactions are successful, they can raise the GDP of entire nations! But as we were catching up on our lives one day, he dropped a bomb on me. He said, "I hope this won't shock you, but I don't call myself a Christian anymore. I follow Christ as faithfully as I can, but I don't ever want to be associated with

what that word, or that ‘brand,’ has come to represent in the world.”

I asked him what he felt the consequences would be for him professionally or socially if people were to know about his faith. He responded with a cynical prediction, “It would be the death of my business career to be marked as a Christian because of all the baggage it represents.” Our current dilemma is that there are thousands of people just like Dan out there, and you may be one of them. Maybe you haven’t left the faith altogether, but you find yourself increasingly uncomfortable with what it has become.

Do not be discouraged. God is at work at this very moment. He doesn’t look upon our current cultural milieu and wring his hands as if he didn’t see it coming. In the midst of unprecedented change, his people are rooting themselves in the fertile ground of our current age and celebrating what the Christian movement is becoming. As we confront the possibilities that tomorrow may hold, I invite you to not only study the facts. I urge you to reenvision your faith.

To enhance your experience while reading this book, go to www.nextchristians.com/enhanced to meet the author, see video content, and hear interviews with those this book describes.