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## The Next Christians

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## *The Next Christians*

Lyons, G. (2010).  
New York, NY: Doubleday.

Reviewed by Paul Stonecipher

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The college environment not only develops the critical thinking skills of college students, but higher education often brings students to engage those critical thinking skills toward their spiritual selves. And although *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons was not explicitly directed toward college students or toward higher education professionals, the author presents some challenging concepts certainly applicable to both audiences. This text is reviewed here to promote not just the critical analysis of our individual faith but provide some challenging perspectives on how that faith is expressed in the increasingly pluralistic environment which contemporary students and student development professionals encounter.

Following up on the provocative findings of *Unchristian* released in 2007, Gabe Lyons tackles the challenge of answering the question “so now what?” that naturally followed. It is through his work *The Next Christians* where the answers start to develop. Lyons represents the prototypical graduate of many Christian colleges and universities. Upon graduating from Liberty University, he became active in Christian leadership circles with his high-profile work. But Lyons admits he was honestly ashamed to call himself Christian; a statement many Christian college students probably can appreciate and identify with, especially those who attend or have graduated from a secular college. In this follow-up text, Lyons attempts to portray the next generations of Christians who are returning to the call of restoration and changing the way the world sees Christianity in the long term.

Using a case-study approach in demonstrating his concerns regarding the perceptions of Christianity and the paradigm shifts he sees coming, Lyon's work is extremely applicable to Christians engaging in student development. Although Lyon's book does not explicitly discuss the higher education environment, his words are extremely poignant during this period when higher education is also exploring and redefining its mission and presence. The college, even the Christian college, is one of the seven channels of cultural influences this text encourages Christians to reengage. Written in three parts, *The Next Christians* self-admittedly does not declare new, ground-shaking concepts. Instead, every concept raised is actually as old as first-century Christianity, but each example is displayed using current and applicable case studies.

In "Part One: The World is Changing," Lyons illustrates the reality of a transition taking place in America. Founded in the rich data laid out in *Unchristian*, Lyons provides poignant stories and imagery of the perceptions of Christianity in America and the changing landscape. One of the most striking images is that of the French countryside where centuries-old villages were built around the church, occupying the center of culture not just for their religious roles but as centers of education, civics, artistry, and innovation. Today, many of these same places of worship have become nothing more than places of architectural interest for tourists. Exploring the post-Christian landscape of postmodernism and skepticism would strike many as a pessimistic and fearful discussion. Lyons views this as a rising opportunity for true cultural change.

In chapter three, Lyons lays out a spectrum of responses Christians have taken to dealing with the current culture, from separatist to cultural, explaining that a healthier, more effective and Christ-like approach lives in the heart of the "restorer." The last chapter of this section explores the Gospel, bringing back two "chapters" often forgotten in many evangelistic tellings: creation in the image of God and the call to join God in restoration.

"Part Two: The Restorers" illustrates seven significant paradigm shifts in the behaviors of Christians engaging culture: (a) provoked, not offended; (b) creators, not critics; (c) called, not employed; (d) grounded, not distracted; (e) in community, not alone; (f) civil, not divisive; and (g) countercultural, not relevant. In a context of social media-obsessed students, who despite having hundreds or thousands of "friends" or "followers" are feeling more isolated than ever, the chapter "In Community, Not Alone" can be especially powerful and full of application. Additionally, for a generation tired of hypocrisy and incivility (especially with regard to the church), the admonition to be "civil, not divisive" might come as a healing balm or a word of hope.

Brady Bobbink, a campus minister at Western Washington University, once compared reading a book, especially a Christian book, to eating fried chicken. He encouraged his students and interns to enjoy the good meat provided by the great authors, but to be aware of the bones to be thrown away. Such a provision might be wise here. Although some of his assertions might be a bit simplistic, the spectrum of Christian responses to culture or the seven characteristics of "the next Christians" for example, they do represent

a solid theoretical construct from which to begin the discussion. And his illustrations demonstrate the ways in which the variety of Christian responses to culture is as classic as the days when Jesus walked the earth. Lyons also uses examples or case studies some Christians would find objectionable or containing messy elements which might distract from the message being delivered, but this internal discomfort is also part of the point in that it promotes critical thought on why we are feeling this discomfort. All of these are prime elements for starting solid discussions on Christian behavior and practice for the next generation.

Lyons' work *The Next Christians* provides a great book for starting some deep conversations and ideas. This book requires more conversation, practical application, and deeper case studies, and I believe these are responses Lyons explicitly encourages. Having founded Qideas.org and hosting a series of conferences gathering leaders and innovators to converse on weighty issues, Lyons would encourage readers to find others to talk through what his book has to say. As student development professionals and administrators of higher education, we have a hand in shaping the very culture Lyons writes about. The very Millennials we advise and mentor are "the next Christians" of tomorrow. This book would serve as a powerful tool for discussion groups, readings for student leaders, and anyone realizing the importance of their roles in engaging the larger culture outside of our Christian circles of influence.