

# Transhumanism and Artificial Intelligence

*Kerby Anderson provides an overview of transhumanism and AI, considering its impact on us and our families.*

Over the last few years, we have heard more pundits and futurists talk about transhumanism. What is this philosophy? How will it affect our families and us? How should a Christian think about transhumanism?

Transhumanism is an intellectual and cultural movement that seeks to transform the human condition. The leaders of this movement want to use the developing technologies to eliminate aging and enhance human potential (physical, psychological, and mental).

Nick Bostrom explains that transhumanism views human nature as a “work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways.” He goes on to explain the transhumanist vision: “Transhumanists hope that by responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means we shall eventually manage to become posthumans, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have.”[\[1\]](#)

Two primary ways they want to do this is through genetic engineering and artificial intelligence. They want to genetically create “the new man,” and they want to use technology to merge humans with machines.

The genetic part of this equation claims that we can use gene splicing and other genetic modification techniques so that genes can be easily transferred between species. But we should be concerned about geneticists who want to create a superhuman race. Leon Kass warned that “Engineering the engineer seems to differ in kind from engineering the engine.”[\[2\]](#)

The other part of the equation concerns technology. The leaders of transhumanism believe we are on the cusp of a technological threshold in both artificial intelligence and human-machine technology.

The “humanism” in transhumanism reminds us that this is a philosophy rooted in Enlightenment humanism. But it is different. Whereas the goal of humanism was to develop the ideal human, the goal of transhumanism is to transcend what we have traditionally considered human.

The Transhumanist Declaration provides eight key points to describe what the signers believe should be the future of humans.<sup>[3]</sup> It begins with this claim: “Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future. We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.”

## Two Principles of Transhumanism

Now I would like to look at the two foundational principles of transhumanism.

The first principle is “metaman.” Futurists predict that our current human condition will evolve into being a cyborg (short for *cybernetic organism*). Our bodies will be joined to machines as we “evolve” through technological progress.

Transhumanists believe we will have immense knowledge and information because of the rapid advances in artificial intelligence and computing power. These advances will eventually exceed human intelligence. Meanwhile, advances in genetic engineering will allow scientists to modify the human body to keep pace with these technological advances.

This is the two-fold hope of the transhumanists: artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. One represents biological change through mixing and matching genes. The other

presents the merging of human intelligence with artificial intelligence.

In fact, the hope is to create a superorganism through the transference of genes between species. This may even eradicate the differences between species. One scientist even suggested that tampering with the genetic codes of all plants and animals on this planet would cause the “definition of human beings to drift.”[\[4\]](#) Humans would merge with the rest of nature, thereby creating a planetary superorganism he calls “Metaman.”

In essence, transhumanists would like to erase any distinction between human, other forms in nature, and machines. Humans would now control the future direction of evolution and merge all forms of life and non-life together in one enormous superorganism.

The second principle is “the singularity.” Transhumanists wait for the arrival of a technological threshold that will be achieved through artificial intelligence. Futurists predict that sometime in the middle of this century, we will achieve what transhumanists call “the singularity.”[\[5\]](#) The current distinction between humanity and nature and machine will fade and there will no longer be any barriers between the natural world and artificial world.

This utopian view assumes that humans will be able to transcend the limitations of our biological bodies and brains. There will no longer be any distinction between humans and machines. And this, say the transhumanists, will allow humanity to no longer be resigned to death as the end. All of this, they predict, will usher in a technological millennium.

## **History of Artificial Intelligence**

The term artificial intelligence was coined in 1956 by the American computer scientist John McCarthy. He defines it as

“getting a computer to do things which, when done by people, are said to involve intelligence.” Unfortunately, there is no standard definition of what constitutes AI. Part of the problem is the lack of agreement on what constitutes intelligence and how it relates to machines.

McCarthy proposes that “Intelligence is the computational part of the ability to achieve goals in the world. Varying kinds and degrees of intelligence occur in people, many animals, and some machines.”[\[6\]](#) This would include such capabilities as logic, reasoning, conceptualization, self-awareness, learning, emotional knowledge, planning, creativity, abstract thinking, and problem solving.

Researchers have for decades hoped to build machines that could do anything the human brain could do. Progress was slow for many decades but has accelerated in the last few years. A significant breakthrough occurred in 2012, when an idea called the neural network shifted the entire field. This is a mathematical system that learns skills by finding statistical patterns in enormous amounts of data.

The next big step came around 2018 with large language models. Companies such as Google, Microsoft, and OpenAI began building neural networks trained on vast amounts of text including digital books, academic papers, and Wikipedia articles. Surprisingly, these systems learned to write unique prose and computer code and to carry on sophisticated conversations. This breakthrough has been called “generative AI.”

These AI algorithms are based on intricate webs of neural networks and allow for what is considered “deep learning.” These advanced AI systems collect huge amounts of data and can correct mistakes and even anticipate future problems.

The benefits are significant. Factory automation, self-driving cars, efficient use of resources, correlating massive amounts of data, and fewer errors in medical diagnoses are just a few

of the many ways in which AI will improve our lives in the 21st century.

Unfortunately, AI poses dangers to us.

## Dangers of Artificial Intelligence

Although artificial intelligence offers some significant benefits, it also poses many dangers. The authors of the open letter on AI warn that human beings are not ready for a powerful AI under present conditions or even in the foreseeable future. What happens after AI becomes smarter than humans? That is a question that bothered Eliezer Yudkowsky. In his opinion piece for *Time* magazine, he argued that “We Need to Shut It All Down.”[\[7\]](#)

He warned that “Many researchers steeped in these issues, including myself, expect that the most likely result of building a superhumanly smart AI, under anything remotely like the current circumstances, is that literally everyone on Earth will die.” He doesn’t think this is merely a possibility but believes it is a virtual certainty.

He uses this illustration to drive home his point: “To visualize a hostile superhuman AI, don’t imagine a lifeless book-smart thinker dwelling inside the internet and sending ill-intentioned emails. Visualize an entire alien civilization, thinking at millions of times human speeds, initially confined to computers—in a world of creatures that are, from its perspective, very stupid and very slow.”

Bill Gates understands both the benefits and dangers of AI. He explains that the “development of AI is as fundamental as the creation of the microprocessor, the personal computer, the Internet, and the mobile phone.” While these changes in how we work, learn, and communicate are good, there is also “the possibility that AIs will run out of control.”[\[8\]](#)

He asks, “Could a machine decide that humans are a threat,

conclude that its interests are different from ours, or simply stop caring about us?" He recognizes that "superintelligent AIs are in our future" and that they "will be able to do everything that a human brain can, but without any practical limits on the size of its memory or the speed at which it operates." However, these "strong AIs" will "probably be able to establish their own goals." Those would likely conflict with our best interests.

Notice the number of dystopian movies where the machines have taken over. That would include movies like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *I, Robot*, the *Matrix* series, and the *Terminator* series. That is why many people fear how AI will be used in the future.

## **Biblical Perspective**

How should Christians respond to transhumanism? We should begin by looking at the philosophical foundation of this movement. It begins with a belief that there is no God and we are responsible for our own destiny. It also is based upon an evolutionary foundation that assumes that we are the product of millions of years of chance process.

The leaders of transhumanism see genetic engineering as a tool to be used to speed up the process of evolution. We can use genetics to enhance and improve the human race. If we believe that humans are merely the product of the undirected force of evolution, then certainly intelligent scientists can "improve on nature."

The evolutionary argument goes like this. Humans die due to some technological glitch (e.g., heart stops beating). Therefore, "Every technical problem has a technical solution. We don't need to wait for the Second Coming in which to overcome death. A couple of geeks in a lab can do it. If traditionally death was the specialty of priests and theologians, now the engineers are taking over." [\[9\]](#)

The leaders of transhumanism believe we should use technology to improve the human race so that we are perfect and immortal. In many ways, this technological imperative harkens back to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). Instead, we should use technology wisely as we exercise dominion over the world (Genesis 1:28).

Here are a few biblical principles. First, we begin with the reality that each human being is created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27, Psalm 139:13-16, Isaiah 43:6-7, Jeremiah 1:5, Ephesians 4:24). We have been given dominion and stewardship over the creation (Genesis 1:28, Colossians 1:16) and should reject any form of technology that would usurp or subvert that stewardship responsibility.

Second, humans are created as moral agents. Computer technology can aid us in making moral decisions because of its powerful ability to process data. But we can never cede our moral responsibility to those same computers. God will hold us responsible for the moral or immoral decisions we make (Roman 2:6-8, Galatians 5:19-21, 2 Peter 1:5-8). We should never give computers that authority.

We should reject the vision of transhumanism that looks forward to the day in which man and machine become one in the singularity. We must reject the idea that this is the next step in human evolution. We should reject the worship of technology and reject the idea that AI will make us more human. And we should reject the false utopian vision of a world when machines are given co-equal value to humans created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27).

## Notes

1. Nick Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values," *Ethical Issues for the Twenty-First Century* (2005): 3-14.
2. Kass, Leon. "The New Biology: What Price Relieving Man's Estate?" *Science*, 19 November 1971, 779.
3. Transhumanism Declaration,

[www.humanityplus.org/the-transhumanist-declaration](http://www.humanityplus.org/the-transhumanist-declaration).

4. Gregory Stock, *Metaman: The Merging of Humans and Machines Into a Global Superorganism*, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
5. Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near*, NY: Penguin, 2005.
6. John McCarthy, "What is AI/Basic Questions," [jmc.stanford.edu/artificial-intelligence/what-is-ai/index.html](http://jmc.stanford.edu/artificial-intelligence/what-is-ai/index.html)
7. Eliezer Yudkowsky, "Pausing AI Developments Isn't Enough. We Need to Shut it All Down," *Time*, March 29, 2023.
8. Bill Gates, "The Age of AI has Begun," March 21, 2023, [www.gatesnotes.com/The-Age-of-AI-Has-Begun](http://www.gatesnotes.com/The-Age-of-AI-Has-Begun).
9. Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Penguin, 2016, 23.

### For Further Reading

Kerby Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005, chapter 20.

Kerby Anderson, *Technology and Social Trends* Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishers, 2016, chapter 3.

Jacob Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God* Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2019.

Lawrence Terlizze, *Into the Void: The Coming Transhuman Transformation*, Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishers, 2016.

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## Smuggling Theology Into "Out of the Silent Planet"

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides an overview of how C.S. Lewis wove theology into his 'Out of the Silent Planet,' the first book of his space trilogy,*

*Out of the Silent Planet*, C.S. Lewis' first foray into the science-fiction genre, was originally published in 1938.<sup>[1]</sup> Lewis, who appreciated the science-fiction stories of authors like H. G. Wells, was nonetheless troubled by elements in these stories that were morally and intellectually objectionable. According to Alister McGrath, Lewis realized "that the forms of science fiction

. . . used to promote various forms of atheism and materialism could . . . be used to *critique* these viewpoints and advocate an alternative."<sup>[2]</sup> This is what Lewis *did* in *Out of the Silent Planet*—and what he *continued* to do in two follow-up books: *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. Together, these books are commonly known as "the Space Trilogy."

*Out of the Silent Planet* tells the story of Dr. Elwin Ransom, who is drugged, kidnapped, and taken aboard a spaceship traveling to Mars. Weston and Devine, the two men who kidnap Ransom, have been to Mars before and believe that the planet's inhabitants want them to bring back another human being (wrongly assuming that the person *may* be wanted as a sacrificial offering). Weston is a physicist, interested in finding potential planets for humanity to colonize once our own planet becomes uninhabitable. Devine is an investor, hoping to make some money from the enterprise.



On their way to Mars (known as Malacandra to its own inhabitants), Ransom learns that his life may be in danger once they reach the planet. Hence, shortly after their arrival, Ransom escapes his kidnappers and ends up meeting a creature called a Hross, one of the planet's native inhabitants. He soon discovers that, much like himself, these are intelligent and moral beings. Indeed, in some ways they, along with the other intelligent species on the planet, are superior to human beings, for they have not been infected with the same moral illness that plagues our own species. Eventually, Ransom even meets the designated ruler of the

planet, a spiritual intelligence referred to as an Oyarsa. He then learns why earth is known as “the silent planet.”[\[3\]](#)

After publishing the book, Lewis confided to one interested correspondent that most of the early reviews had completely missed of Christian theology that he had woven into his narrative. He humorously noted that, apparently, “any amount of theology can now be smuggled into” such a book without anyone’s even noticing.[\[4\]](#) So how much theology did Lewis “smuggle into” *Out of the Silent Planet*? That’s what we’ll discuss in the remainder of this article.

## The Heavens Declare the Glory

As Weston, Devine, and Ransom travel through space on their way to Mars, Ransom is surprised by just how *good* he is feeling: courageous, joyful, alert, and full of life. He reflects upon the fact that he had been educated to regard space as “the black, cold vacuity” separating the worlds. He comes to realize, however, that this was all wrong. The term “space,” he muses, was utterly inadequate “for this . . . ocean of radiance in which they swam.” He thus *rejects* the term, observing that “Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens—the heavens which declared the glory.”[\[5\]](#)

Ransom is here reflecting upon the words of King David in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” As one commentator remarks, “David was moved by observing that the heavens, under the dominating influence of the sun, declare the splendor of God’s handiwork.”[\[6\]](#) The reference to the sun here is apt, for it is largely through the influence of the solar rays that Ransom feels “his body and mind daily rubbed and scoured and filled with new vitality.”[\[7\]](#)

Of course, we must remember that Lewis is here writing science

*fiction*—and not science fact. While “the substitution of heaven for space” was Lewis’s “favorite idea in the book,” he also acknowledged “that the rays in interplanetary space, so far from being beneficial,” would actually be harmful to us.[\[8\]](#) But Lewis was attempting to reintroduce a conception of wonder and beauty into the world. He wanted to move his readers’ understanding of “space” from something merely cold, dark, and dead, to a conception of the “heavens” as something radiant and alive with the goodness and bounty of their Creator. And this, in the fictional (and even mythological) world of the story, he has arguably achieved.

Indeed, it’s one of the reasons that many dislike referring to these books as “the *space* trilogy.” Such language misses the fact that Lewis was attempting to shift our attention from the darkness and deadness of “space” to the glory and splendor of the “heavens.” It’s just one of the ways in which Lewis was attempting to reclaim for God a genre of literature that was so often dominated by atheistic and materialistic forms of thinking.[\[9\]](#)

## War in Heaven

Before we go any further, we must address the meaning of Lewis’s title, “*Out of the Silent Planet*.” The novel concerns a voyage from Earth to Mars, and details the adventures of the main character, Dr. Elwin Ransom, after his arrival. In the novel, Earth is known as “the *silent* planet.” But why?

The answer has partly to do with “smuggled theology” and partly with the mythological world of the story created by Lewis. In this mythological world, we are introduced to the idea that each planet in our solar system is ruled by a very great, though still created, spiritual being. These beings were created by God and are something like a cross between a Christian archangel and a Roman god or goddess. Hence, the spirit that governs Mars is something like a cross between the

archangel Michael and the Roman god Mars (devoid, of course, of all the negative characteristics traditionally ascribed to Mars in Greco-Roman mythology). In fact, this being is a loyal servant of God and was created (at least in part) for the purpose of ruling the planet assigned to it. In the novel, such a ruling spiritual power is referred to as an *Oyarsa*.

Eventually, Ransom meets this ruling power and learns why Earth is known as “the silent planet.” He is told that the Oyarsa of *our* world was once very great, even greater than that of Mars.<sup>[1]10</sup> Unfortunately, however, he became “bent” (or evil). This happened in the distant past, before there was any life on Earth. Because this “Bent One” desired to destroy “other worlds besides his own,” there was “great war” in the heavens. Eventually, he was “bound . . . in the air of his own world.” “There,” Ransom learns, “doubtless he lies to this hour.”<sup>[11]</sup> The other planets have no communication with Earth. It is “silent.”

Do you see what Lewis is doing? In the fictional world of the novel, he is telling us a story very similar to that of the fall of the devil. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul refers to Satan as the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:1-2) and the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Lewis is doing something similar in his description of the “Bent One” who rules the Earth as a rebel against God. But Lewis goes much further than this.

## War on Earth

Above, we left Ransom, the hero of C. S. Lewis’s novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, deep in conversation with the divinely appointed spiritual ruler of Mars. After telling Ransom that Earth, alone among the planets in our solar system, is “silent,” being ruled by a “bent” (or evil) power, the Martian ruler then says something quite intriguing.

He tells Ransom that they do not think that "Maleldil" (more on this in a moment) would completely surrender Earth to the "Bent One." Indeed, he says, "there are stories among us" that Maleldil has done some "strange" and wonderful things, even personally appearing on Earth and "wrestling with the Bent One" for the right to rule. "But of this," he says, "we know less than you; it is a thing we desire to look into."[{12}](#)

So who is Maleldil, and what exactly has he done? In the world of the novel, Maleldil is the name for God in the Old Solar language, which Ransom has gradually learned during his time on Mars.[{13}](#) Hence, the Martian ruler is essentially telling Ransom that they do not believe that God would completely surrender Earth to the devil. Indeed, they have even heard stories that God (or Maleldil) has visited "the silent planet" and done battle with the evil one. He admits that there is much they do not know about all this but says that he (and other loyal servants of God) long to look into these things.

Those familiar with the Bible will doubtless see what Lewis is doing here, for he concludes this passage with what is basically a biblical quotation. The Apostle Peter wrote of "the prophets who prophesied about the grace" that was to be ours in Christ. So great was the content of this revelation, notes Peter, that even "angels long to look" into such things (1 Peter 1:10-12). Thus, as Christiana Hale rightly notes, the "strange counsel" that Maleldil has taken, and the wonderful things he has done, "the things that all the angels desire to look into, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ: the Incarnation, birth, death, and resurrection of the Son of God."[{14}](#)

Once again, therefore, we see Lewis "smuggling theology" into his interplanetary space adventure. In this case, though not stating it explicitly, he clearly alludes to the whole gospel message about Jesus. Next, we'll consider one final example of "smuggled theology" in C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*.

# Divine Providence and the Martial Spirit

Although God, who is known as Maleldil in the novel, is mentioned repeatedly, He is always mentioned in the third person. We hear about things that Maleldil *has done, is doing,* or may one day *do*, but we do not hear directly from God (or Maleldil) himself. Nevertheless, it is clear that He is ultimately in charge, and He is providentially at work in and through His creatures.[{15}](#)

For example, the spiritual power that Maleldil created to govern Mars, tells Ransom (the hero of the novel) that it was only by Maleldil that he had been able to save his own planet from the destructive rage of the “Bent One” (or devil). Indeed, it was only by Maleldil that the heavenly host were able to stop the “Bent One’s” ambitious cruelty and confine him to the Earth.[{16}](#) Moreover, we learn that Maleldil has done marvelous things and even personally visited Earth to do battle with the devil.[{17}](#)

Lewis thus portrays God (or Maleldil) not only as a king, but also as a warrior. He is characterized (in an appropriate way) by what might be called the “warrior” or “martial spirit.” Moreover, the spiritual power that Maleldil created to govern Mars is also (like the god of Roman mythology) imbued with the martial spirit. He, too, is a warrior, loyally engaged in fighting in the service of God. In light of this, once we learn that Ransom has been called to Mars by its planetary ruler, we can rightly surmise that it was, in fact, *God’s will* for Ransom to make this journey. We might even guess that one of the purposes of this journey was to develop the “martial spirit” in Ransom himself.

As Christiana Hale observes, “Lewis does not randomly pick Mars as the location, as if any alien planet would do. No, he chooses Mars for a reason, and an enormous part of that reason is to mold Ransom into a Martial character.”[{18}](#) In other words, God (or Maleldil) wants to develop certain martial

virtues in Ransom, things like courage, strength, determination, perseverance, and grit. Indeed, this is providentially necessary, for He is preparing Ransom for something far greater in the future. Hence, through the providence of God and the influence of Mars, we witness Ransom's growth in the martial spirit, thus preparing him for his next great adventure on a different alien world, that of Perelandra.

## Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965).
2. Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.
3. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.
4. C. S. Lewis to Sister Penelope CSMV, August 9, 1939, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 262.
5. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 32.
6. Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*. ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1985), 807.
7. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 31-32.
8. C. S. Lewis to Mrs. Stuart Moore (Evelyn Underhill), October 29, 1938, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 233-34.
9. See Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.
10. See Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.
11. All quotations in the paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.
12. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.

13. Christiana Hale, *Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2020), 155.
14. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 88.
15. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 67-8.
16. Ibid., 121.
17. Ibid.
18. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 70.

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## Stranger Than Fiction

*T.S. Weaver processes the 2006 fantasy comedy-drama film Stranger Than Fiction through a biblical worldview lens.*

I recently watched the movie *Stranger Than Fiction*. I thought it would be profitable to practice apologetic engagement using this form of popular culture, and an ideal opportunity to explore some apologetic themes found in the movie. Most literature has echoes of the biblical storyline since it's the foundation of understanding life in this world. As taught to the [Mind Games camp](#) participants every summer, properly understood, film can be of excellent value in discerning the philosophical positions and shifts in society and can enable the Christian to better respond to his or her culture. When interpreting a film, one should ask the following questions:

1. Is there a discernible philosophical position in the film? If so, what is it, and can a case be made for your interpretation?
2. Is the subject matter of the film portrayed truthfully? Here the goal is to decide if the subject matter is being

dealt with in a way that agrees with or contrary to the experiences of daily reality.

3. Is there a discernible hostility toward particular values and beliefs? Does the film look to be offensive for the sake of sensationalism alone?

The main character, Harold, lives a strait-laced, boring, lonely life as an IRS agent, and he realizes he is the main character of a novel being written by a stranger. The novel plot affects his life as the author writes. He realizes this when he hears the narrator's voice describing his nearly every move. This is how the tension starts and then he hears the narrator say something like, "Little did he know, this seemingly inconsequential action would cause his imminent death." Obviously, death is relatively imminent for all of us, but the context implies his would be coming soon. He is an unmarried, middle-aged man; so, this is the problem of the story: he is going to die sooner than he expected, and he does not know how or when.

Being a seminary student, I wanted to know what Harold was thinking came after death. Why was a premature death (according to him) so tragic? Yet, there was no element to the movie at all that included thoughts of life after death. But, like most movies, there was reflection from Harold about life. Oddly, he did not start the reflection on his own. A literary theory professor had to be the one to ask him an apologetic type of question: "What is your life ambition?" Harold's shockingly shallow (and sad) answer was, "I've always wanted to learn the guitar." He was somehow motivated enough to be a successful IRS agent and do things like count the number of brush strokes while he brushed his teeth every morning, but he had not managed to get around to learning the guitar or answering life's biggest questions such as, "Why is there something instead of nothing? Why am I here? What is my purpose? What must I do to be good? What is my destiny?" I wonder how many other Harolds there are out there. Surely (and

hopefully) this is not a good representation of the average American.

Although the thought of death did not lead him to where I thought it should, it did lead him to a lifestyle change and new philosophy. If his old philosophy was, "I need to do well as an IRS agent," his new philosophy was, "I need to enjoy life more and do the things I've always wanted to do before I die." Now you would think this would turn into a hedonistic lifestyle but all he really did was stop counting his brush strokes, stop working, and start learning to play the guitar. However, he did turn his attention to a woman.

Her story was interesting as well, because she dropped out of Harvard Law School to make the world a better place by baking cookies to make people happy. So, I suppose part of her worldview was that if people are happy, the world is a better place. No one in the movie pressed her on the issue. Harold just accepted it and continued indulging himself with her cookies.

Predictably, this relationship turned into a romance and they both fell in love and started sleeping together. Apparently, sex was not something that needed a covenant of marriage for them. Nor much of a commitment of any kind. Not once during the movie did either of them call each other boyfriend or girlfriend or say the words "I love you."

There was no theological thought presented between the characters for most of the movie. Where some theology did occur with the characters (albeit just undertones) was with the professor thinking through Harold's dilemma and giving him advice. At one point, he realized Harold had no control in the story the narrator was telling about his life, and he told him, "You don't control your fate." He meant the narrator controlled it. So, this jumped out at me as though the narrator were God and Harold, and the professor had a fatalistic theology. This is the point where Harold turned to

his new philosophy thanks to the advice of the professor. With this type of theology, I think it is easy to result in the “It does not matter what I do, so I may as well stop thinking about it” mindset, which is where Harold turned.

An odd element to the story was that Harold’s wristwatch had thoughts, feelings, and was even able to communicate to Harold. It was as if the narrator was God, and the wristwatch was the Holy Spirit guiding Harold at times. Yet ironically the narrator did not know Harold was a real person, so *she* (there is a rabbit trail waiting to be taken) was unknowingly playing the role of God.

During the tension of Harold’s dilemma of soon-imminent death, it was easy to see Harold needed saving, but the mystery was, who was going to be his savior (playing the role of Jesus)? At first, I thought the professor was going to save Harold by telling him how to avoid death. Then I wondered if Harold was Jesus himself because he eventually became willing to face his death to allow the story to end the way they (the narrator, Harold, and the professor) all thought it ought to (they eventually all met). Then the next thing you know Harold saves a boy from being hit by a bus and Harold is hit in his place. I thought that was the ending of the book and Harold was dead. Consequently, I thought Harold was the savior for the boy and Harold played Jesus.

Harold’s tremendously heroic act makes no sense based on the worldview he adopted, but it makes a world of sense based on a Christian worldview. It turns out Harold survived anyway, and it was the wristwatch who was the savior (part of it got lodged in his artery and stopped him from bleeding to death) because the author/narrator changed the ending. Thus, in a way, the narrator was God, the wristwatch was both the Holy Spirit and Jesus.

The redeeming moment was Harold getting to live after all his fear of dying and his life changing “for the better” (at least

I think that is the movie wanted us to see). It was better in some ways, but in some ways the word “better” is a stretch because of how shallow the changes in his life were (ignoring the deep change of falling in love because the relationship was as shallow as most romantic comedy movies). The narrator even ties a bow on it all at the end by what seemed like (especially with the montage and the dramatic music) it was supposed to be a deeply profound message of the entire movie and what everyone (including the viewers) should walk away with. Here was the long word-for-word message before the closing credits (and the end of the book in the movie):

As Harold took a bite of a Bavarian sugar cookie, he finally felt as if everything was going to be ok. Sometimes, when we lose ourselves in fear and despair, in routine and constancy, in hopelessness and tragedy, we can thank God [*the first time He was mentioned*] for Bavarian sugar cookies. And fortunately, when there aren't any sugar cookies we can still find reassurance in a familiar hand on our skin, or a kind and loving gesture. Or a subtle encouragement. Or a loving embrace. Or an offer of comfort . . . not to mention hospital gurneys and nose plugs . . . an uneaten Danish . . . a soft-spoken secret . . . and Fender Stratocasters . . . and maybe the occasional piece of fiction. And we must remember that all these things: the nuances, the anomalies, the subtleties . . . which are in fact here for a much larger and nobler cause, they are here to save our lives. I know the idea seems strange, but I also know that it just happens to be true. And so, it was: the wristwatch saved Harold Crick.

What a load of nonsense. *That* is the final word and message of the story? Life is all about cookies, honorable deeds, comfort, and random material items. Nuances, anomalies, and subtleties save our lives? It *is* strange. How does it “just happen to be true?” In that case, how is one's life different from someone else's? What makes up fear, despair, routine,

constancy, hopelessness, and tragedy? Is it no sugar cookies? With this philosophy, what is the point of life? Does this not claim we are all saved? Which nuances, anomalies, and subtleties save us? Are they universal or relative? Or am I not saved because I do not wear a wristwatch?

And why are we thanking God for sugar cookies, but claiming our savior is a wristwatch? What is God's role in all of this? Why does He not get more credit? If He gave us the cookies, should He not at the very least get some praise for giving us the wristwatch also? Obviously, this was a secular movie, and it was far from Christian theology. But there was lostness, salvation, and redemption clear in the story. The worldview offered in *Stranger Than Fiction* is not strong enough to support the challenges of this world, but the Christian one is. But, hey, thank God for sugar cookies, right?

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## unChristian: Is Christianity's Image Hurting Christ's Image?

*Byron Barlowe reviews the book unChristian, based on research on what young people think of evangelicals and born-again Christians: that they're hypocritical, judgmental, too political, exclusive. He calls out Christians to improve the reality behind the image to better reflect Christ.*

**Section Synopsis:** A recent book entitled unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters uncovered overwhelmingly negative views of

*evangelicals and born-again Christians, especially among young generations. In some ways these views are warranted, in some ways they are not, but Christians do well to take them as a wake-up call for the sake of those God wants to save and mature.*

The meaning of *gospel* is literally “good news.” The book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*[\[1\]](#) is a book of bad news—that half of those outside the church have a negative perception of Christianity. And that’s even true of many young people inside the church.



Evangelical Christians by definition consider Jesus’ charge to present the biblical gospel message to the world a mandate. Yet many of the very people who they reach out to are rejecting the messengers. Researchers with the Barna Group found that a majority today believe that evangelical and born-again Christians are sheltered from the real world, are judgmental, way too political, anti-homosexual (to the point of being gay-hating), and hypocritical.

These are widespread perceptions, especially among sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds, even those who go to church. To many people, perception is ninety percent of reality. So whatever your opinion of the study, this is the feeling out there.

Barna’s survey results and commentary have been making a stir through *unChristian* since its release in 2007. It’s not a deep theological or philosophical book. It contains statistical interpretation broken up by commentary from every stripe of evangelical Christian. It is a sobering cultural assessment that calls out believers to be more Christlike.

The authors’ applications are not always solidly based. They seem a little dismissive of valid objections to their analysis and conclusions. Also, confusion among unchurched respondents

about the meaning of the terms “born again” and “evangelical” leads one to ask, How seriously do we take survey-takers’ critique of Christians if they don’t even know who or what these Christians are? That is, many times the people being surveyed couldn’t clearly define what “born-again” means or what an “evangelical” is, so how much stock should we put in their criticisms?

Yet, the stats are stark enough to be alarming: of those outside the church, fully half had a bad impression of evangelicals. Only three percent had a good impression! Are Christians so bent on moral persuasion that we’re alienating the lost with a lovelessness that really is unChristian? Or is this just a case of the unsaved experiencing the gospel as a stumbling block, as Jesus said would happen? The authors say it’s mainly Christians’ fault; I agree but suspect there’s more to it.

Here’s a modest proposal: even if respondents were biased or misled, why don’t we in the church humble ourselves, listen, and change where we need to? In the spirit of King David, when Shimei cursed him loudly, we may need to simply say, “Let them critique. The Lord told them to.”

Some question whether perceptions of outsiders should shape the church’s behavior. Co-authors Kinnaman and Lyons make the case that the church needs to be thoughtful about our responses to homosexuals, less trusting of political action as the way to change culture, and *more humble* and open to people who have not yet experienced grace. If outsiders feel that we are running a club they’re not invited to, where is Christ in that? they ask.

According to the authors, “Theologically conservative people are increasingly perceived as aloof and unwilling to talk.” But those under 30 “are the ultimate ‘conversation generation’.” Those outside church want to discuss issues, but see Christians as unwilling. Have you recently had a spiritual

dialogue with a young unbeliever? How'd it go?

## “Christians Are Hypocritical”

**Section Synopsis:** *unChristian documents a heavy bias against Christians as hypocritical, a charge which is in part true, admit many. But it's also an unavoidable reality of a grace-based religion, which if explained, goes a long way towards mitigating the charge and explaining the gospel message.*

One overwhelming opinion among the survey group is that Christians are *hypocrites* and this keeps people away from church.

In fact, the survey on which the book is based reveals blatant legalism among believers, that the top priority of born-again Christians is, “doing the right thing, being good, and not sinning.” This do-your-best value topped biblical values like “relationships, evangelism, service and family faith.” In another survey, four out of five churchgoers said that “the Christian life is well described as, ‘trying hard to do what God commands’.” {2} Such a primary focus on *lifestyle* and sin-management as a measure of spirituality leads to what they call a “false pretense of holiness,” that is, hypocrisy.{3} It's often like we Christians are living for others' approval and forgetting about grace.

This isn't lost on younger generations. “Like it or not, the term ‘hypocritical’ has become fused with young peoples' experience of Christianity,” say the authors.{4} *Eighty-five percent* of “outsiders” and *half of young churchgoers* say so. The book offers story after painful story of sometimes breathtaking hypocrisy based on lengthy interviews. This adds weight to the conclusions drawn by Kinnaman and Lyons. The research was not simply based on surveys (quantitative) but also on in-depth interviews (qualitative).

There may be a silver lining here. The charge of hypocrisy

offers a handy starting point for turning around negative perceptions and explaining grace. Pastor and author Tim Keller admits that we Christians actually *are* often hypocritical and need to be humble about it. Unrepentant hypocrites don't admit mistakes, so we immediately challenge a perception by owning up to it.

But the other unavoidable fact is that non-Christians assume we are *trying* to live like Jesus to *get into* heaven, like the good-works motivation of other religions and cults. So, when they find out we're not perfect people, they critique us as hypocrites. In contrast, an old saying captures the biblical worldview: "The Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." [\[5\]](#) Unbelievers simply cannot understand this; we have to be patient with that, says Keller.

You could respond to the accusation of hypocrisy like this: "I have a relationship with Christ not because I'm good but precisely because I am not good. He rescued me from myself and the ruin I was causing. But He's changing me. I'm still a mess, but I'm God's mess."

In an age of Internet image-making and advertising, young outsiders are cynical about finding anybody who's genuine. Christians need to genuinely repent of hypocrisy. Meanwhile, we can explain that grace means our imperfections are covered by God during the process of spiritual transformation. Maybe outsiders will opt for grace once they see more of it.

## **"Christians Hate Homosexuals"**

**Section Synopsis:** *Evangelical and born-again Christians today have a well-deserved but understandable reputation as anti-gay, but attitudes can go so far as being gay-hating. Balancing conviction about the broader gay agenda and the personal sin of homosexuality with a humble compassion for gay individuals who are made in God's image is key, especially as*

*we model for younger believers.*

The guys in my Bible study group were discussing gay marriage and the upcoming elections. The lively banter stopped when I dropped a bomb. "You know," I said, "when most non-Christians under thirty-years-old find out we're evangelicals, we may as well be wearing a sandwich board emblazoned with 'God hates gays.'" I'd been reading *unChristian*, and it was sobering.

According to the authors, if we're raising kids to "shun their peers who are 'different,' we are actually limiting their . . . spiritual influence" and may lead them to question their own faith.[\[6\]](#) Why? Because they'll probably have friends who identify as gay and other sexual identities. As Probe colleague Kerby Anderson says, "One of the biggest challenges for churches and individual Christians who reach out to homosexuals is keeping two principles in proper tension: biblical convictions and biblical compassion."[\[7\]](#)

An emerging adult generation accepts homosexuality, often without thinking, even those who grew up in church. Only one-third of churched young people believe homosexuality to be a "major problem."

And, only a small percentage of young adults "want to resist homosexual initiatives" in society. This is alarming, given America's softening of sexual morals, mainstreaming of gay culture and the redefinition of marriage. But the issue addressed in *unChristian* is that in our battle against a few agenda-driven radicals, we've regularly forgotten that our fight is not with same-sex strugglers, but with unbiblical ideas.[\[8\]](#) We're called to love, not condemn, the people made in God's image who are caught up in sin, even while we stand up as Christian citizens.

Barna's survey shows just how unbiblical self-identified Christians can be. Over half said homosexuality was a problem, but only two out of six hundred people said anything about

love or “being sympathetic” as a potential solution. A mere one percent say they pray for homosexuals! “We need to downgrade the importance of being antihomosexual as a ‘credential,’” of our commitment to Christ, say the authors.[\[9\]](#) That is, we need to repent if we believe that it’s a spiritual badge of honor to be anti-gay.

If a certain brand of sin is disgusting to us, why should that get in the way of communicating the love of a forgiving God? We need to keep in mind that *all* sin is disgusting to God, even our pet sins. This is the kind of challenge the book *unChristian* does well. Yet, scant mention is made of the greater consequences of sexual sins, including sickness and the desperate need for repentance and recovery among same-sex practitioners. Perhaps that would have been off-point for this book.

Kinnaman observes that younger generations are “hard-wired for relational connections” and view the church’s lack of spiritual solutions as uncaring and insincere. If we lose our audience due to heartlessness it won’t matter how much truth we proclaim.

## “Christians Are Judgmental”

**Section Synopsis:** *“Christians are judgmental” is an accusation coming from young people inside and outside the Church today. Believers need to learn to retain the biblical mandate to judge the fruits of ideas and behaviors while going out of our way not to condemn people who’ve never (or seldom) experienced God’s grace.*

One of the most troubling perceptions that a watching world has of “born agains” and “evangelicals”, especially among the under-thirty crowd, is that we are judgmental. The book *unChristian* cites findings that ninety percent of “outsiders” believe this. More than half of young churchgoers agree!

It's not compromise to graciously work with disagreements. Sometimes the need to be right and "stay right" cancels out the truth we're trying to defend. To use the old saying, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." This seems to be the main finding the research revealed.

The authors credit young generations with insightfulness into peoples' *motives* since they've been endlessly targeted by marketing, lectures, and sermons. (Most have spent time in church, by the way.) They don't want unsolicited advice, say the authors. But that makes them resistant, *not* unreachable. Another factor is that younger generations reject black-and-white views. "They esteem context, ambiguity, and tension. . . . *How* we communicate [to them] is just as important as *what* we communicate," according to the book. [{10}](#) One popular author is seeing fruit among younger people by focusing on God Himself as the original community, the Trinity, and giving credence to our need for community.[{11}](#)

Well, aren't unbelievers the ones judging believers? Aren't Christians just standing up to sin? In-depth interviews showed that many respondents "believe Christians are trying . . . to justify feelings of moral and spiritual superiority."[{12}](#) My opinion is this: If we think we're better, we need to revisit Amazing Grace! Arrogance is the charge; are you guilty of it? I know I've been.

What does it mean to be judgmental? People are stumbling over stuff like this:

- Judgmentalism doesn't stop to ask why people do the things they do and why they are the way they are. That is, it just doesn't care.
- Judgmental minds see everything in terms of rules kept or rules broken.
- A judgmental heart maintains the us-them dichotomy,

keeping people at a distance from us. Holding people in contempt is easier when we lump them into categories.

- The core belief of a judgmental spirit is, “I’m right and I’m better.”

It’s true, the worldview of young generations in America has shifted in recent years to include a “do-it-yourself” morality and this is deeply troubling. Youth apologist Josh McDowell notes that seniors have the emotional maturity of freshmen today. Many suffer from broken families.[\[13\]](#) Still, an entire generation—churched and many formerly-churched—doubts our motives. Yes, they are judging us! But if our attitudes truly are stiff-arming people, shouldn’t we start sympathetically inviting them into God’s fellowship?

Christ-followers have a very hard time distinguishing between judging *people* and judging *what they do*. Scripture teaches us clearly not to condemn people to hell. Paul the Apostle taught that he didn’t even judge himself, much less outsiders. Yet we are told to judge fruits, which consist of what people do. That way, we know if we’re dealing with an unbelieving person, a confused believer or a mature disciple of Christ. If an unbeliever commits sin, we can see from it how to minister to them.

We church folks say, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” Those studied said they experience hate of the sin *and* the sinner. Much of church peoples’ discomfort and judgmentality stems from cultural and generational sources. If something like tattoos gets in the way of a Christlike response, maybe we need to take a fresh look at our attitudes.

## How Can True Christians Constructively Respond?

**Section Synopsis:** *Repairing a damaged image is a worthy goal*

*for Christians so that critics can see Christ instead of negative stereotypes. We can tear down stereotypes by being Christlike and then we have a chance to tear down deeper misconceptions about God, the Bible, and faith.*

The panhandler touched Dave's heart with his honest appeal. "I just want a burger." Throughout the meal, Dave talked with him, finding out about his life and views. He didn't try to cram the gospel in or argue. Dave later overheard the man say to his homeless companion, "Hey that guy's a Christian and we actually had a conversation." Dave wondered what kind of negative interactions with Christians from the past prompted that response!

The authors of *unChristian* uncovered a low public opinion of evangelicals and born-again Christians among outsiders. They may be biased, but it's helpful to know what people think.

One of the most important ministries you can have these days is to tear down negative stereotypes of Christ-followers simply by being Christlike. That may set the stage for tearing down myths and lies about God, the Bible, and Christianity.

We need to seek common ground to begin a dialogue with those outside the faith. We all respond to agreement better than arguments, so affirming is a good start towards persuading. I recently saw a bumper sticker on the truck of a worker. It said in effect, "Jesus loves you but I think you're a jerk", although in more colorful language! After I chuckled about how God loves "jerks" like me, we spent forty-five minutes discussing his views, mostly on God and religion.

At one point, he proclaimed, "I like to think of God as feminine." I explored his reasons, which included the presence of beauty in the world. I affirmed that observation far as I could and expanded his thinking. I said, "What if God is so big and complete that He embodies perfect femininity *and* masculinity?" The door opened wider. But what if I'd acted

offended by the cuss word on the sticker or been put off by his distorted theology? I'm sure he would have been put off and the conversation would have been aborted.

Again, we also need to admit mistakes and problems, say the authors. Youth today emphasize "keepin' it real," being genuine. "Transparency disarms an image-is-everything generation."[\[14\]](#)

Lastly, the authors urge us to respond with truth *and* love to gays and their friends. Speaking out against homosexual sin and harmful politics may be our role. At the same time, Kerby Anderson points out that Christians "should lovingly welcome those who struggle with homosexual temptations and dedicate [ourselves] to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of" homosexual strugglers.[\[15\]](#)

Our tone of voice, demeanor and facial expression are much more important than we think. As Tim Keller says, "You actually have to embody a different kind of Christian than the ones that they've known in the past or they're simply not going to listen to what you're saying."[\[16\]](#)

## Notes

1. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why it Matters* (BakerBooks: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007).
2. David Kinnaman and Lyons, 51
3. Ibid, 49.
4. Ibid, 42. 5. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton/Penguin Group, New York, New York: 2008), 54.
6. Kinnaman and Lyons, 99.
7. Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Homosexuality* (Harvest House: Eugene, Oregon, 2008), 82.
8. Ephesians 6:12 (NASB). See: [www.BibleGateway.com](http://www.BibleGateway.com).
9. Kinnaman and Lyons, 105.

10. Ibid, 183.

11. Tim Keller, interviewed by Ed Stetzer, researcher, blogger and host of Inside Lifeway, posted April 24, 2008, [lifeway.edgeboss.net/download/lifeway/corp/IL\\_Evangelism\\_and\\_Keller.mp3](http://lifeway.edgeboss.net/download/lifeway/corp/IL_Evangelism_and_Keller.mp3).

12. Kinnaman and Lyons, 182.

13. Josh McDowell, as quoted by Charlie Mack, staff representative of Faculty Commons (Campus Crusade for Christ) in a PowerPoint® presentation presented to professors at Michigan State University, Spring, 2008.

14. Kinnaman and Lyons, 56.

15. Kerby Anderson, 83-84.

16. Keller, "Inside Lifeway" interview.

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## **Probe 2020 Survey Report #3: Religious Practices and Purpose for Living**

*Steve Cable explores Probe's 2020 survey, examining the participants' religious practices, sense of purpose for living, and views on tolerance vs. acceptance.*

In our [first two reports](#), we looked primarily at religious affiliations and core religious beliefs. In this report, we examine the level of religious activity of different religious groups and how they relate to people with different religious beliefs.

Some of the key results for Americans ages 18 through 39 on religious practices are as follows:

- Only about a fourth of Born Again Christians prayed multiple times per day and a similar number said they read their Bible daily.
- Only about one in five Born Again Christians give 10% or more of their income to their church and other charities.
- Only about one in twenty Born Again Christians reported a consistent religious life where they attended church at least **twice** a month, considered their faith as **strongly** important in their daily life, prayed **multiple times** per day, and read their Bible **daily**.
- Less than one in five Born Again Christians reported a nominal religious involvement where they attend church at least once a month, considered their faith as important in their daily life, prayed at least once a day, and read their Bible at least weekly, and gave at least 5% to their church and other charities.
- From 2010 to 2020, the percent of Born Again Christians who reported attending church at least twice a month, considered their faith as strongly important and read their Bible daily dropped by one half from 40% down to 20%.
- When asked about their ultimate purpose for living, slightly more than half of Born Again Christians selected a purpose which included serving God which was a significant drop from the two thirds who selected a similar purpose in 2010.

Some of the key results for Americans ages 18 through 39 on tolerance of other religions are:

- Only about one quarter (27%) of them disagree with the statement “. . . it is important to let people know that I affirm as true (at least for them) their religious beliefs and practices.”

- At the same time, almost two thirds (65%) agree that tolerance is best defined as “Treating with respect people with ideas or actions that you believe to be wrong or misguided.”
- This is another topic where we see somewhat conflicting results. Apparently, many Born Again Christian young adults think that you cannot believe someone is “wrong or misguided” when it comes to religion. Or they believe that “Treating with respect” means “affirming as true (at least for them)”.

## Level of Religious Activities

We will begin by looking at two different levels of religious activity: a Nominal Level and a Committed Level as shown in Table 1 below.

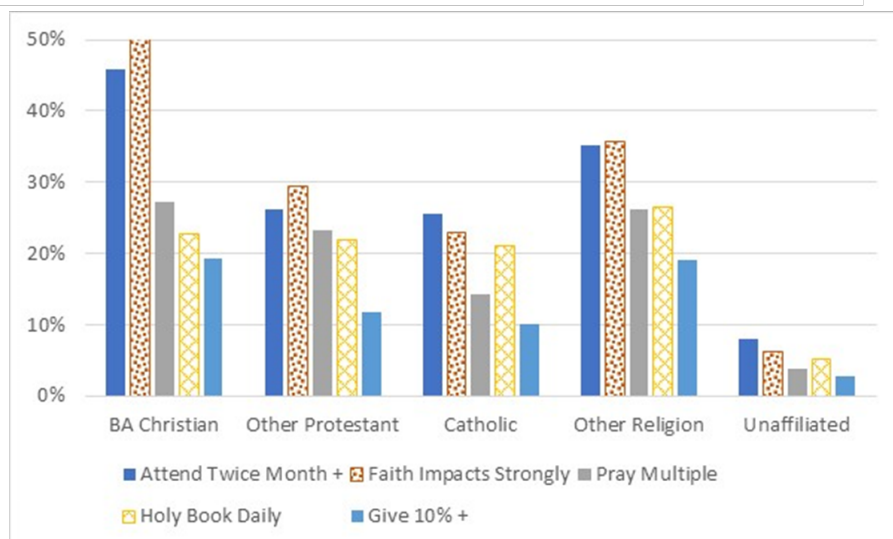
**Table 1 Defining Levels of Religious Activity**

Religious Activity	Nominal Level	Committed Level
How often do you attend religious services, not including special events such as a wedding or funeral?	Monthly	Twice a month or more
My religious faith has a significant impact on my daily life	Agree	Agree strongly
How often do you pray outside of a formal religious service?	Daily	Multiple per day
How often do you read or study your Holy Book in a small group setting or by yourself	Weekly	Daily or more
How much do you give to religious organizations and charities each year?	5% to 10% of income	At least 10% of income

I think most would agree that someone doing the activities

listed at the level required for the Committed Level is serious about their faith. They consider it important enough to make it a priority in their thoughts, time and finances. One can find specific instructions or examples in scripture for the importance of the first four activities listed above in the Committed Level column. Giving at least 10% of your income is not a clear direction in the New Testament, but it is a good metric for assessing someone's commitment. The nominal level probably represents someone who considers their faith as important but not important enough to involve a significant amount of time and money.

*Figure 1 Committed Level of Religious Activity by Faith Group  
Ages 18 through 39*



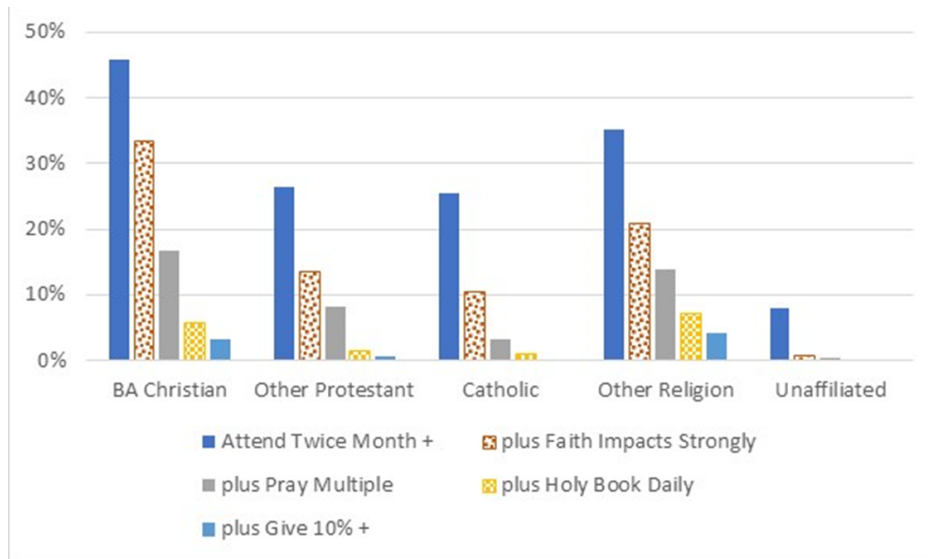
## Committed Level of Religious Activity

Those ages 18 through 39 who practice their religion at a committed level are shown in Figure 1 at right. We have roughly ordered these items from highest probability of adherence to lowest.

As shown in the figure, Born Again Christians lead the way in frequent church attendance and for strongly considering their faith significant. For the next two, prayer and reading your holy book, all four of the religious groups were similar. Finally, for the giving metric, Born Again Christians show about 20% at that level of giving while Other Protestants and

Catholics are about half of that level, or 10%.

*Figure 2 Committed Level of Religious Activity – Cumulative  
Ages 18 - 39*



It is distressing that three of the five metrics show only about one in four of Born Again Christians who practice them. Even the most commonly practiced religious behaviors show

fewer than half of Born Again Christians active at those levels.

And when we combine all of these metrics together (as shown in Figure 2) to identify people who show a strong commitment to their religious faith, we find around 3% (1 out of 33) Born Again Christians saying they perform all five activities. In fact, people of Other Religions have about 4% performing all five metrics. However, for all practical purposes, there is not difference between 3% and 4%. Both numbers represent a tiny portion of the faith group.

Note that if we exclude the question on giving, the percentage of Born Again Christians increases from 3% to 5%. Clearly, money is not the primary issue driving down the number of consistently active believers.

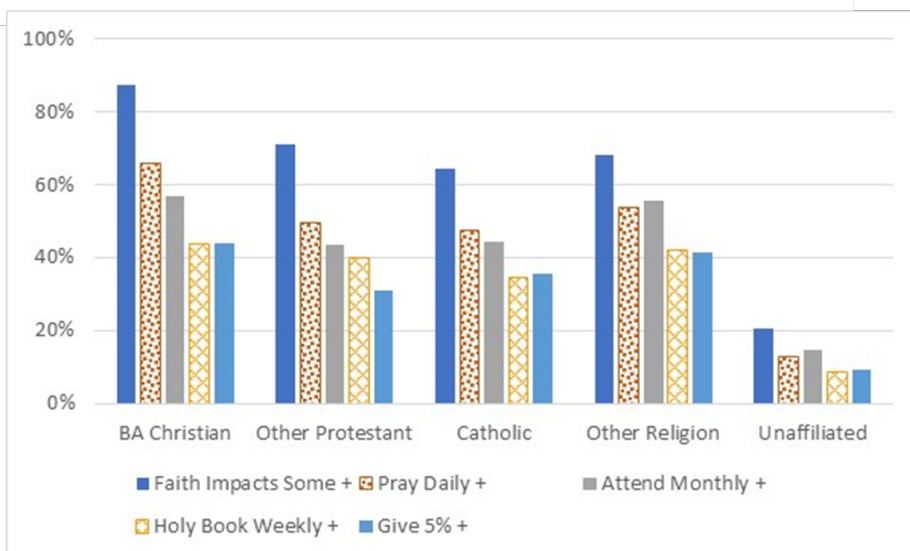
Also note that the entire Unaffiliated group reports less than 8% on each of these practices and less than 1% who claim to do even two of these practices.

These survey results clearly show that a scant few Americans

of any religious persuasion take the time to be actively involved in practices to help them grow in their faith.

## Nominal or Committed Levels of Religious Activity

Figure 3 At Least a Nominal Level of Religious Activity by Faith Group  
Ages 18 through 39

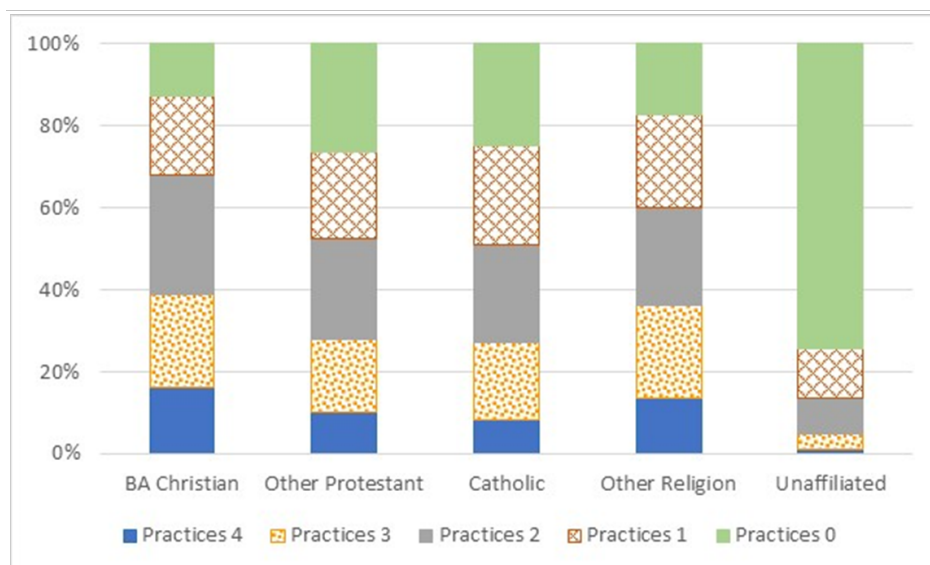


Now let's look at those with at least a Nominal level of religious practice (i.e., those who select the nominal level or the committed level). As shown in the figure, this is a much lower bar with all religious faiths hovering over 60% on those who agree/strongly agree that their faith has a significant impact on their daily lives and around half on those who pray at least daily. The other three activities range between 30% and 50%.

We should not forget that the pastors of these religious groups should be (and probably are) ashamed of these numbers. Particularly so when we consider the percentage of each group that practices all five of these relatively easy levels of commitment. The numbers (not shown on the graph) for those who practice all five are 16% of Born Again Christians, 13% of Other Religions, 9% of Other Protestants and 7% of Catholics. I must believe that pastors of those who answered the two Born Again questions would expect those congregants to be greater than 80% rather than hovering around 15%.

It is interesting that when we combine five different metrics, each of which is greater than 40% for Born Again Christians, that it drops down to 16%. Note both the metrics for reading the Bible at least weekly and giving at least 5% of your income to charities come in at Almost half (44%). When we combine the two metrics to see how many Born Again Christians affirm that they engage in both of these activities, the number drops to about one in four (26%).

*Figure 4 Number of Nominal Religious Activities  
Ages 18 through 39*



So let's look and see how many said they did all the activities, three of the activities, two of the activities, etc. Almost 40% of Born Again Christians did at least three of

the activities. Only 5% of the Unaffiliated could say the same. In fact, over 75% of the Unaffiliated did none of these activities.

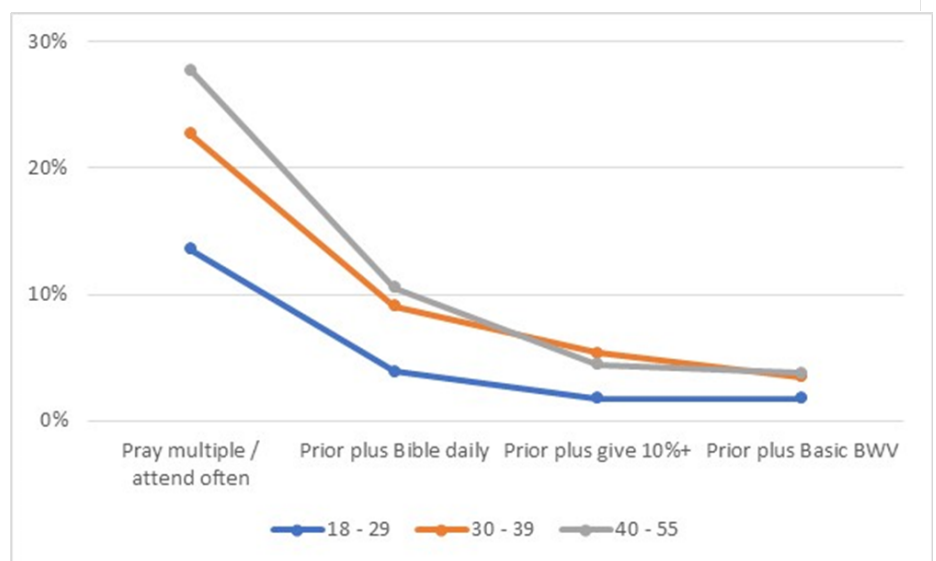
It is worth noting that Other Protestants and Catholics do not lag far behind Born Again Christians in the percentage doing at least three of the activities. This difference is a significant contrast to the Basic Biblical Worldview questions and the "who is Jesus" questions where these other religious groups lagged far behind Born Again Christians.

If I were to say to a Born Again believer, "to consistently grow in your faith and represent the good news of Christ to the world, I recommend that you pray to God daily, attend church at least one a month, read your Bible at least one a

week, and give at least 5% of your income to religious charities including your church.” I would not expect to get much blowback. After all, it takes less than one hour a week and no real financial hardship. Of course, what I really say is we should all try to live at a Committed level. Not because it is necessary for salvation, rather this level of activity will help us live a life honoring God and making a difference beyond the temporal into eternity.

### Variations by Age among Born Again Christians

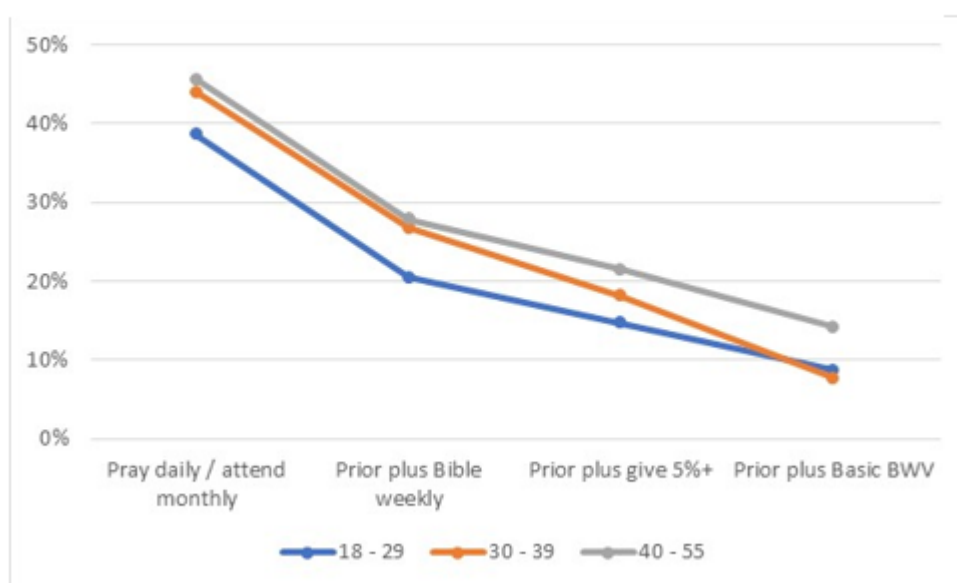
*Figure 5 Committed Level of Religious Activity for Born Again Christians by Age Range*



How do these religious activities vary by age among Born Again Christians? The results are plotted in the graph on the right for a

Committed Level of Activity. As shown, the percentage of the youngest adults is significantly less than for the two older groups. However, as the graph moves to the right adding more aspects to the cumulative total, the difference becomes small. In general, the youngest adults are less likely to practice key components of an active faith, but regardless of age the numbers are small.

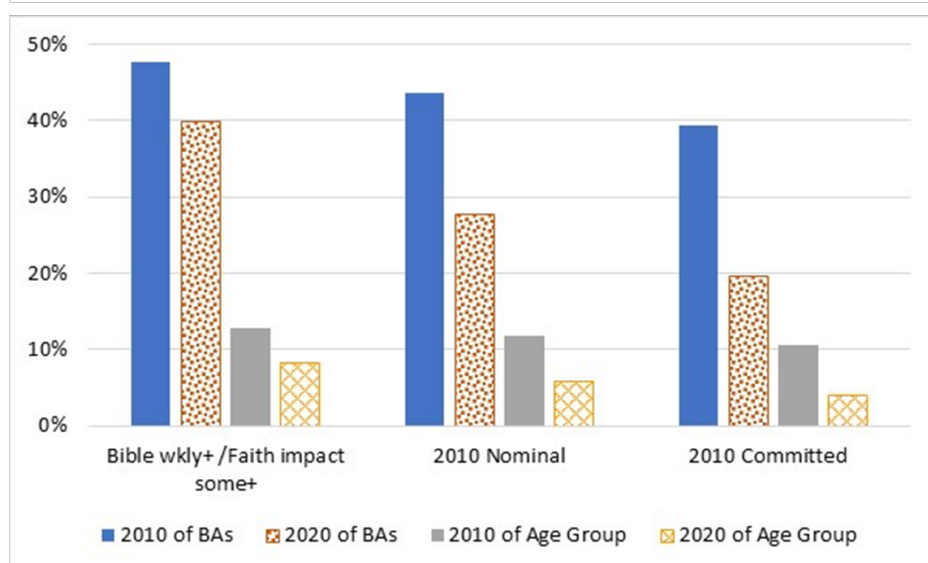
*Figure 6 At Least a Nominal Level of Religious Activity for Born Again Christians by Age Range*



The results are shown on the left for a Nominal or Committed Level of Activity. We have more Born Again Christians who participate across these levels. The

lines still trail down sharply as we move to the right, adding more practices to the cumulative total. The fact that only one out of five Born Again Christians ages 18 through 29 pray daily, attend church at least monthly, and read the Bible at least weekly presents a major challenge to our young adult ministries. I would suggest that these activities are essential to a consistently grow sanctification in our lives.

*Figure 7 Comparison of Religious Practices in 2010 and 2020 Born Again Christians Ages 18 through 39*



## Religious Practice from 2010 to 2020

How has the commitment to religious practices fared over the last 10 years or so? Our survey from 2010 asked the same questions regarding attendance, Bible reading, and the importance of faith. The questions on prayer and giving were different. However, we can get some good comparison data looking at the three common questions.

In the figure at right we use two terms, 2010 Nominal and 2010 Committed, which are defined below. The 2010 Nominal attend monthly plus, read the Bible weekly plus, and agree that their faith is significant in their daily lives. The 2010 Committed attend **more than** monthly, read the Bible weekly plus, and **strongly agree** that their faith is significant in their daily lives.

The first category shown does not include church attendance. One unknown with the attendance question taken during the Covid-19 pandemic is that some respondents may have replied taking the pandemic into consideration and while other respondents considered normal times. We see a slightly greater drop-off between the first category and the 2010 Nominal category which could be associated with this issue. However, the difference is not large enough to impact the overall conclusions.

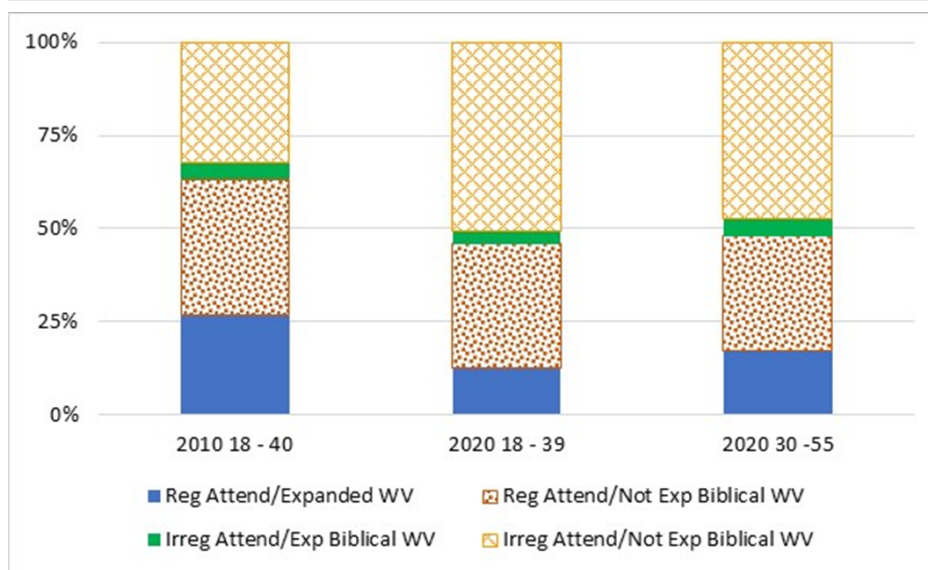
What we see is that the drop-off in the 2010 Nominal category is from 44% to 28% and the drop-off in the 2010 Committed category is down one half from 40% to 20%. These numbers reflect an astounding drop in the importance that Born Again Christians place on these simple religious activities.

**Combining Worldview and Church Attendance** (a key metric from our earlier book[\[1\]](#))

In our prior study of Born-Again Christians, one of the key divisions we used in looking at religious practices, religious beliefs and cultural practices was a combination of Biblical

Worldview and Church Attendance. We found that those Born-Again Christians with a Biblical Worldview and regular church attendance (twice a month or more), were much more likely to demonstrate biblical religious practices, beliefs, and cultural practices. So, we wanted to compare those results with the findings from our new survey.

*Figure 8 Church Attendance and Expanded Biblical Worldview*



The figure on the left compares the findings from 2010 with those from 2020 using the more stringent Expanded Biblical Worldview. The values shown are the percent of Born-Again Christians (so

all columns add up to 100% even though the percentage of Born Again Christians is less in 2020). Two age ranges are used in 2020; the first one is basically the same age range used in 2010 (18 – 39) and the second age range (30 – 55) is very close to the age range of the 2010 survey aged by the ten years that have gone by.

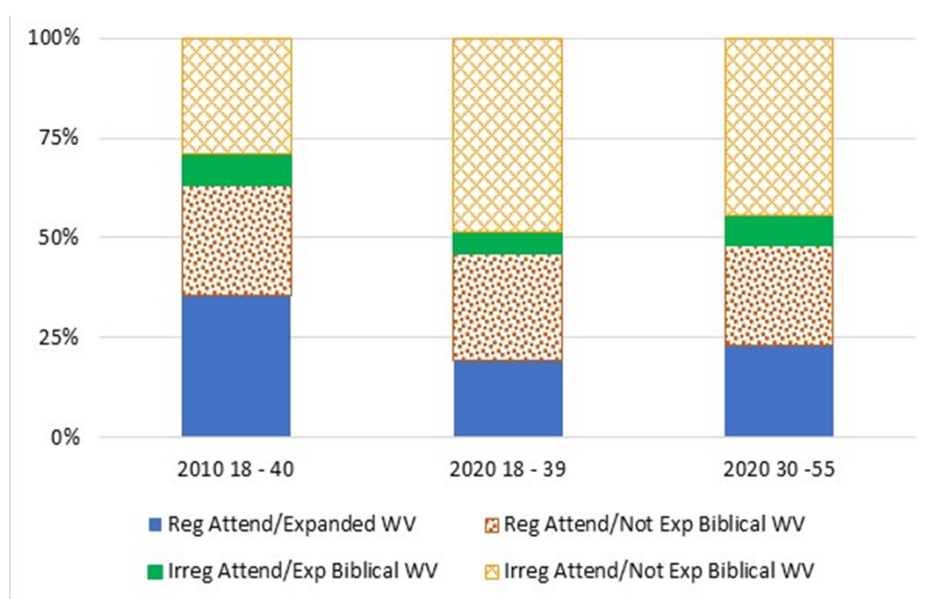
Looking at those with regular attendance and an Expanded Biblical Worldview we see a significant reduction among 18- to 29-year-olds in 2020 (27% down to 13%) with a lesser reduction among 30- to 55-year-olds down to 17%. The percentage of regular attenders without an Expanded Biblical Worldview has remained relatively constant. But of course, that does not mean that the people who stopped attending were those with an Expanded Biblical Worldview. It could be that many without it stopped attending while some decided that they did not believe all of the positions in the worldview but kept attending on a

regular basis.

The area showing a startling high level of growth are those attending monthly or less who do not hold to an Expanded Biblical Worldview. This is the square that ten years ago we wanted to drive down to a smaller number. Instead, it has grown by about 18% (from 32% to 50%).

Now let's examine the same chart using a Basic Biblical Worldview. We see nearly the same features as discussed above. A significant drop is shown in those with regular attendance and a Basic Biblical Worldview coupled with a significant increase in those with irregular attendance and no Basic Biblical Worldview.

*Figure 9 Church Attendance and Basic Biblical Worldview among Born Again Christians in 2010 and 2020*



## Ultimate Purpose for Living

We wanted to explore what American young adults thought they were living their lives for. So we asked, "Which statement comes closest to describing your ultimate primary purpose for living?" The choices to select from were:

1. To be a good person and make others happy.
2. To serve God by living a life which proclaims Christ's grace.
3. To make it through each day with integrity.

4. To live at peace with all.

5. To enjoy the best life has to offer, e.g. success, money, travel.

6. To love my family and raise loving, productive children.

Most of these answers sound like good purposes for life. But only one of them extends into eternity and recognizes our Creator and his “desire for all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”[\[2\]](#) The answers to this question help identify those who are living their life as eternal beings rather than as temporal beings.

The results are charted in the graph to the left. As shown, just over half of Born Again Christians profess an eternal perspective. This means almost half do not, with most of those

selecting a purpose that focuses on good behaviors in their personal life.

Every other religious group has very few that selected an eternal perspective as their ultimate purpose for living. Around forty to fifty percent of the other groups selects a purpose reflecting good behaviors.

It is interesting that only a small percentage of each group selected the family focused purpose for living. I would like to know if that would have been a larger number say fifty years ago.

*Figure 24 My Ultimate Purpose for Living  
Americans 18 through 39*

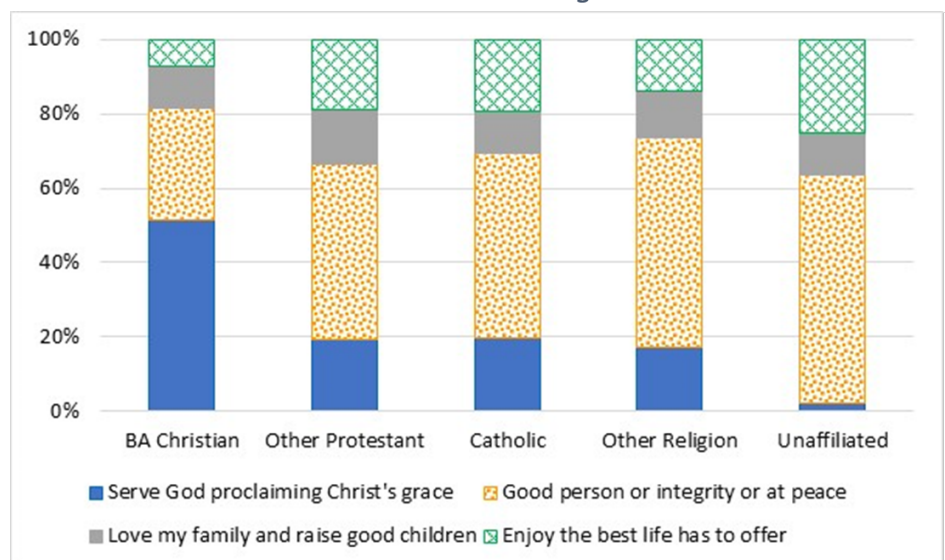
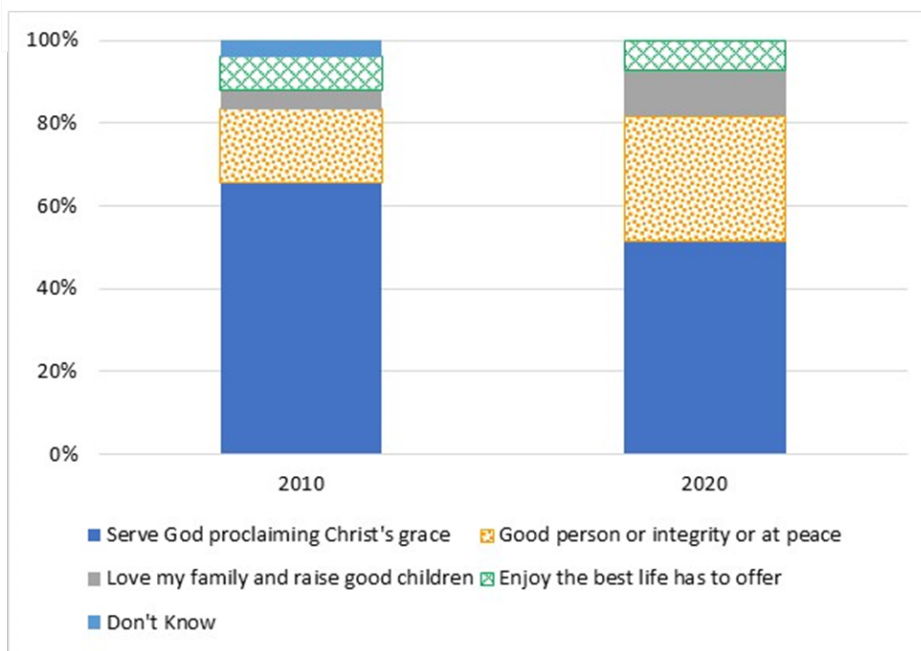


Figure 25 My Ultimate Purpose for Living: 2010 and 2020  
Born Again Christians 18 through 39



Finally, note this is another question that highlights the stark difference between the Unaffiliated and Born Again Protestants. We see that 57% of Born Again Protestants selected the eternal answer

while only 2% of the Unaffiliated did the same. This result is a clear indicator that the Unaffiliated do not include a lot of Christians who do not want to affiliate with a particular Christian group.

For Born Again Christians, we can compare data from our 2010 survey with the 2020 survey as shown in the figure. The 2010 survey had the same question as the 2020 survey, but it had more answers to choose from. For example, there were three answers that had an eternal perspective: *to serve God and live out His will for my life, to lead others to salvation in Jesus Christ, to praise and glorify God*. These three answers were grouped together to align with the 2020 answer: *To serve God by living a life which proclaims Christ's grace*.

As you can see the percentage of Born Again Christians who included God in their ultimate purpose for living dropped from 66% in 2010 to 51% in 2020, a significant drop. It appears that in 2020 people who did not name God in their answer opted to pick an admirable answer focused on themselves.

## Relationship to a Basic Biblical Worldview

Consider the question of how many Born Again Christians accept a Basic Biblical Worldview and an eternal perspective on their ultimate purpose. We find that 88% of those with a Basic Biblical Worldview selected an ultimate purpose proclaiming God's grace. Conversely, 43% of those selecting an ultimate purpose proclaiming God's grace affirmed a Basic Biblical Worldview for their life (as compared with 25% for Born Again Christians as a whole). Thus, we find a fairly strong correlation between a biblical worldview and an eternal ultimate purpose for life.

## Acceptance or Tolerance

Some of the key findings on this topic summarized at the beginning of this report are repeated below prior to going into the details.

Looking at Born Again Christians ages 18 through 39, we find:

- Only about one quarter (27%) of them disagree with the statement “. . . it is important to let people know that I affirm as true (at least for them) their religious beliefs and practices.”
- At the same time, almost two thirds (65%) agree that tolerance is best defined as “Treating with respect people with ideas or actions that you believe to be wrong or misguided.”
- This is another topic where we see somewhat conflicting results. Apparently, many Born Again Christian young adults think that you cannot believe someone is “wrong or misguided” when it comes to religion. Or they believe that “Treating with respect” means “affirming as true (at least for them)”.

According to the Collins Dictionary, “Tolerance is the quality

of allowing other people to say and do what they like, even if you do not agree with or approve of it.”[\[3\]](#) In today’s culture, we find two conflicting understandings of the meaning of tolerance. One, following the idea of the dictionary meaning is, “treating with respect people with ideas or actions that you believe to be wrong or misguided.” The second one influenced by postmodern philosophy and popularized by the secular media, is “valuing human beings equally and affirming their ideas as right for them.” The second definition basically assumes that there are no absolute truths in our existence and therefore we have no basis to disagree with what someone else believes.

Which of these definitions holds sway among our population today?

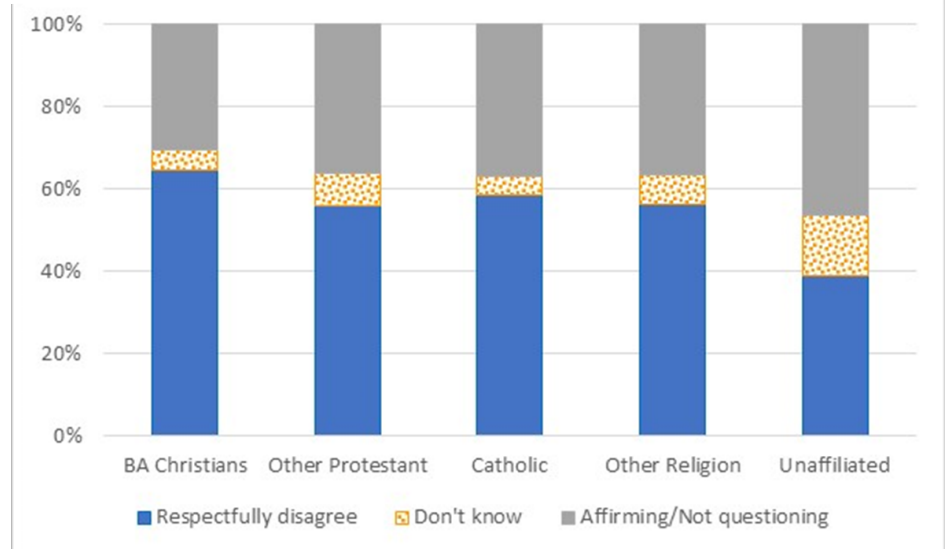
To explore this question, we asked two different questions dealing with how to treat those who have a different religious viewpoint. The first question we asked on this topic is “What does Tolerance mean to you?” The respondents chose from four possible answers:

1. Treating with respect people with ideas or actions that you believe to be wrong or misguided.
2. Not questioning another person’s moral decisions.
3. Valuing human beings equally and affirming their ideas as right for them.
4. Don’t know.

This question gives us information on how people interpret the word, not whether they apply tolerance in their dealings with others.

Figure 1 How 18 - 39 Year Old Americans Define Tolerance

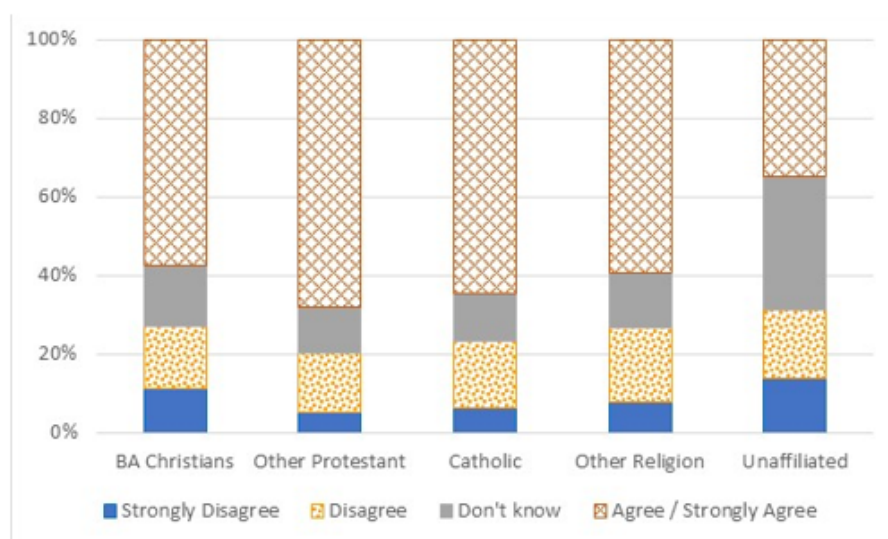
In figure 1, we see how the definitions are distributed. Almost two thirds (65%) of young adult, Born Again Christians selected a classic definition of tolerance.



As shown, over 50% of the other religious groups also selected a classic definition. But as one can see from the graph, a significant number of young adult Americans were selecting a different definition with the portions ranging from one third to almost one half of each religious group. So, it appears that a majority of the population is hanging onto the classic definition, but definitions which question the reality of absolute truths have a strong following.

Now let's look at how people apply tolerance in the area of religious beliefs. Are they quick to say, "I will respect you and your beliefs even though I believe them to be wrong"? Or are they going to follow the trend saying, "They may well be true for you."

*Figure 2 Should I tell others I affirm as true their religious beliefs  
18 – 39 Americans*



To find out, we asked another question: “When discussing religious matters, I feel that it is important to let people know that I affirm as true (at least for them) their religious beliefs

and practices,” with the answer ranging from Agree Strongly to Disagree Strongly. As an evangelical Christian, I would answer that I Disagree Strongly with that statement. I want them to know that I respect them as a person, but I believe I have been shown the absolutely true answer as to how man can be reconciled to our creator God. But somehow, when asked in this manner, Born Again Christians just don’t seem to get the importance of disagreeing as shown in Figure 1.

As shown in the figure, only about one in four (27%) Born Again Christians disagree with the statement. This level tracks closely with the rest of the population. If one is agreeing with the statement, one is either saying in religion what’s not true for me can be true for you, or there are multiple religions that are the truth, or we should lie to others about the absolute truth of Christianity when discussing religion with them. All three of those options are clearly countered by the Bible which tells us that Jesus Christ is the source of absolute truth, that there is only one way to heaven, and that lying about the truth is against the nature of God.

The disconnect between the definition of tolerance and

applying tolerance in our interactions with other religions is striking. As noted in the initial summary, apparently many Born Again Christian young adults think that you cannot believe someone is “wrong or misguided” when it comes to religion. Or they believe that “Treating with respect” means “affirming as true (at least for them).” We don’t have data to distinguish between these two options, but I suspect that both of them contribute to the current reluctance to lift up Jesus as God’s one true answer to the fundamental problem of mankind.

### Notes

1. Stephen Cable, Cultural Captives: The Beliefs and Behaviors of American Young Adults, 2012
2. 1 Timothy 2:4
3. Collins English Dictionary, [Tolerance definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary \(collinsdictionary.com\)](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/en/english-american/dictionary/tolerance)

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# Introducing Probe’s New Survey: Religious Views and Practices 2020

*The results are in from Probe’s newest assessment of the state of biblical beliefs in America 2020, and the news is not good.*

Our 2020 survey reveals a striking decline in evangelical religious beliefs and practices over the last ten years. From a biblical worldview to doctrinal beliefs and pluralism to the application of biblical teaching to sexual mores, the number of Americans applying biblical teaching to their thinking has

dropped significantly over this period. Unfortunately, the greatest level of decline is found among Born Again Protestants.

Our previous survey, the 2010 *Probe Culturally Captive Christians* survey<sup>{1}</sup>, was limited to Born Again Americans' ages 18 through 40. This survey of 817 people was focused on obtaining a deeper understanding of the beliefs and behaviors of young adult, Born Again Christian Americans.

Our new 2020 survey looks at Americans from 18 through 55 from all religious persuasions. Although still focused on looking at religious beliefs and attitudes toward cultural behaviors, we expanded the scope, surveying 3,106 Americans ages 18 through 55. Among those responses, there are 717 who are Born Again<sup>{2}</sup>, allowing us to make meaningful comparisons with our 2010 results while also comparing the beliefs of Born Again Christians with those of other religious persuasions.

Two questions were used in both surveys to categorize people as Born Again<sup>{3}</sup>. Those questions are:

1. Have you ever made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in your life today? **Answer: YES**
2. What best describes your belief about what will happen to you after you die? **Answer:  
I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.**

In our 2020 survey, we delve into what Americans believe regarding biblical worldview, basic biblical doctrine, pluralism and tolerance, religious practices, applications of religious beliefs to cultural issues, and more. In this first release, we lay the groundwork by explaining the trends in religious affiliation over time using a number of different surveys. Then we look deeper, examining how many of those of each religious faith group adhered to a biblical worldview in 2010 and now in 2020.

# Laying the Groundwork: American Religious Affiliations Over Time

How have the religious affiliations of American young adults changed over the years? We have examined data over the last fifty years<sup>{4}</sup> to answer this question. From 1972 through the early 1990's, the portion of the population affiliated with each major religious group stayed fairly constant. But since then, there have been significant changes. As an example, looking at data from the General Social Survey (GSS)<sup>{5}</sup> surveys of 1988, 1998, 2010, and 2018 and our 2020 Religious Views survey, we see dramatic changes as shown in Figure 1. Note that the GSS survey asks, "Have you ever had a "born again" experience?" rather than the two questions used in the Probe surveys (see above). Looking at the chart it appears that the question used in the GSS surveys is answered yes more often than the two questions used by Probe.

As shown, the most dramatic change is the increase in the percentage of those who **do not** select a Christian affiliation (i.e., Other Religion and Unaffiliated). Looking at GSS data for those age 18–29, the percentage has grown from 20% of the population in 1988 to over 45% of the population in 2018. Most of this growth is in the number of Unaffiliated (those who select Atheist, Agnostic or Nothing in Particular). In fact, those from other religious faiths<sup>{6}</sup> grew from 7% to 10% over this time period while **the Unaffiliated almost tripled** from 13% to 35% of the population.

The Pew Research data (not shown in the graph) shows an even greater increase, growing from 27% in 1996 to 59% in 2020. The Probe data from 2020 tracks the GSS data, supporting the overall growth trend shown in the figure.

Looking at the Unaffiliated for the 30–39 age group, we see the same growth trend growing from 9% to 30%. Comparing the 18–29 data with the 30–39 data, we can determine that more

people are transitioning to Unaffiliated as they mature. For example, we see that 26% of those in their twenties were Unaffiliated in 2010, growing to 30% of those in their thirties in 2018. This result means that more of the people in their twenties became Unaffiliated in their thirties. This result runs directly counter to the supposition of many that the growth in Unaffiliated will dissipate as young adults age and return to churches to raise their families.[\[7\]](#)

Considering the other religions shown in Figure 1, we see that the group seeing the greatest decline is Other Protestants, i.e. Protestants who did not profess to being born again. As shown, this group dropped by half (from 26% down to 13%) from 1988 to 2018. Similarly, those professing to be Catholics dropped by one quarter (from 24% to 18%) over the same time period.

In the GSS data, Born Again Protestants are remaining a relatively constant percent of the population. There has been a steady decline in those ages 18–29, but those in their thirties have not declined over this time period. This data appears to indicate that some young adults in their late twenties and early thirties are undergoing a “born again” experience.

However, while Born Again Protestants have remained stable, those who say they are affiliated with an Evangelical church have begun to decline somewhat. Pew Research surveys[\[8\]](#) of at least 10,000 American adults do show a decline in young adult Evangelicals from 28% in 2007 to 25% in 2014 to 20% in 2019.

## **Is a Christian Biblical Worldview Common Among Young Americans?**

In assessing the worldview of people, we were not able to sit down and talk to them to fully understand their worldview. So, our 2010 and 2020 surveys include specific questions which help us identify someone with a Christian biblical worldview.

A set of four questions is used to assess what we call a Basic Biblical Worldview. Two additional questions are added to get to a fuller assessment first used by the Barna Group. We use the six questions together to assess what we call an Expanded Biblical Worldview. The questions are as follows:

### **Basic Biblical Worldview**

1. Which of the following descriptions comes closest to what you personally believe to be true about God: **God is the all-powerful, all knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.**[\[9\]](#)
2. The Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings: **Strongly Agree**
3. If a person is generally good enough or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven: **Disagree Strongly**
4. When He lived on earth, Jesus Christ committed sins like other people: **Disagree Strongly**

### **Additional Beliefs for an Expanded Biblical Worldview**

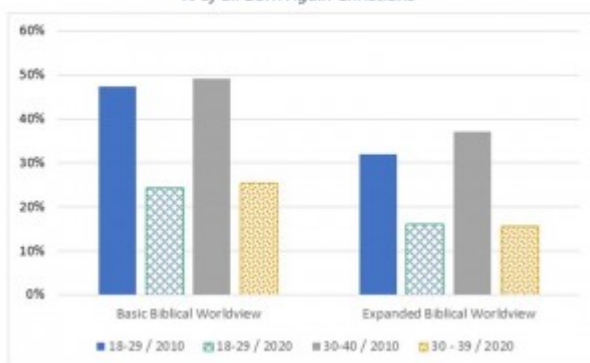
5. The devil or Satan is not a real being, but is a symbol of evil: **Disagree Strongly**
6. Some people believe there are moral truths (such as murder is always wrong) that are true for everyone, everywhere and for all time. Others believe that moral truth always depends upon circumstances. Do you believe there are moral truths that are unchanging, or does moral truth always depend upon circumstances: **There are moral truths that are true for everyone, everywhere and for all time.**

**First, how do different Christian groups respond to these questions?** In Figure 4, we show the percentage of each group in 2020 who have either a Basic Biblical Worldview or an Expanded Biblical Worldview. We use three groups of

affiliations: Born Again Christians, Other Protestants, and Catholics.<sup>{10}</sup> On the left half of the chart, we indicate the percentage with a Basic Biblical Worldview by affiliation and age group. Those in the Born Again Christian group are at about 25% (about 1 out of 4) for those under the age of 40 and then jump up to 35% (about 1 out of 3) for those between 40 and 55. For those in the Other Protestant group, much less than 10% (1 out of 10) possess a Basic Biblical Worldview. Almost no Catholics possess a Basic Biblical Worldview. For both the Other Protestant group and the Catholics, the concept the vast majority do not agree with is that you cannot earn your way to heaven via good works. The other three questions are also much lower for Other Protestants and Catholics than for Born Again Christians.

Adding in the questions on Satan and absolutes for an Expanded Biblical Worldview, we see each group drop significantly. The Born Again Christian group runs about 15% below age 40 and 25% (or 1 in 4) from 40 to 55. The other two groups drop from almost none to barely any.

Figure 5 Born Again Christian Worldview Beliefs Across 10 Years  
% of all Born Again Christians



Now let's compare these 2020 results with the results from our 2010 survey. Figure 5 shows the results across this decade for Born Again Christians looking at the percent who agree with the worldview answers above. As shown, there has been a dramatic drop in both the

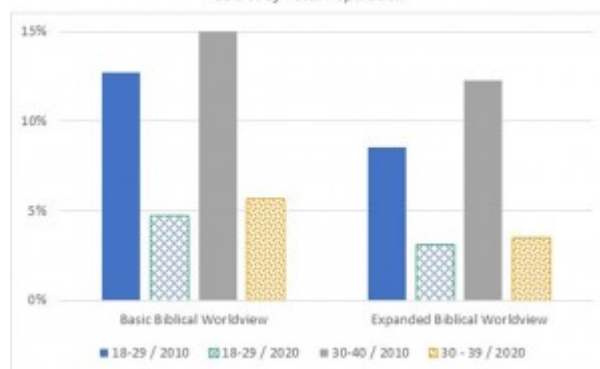
Basic Biblical Worldview and the Expanded Biblical Worldview.

If we compare the 18–29 result from 2010 with the 30–39 result from 2020 (i.e., the same age cohort 10 years later), we see a drop from 47% to 25% for the Basic Biblical Worldview and from 32% to 16% for the Expanded Biblical Worldview. **So, the percentage of Born Again Christians with a Biblical Worldview (of either type) has been cut in half over the last decade.**

This result is a startling degradation in worldview beliefs of Born Again Christians over just 10 years.

However, because the percent of the population who profess to being born again has dropped over the last ten years as well, the situation is even worse. We need to look at the percent of Americans of a particular age range who hold to a Biblical Worldview. Those results are

Figure 6 Born Again Christian Worldview Beliefs Across 10 Years as a % of Total Population



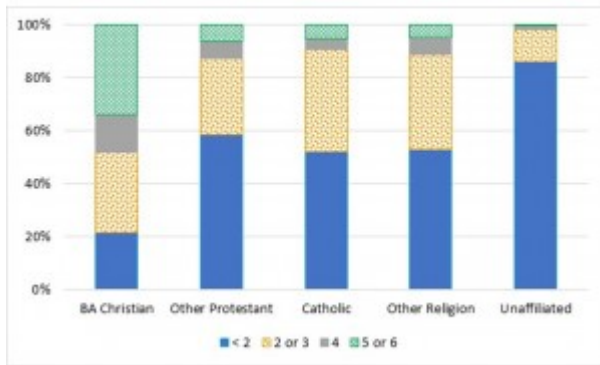
shown in Figure 6. Once again, comparing the 18–29 age group from 2010 with the same age group ten years later now 30–39, we find an even greater drop off. For the Basic Biblical Worldview, we see a drop off from 13% of the population down to 6%. For the Expanded Biblical Worldview, the decline is from 9% down to just over 3% (a drop off of two thirds).

The drop off seen over this ten-year period is more than dramatic and extremely discouraging. In 2010, we had about 10% of the population modeling an active biblical worldview. Although small, 10% of the population means that most people would know one of these committed Christians. At between 6% and 3%, the odds of impacting a significant number of Americans are certainly reduced.

However, we cannot forget that the percent of biblical worldview Christians in the Roman Empire in AD 60 was much less than 1% of the population. Three hundred years later virtually the entire empire was at least nominally Christian. If we will commit ourselves to “proclaiming the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light,”[\[11\]](#) God will bring revival to our land.

**Second, how do various religious groups stack up against these questions?**

Figure 7 Number of Biblical Worldview Topics Affirmed by Americans ages 18 - 39



Rather than look at the two biblical worldview levels discussed above, we will look at how many of the six biblical worldview questions they answered were consistent with a biblical worldview. In the chart, we look at 18- to 39-year-old individuals grouped by

religious affiliation and map what portion answered less than two of the questions biblically, two or three, four, or more than four (i.e., five or six).

You can see that there are three distinct patterns. First, Born Again Christians where almost half of them answered four or more questions from a biblical perspective (the top two sections of each bar). Then, we see Other Protestants, Catholics{12}, and Other Religions{13} chart about the same, with over half answering zero or one and very few answering more than three.

Finally, we see that the Unaffiliated have over 85% who answer zero or one. This result is one of many we have identified over the years, clearly showing that the Unaffiliated are not active Christians who do not want to affiliate with a particular group. Some have suggested this possibility, but the data does not support that hopeful concept.

### Third, what do they say about God and His relationship to the world?

People have many different views of God or gods in this life. In this chart, we look at how 18-to 39-year old respondents define God across the different religious affiliations used in the prior chart. Our respondents were asked: Which of the following descriptions comes closest to what you personally believe to be true about God? They were given the following answers to choose from (without the titles).

1. **God Rules**: God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.
2. **Impersonal Force**: God refers to the total realization of personal human potential OR God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach.
3. **Deism**: God created but is no longer involved with the world today.
4. **Many gods**: There are many gods, each with their different power and authority.
5. **No God**: There is no such thing as God.
6. **Don't Know**: Don't know

Once again, the answers fall into three groups. A vast majority of Born Again Christians (~80%) believe in a creator God who is still active in the world today. It is somewhat surprising that over 20% ascribe to a different view of God. The second group consists of Other Protestants who do not claim to be born again, Catholics and Other Religions. These groups are remarkably similar in their responses with around 40% who believe in an active, creator God. So, the remaining 60% have a different view. The third group are the Unaffiliated with less than 10% professing belief in an active, creator God. Over 50% believe in no God or they just don't know. **Overall, only about one third of Americans 55 and under believe in an active, creator God.** We must admit that **America is not a Judeo-Christian nation** as the belief in God is central to Judeo-Christian views. From an evangelistic viewpoint, one needs to be prepared to explain why someone should believe in a creator God. The Probe Ministries website, [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org), is an excellent place to explore the topic.<sup>{14}</sup>

## Summary

This document begins the process of understanding the status

and trends of religious beliefs and behaviors in the America of this third decade of the twenty first century. Several findings addressed above are worth highlighting in summary.

- Unaffiliated Americans continue their growth toward one half of the population which began before the turn of this century. The current number of young adults (under the age of 40) who are **unaffiliated ranges between one third and one half of our population.**
- The percentage of young adult Americans who claim to be Born Again Protestants has declined slightly among the youngest group (18–29) but has remained fairly constant during this century.
- Other Protestants and Catholics have seen marked declines during this century. The percentage of **young adult Other Protestants has dropped by one half** (from about one quarter of the population to about one eighth) since 1988.
- Born Again Christians are the only group to have a significant number of adherents who profess to having a Basic Biblical Worldview. This worldview is measured by the answers to four very basic questions at the heart of Christian doctrine. Even among this group, **only about one in four (25%) of them hold to a Basic Biblical Worldview.**
- Over the last ten years, the number of young adult (18–39) Born Again Christians with **a Basic Biblical Worldview has dropped by two thirds** from almost 15% of the population down to about 5%. This is a remarkable and devastating drop in one decade.
- Just under one half of Born Again Christians agree with more than three of the six worldview questions. Amongst other Christian groups and the population as a whole less than one in ten do so.
- **Overall, only about one third of Americans 55 and under**

## believe in an active, creator God.

In our next release, we will look at how American young adults

- react to the doctrine of Jesus Christ,
- believe that Jesus is the only path to heaven, and
- have a classic view of tolerance.

In the meantime, be in prayer about what you can do in your sphere of influence to stem the trends listed above.

## Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of the outcomes of our 2010 survey and other surveys from that decade, go to our book [\*Cultural Captives: The Beliefs and Behavior of American Young Adults\*](#).
2. The 717 respondents equated to 747 equivalent people when weighted to adjust for differences between those surveyed and the distribution of gender, ethnicity, ages, and location as given by the United States Census Bureau.
3. Our 2010 survey was facilitated by the Barna Group and I would presume they commonly use these two questions in other surveys to identify born again Christians.
4. We have looked at religious affiliation from Pew Research, GSS, PALS, Barna Group and others.
5. General Social Survey data was downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the National Opinion Research Center.
6. Note that the Other Religions category includes Christian cults (e.g. Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses), Jews, and other world religions.
7. In future releases, we will also see that the Unaffiliated are very unlikely to hold to basic Christian beliefs.
8. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014, Religious Knowledge Survey 2019 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for

the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

9. Other answers to select from: God created but is no longer involved with the world today; God refers to the total realization of personal human potential; there are many gods, each with their different power and authority; God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach; there is no such thing as God; and don't know.

10. Born Again Christians include Catholics who answered the born again questions to allow comparison with the 2010 survey but in the Catholic category we include all Catholics including those who are born again.

11. 1 Peter 2:9

12. Catholics here include about 20% who profess to be born again. That subset is included in both the BA Christian column and the Catholic column in Figure 7 and Figure 8.

13. One of the reasons that Other Religions include some that answer more than three worldview questions is that Mormons and other Christian cults are included in that category.

14. Articles on our website addressing this topic include [Evidence for God's Existence](#), [There is a God](#), [Does God Exist: A Christian Argument from Non-biblical Sources](#), [The Impotence of Darwinism](#), [Darwinism: A Teetering House of Cards](#), and many others.

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## What is Art, Anyway?

*When my dear friend Laura Helms told me about integrating her biblical worldview with how she teaches high school art, I was*

*fascinated and asked her to write about her approach.*



For the last nine years I have had the privilege of teaching visual arts in the public school system here in Texas. Each year I start off with one question on the board: "What is art?" Students give a wide range of answers but they usually land somewhere near the phrase "art can be whatever you want it to be."

This year I laid out an assortment of objects ranging from pottery to paintings to piles of trash that I pulled from the garbage can that morning. Through many giggles and lots of questions, many of the students still firmly asserted that all of these items could be considered "art." While you may agree or disagree with the used candy wrapper being called "art," art is a form of visual communication that encompasses the values and beliefs of the maker. Effective art communicates those beliefs clearly to the viewer. And I believe good art communicates truth to the viewer.

I don't get upset when my students hold the candy wrapper up as "art." I don't get upset because I know why they think that way. Matthew 6:22-23 says, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" My primary goal as an art teacher is to help students learn how to see clearly. The goal is to teach them to look for truth—objective truth rather than subjective truth.

Art history is a reflection of what cultures believe about

truth. The shift in western art movements closely correlates to changes in public value systems. Nietzsche famously wrote "God is dead" in the late 1800s. After two world wars, the rise of Nihilism in the West, and the elevation of reactionary self-determination supported by the growing popularity of psychology, artistic thought turned inward for answers to the human experience. Artists looked at a world going up in flames and thought to themselves, *Maybe it is true. Maybe I am on my own and this is all there is to life.* Artists created art in their own image, validating their own truths and personal beliefs. When our eyes do not work, we do not see clearly. It is not shocking, but it is heartbreaking. When we exchange the truth of God for a lie (Romans 1:25), we hope to find life in things that cannot give us life.

I want to briefly share with you the journey my students take each year. Together we first identify our beliefs. What do you think the definition of art really is? What is the purpose of art? How do you know if art is good art? We start by identifying what we believe about "art."

Next, we look at how we came to hold those beliefs. Together we look at history, philosophy and the evolution of Western thought. We talk about wars and Darwin, about appropriation and human rights. We look at the change in technology and how it influenced human interaction. We talk about religion and worldviews. We pinpoint large ideological shifts that show up in history. Did you know that the phrase "art is about personal expression" would have been laughed at before 1900? And the phrase "art can be what I want it to be" didn't show up in public thought until the 1960s. As a class, we look at these origins and take note of how they have shaped our own thoughts and beliefs about art.

Once students can articulate what they believe about art and the origins of those beliefs, we take a second look. How do you know your beliefs are true? How has your understanding of art changed after your studies? Students think they are profound when they make grandiose statements like “art is whatever I want it to be.” The goal isn’t to change their beliefs. The goal is to teach them to see clearly.



I think we all need to go to art class. At our core, none of us want to be fools, trusting in false hopes. We all desire to see truth. It is my goal to help them learn how to seek it and find it. When was the last time you asked yourself, “How do I know this to be true?”

Now go make some good, weird art.

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/what-is-art-anyway/](https://blogs.bible.org/what-is-art-anyway/)  
on April 30, 2019.

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## A Pilgrim's Progress: Suffering in the Life of John

# Bunyan – A Christian View of Suffering

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn considers the lessons presented by the life and writings of the famous author of The Pilgrim's Progress to give each of us a better understanding of the role of suffering in the lives of followers of Christ.*

## A Suffering Pilgrim

John Bunyan is known to most people today as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a book he began writing in prison. It tells the story of "Christian," who makes his way from the "City of Destruction" (which represents this world) to the "Celestial City" (which represents Heaven). It's been described as "perhaps the world's best-selling book" (after the Bible), and has been "translated into over 200 languages."[\[1\]](#) Written in the form of an allegory, it essentially relates the story of Bunyan's own Christian journey.[\[2\]](#) And just as *his* life was full of trials and suffering, so also "Christian" must face many hardships and difficulties as well.



Bunyan was born in England in 1628 at a time of great political and religious unrest. In 1644, at just fifteen years old, both his mother and sister died within a month of each other. Later that year, "when Bunyan had turned sixteen, he was drafted into the Parliamentary Army and for about two years was taken from his home for military service."[\[3\]](#) He married in 1648, at about the age of twenty, but his wife died just ten years later, leaving him with four children, the oldest of whom was blind. He married again the following year, in 1659, but incredibly, just one year after this, "Bunyan was arrested and put in prison."[\[4\]](#) His wife, who was pregnant at the time, suffered a miscarriage, probably because of the

added stress which this ordeal created. She was then left to care for Bunyan's four children while he spent the next twelve years in jail.{5}

As you can see, Bunyan was no stranger to suffering. Indeed, he had an intimate, firsthand acquaintance with heartache, trials, and difficulties. But what crimes had he committed to be cast into prison? Essentially, the charges against him were two: first, "he refused to attend the services of the Established church" of England; and second, he "preached to unlawful assemblies." {6} You see, Bunyan had converted to Christianity during his first marriage and had become a powerful and respected preacher. But in the volatile political and religious climate of that day, the freedom of Nonconformist preachers like Bunyan eventually came to an end. And when it did, he was arrested and put in prison.

In the remainder of this article we'll look at some of the trials this man endured, how he responded to them, and what they might teach us as we each make our own spiritual journey.

## The Pilgrim's Conversion

*The Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the best-selling Christian books of all time. But as Bunyan tells us in another of his books, the autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, before becoming a Christian he had few equals in "cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God." Indeed, prior to his marriage, he says he was "the very ring-leader of all the youth . . . into all manner of vice and ungodliness." {7}

Bunyan's young wife had a very godly father. When he died, he left her two books which she brought into her marriage: *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*. According to Bunyan, although these books did not awaken him to his "sad and sinful state," they nevertheless did arouse

within him “some desires to religion.”[{8}](#) One of the practical effects of these new desires was Bunyan’s regular attendance at a local church.

Soon Bunyan also began to read the Bible. He then came under such powerful conviction of sin that he scarcely knew what to do. “Sin and corruption,” he wrote, “would as naturally bubble out of my heart, as water would bubble out of a fountain. . . I thought none but the devil himself could equalize me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind.”[{9}](#) Bunyan was plunged into a state of despair over the greatness of his sin which, he tell us, “continued a long while, even for some years together.”[{10}](#)

Eventually, after years of spiritual and emotional agony, Bunyan described “what seemed to be the decisive moment.”[{11}](#) He was heading into the field one day when suddenly this sentence broke in upon his mind: “Thy righteousness is in heaven.” At this, he says, “I . . . saw . . . that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse: for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, *the same yesterday, and today, and for ever* (Heb. 13:8).” “Now,” he said, “did my chains fall off my legs indeed . . . my temptations also fled away . . . now went I . . . home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God.”[{12}](#)

After years of spiritual anguish, Bunyan had been set free by the grace of God from some of his worst fears and torments. But as we’ll see, this was not to be the end of his experience with suffering. As one set of trials was ending, another was soon to begin.

## **The Pilgrim’s Imprisonment**

According to Bunyan, five or six years after his conversion, in about the year 1655, some of the believers in his local

congregation began entreating him “to speak a word of exhortation unto them.”[{13}](#) Although initially hesitant, Bunyan agreed to their request “and suddenly a great preacher was discovered.”[{14}](#) Apparently, word spread quickly through the English countryside. According to one author, “In the days of toleration, a day’s notice would get a crowd of 1,200 to hear him preach at 7 o’clock in the morning on a weekday.”[{15}](#)

Unfortunately, it was not to last. In 1660, the same year in which Charles II was brought home as king in the Restoration of the Monarchy, John Bunyan was arrested and imprisoned “for preaching without state approval.”[{16}](#) Officially, he was charged with being in violation of the Elizabethan Conventicle Act of 1593. According to this Act, anyone found guilty of “abstaining from coming to church to hear divine service, and . . . being a common upholder of several unlawful meetings . . . could be held without bail until he or she submitted to the authority of the Anglican church.”[{17}](#) As a Nonconformist preacher, this Act applied to men like Bunyan.

What’s interesting, however, is that Bunyan could have gone free at any time, so long as he agreed to give up preaching. But as he was firmly persuaded that he had been called by God to this ministry, he was completely unwilling to abandon his calling. He thus spent the next twelve years in prison, largely cut off from his wife, children, friends, and church.

I say “largely cut off” for, strange as it may seem, it appears that Bunyan was occasionally let out “to see his family or make brief trips.”[{18}](#) Of course, this was the exception and not the rule. Nevertheless, by “the standards of the seventeenth century the conditions in which he was held were not particularly brutal.”[{19}](#) On the other hand, Bunyan was largely fortunate in this respect: “hundreds of Dissenters died in prison, and many more came out with their health broken by foul, over-crowded conditions.”[{20}](#)

Although these qualifications must be admitted, we must never

lose sight of the fact that Bunyan was willing to endure twelve long years of this suffering, rather than agree to give up preaching. And thankfully, as we'll see, God brought a great deal of good out of His faithful servant's suffering.

## The Pilgrim's Writings

Most people today know John Bunyan as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but this is just one of many works written by the metal-worker turned minister. His first book was written in 1656, when he was twenty-eight years old. But by the time of his death, some thirty-two years later, he had authored fifty-seven more! [{21}](#) John Piper notes:

*The variety in these books was remarkable: books dealing with controversies (like those concerning the Quakers . . . justification and baptism), collections of poems, children's literature, and allegory (like The Holy War and The Life and Death of Mr. Badman). But the vast majority were practical . . . expositions of Scripture built from sermons for the sake of . . . helping Christian pilgrims make their way successfully to heaven.* [{22}](#)

What's especially astonishing about the size and variety of Bunyan's literary legacy is that it came from a man with almost no formal education. As a child Bunyan had been taught to read and write, but nothing more. He had no university or seminary degrees in which to boast. And yet his diligent study of the Bible, born mainly out of a burning desire to find peace with God, made Bunyan mighty in the Scriptures. Indeed the Bible, more than any other book, would be the primary influence upon his many writings. So evident was this to Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth century Baptist preacher, that he once wrote of Bunyan:

*He had studied our Authorized Version . . . till his whole being was saturated with Scripture; and though his writings*

*are . . . full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress—that sweetest of all prose poems—without continually making us feel and say, “Why, this man is a living Bible!” Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.*[{23}](#)

Not even his suffering in prison could dampen Bunyan's enthusiasm for the Word of God or for writing. Indeed, if anything, it increased it. Some of his best-known works were written from the confines of a prison cell. These include *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, written during his first imprisonment, as well as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, apparently completed during a second, briefer period of imprisonment in 1677.[{24}](#) Bunyan's writings are surely one of his greatest gifts to the church.

## **Lessons from a Suffering Pilgrim**

A thoughtful examination of John Bunyan's reflections on the purpose and value of suffering can give us much wisdom in how best to deal with it in our own lives. Near the end of his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, he appended a brief account of his imprisonment in the Bedford jail. In it, he tells of how he tried to prepare himself for imprisonment, and possibly even death, when he realized that he might soon be called upon to suffer for the cause of Christ. Naturally, as one might well expect, one of the things he did was pray. He was particularly concerned to ask God for the strength to patiently endure his imprisonment, even with an attitude of joy (Col. 1:11).[{25}](#)

However, it's the second thing he says that I find especially interesting and helpful. He reflects on the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:9: “[W]e had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” (NASB). Commenting

on this verse, he then makes the following two observations:

*By this scripture I was made to see that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. . . . The second was, to live upon God that is invisible; as Paul said in another place, the way not to faint, is to look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen, they are eternal{26}.*

Bunyan realized that, like it or not, suffering, pain, loss and death would all come to him in one way or another. Indeed, sooner or later every single one of us must ultimately face these terrifying realities. How, then, can we best prepare to meet them? As Bunyan reminds us, if we only prepare for prison, say, then we will be unprepared for beatings. But if we stop our preparation with beatings, then we will be unprepared for death. But we cannot evade or cheat death forever. And thus, concludes Bunyan, “the best way to go through sufferings, is to trust in God through Christ, as touching the world to come; and as touching this world.”{27} This was how Bunyan lived, and with God’s help it was also how he died. May the eternal and unseen God grant each of us the grace to follow his example.

## Notes



1. Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628-1688* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 375, cited in John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 60.
2. W. R. Owens, “Introduction,” in *Grace Abounding to the*

- Chief of Sinners* (New York: Penguin, 1987), xxiii.
3. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 49.
  4. Ibid., 54.
  5. Ibid.
  6. Owens, "Introduction," xv.
  7. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. W. R. Owens (New York: Penguin, 1987), 8.
  8. Ibid., 10.
  9. Ibid., 24.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 52.
  12. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 59.
  13. Ibid., 67-68.
  14. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 53.
  15. Ibid.
  16. Ibid., 47.
  17. Owens, "Notes," in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 127, n. 137.
  18. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 48.
  19. Owens, "Introduction," xvi.
  20. Ibid.
  21. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 60.
  22. Ibid., 60-61.
  23. Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 159; cited in Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 77.
  24. Owens, "Introduction," xvi-xvii.
  25. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 79.
  26. Ibid.
  27. Ibid.

# Probe Responses to “The Shack”

Probe staff members are not unanimous in their responses to *The Shack*. Sue Bohlin enjoyed it as “a good book with problems,” and former staffer Pat Zukeran sees value in the book but is concerned enough about the theological problems to give it a “thumbs down.” Those of us who have read the book have a difference of opinion with each other, but we remain friendly and mutually respectful even as we disagree.

The movie is faithful enough to the book that our takeaways still stand.

	<a href="#">Sue Bohlin's Response to <i>The Shack</i></a>
	<a href="#">Patrick Zukeran's Critique of <i>The Shack</i></a>

Originally published in 2008.

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## What is Probe?

Probe Ministries is a non-profit ministry whose mission is to assist the church in renewing the minds of believers with a Christian worldview and to equip the church to engage the world for Christ. Probe fulfills this mission through our Mind Games conferences for youth and adults, our 3-minute daily radio program, and our extensive Web site at [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org).

Further information about Probe's materials and ministry may be obtained by contacting us at:

Probe Ministries

Suite 2000  
2001 W. Plano Parkway  
Plano, TX 75075  
(972) 941-4565  
[info@probe.org](mailto:info@probe.org)  
[www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org)  
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# Japan's Unknown Christian History: A Review of 'Silence'

*Former Probe staffer Dr. Patrick Zukeran reviews Silence, the book by Shusaku Endo and the movie directed by Martin Scorsese, which look at the little-known Christian history of Japan.*

## **Introduction: Historical Background**

The novel *Silence*, written by Shusaku Endo, has been made into a movie directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Liam Neeson and Andrew Garfield. This historical fiction provides a glimpse into the little known Christian history of Japan. Few are aware that Japan has a rich Christian history that dates back over four centuries.

The first Christian missionary from Europe was Francis Xavier,

who arrived in Japan in 1549. The Japanese embraced the message of Christ and for half a century Christianity flourished in Japan. By 1587, it is estimated that there were nearly 200,000 Christians in Japan. In 1597, it is estimated that approximately 300,000 Japanese had become Christian, 1.6% of the population.<sup>[1]</sup>

The situation changed dramatically in 1587 under the rule of the Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. He grew concerned about the growing influence of Christianity and viewed it as a threat to his power. He gave an edict outlawing Christianity in Japan. In 1597 the first 26 Christians were arrested in Kyoto and marched 600 miles to Nagasaki, the center of Christianity in Japan. There they were tortured and later crucified. This began the Christian persecution in Japan.

Following Hideyoshi came the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867), which lasted over 250 years. Under the Tokugawa rule one of the fiercest Christian persecutions occurred in Church history. Church historians estimate that between 300,000 and 500,000 Christians died during this time.

The Tokugawa Shoguns realized that killing the Christians did not diminish the growth of Christianity in Japan. The Shogun eventually devised a more sinister and effective way of thwarting the spread of Christianity. Instead of quickly executing Christians, it was more effective to torture the Christians and coerce them to renounce their faith. After committing apostasy, the apostate would be paraded throughout Japan and have them persuade fellow Christians to abandon their faith. This proved more effective in discouraging people from becoming Christians. Christians who apostatized were known as "korobi" or fallen Christians. Priests who apostatized were the most valuable in this endeavor.

To induce Christians to renounce their faith, the Shogun devised some of the most heinous forms of torture that he

unleashed on the Christians. Christian men, women, and children were slowly burned at the stake, boiled in hot springs, thrown into frozen lakes and brutalized in various ways. One of the most feared methods was the pit. In this technique, people were hung upside down and their head was placed in a covered pit filled with sewage. The torturers would cut a slit behind the ears or across the forehead so the blood rush would not kill the person but prolong the agony for days.

The persecution proved to be very effective. In 1612 there were an estimated 300,000 Christians. In 1625 it is estimated that there were less than half that number. For the next 250 years the Japanese Christians were forced to worship secretly and were known as the “kakure” or hidden Christians.

This is the historical setting for the movie *Silence* which takes place in 1639 during the height of the Christian persecution in Japan. Two Jesuit priests from Portugal, Father Sebastião Rodrigues and Father Francisco Garrpe, secretly enter Japan in search of their mentor Father Cristóvão Ferreira (Neeson) who is purported to have apostatized. Their goal is to find Ferreira and minister to the Japanese Christians who are without priests and thus without true spiritual guidance.

The priests arrive in Japan to find that the Christians live a very arduous life. The movie does an excellent job in revealing the poverty of the Christian communities who are forced to retreat to remote areas. The audience also feels the anxiety and fear that constantly looms over the Christian villages. The priests spend their days in hiding and in the evenings they minister to the community. However, the priests are discovered and eventually captured.

*Silence* vividly portrays graphically the brutal torture the Japanese Christians suffered at the hands of the daimyos. There are heart-wrenching scenes that depict the way fathers,

mothers, and children were inhumanely tortured before they were executed. In many church history books we read of the glorious death of the Christian martyrs. However, this is not the case in the novel or the movie. In the book *Silence*, Susaku Endo wrote,

I had long read about the martyrdom in the lives of the saints – how the souls of the martyrs had gone home to Heaven, how they had been filled with glory in Paradise, how the angels had blown trumpets. This was the splendid martyrdom I had often seen in my dreams. But the martyrdom of the Japanese Christians I now describe to you was no such glorious thing. What a miserable and painful business it was. {2}

Indeed, the horror of martyrdom is captured in the movie. The agonizing deaths of the Christians are not inspiring or glorious but dreadful to watch.

The priests are coerced to apostatize while in prison. The priests do not fear their own death but they cannot bear to watch the suffering of others. Father Garrpe dies attempting to rescue Christians tossed into the ocean. Rodrigues is now the last missionary in Japan. Finally, the dreaded but sought-for meeting occurs. He meets his mentor Father Ferreira who has apostatized and now goes by his Japanese name Sawano Chuan. He is married and spends his days translating European writings for the Japanese and persuading Christians to abandon their faith in Christ. He encourages Rodrigues to save his life and his fellow believers by apostatizing. Rodrigues refuses and expresses his heartfelt disappointment at Ferreira. Rodrigues courageously resists but eventually he is unable to endure the suffering of his fellow Christians hanging in the pit. Worn down by the cruelty, he eventually steps on the portrait of Jesus, renouncing his faith in Christ. Knowing the Catholic Church cannot forgive him, Rodrigues wonders if Jesus will forgive him for what he has done. This becomes his agonizing struggle for the rest of

his life.

## The Silence of God

The main question that is asked throughout the movie is, Where is God? How can He let His people suffer and die like this? Why does He remain silent and not answer the cries of His people? The priests Garrpe and Rodrigues wrestle with that question throughout the movie and we are drawn into their struggle. This is the question people in every age ask in the midst of their suffering.

Each year I lead the Japan Christian Martyrs Tour where I take the group along the path of the Martyrs. We see the sites and hear the stories where thousands of Japanese Christians were brutally tortured and executed. At those times, even four centuries later, we still ask, "Where was God? Why was He silent? How could He allow the violent massacre of His people in Japan?"

In the final moments of the movie, Rodrigues, now known as the Apostate Paul wrestles with God on this lifelong struggle. He reflects on his act of apostasy, stepping on the image of Christ but instead of anger in the eyes of Christ, he saw eyes of understanding, grace and love. He states,

Even now that face is looking at me with eyes of pity from the plaque rubbed by many feet. "Trample!" said those compassionate eyes. "Trample! Your foot suffers in pain; it must suffer like all the feet that have stepped on this plaque. But that pain alone is enough. I understand your pain and your suffering. It is for that reason I am here."

"Lord, I resented your silence," states Rodrigues. Jesus replies, "I was not silent. I suffered beside you."

Despite his act of apostasy, Rodrigues in the end finds forgiveness from a Christ who understands his situation and extends grace to him. He realizes Christ was not silent

but with him though his suffering and remained with him even in his final days. He seems to realize the love of Christ is more powerful and faithful than he has ever known.

This is one of the unique aspects of *Silence*. Endo and Scorsese want us to see through the eyes of the “korobe” Christian. We applaud those who died never renouncing their faith in Christ and quickly condemn those who publicly renounced their faith in Christ. However, I believe Shusaku Endo through his novel tells us, “Not so fast!”

Those who apostatized struggled and suffered greatly too. I believe Endo wants us to see through the eyes of Rodrigues and ask ourselves the question, “Could we endure watching our wives, children and loved ones receiving such vicious treatment for days without end?” “Would we remain steadfast or would we renounce Christ to save our loved ones from such an unbearable fate?” “Would Christ condemn us for renouncing Him to save our loved ones or would he understand and extend grace in such a situation as the Japanese and other persecuted Christian face?”

I believe Endo wants us to understand the struggle of persecuted Christians and wants us to understand they wrestle with their guilt for the rest of their lives. If God’s grace is indeed “greater than all my sin,” should we consider extending grace to our “fallen brethren” as well?

I believe another lesson Endo wants us to learn is that God is not silent but remains with His people in their suffering, never abandoning His people. Throughout church history, Christians have faced brutal persecutions. Even Christ the Son of God suffered the most dreadful death on the cross. Therefore, God understands the pain we experience, He grieves at the wickedness of men, and He promises to be with us always.

I agree with Endo that God is with us in our suffering.

However, I feel his answer is incomplete. In a Christian's suffering, often a disciple feels the presence of Christ in an even greater way. In the writings of the persecuted saints and in the many interviews I have had with Christians who are suffering, many state they feel the presence of God in greater ways than they have ever known. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:10-11, ". . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." So many times in suffering Christians identify with the sufferings of Christ and sense His presence in greater ways.

What I found troubling about the novel and movie is the gloomy mood of the story. The movie emphasizes the brutal deaths of Christians, the struggles of a fallen priest, and what appears to be the demise and bleak future of Christianity in Japan. Indeed, the Christian history of Japan is sorrowful and the movie ends in the midst of Japan's persecution so I can understand Endo's ending. On this earth, life will not always have a happy ending. What I find missing in Endo's story is the message of hope that is found in Christ even in suffering. What compels Christians to surrender their life for Christ is the assured hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:2 states, ". . . looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

There is little joy when focusing primarily on the affairs and outcomes in this fallen world. If this is where the story ends, it is indeed dark and disheartening. However, through the darkness shines the hope that allowed Christ to have joy even when facing the agony of the cross. Believers can also have joy and hope if they look forward to the glory that awaits every believer in Christ. Despite the suffering believers face, it pales in comparison to the eternal glory

that is to come. Persecution teaches Christians we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Christians can endure and remain joyful even in their suffering when focused on Christ and the glory of our true home. The end is not the cross of death, but the resurrection of Jesus and every disciple of Christ. This is important in any story of persecuted Christians. It is emphasized in the New Testament and is the story of Christ's and the believer's ultimate triumph. The New Testament prophesies the future persecution of all believers but ends with the triumphant resurrection and return of Christ. Through Christ's victory, the Christian story ends ultimately in triumph. The end is not the death of the Christians in Japan but the glory they received from Christ in heaven. Their courageous commitment should be an inspiration to believers around the world and an example of what it means to live not for this world, but the kingdom of heaven. Hebrews 11:35-40 states,

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

The Japanese Christians were living for another kingdom and looking forward to the eternal glory of heaven. This message was not present in the novel or the film, which I believe made it a dark and gloomy story. Although Japan Christian history is discouraging, the end has not been written for the Christ's Church in Japan.

# Can A Tree Grow in a Swamp?

One of the most significant dialogues in the movie occurs between Rodrigues and the Samurai Lord Inoue, also known as the Inquisitor. Inoue states,

A tree which flourishes in one kind of soil, may wither if the soil is changed. As for the tree of Christianity, in a foreign country its leaves may grow thick and the buds may be rich, while in Japan the leaves wither and no bud appears. Father, have you never thought of the difference in the soil, the difference in the water?

Inoue tells Rodrigues that a tree cannot grow in a swamp. Therefore, Christianity will not take root in Japan.

There is a famous saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." In other words, persecution strengthens the faith of Christians and the church grows when persecuted. This was not the case in Japan. The genocide that took place from 1600-1800 was devastating and Christianity has never regained a strong foothold in Japan. Another question Christians struggle with is, "Why has Christianity not taken root in Japan?" Today the largest growth of Christianity is occurring throughout Asia. Despite this, Christianity continues to struggle in Japan.

When Christianity first arrived in Japan in 1549, the Japanese embraced the gospel of Christ. Xavier was so impressed with Japan that he called for only the missionaries of highest quality to be sent.[\[3\]](#) Xavier wrote, "Japan is the only country yet discovered in these regions where there is hope of Christianity permanently taking root. . . . These are the best people so far discovered, and it seems to me that among the unbelievers, no people can be found to excel them."[\[4\]](#) Father Organto, who followed Xavier, wrote that Japan would be Christianized in 30 years, expressing the optimism of missionaries that Christianity would thrive

in Japan.[{5}](#) The situation quickly changed and the two centuries of persecution that followed nearly eradicated Christianity in Japan.

Today there is a famous saying among missionaries: "Japan is where Christian missionaries go to die." Indeed, many return after years of labor discouraged and disillusioned by the little fruit they see in their years of labor in Japan. There are many reasons given why the gospel has not thrived in this country. Can the seed of the gospel penetrate the hard soil of Japanese culture?

As unbelievable as this may seem, I believe a spiritual revival for Japan. As the gospel flourished 400 years ago, spiritual awakening will come to this nation again. How it will come about only God knows. I believe the Japanese are realizing the emptiness of their secular outlook and lifestyle of materialism and consumerism. Their high suicide rate reflects the emptiness of these ideologies. Japanese Buddhism and Shinto fail to answer the great questions of life or fill the void in the heart of all people. These religions are also largely built on myths and so they are not based on reality.

Xavier realized the Japanese religions did not answer the big questions of life such as the origin of life and the universe, the nature of God, the origin of evil, the answer to the problem of evil, and what happens after death.[{6}](#) The ideologies that dominate Japan still fail to adequately answer these questions today. As Xavier demonstrated that Christianity provides the best answer to these questions, so the Church in Japan must do the same. Christianity has the evidence to uphold its claims to truth and life everlasting in Jesus. I believe that Christian apologetics would do well in this country that is very rational and well educated. The message of the gospel provides the true message of hope for this nation. I hope that the message and lives of the Japan Christian martyrs will one day be recognized and remembered by the people of Japan.

# Conclusion

Scorsese's film is one of the few films about the little known Christian history of Japan. Even the Japanese are not aware of the tremendous Christian history of their nation. We should be thankful to Scorsese for showing the brutal persecution and the suffering endured by the Christians of Japan. Endo and Scorsese reveal to us the heinous tortures but they also take us into the mental torture that those suffering persecution go through. The struggles of the priests and the questions they ask are the same questions we all struggle with in our journey of faith. Endo and Scorsese present a unique perspective looking through the eyes of one who apostatizes and yet finds God's grace through it all.

It is my hope that Christians throughout the world gain a greater awareness of one of the greatest massacre of Christians that took place in Church history. I also hope that people will appreciate and admire the courage and commitment of the Japanese Christians who gave their lives for Christ. The Japanese unfortunately hide this part of their history. However, the Japanese and the world should recognize this facet of their history. The story of the men, women and children who gave their lives for Christ is moving and inspirational. They truly lived out the call of discipleship as Jesus commanded. In Matthew 10:37-39 Jesus said,

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Few have lived out the commands of Christ so faithfully and courageously as the Christians of Japan. I hope that more will recognize and remember the Christians of Japan who gave their lives for the Gospel.

## Notes

1. Keith Webb, *Overcoming Spiritual Barriers in Japan*, (Nextchurch Resources, 2010), 15.
2. Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1969), 60.
3. John Dougill, *In Search of Japan's Hidden Christians* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 34.
4. Webb, 15.
5. Dougill, 51.
6. Henry Coleridge, *The Life and Letters of Francis Xavier* (London: Burns and Oates, 1881), 572.

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Addendum 1/3/2022:

We received this inquiry to our website:

**I was fascinated by this article on your site <https://probe.org/japans-unknown-christian-history-a-review-of-silence/> about unspeakable torture that rulers of Japan did. But it is said there is many reasons why Japanese people do not come to Christ in large numbers. So what are these reasons? Help me to understand, please. Also, I believe that the tortures that rulers of Japan performed could only take place because God granted them freedom, and there should be sufficient moral reason why He permitted it. It is known that the blood of martyrs brings salvation to the land; maybe we just need to wait more and we'll see how their sacrifice will bring God's grace and Christ' salvation to people of Japan, especially now in the era of info technology.**

Dr. Pat Zukeran, now leading his ministry Evidence and Answers from his Hawaii home, responded:

Aloha,

Thank you for reading the article on the movie *Silence* and your questions.

First, we do not know why God allows evil and suffering on some people and nations. God is in control of all things and has a plan for all that happens. Sometimes, only He knows the reason for the suffering of the Japanese Christians.

Today, less than 1% of Japanese are Christian. There are numerous reasons the nation of Japan is resistant to the Gospel message but no one really knows for sure. Here are some factors that contribute to their resistance to Christ.

First, the Japanese culture is a “group think” culture. Before a person makes a decision, he or she must consider how it will affect the family, clan and ancestors. Often they must consider how it affects their business partners, friends, etc.... The group pressure is very high in Japan.

Second, Japan is a very materialistic culture and it places little importance on the spiritual life. As a result, there really is no Sabbath day or rest. Most people from students to business people work 6 to 7 days a week. This makes time for church or Bible study very difficult.

Third, Christianity is seen as a western religion. The Christian history of Japan is not usually portrayed in a positive way.

Fourth, the concept of sin is unclear in Japanese thinking. There is no accurate word for sin. The term used now, *shimi*, actually means “criminal.” They view human nature as good and most would not see themselves as criminal. So it is hard to receive the gospel if you do not understand sin and the need for a savior.

Ultimately, there is a dark spiritual stronghold on Japan. We hope one day, a spiritual awakening will occur in that land.

Thank you for your question, I hope this was helpful.

Blessings,

Patrick Zukeran

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