

Body and Soul in the Old Testament

Dr. Michael Gleghorn addresses how the Old Testament treats body and soul. What does it have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?

The Breath of Life

The worldview of Naturalism tells us that the natural world is all that exists. There is nothing “above” or “beyond” this. Space, time, matter, and energy, the sort of things studied in physics, are the only material entities. You are your body, and nothing more. You do not have an immaterial mind or soul that is (in some sense) distinct from your body. You *are* your body. And when your body dies, you will cease to exist.

But is this true? In this article we address body and soul in the Old Testament. What does the Old Testament have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?



Let's begin with the creation of Adam. Consider the way in which the Bible describes this event: “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). Note that Adam is created from two distinct elements: the dust of the ground and the breath of life. His body is composed of “dust from the ground.” But he doesn't become “a living creature” until God takes the second step of breathing “the breath of life” into his nostrils. Although this description may well be metaphorical in certain respects, it seems evident that God must add “the breath of life” for Adam to become a living human being.

Here's another observation. Notice that Adam doesn't suddenly

spring to life once the dust of the earth has been ordered in a particular way. Apparently, human personality does not spontaneously emerge once God has formed the dust of the ground into a human body.^{1} Merely ordering the physical elements into a human body is not enough (at least, at this initial stage of human development) to get a human person. That second step, in which God breathes the breath of life into the already formed body, is also necessary.

So what are we to make of this? Does Genesis give us a picture of a human being as a body-soul composite? At this point, such a conclusion would be premature. We have not yet considered what a soul is, nor whether “the breath of life” in some way corresponds to, or produces, it. One thing seems clear, however. The Bible seems to suggest that human beings are more than just physical bodies. There appears to be an additional component to our nature, and we need to spend some time gaining a better understanding of what that is.

Surviving the Death of the Body

The book of Genesis briefly describes the death of Jacob’s wife, Rachel, as she gave birth to their son, Benjamin.^{2} We read that “as her soul was departing (for she died),” she named her son (Genesis 35:18).

How are we to understand the phrase, “as her soul was departing”? In Hebrew, the word here translated “soul” is the term *nephesh*. Part of the difficulty in understanding the phrase is that *nephesh* can be used in a variety of ways. According to the Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland, “The term *nephesh* . . . is used primarily of human beings, though it is also used of animals (Genesis 1:20; 9:10; 24:30) and of God Himself (Judges 10:16; Isaiah 1:14).”^{3}

Depending on the context, the term might refer to a part of the body, like the neck (Psalm 105:18) or throat (Isaiah

5:14). It can also be used of the principle of life, as in Leviticus 17:11: “the life [that is, *nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood.” Strangely, however, it can also refer to a dead human body (Numbers 5:2; 6:11). Moreover, it can be used of various psychological aspects of human experience, like emotions or desires (Proverbs 21:10; Isaiah 26:9; Micah 7:1). Finally, there are also indications that the term can refer to what might be called the “soul”—the immaterial component of a human being in which one’s personal identity is located.[{4}](#)

So when we read that Rachel’s “soul was departing,” does this simply mean that she was dying, that the “principle of life” (which had sustained her to this point) was departing? Or could it mean that her “soul,” an immaterial component of her being encompassing her personal identity, was departing? In other words, is this verse merely telling us that Rachel’s body was dying, or is it also telling us that, as her body was dying, her soul was leaving her body (possibly to continue its existence elsewhere)?

If we examine other passages of Scripture, we see evidence that the human soul continues to exist after the death of the body. Consider Psalm 49:15: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” In Hebrew thought, Sheol was the place of the dead, somewhat like the Greek conception of Hades.[{5}](#) In this passage, the Psalmist expresses confidence that God will ransom his “soul” from the place of the dead and receive the Psalmist to himself. This view of the soul becomes even clearer when we examine what the Old Testament has to say about the afterlife.

The Place of the Dead

In the Old Testament the place of the dead is called Sheol. Of course, in some places the term simply refers to the grave. Nevertheless, according to John Cooper, “There is virtual

consensus that the Israelites did believe in some sort of ethereal existence after death in a place called Sheol.”[\[6\]](#)
What sort of place was this?

Job describes it as a place of “ease,” where “the wicked cease from troubling” and “the weary are at rest” (3:13, 17-18). That sounds pretty good! However, it’s also described as a place of “darkness” and “the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12), a place where not much is happening. As the author of Ecclesiastes puts it: “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (9:10). Hence, J. P. Moreland observes, “Life in Sheol is often depicted as lethargic and inactive.”[\[7\]](#)

But there are exceptions. Consider the case of Saul and the medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28). The prophet Samuel had died, and Saul is preparing to go to war against the Philistines (vv. 1-4). After seeing the Philistine army, however, Saul is afraid (v. 5). He inquires of the Lord, but the Lord does not answer him (v. 6). In desperation, Saul seeks out a medium at Endor, and asks her to call up Samuel from the dead (vv. 7-11). Incredibly, the plan works, and Samuel actually makes an appearance (vv. 12-14).

Saul inquires of Samuel, but Samuel essentially rebukes Saul (vv. 15-16), reminding Saul of his prior disobedience. He tells Saul that Israel will be defeated by the Philistines and informs him that “Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (vv. 18-19). It’s a fascinating story, but we must not lose sight of what (for us) is the main point.

Notice that Samuel, who had previously died, and whose body had been buried (v. 3), retains his personal identity in the shadowy underworld of Sheol. He still knows who he is, remembers Saul, and can function as the Lord’s prophet. Although Samuel is pictured in the story as “an old man . . . wrapped in a robe” (v. 14), Moreland reminds us that the Bible often uses such imagery “in a nonliteral way to describe

immaterial, invisible realities.”[{8}](#) Regardless, the Old Testament teaches that human beings continue to exist after the death of the body. Moreover, the righteous express a hope that God will rescue their souls even from Sheol.

Redemption from Sheol

The Old Testament pictures all those who die as going initially to Sheol, the place of the dead. However, it also intimates a hope for the righteous even “beyond the grave.” As John Cooper notes, “Several Psalms read most naturally as confessing a steadfast if unspecified trust in God beyond death.”[{9}](#)

Consider Psalm 49. The psalmist observes that all people die. Sooner or later each person’s life ends in death (vv. 5-12). But for the psalmist that is not the end of the story. Though he knows that this life will end with the death of his body, he nonetheless confidently proclaims: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me” (v. 15).

Or consider Psalm 73. The psalmist begins by confessing that he was “envious of the arrogant” and “wicked” (v. 3). However, as he contemplated that their end is “destruction,” his hope in God was renewed (vv. 17-24).

Although the psalmist recognized that he, too, would die, he declares his hope in God: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (v. 26). After surveying such material, one Old Testament scholar notes that before God “there is not only the alternative between this life and the shadow existence in the world of the dead; there is a third possibility—a permanent, living fellowship with him.”[{10}](#) This third possibility was the confident hope of the psalmists.

Of course, if we're going to be fair, we must also agree with C. S. Lewis, who observes that throughout much of the Old Testament, belief in the afterlife held virtually no "religious importance" whatever.[{11}](#) What mattered to the ancient Israelite was life on this earth. It is here that we can enjoy fellowship with family, friends—and God.

So why did God reveal so little to the ancient Israelites about the nature of the afterlife? Lewis suggests that God may have wanted His people to come to love Him primarily as an end in itself—and not for any rewards he might bestow in the afterlife. If one becomes friends with God in this life, then one will naturally fear to lose this relationship in death. And at this point, God can step in with the "good news" that friendship with Him can continue beyond death.[{12}](#) Indeed, God even promised to raise the bodies of his people from the dead, to continue their friendship with him on a new earth!

The Resurrection of the Body

The resurrection of the body is a doctrine that many believers rarely think about. Yet this doctrine is not only taught throughout the New Testament, it's even found in the Old Testament.

Consider Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." This verse is not denying a disembodied afterlife between death and resurrection. Rather, it is affirming that the souls of the dead, whose bodies appear to be asleep in in the "dust of the earth," shall be "awakened" and raised from the dead.

Notice that some are raised "to everlasting life," but others to "everlasting contempt." Cooper writes, "This verse . . . connects resurrection, judgment, and two eternal

destinies.”^{13} The Old Testament suggests that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with their bodies for all eternity. As Moreland observes, “Old Testament teaching implies that the soul or spirit is added to flesh and bones to form a living human person (Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37) and that the resurrection of the dead involves the re-embodiment of the same soul or spirit (Isaiah 26:14, 19).”^{14}

How might we sum up Old Testament teaching about the nature and destiny of human beings? First, human beings appear to be composed of both body and soul. When God created Adam, he first formed his body from the dust of the earth, and then “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). This at least hints at the possibility that human beings are a body-soul composite. The evidence for this is strengthened, however, when we consider Old Testament teaching about life after death.

Throughout the Old Testament we see evidence for continued personal existence, after the death of the body, in a place called Sheol. An interesting example of this can be seen when Saul, with the help of a medium, calls up the prophet Samuel from the dead. We saw that Samuel continues to exist and retain his personal identity even after the death of his body (1 Samuel 28).

But this was not the end of the story. For the Old Testament also teaches that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with resurrected bodies, either to enjoy eternal life on a new earth, or to suffer eternal shame and contempt. This, in a nutshell, is what the Old Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of human beings.

Notes

1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Eerdmans, 2000), Loc. 727-39, Kindle.

2. See the story in Genesis 35:16-20.

3. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 45, Kindle.

4. The material in this paragraph is indebted to Moreland, *The Soul*, 45-46.

5. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 810.

6. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 783.

7. Moreland, *The Soul*, 51.

8. Moreland, *The Soul*, 52.

9. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 906. The preceding words, concerning hope "beyond the grave" are also taken from Cooper, Loc. 902.

10. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 109; cited in Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 912.

11. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 36.

12. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 36-43.

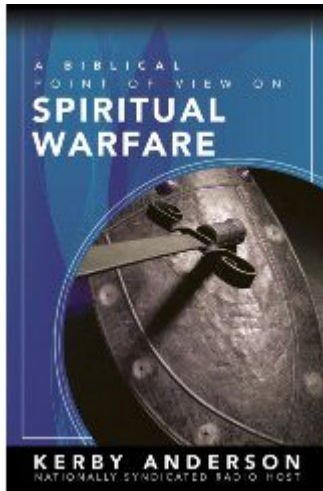
13. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 916.

14. Moreland, *The Soul*, 53.

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Satan

What does the Bible say about Satan, and what do Christians believe about him? Not only is this an important biblical doctrine, but it has also been used to determine if someone has a biblical worldview. Kerby Anderson explains the basics about Satan, how he catches us in his snares, how to resist his temptations.



The Barna Group has found that a very small percentage of born again Christians have a biblical worldview. They define a “biblical worldview” as having the following six elements: “The Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today.”[\[1\]](#)

Various surveys (including the Barna surveys) show that many Christians think that belief in Satan is optional. After all, they argue, if I believe in Jesus that is enough. But if you believe that Jesus was God then you have to believe that Satan exists. Satan is mentioned in the Gospels twenty-nine times. And in twenty-five of those references, Jesus is the one talking about Satan.



It is also worth noting that Satan is mentioned many other times in the Bible. Satan is referred to in seven Old Testament books and every New Testament writer talks about Satan. Belief in Satan is not optional.

When Satan is discussed in the New Testament, he is identified

by three titles. These three titles describe his power on earth and his influence in the world:

1. *Ruler of the world* – Jesus refers to Satan as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). This means that he can use the elements of society, culture, and government to achieve his evil ends in this world. That doesn’t mean that every aspect of society or culture is evil. And it doesn’t mean that Satan has complete control of every politician or governmental bureaucrat. But it does mean that Satan can use and manipulate the world’s system.

2. *God of this world* – Paul refers to Satan as “the god of this world” who “has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Satan sets himself up as a false god to many. His power over religion and the ability to promote false religions keeps people from know the true gospel.

3. *Prince of the air* – Paul reminds Christians that they were dead in their trespasses and since in which they “formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air.” Satan is the prince of the air and thus controls the thoughts of those in the world system. The Bible says: “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). So we should not be surprised that we find ourselves in the midst of spiritual warfare.

How Did Satan Fall?

The Bible doesn’t say much about Satan and his fall. There are two passages in Scripture that many believe does describe Satan’s fall but not all theologians are convinced. These passages are Ezekiel 28:11-19 and Isaiah 14:12-19.

Ezekiel predicts the coming judgment of the Gentile nations and refers to “the prince (or leader) of Tyre” and then later

to "the king of Tyre." These do not seem to be the same person. The first is obviously the earthly leader of the city Tyre. Ezekiel is predicting his ultimate downfall and the destruction of his kingdom.

The person referred to as the "king of Tyre" seems to be a different person. He has "the seal of perfection" and was "blameless." He is described as "full of wisdom and perfect in beauty." It also says that he was "in Eden, the garden of God."

It appears that the "king of Tyre" describes Satan who was serving God as an angel. The passage further says that Satan was "lifted up" because of his beauty which many commentators suggest mean that he was the greatest of all of God's creations. But he sinned. This passage says "you sinned" and "you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor."

Another passage that appears to be talking about Satan is where the prophet Isaiah is predicting that God will bring judgment against Babylon. The first part of chapter 14 (verses 1-11) is directed at the king of Babylon. But many theologians and commentators believe that the subject changes in the next section (verses 12-19) because it focuses on the "star of the morning."

It worth mentioning that the "star of the morning" in verse 12 could just as easily be translated "the shining one." That connects with Paul's statement that Satan is an "angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The passage also says that he has "fallen from heaven." It seems like we are not talking about the Babylonian king but actually talking about Satan.

If this passage is talking about Satan, then it tells us more about his motivations that led to his fall. Five times in this passage we see the phrase "I will." He is prideful and wants to achieve a position "above the stars of God" (Isaiah 14:13). He also sought to be "like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14). And

he wanted to “sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north” (Isaiah 14:13). Each of these desires tells us more about his motivations.

From this passage we discover three things about Satan. First, Satan wanted to be superior to creation. Second, Satan wanted to be superior to the Creator. Third, Satan wanted a superior place to rule all of creation.[\[2\]](#)

What Do We Know About Satan’s Character?

The Bible tells us a great deal about Satan through the various names that are given to him. Let’s begin by looking at the name “Satan.” In Hebrew the name means “adversary.” He is opposed to God and His plans. And Satan is also opposed to God’s plan in our lives. If we are to be successful in spiritual warfare, we must understand that he is our adversary. This characteristic of Satan is significant. The Old Testament uses this name for him eighteen times, and it is used thirty-four times in the New Testament.

Another common name for Satan is “the devil.” This name in the Greek is *diabolos* and is derived from the verb meaning “to throw.” The Devil throws accusations and lies at us. This is a significant part of spiritual warfare. He accuses believers while he slanders and defames the name of God. This name occurs thirty-six times in the New Testament.

There is one passage in the New Testament that uses both of these names for Satan. Peter warns believers about Satan who is an “adversary” and “the devil” who is on the prowl like roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). He is a formidable adversary that believing Christians should not take lightly.

Satan is also known as the “tempter.” He tempts us to follow him and his evil ways rather than follow God’s plan for our lives. When he appears to Jesus in the wilderness, he is referred to as the tempter (Matthew 4:3). Also, Paul refers to

Satan as “the tempter” (1 Thessalonians 3:5) and thus illustrates one of the key characteristics of Satan: he tempts humans to sin.

A related name is “serpent.” Satan took the form of a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Paul talks about Satan tempting Eve due to his subtle tempting and craftiness (2 Corinthians 11:3).

In addition to tempting believers, Satan is referred to as the “accuser of the brethren” (Revelation 12:10).

Satan is also called “the evil one” both by Jesus (John 17:15) and John (1 John 5:18-19). Satan can control the world system, but believers are given the power to resist his temptations and evil designs. Satan is the source of much of the evil in the world, and that is why believers must reckon with his impact and content with spiritual warfare.

We also see his power in the names that describe his dominion. He is described as “the god of this world” in 2 Corinthians 4:4. He is also called “the prince of the world” (John 14:30) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). And he is known as “the ruler of the demons” in Matthew 12:24.

How Are We Caught in the Snares of Satan?

The Bible teaches that Satan can capture our minds and divert us from God’s purpose. This is called a snare. In certain biblical passages (for example, Psalm 124), we read about fowling and the use of snares. They would capture birds by spreading a net on the ground that was attached to a trap or snare. When the birds landed to eat the seeds spread out, the trap would spring and throw the net over the birds.

A snare could be anything Satan uses that entangles us or impedes our progress. It could be roadblock or it could be a diversion. A wise and discerning Christian should be alert for

these snares that can prevent our effectiveness and even ruin our testimony.

The character of Satan gives us some insight into his methods and techniques. James gives us a perspective on this by telling us that when we are tempted we should not blame God. Instead we should understand the nature of temptation and enticement. "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14-15).

James shows that temptation toward sin is usually a process rather than a single act. We are tempted and then carried away and enticed by our own lust. Like a fisherman who tries to catch a fish using bait, Satan tries to entice us by placing before us something that will cause us to be carried away. Then when lust has conceived, we do it again, and eventually experience death.

Satan is not only the tempter, but he is a subtle deceiver "who deceives the whole world" (Revelation 12:9). Jesus warned that there will be "false Christs and false prophets" who will "show great signs and wonders." They will be so convincing that they "shall deceive the very elect" (Matthew 24:24).

Paul teaches that Satan disguises himself as an "angel of light" and his demons transform themselves as "ministers of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Satan's main strategy is to lie. Jesus said concerning Satan, "When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44). Paul prays that Christians would "no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting" (Ephesians 4:14).

How Did Jesus Resist the Temptations of Satan?

How can we resist Satan's temptations? We can learn some valuable lessons about how to deal with spiritual warfare by watching how Jesus was able to resist the temptations of Satan (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4) in the forty-day Temptation. The Bible records three attempts by Satan to get Jesus to act independently of His Father's will for Him.

1. *Challenged God's provision* – Satan first challenged Jesus to turn stones into bread (Matthew 4:3). The Bible tells us that Jesus was very hungry after fasting for forty days. While Jesus had the power to do so, He resisted because it was His Father's will that he fast in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights.

Instead Jesus quotes a portion of Deuteronomy 8:3 back to Satan. "But He answered and said, 'It is written, man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4).

2. *Challenged God's protection* – Satan next took Jesus into "the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple" (Matthew 4:5). He then commanded Jesus to throw Himself down in order for the angels to protect Him. In other words, Satan wanted Jesus to take His protection into His own hands and no longer trust in God's protection. Notice that Satan even quotes Scripture (Psalm 91) to Jesus (Matthew 4:6) in order to tempt Him.

Jesus, however, quotes a portion of Deuteronomy 6:16 back to Satan. "Jesus said to him, 'On the other hand, it is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matthew 4:7).

3. *Challenged God's dominion* – Satan then took Jesus "to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the

world and their glory” (Matthew 4:8). And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). Satan would give Jesus rule and dominion over all that the world could provide if he were turn away from His mission to save mankind and worship Satan.

Notice that Jesus did not challenge Satan’s claim that he had the kingdoms of the world to give to Him. After all, Satan is the “prince of this world” (John 12:31). But instead Jesus said to him, “Go Satan! For it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only” (Matthew 4:10).

As believers we should remind ourselves that Satan is a defeated foe. Jesus tells us that “the ruler of this world has been judged” (John 16:11). But his influence is still felt. Jesus also refers to Satan as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). John tells us that “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). And Peter reminds us that “the Devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). The good news is that “greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

Notes

1. “Barna Survey Examines Changes in Worldview Among Christians over the Past 13 Years,” March 2009, www.barna.org.
2. You can find more information about Satan, demons, angels, and spiritual warfare in my book [*A Biblical Point of View on Spiritual Warfare*](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009).

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See Also

[*Probe Answers Our Email: Angels and Demons*](#)

The Inspiration of the Bible

What Jesus said of Scripture and the nature of apostolic teaching are two of the main issues in Rick Wade's examination of the inspiration of Scripture.

A question we often encounter when talking with non-believers about Christ is, "Why should I believe the Bible?" Or a person might say, "You have your Bible; Muslims have their Koran; different religions have their own holy books. What makes yours special?" How would you answer such questions?



These questions fall under the purview of apologetics. They call for a defense. However, before giving a defense we need theological and biblical grounding. To defend the Bible, we have to know what it is.

In this article, then, we'll deal with the nature of Scripture. Are these writings simply the remembrances of two religious groups? Are they writings consisting of ideas conceived by Jews and early Christians as they sought to establish their religion? Or are they the words of God Himself, given to us for our benefit?

The latter position is the one held by the people of God throughout history. Christians have historically accepted both the Old and New Testaments as God's word written. But two movements of thought have undermined belief in inspiration. One was the higher critical movement that reduced Scripture to simply the recollections and ideas of a religious group. The more recent movement (although it really isn't organized

enough to call it a “movement”) is religious pluralism, which holds that all religions—or at least the major ones—are equally valid, meaning that none is more true than others. If other religions are equally valid, then other holy books are also. Many Christian young people think this way.

Our evaluation of the Bible and other “holy books” is governed by the recognition that the Bible is the inspired word of God. If God’s final word is found in what we call the Bible, then no other book can be God’s word. To differ with what the Bible says is to differ with God.

What do we mean by *inspiration*? Following the work of the higher critics, many people—even within the church—have come to see the Bible as inspired in the same way that, say, an artist might be inspired. The artist sees the Grand Canyon and with her imagination now flooded with images and ideas hurries back to her canvas to paint a beautiful picture. A poet, upon viewing the devastation of war, proceeds to pen lines which stir the compassion of readers. Is that what we mean when we say the Bible is inspired?

We use the word *inspiration* because of 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.” *Inspired* is translated from the Greek word *theopneustos* which literally means “God-breathed.” Some have said the word could be translated “ex-spined” or “breathed out.” *Inspiration*, then, in the biblical sense, isn’t the stirring of the imagination of the writer, but rather is the means by which the writers accurately wrote what God wanted written.

This idea finds support in 2 Peter 1: 20-21: “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

What we need before proceeding is a working definition of inspiration. Theologian Carl F. H. Henry writes, "Inspiration is a supernatural influence upon the divinely chosen prophets and apostles whereby the Spirit of God assures the truth and trustworthiness of their oral and written proclamation."[\[1\]](#) Furthermore, the writers were "divinely superintended by the Holy Spirit in the choice of words they used."[\[2\]](#) Although some things were dictated to the writers, most of the time the Spirit simply superintended the writing so that the writer, using his own words, wrote what the Spirit wanted.

The Historical View of the Church

The first place to look in establishing any doctrine is, of course, the Bible. Before turning to Scripture to see what it claims for itself, however, it will be worthwhile to be sure this has been the view of the church throughout history. Because of the objections of liberal scholars, we might want to see whose position is in keeping with our predecessors in the faith.

Historically, the church has consistently held to the inspiration of Scripture, at least until the 19th century. One scholar has said that throughout the first eight centuries of the church, "Hardly is there a single point with regard to which there reigned . . . a greater or more cordial unanimity."[\[3\]](#) The great Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield said, "Christendom has always reposed upon the belief that the utterances of this book are properly oracles of God."[\[4\]](#) In the 16th century, the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin were explicit in their recognition of the divine source and authority of Scripture.[\[5\]](#) B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, J. Gresham Machen, Carl F. H. Henry, J. I. Packer and other very reputable scholars and theologians over the last century and a half have argued forcefully for the inspiration of Scripture. And as Warfield notes, this belief underlies all the creeds of the church as well.[\[6\]](#)

The Witness of the Old Testament

Let's turn now to the Bible itself, beginning with the Old Testament, to see whether its own claims match the beliefs of the church.

The clear intent of the Old Testament writers was to convey God's message. Consider first that God was said to *speak* to the people. "God says" (Deut. 5:27), "Thus says the Lord" (Exod. 4:22), "I have put my words in your mouth" (Jer. 1:9), "The word of the Lord came to him" (Gen. 15:4; 1 Kings 17:8). All these references to God speaking show that He is interested in communicating with us verbally. The Old Testament explicitly states 3,808 times that it is conveying the express words of God.[\[7\]](#)

Furthermore, God was so interested in people preserving and knowing His word that at times He told people to write down what He said. We read in Exodus 17:14: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.'" (See also 24:3-7, 34:27; Jer. 30:2; 36:2.)

The clear testimony of Old Testament writings is that God spoke to people, and He instructed them to write down the things He said. These writings have been handed down to us.

Of course, we shouldn't think of all the Old Testament—or the New Testament either—as having been dictated to the writers. In fact, most of the Bible was not. What we want to establish here is that God is a communicating God, and He communicates verbally. The idea that God is somehow unable or unwilling to communicate propositionally to man—which is what a number of scholars of this century continue to hold—is foreign to the Old Testament. God spoke, and the people heard and understood.

We should now shift to the New Testament to see what it says about inspiration. Let's begin with the testimony of Jesus.

The Witness of Jesus

Did Jesus believe in the doctrine of inspiration?

It is clear that Jesus acknowledged the Old Testament writings as being divine in nature. Consider John 10:34-36: "Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, "I have said you are gods"? If he called them "gods" to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?'" Jesus believed it was *God's* word that came to the prophets of old, and He referred to it as Scripture that could not be broken. In Matt. 5:17-19, He affirmed the Law as being fixed and above the whims of men.

Jesus drew on the teachings of the Old Testament in His encounter with Satan (Matt. 4:1-11). His responses, "Man shall not live on bread alone" (Deut. 8:3), "You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only" (Deut. 6:13), and "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deut. 6:16) are all drawn from Deuteronomy. Each statement was prefaced by "It is written" or "It is said." Jesus said that he only spoke what the Father wanted Him to (John 12:49). By quoting these passages as authoritative over Satan, He was, in effect, saying these were God's words. He also honored the words of Moses (Mark 7:10), Isaiah (Mark 7:6), David (Mark 12:36), and Daniel (Matt. 24:15) as authoritative, as carrying the weight of God's words.^{8} Jesus even referred to an Old Testament writing as God's word when this wasn't explicitly attributed to God in the Old Testament itself (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4,5).

In our consideration of the position of Jesus on the nature of Scripture, we also need to look at His view of the New Testament. But one might ask, "It hadn't been written yet, how could Jesus be cited in support of the inspiration of the New Testament?"

To get a clear picture of this we need to realize what Jesus

was doing with His apostles. His small group of twelve was being trained to carry on the witness and work of Jesus after He was gone. They were given a place of special importance in the furthering of His work (Mark 3:14-15). Thus, He taught them with clarity while often teaching the crowds in parables (Mark 4:34). He sent them as the Father had sent Him (John 20:21) so they would be witnesses of “all these things” (Luke 24:48). Both the Spirit and the apostles would be witnesses for Christ (John 15:26ff; cf. Acts 5:32). He promised to send the Spirit to help them when He left. They would be empowered to bear witness (Acts. 1:4,5,8). The Spirit would give them the right things to say when brought to trial (Matt. 10:19ff). He would remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26) and would give them new knowledge (John 16:12ff). As John Wenham said, “The last two promises . . . do not of course refer specifically or exclusively to the inspiration of a New Testament Canon, but they provide in principle all that is required for the formation of such a Canon, should that be God’s purpose.”[\[9\]](#)

Thus, Jesus didn’t identify a specific body of literature as the New Testament or state specifically that one would be written. However, He prepared the apostles as His special agents to hand down the truths He taught, and He promised assistance in doing this. Given God’s work in establishing the Old Testament and Jesus’ references to the written word in His own teaching, it is entirely reasonable that He had plans for His apostles to put in writing the message of good news He brought.

The Witness of the Apostles

Finally, we need to see what the apostles tell us about the nature of Scripture. To understand their position, we’ll need to not only see what they *said* about Scripture, but also understand what it meant to be an apostle.

The office of apostle grew out of Jewish jurisprudence wherein a *sjaliach* (“one who is sent out”) could appear in the name of another with the authority of that other person. It was said that “the *sjaliach* for a person is as this person himself.”^{10} As Christ’s representatives the apostles (*apostle* also means “sent out”) carried forth the teaching they had received. “This apostolic preaching is the foundation of the Church, to which the Church is bound” (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20).^{11} The apostles had been authorized by Jesus as special ambassadors to teach what he had taught them (cf. John 20:21). Their message was authoritative when spoken; when written it would be authoritative as well.

As the apostles were *witnesses* of the gospel they also were bearers of *tradition*. This isn’t “tradition” in the contemporary sense by which we mean that which comes from man and may be changed. *Tradition* in the Hebrew understanding meant “what has been handed down with authority.”^{12} This is what Paul referred to when he praised the Corinthians for holding to the traditions they had been taught and exhorted the Thessalonians to do the same (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15). Contrast this with the tradition of men which drew criticism from Jesus (Mark 7:8).

Paul attributed what he taught directly to Christ (2 Cor. 13:3). He identified his gospel with the preaching of Jesus (Rom. 16:25). And he said his words were taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). What he wrote to the Corinthians was “the Lord’s commandment” (1 Cor. 14:37). Furthermore, Paul, and John as well, considered their writings important enough to call for people to read them (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; John 20:31; Rev. 1:3). Peter put the apostolic message on par with the writings of the Old Testament prophets (2 Pet. 3:2).

What was the nature of Scripture according to the apostles? Many if not most Christians are familiar with 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”

This is the verse most often cited in support of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Paul was speaking primarily of the Old Testament in this passage. The idea of God “breathing out” or speaking wasn’t new to Paul, however, because he knew the Old Testament well, and there he could read that “the ‘mouth’ of God was regarded as the source from which the Divine message came.”^{13} Isaiah 45:23 says, “I have sworn by Myself, The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back” (see also 55:11). Paul also would have known that Jesus quoted Deuteronomy when He replied to the tempter, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3).

Peter also taught that the Scriptures were, in effect, the speech of God. In 2 Peter 1: 20-21, he noted that prophecy was made by “men moved by the Holy Spirit [who] spoke from God.” It didn’t originate in men.

One further note. The Greek word *graphe* in the New Testament only refers to sacred Scriptures. This is the word used in 1 Timothy 5:18 and 2 Peter 3:16 to refer to the writings of the apostles.

The apostles thus were the ambassadors of Christ who spoke in His stead and delivered the message which was the standard for belief and practice. They had both their own recollections of what they witnessed and heard and the empowerment of the Spirit. The message they preached was the one they wrote down. The New Testament, like the Old, claims very clearly to be the inspired word of God.

Making a Defense

We now come to a very important part in our discussion of the inspiration of Scripture. It’s one thing to establish the biblical teaching on the nature of the Bible itself. It’s

quite another to give a defense to critics.

As I noted earlier, we frequently hear questions such as “Many religions have their own holy books. Why should we believe the Bible is special?”

When this objection comes from someone who holds to religious pluralism, before answering the question about the Bible we will have to question him on the reasonableness of pluralism itself. No amount of evidences or arguments for the Bible will make a bit of difference if the person believes that there is no right or wrong when it comes to religion.[{14}](#)

It's easy for apologists to come to rely primarily on their arguments when responding to critics, which is something even Paul wouldn't do (1 Cor. 2:3-5). What we learn from Scripture is the power of Scripture itself. “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword,” Hebrews says (4:12). Isaiah 55:11 says that God's word will accomplish his will. In Acts 2:37 we see the results of the proclamation of the word of God in changed people.

So, where am I going with this? I wonder how many people who object to our insistence that our “holy book” is the only true word of God have ever read any of it! Before we launch into a lengthy apologetic for Scripture, it might be good to get them to read it and let the Spirit open their minds to see its truth (1 Cor. 2:6-16).

Am I tossing out the entire apologetics enterprise and saying, “Look, just read the Bible and don't ask so many questions”? No. I'm simply trying to move the conversation to more fruitful ground. Once the person learns what the Bible says, he can ask specific questions about its content, or we can ask him what about it makes him think it might *not* be God's word.

The Bible clearly claims to be the authoritative word of God, and as such it makes demands on us. So, at least the *tone* of Scripture is what we might expect of a book with God as its

source. But does it give evidence that it *must* have God as its source? And does its self-witness find confirmation in our experience?

Regarding the necessity of having God as its source, we can consider prophecy. Who else but God could know what would happen hundreds of years in the future? What mere human could get 300 prophecies correct about one person (Jesus)?[{15}](#)

The Bible's insight into human nature and the solutions it provides to our fallen condition are also evidence of its divine source. In addition, the Bible's honesty about the weaknesses of even its heroes is evidence that it isn't just a human book. By contrast, we tend to build ourselves up in our own writing.

As further evidence that the Bible is God's word, we can note its survival and influence throughout the last two millennia despite repeated attempts to destroy it.

What Scripture proclaims about itself finds confirmation in our experience. For example, the practical changes it brings in individuals and societies are evidence that it is true.

One more note. We have the testimony of Jesus about Scripture whose resurrection is evidence that He knew what He was talking about!

In sum, the testimony of Scripture to its own nature finds confirmation in many areas.[{16}](#) Even with all this evidence, however, we aren't going to be able to prove the inspiration of the Bible to anyone who either isn't interested enough to give it serious thought or to the critic who only wants to argue. But we can share its message, make attempts at gentle persuasion and answer questions as we wait for the Spirit to open the person's mind and heart.

Notes

1. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4, *The God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), 129.
2. Class notes, *Introduction to Theology*, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, May 4, 1987. See also Warfield cited in Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 4:141.
3. L. Gaussen, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1949), 145. See the entire section, pp. 145-152.
4. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 107.
5. Warfield, 108-09.
6. Ibid., 110-11.
7. René Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 81.
8. John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 24.
9. Wenham, 113.
10. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 21.
11. Ibid.
12. Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of the New Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry ;(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 192, 193.
13. Ibid., 193.
14. For help in dealing with relativism and religious pluralism, see these other Probe articles: Don Closson, [How Do You Spell Truth?](#) and Rick Rood, [Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions](#).
15. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, rev. ed. (San Bernardino, Ca.: Here's Life Publishers, ;1979), 144.
16. See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), esp. chaps. 8 and 9.

The Purpose of Life

Paul Rutherford looks at the purpose of life from his Christian perspective as well as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Hollywood.

On a warm day recently I visited my alma mater. And between the hallowed halls of old, a chance encounter reconnected me with an old friend. Eager for news, she asked me what I'd done since graduating, and my easy reply included mission work and how much I enjoy it. She smiled and said, "That's great, as long as you're happy." Have you had this type of conversation before?



If you have, then perhaps you also understand my consternation at my friend's response. I don't do mission work to be happy. I do it to honor and please the Lord Jesus Christ. On some level I felt misunderstood. Yet, her response indicates, I think, a prominent view held in our culture that happiness is what really matters. As far as her response is concerned, I could just as well have taken a job at a coffee shop, so long as I was happy.

Her response, while not uncommon, demonstrates a prevailing value in our culture today—pluralism. Mankind's ultimate purpose can be attained through multiple acceptable means, be they religion, economics, or otherwise.

You might be saying to yourself, "How did you get from your friend's comment about your happiness to mankind's ultimate purpose?" Good question. I skipped a few steps. When my friend

bases her approval of what others do on their happiness, that means that what they *do* to be happy matters less than the fact that they *are* happy. Being happy then becomes the primary purpose or aim in life. You see? Happiness becomes a sort of general unit of measure for life's success. Since I am happy in life, I received my friend's stamp of approval.

But what is our ultimate purpose? Isn't that the million dollar question! And it's precisely the question I want to explore in this article. The answer you give will depend on your perspective. So I'll consider several different perspectives, or worldviews, including my own, Christianity. Contrary to current thinking, the fact that there are different perspectives which result in differing meanings to life does not mean that all perspectives are equally true or even valid. Truth is found in Scripture so that's where we look to discover the true meaning of life.

As a Christian, I believe the ultimate purpose in life is salvation; that is, after I die I want to be with God for eternity.

"Being with God for eternity is great," you might say. "But how does one do that?" That's a great question. Certainly not all Christians will state it the same way, but the answer is believing in Jesus Christ of Nazareth as God who died for your sins and rose again to new life (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4). A Christian living out this principle patterns his life and relationships after Jesus Christ—serving, loving, and teaching.

Christianity is unmistakably present in America, but obviously this isn't the case in every culture. Next we'll consider mankind's purpose according to a very different worldview closer to home than you might think: Buddhism.

Buddhism

I was at a diner last week grabbing a late night burger with my friend from Bible study, and I mentioned a desire to start a new workout regimen. He handed me a business card for a place doing some new form of [yoga](#), apparently really good for you.

Is it me, or does yoga seem to be increasing in currency among Christians as just one more way to work out?

It's totally fine for Christians to practice yoga as physical exercise, isn't it? The answer is too complex to say here, but the sheer fact that we pose the question underscores the unmistakable impression yoga has made on American culture.

What if I did practice yoga? What if I were a practicing Buddhist? Would that make a difference anyway? I think so.

To ask a larger question, what is our ultimate purpose? Once again, the answer depends upon your perspective. For the yoga-practicing Buddhist, the answer is nothing. Literally. The ultimate purpose for life is to cease to exist, or what is called *nirvana*.

Traditionally understood to be from India, yoga is a discipline of the mind and the body, and is actively practiced today by both Buddhists and Hindus.^{1} But increasingly, Americans have jettisoned the spiritual disciplines of yoga, ignoring its spiritual aspects, in favor of the sheerly physical, often in lieu of the morning jog.

Now, ceasing to exist, or *nirvana*, may seem more like an anti-purpose for life because it is defined by not living rather than that for which one lives. Nevertheless, much thought and action is involved in this monumental goal of *nirvana*.

One such step in attaining *nirvana* is realizing the second of the Four Noble Truths: all frustration in life arises from

desire. Did that make your head spin? It makes mine spin. Simply put, frustration is an unmet expectation or desire, so frustration's origin then, is desire.

Life is filled with desires—food, shelter, or clothing may be the first to come to mind—but there are a myriad of others from cars, to jewelry, technology, even relationships.

Follow me here. Since desire leads to frustration, the best way to eliminate frustration is to eliminate desire. This is precisely the path to *nirvana*, the elimination of desire. Therefore, we must cease to exist in order to free ourselves from this frustration or suffering.

Do you see the difference in life's purpose? The ultimate purpose in life for the Christian is to be with God for eternity, but for a Buddhist it's to cease to exist. Very different indeed.

Hinduism

Fifty singers gather on a Sunday morning in Queens. The director groups them together and gives them one final word of instruction before they begin. Listeners don't entirely fall silent. Priests in the background continue to laugh among themselves, as the choir begins, "Om! Ganesha Sharanam!"

Notice something different about this picture? It may not fit your expectations. That's because this choir isn't singing praise to Jesus Christ; they aren't even in a church. Rather they're Hindus worshipping in their New York temple.

Surprised? So were many of the devotees gathered that Sunday morning in late August 2009, the New York Times reported. [{2}](#) Most of the faithful Hindus worshipping there for years had never before heard a Hindu choir. It is a mix of both Hindu and Christian traditions.

This story testifies to the strange and wonderful effects of

very different religions meeting in a single culture, and undoubtedly demonstrates the pervasiveness of Hinduism in American culture today.

Choirs seem so commonplace in America. How can a Hindu, like those mentioned earlier, have never heard one in his own religion before? The answer lies in the difference between Hindu and Christian worship.

Hindu worship tends to be much more individualistic. And while predominantly occurring at a temple rather than at one's home, Hindu worship is more focused on prayers and rituals rather than on an assembly or gathering as a Christian understands a church service.

Take a step back. Ask a larger question. Why does the Hindu go to temple? What's his motivation? The answer? To appease a myriad of gods in hopes of being reincarnated in the next life as a higher life form. If you're a human being listening to this right now, then you've already had thousands of good lifetimes prior, combined to bring you to your current form.

To be fair, Hinduism is a huge religion with over one billion practitioners, spanning thousands of years, and existing in multiple different cultures. Some scholars believe it is the oldest recorded religion. So to ascribe the Hindu's motivation as wanting to please the gods is a drastic oversimplification, but is nonetheless true for many if not most Hindus.

You see, for the Hindu the world exists eternally. People die and are reborn all the time in a never-ending cycle. The ultimate purpose for life, then, is to be freed from the never-ending cycle of rebirth and become one with Brahma, or the ultimate singularity of the universe. This release is called *moksha*. It's achieved by offering sacrifices to the gods, including prayers, and right living.

Does this sound like your life? If not, you're probably not

Hindu. This further underscores the fact that all religions at their core may not all be the same.

Islam

“Boycott Facebook” reads the placard of an Islamist protestor in Karachi.

Late spring 2010 in Pakistan, a Facebook page declares, “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” A Pakistani high court deems the material highly offensive, and the entire Facebook website was shut down within its borders as a result, the *Wall Street Journal* reports.[\[3\]](#)

Ban Facebook! You may find yourself asking, why would anyone ever do that? What about rights to free speech, or exercise of religion? Doesn't a Facebook ban deny people just such rights? Well, under a government far less liberal in doling out these liberties, claiming rights quickly makes a sticky situation.

But the short answer to the motivation for banning Facebook is because they're Muslim, and as such they regard as sacred Mohammed, their most famed prophet. He's so sacred, in fact, that to depict him in a portrait is a kind of blasphemy. Hence art from Muslim cultures is either calligraphy or geometric (think mosaics).

There is more going on here beneath the surface, leading an entire country to ban Facebook. It's not just reverence for a significant religio-cultural phenomenon, or even devotion to their faith. No, it goes deeper than that. Muslims have a different perspective from most Westerners on how this world operates at its most fundamental level.

For the Muslim there is one God, Allah. He is the supreme unquestioned creator and Lord of the universe who revealed his intentions for mankind through his prophet Mohammed. Reverence for Allah is paramount, even above the value of the individual. This leads Muslims to value obedience to Allah

over freedoms of the individual. In this case obedience is not portraying Mohammed.

You may respond by posing once again the previous question: what about a man's right to speech or religion? But for the Muslim, you're simply asking the wrong question. A better question the Muslim would ask is, what about putting Mohammed in his proper place, and by extension obeying Allah?

The ultimate purpose in life for a Muslim is to obey Allah and to be rewarded after life by entering paradise. Unlike Christians, Muslims do not believe mankind is sinful and in need of a savior, but only needs to perform the right actions, of which we are certainly capable. While Muslims hope for the mercy of Allah, the right to enter paradise is a result of obedience, not his grace. So central is this unmitigated obedience to Muslims, that many give their lives to defend Allah and their way of life.

Rights to free speech aside, when given the choice between a Facebook ban and martyrdom, suddenly Facebook deprivation doesn't seem so bad.

Hollywood

An honest working man returns home from a rough day at the office. He's a struggling ad specialist for a sports magazine. He's in his mid-thirties, single, and completely eligible. But the right woman just hasn't come along. He's a handsome, brown-haired man with kind blue eyes and a knack for making you want to trust him when he flashes you his easy smile. We long for him to find satisfaction in someone as we trace the story of his search.

One night he meets a dashing young lady. Our hearts jump for him. A relationship ensues and they grow closer. One night in desperation to express his deepest and truest feelings for the gal, he confesses, "You complete me." Perhaps now you realize

I'm describing the story from Hollywood's hit 1996 film, *Jerry Maguire*.

We've been considering the ultimate purpose of man from different perspectives, and, with an ever-increasing number of Americans considering themselves not religious, I've gone to a secular source for consideration: Hollywood.

Jerry Maguire's famous confession, "You complete me," is a wonderful illustration of mankind's ultimate purpose being himself, or what is called humanism. Maguire realizes something is missing in his life. He longs for satisfaction, for joy, for love, but his seeming inability to find it causes him pain. We realize that the world in which we live is broken and imperfect, and who would disagree?

Maguire finds in this woman, in this relationship, the completion of himself. He looks to her to be what he cannot be himself. In so doing, he creates out of her a savior. He looks to her to save him from his misery of singleness and heartache. He needs her in order to be whole himself.

This story is a clear demonstration of mankind looking to himself to be his ultimate purpose. I am generalizing a bit to choose words from a single film, but many messages from Hollywood films don't contradict this theme. We want to be able to save ourselves. Isn't that the American ideal: pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps?

Beware what Hollywood would have us believe, that our ultimate purpose is ourselves, and only we can save ourselves. Hollywood would have us believe that life can be found in relationships, people, or even ourselves. It's a lie. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Only Jesus can save mankind. Serving Him is the only purpose that will bring satisfaction and joy in life, only in Him alone.

"What is my ultimate purpose?" That's the question. The

answers we've considered from different perspectives range from happiness to appeasing the gods. Why does it matter? Because your ultimate purpose determines how you live, and while we may all be alike, since we are all human, when it comes to what really matters in life, we are very different indeed.

Notes

1. "Yoga," Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga (accessed May 6, 2010).
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Putting Beliefs Into Practice Revisited: Twenty-somethings and Faithful Living

Rick Wade updates his [earlier discussion](#) of 3 major ingredients necessary for Christians' faithful living: convictions, character, and community.

A Turning Point

In recent months Probe has focused more and more attention on the state of the younger generations in the evangelical church regarding their fidelity to basic Christian doctrines and Christian practices like prayer and church attendance. Our

concern has deepened as we've become more aware of the fact that, not only is the grasp on Christian beliefs and practices loosening, but that some unbiblical beliefs and practices in our secular culture are seen as acceptable for Christians.



With this in mind it seems appropriate to revisit a [program](#) I wrote over ten years ago on the necessity of linking our beliefs with the way we live in order to practice a healthy Christian life. It was based on Steven Garber's book *The Fabric of Faithfulness*.[{1}](#) Garber's book was written with college students in mind. However, the principles are the same for people in other stages of life as well.

The Fabric of Faithfulness was written to help students in the critical task of establishing moral meaning in their lives. By "moral meaning" he is referring to the moral significance of the general direction of our lives and of the things we do with our days. "How is it," he asks, "that someone decides which cares and commitments will give shape and substance to life, for life?"[{2}](#)

In this article I want to look at three significant factors which form the foundations for making our lives fit our beliefs: convictions, character, and community.[{3}](#)

For many young people, college provides the context for what the late Erik Erikson referred to as a *turning point*, "a crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable."[{4}](#) However, as sociologists Christian Smith and Patricia Snell report, graduation from college is no longer the marker for the transition of youth to adult.[{5}](#) Steve Cable notes that "most young adults assume that they will go through an extended period of transition, trying different life experiences, living arrangements, careers, relationships,

and viewpoints until they finally are able to stand on their own and settle down. . . . Some researchers refer to this recently created life phase as 'emerging adulthood,' covering the period from 18 to 29." {6}

Telos and Praxis

The young adult years are often taken as a time to sow one's wild oats, to have lots of fun before the pressures (and dull routine!) of "real life" settle in. Too much playing, however, delays one's preparation for those pressures. In addition, bad choices can be made during that time that will negatively affect the course of one's life.

Theologian Jacques Ellul gives this charge to young people:

"Remember your Creator during your youth: when all possibilities lie open before you and you can offer all your strength intact for his service. The time to remember is not after you become senile and paralyzed! . . . You must take sides earlier—when you can actually make choices, when you have many paths opening at your feet, before the weight of necessity overwhelms you." {7}

Living in a time when so many things seem so uncertain, how do we even *begin* to think about setting a course for the future? Steven Garber uses a couple of Greek words to identify two foundational aspects of life which determine its shape to a great extent: *telos* and *praxis*. *Telos* is the word for the end toward which something is moving or developing. It is the goal, the culmination, the final form which gives meaning to all that goes before it. The goal of Christians is to be made complete in Christ as Paul said in Colossians 1:28: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature [or complete or perfect] in Christ." This over-arching *telos* or goal should govern the entirety of our lives.

Garber's second word, *praxis*, means action or deed. {8} Jesus

uses the word in Matthew 16:27 when he speaks of us being repaid according to our deeds or *praxis*.

While everyone engages in some kind of *praxis* or deeds, in the postmodern world there is little thought given to *telos* because many people believe no one can *know* what is ultimately real, what is eternal, and thus where we are going. We are told, on the one hand, that our lives are completely open and free and the outcome is totally up to us, but, on the other, that our lives are determined and it doesn't matter what we do. How are we to make sense of our lives if either of those is true?

Where we begin is the basic beliefs that comprise the *telos* of the Christian; i.e., our convictions.

Convictions: Where It Begins

When we think of our "end" in Christ we're thinking of something much bigger and more substantive than just where we will spend eternity. We're thinking of the goal toward which history is marching. In His eternal wisdom God chose to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). New Testament scholar J. B. Lightfoot wrote that this refers to "the entire harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ."[\[9\]](#) It is the *telos* or "end" of Christians to be made perfect parts of the new creation.

Who is this Jesus and what did he teach? He said that He is the only way to God, and that our connection with Him is by faith, but a faith that results in godly living. He talked about sin and its destruction, and about true faith and obedience. What Jesus said and did provide the content and ground of our convictions, and these convictions provide the ground and direction for the way we live. These aren't just religious ideas we've chosen to adopt. They are true to the

way things are.

Garber tells the story of Dan Heimbach who served on President George H. W. Bush's Domestic Policy Council. Heimbach sensed a need while in high school to be truly authentic with respect to his beliefs. He wanted to know if Christianity was really true. When serving in Vietnam he began asking himself whether he could really live with his convictions. He says,

“Everyone had overwhelmingly different value systems. While there I once asked myself why I had to be so different. With a sense of tremendous internal challenge I could say that the one thing keeping me from being like the others was that deep down I was convinced of the truth of my faith; this moment highlighted what truth meant to me, and I couldn't turn my back on what I knew to be true.”[\[10\]](#)

Christian teachings that we believe give meaning to our existence; they provide an intellectual anchor in a world of multiple and conflicting beliefs, and give direction for our lives. For a person to live consistently as a Christian, he or she must know at least basic Christian doctrines, and be convinced that they are “true truth” as Francis Schaeffer put it: what is really true.

Character: Living It Out

So our beliefs must be grounded in Christ. But we can't stop there. Not only do we need to receive as true what Jesus taught, we also need to live it out as He did. After telling the Corinthians to do all things to the glory of God, Paul added that they should “be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Morality is inextricably wedded to the way the world is. A universe formed by matter and chance cannot provide moral meaning. The idea of a “cosmos without purpose,” says Garber, “is at the heart of the challenge facing students in the

modern world.”[\[11\]](#) This is a challenge for all of us, student and non-student. Such a world provides no rules or structure for life. Christianity, on the other hand, provides a basis for responsible living for there is a God back of it all who is a moral being, who created the universe and the people in it to function certain ways. To not live in keeping with the way things are is to invite disaster.

If we accept that Christianity *does* provide for the proper development of character in the individual based on the truth of its teachings, we must then ask *how* that development comes about. Garber believes an important component in that process is a mentor or guide.

Grace Tazelaar graduated from Wheaton College, went into nursing, and later taught in the country of Uganda as it was being rebuilt following the reign of Idi Amin. At some point she asked a former teacher to be her spiritual mentor. Says Garber, “This woman, who had spent years in South Africa, gave herself to Grace as she was beginning to explore her own place of responsible service.” Grace saw her mentor’s beliefs worked out in real life.[\[12\]](#)

The White Rose was a group of students in Germany who opposed Nazism. Brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl were strongly influenced in their work by Carl Muth, a theologian and editor of an anti-Nazi periodical. One writer noted that “The Christian Gospel became the criterion of their thought and actions.” Their convictions carried them to the point of literally losing their heads for their opposition.

Being a mentor involves more than teaching others how to have quiet times. They need to see how Christianity is fleshed out in real life, and they need encouragement to extend themselves to a world in need in Jesus’ name, using their own gifts and personalities.

Community: A Place to Grow

Garber adds one more important element to the mix of elements important in being a Christian. We've looked at the matter of convictions, the beliefs we hold which give direction and shape to our lives. Then we talked about the development of character, the way those beliefs are worked out in our lives. Community is the third part of this project of "weaving together belief and behavior" (the sub-title of Garber's book), the place where we see that character worked out in practice.

Christian doctrines can seem so abstract and distant. How does one truly hold to them in a world which thinks so differently? Bob Kramer, who was involved in student protests at Harvard in the '60s, said he and his wife learned the importance of surrounding themselves with people who also wanted to connect *telos* with *praxis*. He said, "As I have gotten involved in politics and business, I am more and more convinced that the people you choose to have around you have more to do with how you act upon what you believe than what you read or the ideas that influence you. The influence of ideas has to be there, but the application is something it's very hard to work out by yourself." [\[13\]](#)

The Christian community (or the church), if it's functioning properly, can provide a solid plausibility structure for those who are finding their way. To read about love and forgiveness and kindness and self-sacrifice is one thing; to see it lived out within a body of people is quite another. It provides significant evidence that the convictions are valid. "We discover who we are," says Garber, "and who we are meant to be—face to face and side by side with others in work, love and learning." [\[14\]](#)

During their university years and early twenties, if they care about the course of their lives, young people will have to make major decisions about what they believe and what those

beliefs mean. Garber writes, "Choices about meaning, reality and truth, about God, human nature and history are being made which, more often than not, last for the rest of life. Learning to make sense of life, for life, is what the years between adolescence and adulthood are all about."[\[15\]](#)

Convictions, character, and community are three major ingredients for producing a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God, for putting together our *telos* and our *praxis*.

Notes

1. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996). An expanded edition was published in 2007 under the shortened title *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*.

2. Ibid., 27.

3. Ibid., 37.

4. Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 138, quoted in Garber, 17.

5. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

6. Steve Cable, "Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America," Probe Ministries, 2010, www.probe.org/emerging-adults-and-the-future-of-faith-in-america/.

7. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 282-83, quoted in Garber, 39.

8. Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v.

“Work,” by H.-C. Hahn (3:1157-58). [Note: The hyphen is there in the source text.]

9. J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistle of St. Paul*, 322, quoted in Brown, NIDNTT, s.v. “Head,” by C. Brown (2:163).

10. Garber, *Fabric*, 122.

11. *Ibid.*, 59.

12. *Ibid.*, 130.

13. *Ibid.*, 149.

14. *Ibid.*, 147.

15. *Ibid.*, 175.

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The Just War Tradition in the Present Crisis

Is it ever right to go to war? Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese provides understanding of just war tradition from a biblical perspective.

Searching for Answers

Recent events have prompted Christians to ask moral questions concerning the legitimacy of war. How far should we go in punishing evil? Can torture ever be justified? On what basis are these actions premised? These problems remain especially acute for those who claim the Christian faith. Fortunately, we are not the first generation to face these questions. The use of force and violence has always troubled the Christian

conscience. Jesus Christ gave his life freely without resisting. But does Christ's nonviolent approach deny government the prerogative to maintain order and establish peace through some measure of force? All government action operates on the premise of force. To deny all force, to be a dedicated pacifist, leads no less to a condition of anarchy than if one were a religious fascist. Extremes have the tendency to meet. In the past, Christians attempted to negotiate through the extremes and seek a limited and prescribed use of force in what has been called the Just War Tradition.



The Just War Tradition finds its source in several streams of Western thought: biblical teaching, law, theology, philosophy, military strategy, and common sense. Just War thinking integrates this wide variety of thought through providing Christians with a general orientation on the issues of war and peace. This tradition transcends denominational barriers and attempts to supply workable answers and solutions to very difficult moral problems. Just War has its origins in Greco-Roman thinking as well as Christian theology: Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin have all contributed to its development. [\[1\]](#)

Just War thinking does not provide sure-fire ways of fighting guilt-free wars, or offer blanket acceptance of government action. It often condemns acts of war as well as condones. Just War presents critical criteria malleable enough to address a wide assortment of circumstances. It does not give easy answers to difficult questions; instead, it provides a broad moral consensus concerning problems of justifying and controlling war. It presents a living tradition that furnishes a stock of wisdom consisting of doctrines, theories, and philosophies. Mechanical application in following Just War

teachings cannot replace critical thinking, genius, and moral circumspection in ever changing circumstances. Just War attempts to approximate justice in the temporal realm in order to achieve a temporal but lasting peace. It does not make pretensions in claiming infinite or absolute justice, which remain ephemeral and unattainable goals. Only God provides infinite justice and judgment in eternity through his own means. “‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Deut. 32:35; Heb. 10:30).

The Clash of Civilizations

To apply Just War criteria we must first have a reasonable assessment of current circumstances. The Cold War era witnessed a bipolar world consisting of two colossal opponents. The end of the Cold War has brought the demise of strict ideological battles and has propelled the advent of cultural divisions in a multi-polar world. Present and future conflicts exist across cultural lines. The “Clash of Civilizations” paradigm replaces the old model of East vs. West.^{2} People are more inclined to identify with their religious and ethnic heritage than the old ideology. The West has emerged as the global leader, leaving the rest of the world to struggle either to free itself from the West or to catch it economically and technologically. The triumph of the West—or modernized, secular, and materialist society—has created a backlash in Islamic Fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism does not represent ancient living traditions but a modern recreation of ancient beliefs with a particular emphasis on political conquest. Fundamentalists do not hesitate to enter into battle or holy war (jihad) with the enemies of God at a political and military level. The tragic events of 9/11 and the continual struggle against terrorism traces back to the hostility Islamic fundamentalists feel towards the triumph of the West. They perceive Western global hegemony [ed. note: leadership or predominant influence] as a

threat and challenge to their religious beliefs and traditions, as most Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals feel threatened by the invincible advance of modern secular society. The error of fundamentalism lies in thinking it can recreate the past and enforce those beliefs and conditions on the modern world. Coercion remains at the heart of fundamentalist practice, constituting a threat potentially worse than modern secular society.

This cultural divide causes Christians to reconsider the basis of warfare premised on the responsibilities of the state to defend civil society against the encroachments of religious extremism that fights in the name of God and for a holy cause or crusade.

This may sound strange at first to theological ears, but an absolute principle of Just War states that Christians never fight for “God and Country,” but only for “Country.” There is only a secular and civil but necessary task to be accomplished in war, never a higher mandate to inaugurate God’s kingdom. In this sense Just War thinking attempts to secularize war by which it hopes to limit its horrendous effects.

Holy War or Just War

An essential distinction divides Just War from holy war. Just War does not claim to fight in the name of God or even for eternal causes. It strictly concerns temporal and political reasons. Roland Bainton sums up this position: “War is more humane when God is left out of it.”^{3} This does not embrace atheism but a Christian recognition concerning the value, place, and responsibilities of government. The state is not God or absolute, but plays a vital role in maintaining order and peace (Matt. 22:21). The Epistles repeat this sentiment (Rom.13; 1 Peter 2: 13-17; 1 Tim.2; Titus 3:1). Government does not act as the organ or defender through which God establishes his kingdom (John 18: 36).

Government does not have the authority to enforce God's will on unwilling subjects except within a prescribed and restricted civil realm that maintains the minimum civil order for the purpose of peace. Government protects the good and punishes the evil. Government serves strictly temporal purposes "in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (2 Tim. 2:2). God establishes civil authorities for humanity's sake, not his own. Therefore, holy war that claims to fight in the name of God and for eternal truths constitutes demonic corruption of divinely sanctioned civil authority.

The following distinctions separate holy war and Just War beliefs. Holy war fights for divine causes in Crusades and Jihads to punish infidels and heretics and promote a particular faith; Just War fights for political causes to defend liberty and religious freedom. Holy war fights by divine command issuing from clerics and religious leaders; Just War fights through moral sanction. Holy war employs a heavenly mandate, Just War a state mandate. Holy war is unlimited or total; anything goes, and the enemy must be eradicated in genocide or brought to submission. The Holy War slogan is "kill 'em all and let God sort them out!" Holy war accepts one group's claim to absolute justice and goodness, which causes them to regard the other as absolutely evil. Just War practices limited war; it seeks to achieve limited temporal objectives and uses only necessary force to accomplish its task. Just War rejects genocide as a legitimate goal. Holy war fights out of unconditional obedience to faith. Just War fights out of obedience to the state, which is never incontestable. Holy war fights offensive wars of conquest; Just War fights defensive wars, generally responding to provocation. Holy war battles for God to enforce belief and compel submission. Just War defends humanity in protecting civil society, which despite its transitory and mundane role in the eternal scheme of things plays an essential part in preserving humanity from barbarism and allows for everything

else in history to exist.

Why Go to War?

Just War thinking uses two major categories to measure the legitimacy of war. The first is called *jus ad bellum* [Latin for "justice to war"]: the proper recourse to war or judging the reasons for war. This category asks questions to be answered before going to war. It has three major criteria: just authority, just cause, and just intent.

Just authority serves as the presupposition for the rest of the criteria. It requires that only recognized state authorities use force to punish evil (Rom. 13:4; 1 Pet. 2). Just War thinking does not validate individual actions against opponents, which would be terrorism, nor does it allow for paramilitary groups to take matters in their own hands. Just authority requires a formal declaration. War must be declared by a legitimate governmental authority. In the USA, Congress holds the right of formal declaration, but the President executes the war. Congressional authorization in the last sixty years has substituted for formal declaration.

Just cause is the most difficult standard to determine in a pluralistic society. Whose justice do we serve? Just War asserts the notion of comparative or limited justice. No one party has claim to absolute justice; there exists either more or less just cause on each side. Therefore, Just War thinking maintains the right to dissent. Those who believe a war immoral must not be compelled against their wills to participate. Just War thinking recognizes individual conscientious objection.

Just cause breaks down to four other considerations. First, it requires that the state *perform all its duties*. Its first duty requires self-defense and defense of the innocent. A second duty entails recovery of lost land or property, and the third

is to punish criminals and evil doers.

Second, just cause requires *proportionality*. This means that the positive results of war must outweigh its probable destructive effects. The force applied should not create greater evil than that resisted.

Third, one judges the *probability of success*. It asks, is the war winnable? Some expectation of reasonable success should exist before engaging in war. Open-ended campaigns are suspect. Clear objectives and goals must be outlined from the beginning. Warfare in the latter twentieth century abandoned objectives in favor of police action and attrition, which leads to interminable warfare.

Fourth, *last resort* means all alternative measures for resolving conflict must be exhausted before using force. However, preemptive strikes are justified if the current climate suggests an imminent attack or invasion. Last resort does not have to wait for the opponent to draw "first blood."

Just intent judges the motives and ends of war. It asks, why go to war? and, what is the end result? Motives must originate from love or at least some minimum concern for others with the end result of peace. This rules out all revenge. The goals of war aim at establishing peace and reconciliation.

The Means of War

The proper conduct in war or judging the means of war is *jus in bello* [Latin for "justice in war"], the second category used to measure conflict. It has two primary standards: proportionality and discrimination.

Proportionality maintains that the employed necessary force not outweigh its objectives. It measures the means according to the ends and condemns all overkill. One should not use a bomb where a bullet will do.

Discrimination basically means non-combatant immunity. A "combatant" is anyone who by reasonable standard is actively engaged in an attempt to destroy you. POW's, civilians, chaplains, medics, and children are all non-combatants and therefore exempt from targeting. Buildings such as hospitals, museums, places of worship and landmarks share the same status. However, those previously thought to be non-combatants may forfeit immunity if they participate in fighting. If a place of worship becomes a stash for weapons and a safe-house for opponents, it loses its non-combatant status.

A proper understanding of discrimination does not mean that non-combatants may never be killed, but only that they are never intentionally targeted. The tragic reality of every war is that non-combatants will be killed. Discrimination attempts to minimize these incidents so they become the exception rather than the rule.

Killing innocent lives in war may be justified under the principle of *double effect*. This rule allows for the death of non-combatants if they were unintended and accidental. Their deaths equal the collateral effects of just intent. Double effect states that each action has more than one effect, even though only one effect was intentional, the other accidental. Self-defense therefore intends to save one's life or that of another but has the accidental effect of the death of the third party.

The double effect principle is the most controversial aspect of the Just War criteria and will be subject to abuse. Therefore, it must adhere to its own criteria. Certain conditions apply before invoking double effect. First, the act should be good. It should qualify as a legitimate act of war. Second, a good effect must be intended. Third, the evil effect cannot act as an end in itself, and must be minimized with risk to the acting party. Lastly, the good effect always outweighs the evil effect.

Given the ferocity of war, it is understandable that many will scoff at the notion of Just War. However, Just War thinking accepts war and force as part of the human condition (Matt. 24:6) and hopes to arrive at the goal of peace through realistic yet morally appropriate methods. It does not promote war but seeks to mitigate its dreadful effects. Just War thinking morally informs Western culture to limit its acts of war and not to exploit its full technological capability, which could only result in genocide and total war.

Notes

1. The following books are helpful sources on Just War thinking: Robert G. Clouse, ed. *War: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991); Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall the Modern War be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961); Lawrence J. Terlizzese, "The Just War Tradition and Nuclear Weapons in the Post Cold War Era" (Master's Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1994).
2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
3. Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 49.

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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

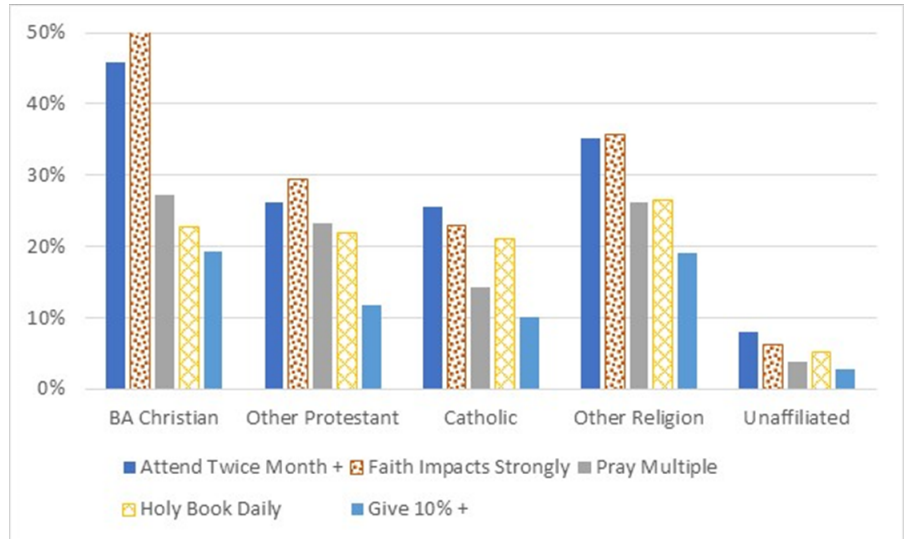
We will begin by looking at two different levels of religious activity: a Nominal Level and a Committed Level as shown in Table 1 below.

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

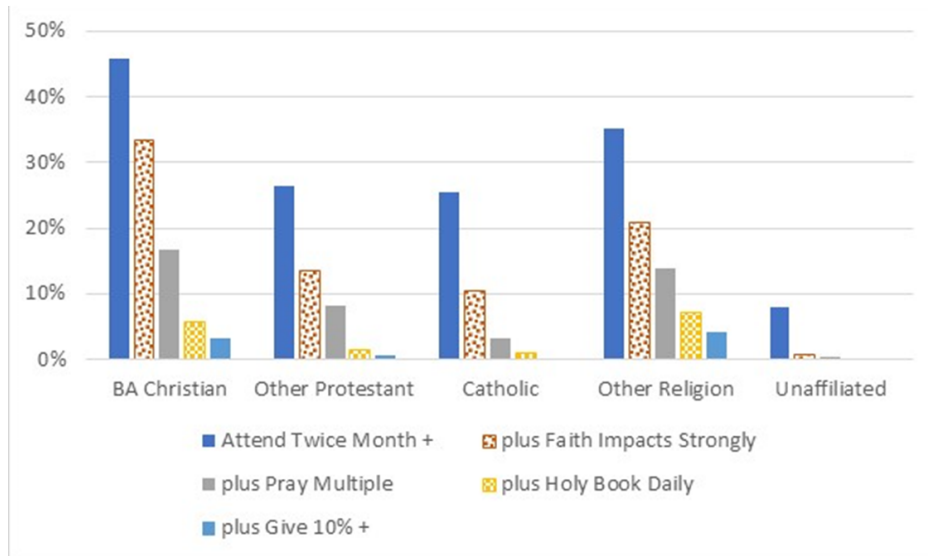


Committed Level of Religious Activity

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.

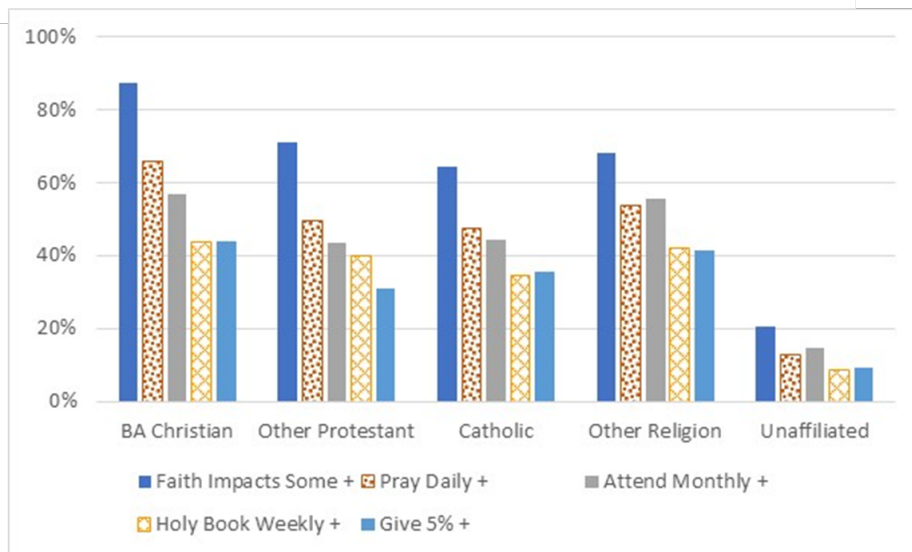
Also note that the entire Unaffiliated group reports less than 8% on each of these practices and less than 1% who claim to do even two of these practices.

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



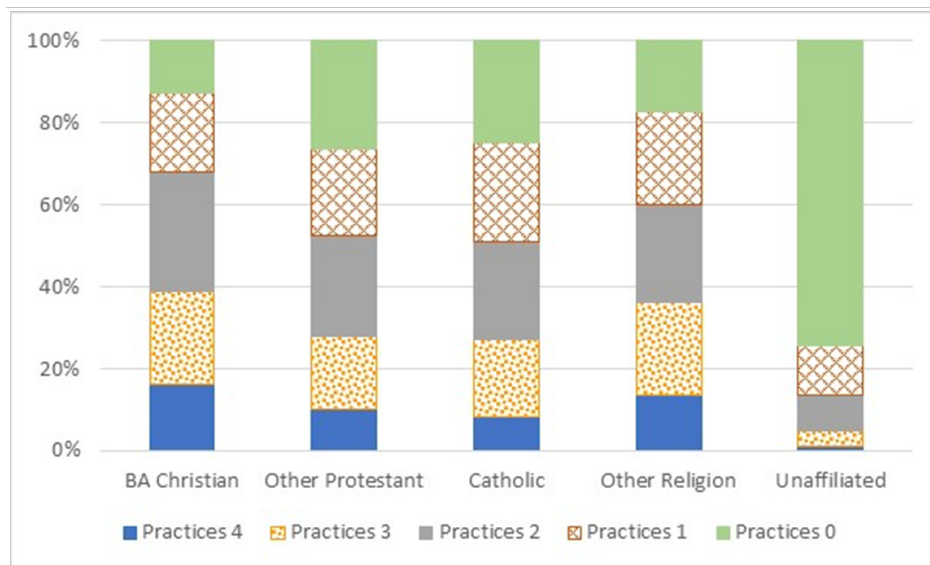
Now let's look at those with at least a Nominal level of religious practice (i.e., those who select the nominal level or the committed level). As shown in the figure, this is a much lower bar with all religious faiths hovering over 60% on those who agree/strongly agree that their faith has a significant 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.

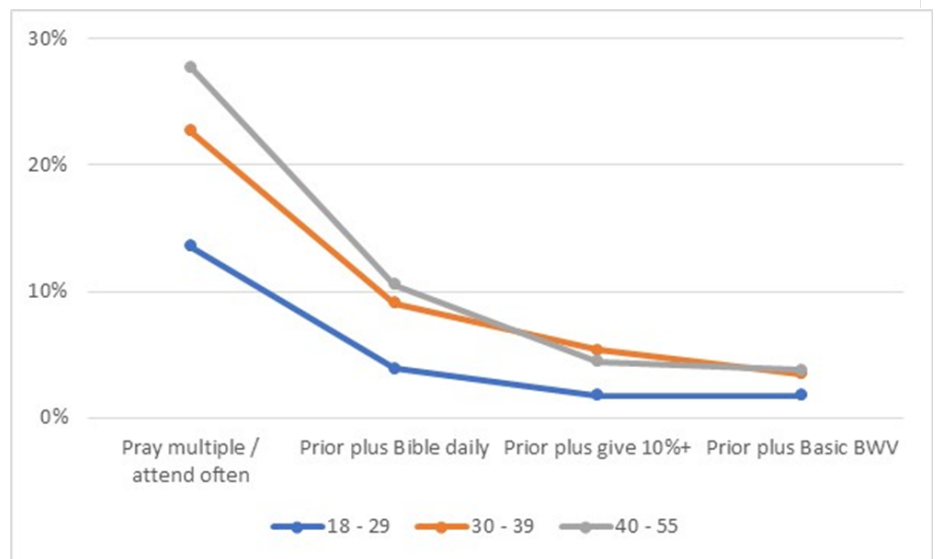
It is worth noting that Other Protestants and Catholics do not lag far behind Born Again Christians in the percentage doing at least three of the activities. This difference is a significant contrast to the Basic Biblical Worldview questions and the "who is Jesus" questions where these other religious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

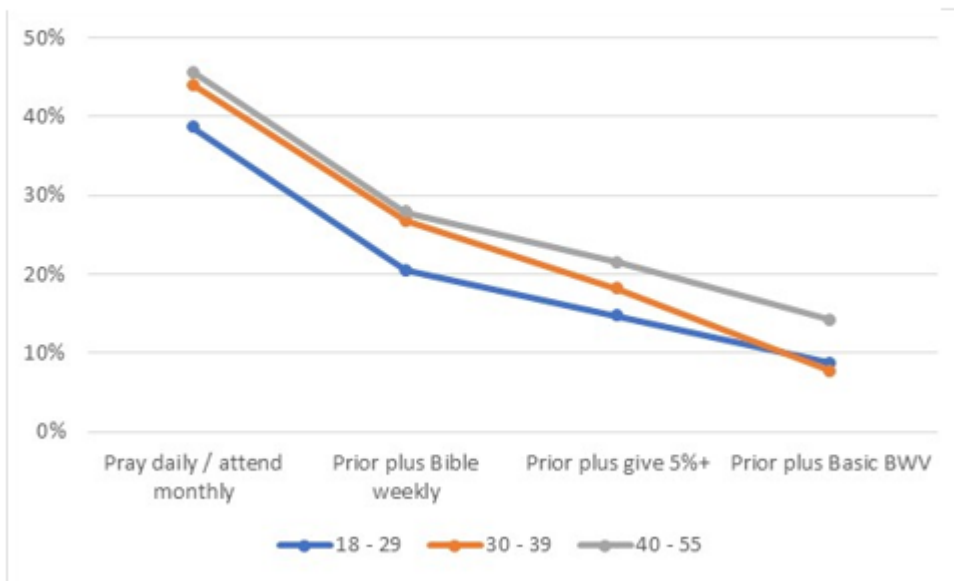
Variations by Age among Born Again Christians

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.

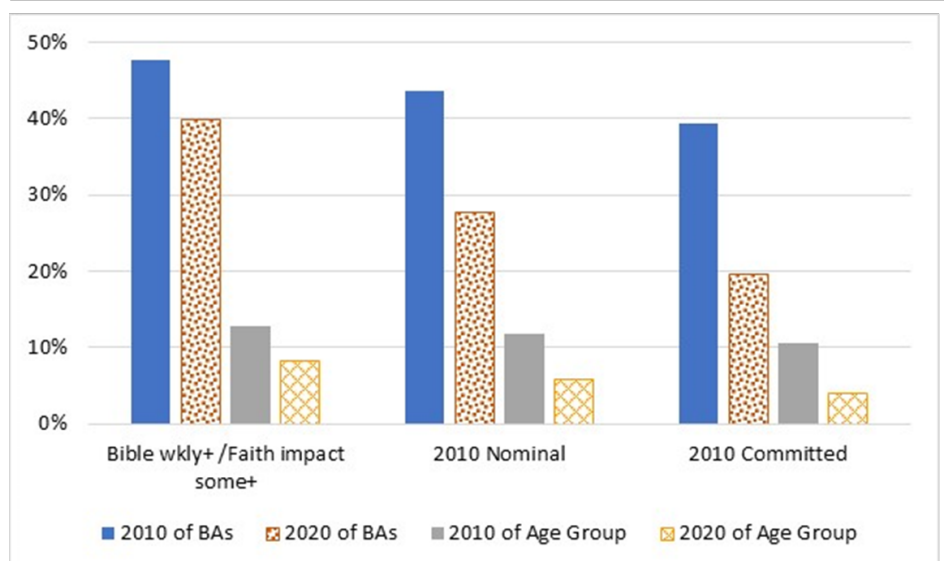
Figure 6 At Least a Nominal Level of Religious Activity for Born Again Christians by Age Range



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.

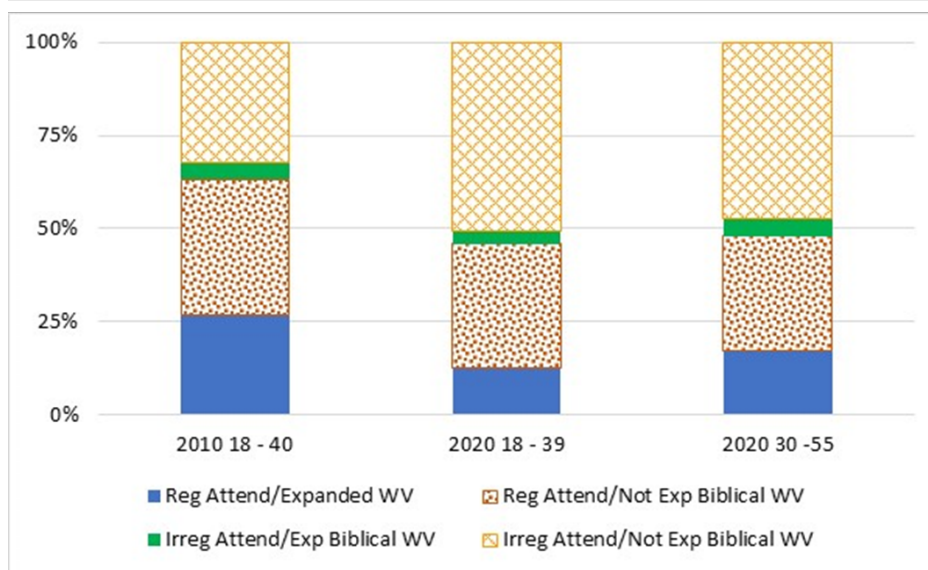
What we see is that the drop-off in the 2010 Nominal category is from 44% to 28% and the drop-off in the 2010 Committed category is down one half from 40% to 20%. These numbers reflect an astounding drop in the importance that Born Again Christians place on these simple religious activities.

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.

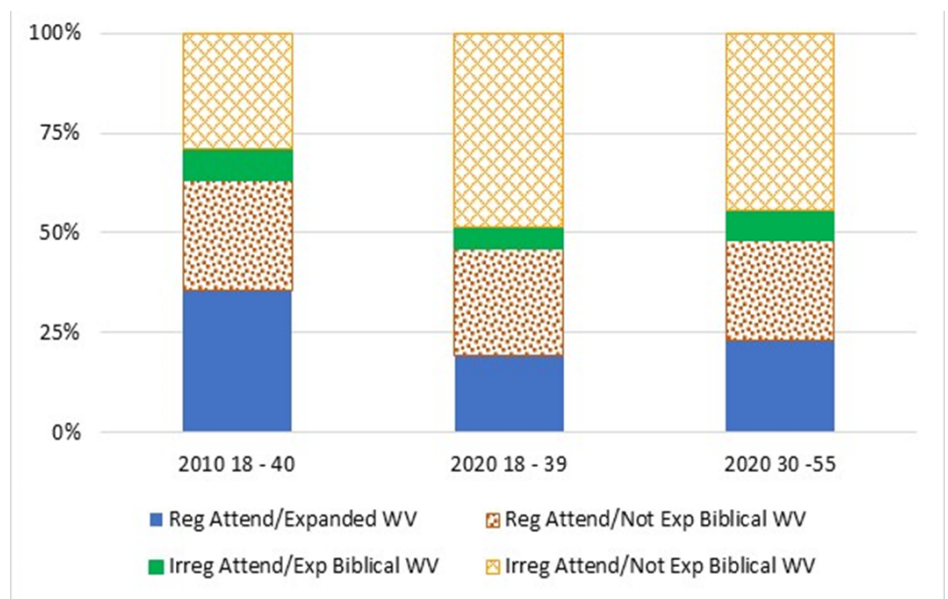
Looking at those with regular attendance and an Expanded Biblical Worldview we see a significant reduction among 18- to 29-year-olds in 2020 (27% down to 13%) with a lesser reduction among 30- to 55-year-olds down to 17%. The percentage of regular attenders without an Expanded Biblical Worldview has 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



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.

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.

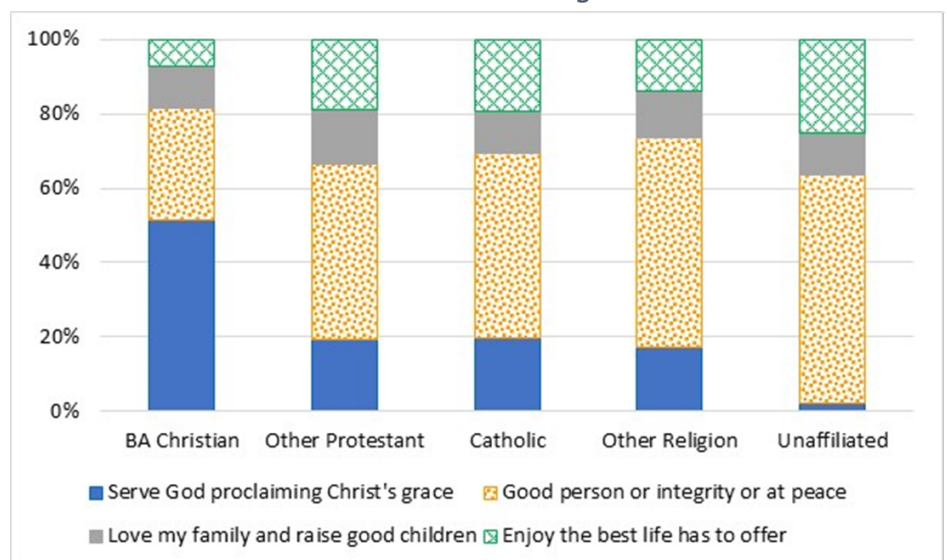
5. To enjoy the best life has to offer, e.g. success, money, travel.

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.

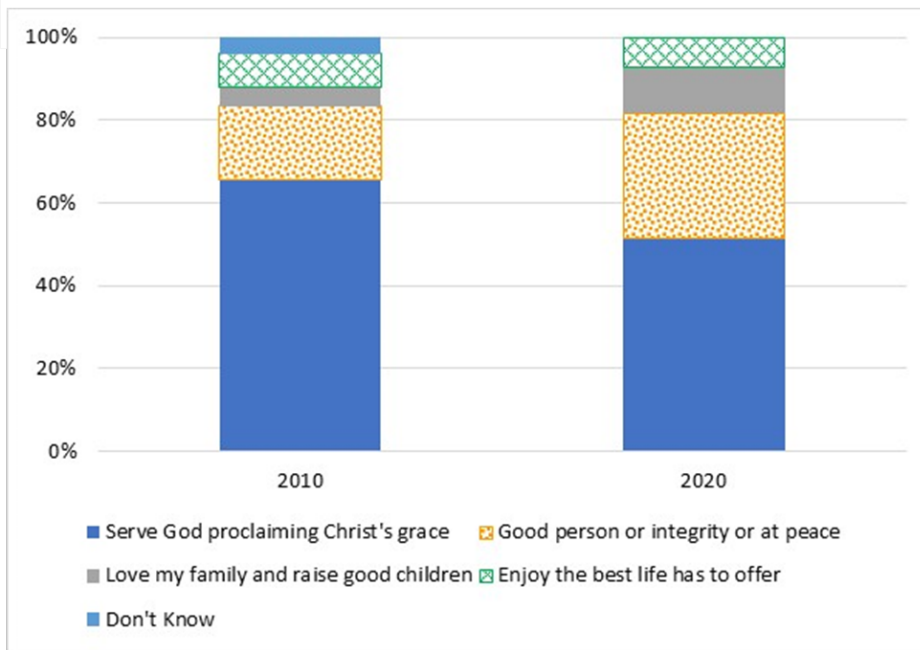
*Figure 24 My Ultimate Purpose for Living
Americans 18 through 39*



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 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?

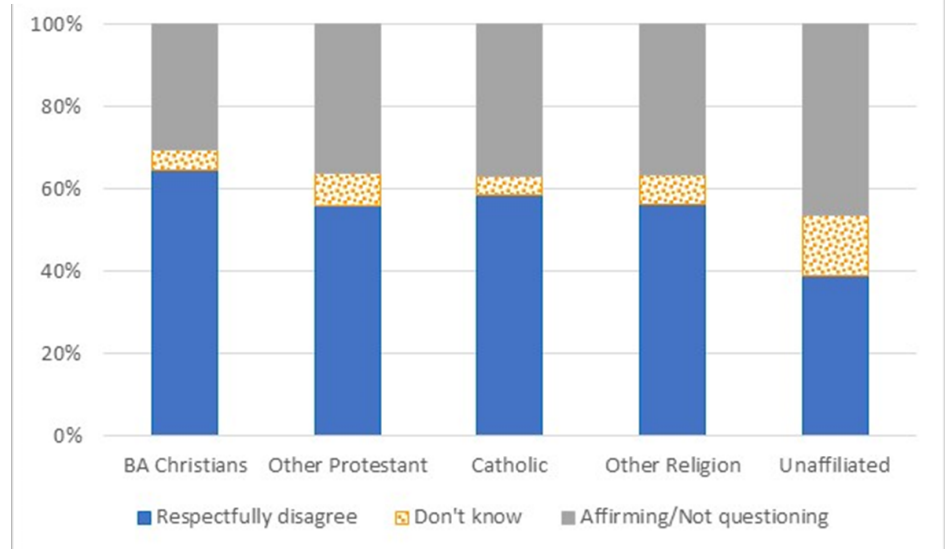
To explore this question, we asked two different questions dealing with how to treat those who have a different religious viewpoint. The first question we asked on this topic is “What does Tolerance mean to you?” The respondents chose from four possible answers:

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

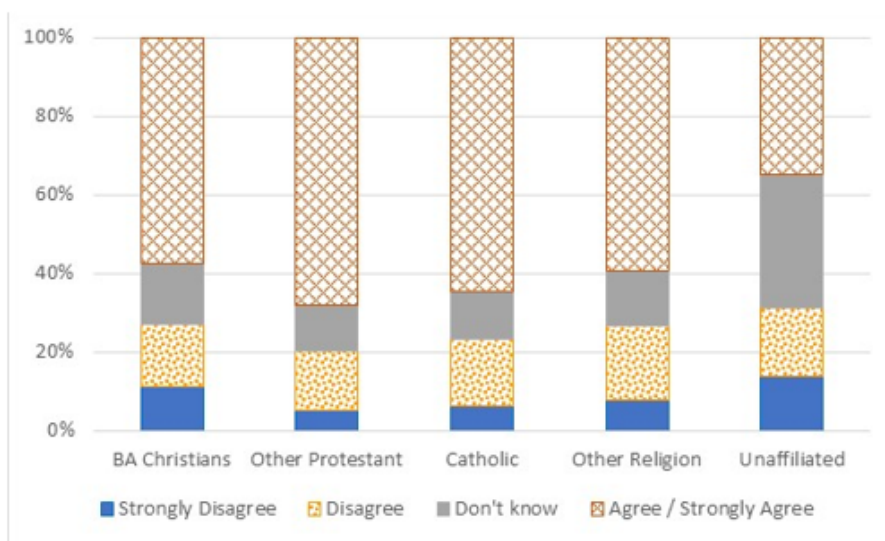
In figure 1, we see how the definitions are distributed. Almost two thirds (65%) of young adult, Born Again Christians selected a classic definition of tolerance.



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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Probe Religious Views Study 2020 – Do Christians Believe in Christ as the Only Savior of the World?

Steve Cable explores the results of Probe’s new 2020 survey, examining what people believe about Jesus in His time on earth, and His claim to be the only way to the Father.

Our 2020 survey reveals a striking decline in evangelical religious beliefs and practices over the last ten years. In

our first article, we saw a significant degradation in the percentage of American young adults who are born again^{1} and profess a biblically informed worldview^{2}. Perhaps a biblical worldview, as defined by the set of questions we used, is not an accurate gauge of an orthodox Christian belief.

In this article, we will look at several other areas designed to identify those people who closely align their thoughts with the teaching of the Bible. We will look at two areas of belief for all American young adults and for Born Again Protestants in greater detail:

1. Do you believe in some critical aspects of Jesus Christ and His time on earth?
2. Do you believe that Jesus was right in saying “No one comes to the Father except by Me”?

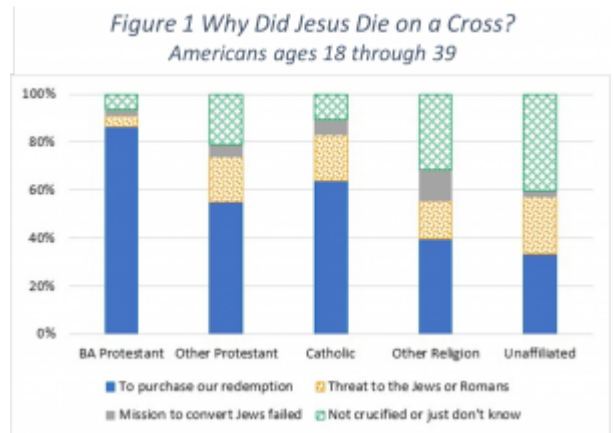
We will look at these two areas alone and then see how those with a biblical worldview align with these questions.

Topic 1: What About Jesus and His Time on Earth?

In our survey, we asked three questions specifically about Jesus. The first question was about what caused Jesus to die on a cross as given below.

1. Why did Jesus die on a cross?
 - a. He threatened the Roman authorities' control over Israel.
 - b. He threatened the stature of the Jewish leaders of the day.
 - c. To redeem us by taking our sins and our punishment upon Himself.
 - d. He never died on a cross.
 - e. He failed in his mission to convert the Jewish people into believers.
 - f. I don't know.

The responses for ages 18 through 39 are shown in Figure 1. As shown, Born Again Protestants have a far greater percentage, over 85%, stating that Jesus was crucified to purchase our redemption. One would suspect that all Protestant and Catholic leaders would want their people to know that Jesus' death on the cross was for their redemption. Yet, less than two thirds of each group selected that answer. Note that the answer to this question did not say that salvation was through grace alone. So even those with a works-based gospel should still select that answer.



A fair number of Other Protestants and Catholics (about 20% of each group) said that either the Jewish leaders or the Romans caused Jesus' death on the cross. But any Christian should realize that Jesus had to choose crucifixion. Prior attempts by authoritative groups demonstrated that they could not lay a hand on him otherwise.

Interestingly, about 40% of Other Religions and 30% of the Unaffiliated say Jesus died to redeem us. They understand this is what Christians say about Jesus' crucifixion. It is the best answer for them because it doesn't say that Jesus' death actually worked to redeem us, only that He did it to redeem us. Also note that roughly one third of the Other Religion category is made up of people who affiliate with Christian cults, e.g. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

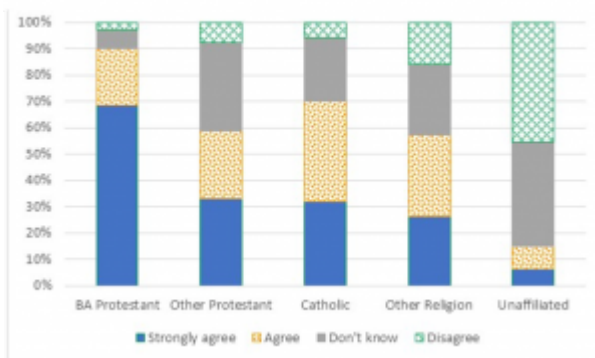
The second question is:

2. Jesus will return to this earth to save those who await His coming.

a. **Answers ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.**

This question is almost a quote of Hebrews 9:27-28 ESV, “And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” As you can see, this verse answers question 1 and question 2. The apostle Paul writing in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 says, “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” He makes it clear that the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to call us to Himself.

*Figure 2 Jesus Will Return to Save Us
Americans Ages 18 through 39*



The results for this question follow a similar pattern to those for the first question above with a little less surety shown among Christians. As shown, just over two thirds of Born Again Protestants strongly agree that Jesus will return to save. Meaning that almost one

third of them are not absolutely sure of Jesus’ return.

For other Christian groups, only about one third of them strongly agree with this statement. Almost one third say they Disagree or Don’t Know about this statement.

Once again, over half of those affiliated with Other Religions affirm what they believe to be taught by the Christian religion. At the same time, the Unaffiliated continue to show that very few of them affirm any Christian beliefs.

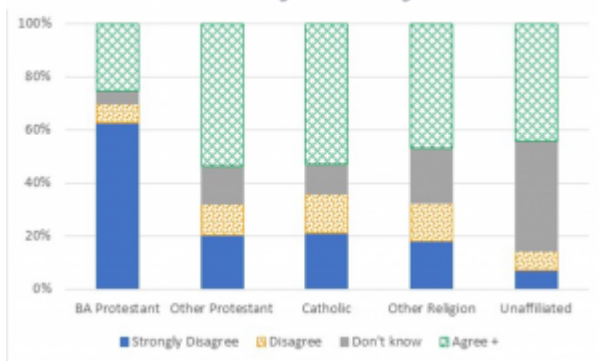
The third question (also used for determining a Basic Biblical Worldview) is:

3. When He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.

a. **Answers ranging from Agree Strongly to Disagree Strongly**

The Bible clearly states that Jesus lived a sinless life. For example, Hebrews 4:15 ESV states, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, **yet without sin.**” And again in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made the one who did **not know sin** to be sin for us so that in Him we would become the righteousness of God.” As indicated in this verse, God laid our sins upon Jesus in His earthly death. Jesus did not sin but He carried our sins to the cross and the grave to redeem us. If Jesus were a sinner like you and me, His death would have been for His own sin rather than for the sins of the world.

*Figure 3 Jesus Committed Sins Like Other People
Americans Ages 18 through 39*

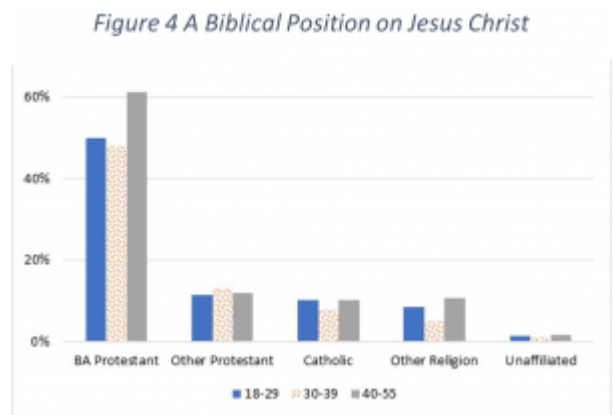


Young adult American beliefs about this statement follow a similar pattern as the first two questions. Once again, about one third of Born Again Protestants either Don't Know or Agree with this statement. Having this large a number of Born Again Protestants who don't accept a primary belief of Biblical Christianity is disappointing.

However, four out of five respondents who affiliated with Other Protestant or Catholic beliefs do not strongly believe that Jesus lived a sinless life. The Unaffiliated group continues to show their aversion to accepting any Christian religious doctrines.

Accepting a Doctrinally Consistent Set of Beliefs

What happens when we look at how many Born Again Protestants take a biblically consistent view on all three of these questions? Consider the results shown in Figure 4. First, we see that young adult Born Again Protestants drop from about two thirds for the individual questions down to about one half when looking at all three questions. It appears that about one half of those categorized as Born Again Protestants are trusting Jesus to save them but do not have a good understanding of biblical teaching on Jesus.



As you can see, all other religious groups drop to around one in ten or less with a good understanding of Jesus. The Unaffiliated drop to a level that is basically zero. In toto, about one out of six Americans age 55 and under have an understanding of who Jesus really is in these three fundamental areas.

Does Having a Basic Biblical Worldview Equate to Having a Biblical Understanding of Jesus?

For most people it does. Approximately 90% of people with a Basic Biblical Worldview have a biblical understanding of Jesus, i.e. answer the three Jesus questions from a biblical perspective. This finding (especially if true across other questions where many Born Again Christians ascribe to an unbiblical viewpoint) is important because the four simple questions which define a Basic Biblical Worldview identifies a set of people who also take a biblical view of Jesus' purpose.

Topic 2: Are there multiple ways to

heaven?

Pluralism is the belief that there are multiple ways to obtain a right relationship with God, including most if not all world religions. The Bible is very clear on how people can be reconciled to God and obtain eternal life. First, we cannot receive it through our own efforts at righteous living. This truth is addressed throughout the New Testament including Romans 3:23, "For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And Titus 3:5, "He saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of his mercy . . ."

Second, we cannot receive it by placing our faith in some other person or deity. If we try, we are still weighed down by our sin, and that other person or deity has no standing before the living God. Even an angel of the living God has no standing on which to intercede for our salvation as we see in Hebrews 2:5, "For He did not put the world to come, about which we have been speaking, under the control of angels."

The only way God could redeem us was through the sacrifice of Jesus, fully God and fully man. As Romans goes on to say in 3:24, "But they are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." And Titus 3:5 continues, "[T]hrough the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us in full measure through Jesus Christ our savior."

Jesus clearly stated, "No one comes to the Father except through me." The high price of degradation and suffering paid through Jesus' life and death excludes the possibility of Jesus being just one of several options offered by God.

What do Americans believe about multiple ways to heaven? And, especially what do Born Again Christians believe? To determine who was a pluralist, we asked what the respondents thought

about the following two statements:

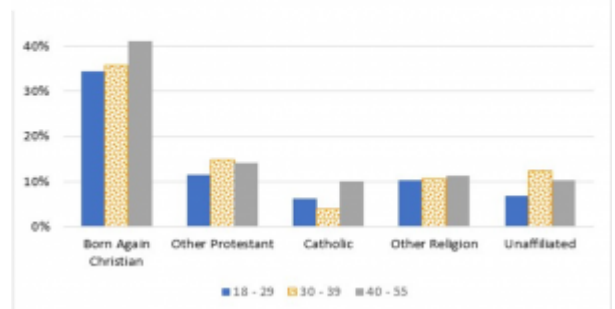
1. Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God.
Answers from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly

2. I believe that the only way to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ. **Answers from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly**

Who Believes in Multiple Ways to God

First let's look at just question number one across the various religious groups, looking for the answer **Disagree strongly** as shown in Figure 5{3}. If someone disagrees with this statement, they could be a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist, etc.

Figure 5 Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus are All Valid Ways to God: Disagree Strongly



The first thing you may notice is that all religious groups other than Born Again Christian all congregate around 5% to 15%. So, for all these groups, around one in ten people take a strong non-pluralistic view. Or turning it around, about 9 out of 10 of them are pluralists.

The real shocker jumping from this page is that over 60% of Born Again Christians are also pluralists. Apparently, a majority of Born Again Christians are ignorant about the basic teachings of their faith. Also, it is interesting and disturbing that the percentage of Born Again Christians who are not pluralistic is almost flat across the ages from 18 to 55. A strong majority of Born Again Christians are pluralists across that entire age range.

Who Believes Jesus is the Only Way

Now to narrow the question even further, we could have stated "Only Jesus taught valid ways to God." The percentage of people strongly agreeing with this statement should be a

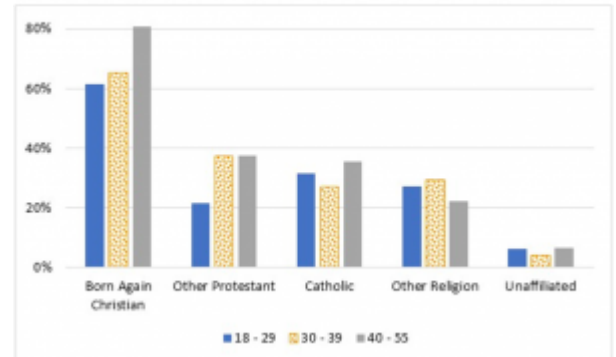
subset of the people who disagreed strongly with the question above, “Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God.”

Instead, we asked this second question in a slightly different way but with the same intent: “I believe that the only way to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ.” We thought that this question would be

equivalent to the first one in the prior paragraph. But as we will see, people’s brains allow them to give answers that contradict each other.

Comparing this chart with the prior one, we see that Born Again Christians are at least 25 percentage points higher for this second question. And, the other Christian religious groups are higher by about 25 percentage points as well. And even Other Religions are up by over ten percentage points. Only the Unaffiliated drop from the first question to the second, dropping by almost half from ten percentage points down to about five percentage points.

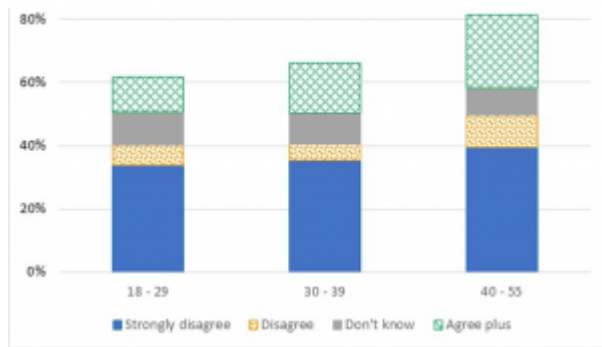
Figure 6 Jesus is the Only Way to a True Relationship with God



An Inconsistent Worldview Among Many Born Again Christians

The results outlined above are disconcerting in that if the answers to the two questions were consistent, we would see Figure 6 reporting lower numbers than Figure 5 which is clearly not the case. Logically, one could say that Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus are not all valid ways to God while still saying that Jesus is not the only way to God. You could believe, for example, that Buddha is the only one who taught a valid way to God. But, if you say that Jesus is the only way to a true relationship with God, then it follows that you believe that Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus cannot all be valid ways to God.

Figure 7 What Born Again Christians Who Say Jesus is the Only True Path to God Say About Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus All Teaching Valid Ways to God



However, the survey respondents show us that one does not have to give answers which logically support one another. Even if some of the respondents misread the statement, the difference between the two is great enough that it is safe to assume that the results are not primarily

attributable to misreading.

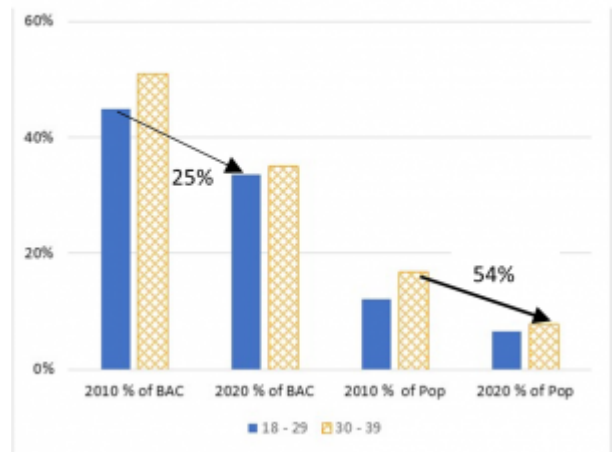
In Figure 7, we look at what the Born Again Christians who stated that Jesus is the only way to a true relationship with God said when responding to the question about Mohammad, Buddha and Jesus. First note that the total height of each column is the same as the Born Again Christian columns in Figure 6. As shown, almost half of each column represents those who did not strongly disagree with the pluralistic view. For the youngest adults, that upper portion is about evenly split between those who Don't Know and those who Agree or Strongly Agree that the three men taught valid ways to God. For those ages 40 through 55, we see that a significantly higher percentage affirm that all three men taught valid ways to God.

Based on these results, about one third of Born Again Christians appear to have a consistent biblical view toward pluralism. Another third appear to be totally in line with the pluralist position. The last third are those who want to say that Jesus is the only true path to God AND that Mohammad and Buddha also taught valid ways to God. In church, they may say that Jesus is the only way, but out in the world they act as if Muslims and Buddhists don't need to know this critical truth. These individuals have an incoherent worldview.

Changes over the Last Decade

How have the statistics on Born Again Christians and pluralism changed from 2010 to 2020? As shown in the figure, we see a significant drop in the percent of BACs who are not pluralists. Those age 18 to 29 drop by 25% (from 45% to 34% of all BACs) and those age 30 to 39 drop by 31% (from 51% to 35% of all BACs).

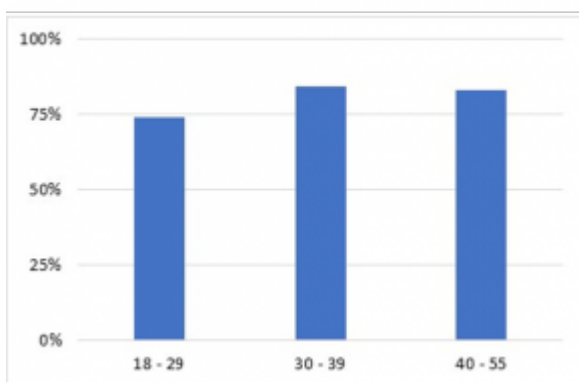
Figure 8 Born Again Christians Who Are Not Pluralists comparing 2010 with 2020



Of course, we need to remember that the percentage of BACs in the population has dropped as well. So, when we look at the percentage of Born Again Christians who are definitely not pluralists in our country the drop off is greater. As shown the number of those age 30 to 39 drops from 17% in 2010 to less than half of that number at 8% in 2020 (a drop of 54%).

Over the last decade, Born Again Christians in America have continued to grow in the number who are pluralists.

Figure 9 Born Again Christians with a Basic



What about that smaller subset of people who have a Basic Biblical Worldview? Do a majority of them also have a pluralistic worldview? The answer is no. As shown, between 75% and 85% of them are not pluralists.

This result is not a surprise since the Basic Biblical Worldview questions do not align well with a pluralistic view. However, the result that about one in four of Born Again Christians with a Basic Biblical Worldview appear to be pluralists is unsettling.

Countering the Negative Slide

If you are reading this, you may want to do something to help reverse this trend among Born Again Christians to misunderstand who Jesus is and His unique ability to redeem us and restore into a relationship with our Creator. Here are several suggestions that can help in this reversal.

Faithful prayer. Daily pray for the lost and against the forces of darkness so visibly arrayed against them. Pray for the saved, that they may take up the true gospel and cling to the eternal truth of Jesus.

Preach, teach and speak OFTEN about the events of the cross and the tomb.

- Explain that only someone perfectly sinless could undertake the task of reconciling us before a holy God. Make sure they understand that “God made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf in order that we may become the righteousness of God in him.” 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Explain that only God, in the person of Jesus Christ, could be that sinless sacrifice. God had to undergo the pain and suffering of separating Himself from His Son on the cross. “Though he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!” Philippians 2:6-8
- Explain that the cost was so high, no other way to God is possible for sinful man. No one can come to the Father except through the Son and anyone may come through Him. “God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one intermediary between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave

himself as a ransom for all, revealing God's purpose at his appointed time." 1 Timothy 2:4-6

- Explain that Jesus' return is delayed only by the loving patience of God who is waiting for all to come to Jesus who will. "The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." 2 Peter 3:9

- Explain that accepting pluralism will not automatically get your non-Christian friends into heaven. Only the truth of Christ presented to them by willing lips has the power to change their eternal destiny. If you care about them, you will share with them.

It is critical that every teenager, young adult, and older adult who crosses our path needs to have these truths reiterated for them. Use different techniques and different word pictures as you strive by the power of the Holy Spirit to continually make this message clear. We know God desires to work in their life.

Notes

1. A Born Again person in our survey results is someone who 1) has made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and 2) when asked what will happen to you after you die, they answer I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

2. See our first article: Introducing Probe's New Survey: Religious Views and Practices 2020 for a description of the biblical worldview questions used.

3. 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. About 20% of Catholics

affirm the two born again questions.

Tradition and Scripture

While many evangelical Christians treat tradition with suspicion if not hostility, Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a case for the value of tradition in understanding and supporting our faith.

Understanding Tradition

In this article we'll be thinking about tradition and its relationship to Scripture. Now I realize that some of you may already be asking, "Tradition! Can anything good come from there?" The answer of course is "yes"—for if it were not, then I wouldn't bother writing about it. Indeed, it's actually an important topic to address, for in our day many evangelicals seem to harbor an attitude of suspicion—if not outright hostility—toward the very notion of tradition.[\[1\]](#) In support of this attitude, some might point to what Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions" (Mark 7:9 NIV). And if this is what Jesus said, then aren't we better off to simply dismiss tradition and focus solely on the teaching of Scripture?



Before we jump to that conclusion, we must first determine what we mean when we use the word "tradition." After all, in other passages Scripture speaks very favorably of tradition. Paul told the Corinthians, "Now I praise you

because you . . . hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2 NASB). Traditions, it seems, can sometimes be good—and sometimes bad. And this is true even of the *Christian* tradition. But in order to talk intelligently about our subject, we must first understand precisely what we're talking about. What, then, is the meaning of "tradition"?

When theologians speak about the Christian tradition, they are typically referring to the ways in which the faith has been understood by previous generations of Christians. For example, what understanding did our Christian forbears have of worship and theology, and how did they express their understanding through creeds, confessions, sermons, and books? Stanley Grenz and John Franke describe the Christian tradition "as the history of the interpretation and application of canonical scripture by the Christian community, the church, as it listens to the voice of the Spirit speaking through the text."[{2}](#) And Richard Lints describes it as "the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us."[{3}](#)

Defined in this way, we must candidly admit that the Christian faith has been understood somewhat differently from one time and place to another. How are we to think about such differences? Should they always be viewed negatively, as a corruption of the original faith deposit? Or might they sometimes be seen as a positive and healthy development of this deposit?

Tradition: A Metaphor

In a fascinating discussion of these issues, Colin Gunton asks us to think of tradition as an organism.[{4}](#) He notes that just as a child or plant may grow larger and stronger over time, so too the content of Christian doctrine can become more elaborate and enriched with the passage of time. He then

observes, “If revelation is something given in the beginning—as undoubtedly one dimension of it is, the faith once for all delivered to the saints—then it may be argued that through tradition what began as a seed or a seedling is enabled to expand without falsifying its beginnings.”^{5} This comment helps us see the interconnectedness of tradition and revelation—an issue which we will return to later.

For now, it’s important to notice what this metaphor does for us. It enables us to see tradition, like the growth of a child or a plant, as something *natural* and *healthy*—indeed, something to be *hoped for*, *encouraged*, and *expected*. This is an important reminder for those of us who might be tempted to view tradition solely in negative terms.

At the same time, however, Gunton is aware that things can always go wrong. He writes, “The organism might become diseased, and require surgery; or it might simply grow too many branches, or branches in the wrong places, and require pruning.”^{6} In this case, instead of the tradition developing in a natural and healthy way from the original revelation, it develops in an unnatural and unhealthy way. We might identify this latter situation with the unpleasant possibility of heresy—something which needs to be corrected or even surgically removed so that the organism doesn’t die or mutate into a completely different, unrelated life-form. If that were to happen, then while we might still have tradition of a sort, it could no longer be properly thought of as *Christian* tradition.^{7} It will be helpful for us to keep this metaphor in mind as we continue to reflect on the role of tradition and its relationship to Scripture, particularly because we must now deal with a problem that this discussion inevitably raises.

Scripture and Tradition: A Problem

Stanley Grenz and John Franke view tradition as a “source or

resource” of the Christian church, which can aid in the church’s task of both theological construction and lived performance.{8} Some of the specific elements of the Christian tradition which they see as especially valuable in informing how we accomplish these tasks are the histories of worship, liturgy, and theology, as well as the “classic” theological formulations of the church, such as creeds and confessions. Of course, they are careful to point out that while these resources are extremely valuable, they “must always and continually be tested by the norm of canonical scripture.”{9}

In a similar way, Richard Lints describes the “goal of theology” as bringing “the biblical revelation into a position of judgment on all of life,” including tradition.{10} But this raises a bit of a problem, for in order to bring tradition under the authority of Scripture, Scripture must first be interpreted. And many scholars maintain that the Christian tradition primarily consists of the scriptural interpretation and application of faith communities from the past. Indeed, this is basically how Lints himself defines the term. “In the discussion that follows,” he says, “*tradition* will signify the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us.”{11}

Moreover, Lints rightly believes that we neglect this tradition at our peril. For in banishing past interpretations of Scripture from our present consideration in doing theology, we can easily become ensnared “in a web of subjectivism” regarding our own interpretation of the Bible.{12} And this would be an incalculable loss to the church in her ongoing task of preaching and teaching the Bible. The fact of the matter is that these past interpretations are a necessary aid, both in revealing our own biases and blind spots, and in helping us avoid “what C. S. Lewis aptly called ‘chronological snobbery’—the conceit that we are necessarily wiser than our forbears.”{13}

But this leads to the following problem: If Scripture is to be

brought into a position of judgment over all of life (including the Christian tradition), it must first be properly interpreted. But it would be irresponsible to engage in this interpretative task without the aid of the very tradition of past interpretation over which Scripture is to sit in judgment. How can this difficulty be resolved? Does Scripture occupy a place of authority over tradition, or does tradition rather occupy a place of authority over Scripture?

Scripture and Tradition: A Solution

Before we attempt to respond to this question, we should first take time to remember just how it was that Scripture came into being in the first place. As Grenz and Franke remind us,

[T]he community precedes the production of the scriptural texts and is responsible for their content and for the identification of particular texts for inclusion in an authoritative canon to which it has chosen to make itself accountable. Apart from the Christian community, the texts would not have taken their particular and distinctive shape. Apart from the authority of the Christian community, there would be no canon of authorized texts. In short, apart from the Christian community the Christian Bible would not exist.[\[14\]](#)

It might now be interesting to ask what the Christian community and the Christian Bible have in common. According to Grenz and Franke, it is the work of the Holy Spirit—a work that grants to each one its respective authority. They write,

In this conception, the authority of both scripture and tradition is ultimately an authority derived from the work of the Spirit. Each is part of an organic unity, so that even though scripture and tradition are distinguishable, they are fundamentally inseparable. . . . The authority of each—tradition as well as scripture—is contingent on the

work of the Spirit, and both scripture and tradition are fundamental components within an interrelated web of beliefs that constitutes the Christian faith. To misconstrue the shape of this relationship by setting scripture over against tradition or by elevating tradition above scripture is to fail to comprehend properly the work of the Spirit.[{15}](#)

Does this mean, then, that there is no sense in which all of life (including tradition) should be brought under the judgment of Scripture? This does not seem to be what Grenz and Franke are saying. Although they do contend that the triune God “is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through scripture, the church, and even the world,” they then qualify this by noting, “albeit always normatively through scripture.”[{16}](#) In their view, Scripture is still theology’s “norming norm,” but since Scripture must always be interpreted, it cannot be easily separated from tradition. Scripture still holds the place of prominence in doing theology, but in a carefully nuanced and qualified way that gives appropriate weight to God’s other mediums of revelation, such as tradition, creation, and the church.

Tradition in Scripture and Theology

In one of his 1993 Warfield Lectures, the late Colin Gunton observed that two of the narrative sections in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians contain possibly the most easily recognizable accounts of “the working of tradition in the New Testament.”[{17}](#) In both 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul discusses the Lord’s Supper, and 1 Corinthians 15, where he refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection as the heart of the gospel, Paul specifically declares that he is delivering to the Corinthians certain traditions about Jesus which he himself had previously received. In other words, the biblical writings themselves are seen to be “part of a tradition of interpretation of that which is in certain respects prior to them.”[{18}](#)

The unique revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is *prior* to the traditions about Him which Paul had received. And the traditions which Paul had received, including the meaning given them by the early church and Paul himself, are also *prior* to his deliverance of them to the Corinthians (as well as those of us who have subsequently read this letter). Tradition, it seems, cannot always be so easily separated from the Bible itself.

Of course, very few Christians would disagree that traditions like those passed on by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are “authoritative for the faith and life of the church.”[{19}](#) The problem rather arises with how the original revelation “is interpreted and handed on by those who follow the . . . apostles: the way in which revelation is mediated by tradition.”[{20}](#) How should we understand this relationship?

For one thing, we should probably grant a certain degree of freedom, in response to the Spirit’s guidance, to the way in which the tradition is articulated in different cultural and historical contexts. This allows the tradition to grow in a healthy way which, at the same time, is still amenable to correction when necessary. Granted, we are speaking of the development of tradition in something like an ideal setting, and the world in which we now live is certainly not ideal. But if tradition is one of the means which God has chosen for mediating revelation from one generation to another, then for better or worse, it will (and should) continue to play an important role in the life of the church. As Gunton wisely concludes, “although we may and must be critical of tradition, as the action of fallible and sinful human beings, we may not lay aside the means which God has himself chosen.”[{21}](#)

Notes

1. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 109.

2. Ibid., 118.
3. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 84.
4. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 85-87.
5. Ibid., 85.
6. Ibid., 86.
7. Ibid., 87.
8. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 120-29.
9. Ibid., 124.
10. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 82.
11. Ibid., 84.
12. Ibid., 93.
13. Ibid., 96.
14. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115.
15. Ibid., 117.
16. Ibid., 117-18.
17. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 93.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 102-03.

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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^{1}, 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^{2}, 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^{3}. 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 American's 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^{4} 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)^{5} 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^{6} 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

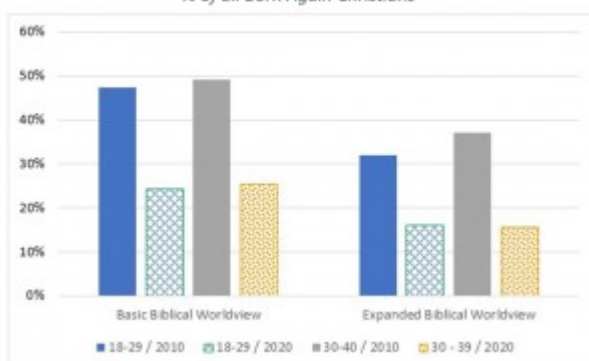
5. The devil or Satan is not a real being, but is a symbol of evil: **Disagree Strongly**
6. Some people believe there are moral truths (such as murder is always wrong) that are true for everyone, everywhere and for all time. Others believe that moral truth always depends upon circumstances. Do you believe 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.^{10} 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



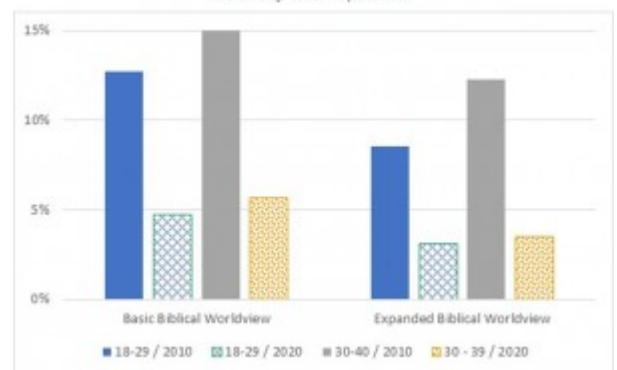
Now let's compare these 2020 results with the results from our 2010 survey. Figure 5 shows the results across this decade for Born Again Christians looking at the percent who agree with the worldview answers above. As shown, there has been a dramatic drop in both the

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).

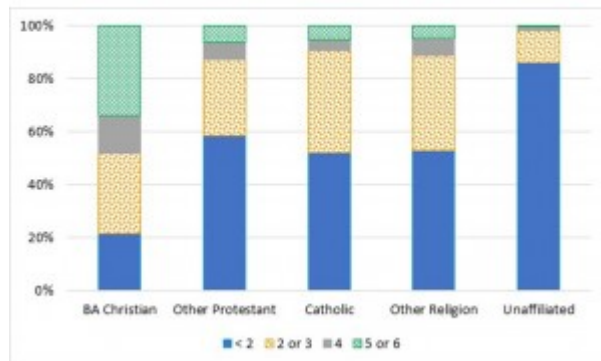
The drop off seen over this ten-year period is more than dramatic and extremely discouraging. In 2010, we had about 10% of the population modeling an active biblical worldview. Although small, 10% of the population means that most people would know one of these committed Christians. At between 6% and 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, is an excellent place to explore the topic.^{14}

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, 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, 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.