

Introducing Probe's New Survey: Religious Views and Practices 2020

Steve Cable



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

Laying the Groundwork: American Religious Affiliations Over Time

How have the religious affiliations of American young adults changed over the years? We have examined data over the last fifty years^{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.

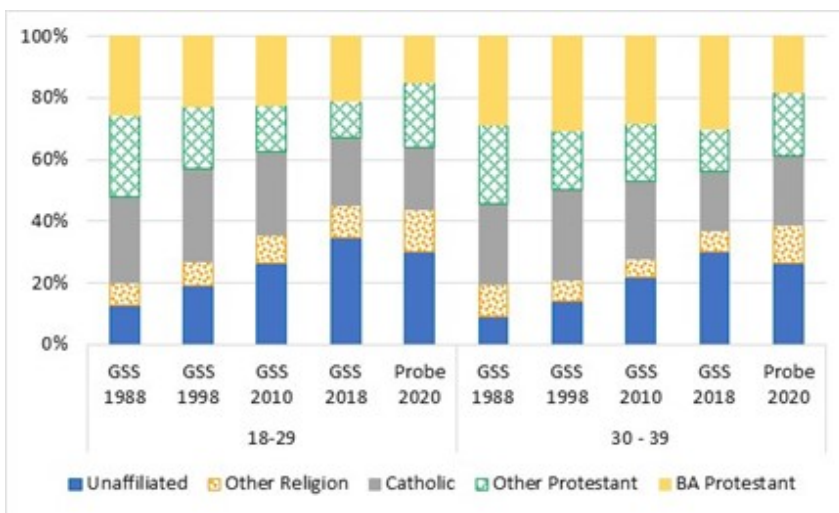


Figure 1 - Religious Affiliations of Young Adults Over Time

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.**

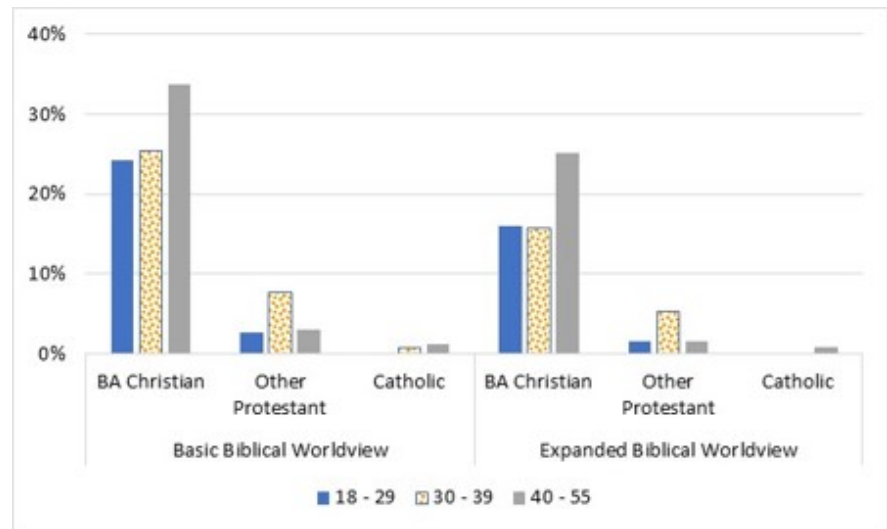
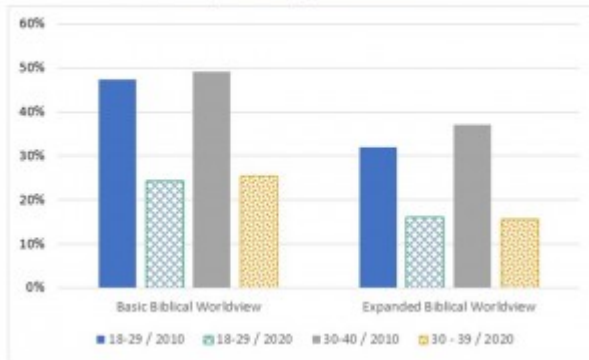


Figure 4 - Worldview Beliefs of 2020 Protestants

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

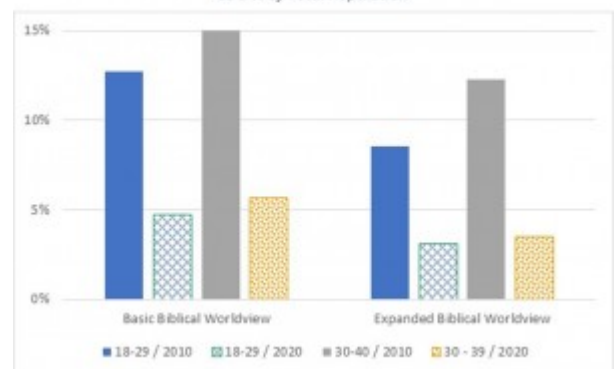


Now let's compare these 2020 results with the results from our 2010 survey. Figure 5 shows the results across this decade for Born Again Christians looking at the percent who agree with the worldview answers above. As shown, there has been a dramatic drop in both the Basic Biblical Worldview and the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

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

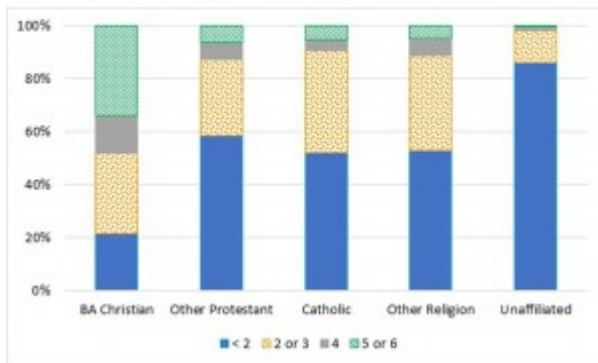


The drop off seen over this ten-year period is more than dramatic and extremely discouraging. In 2010, we had about 10% of the population modeling an active biblical worldview. Although small, 10% of the population means that most people would know one of these committed Christians. At between 6% and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

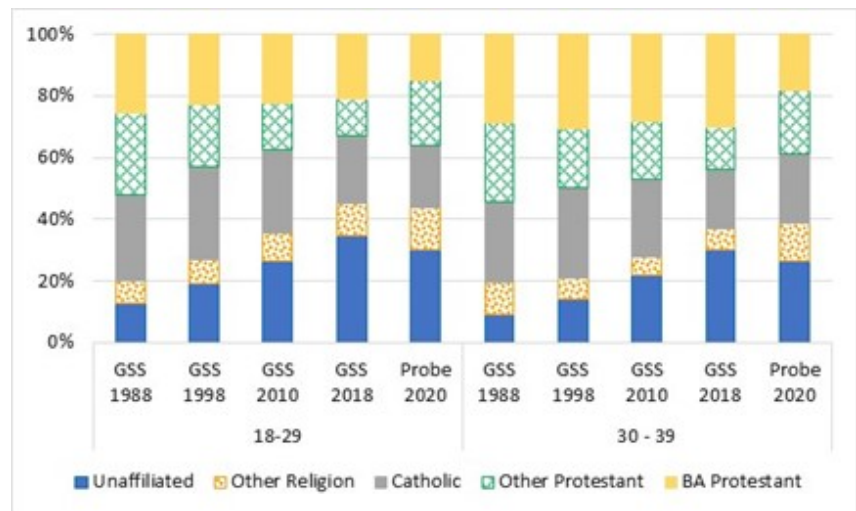


Figure 8 - What Do You Personally Believe to be True About God?

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.

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The Bible: Intentionally

Misunderstood (Radio Transcript)

Steve Cable



Steve Cable examines the faulty reasoning and interpretation of the Bible in Kurt Eichenwald's Newsweek article "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin."

Dissecting the Bible by Focusing on Nits

Recently, New Testament scholar, Dr. Daniel Wallace, addressing our strong confidence in our modern translations, mentioned others presenting a false view of this situation. One example, *The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin* by Kurt Eichenwald^{1}, appeared in *Newsweek*. This article presents arguments intended to undermine the New Testament. Let's evaluate some of these arguments to be better equipped in sharing the truth.^{2}

Eichenwald begins by parroting negative stereotypes about American evangelicals. Adding rigor to his rant, he states, "A Pew Research poll in 2010^{2} found that evangelicals ranked only a smidgen higher than atheists in familiarity with **the New Testament and Jesus's teachings.**"^{4}



He referred to a table showing the average number of questions out of twelve answered correctly. However, only **two of the twelve related to the New Testament** and **none to Jesus's teachings.**^{5} Two questions are not enough to evaluate someone's knowledge of the New Testament, But, for the record, the two questions were "Name the four gospels" and "Where, according to the Bible, was

Jesus born?" 53% of those professing to be born again answered these correctly versus 20% of atheists. Apparently to Eichenwald, a "smidgen higher" must mean almost three times as many.

Eichenwald spends two pages bemoaning the translation problems in the New Testament. But as pointed out by Dr. Wallace and others, his critique really serves to highlight the excellence of today's translations. The areas he points out as having questionable additions in the text are clearly marked in all of today's popular translations{6} and if removed make no difference in the overall message of the New Testament (i.e. the woman caught in adultery in John and snake handling in Mark).

He also lists three short passages, claiming they did not appear in earlier Greek copies. Upon examination, we find that one of those passages does not appear in modern translations. The other two do appear in the translations. Why? Because they appear in numerous early Greek manuscripts.{7} Once again his scholarship is found wanting.

All scholars agree there are variations between ancient manuscripts from different areas but they do not change the message. As Wallace points out, "We are getting closer and closer to the text of the original. . . . The New Testament has more manuscripts that are within a century or two of the original than anything else from the Greco-Roman world. If we have to be skeptical . . . , that skepticism . . . should be multiplied one thousand times for other Greco-Roman literature." {8}

Supposed Biblical Contradictions

Eichenwald continues attacking the Bible with nine different topics he claims reveal contradictions in the biblical record. Let's examine three of them to see if his arguments have substance.

First, he claims there are three different creation models, stating that “careful readers have long known that the two stories of Genesis 1 and 2 contradict each other.”[{9}](#)

However, a clear-headed examination sees chapter 1 describing the overall creation while chapter 2 talks about the creation of Adam and Eve. As commentators explain, “what follows Genesis 2:4 is not another account of creation but a tracing of events from creation through the fall and judgment.”[{10}](#)

In his third creation model “the world is created in the aftermath of a great battle between God and . . . a dragon . . . called Rahab.”[{11}](#)

Reading the relevant verses shows no creation story but rather the creature Rahab representing Egypt. Job 9:13 says “under (God) the helpers of Rahab lie crushed.” Some speculate this could relate to the Babylonian Creation Epic. Even if this speculation were true, rather than a third creation story one would say this reference tells us God destroys all idols raised up by others.

Eichenwald’s claim of three different creation models is an illusion.

His second claim states the Gospel of John was written “when gentiles in Rome were gaining dramatically more influence over Christianity; that explains why the Romans are largely absolved from responsibility for Jesus’s death and blame instead is pointed toward the Jews,”[{12}](#) implying the other gospels put much of the blame on the Romans.

Examining his claim, in Luke we read, “The chief priests . . . were trying to find some way to execute Jesus.” While

the Roman governor did not find Jesus guilty of anything worthy of death.[{13}](#)

In Acts, Peter squarely places the responsibility onto the Jewish leaders and nation.[{14}](#) We find similar verses in Matthew[{15}](#) and Mark[{16}](#).

All the gospels place the blame on the Jewish nation. There is no shift in perspective in

John.

In a third supposed contradiction Eichenwald writes, “As told in Matthew, the disciples go to Galilee after the Crucifixion and see Jesus ascend to heaven; in Acts, written by Luke, the disciples stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus ascend from there.”[{17}](#)

The gospel of Matthew ends saying **nothing** about Jesus ascending to heaven. In Acts, Luke says the Lord was with His disciples over a forty-day period and could have easily traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee and back.

Not surprisingly, his other six so-called “contradictions” all fail to hold up when one examines the Scriptures.

Faulty Interpretation Part 1

Eichenwald wants to show that what we think the Bible teaches about homosexuality is not what God intended. He begins by pointing out “the word homosexual didn’t even exist until . . . 1,800 years after the New Testament was written . . . these modern Bibles just made it up.”[{18}](#)

But this could be said of many English words used today. A respected dictionary of New Testament words[{19}](#) defines the Greek word he questions as “a male engaging in same-gender sexual activity, a sodomite. . .”

He then tells us not to trust 1 Timothy when it lists homosexuality as a sin because “Most biblical scholars agree that Paul did not write 1 Timothy.”[{20}](#)

The early church fathers from the second century on and many contemporary scholars[{21}](#) do not agree it is a forgery.[{22}](#) Regardless, the same prohibition appears in other epistles and not just in Timothy.

Eichenwald points out Romans, Corinthians and Timothy discuss other sins in

more detail than homosexual behavior. He writes, “So yes, there is one verse in Romans about homosexuality . . . and there are eight verses condemning those who criticize the government.”

Most people understand that explaining our relationship to the government is more complex than forbidding homosexuality which is clearly understood.

He claims people are not banished for other sins such as adultery, greed, and lying.

But if you proclaimed you practice those actions regularly and teach them as truth, your church is going to remove you from any leadership position. They should still encourage you to attend worship services out of a desire to see God change your heart.[{23}](#) Mr. Eichenwald would be surprised to learn that most evangelical churches handle issues with homosexuality in the same way.

Then he declares, “plenty of fundamentalist Christians who have no idea where references to homosexuality are in the New Testament . . . always fall back on Leviticus.”[{24}](#)

Personally, I have never run into another church member who was unfamiliar with the New Testament, but knew the details of Leviticus.

In summary, Eichenwald believes we should declare homosexuality is not a sin and those who practice it should be honored as leaders within the church. He does not suggest that we treat any other sins that way. He does not present a cogent argument that the New Testament agrees with his position. He is saying that we should ignore biblical teaching. But, we really do love those struggling with homosexual behavior and we want to help them gain freedom from those lusts just as much as someone struggling with opposite sex issues.

Faulty Interpretation Part 2

To strengthen his position on homosexuality, Eichenwald calls out “a fundamental conflict in the New Testament – arguably the most important one in the Bible.”[{25}](#) As Christians, are we to obey the Mosaic Law or ignore it?

He claims, “The author of Matthew made it clear that Christians must keep Mosaic Law like the most religious Jews, . . . to achieve salvation.”[{26}](#) He says this is contrary to Paul’s message of salvation through grace not works.

What a mistaken understanding. In Matthew, Jesus explains that to enter God’s kingdom “our righteousness must surpass that of (the most religious Jews)[{27}](#).” We must not get angry, call people names, or lust even once. In fact, “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”[{28}](#) Jesus clearly taught we cannot be good enough. Only through His sacrifice can we be made righteous.

In Acts 15, some believers with Pharisaical backgrounds brought the Mosaic Law up to the apostles. Peter told them, “Why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? . . . we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as (the Gentiles) also are.”[{29}](#) The apostles and the whole church agreed to send the Gentiles word that they were not required to follow the Law.

Eichenwald is right: we are not required to follow the Law. The New Testament is very careful to identify actions and attitudes which are sin so may try to avoid them. This truth is why sexual sins are specifically mentioned in the New Testament.[{30}](#) Even in Acts 15, the apostles tell Gentile Christians to abstain from fornication[{31}](#), a term covering all sexual activity outside of marriage.

Eichenwald also castigates us for disobeying the biblical teaching about government. He says Romans has “eight verses condemning those who criticize the government.”[{32}](#) Pat Robertson sinned by stating, “We need . . . to pray to

be delivered from this president.”

Actually, Romans says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. . . . the person who resists such authority resists the ordinance of God.”[{33}](#) We are not required to say good things about the government, but rather to obey the law. Our Bill of Rights states that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech.”[{34}](#) So, if we do not voice our opinions about our government, we are not availing ourselves of the law established by our governing authorities.

Faulty Interpretation Part 3

As we examine popular arguments against the Bible, we will conclude by looking at prayer. In his *Newsweek* article, Kurt Eichenwald castigates a Houston prayer rally[{35}](#) saying, “(Rick) Perry . . . boomed out a long prayer asking God to make America a better place . . . babbling on . . . about faith and country and the blessings of America.” He claimed Perry “heaped up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.”

In reality, Perry prayed succinctly for about two minutes with no empty phrases.

Eichenwald explains, Perry is just an example of our error. Most Christians are disobeying by praying in front of people. Jesus told us, “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray . . . so that they may be seen by others.”

But someone can speak a prayer before others without being a hypocrite. Jesus does tell us to make our prayers a personal conversation with our God. But Jesus prayed often before synagogue attenders, in front of His disciples,[{36}](#) and before over 5,000 people.[{37}](#) Those times, although numerous, were less than the time He spent praying alone as should be true for us.

Eichenwald states we should repeat the Lord's prayer verbatim.

But in Matthew, Jesus gave an example of how to pray, not a set of words to repeat meaninglessly. The New Testament contains many prayers offered by the apostles and none repeat the words from the Lord's prayer. If Eichenwald were there to instruct them, the apostles would not have sinned so grievously.

Eichenwald claims the only reason anyone could pray in front of a large crowd, or on television, is "to be seen." This claim does not make sense; the people he is judging can build themselves up without having to resort to prayer.

In this article we have seen that critics use an incomplete, shallow examination of Scripture to claim it is not accurate and our application is faulty. In every case, we have seen that these claims leak like a sieve.

Dan Wallace concludes, "But his numerous factual errors and misleading statements, his lack of concern for any semblance of objectivity, his apparent disdain for . . . genuine evangelical scholarship, and his uber-confidence about more than a few suspect viewpoints, make me wonder. . . . Eichenwald's . . . grasp of genuine biblical scholarship (is), at best, subpar." [\[38\]](#)

If Eichenwald's article represents the best arguments discrediting the Bible, one rejoices in our firm foundation.

However, realizing many readers of such pieces don't know their flimsy nature, one is saddened by the potential impact on a society inclined to ignore the Bible.

Notes

1. Eichenwald, Kurt, "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin," *Newsweek Magazine*, December 2014.
2. There are numerous web postings placed after release of Eichenwald's article. Two you may find interesting that deal with areas of the article not addressed

herein are as follows: Daniel B. Wallace, [“Predictable Christmas fare: Newsweek’s Tirade against the Bible,”](#) blogpost December 2014; and Darrell Bock, [“Darrell Bock Responds to Kurt Eichenwald’s Newsweek Article on the Bible,”](#) blogpost December 2014.

3. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, September 2010, pages 17-23.

4. Eichenwald, paragraph 4.

5. The 12 questions are as follows:

1. What is the first book of the Bible? (Open-ended)
2. What are the names of the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels?
3. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born? Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Jericho?
4. Which of these is NOT in the Ten Commandments? Do unto others . . . , no adultery, no stealing, keep Sabbath?
5. Which figure is associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering? Job, Elijah, Moses or Abraham?
6. Which figure is associated with leading the exodus from Egypt? Moses, Job, Elijah or Abraham?
7. Which figure is associated with willingness to sacrifice his son for God? Abraham, Job, Moses or Elijah?
8. What is Catholic teaching about bread and wine in Communion? They become body and blood, or are symbols?
9. Which group traditionally teaches that salvation is through faith alone? Protestants, Catholics, both or neither?
10. Was Mother Teresa Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Mormon?
11. What is the name of the person whose writings and actions inspired the Reformation? Luther, Aquinas or Wesley?
12. Who was a preacher during the First Great Awakening? Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Billy Graham?

6. Check your footnotes and the italics applied to the story of the woman caught in adultery and the last few verses of the Gospel of Mark.
7. Insert summary on 1 John 5:7, Luke 22:20, and Luke 24:51.
8. Wallace.
9. Ibid, paragraph .
10. New English Translation, Genesis 59 Chapter 2, Notes 9 and 11.
11. Ibid, paragraph 66.
12. Eichenwald, paragraph 51.
13. See Luke 23:4,14,22.
14. See Acts 2:23,23,3:14-15,4:10,5:30.
15. Matthew 26:4,27:23-24.
16. Mark 14:1, 15:14-15.
17. Eichenwald, paragraph 52.
18. Ibid, paragraph 68.
19. William Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Zondervan, 2006.
20. Eichenwald, paragraph 70.
21. Among those disagreeing with Eichenwald's assertion are Daniel Wallace, John MacArthur, Charles Swindoll, John Stott, and Craig Keener.
22. In Daniel Wallace, *Intro to 1st Timothy*, Dr. Wallace writes, "In sum, although the evidence against the authenticity of the pastorals is as strong as any evidence against the authenticity of any NT book, it still cannot overthrow the traditional view. The traditional view, however, must be modified by the substantial linguistic evidence against authenticity: an amanuensis (possibly Luke) had great freedom in writing these letters for the apostle Paul."
23. See the Watermark Community Church story: www.watermark.org/statement.
24. Eichenwald, paragraph 80.
25. Eichenwald, paragraph 81.
26. Eichenwald, paragraph 82.
27. Matthew 5:20.
28. Matthew 5:48.

29. Acts 15:10-11.

30. For example in Mt 5:xx, Luke x:xx, John x:xx, Romans x:xx, Ephesians x:xx, Phil x:xx, 1 Peter x:xx, 1 John x:xx.

31. Acts 15:20,29.

32. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.

33. Romans 13:1,2.

34. Amendment 1 to the Constitution of the United States of America.

35. Houston 2011.

36. John chapter 17.

37. Luke chapter 9.

38. Wallace, paragraph ??.

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The Bible: Intentionally Misunderstood

Steve Cable



Dissecting the Bible by Focusing on Nits

Recently, New Testament scholar and expert on ancient New Testament documents, Dr. Daniel Wallace, spoke on the work being done to ensure we have the most accurate version of the Greek New Testament. He also mentioned several documents presenting a false view of this level of accuracy. One of these documents, *The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin* by Kurt Eichenwald, appeared in *Newsweek* in December 2014.[\[1\]](#) His article presents arguments intended to undermine the New Testament. Let's evaluate some of these arguments to be better equipped in sharing the truth.

The article contains at least 125 errors and/or half-truths in 14 pages. Of course, I am not the first to respond to this article. Dr. Wallace and Dr. Darrel Bock both wrote responses shortly after the document was published addressing specific areas of interest to them. I commend their posts to you as excellent resources.[\[2\]](#) I will address some areas that are not addressed or only partially addressed by these seminary professors.

Using Survey Data Without Understanding It

Eichenwald begins his article by parroting the negative stereotypes put forth by those who cannot be bothered with trying to understand the vast majority of evangelicals. Attempting to add some rigor to his rant, he refers to two surveys on religious beliefs. Unfortunately for Eichenwald, rather than adding rigor, his comments showed that he did not take the time to examine the survey results he was spouting.

He first states, "[Evangelicals'] lack of knowledge about the Bible is well established. A Pew Research poll in 2010[\[3\]](#) found that evangelicals ranked only a smidgen higher than atheists in familiarity with the New Testament and Jesus's teachings."[\[4\]](#) He referred to a table showing the average number of questions out of twelve that each faith group answered correctly. However, only two of the

twelve questions had anything to do with the New Testament and none of them related to Jesus's teachings. The remaining questions were divided equally between the Old Testament and on latter day religious figures/beliefs. {5} Two questions are not enough to evaluate someone's knowledge of the New Testament. But, for the record, the questions were "Name the four gospels" and "Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?" Fifty three percent of those professing to be born again answered these correctly versus twenty percent of atheists. Apparently to Eichenwald, a "smidgen higher" must mean almost three times as many. Perhaps, *Newsweek* cannot afford a fact checker?

The second poll he referenced was a 2012 effort by the Barna Group {6}. He said, "[It found] that evangelicals accepted the attitudes and beliefs of the Pharisees . . . more than they accepted the teachings of Jesus." The study actually showed that 63% of evangelicals accepted the attitudes and actions of Jesus at least as much, if not more, than the attitudes and actions the Barna Group associated with the Pharisees.

Accuracy of English Translations Not Effectively Addressed

Eichenwald spends two pages bemoaning the translation problems in the New Testament. But as pointed out by Wallace and Bock, his critique really serves to highlight the excellence of today's translations. The areas he points out as having questionable additions in the text are clearly marked in all of today's popular translations and if removed make no difference in the overall message of the New Testament (i.e. the woman caught in adultery in John and snake handling at the end of Mark).

He goes on to say, "The same is true for other critical portions of the Bible, such as . . ." {7} and then lists three short passages which he claims did not appear in earlier Greek copies. One passage is 1 John 5:7 which was expanded in the original King James Version but (as Eichenwald is apparently unaware of) was removed in modern translations, e.g. NASU, NET, ESV, NIV. Another passage is

Luke 22:20 which does appear in almost all modern translations as well as the KJV. As Metzger^{8} points out, the longer version with Luke 22:20 appears in “all Greek manuscripts except for D and in most of the ancient versions and Fathers.” So this passage does appear in most earlier Greek copies, contrary to what Eichenwald claims. He finally refers to Luke 24:51 as a passage not found in the earlier Greek versions. Once again, he is wrong. This passage appears in many older manuscripts^{9} including the Bodmer Papyrii written in about 200 AD.

When Eichenwald attempts to strengthen his argument, he draws from limited sources that contain questionable data. Even if they were correct, they and all the other areas where ancient manuscripts vary do not change the message of the New Testament in any significant way. As Wallace points out, “The reality is that we are getting closer and closer to the text of the original New Testament as more and more manuscripts are being discovered and catalogued. . . . The New Testament has more manuscripts that are within a century or two of the original than anything else from the Greco-Roman world too. If we must be skeptical about what the original New Testament said, that skepticism, on average, should be multiplied one thousand times for other Greco-Roman literature.”^{10}

Supposed Biblical Contradictions

After attacking the accuracy of the New Testaments available to most American Christians, Eichenwald attacks the consistency of the biblical record to undermine our confidence in what we read and the message we take from it. He presents nine different topics where he sees obvious contradictions in the text. We will examine four of them here, two from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament.

Number One: Creation

First, he claims there are three different creation models in the Bible, one in Genesis chapter 1, one in Genesis chapter 2, and “one referenced in the Books of

Isaiah, Psalms and Job”[{11}](#) in which “the world is created in the aftermath of a great battle between God and . . . a dragon . . . called Rahab.”[{12}](#)

Liberal theologians claim that chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis describe different accounts. If they were describing the same events in the same way, that might be so. However, whether Exodus was written by Moses or whether it was put together later, a human author would not contradict himself on the same page. A clear-headed look at the two passages shows that chapter 1 describes the overall creation as observed from earth while chapter 2 talks about what God did on the sixth day in creating Adam and Eve. As pointed out in the NET Bible, “for what follows (verse 2:4) is not another account of creation but a tracing of events from creation through the fall and judgment (the section extends from 2:4 through 4:26.”[{13}](#)

Eichenwald adds in the so-called third creation story of God and Rahab stating, “In fact, the Bible has three creation models”[{14}](#) as if this were a clear and well-known fact. If you read all the verses in Isaiah, Psalms and Job that reference Rahab, you will scratch your head and wonder how could anyone relate those few verses to a creation story. Rahab is a Hebrew word meaning “strong one and it is not necessarily a name. It is clear in Isaiah and Psalms that Rahab is a reference to Egypt, not some mythical dragon. In Job, it could be referring to the forces of chaos. He probably gets his idea from some articles that suggest that since Job 9:13 says “God does not restrain His anger; under Him the helpers of Rahab lie crushed” that the helpers of Rahab could refer to the helpers of Tiamat from the Babylonian Creation Epic. Even if this were true, rather than a third creation story one would say this verse tells us

1. God destroys all idols and false gods raised up by others, and
2. This is what Job said and Job was forced to retract what he said when he was confronted by Yahweh as seen in Job 42:1-6.

Eichenwald’s claim of three different creation models is an illusion.

Number Two: The Flood

Eichenwald reports another set of clear contradictions in the Genesis story of Noah and the flood. He points to three areas of supposed contradiction.

The first one has to do with how many animals are on the ark. In Genesis 6:19, God tells Noah that he shall “bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you.” Years later after Noah has completed the ark, God tells him in Genesis 7:2 to take seven pairs of every clean animal and two of every unclean animal. Eichenwald claims this is a contradiction that the author/editor was so incompetent as to include only five verses apart. He does not consider the option that after completing the ark, God gave Noah more complete instructions because more

clean animals would be needed to provide for the sacrifices to the Lord in Genesis 8:20. Noah did not need this detail before starting to build the ark.

The second contradiction is that the Bible has Noah and his family boarding the ark and the flood

beginning in two different sections. What Eichenwald sees as a contradiction, most readers take as a common literary technique, i.e. summarize the situation and then describe it again with more details. This was a seminal event in human history and deserved repeating.

The third contradiction according to Eichenwald is, “The water flooded the earth for 40 days (Genesis 7:17), or 150 days (Genesis 7:24). But Noah and his family stayed on the ark for a year (Genesis 8:13).” Upon reading the account, it is clear that Noah was on the ark for 12 months and 11 days during which it rained for forty days, the earth was totally inundated for 150 days as the waters slowly receded, but Noah waited to leave the ark until the land had become dry. You may choose not to believe in a universal flood, but to say the Bible has contradictions in its description is ludicrous.

Number Three: The Trial and Crucifixion

In this claim, he states that John was written “at a time when gentiles in Rome were gaining dramatically more influence over Christianity; that explains why the Romans are largely absolved from responsibility for Jesus’s death and blame instead is pointed toward the Jews.”[{15}](#) Thus, he implies that the other gospels put much of the blame on the Romans. Let us see if this is true.

Luke is very clear that the instigators of the death of Jesus were the Jewish leaders and those who followed them. In Luke 22:2 we read, “The chief priests and the experts in the law were trying to find some way to execute Jesus.” When Pilate is brought in to the process, Luke records that Pilate did not find Jesus guilty of anything worthy of death and stated so three different times[{16}](#). At least five times in the book of Acts, Luke records Paul as squarely placing the responsibility for Jesus’ death onto the Jewish leaders and nation.[{17}](#) We find similar verses in Matthew[{18}](#) and Mark.[{19}](#)

All of the gospels squarely place the blame on the Jewish leaders and those that followed them. Either Eichenwald has never read the gospels and just assumed the other gospels blamed the Romans, or he assumes his readers have never read the gospels.

Number Four: Ascension of Jesus

The fourth supposed contradiction deals with the ascension of Jesus. Eichenwald writes, “As told in Matthew, the disciples go to Galilee after the Crucifixion and see Jesus ascend to heaven; in Acts, written by Luke, the disciples stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus ascend from there.”[{20}](#)

As most of you know, the gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus meeting his disciples in Galilee and giving them the Great Commission. Matthew says **nothing** about Jesus ascending to heaven in Galilee or anywhere else. Because the Gospel of Luke does not discuss the time intervals, one might interpret it as saying that Jesus ascended into heaven on the day He was resurrected. But in Acts, Luke tells us that the resurrected Lord was with His disciples over a 40-day period. During

which time, it would have been easy to travel to Galilee, as recorded in Matthew and John, and then travel back to Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, his other five so-called “contradictions” all fail to hold up when one examines the Scriptures.

Faulty Interpretation of Scripture Passages Passages on Homosexuality

Eichenwald wants to convince us that what we think the Bible teaches about homosexuality is not what God intended.

He begins by pointing out, “The word homosexual didn’t even exist until more than 1,800 years after the New Testament was written. . . . The editors of these modern Bibles just made it up.”[{21}](#) But this could be said of many English words we use today. The ancient Greek word used in the text is a compound word clearly meaning male-with-male sexual activity. A respected dictionary of New Testament words defines it this way, “a male engaging in same-gender sexual activity, a sodomite.”[{22}](#)

He then tells us, “Most biblical scholars agree that Paul did not write 1 Timothy”[{23}](#) and, presumably, should not be trusted when addressing behaviors we should avoid, such as homosexuality. The early church fathers from the second century on and many contemporary scholars[{24}](#) do not agree it is a forgery. Regardless, the same prohibition appears in other epistles and not just in Timothy.

Eichenwald points out Romans, Corinthians and Timothy discuss other sins in more detail than homosexual behavior. He writes, “So yes, there is one verse in Romans about homosexuality . . . and there are eight verses condemning those who criticize the government.”[{25}](#)

Most people understand that explaining our relationship to the government is

more complex than forbidding homosexuality which is clearly understood. Romans talks about not resisting government authority. It says nothing about criticizing people in the government. In fact, that expression is protected by the laws of our land. In other words, to obey those laws you should feel free to criticize the government.

He then claims that people engage in other sins such as adultery, greed, drunkenness and lying and are not banished for those behaviors. But if you proclaimed you practice those actions regularly and teach them as truth, your church is going to remove you from any leadership position. They should still encourage you to attend worship services out of a desire to see God change your heart.[{26}](#) Mr. Eichenwald would be surprised to learn that most evangelical churches handle issues with homosexuality in the same way.

Then he declares, “Plenty of fundamentalist Christians who have no idea where references to homosexuality are in the New Testament . . . always fall back on Leviticus.”[{27}](#) Personally, I have never run into another church member who was unfamiliar with the New Testament, but knew “by memory” the details of Leviticus.

Christianity and the Law

Eichenwald claims homosexuality is not a sin or if it is, it is the same as all the other sins that he believes we ignore so that we can throw all our venom at homosexuals. To strengthen his position, he brings out “a fundamental conflict in the New Testament—arguably the most important one in the Bible.”[{28}](#) This conflict is whether as Christians we are to obey the Mosaic Law or whether we are to ignore it.

He claims, “The author of Matthew made it clear that Christians must keep Mosaic Law like the most religious Jews, in order to achieve salvation.”[{29}](#)

Wow, what a mistaken understanding of the message. In Matthew, Jesus explains

if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven “our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (the most religious Jews).” {30} We must not get angry, call people names, or lust after others in our minds. He caps it off by saying, “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” {31} He is clearly not teaching them to be like Orthodox Jews and they will be okay. He is teaching they cannot be good enough. It is only through His sacrifice that we can be made righteous.

In Acts 15, we see that some believers who were Pharisees by background brought this question up to the apostles and elders. Peter responded by telling them, “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they (the Gentiles) also are.” {32} And the apostles, the elders, and the whole church agreed to send directions to the Gentiles that they were not required to follow the Mosaic Law.

So as Gentiles, we are not required to follow the Law of Moses as laid out in Leviticus. But the New Testament is very careful to identify those actions and attitudes which are sin so that we Gentiles know to avoid them. Which is why sexual sins are specifically mentioned in the New Testament. {33} Even in Acts 15 where the church in Jerusalem is deciding what to tell Gentile Christians about the Law, they decide to tell them to abstain from fornication, a term generally covering all sexual activity outside of marriage. {34}

In summary, Eichenwald believes we should declare homosexuality is not a sin and those who practice it should be honored as leaders within the church. He does not suggest that we treat any other sins that way. He does not present a cogent argument that the New Testament agrees with his position. He is saying that we should ignore biblical teaching. But, we really do love those struggling with homosexual behavior and we want to help them gain freedom from those lusts just as much as someone struggling with opposite sex issues.

Obeying the Law vs. Criticizing the Government

Eichenwald also castigates us for disobeying the New Testament teaching about government. He says Romans has “eight verses condemning those who criticize the government. . . . In other words, all fundamentalist Christians who decry Obama have sinned as much as they believe gay people have.” {35} He points to Pat Robertson as sinning when Pat stated, “We need to do something, to pray to be delivered from this president.” Does Romans condemn those who criticize the government?

Actually, Romans says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. . . . the person who resists such authority resists the ordinance of God.” {36} It doesn’t say that we are required to say good things about the government, but rather that we should obey the laws of our government. Our Bill of Rights states that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech.” {37} So, if we do not voice our opinions about those running our government, we are in fact, not availing ourselves of the law established by our governing authorities.

Judging Our Motives for Prayer

Eichenwald casts aspersion on people of faith for gathering together to pray. He begins by castigating a prayer rally in Houston in 2011. He says, “[Then-governor Rick] Perry stepped to a podium, his face projected on a giant screen . . . and boomed out a long prayer asking God to make America a better place . . . babbling on . . . about faith and country and the blessings of America.” He further claimed that Perry “heaped up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.”

In reality, during the daylong event, Rick Perry spoke about 12 minutes and prayed for slightly more than **two minutes**. In his short prayer, Perry prayed in a cogent manner, praying for among others our president and his family.

Eichenwald explains that Perry is just an example of our misguided ways. The

problem is that most Christians in American are disobeying the teaching of Jesus by praying in front of people and praying words other than the Lord's Prayer. As Jesus told us, "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray . . . so that they may be seen by others."

Yes, Jesus is very clear that we are not to be hypocrites, but it is possible for someone to speak a prayer

in the presence of others without being a hypocrite. Jesus does tell us to make our prayers a personal conversation with our heavenly Father. But Jesus prayed often before synagogue attenders, in front of his disciples, and before over 5,000 people. But clearly those times, although numerous, were much less than the time He spent communing with His Father alone. That ratio should be true of our lives as well.

Even stranger is Eichenwald's belief that we should only pray the Lord's Prayer just as Jesus stated it. But, the passage in Matthew 6 tells us that Jesus was giving us a model, an example, of how to pray, not giving us a set of words to repeat in a meaningless fashion. In the gospels and the other New Testaments books, we are privy to many of the prayers offered by the apostles. None of them use the words from the Lord's prayer. If only Eichenwald had been there to instruct them, they would not have sinned so grievously.

Eichenwald claims the only reason anyone could be praying in front of a large crowd, or on television, or

by extension in a small congregation is "to be seen." This claim does not make sense. The people he is judging can build themselves up without having to resort to prayer.

Conclusion

In this article, we have seen that critics use an incomplete, shallow examination of Scripture to claim it is not accurate and our application is faulty. In every case,

we have seen that these claims leak like a sieve.

Dan Wallace sums up Eichenwald's arguments this way:

Time and time again the author presents his arguments as though they were facts. Any serious disagreements with his reasoning are quietly ignored as though they did not exist. The most charitable thing I can say is that Eichenwald is in need of a healthy dose of epistemic humility as well as a good research assistant who can do some fact-checking before the author embarrasses himself further in print. . . . But his numerous factual errors and misleading statements, his lack of concern for any semblance of objectivity, his apparent disdain for and lack of interaction with genuine evangelical scholarship, and his uber-confidence about more than a few suspect viewpoints, make me wonder. . . . Eichenwald's grasp of conservative Christianity in America as well as his grasp of genuine biblical scholarship are, at best, subpar. And this article is an embarrassment to *Newsweek*—or should be!" [\[38\]](#)

If Eichenwald's article represents the best scholarship discrediting the Bible, one rejoices in our firm foundation. On the other hand, realizing how many readers of such pieces don't know their flimsy nature, one is saddened by the potential impact on a society inclined to ignore the Bible.

Notes

1. Eichenwald, Kurt, "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin," *Newsweek Magazine*, December 2014.
2. Daniel B. Wallace, "[Predictable Christmas Fare: Newsweek's Tirade against the Bible](#)," blogpost December 2014 and Bock, Darrell, "[Darrell Bock Responds to Kurt Eichenwald's Newsweek Article on the Bible](#)," blogpost December 2014.
3. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, September 2010, pages 17-23.
4. Eichenwald, paragraph 4.
5. The 12 questions are as follows:

1. What is the first book of the Bible? (Open-ended)
 2. What are the names of the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels?
 3. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born? Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Jericho?
 4. Which of these is NOT in the Ten Commandments? Do unto others . . ., no adultery, no stealing, keep Sabbath?
 5. Which figure is associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering? Job, Elijah, Moses or Abraham?
 6. Which figure is associated with leading the exodus from Egypt? Moses, Job, Elijah or Abraham?
 7. Which figure is associated with willingness to sacrifice his son for God? Abraham, Job, Moses or Elijah?
 8. What is Catholic teaching about bread and wine in Communion? They become body and blood, or are symbols?
 9. Which group traditionally teaches that salvation is through faith alone? Protestants, Catholics, both or neither?
 10. Was Mother Teresa Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Mormon?
 11. What is the name of the person whose writings and actions inspired the Reformation? Luther, Aquinas or Wesley?
 12. Who was a preacher during the First Great Awakening? Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Billy Graham?
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6. The Barna Group, *Christians: More Like Jesus or Pharisees?*, 2012.
 7. Eichenwald, paragraph 19.
 8. Metzger, Bruce, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition, German Bible Society, Stuttgart, pages 148-150.
 9. Ibid, pages 162-163.
 10. Wallace.
 11. Eichenwald, paragraph 66.
 12. Ibid, paragraph 66.

13. New English Translation, Genesis Chapter 2 Notes 9 and 11.
14. Eichenwald, paragraph 66.
15. Eichenwald, paragraph 51.
16. See Luke 23:4,14,22.
17. See Acts 2:23,23,3:14-15,4:10,5:30.
18. Matthew 26:4,27:23-24.
19. Mark 14:1, 15:14-15.
20. Eichenwald, paragraph 52.
21. Ibid, paragraph 68.
22. William Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Zondervan, 2006.
23. Eichenwald, paragraph 70.
24. Among those disagreeing with Eichenwald's assertion are Daniel Wallace, John MacArthur, Charles Swindoll, John Stott, and Craig Keener.
25. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.
26. See the Watermark Community Church story: www.watermark.org/statement
27. Eichenwald, paragraph 80.
28. Eichenwald, paragraph 81.
29. Eichenwald, paragraph 82.
30. Matthew 5:20.
31. Matthew 5:48.
32. Acts 15:10-11.
33. For example in Mt 5:27-28, Romans 13:13-14, 1 Corinthians 6:9-20, Ephesians 4:19, Col 3:5, 1 Peter 4:3.
34. Acts 15:20,29.
35. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.
36. Romans 13:1,2.
37. Amendment 1 to the Constitution of the United States of America.
38. Wallace.

The True State of American Evangelicals

Steve Cable



Steve Cable analyzed the data concerning 18- to 40-year-old born-againists and presents a concise summary of the results.

Good News for Evangelicals?

How is the evangelical church doing in America as we begin to make our way through the second decade of this century? Are we growing in numbers and in the clarity of our message, or are we holding our own against a tide of secularism, or are we on the verge of a major collapse partially obscured by continuing attendance? The people who should have the best handle on this question are the sociologists and pollsters who map and track many different aspects of our society. What are they saying about the evangelical church?

First, consider Bradley Wright, professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut. In his 2010 book, *Christians Are Hate-filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've Been Told*, he finds "there seems to be no compelling evidence-based on the data we



have about our young people—that the church in America is on the verge of collapse.” {1}

Looking at the data from the Pew U. S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008, and the General Social Survey, he concludes, “On the negative side, the number of young people who do not affiliate with any religion has increased in recent decades just as it has for the whole population. . . . On the positive side, the percentage of young people who attend church or who think that religion is important has remained mostly stable. . . . What I don’t see in the data are evidence of a cataclysmic loss of young people.” {2}

Wright notes that the percentage of Evangelicals has remained fairly constant in recent years, while mainline Protestantism has declined. He suggests that one reason mainline Protestantism has decreased as a percentage of the population is that most mainline churches have not emphasized church planting. Therefore, “the number of Americans has grown every year but the number of seats in mainline churches has not.” {3}

Another sociologist looking at this question is Byron Johnson, professor of Social Sciences at Baylor University. Considering data from a survey commissioned by Baylor in 2005, {4} he concludes, “Leading religious observers claim that evangelicalism is shrinking and the next generation of evangelicals is becoming less religious and more secular, but these are empirical questions, and the evidence shows that neither of these claims is true. . . . Those who argue that a new American landscape is emerging—one in which the conservative evangelicalism of the past few decades is losing numbers and influence—are simply ignoring the data.” {5}

As Johnson points out, “For starters, evangelicals have not lost members . . . Fully one-third of Americans (approximately 100 million) affiliate with an evangelical Protestant congregation.” {6}

Another eminent sociologist, Christian Smith of the University of Notre Dame, has

done an extensive study of young Americans over the five years from 2003 to 2008, which he summarizes in his book *Souls in Transition, The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.[{7}](#) He begins by identifying the distinctly different culture of today's twenty-somethings in contrast with those of prior generations. The major source of distinction is the view that they don't really need to start living as married adults until they reach their thirties. The twenties are for exploring different jobs, lifestyles, and relationships before getting married and settling down. But when it comes to religion, he states, "The preponderance of evidence here shows emerging adults ages 18 to 25 actually remaining the same or growing more religious between 1972 and 2006—with the notable exceptions of significantly declining regular church attendance among Catholics and mainline Protestants, a near doubling in the percent of nonreligious emerging adults, and significant growth in the percent of emerging adults identifying as religiously liberal."[{8}](#)

However, looking at the more detailed data from his surveys, he concludes, "Most emerging adults are okay with talking about religion as a topic, although they are largely indifferent to it—religion is just not that important to most of them. . . . Most of them think that most religions share the same core principles, which they generally believe are good."[{9}](#) He goes on to say, "Furthermore, among emerging adults, religious beliefs do not seem to be important, action-driving commitments, but rather mental assents to ideas that have few obvious consequences."[{10}](#) He also concludes that among these young adults the tenets of liberal Protestantism have won the day, influencing many evangelicals, Catholics and Jews as well as mainline Protestants. One surprising outcome of this trend is the demise of mainline Protestant churches since their teaching is "redundant to the taken-for-granted mainstream" that they helped create.[{11}](#)

Standing in contrast to these eminent sociologists are the findings of George Barna and the Barna Group. Their surveys between 1995 and 2009[{12}](#) indicate that among all Americans who self-identify as being born again, less than 20% of

them agree with six basic historic Christian beliefs^{13} which Barna associates with a biblical worldview. Among those between 18 and 25, this number drops even further. Young people may be affiliating with evangelical churches at similar rates over the last fifty years, but that affiliation does not mean that they have beliefs similar to prior generations.

So what is right? Is it true that there is no compelling evidence that the church in America is on the verge of collapse? Or, do we have more religious young people who are heavily influenced by the beliefs of mainline Protestantism? Or, is the dearth of a biblical worldview an early warning sign of a significant collapse? As you can imagine, this is a question that we at Probe just had to get to the bottom of. So, we dove in to analyze the data behind the statements above, using their own data to validate or question their conclusions. We also commissioned our own survey of 18- to 40-year-old, born-again Americans to probe deeper into this question. Unfortunately, what we found convinced us that things are not only worse than what Wright, Johnson, and Smith concluded, but they appear to be worse in some ways than our prior assumptions from the existing Barna surveys.

Where Do We Really Stand?

When we look at the underlying survey data used by Wright, Johnson, Smith, *and* Barna, we discover an unsurprising result: on similar questions they get similar results. For example, consider the question “Do you believe God is all powerful and involved in the world today?” This question is asked in one form or another by all four surveys used by the authors above.^{14} Looking at twenty-somethings, we find the following affirmative responses:

Question	Author	Source Survey	Result
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All powerful God involved in the world today	Wright	GSS	79%
	Johnson	Baylor 2005	83%
	Smith	NSYR 2008{15}	83%
	Barna	Barna 2009	83%

As you can see, all sources have essentially the same results (which is nice since it tends to corroborate their polling techniques). So, how did they come to such different conclusions about the meaning of similar sets of data? Looking at these high percentages, how could Smith say there is something different about this emerging generation, or how could Barna say that “Jesus would be disappointed by the answers He received from today’s Americans?”

The answer comes from two sources. First, you need to ask more questions about their beliefs and practices than just “Do you believe in a God and in Jesus as His Son?” A person can mean a lot of different things when answering yes to those questions. Second (and it turns out to be extremely important), you must look at the combined answers to a set of related questions. In his book, Smith took the first step of asking a lot of probing questions, both in the survey and in face-to-face interviews. By doing this, it became clear that their answers to a few questions about God and Jesus did not mean that they were biblically literate Christians. Barna took the second step of looking at the answers to a combined set of questions and discovered that the beliefs of Americans were disjointed and inconsistent, particularly among the younger generations. So, even though 83% of 18- to 26-year-olds who professed to be born-again believed that God is all powerful and involved in the world today, only a small subset of them believed all six biblical worldview questions.{16}

What happens if we look at the results of the surveys used by Wright, Johnson, and Smith? Fortunately, we were able to access the raw questionnaire results using the Association of Religious Data Archives online database. Of course, these surveys did not ask exactly the same questions, but we were able to find a set of

roughly equivalent questions within each survey. And this is what we found about those with a biblical worldview, compared to those who actually apply their biblical worldview to the way they live:

Belief	Baylor	NSYR	Barna	Probe^{17}
Biblical Worldview	27%	22%	19%	37%
Biblical Worldview plus Cultural Application	8%	3%	NA	10%

So each of the surveys used by the four different sociologists basically showed the same result: less than one third of born-again (or evangelicals) had a set of beliefs consistent with the biblical worldview taught by Jesus, and less than 10% had a biblical worldview *and* a set of cultural beliefs (e.g. beliefs about sex outside of marriage, abortion, materialism, caring for the poor, etc.) taught by Jesus in the New Testament. So, it appears that if they had done more in-depth analysis of their own data, Wright, Johnson and Smith should have been espousing the same message as the Barna survey.

This surprising result (at least to Wright and Johnson) that their data actually is consistent with Barna's data allows us to quit worrying about the differences and concentrate on the common message of these surveys. Among several, I think that three major messages from the survey results are important for us to consider here.

1. First, as the culture has adopted more unbiblical views regarding pluralism, sexuality, honesty, etc., the majority of evangelical church members have adapted to accept the new cultural positions rather than stand firm in the truth taught by Christ and his apostles. In other words, they have been taken "captive by the empty deception and philosophy according to the traditions of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Col. 2:8).

2. Second, our 18- to 29-year-olds are leaving a classical evangelical faith in large numbers. A third of them directly leave any involvement with evangelical church, with half of that number going into liberal mainline denominations and the other half leaving behind all church affiliation. Of those who remain associated with an evangelical church, one third of them attend church but do not hold to a biblical worldview and another third do not go to church or hold to a biblical worldview. So, just less than 8% of American teenagers move into emerging adulthood with a strong, evangelical worldview.

3. The percentage of Americans belonging to evangelical churches has remained fairly consistent, but that does not mean that the beliefs of the members have remained constant. The sacred / secular split, described by Nancy Pearcey in her book *Total Truth*, [{18}](#) allows them to ascribe to at least a limited set of evangelical beliefs in their sacred side while keeping the “real truths” of the secular side isolated and unaffected by any evangelical beliefs.

How Did We Get to This State?

If you find your child trapped inside the dryer at home, you not only want to get them freed from captivity, you also want to understand how they got into that mess so you can prevent it in the future. In the same way, Probe has undertaken an in-depth survey to help us understand how seemingly born-again believers in Christ are so often taken captive by the thoughts of men rather than Christ. Our survey found they fall into three equally sized categories:

- Those *with* a biblical worldview who *attend* church regularly (Free Ones)
- Those *without* a biblical worldview who *attend* church regularly (Partial Captives)
- Those *without* a biblical worldview who *do not attend* church regularly (Full Captives)

The first take-away from this study is disturbing but not very surprising. Most American born-again between the ages of 18 and 40 received their spiritual beliefs (and most of their other beliefs) from their parents or grandparents. In other words, their hodgepodge of inconsistent beliefs covering everything from God to gossip, they essentially obtained from the previous generation. What the other surveys show is that people in their 40s and 50s have viewpoints that are more conformed to the culture than to Christ just as their children do. It is not quite as dramatic but it is very pronounced. If we parents are holding beliefs that are captive to the traditions of men and the elementary principles of this world, then it is not surprising to see that thinking expanded in our children.

It is very interesting to note that 42% of church-going young adults with a biblical worldview (called the Free Ones hereafter) stated that their spiritual beliefs were driven by sources other than immediate family members, versus only 30% for other born-again (an increase of 40%). Interestingly, this difference also coincides with the higher percentage of college graduates among the Free Ones relative to other young born-again. In fact, college graduates influenced by sources outside their family are more than twice as likely to be church attendees with a biblical worldview than are those who did not graduate from college. So, it appears that this committed group of church-going young adults with a biblical worldview had to deal with challenges to their faith in college which led them to delve into the questions and develop a solid biblical worldview, drawing from sources outside their families.

However, it is worthwhile to note that when asked an additional six worldview questions only half of the Free Ones expressed a biblical point of view on those questions.

The second take away is in the different ways of viewing non-biblical thinking among young adults. We surveyed their attitudes and actions on a number of unbiblical areas of behavior including sexual activity, negative feelings such as anger and unforgiveness, use of the tongue, self-focus and greed, negative

attitudes and sinful actions. For these unbiblical behaviors, if they engaged in that behavior we asked them what they thought about it. They could select from “I do not believe it is wrong,” “Believe it is wrong, do it anyway and feel guilty or embarrassed,” or “Believe it is wrong, do it anyway, without feeling guilty or embarrassed.” Not surprisingly, the Free Ones tended to have the same level of participation in each area as other born-again, but a significantly lower percentage of those said the behavior wasn’t wrong or did it without feeling guilty or embarrassed. On the other hand, among the one-third with irregular church attendance and no biblical worldview (the Fully Captive), about one-third had no guilt with their sexual indiscretions and over one-half had no guilt associated with issues of internal attitudes, sins of the tongue, and other negative actions.

A third take-away from our survey was a difference in attitude as a function of age. Those between 30 and 40 were almost 30% more likely to subscribe to a biblical worldview than those between 18 and 24. Similarly, Christian Smith’s data shows that over one-third of all 18- to 24-year-olds are no longer affiliated with any Christian religion today as compared to about one in five thirty-somethings.[\[19\]](#) If this is a precursor to permanent erosion in the number of people with a biblical worldview, we need to address it now.

In summary, the majority of young born-again

1. Caught their unbiblical beliefs from their parents
2. Make important decisions without considering biblical truth
3. Don’t consider sinful behavior much of a problem

It should be noted that not all of the 817 born-again questioned in our survey are affiliated with evangelical churches. From the Baylor survey, we find that in the general population from age 18 to 44, 35% are evangelical or Pentecostal, 20% are mainline Protestants, 20% are Catholic, and the remaining 25% are not Christians. Among those who self-identified as born-again, 57% are evangelical or

Pentecostal, 30% are affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations, and only 5% are Catholics. However, when we look at those born-again with a biblical worldview, we find almost 71% are evangelicals and Pentecostals, about 27% are mainline Protestants and only 1% are Catholics. This result shows the wide disparity of beliefs across denominations even among those who meet the criteria of being born-again.

We asked these born-again in making decisions associated with family, business, and religious matters, “What is the primary basis or source of those principles and standards that you take into consideration?” We found there was a huge difference between Free Ones and the remainder. In fact, 75% of the Free Ones looked to a biblical source in making those decisions while only 33% of the Partially Captive and 10% of the Fully Captives considered a biblical source.

From Captives to Conquerors

As we dove into the data on how the American church is faring today, we started with something that first looked like a pure, white sand Caribbean beach but turned out upon further evaluation to be a trash-filled swamp of putrid, stale water. And, we have to ask the question, Can the church continue on this trajectory of scattered beliefs and split personalities for long? I think the answer has to be no. Either the evangelical church will follow the path of other Protestant denominations into shrinking, irrelevant entities, or something will bring it back to the truth found in Christ Jesus.

An encouraging note in this discouraging journey of discovery is that our status is not new. The apostle Paul expressed concern about a similar loss of the truth impacting the genuine believers of Colossae. He warned them, “I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument” (Col 2:4) with the intent of taking them captive “through philosophy and empty deception . . . rather than according to Christ” (Col 2:8).

We find in the New Testament that it is clearly a strategy of Satan to offer watered-down and distorted views of what it means to live in Christ as a way to prevent Christians from bringing more people into eternal life through faith in Jesus. Clearly, from the data we have looked at for American evangelicals, this strategy is having a powerful effect in America today.

In this second chapter of Colossians, Paul goes on to highlight four different types of arguments that could lead us astray: Naturalism, Legalism, Mysticism and Asceticism. All four of these false views are alive and well in our world today. Naturalism (e.g. neo-Darwinism) and Mysticism (e.g. the forms presented by Eckhart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey^{20}) are the most prevalent in our society, but Legalism (i.e. religious rituals and performance over grace) still has a strong influence, and Asceticism (i.e. denying the body through severe treatment) is very strong in other parts of the world.

But, just as it was true for the Colossians, it is true for us: we don't have to fall for these traps that are out to delude our minds. Christ gives us the freedom and Paul gives us clear directions on how to escape from delusional thinking. Paul's advice can be summarized in five key areas:

- Ask God to fill us with the knowledge of His will (of the truth) with all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Col. 1:9-10; 2:2-3).
- Recognize that Christ is the maker and the sustainer of all, and therefore every truth in this world is Christ's truth (Col. 1:15-20).
- Accept that in Christ I have been made complete, and the acceptance of men and accolades of this world cannot add to that completeness (Col. 2:9-10).
- In the same way I received Christ Jesus for eternal life, I am to walk in His truth in this life. Jesus is not just my insurance for when I die; He is my life and I need to be "firmly rooted and grounded in Him" (Col. 2:6-7).

- Realize that I am now living in eternity with Christ and am assigned for a brief time to this temporal world (Col. 3:1-3).

Don't fall for Satan's trap that some man-made concept has a better grip on truth than Jesus our creator and sustainer. We have seen that coming generations are looking to you to define their beliefs. Are you going to show them an active belief in Christ as your Truth? If you do, it can make a difference!

Notes

1. Bradley Wright, Ph.D., *Christians Are Hate Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've Been Told* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2010), 75.
2. Ibid., 66.
3. Ibid., 41.
4. Baylor University. 2005. *The Baylor Religion Survey*. Waco, TX: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion.
5. Byron Johnson, Ph.D., "The Good News About Evangelicalism," *First Things* online edition, February 2011, www.firstthings.com/article/2011/01/the-good-news-about-evangelicalism.
6. Ibid.
7. Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition, The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). You can find two extensive articles on the Christian Smith book and data by Steve Cable at the Probe web site: "Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America," bit.ly/g5VH4h and "Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths," bit.ly/mQYubb.
8. Ibid., 101.

9. Ibid., 286.

10. Ibid., 286.

11. Ibid., 288.

12. Barna Group, Barna Survey Examines Changes in Worldview Among Christians over the Past 13 Years, 2009. bit.ly/akBPci

13. For the purposes of the survey, a “biblical worldview” was defined as believing that absolute moral truth exists; 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. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview.

14. GSS (Bradley Wright): Believe in God

Christian Smith: God is a personal being involved in the lives of people today

Baylor study: I have no doubt that God exists and He is concerned with the well being of the world

Barna Group: God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today

15. www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp. “The National Study of Youth and Religion,” www.youthandreligion.org, whose data were used by permission here, was generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., under the direction of Christian Smith of the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame.

16. A “biblical worldview” was defined as believing that absolute moral truth exists; 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. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview.

17. We included the results from the Probe study done for us by the Barna Group and discussed later in this report for comparison purposes.

18. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004).

19. From GSS survey data.

20. Steve Cable, "Oprah's Spirituality: Exploring A New Earth," probe.org/oprahs-spirituality

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