

# Religious Trends Over the Last Decade

*Probe VP Steve Cable examines some of the findings of the Probe Survey 2020: The Changing Face of Christianity in America.*

## Religious Trends Over the Last Fifty Years

In late 2020, Probe administered a [new survey{1}](#) to over 3,000 Americans ages 18 through 55 as a follow up to our 2010 survey{2}. Comparing these two surveys reveals a striking decline in Christian religious beliefs and practice across America over the last decade. Before focusing on these changes, let's begin with a foundational question.

*How have young adult religious affiliations changed over the last five decades?*



As documented in the General Social Surveys{3} from 1970 through 1990, their religious affiliations remained fairly constant. Since then, there have been significant changes.

The most dramatic change is found in young adults under thirty who select a non-Christian affiliation. This group grew from about one fifth of the population in 1990 to almost half today. Those non-Christians from other religious faiths{4} such as Judaism, Islam, and Mormonism, grew slightly up to about 10% of the U.S. young adult population. At the same time, **the Unaffiliated (i.e. Atheist, Agnostic or Nothing in Particular) almost tripled** to over a third of the population. Among the Unaffiliated, the Nothing in Particular category had by far the largest growth. The Pew Research surveys show an

even greater increase, growing from 27% in 1996 to 59% in 2020.

Now bringing in the data from GSS 2010 survey, we learn 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 people in their twenties became Unaffiliated in their thirties. This result runs directly counter to the supposition of many that the growth in Unaffiliated would dissipate as young adults age and return to churches to raise their families.

Conversely, **Christian groups declined** with Other Protestants[\[5\]](#) dropping by half, from about one in four down to less than one in eight young adult Americans. Catholics also experienced major losses, dropping by one quarter down to less than one in five young adult Americans over this thirty-year period.

Although less affected, the Evangelical affiliation also experienced a drop in recent years. GSS reported a small decline in young adult, born again Protestants, from about one in four down to around one in five Americans. Pew Research[\[6\]](#) reported a steeper decline in young adult Evangelicals, from 28% in 2007 down to 20% in 2019.

Perhaps this decline is a winnowing out of those whose Christian beliefs are not vital to their lives. In which case, a greater percentage of born again Christians should hold a strong biblical worldview now in 2020 than in 2010. In the next section, we will explore this topic to find out the truth of the matter.

## **Born Again Young Adults and a Biblical Worldview**

In the next sections, we will be focusing on Born Again

Christians in our Probe results. A Born Again Christian is someone who says:

1. I have made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important in my life today and
2. I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

We can compare the responses of Born Again Christians to those of Other Protestants and Catholics.

What portion of these three groups have a Basic Biblical Worldview strongly affirming that:

1. God is the all-powerful, all knowing, perfect creator who rules the world today.[{7}](#)
2. The Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings.
3. A person cannot be good enough to earn a place in heaven.
4. While on earth, Jesus committed no sins like other people do.

All four concepts above are key components of God's redemptive plan. For example, Jesus being sinless made it possible for his death to redeem us.[{8}](#) Or, if the Bible is inaccurate in some of its teachings how could we know that it is correct in teaching about redemption?

In 2020 for those ages 18 through 39, one of four Born Again Christians, one of twenty Other Protestants and one of one hundred Catholics affirmed all four of these foundational beliefs. The statement least likely to be affirmed by all three groups was "a person cannot earn a place in heaven". Perhaps many have been influenced by the current postmodern thinking that what's not true for you can be true for someone else.

Only Born Again Christians had a sizable minority of one fourth affirming this worldview. In contrast, nearly half of Born Again Christians affirmed it in 2010. Clearly, this last

decade had a serious impact on the perception of what it means to be a Christian.

We see a similar drop when comparing those ages 18 to 29 in 2010 with the same cohort now 30 to 39 in 2020, once again belying the notion that young adults will return to a conservative faith in their thirties. Instead of a noticeable increase as the cohort aged, we see a sizeable drop in those who affirm these key Christian doctrinal statements.

As the percent of true Christians drops, the ability to reach out with the gospel is surely reduced. However, Christians in the Roman Empire in AD 60 were an even smaller portion. Three hundred years later virtually the entire empire was nominally Christian. If we “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light<sup>{9}</sup>,” God will bring many to repentance.

## Born Again Young Adults and Pluralism

Pluralism is the belief that there are multiple ways to be right with God. **Pluralism and Christianity are not compatible.** Jesus clearly stated, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>{10}</sup> The high price paid through Jesus’ life and death excludes the possibility of Jesus being one of several options. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “There is salvation in no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved.”<sup>{11}</sup>

What does Probe’s new survey reveal about pluralism? Confronted with the statement, “Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God,” how did American Christians respond? Do they align with clear biblical teaching by strongly disagreeing? For those ages 18 through 39, we found that about one third of Born Again Christians, one in eight Other Protestants, and one in twenty Catholics did so. An overwhelming majority of Christians chose to accept a belief

that devalues the death and resurrection of our Lord. Once again, only Born Again Christians had a sizeable minority of one third who agreed with Jesus and the New Testament.

Looking back to 2010, was there a significant change among Born Again Christians during this decade? For the same age group, the percent in 2010 strongly disagreeing was almost one half, compared to the one third in 2020. So, more Christians than ever have no reason to share their faith with people of other religions. As the need for evangelism increases, the number of Christians who believe evangelism is even needed by people of other religions decreases.

The age group 18 to 29 saw 45% choosing a non-pluralist view in 2010 with that same age cohort (now 30 to 39) dropping to 35% in 2020. Once again, we see that as Born Again Christians are maturing, more of them are abandoning rather than clinging to the strong truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To counter this slide with the young adults we know, please:

1. Pray for the Lord to send laborers into the harvest, opening their to the infinite value of the gospel.
2. Explain that the chasm is so great only God can make a way of reconciliation. As Paul wrote, *"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, Jesus . . . who gave himself as a ransom for all . . ."*

[{12}](#)

3. Explain that your accepting pluralism will not get your non-Christian friends into heaven. Only the truth of Christ presented to them by willing lips has power over their eternal destiny.

## Young Adults and Jesus Our Savior

Probe's new survey shows that professing to be born again does not equate to orthodox biblical beliefs. In this section, we will see this borne out in beliefs about Jesus Christ.

**First, why did Jesus die on a cross?** The Bible is clear Jesus chose the cross. **"He did it to redeem us by taking our sins and our punishment upon Himself."** Close to nine out of ten 18- to 39-year-old, Born Again Protestants selected this answer.[{13}](#) All Christian leaders should want their people to know Jesus' role in their redemption, even those with a works-based gospel. Yet less than two thirds of Other Protestants and Catholics selected that answer.

Many said either the Jewish or Romans leaders caused Jesus' death. But Christians should know that prior attempts by those groups were supernaturally thwarted.

**Second, "Jesus will return to this earth to save those who await his coming."**

This statement comes from scripture, *" . . . so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, . . . to save those eagerly waiting for him."*[{14}](#) As you can see, this verse answers both questions. The apostle Paul wrote, *"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven . . . and the dead in Christ will rise first."*[{15}](#)

Around two thirds of Born Again Protestants strongly agree that Jesus will return to save. Apparently, the remaining third are not sure.

For other Christian groups, only about one third of them strongly agreed.

**The third question is: "When he lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people."**

The Bible clearly states, “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.”[\[16\]](#) God laid our sins upon Jesus in his earthly death. If Jesus were a sinner like you and I, His death would have been for His own sin.

Once again, about one third of Born Again Protestants did not select Disagree Strongly. Having this large group who don't understand biblical Christianity is disappointing.

Young adult Born Again Protestants drop down to about one half when looking at **all three questions together**. It appears the other half are trusting Jesus to save them, without a good understanding of who Jesus is. All other Christian groups drop to one in ten or less professing these truths about Jesus.

Finally, we find nine out of ten people with a Basic Biblical Worldview also select a biblical answer for the three Jesus questions. This shows a strong correlation between a Basic Biblical Worldview and an understanding of Jesus' purpose.

## **Are the Unaffiliated Uncommitted Christians?**

In this section we will access Probe's 2020 survey to learn about those identifying as Agnostic or Nothing in Particular. We will call them AGNIPS. Perhaps, as some have suggested, a significant percentage are really Christians not affiliated with any denomination.

Among those ages 18 through 39, one in five are AGNIPS. About one third of these were Protestants as children but only three out of one hundred profess to being born again. So, it appears unlikely that any significant portion of the AGNIPS are latent Born Again Christians.

Of course, many people professing to be Christians do not qualify as Born Again. So perhaps many AGNIPS are latent Other

Protestants or Catholics. Let's look at three different metrics to see if this proposition is supported by data.

First, look at a nominal level of religious activity: pray at least daily and read your Bible at least weekly. I think anyone not doing these has little interest in their faith. For this young adult segment, 35% of Born Again Christians and almost 30% of Other Protestants and Catholics *but* less than 5% of AGNIPS perform these activities. Compared to professing Christians, the AGNIPS have very few doing these activities.

Looking only at AGNIPS who were affiliated with a Protestant faith as a child, we find only 3% performing these activities.

A second metric: how about those who believe God is creator and active in the world and do not believe good works will get them into heaven? We find: 33% Born Again Christians, 4% Other Protestants and Catholics, around 0.5% of all AGNIPS and only 0.4% of AGNIPS with a childhood Protestant affiliation.

Finally, of those who strongly agrees with the statement, "I believe that the only path to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ." Once again: 64% of Born Again Christians, 28% of Other Protestants and Catholics, 5% of all AGNIPS and 5% of AGNIPS with a childhood Protestant affiliation.

All of these metrics agree that very few young adults who are Agnostics or Nothing in Particular appear to have latent Christian beliefs. Even those who were affiliated with a Protestant church as a child did not have a higher level of affiliation with Christian beliefs.

Over this last decade, among Born Again Christians, a basic biblical worldview and understanding of Jesus is decreasing while pluralism is increasing. And the growing AGNIP population is far removed from Christian thought. Those who follow Christ, must respond by speaking the truth about Christ in our churches, our neighborhoods, and the world. We cannot



expect any of these groups to just come back to a solid Christian belief. We must reach out to them.

## Notes

1. 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 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.
2. Our previous survey, the 2010 Probe Culturally Captive Christians survey, was limited to Born Again American's ages 18 through 40. This survey of 817 people was focused on a obtaining a deeper understanding of the beliefs and behaviors of young adult, Born Again Christian Americans. 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](#)
3. General Social Survey data was downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the National Opinion Research Center.
4. Note that the Other Religions category includes Christian cults (e.g. Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses), Jews, and other world religions.
5. Protestants who did not profess to being born again
6. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014, Religious Knowledge Survey 2019 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the Pew Research Center.
7. 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.
- Don't know

8. See for example 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15

9. 1 Peter 2:9

10. John 14:6

11. Acts 4:12

12. 1 Timothy 2:4-6

13. Other answers included:

- He threatened the Roman authority's control over Israel.
- He threatened the stature of the Jewish leaders of the day.
- He never died on a cross.
- He failed in his mission to convert the Jewish people into believers.

14. Hebrews 9:27-28 ESV

15. 1 Thessalonians 4:16

16. 2 Corinthians 5:21 NET

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**unChristian:**

**Is**

# Christianity's Image Hurting Christ's Image?

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

**Section Synopsis:** *A recent book entitled unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters uncovered overwhelmingly negative views of evangelicals and born-again Christians, especially among young generations. In some ways these views are warranted, in some ways they are not, but Christians do well to take them as a wake-up call for the sake of those God wants to save and mature.*

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



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

These are widespread perceptions, especially among sixteen- to

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

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

The authors' applications are not always solidly based. They seem a little dismissive of valid objections to their analysis and conclusions. Also, confusion among unchurched respondents about the meaning of the terms "born again" and "evangelical" leads one to ask, How seriously do we take survey-takers' critique of Christians if they don't even know who or what these Christians are? That is, many times the people being surveyed couldn't clearly define what "born-again" means or what an "evangelical" is, so how much stock should we put in their criticisms?

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

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

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

According to the authors, "Theologically conservative people are increasingly perceived as aloof and unwilling to talk." But those under 30 "are the ultimate 'conversation generation'." Those outside church want to discuss issues, but see Christians as unwilling. Have you recently had a spiritual dialogue with a young unbeliever? How'd it go?

## **"Christians Are Hypocritical"**

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

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

In fact, the survey on which the book is based reveals blatant legalism among believers, that the top priority of born-again Christians is, "doing the right thing, being good, and not sinning." This do-your-best value topped biblical values like "relationships, evangelism, service and family faith." In another survey, four out of five churchgoers said that "the Christian life is well described as, 'trying hard to do what God commands'." [\[2\]](#) Such a primary focus on *lifestyle* and sin-management as a measure of spirituality leads to what they

call a “false pretense of holiness,” that is, hypocrisy.[{3}](#) It’s often like we Christians are living for others’ approval and forgetting about grace.

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

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

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

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

In an age of Internet image-making and advertising, young

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

## **"Christians Hate Homosexuals"**

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

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

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

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

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

Barna’s survey shows just how unbiblical self-identified Christians can be. Over half said homosexuality was a problem, but only two out of six hundred people said anything about love or “being sympathetic” as a potential solution. A mere one percent say they pray for homosexuals! “We need to downgrade the importance of being antihomosexual as a ‘credential,’” of our commitment to Christ, say the authors.[\[9\]](#) That is, we need to repent if we believe that it’s a spiritual badge of honor to be anti-gay.

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

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



# “Christians Are Judgmental”

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

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

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

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

Well, aren’t unbelievers the ones judging believers? Aren’t Christians just standing up to sin? In-depth interviews showed that many respondents “believe Christians are trying . . . to

justify feelings of moral and spiritual superiority.”[{12}](#) My opinion is this: If we think we’re better, we need to revisit Amazing Grace! Arrogance is the charge; are you guilty of it? I know I’ve been.

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

- Judgmentalism doesn’t stop to ask why people do the things they do and why they are the way they are. That is, it just doesn’t care.
- Judgmental minds see everything in terms of rules kept or rules broken.
- A judgmental heart maintains the us-them dichotomy, keeping people at a distance from us. Holding people in contempt is easier when we lump them into categories.
- The core belief of a judgmental spirit is, “I’m right and I’m better.”

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

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

unbeliever commits sin, we can see from it how to minister to them.

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

## How Can True Christians Constructively Respond?

**Section Synopsis:** *Repairing a damaged image is a worthy goal for Christians so that critics can see Christ instead of negative stereotypes. We can tear down stereotypes by being Christlike and then we have a chance to tear down deeper misconceptions about God, the Bible, and faith.*

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

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

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

We need to seek common ground to begin a dialogue with those

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

At one point, he proclaimed, "I like to think of God as feminine." I explored his reasons, which included the presence of beauty in the world. I affirmed that observation far as I could and expanded his thinking. I said, "What if God is so big and complete that He embodies perfect femininity *and* masculinity?" The door opened wider. But what if I'd acted offended by the cuss word on the sticker or been put off by his distorted theology? I'm sure he would have been put off and the conversation would have been aborted.

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

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

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

## Notes

1. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why it Matters* (BakerBooks: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007).
2. David Kinnaman and Lyons, 51
3. Ibid, 49.
4. Ibid, 42. 5. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton/Penguin Group, New York, New York: 2008), 54.
6. Kinnaman and Lyons, 99.
7. Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Homosexuality* (Harvest House: Eugene, Oregon, 2008), 82.
8. Ephesians 6:12 (NASB). See: [www.BibleGateway.com](http://www.BibleGateway.com).
9. Kinnaman and Lyons, 105.
10. Ibid, 183.
11. Tim Keller, interviewed by Ed Stetzer, researcher, blogger and host of Inside Lifeway, posted April 24, 2008, [lifeway.edgeboss.net/download/lifeway/corp/IL\\_Evangelism\\_and\\_Keller.mp3](http://lifeway.edgeboss.net/download/lifeway/corp/IL_Evangelism_and_Keller.mp3).
12. Kinnaman and Lyons, 182.
13. Josh McDowell, as quoted by Charlie Mack, staff representative of Faculty Commons (Campus Crusade for Christ) in a PowerPoint® presentation presented to professors at Michigan State University, Spring, 2008.
14. Kinnaman and Lyons, 56.
15. Kerby Anderson, 83-84.
16. Keller, "Inside Lifeway" interview.

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## Probe Survey Report #4:

# Witnessing to Your Faith and the Response

*Steve Cable continues to explore Probe's 2020 survey on religious beliefs and practices, examining how people witness to their faith or not, and reasons for both sharing and for not trusting Christ.*

## 1. How Often Do You Witness to Your Faith?

Let's consider the topic of witnessing or sharing your faith with others. In our 2020 survey we asked two questions about this topic. The first question was: *How often do you engage in intentional spiritual conversation with non-believers about your faith with a desire to see them accept it for themselves?* With this question, we wanted to avoid casual mentions of your faith and discussions with no intent at conversion. The results as shown in the chart below are surprising.

Among Americans ages 18 through 39 who profess an affiliation with some religion, we find that less than 1 out of 5 (20%) of them strongly disagree with the statement that Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God. Yet at the same time almost 6 out of 10 (60%) of them state that they share their faith with an unbeliever at least once a year with the intent of converting them to their belief.

So the majority of American believers (of any faith) must believe that at least for some people with different religious beliefs, it would be better for them to turn from their current belief and accept the tenets of my faith. They want to do this even though they believe that there are multiple ways to God not beyond just their faith.

Looking at the detailed results, all religions except the Unaffiliated showed very similar results: over 20% (1 in 5) of those witnessed at least monthly and about half witnessed at least yearly. So, it would appear that there is a lot of witnessing going on with very few conversions.

Figure 1 Witness with a Desire to See Conversion

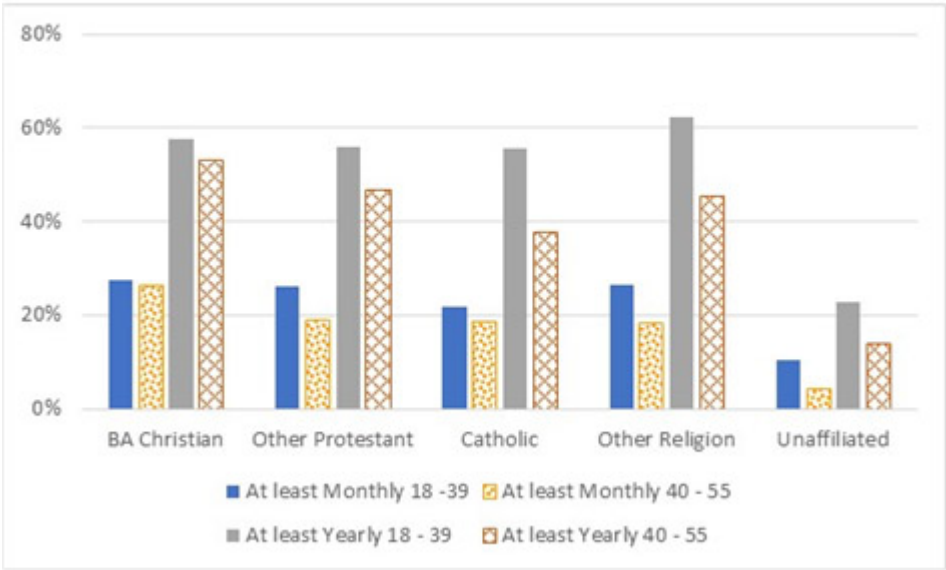


Table 1 below shows several estimates as to how many people are the recipients of these “*intentional spiritual conversations*” in a given year. The different levels shown are based on different assumptions as to how often they share with the same person and how many people they share with in a year consistent with the responses to the survey. More details are provided in the endnotes.

Table 1 Potential

Number of People Shared with by American Adults Ages 18 through 55

Religious Affiliation of Person Sharing with Intent to Convert	Potential number of individuals shared with in one year		
	Low estimate (millions){1}	Nominal estimate (millions){2}	High estimate (millions){3}
Born Again Protestant	27	56	118

Other Protestant	24	50	106
Catholic	25	51	108
Other Religion	15	31	65
Unaffiliated	12	25	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>449</b>

These results amazed me. If the nominal estimate was truly happening almost 60% of the population would have someone attempting to convert them every year. This topic deserves additional related questions to determine what level of sharing with the intent of conversion is actually happening in America. It may be that most people answering this question are only sharing with one or two family members such as their teenage children or a sibling. Or perhaps, many people think they would do this, but really they do not.

What makes this especially surprising is that Other Protestants and Catholics have a lot more people witnessing than they have holding a Basic Biblical Worldview or actually being involved in their religion. While only about one in ten (10%) strongly disagree with the statement that Mohammed, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God, over half (50%) of them are sharing their faith with the intent to convert at least once a year. And, one in five (20%) are sharing monthly or more. If you think that there are multiple ways to heaven, why would you want to go out of your way to convert someone to your religion. Of course, you could be sharing with an Unaffiliated person who needs to choose a valid religion.

Only 4.6% of Other Protestants and 0.7% of Catholics have a Basic Biblical Worldview, but almost half of them say they intentionally witness to their faith at least yearly. When they engage in a conversation with the intent of having this other person accept their faith for themselves, WHAT IS THIS FAITH THEY ARE TRYING TO GET THE OTHER PERSON TO ACCEPT? These results do suggest that most people desire more people to



think like them when it comes to religion.

In a similar vein, less than 1 in 10 (10%) Catholics and Other Protestants say they pray daily, attend church at least monthly, read the Bible weekly and say their faith is important in their daily life. So, the question remains, "What are they witnessing to???"

In contrast, only 29% of Born Again Christians have a Basic Biblical Worldview while well over half of them report intentional witnessing at least once a year. But at least BAC's have something to witness to. Those Born Again Christians with a Basic Biblical Worldview report that almost two thirds (63%) of them share their faith at least once a year. This level is only a few percentage points higher than that for Born Again Christians as a whole.

## **How Should We Respond?**

If the number of people sharing their faith is actually consistent with the answers to this question, then we know that the percentage of people actually converting as a result of their witness is very small. Otherwise, we would have many people toggling back and forth between different professed religions.

Among Born Again Christians, we project they are sharing their faith with between 25 million and 100 million nonbelievers. However, they are sharing ineffectively with the number being shared with far exceeding the growth rate of evangelicals in America. So, pastors and parachurch organizations need to up their game in training their people to share the good news of Christ. BAC's need to understand and practice the following:

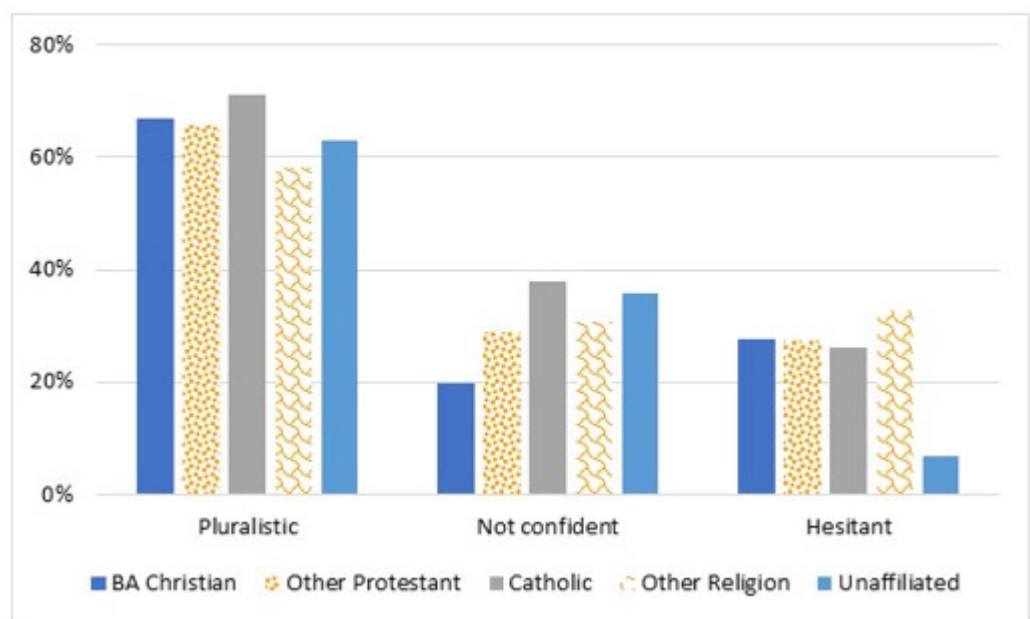
1. Bathe their unsaved acquaintances in prayer asking God to bring to a clear feeling of need
2. Recognize their call to effectively share the gospel looking for opportunities to share

3. Understand how to build bridges spanning the gaps of understanding for those with different worldviews
4. Clearly explain the wonderful gift purchased for us through Jesus' death and resurrection
5. Unapologetically ask for a response to the good news shared with others
6. Realize that they should not be discouraged by a lack of interest or the lack of a positive response

## 2. What Keeps You From Communicating Your Religious Belief?

We also asked the question: "When I refrain from communicating my religious belief with someone, it's usually because:"{4

*Figure 2 Reason for Refraining from Witnessing  
Americans 18 through 39*



}

1. They can get to heaven through their different religious belief. [Pluralism]
2. We shouldn't impose our ideas on others. [Pluralism]
3. The Bible tells us not to judge others. [Pluralism]
4. It just doesn't seem to be that important and I don't want to risk alienating them. [Not confident]
5. I'm not confident enough in what I believe. [Not confident]
6. I'm waiting for a better opportunity. [Hesitant]

For the chart in Figure 2, we grouped these responses into three sets:

- **Pluralism** – There are other ways besides my way and I don't need to impose my way on others (responses 1, 2 and 3)
- **Not confident** – Not confident that what I have to share is important to them and/or not confident that what I believe is true (responses 4 and 5)
- **Hesitant** – No rush, I can probably find a better time (response 6)

As seen in the chart, the level of respondents selecting each set of reasons for refraining are consistent across all religious beliefs. At first glance, this may seem surprising. But in a culture where pluralism is a dominant part of all religious groups, it begins to make sense. And the pluralistic reasons were dominant, attracting around two thirds of the population across all religious groupings.

For Born Again Christians, lack of confidence in what they believe is less of an issue than for other groups. And we see that the Unaffiliated are much less likely to be hesitant waiting for a better time at around 5% of all Unaffiliated. But note that most of the other groups had less than 25% say that they were hesitant.

Looking at both of the charts, we see that (even with a lot of people saying they sometimes used excuses to avoid the subject) a majority of people of any religious group (not including the unaffiliated) share with someone with a desire to recruit them at least once a year. I would suspect that most of these people are sharing with a family member or close friend. However, we did not ask the question so that is only reasonable speculation.

### **How Should We Respond?**

If you are a church leader or a person who desires to see Christians sharing the good news of Jesus with those who need

to know, how should you respond to this data on self-identified barriers to sharing with others?

On the most common reasons (which indicate a belief that other people don't really need to know about salvation through faith in Jesus), we need to make the exclusive role of Jesus Christ in any hope of salvation a recurring and prominent theme in our teaching. This is not a topic to tiptoe gingerly around. Rather, we need to boldly proclaim, "There is salvation in no other name under heaven other than the name of Jesus Christ." God would not have planned from before the beginning of time to sacrifice himself on the cross for our salvation if there were any other means to reconcile sinful men and women to Himself. God will not force reconciliation on us. We can choose to reject His grace. But as Paul tells us in Romans, "How are they to believe in one they have not heard of?" If we think we can slough off our responsibility to tell others, we do not understand the grace of God and our role as citizens of heaven living on this earth.

For those who do not feel confident in their ability, we need to provide training and practice environments for them to learn to share their faith experience. You are telling someone about the most important element of your life; the process that brought you out of death into true life. Help prepare them and put them in a position to share the good news with a mentor alongside them.

### **3. Why Have You Not Believed In Salvation Through Jesus Christ?**

Finally, we wanted to know why people have not accepted the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is really a question on the other side of witnessing. I am including it here, but it could easily be a separate topic.

The question asked was as follows: *What keeps you from believing that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone?*

The following options were given to select from:

1. Don't believe that God would take upon Himself the penalty for my sin.
2. Salvation is not a gift, it must be earned.
3. I am clearly as good as Christians I know so I should be accepted by God if they are.
4. There is no personal, creator God.
5. Another answer not listed here.
6. Never gave the question any thought.
7. Not applicable, I do believe.

The table below captures the range of answers to this question.

Ages 18 – 39					
	Born Again Protestant	Other Protestant	Catholic	Other Religion	Unaffiliated
Don't believe that God would take the penalty for my sin	4.1%	13.7%	16.3%	10.6%	5.9%
Salvation is not a gift, it must be earned	15.7%	20.1%	23.8%	22.0%	8.0%
I am clearly as good as Christians I know	11.9%	10.6%	16.2%	12.9%	8.1%
There is no personal, creator God	1.0%	2.8%	2.7%	5.8%	23.9%
Another answer not listed here	6.9%	9.9%	9.3%	21.9%	28.2%
Never gave the question any thought	15.0%	29.7%	16.3%	12.7%	13.5%
Not applicable, I do believe	45.4%	13.3%	15.5%	14.1%	12.5%

The first thing to notice in this table is that less than half of Born Again Protestants selected "Not applicable, I do believe." This result is odd since one of the questions

required to be considered a Born Again Protestant is “The statement that best describes you own belief about what will happen to you after you die is ‘*I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.*’” Perhaps some of the Born Again thought we wanted to know what was keeping them away before they surrendered to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this is because some of them consider “confessed my sins and accepted” as something they did to earn their salvation. In that case, one could possibly consider answers 2, 5, 6 and 7 as consistent with Born Again Protestants. Although that would be somewhat of a stretch. That assumption still leaves 17% of BA Protestants whose answers are clearly inconsistent.

Other Protestants are most likely to say, “I never gave the question any thought” or “Salvation must be earned” with only 13% saying they do believe the statement about salvation through faith alone. Catholics are about the same as Other Protestants in saying they believe in salvation through faith alone. The more frequent answers for Catholics being “it must be earned”, “I am clearly as good as Christians I know”, and “never gave the question any thought.”

The most common answer from the Unaffiliated is “another answer not listed here” followed by “there is no personal, creator God”. Those who claim that most “nothing in particulars” are really Christians find little support in that only one in five (20%) say that they do believe in salvation through faith in Jesus.

## **4. Christianity and Other Major World Religions**

One of the things that drives our attitude toward and our approach to witnessing to our faith is how we think Christianity relates to other world religions. In part 2 of this series, we looked at some questions that dealt with

believing that multiple religions could offer a workable road to an eternity with God. In this part we will look at what people believe distinguishes Christianity from other world religions if in fact anything does.

We asked our respondents the following question: *"How does Christianity relate to other major world religions?"* The respondents selected from the following choices:

1. Serves the same function with only minor differences
2. Focuses on living after the example of Jesus Christ
3. Teaches that reconciliation with God is a gift of God accessed by faith not by works
4. Promotes love for other people more deeply than other religions
5. Differs based on misconceptions about God and/or history
6. Not sure how it relates

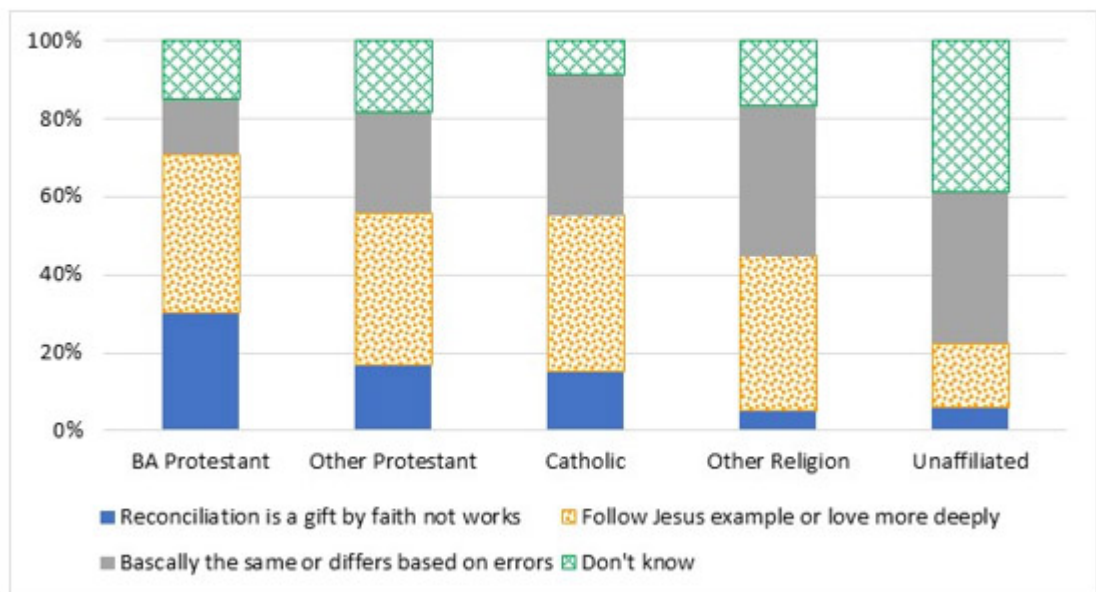
Note that answers 1, 5 and 6 indicate an ignorance about the tenets of Christianity and/or the tenets of other major world religions. As noted earlier, Christianity teaches a way to reconciliation that is very different from other world religions and is not compatible with the reconciliation stories of those other religions.

Answers two and four reflect potential differences between Christianity and other world religions. We do want to follow Christ's example and other world religions would not teach us to do that. Other religions could not promote loving other people more deeply that Christianity does, but some of them might argue that they also promote love for others.

Teaching that reconciliation is a gift of God accessed by faith alone not through works is the greatest substantial difference between Christianity and other world religions. This teaching is significantly different than the teachings of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and others.

The results are charted in the graph to the right. First, notice the interesting result

*Figure 3 How Does Christianity Relate to Other Religions  
Ages 18 - 39*



that only about 30% of Born Again Protestants selected 'reconciliation is a gift' while 40% selected following Jesus' example or love others more deeply. As noted above, this second answer is not inconsistent with the concepts of Christianity but is not as fundamental as the first. However, selecting this answer over reconciliation is a gift' is consistent with what we saw earlier: 70% of Born Again Christians are not exclusivists.[\[5\]](#)

Other Protestants and Catholics have less than one in five that selected 'reconciliation is a gift' and the total selecting answers 1 and 2 is slightly over one half. Thus, almost half of them selected answers showing ignorance of or disbelief in the basic tenets of Christianity.

The results for the Unaffiliated shows their total disregard for salvation by grace and any substantial difference between Christianity and other religions.

## 5.Summary of Key Results

Among Americans ages 18 through 39 who profess an affiliation with some religion, we find that less than 1 out of 5 (20%) of them strongly disagree with the statement that Muhammad,



Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God. Yet at the same time almost 6 out of 10 (60%) of them state that they share their faith with an unbeliever at least once a year with the intent of converting them to their belief.

So the majority of American believers (of any faith) must believe that at least for some people with different religious beliefs, it would be better for them to turn from their current belief and accept the tenets of my faith. They want to do this even though they believe that there are multiple ways to God beyond just their faith.

We also discovered that Born Again Christians are not really more likely than other religious groups to share their faith with the purpose to convert. Born Again Christians with a Biblical Worldview are only marginally more likely to share with the purpose to convert at least yearly as Born Again Christians as a whole (63% vs. 57%).

Amazingly, one could project that nominally about 212 million Americans a year would be the recipients of these spiritual conversations with the intent to convert. However, if almost all of these

conversations were with the same person it might represent as few as 34 million Americans which could be primarily the children and relatives of the person sharing their faith. We cannot know for sure without asking more questions.

Conversely, when asked what makes them refrain from sharing their faith, almost 70% of Born Again Christians selected a reason that indicated they believed that the other person did not really need to know; a universalist belief where all religious beliefs lead to heaven.

About one out of seven (14%) of adults under age 40 who **are not** Born Again Protestants believe that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone. This small number is true for Other Protestants, Catholics and Other Religions. This same group of

religious affiliates has about 1 in 3 who believe that salvation is a result of good works and is earned or rewarded on a curving scale.

Less than one in three, Born Again Christians selected the redeeming work of God through faith as the key difference between Christianity and other religions. And less than one in five Other Protestants and Catholics selected that answer. Instead, about three out of four (75%) selected love deeply, obey Jesus or Christianity is basically the same as the message of other religions.

### Notes

1. Low Estimate: Calculated assuming that those sharing at least monthly on the average shared their faith 12 times per year and those sharing at least yearly but less than monthly shared on the average 1 times per year AND that they shared on the average with the same individual four times.
2. Nominal Estimate: Calculated assuming that those sharing at least monthly on the average shared their faith 18 times per year and those sharing at least yearly but less than monthly shared on the average 2 times per year AND that they shared on the average with the same individual three times.
3. High Estimate: Calculated assuming that those sharing at least monthly on the average shared their faith 24 times per year and those sharing at least yearly but less than monthly shared on the average 4 times per year AND that they shared on the average with the same individual two times.
4. Although most people selected only one answer, on this question they could select multiple answers
5. Exclusivists are those who believe that their religion is the only source of correct teaching concerning our relationship with God. When I get time, I will check out the relationship between those who are exclusivists and those who selected 'reconciliation is a gift'

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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**

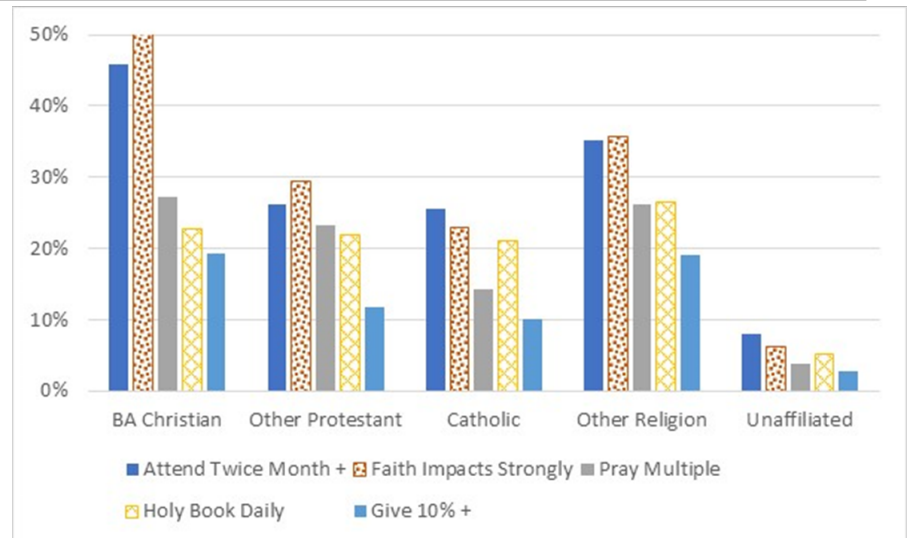
We will begin by looking at two different levels of religious activity: a Nominal Level and a Committed Level as shown in Table 1 below.

**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*

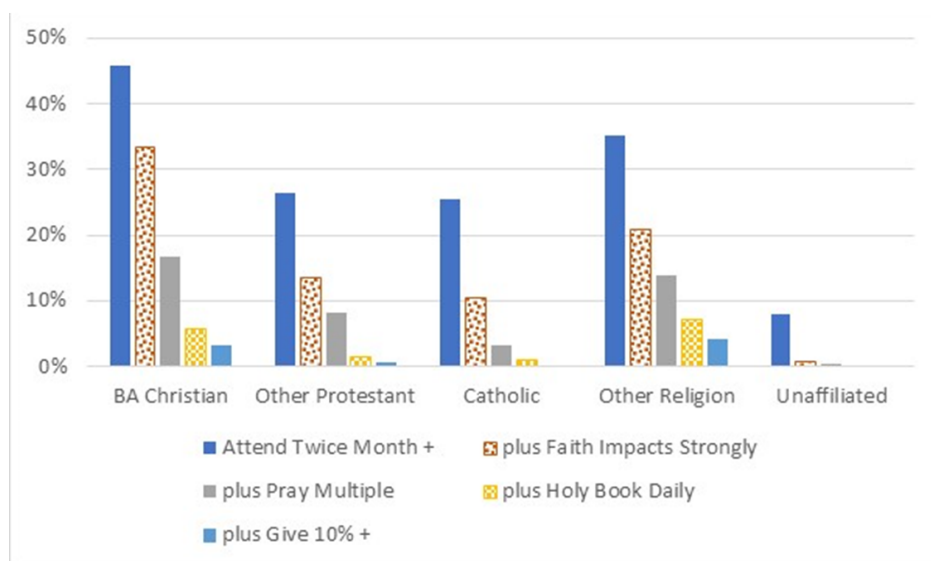


## Committed Level of Religious Activity

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.

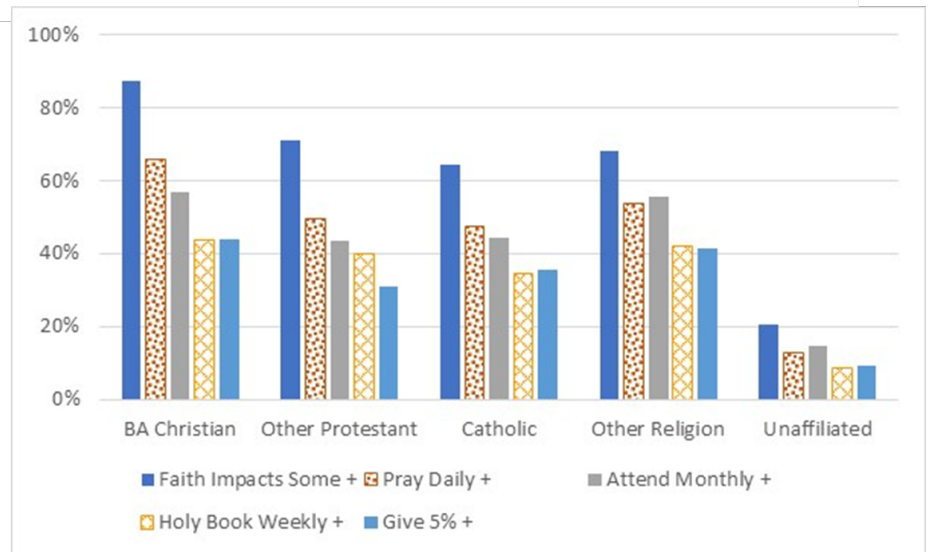
Also note that the entire Unaffiliated group reports less than 8% on each of these practices and less than 1% who claim to do even two of these practices.

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%.

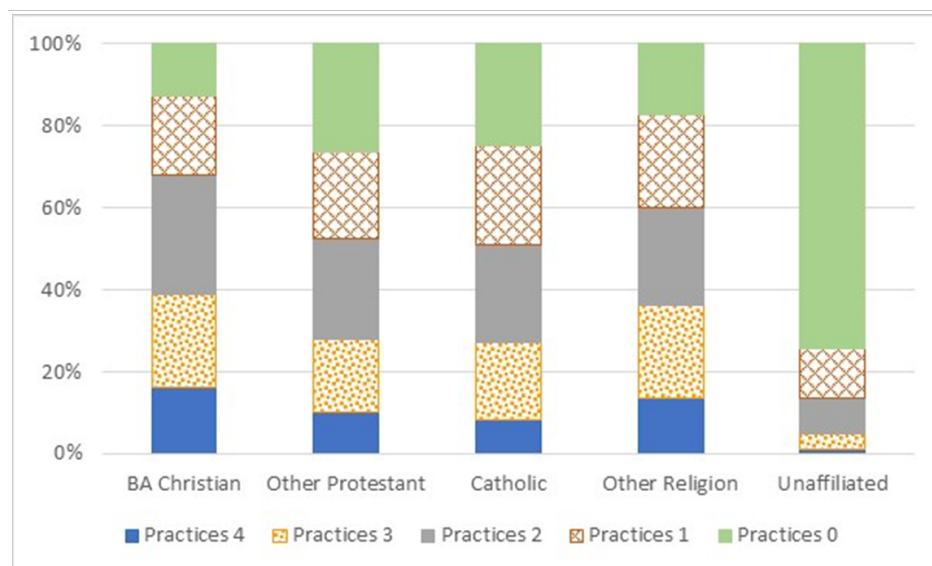
We should not forget that the pastors of these religious groups should be (and probably are) ashamed of these numbers. Particularly so when we consider the percentage of each group that practices all five of these relatively easy levels of commitment. The numbers (not shown on the graph) for those who 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.

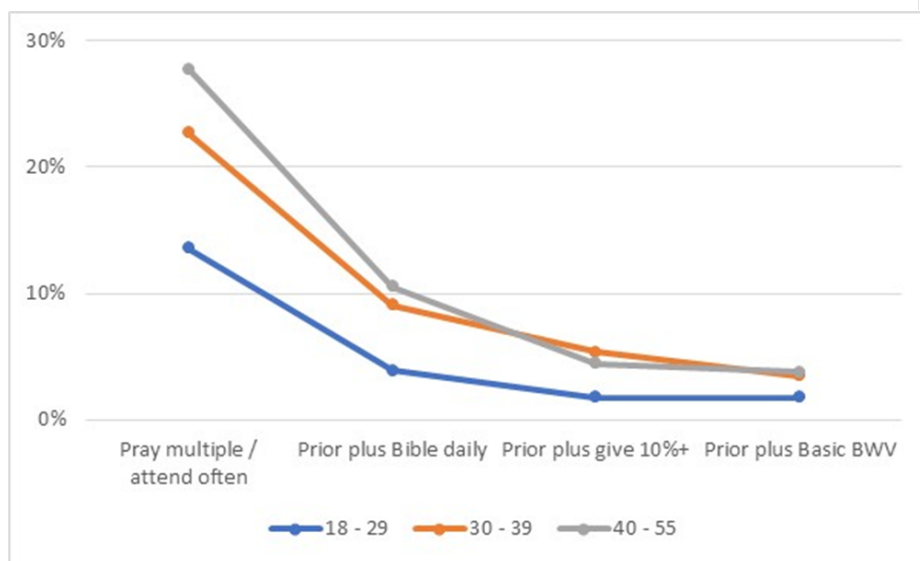
It is worth noting that Other Protestants and Catholics do not lag far behind Born Again Christians in the percentage doing at least three of the activities. This difference is a significant contrast to the Basic Biblical Worldview questions and the "who is Jesus" questions where these other religious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

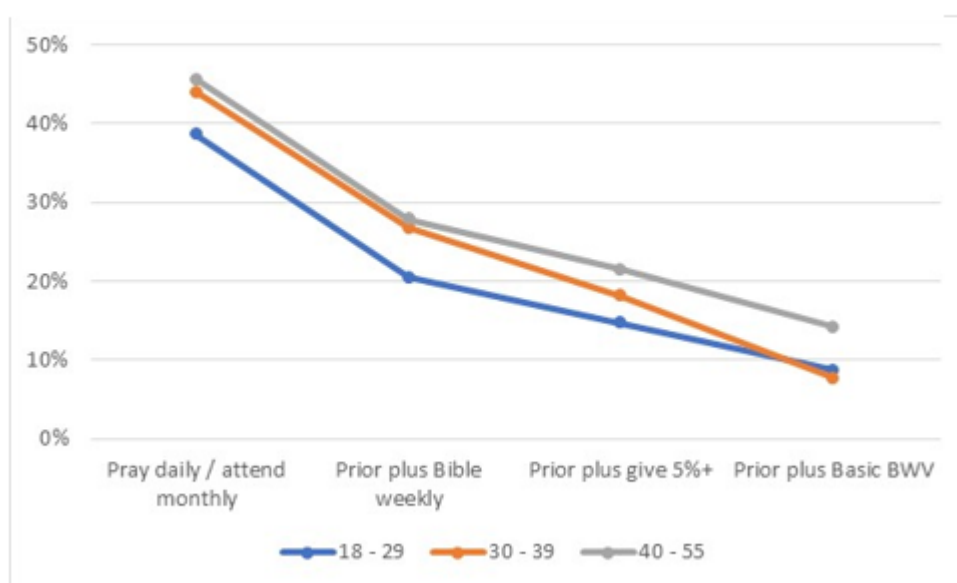
*Figure 5 Committed Level of Religious Activity for Born Again Christians by Age Range*



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.

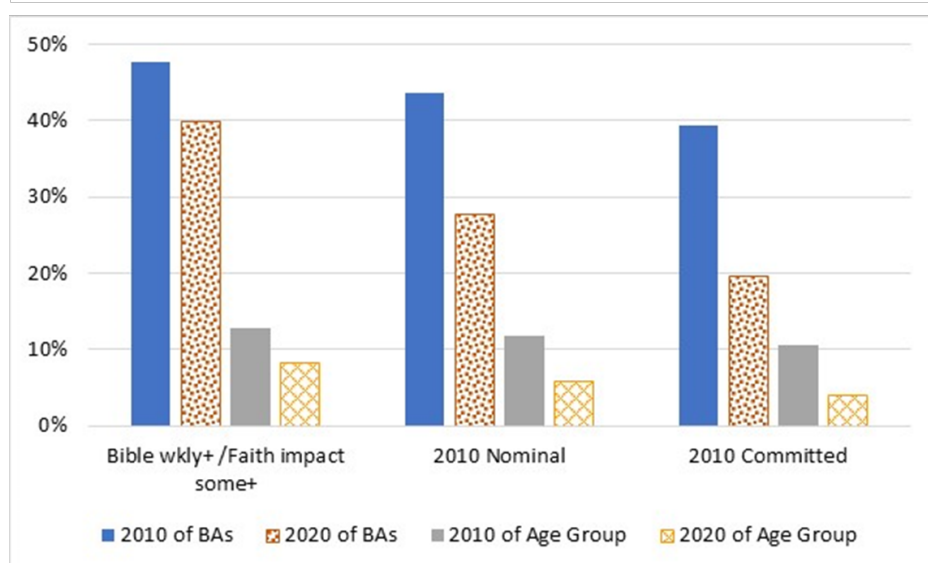
*Figure 6 At Least a Nominal Level of Religious Activity for Born Again Christians by Age Range*



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.

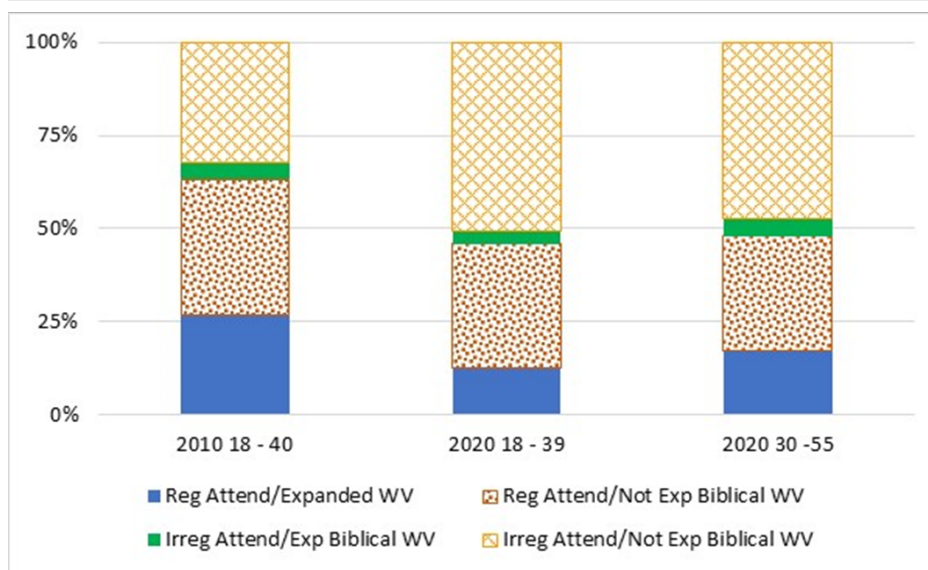
What we see is that the drop-off in the 2010 Nominal category is from 44% to 28% and the drop-off in the 2010 Committed category is down one half from 40% to 20%. These numbers reflect an astounding drop in the importance that Born Again Christians place on these simple religious activities.

**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.

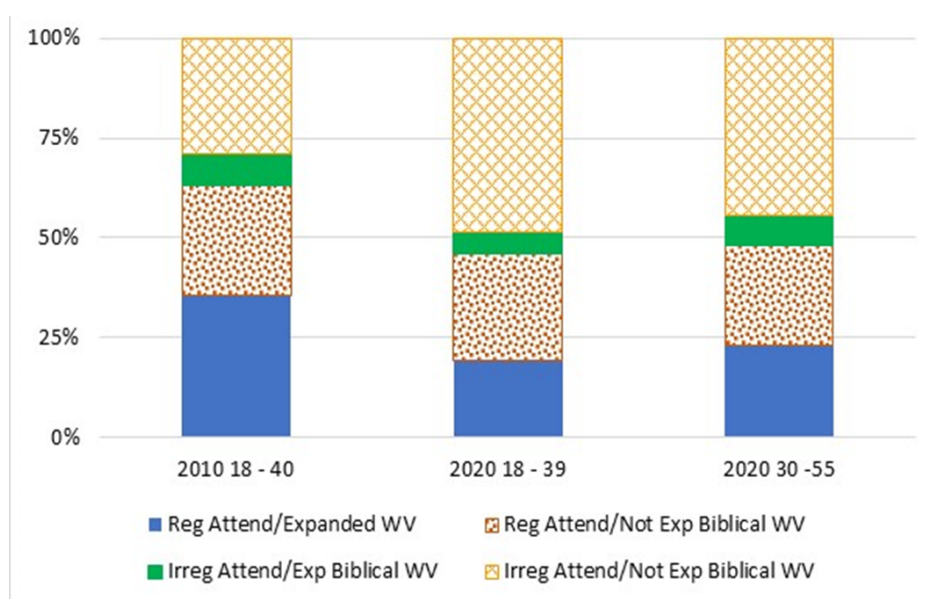
Looking at those with regular attendance and an Expanded Biblical Worldview we see a significant reduction among 18- to 29-year-olds in 2020 (27% down to 13%) with a lesser reduction among 30- to 55-year-olds down to 17%. The percentage of regular attenders without an Expanded Biblical Worldview has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



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.

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

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

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

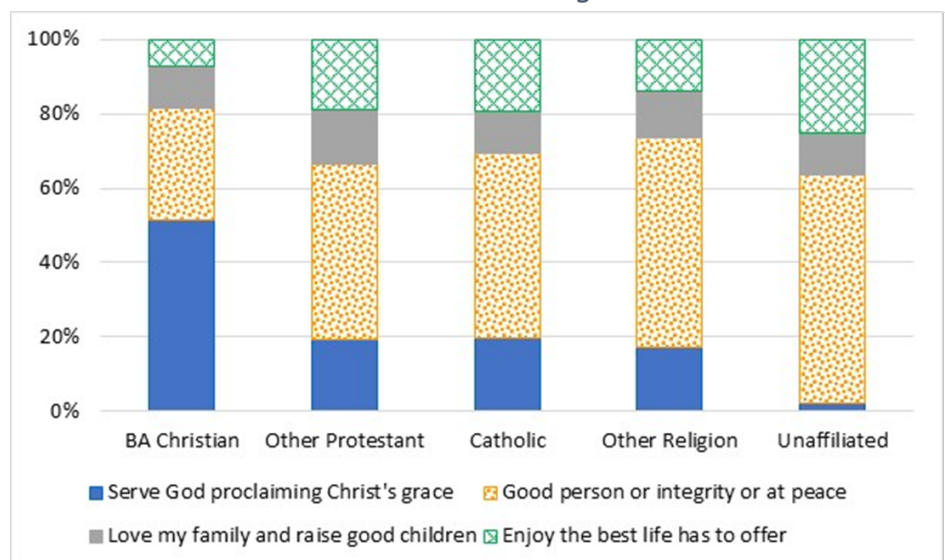
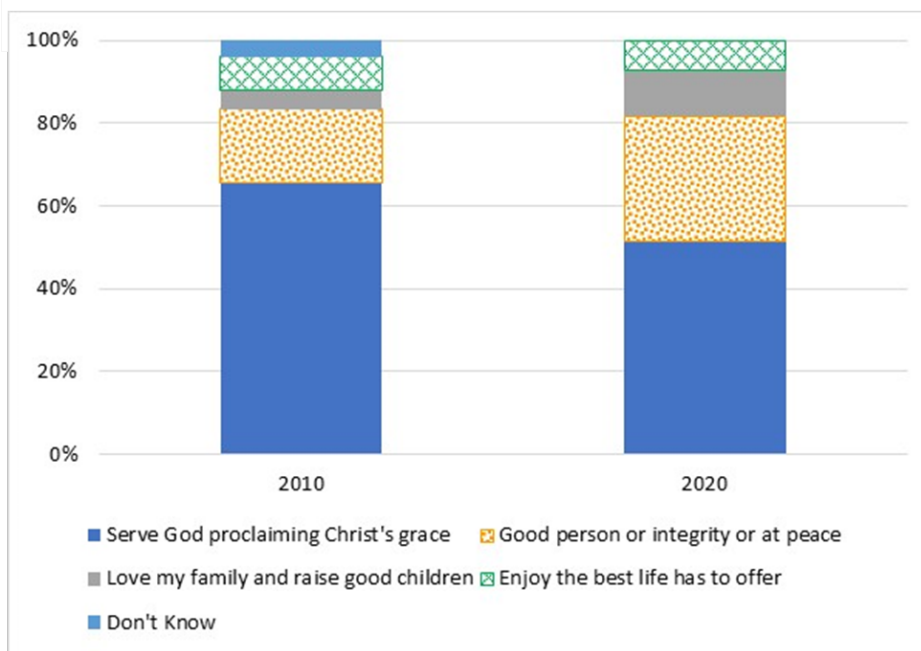


Figure 25 My Ultimate Purpose for Living: 2010 and 2020  
Born Again Christians 18 through 39



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

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

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

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



## Relationship to a Basic Biblical Worldview

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

## Acceptance or Tolerance

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

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

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

According to the Collins Dictionary, “Tolerance is the quality

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

Which of these definitions holds sway among our population today?

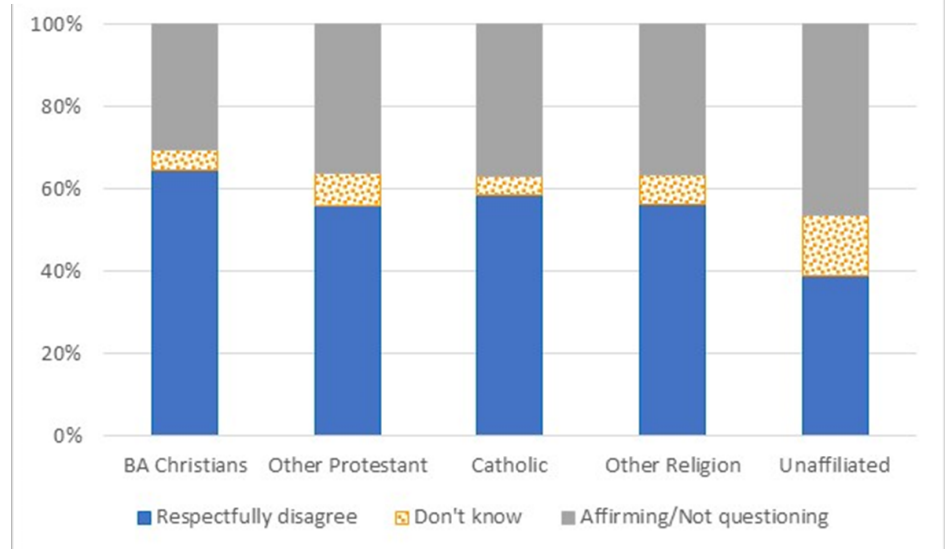
To explore this question, we asked two different questions dealing with how to treat those who have a different religious viewpoint. The first question we asked on this topic is “What does Tolerance mean to you?” The respondents chose from four possible answers:

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

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

*Figure 1 How 18 - 39 Year Old Americans Define Tolerance*

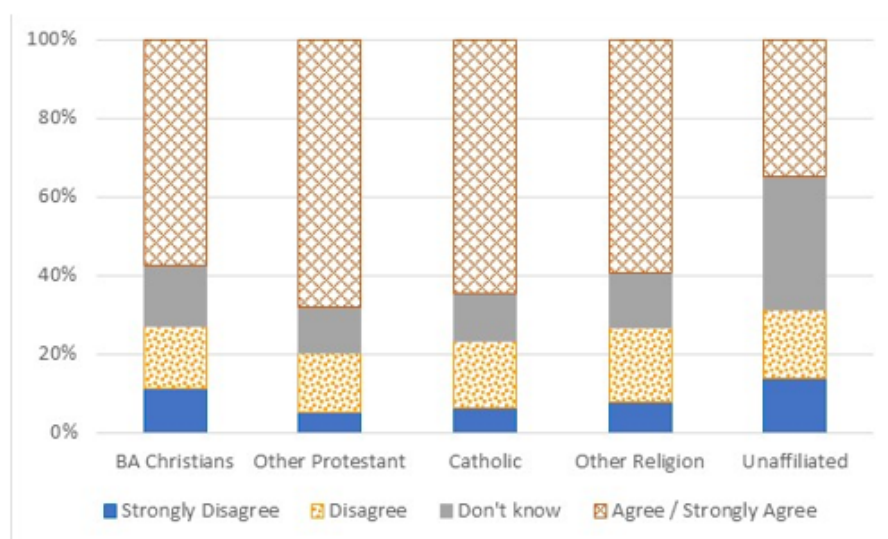
In figure 1, we see how the definitions are distributed. Almost two thirds (65%) of young adult, Born Again Christians selected a classic definition of



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

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

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



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

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

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

The disconnect between the definition of tolerance and

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

## Notes

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

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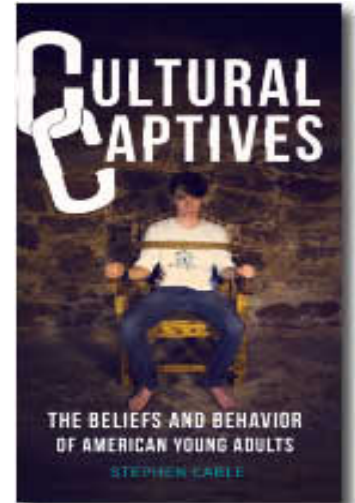
# “Nones” are Not Christians Who Choose Not to Identify with a Specific Tradition

More Cultural Research from Steve Cable

In our [first post](#), we discussed the distressing rise of “**nones**,” those who select for their affiliation no religion at all, among our emerging adults (18- to 29-year-olds). As of 2014, over 35% of emerging adults classify as “**nones**.” Some distinguished scholars have suggested that a large percentage of “**nones**” are actually Christians who just have an aversion

to identifying with a particular religious tradition.

This position seems somewhat odd since the GSS survey, for example, has only four choices that reflect a Christian tradition—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, and Christian. None of those four are very specific as to one's religious beliefs.



But we have another way to see if these “nones” are either actually involved, practicing Christians, or are truly wanting to distinguish their beliefs from those of Christianity. Using the GSS survey taken in 2014, we can probe this question to find answers. First, how many of the “nones” in this survey say they actually attend a church at least once a month? The answer is less than 7% of them.

Second, how many of these “nones” say they believe in a God, believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and believe that there is life after death? The answer is about 12% of them.

Third, how many of these “nones” attend a church and have the three beliefs listed above. The answer is about 1%, or 1 out of every one hundred young adults not identifying as practicing Christians.

These three answers make it very clear that the increase in “nones” among emerging adults is not a result of them avoiding association with a particular religion. It is clear that the vast majority of “nones” are disassociating themselves from organized religion and from basic Christian doctrine as well.

Note: What about the “nones” who select “nothing at all” as

their religious preference as opposed to those who claim they are atheists or agnostics? Perhaps, these “nothing at alls” simply do not want to identify with a specific Christian tradition. Well, the 2014 Pew survey indicates that two-thirds of the **“nones”** fall into this “nothing at all” category. So, if all of the positive answers to the three questions above were given by “nothing at alls,” their percentages would be 10%, 18% and 2% respectively.

So, again it is very clear that the vast majority of “nothing at alls” have broken away from organized religion and mere Christian doctrine. Most are not, as some scholars suggest, young believers keeping their identity options open.

#### Acknowledgements:

The Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study interactive tool, located at <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/> is the source of our data from the 2014 Pew survey.

General Social Survey 2014 conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by Tom W. Smith of the NORC.

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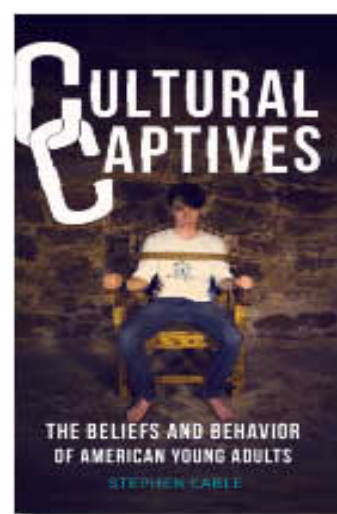
## **Born-again Protestants Make Up Only 20% of Our Emerging Adult Population and That**

# Number is Trending Down

More Cultural Research from Steve Cable

[As reported earlier](#), more than 43% of American emerging adults (ages 18-25) do not identify themselves as being part of the Christian faith. But, that means we still have a majority of emerging adults selecting a Christian faith as part of their identity. How many of that majority are born-again evangelicals, and how has that changed over the years?

In my book, *Cultural Captives*, I reported that the percentage of emerging adults who identified themselves as born-again Protestants had only dropped a small amount from 1976 to 2008, from 28% to 25% of the population. However, the same survey organizations report that the number in 2014 has dropped to 20%. If this sudden drop is a precursor to the rest of this decade, we could see the number drop down to 15% by 2020.



In any case, we find that 20% of emerging adults are born-again Protestants while 43% of them are **“nones”** or of other faiths.

Looking at Protestants who do not consider themselves to be born-again, we find an even more dismal situation. Among emerging adults, they have dropped from around 25% of the population in 1990, down to around 14% of the population in 2014. But they have only dropped one percentage point since 2008 and appear to have leveled off. So perhaps, they will comprise around 12% of the emerging adult population in 2020.

We appear to be heading down a path where over half of emerging adults will be non-Christians and less than one-fourth will identify as Protestants. We are experiencing a



major change in the religious make-up of our country.

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# The True State of American Evangelicals

*Steve Cable analyzed the data concerning 18- to 40-year-old born-again 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
All powerful God involved in the world today	Wright	GSS	79%
	Johnson	Baylor 2005	83%
	Smith	NSYR 2008 <a href="#">{15}</a>	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:

<b>Belief</b>	<b>Baylor</b>	<b>NSYR</b>	<b>Barna</b>	<b>Probe<sup>{17}</sup></b>
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<sup>[20]</sup>) 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](http://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](http://bit.ly/g5VH4h) and "Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths," [bit.ly/mQYubb](http://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](http://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](http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp). "The National Study of Youth and Religion," [www.youthandreligion.org](http://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](http://probe.org/oprahs-spirituality)

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