

Trends in American Religious Beliefs: An Update

Steve Cable examines the newest data reflecting Americans' religious beliefs. It's not encouraging.

Are Nones Still Increasing Toward a Majority?

One dismaying trend in my book, *Cultural Captives*, was the significant growth of people indicating their religion was atheist, agnostic, or nothing at all, referred to collectively as **the none**s. In 2008, the percentage of emerging adults (18- to 29-year-olds) who self-identified as **none**s was one fourth of the population, a tremendous increase almost two and a half times higher than recorded in 1990.

Now, let's look at some updated data on emerging adults. In 2014, the General Social Survey^{[\[1\]](#)} showed the percentage of **none**s was now up to **one third** of the population. The Pew Religious Landscape^{[\[2\]](#)} survey of over 35,000 Americans tallied **35% identifying as none**s.

When we consider everyone who does not identify as either Protestant or Catholic (i.e., adding in other religions such as Islam and Hinduism), the **percentage of emerging adults who do not identify as Christians increases to 43% of the population** in both surveys.

If this growth continues at the rate it has been on since 1990, we will see **over half** of American emerging adults who do not self-identify as Christians by 2020. Becoming, at least numerically, a post-Christian culture.

Some distinguished scholars have suggested that a large percentage of "**none**s" are actually Christians who just have an

aversion to identifying with a particular religious tradition. Using the GSS from 2014, we can probe this assertion using three investigative avenues:

How many of the “**nones**” in this survey say they actually attend a church at least once a month? The answer: less than 7% of them.

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: about 12% of them.

3. How many of these “**nones**” attend a church *and* have the three beliefs listed above? The answer: about one out of every one hundred emerging adults not identifying as a practicing Christian.

What about the “nothing at all” respondents, who are not atheists or agnostics? Perhaps, they simply do not want to identify with a specific Christian tradition. Since the majority of **nones** fall into this “nothing at all” category, if all the positive answers to the three questions above were given by “nothing at all,” their percentages would still be very small.

Clearly, the vast majority of **nones** and “nothing at all” have broken away from organized religion and basic Christian doctrine. Most are not, as some scholars suggest, young believers keeping their identity options open.

American has long been non-evangelical in thinking, but is now becoming post-Christian as well.

Role of Pluralism and Born-Agains in Our Emerging Adult Population

Pluralists believe there are many ways to eternal life, e.g. Christianity and Islam. Our 2010 book, *Cultural Captives*,

looked at pluralism among American emerging adults (18 – 29), finding nearly 90% of non-evangelicals and 70% of evangelicals were pluralists. So, the vast majority of young Americans believed in multiple ways to heaven.

Is that position changing in this decade? We analyzed two newer survey, Portraits of American Life Survey 2012^[3] and Faith Matters 2011^[4]. In the first, if a person disagreed strongly with the following, we categorized them as not pluralistic:

1. It doesn't much matter what I believe so long as I am a good person.
2. The founder of Islam, Muhammad, was the holy prophet of God.

In the second, if a person agreed strongly that "one religion is true and others are not," they are not pluralistic.

For non-evangelical, emerging adults, the number of pluralists grew to 92%. For evangelicals, the number grew to 76%. For those over thirty the number of evangelical pluralists drops to two out of three; still a disturbing majority of those called to evangelize their fellow citizens.

Under the threat of death, Peter told the Jewish leaders, "This Jesus . . . has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."^[5]

God sent His Son because there was no other way to provide redemption. Many evangelicals seem to think this great sacrifice is one of many ways to reconciliation. But Jesus said, "**No one** comes to the Father except through me."^[6]

Not only are Protestants more pluralistic, at the same time there are fewer Protestants. From 1976 to 2008, emerging adults identifying as born-again Protestants only dropped from 28% to 25% of the population. Today only 20% are born-again

Protestants while 43% are non-Christian.

Protestants who do not consider themselves to be born-again have dropped further, from around one quarter in 1990 down to around 14% now.

We are heading to a day when over half of emerging adults will be non-Christians and less than one fourth will identify as Protestants. And, the majority of those Protestants will take a pluralistic view, ignoring the call to evangelize—a major change in the religious make up of our country.

Biblical Worldview Beliefs Considered from A Newer Survey

In our book, *Cultural Captives*, we reported that about one in three evangelical emerging adults and about one in ten non-evangelical emerging adults held a biblical worldview.

Today, we consider a newer survey of over 2,600 people called Faith Matters 2011.[\[7\]](#)

The questions used to define a biblical worldview were on: 1) belief in God, 2) belief in life after death, 3) the path to salvation, 4) inspiration of the Bible, 5) the existence of hell, and 6) how to determine right and wrong.

Let's begin by looking at how many have a biblical worldview on all of the questions above except for the correct path to salvation. About half of evangelical emerging adults (those 18 – 29) take a biblical view versus about 15% of non-evangelicals.

Adding the question about the path to salvation moves evangelical emerging adults from 50% down to about 5%. The question causing this massive reduction is: "Some people believe that the path to salvation comes through our actions or deeds and others believe that the path to salvation lies in our beliefs or faith. Which comes closer to your views?" The

vast majority of evangelicals responding were unwilling to say that salvation is by faith alone even though the Bible clearly states this is the case. Many of them responded with both, even though it was not one of the options given.

However, the reason may not be that evangelicals feel that they need to do some good works to become acceptable for heaven. Instead, they want to leave room for a pluralistic view that surmises that others, not really knowing of Jesus' sacrifice, may get by on their righteous activities. Supporting this premise, the Faith Matters survey shows that about 80% of evangelicals believe that there are more ways to heaven other than faith in Jesus Christ.

Another survey the 2012 Portraits in American Life Survey (PALS){8} also included questions similar to the biblical worldview questions above but did not ask how one obtained eternal life. About one in three evangelical{9} believers under the age of 30 professed a biblical worldview on those questions.

These new surveys clearly demonstrate a biblical worldview is not rebounding among emerging adults

How Confident are Americans in Those Running Organized Religion?

What do the people of America feel about organized religion? Have those feelings changed since 1976? We can explore these questions using data from the General Social Survey (GSS) which asked this question across the decades from 1976 up to 2014:

As far as the people running organized religion are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

Not surprisingly, the surveys show our confidence in these

religious leaders has degraded over time. Let's begin by looking at how these results play out for different age groups.

Across all age groups, the number with "a great deal of confidence" in the leaders of organized religion dropped significantly from 1976 to 2014. The greatest drop from 30% down to 15% was among emerging adults at the time of the survey.

At the same time, those having "hardly any confidence" grew significantly. Both emerging adults and those 45 and over increased the number taking this negative position by about 35% since 1976. For emerging adults, this was an increase from 20% in 1976 to 27% in 2014.

Now let's look at how these results play out across different faith communities, specifically Protestants who claim to be born again, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Other Religions and Nones (i.e. atheists, agnostics and nothing at all).

Once again consider those who said they had "a great deal of confidence" in the leaders of organized religion. All Christian groups show a significant downward trend in their confidence in faith leaders. Not surprisingly, the Nones fell by well over 60%, probably reflecting the general negative trend. If the mainstream population has problems with their religious leaders, the AAN's are more than happy to jump on the bandwagon, expressing disdain toward those leaders. Mainline Protestants experienced the largest drop among any Christian religious group, dropping almost half from 32% down to 18% across the period.

Do we see a similar uptick across all religions in the percentage of respondents having "hardly any confidence" in the leaders of organized religion? Actually, we do not. We had significant decreases among born-again Protestants and those of other non-Christian religions. At the same time, we saw

increases among Mainline Protestants and Catholics and a very significant increase among the AAN's.

The trends shown here leads one to ask, Can religion have a positive impact on our society when four out of five people do not express a great deal of confidence in its leaders? Make it a point to contribute to our society by promoting a positive view of the religious leaders in your church and denomination.

The Hispanic Religious Landscape

Since 1980, our Hispanic population has grown from 6.5% to 17.4%, almost tripling their percentage of our total population.

Many assume the Hispanic population would be primarily Catholic from the 1980's to today. Looking at General Social Surveys from 1976 through 2014, we can see what the actual situation is. Not surprisingly, in 1976 approximately 80% of Hispanics in American self-identified as Catholics. But, the 1980's saw a downward trend in this number, so that through the 1990's up until 2006, approximately 68% of Hispanics identified as Catholics. From 2006 to 2014, this percentage has dropped significantly down to about 55%.

At the same time, the percentage of Hispanics identifying as "nones," i.e., one having no religious affiliation, has grown from about 6% in the 1990's to 16% in 2014 (and to a high of 22% for emerging adult, Hispanics) according to GSS data.

The median age of Hispanics in America is much lower than that of other ethnicities. Many Hispanics in American are emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 29. How do their beliefs stack up? The GSS data shows that about 45% of Hispanic emerging adults indicate a Catholic affiliation while the Pew survey shows only 35%. Both surveys show that significantly less than half of emerging adult Hispanics are Catholic. So have they become mainline, evangelical, "nones" or some

Eastern religion?

Both surveys show a significant increase in the percentage of Hispanic “nones” for emerging adults compared to those over 30. As with other ethnic groups, Hispanic emerging adults are much more likely to select a religious affiliation of “none” than are older adults. According to extensive data in the Pew Research survey, among emerging adults, the 31% of Hispanics who identify as “nones” is coming very close to surpassing the 35% who identify as Catholic.

A majority of Hispanics still identify as Catholics. How closely are they associated with their local Catholic church through regular attendance? Among emerging adult Hispanics affiliated with a Catholic church, about two out of three state that they attend church once a month or less. So, the vast majority are not frequent attenders, but are still more likely to attend than their white counterparts. Among emerging adult whites affiliated with a Catholic church, about four out of five state that they attend church once a month or less.

Soon more Hispanics will be “nones,” evangelicals and mainline Protestants than are Catholic, portending dramatic shifts in the worldview of American Hispanics.

The religious makeup of young Americans is changing dramatically in the early part of this century. We need to proclaim the good news of Christ to our emerging generation.

Notes

1. General Social Survey 2014, National Opinion Research Center, 2014, The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by Tom W. Smith.
2. Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, page 11, source: 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study.
3. Emerson, Michael O., and David Sikkink. *Portraits of*

American Life Study, 2nd Wave 2012.

4. Data downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected on behalf of Harvard University and the University of Notre Dame, principal investigators: Robert Putnam, Thomas Sander, and David E. Campbell.

5. Acts 4:11-12.

6. John 14:6.

7. Data downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected on behalf of Harvard University and the University of Notre Dame, principal investigators: Robert Putnam, Thomas Sander, and David E. Campbell.

8. Emerson, Michael O., and David Sikkink. Portraits of American Life Study, 2nd Wave, 2012.

9. Evangelical includes those who associate with a Historically Black Protestant Church as well as those who associate with an evangelical church.

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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 all” 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 all,” their percentages would be 10%, 18% and 2% respectively.

So, again it is very clear that the vast majority of “nothing at all” 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, and were collected by Tom W. Smith of the NORC.

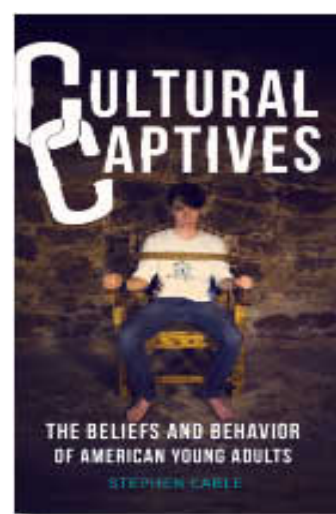
Born-again Protestants Make Up Only 20% of Our Emerging Adult Population and That

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.

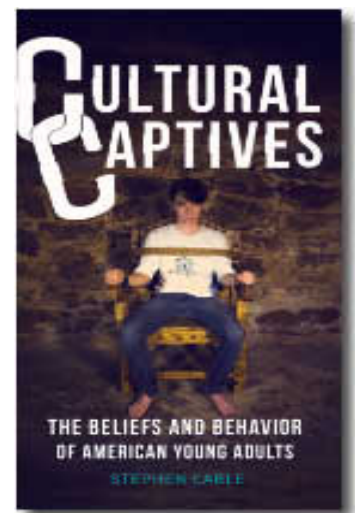
We appear to be heading down a path where over half of emerging adults will be non-Christians and less than one-fourth will identify as Protestants. We are experiencing a

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

Trend Indicates Over Half of Emerging Adults Will Identify as Non-Christian by 2020

More Cultural Research from Steve Cable

One of the dismaying trends I reported on in my book, *Cultural Captives*, was the significant increase in the percentage of people who indicated that their religion was atheist, agnostic, or nothing at all. I referred to this group collectively as the **“nones”** (those with “no religious affiliation”). The percentage of emerging adults (i.e., 18- to 29-year-olds) who self-identified as **“nones”** in 2008 was 25% of the population. This level is a tremendous increase from the 1990 level of 11%.



Now, we have later results from both the General Social Survey (GSS) and the Pew Research Center. Both surveys show another significant increase in the percentage of **“nones”** among this young adult group. In 2014, the GSS survey showed the **percentage of emerging adult “nones” was now up to 33% of the population**, an increase of eight percentage points. The Pew survey of over 35,000 Americans (an astounding number) came up with a similar result, tallying **35% of emerging adults identifying as “nones”** (an increase of nine percentage points over their 2007 survey).

When we consider the number who do not identify as either Protestant or Catholic (i.e., adding in other religions such as Islam and Hinduism), the percentage of emerging adults who do not identify as Christians increases to 43% of the population in both surveys.

If this trend continues at the same rate of growth it has been on since 1990, we will see **over half** of American emerging adults who do not self-identify as Christians by 2020. We will become, at least numerically, a post-Christian culture if things do not turn around.

Acknowledgments:

The General Social Survey 2014 data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by Tom W. Smith and the National Opinion Research Center.

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

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 {15}	83%
	Barna	Barna 2009	83%

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

The answer comes from two sources. First, you need to ask more questions about their beliefs and practices than just “Do you believe in a God and in Jesus as His Son?” A person can mean a lot of different things when answering yes to those questions. Second (and it turns out to be extremely important), you must look at the combined answers to a set of related questions. In his book, Smith took the first step of asking a lot of probing questions, both in the survey and in face-to-face interviews. By doing this, it became clear that their answers to a few

questions about God and Jesus did not mean that they were biblically literate Christians. Barna took the second step of looking at the answers to a combined set of questions and discovered that the beliefs of Americans were disjointed and inconsistent, particularly among the younger generations. So, even though 83% of 18- to 26-year-olds who professed to be born-again believed that God is all powerful and involved in the world today, only a small subset of them believed all six biblical worldview questions.[{16}](#)

What happens if we look at the results of the surveys used by Wright, Johnson, and Smith? Fortunately, we were able to access the raw questionnaire results using the Association of Religious Data Archives online database. Of course, these surveys did not ask exactly the same questions, but we were able to find a set of roughly equivalent questions within each survey. And this is what we found about those with a biblical worldview, compared to those who actually apply their biblical worldview to the way they live:

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

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

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

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

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

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

How Did We Get to This State?

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

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

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

It is very interesting to note that 42% of church-going young adults with a biblical worldview (called the Free Ones hereafter) stated that their spiritual beliefs were driven by

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

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

The second take away is in the different ways of viewing non-biblical thinking among young adults. We surveyed their attitudes and actions on a number of unbiblical areas of behavior including sexual activity, negative feelings such as anger and unforgiveness, use of the tongue, self-focus and greed, negative attitudes and sinful actions. For these unbiblical behaviors, if they engaged in that behavior we asked them what they thought about it. They could select from "I do not believe it is wrong," "Believe it is wrong, do it anyway and feel guilty or embarrassed," or "Believe it is wrong, do it anyway, without feeling guilty or embarrassed." Not surprisingly, the Free Ones tended to have the same level of participation in each area as other born-again, but a significantly lower percentage of those said the behavior wasn't wrong or did it without feeling guilty or embarrassed. On the other hand, among the one-third with irregular church attendance and no biblical worldview (the Fully Captive), about one-third had no guilt with their sexual indiscretions and over one-half had no guilt associated with issues of

internal attitudes, sins of the tongue, and other negative actions.

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

In summary, the majority of young born-again

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

It should be noted that not all of the 817 born-again questioned in our survey are affiliated with evangelical churches. From the Baylor survey, we find that in the general population from age 18 to 44, 35% are evangelical or Pentecostal, 20% are mainline Protestants, 20% are Catholic, and the remaining 25% are not Christians. Among those who self-identified as born-again, 57% are evangelical or Pentecostal, 30% are affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations, and only 5% are Catholics. However, when we look at those born-again with a biblical worldview, we find almost 71% are evangelicals and Pentecostals, about 27% are mainline Protestants and only 1% are Catholics. This result shows the wide disparity of beliefs across denominations even among those who meet the criteria of being born-again.

We asked these born-again in making decisions associated with family, business, and religious matters, "What is the primary

basis or source of those principles and standards that you take into consideration?" We found there was a huge difference between Free Ones and the remainder. In fact, 75% of the Free Ones looked to a biblical source in making those decisions while only 33% of the Partially Captive and 10% of the Fully Captives considered a biblical source.

From Captives to Conquerors

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

1. Bradley Wright, Ph.D., *Christians Are Hate Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've Been Told* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2010), 75.
2. Ibid., 66.
3. Ibid., 41.
4. Baylor University. 2005. The Baylor Religion Survey. Waco, TX: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion.
5. Byron Johnson, Ph.D., "The Good News About Evangelicalism," *First Things* online edition, February 2011, www.firstthings.com/article/2011/01/the-good-news-about-evangelicalism.
6. Ibid.
7. Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition, The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). You can find two extensive articles on the Christian Smith book and data by Steve Cable at the Probe web site: "Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America," bit.ly/g5VH4h and "Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths," bit.ly/mQYubb.
8. Ibid., 101.
9. Ibid., 286.
10. Ibid., 286.
11. Ibid., 288.

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

13. For the purposes of the survey, a “biblical worldview” was defined as believing that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview.

14. GSS (Bradley Wright): Believe in God

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

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

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

15. www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp.

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

16. A “biblical worldview” was defined as believing that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview.

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

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

19. From GSS survey data.

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

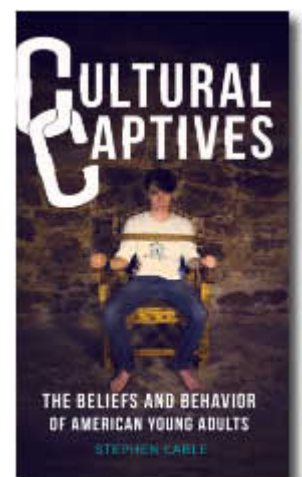
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Cultural Captives

June 14, 2013

Despite what you have heard, Christian young people are not doing fine. That is the conclusion of Stephen Cable in his new book, *Cultural Captives: The Beliefs and Behavior of American Young Adults*. [Stephen Cable](#) serves as Senior Vice-President of Probe Ministries.

As I have mentioned in previous commentaries, the percentage of people generally who check "none of the above" for religious preference is increasing. That is especially true of young people. In fact, the percentage of emerging adults who do not claim any affiliation with Christianity rose from 20% in 1990 to over 37% of the population today.



Stephen Cable found that only 14 percent of born-again,

emerging adults combine a biblical worldview with biblical practices, such as reading the Bible or attending church. He also found that less than 2 percent of born-again, emerging adults apply a biblical worldview to life choices. In other words, only this small percentage has biblical beliefs on topics ranging from abortion to sex outside marriage to science and faith.

This is a major reason why Probe Ministries has developed an integrated strategy aimed at reversing these trends. The learning experience involves an entire church congregation over a seven-week period and includes sermons, videos, original music, and additional material for individuals and small groups.

Stephen Cable's book is a wake up call to the church. We need to reverse these ominous trends and do it quickly before the trends become even worse.

Complete in Christ and Captive to Empty Deception

Steve Cable examines four types of cultural captivity that holds Christians in bondage: naturalism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism.

Problem of Captivity

God has laid a powerful vision on Probe Ministries, calling us to free the minds of fifty million culturally captive Christians and build them into confident ambassadors for Christ by the year 2020. Our survey analysis has shown that cultural captivity is a growing problem within the church.[\[1\]](#)

To be effective in this mission, we need to understand the different forms cultural captivity can take individually and collectively.

Does the Bible provide any insight into cultural captivity and the tools for setting believers free? In an [earlier article](#), we looked at the differing types of cultural captivity: carnal, confused, compromised, and contented Christians.{2} In this article we will see insights from the second chapter of Colossians.

In Colossians 2:8, Paul warns the local Christians, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception,” and then he reminds them that they are “complete in [Christ].”{3} What does this thing look like that can capture someone who is complete in Christ? How can I avoid it or free myself from it in the power of Christ? Surely, the Christians in Colossae were asking the same things. Paul thought as much for he points out four different views that may take genuine Christians captive and keep them from doing their part in the war of ideas.

In Colossians 2:1-4, Paul warns us that we need a true knowledge of “Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” If we don’t completely understand the fullness of Christ and His work of redemption, we are setting ourselves up for those who would “delude you with persuasive arguments.”{4} We must fully grasp that Christ alone is necessary and sufficient for our salvation. We must believe it in the day to day living of our lives—being “rooted and grounded in Him.”{5}

In the remainder of the second chapter of Colossians, Paul lists four specific ways that our thinking can be taken captive by the philosophy of men through persuasive arguments. It is important to remember that these arguments are called “persuasive,” meaning that they appear to make good sense and have the power to sway our thinking. It is only by examining

these arguments in the light of Christ's truth that their falsehood comes to light. I want to examine each of the four, considering how they would appear to the Colossian Christians of that day and how they might play out in this decade.

The examples of cultural captivity exposed by Paul and still relevant to our lives today are naturalism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism. We'll begin with naturalism.

Naturalism: Captive to Scientific Deception

The first type of cultural captivity highlighted in Colossians is found in our key verse, chapter 2 verse 8:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

This verse has the only occurrence of the word "philosophy" in the Bible. The Greek word literally means "the investigation of truth and nature"[\[6\]](#) as emphasized by the remainder of this verse. Thinking in accordance with the tradition of men and the elementary principles of the world can captivate us. The ways in which man explains how the world works and how we fit into it can be a deceptive trap.

In Galatians 4:3, Paul tells us that apart from Christ we are held in bondage by the elementary principles of the world. When we try to limit the forces at work in our universe to simply those elementary forces operating in our daily lives, we are missing out on the powerful work of Christ in our world far above and beyond the everyday forces of nature.

So what are the elementary principles that lure us into captivity today? Certainly, one of the most influential is neo-Darwinism. As discussed in many articles at Probe.org,

neo-Darwinism says the world is the result of the strictly natural processes of random mutations and natural selection. This theory attempting to describe the current diversity and complexity of life on this earth is the dominant view in our society. It is seen by many as the culmination of understanding our existence in this world. In fact, it is full of problems, having no plausible explanation for 1) the existence of a life-supporting planet, 2) the first occurrence of life on this planet, or 3) the irreducible complexity of life forms on this planet.

I would suggest that those Christians who put Christ's role in our creation at a level below that of these elementary principles are allowing themselves to be taken captive. If one believes these principles are lord over Christ instead of the other way around, that person is living practically as a citizen of this earth rather than as a citizen of heaven.

Legalism: Captive to Self-Made Godliness

A second form of cultural captivity, identified in the letter to the Colossians, is legalism. Paul writes:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Col 2:16-17).

Paul was warning against those attempting to take Christians captive through the subtle lies of legalism, telling the new, Gentile followers that believing in Christ was a good start, *but* you also need to follow some of the laws of Moses if you are to be righteous before God.

Notice that the items listed in this verse are not instructions on purity and righteous behavior. Rather, they are specific practices given to Israel as precursors of the coming Messiah. For example, the festival of Passover is a

marvelous foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice of Himself as the Lamb of God to deliver us from slavery to the world of sin and separation from God. But, why celebrate the Passover when one can celebrate the real event? These behaviors designed to prepare us for the coming of Christ are no longer necessary now that we have the presence of Christ in our lives.

In the American culture, legalism appears to have been more prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than it is today. But there are certainly forms of legalism which take people captive today. If you are more interested in passing laws to make some form of Christian behavior the law of the land than you are in changing the hearts of men through the gospel of Jesus Christ, you may be captive to legalistic thinking.

Another form of legalism is the practice of picking only parts of the truth as applicable to you. Jesus noted in Matthew 15:3-6 that this type of legalism was present in the Pharisaical view of committing their resources to God so that they would not have to help their mothers and fathers. Today, I can customize my religious beliefs to conform to what I expect from my religion rather than what my religion sets as a standard for my life. The National Survey of Youth and Religion tells us that over fifty-one percent of 18- to 23-year-olds in American say "it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole."[\[7\]](#)

Mysticism: Captive to Man's Composite View of God

Earlier, we saw naturalism and legalism as two forms of cultural captivity for Christians. Now we will consider another form which can take us captive, mysticism. In Colossians 2:18-19, Paul writes:

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

Here Paul is describing someone who drifts away by delighting in self-derived sources of truth, that is, "visions he has seen," and other religious practices not taught by Christ. This person delights in mixing together teachings from different religions to come up with one's own personalized religious experience. But Christ calls us to worship the Father and the Son, not angels or our own self sacrifice.

Your first reaction may be that this is not a major area of captivity for today's Christians. However, when we begin to consider examples of this type of thinking, we realize that it is very prevalent in our society.

For example, consider the millions of people who joined Oprah Winfrey in extolling and following the teachings of Eckhardt Tolle, author of *A New Earth, Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. Tolle teaches a version of Eastern mysticism which he discovered in a vision. Taking his stand on visions, he teaches we are all part of the universal life force to which we should desire to return. He selectively misquotes Jesus throughout the book, identifying Him as one of the early proponents of this mystic religion. Most of Tolle's followers come from Christian backgrounds, professing to be Christians trying to find a way to integrate his teaching with the teachings of Jesus.

One feature of Tolle's teaching is the view that Jesus was one of many who are bringing a form of truth to us. He believes Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed are all trying to communicate the same truth in different ways. This viewpoint is seen in the National Study of Youth and Religion where over seventy

percent of American 18- to 23-year-olds disagreed with the idea that only one religion was true. In our study of American born-again between 18 and 40, we found that less than half of these born-again believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven, not Mohammed or Buddha.

Asceticism: Captive to Focusing on the Flesh

A fourth form of cultural captivity identified in Colossians is asceticism. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines asceticism as “the doctrine that a life of extreme self-denial and austerity releases the soul from bondage with the body and permits union with the divine.” Asceticism was promoted in Jesus’ time by the Essenes of the Jewish culture and the Stoics of the Greek culture.

Since our hope is rooted in an imperishable life in heaven, one could adopt the view that this earthly body needs to be denied in light of our heavenly home. However, Paul warns us:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence (Col 2:20-23).

Paul warns the Christians at Colossae not to fall for the idea that we must remove our body from all pleasures of the world to partake of the divine. He points out that obsession with self-abasement and severe treatment of the body actually focus our attention on the flesh. Thus, our focus is on eliminating fleshly indulgence rather than on living lives that please

Jesus.

In our post-modern American culture, severe treatment of the body does not appear to be attractive to most young adults (except for extreme cases such as anorexia). Perhaps, though, it is evidenced by some forms of the “buy green” movement. What we do see is the opposite extreme, where an emphasis on bodily enhancement for the here and now takes our focus off the work of Christ. Of course, in other parts of the world such as South America, extreme asceticism is practiced among some believers.

We have seen four types of false thinking that could take Christians captive in Colossae of the first century and can in America today. The four types are naturalism, legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. If we recognize these forms of captivity, as Christians, we can be free of them. We must ask ourselves, Does this way of thinking add anything to the fullness of Christ? If I am already “complete in Him”,^{8} how can these add-ons make me more complete? Obviously they cannot. So leave them behind and “as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord so walk in Him.”^{9}

Notes

1. Steve Cable, [“Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America,”](#); [“Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths,”](#); [“The True State of American Evangelicals in 2011,”](#)
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2. Cable, “Examining Our Cultural Captivity,”
www.probe.org/examining-our-cultural-captivity/.
3. Colossians 2:10
4. Colossians 2:4
5. Colossians 2:7
6. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.
7. www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp. “The National Study of Youth and Religion,”
www.youthandreligion.org, whose data were used by permission

here, was generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., under the direction of Christian Smith of the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame.

8. Colossians 2:10

9. Colossians 2:6

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American Cultural Captivity

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of ways in which American Christians are culturally captive: individualism, consumerism, racism, church growth values and globalization.

Cultural Captivity

Probe Ministries has dedicated itself to helping Christians be freed from cultural captivity. Therefore, I want to focus on how we as Americans are often captive to an American form of Christianity and thus are culturally captive.



Before we address the issue of cultural captivity, it might be worth mentioning how small American Christianity is compared to the rest of the world. Philip Jenkins reports that “the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”[\[1\]](#)

We can put this in perspective by looking at what happened last century. In 1900, about eighty percent of the Christians in the world lived in Europe or North America. Now more than seventy percent live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

A century ago, if you were to describe a typical Christian in the world, you would probably describe a Christian living in the middle of the United States. Today a typical Christian would be a mother in Zambia or a college student in South Korea.

Christianity has also become diverse. “More people pray and worship in more languages and with more differences in styles of worship in Christianity than any other religion.”^{2} Put simply, American Christianity is no longer the norm in the world. Yet we as Americans often make the mistake of assuming that our Western values and assumptions should be the standard for the rest of the world.

Many of my observations come from insights in the book, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*.^{3} Soong-Chan Rah provides numerous examples of how the American church is captive to a white, Western view of the world and thus is culturally captive. Obviously, the church has been captive to materialism, but I will focus on some of his other descriptions of captivity, namely, individualism, consumerism, and racism.

It is worth noting that the phrase “captivity of the church” has been used in different contexts with varied meanings throughout church history. Martin Luther, for example, wrote the tract *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which he compared the Catholic Church’s teaching on the sacraments to the captivity of the Israelites by the Babylonians.^{4} R.C. Sproul has written about how many Christians are captive to the Pelagian view of the basic goodness of humanity instead of holding to the biblical view on original sin.^{5} And Nancy Pearcey’s book *Total Truth* was written as an attempt at “liberating Christianity from its cultural captivity.”^{6}

American Christians don’t like to think of themselves as being culturally captive. But the truth is that they have to a significant extent been assimilated into American culture.

While they rightly criticize many of the sins and failings of American society, they are more conformed to the culture than they would like to believe.

Individualism

One example of American cultural captivity that Rah uses in his book is American individualism. He is hardly the first person to talk about this. Many social commentators over the last century have discussed and documented American's obsession with individualism which has created an individual-focused worldview.

On the positive side, the rugged individualism of Americans is responsible for the willingness to explore, build, and being willing to "go it alone" when circumstances required it. An individual willing to take a bold stand in the midst of theological heresy or cultural captivity is a good thing.

American individualism also has many negative sides. Christians should be aware of the impact of individualism on their theology. Rah says "the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture. The individualistic philosophy that has shaped Western society, and consequently shaped the American church, reduces faith to a personal, private and individual faith." [\[7\]](#)

To put this in perspective, consider that most of the books of the New Testament were written to churches and communities of believers. Only a handful of books (such as Titus and Philemon) were written to individuals. Yet when most Americans read the New Testament, they focus on the individual aspects of the biblical truth rather than consider the larger corporate aspect being presented in Scripture.

Often our Bible study focuses on the individual and personal understanding of God's Word when so much of it applies to our

relationship to the entire body of Christ. Often worship is self-focused and self-absorbed.

Ask a typical Christian about sin, and he or she is likely to describe it in personal terms. Sin certainly is personal, but it can also be corporate. But if you only have a personal, privatized faith, then you are also likely to see sin as merely a personal matter. Rah concludes: “Evangelical theology becomes exclusively an individual-driven theology instead of a community-driven theology.”[{8}](#)

Consumerism

Another example of American cultural captivity that Rah gives is consumerism. This is a topic that I have addressed before not only on radio but in my book *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times*.[{10}](#) Even secular commentators have noticed that American culture is infected with “affluenza.”[{11}](#)

Rah says, “Materialism and consumerism reduce people to a commodity. An individual’s worth in society is based upon what assets they bring and what possessions they own.”[{12}](#)

How has consumerism affected the American church? First, it means that we have been willing to include materialistic values into our worldview and lifestyle. Often it is difficult to distinguish Christian values from the materialistic values of American society. Some commentators point out that many of our churches look more like shopping malls than like churches.

Second, consumerism affects our mindset and perspective about spiritual things. A consumer mindset sees the spiritual life as a consumable product only if it benefits the individual. Believers with a consumer mindset usually aren’t living for eternity but for the here and now. Essentially they are so earthly minded, they are no heavenly good.

Third, consumerism affects the way we choose to fellowship

with other believers. “American evangelicalism has created the unique phenomenon of church shopping—viewing church as yet another commodity and product to be evaluated and purchased. When a Christian family moves to a new city, how much of the standards by which they choose a church is based upon a shopping list of their personal tastes and wants rather than their commitment to a particular community or their desire to serve a particular neighborhood?”[\[13\]](#)

Finally, consumerism even affects the way we measure success. We should be measuring success by the standards of Scripture. Often, we measure it by the American consumer value system. Consider what many refer to as the ABCs of church growth. These are: attendance, building, and cash. Often the success of a church is measured in the same way a secular business would measure its success. The bottom line is often the number of attendees or the size of the church budget.

Jesus asked in Mark 8:36, “What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?” A consumer mentality often chooses short-term solutions instead of eternal values despite the possibility of long-term negative consequences.

Racism

Another example of American cultural captivity that Rah gives is racism. Not only was this a chapter in this book, but he actually wrote another book on the subject of racial and ethnic issues.[\[14\]](#)

Let’s begin by stating that the idea of race is actually artificial. As I pointed out in a previous radio program on [Race and Racial Issues](#), both the Bible and modern science reject the idea of what today we call race. For example, the Bible teaches that God has made “from one blood every nation of men” (Acts 17:26). Here Paul is teaching the Athenians that they came from the same source in the creation as everyone

else. We are all from one blood. In other words, there are no superior or inferior races. The Bible refers to people groups and nations, but does not label based upon skin color.

Race is also an imprecise scientific term. For example, people of every race can interbreed and produce fertile offspring. It turns out that the so-called differences in the races are not very great. A recent study of human genetic material of different races concluded that the DNA of any two people in the world would differ by just 2/10ths of one percent.[{15}](#) And of this variation, only six percent can be linked to racial categories. The remaining ninety-four percent is “within race” variation. That is why “many scientists are now declaring that the concept of race has no basis in the biological sciences, more and more are concurring that race should be seen as a social invention.”[{16}](#)

How have racial ideas and prejudice affected the church? It is tempting to say that this was merely a problem in the past and should be no concern for a country moving towards a post-racial society. Soong-Chan Rah disagrees: “We are quick to deal with the symptoms of sin in America, but oftentimes are unwilling to deal with the original sin of America: namely, the kidnapping of Africans to use as slave labor, and usurping of lands belonging to Native Americans and subsequent genocide of indigenous peoples.”[{17}](#)

Race is an important issue not only in our past, but our future. Many church growth methods are based upon the idea of racial homogeneity. If it is true that the most segregated place in American culture is an American church at 11 AM on Sunday morning, perhaps we should pay more attention to race and racial issues.

Church Growth and Globalization

We can even see cultural captivity in the way we build our

churches and the way we interact with the world. We can see the impact some of these ideas about race and racial issues have on church growth.

The popular church growth movement places a high priority on what is called the “homogeneous unit principle” in order to have substantial numerical growth within a congregation. Homogeneous churches tend to grow faster because church attendees are more comfortable with people with similar racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Racially and ethnically segregated churches are the natural result of such teaching. And not only are segregated churches unbiblical, they are impractical. America in the twenty-first century will be more diverse than any previous century. It will no longer be dominated by white, Eurocentric people.

Church growth principles also prioritize “an individualized, personal evangelism and salvation over the understanding of the power of the gospel to transform neighborhoods and communities. They also emphasize a modern, social science approach to ministry, focusing on a pragmatic planning process that leads to measurable success goals.”[\[18\]](#)

Globalization is another challenge in the twenty-first century and can also illustrate how we spread our cultural captivity to the corners of the world. Globalization often means that one nation’s values and mindset predominate. In this case, American Christian values (which often are not biblical) are spread and dominate other cultures.

Thomas Friedman says, “Culturally speaking, globalization is largely, though not entirely, the spread of Americanization—from Big Macs to iMacs to Mickey Mouse—on a global scale.”[\[19\]](#) Globalization not only allows us to spread the influence of Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and McDonalds, but it also is the means by which American cultural captivity is spread to believers around the globe. Once these values are

transmitted to the rest of the world, we will have a global Christianity that is just as culturally captive to American values as American Christians have been.

This is our challenge in the twenty-first century. American Christians cannot merely look at Christians in other countries and shake their heads about their captivity to their particular cultural values. We too must be aware of culture captivity in our midst and “see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception” (Colossians 2:8). We have been assimilated into the American culture and should “not be conformed to this world” but instead should be “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

Notes

1. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.
2. Ibid.
3. Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).
4. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* trans. A.T.W. Steinhaeuser, *Three Treaties* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947).
5. R.C. Sproul, “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church,” *Modern Reformation*, May/June 2001.
6. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
7. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 30.
8. Ibid., 40.
9. Ibid., 43.
10. Kerby Anderson, *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009).
11. John DeGraaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).
12. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 48.

13. Ibid., 55.
14. Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2010).
15. J. C. Gutin, "End of the Rainbow," *Discover*, November 1994, 71-75.
16. Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007), xi.
17. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 69.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 199), 8.

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Shadow Scholar

April 28, 2011

A few months ago, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an expose written by a man who makes his living writing papers for a custom-essay company. His article is getting even more attention now that *Readers Digest* has printed an edited version. He has written roughly 5,000 pages of scholarly literature for students in college and graduate school. You won't find his name on a single paper.

The article follows his experience with one student who wants him to write a 75-page paper on business ethics. It later became part of a 170-page graduate school thesis. Her e-mail reads as follows: "You did me business ethics propsal [sic] for me I need propsal got approved pls can you will write me paper?" Yes, her English and grammar are that poor. I will spare you all the other e-mails she writes to him.

He has found there are three demographic groups that seek out his services: the English-as-second-language student, the hopelessly deficient student, and the lazy rich kid. He admits that he lives rather well “on the desperation, misery, and incompetence” that our educational system has created. He remarks that “my company’s staff of roughly 50 is not large enough to satisfy the demands of students.”

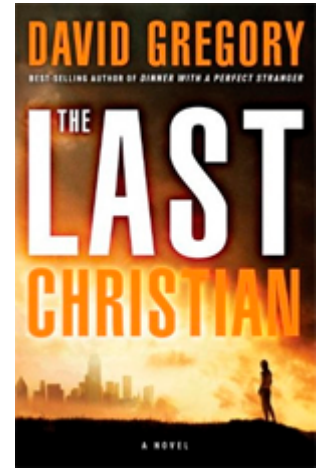
Perhaps the greatest irony in his work is that he does lots of work for seminary students. He says: “I like seminary students. They seem so blissfully unaware of the inherent contradiction in paying someone to help them cheat in courses that are largely about walking in the light of God and providing an ethical model for others to follow. I have been commissioned to write many a passionate condemnation of America’s moral decay as exemplified by abortion, gay marriage, or the teaching of evolution. All in all, we may presume that clerical authorities see these as a greater threat than the plagiarism committed by the future frocked.”

Anyone looking for evidence of moral decline in America need look no further than the willingness of students (including seminary students) to hire ghostwriters to do their work and then claim it as their own. I’m Kerby Anderson, and that’s my point of view.

The Last Christian

I just finished another novel by one of my favorite authors, [David Gregory](#). I really enjoyed *The Last Christian* for several reasons, including the creation of characters I truly cared about, but there are two big reasons that I find myself continuing to think about.

The book is set in 2088. Abby Caldwell, who grew up as the daughter of missionaries in Papua New Guinea in a tribe cut off from the rest of the world, comes back to the U.S. and learns that Christianity has died out. She is “the last Christian.” Her grandparents had left her a message sixteen years before telling her that God had impressed on both of them that she was His choice to bring Christianity back to this country, but because she had no contact with the outside world, she hadn’t received it. At the same time as Abby’s entry to American culture (quite a shock for someone who grew up in a primitive jungle culture), stories start popping up on “the Grid” about people having dreams of Jesus.



One reason the book was compelling is its explanation of how Christianity died out. One of the main characters is a history professor at a Dallas university who gives a five-point lecture about what rendered Christianity so irrelevant and obsolete as to have no presence in the culture at all. The biggest point was the lack of distinctiveness between believers and unbelievers. Since professing Christians had the same beliefs and the same behaviors of those with no allegiance to Christ, there was no reason for anyone to become a Christian.

And that’s where we are today in 2011: in an excruciatingly dangerous position of losing our Christian voice in the culture because in the majority of our lives, Jesus Christ makes absolutely no difference at all. At Probe Ministries, we call this being “[culturally captive](#).” When our beliefs and behaviors are informed and shaped more by the surrounding culture than by the Word of God and the character of God, we have been taken captive. Paul warned the first-century Christians about this very thing: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according

to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8). *The Last Christian* paints a chilling scenario of what could happen right here in the United States, just as the light has gone out in Europe (except for small pockets of believers—God is still faithful!).

The other thing I really loved about the book is the heroine's progression of understanding of her faith. When she arrives in the U.S., convinced God wants her to share the gospel with her home country, she defines it as "we are sinners and Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin so we can go to heaven when we die." Naturally, this message does not resonate with a completely secular audience. The author uses marvelous means to enlighten her to the much larger, far more compelling description of the gospel as the truly good news that God invites us into His life, a quality of abundance and joy and love *today* that is so much bigger than simply having one's ticket-to-heaven card punched.

For the past year, reading through all four gospels, I've been meditating a lot on what Jesus preached: the Kingdom of God, which He sometimes also called the Kingdom of Heaven. *The Kingdom is a party!* Do a word search for "kingdom" in the New Testament, and you'll see it connected with words like righteousness, peace, joy, power, treasure, fine pearls, fruit, and eating and drinking at God's table. Sounds like a party to me! In John's gospel, Jesus refers to the kingdom as "life." Over and over and over again.

If people saw the Christian life as being connected to the source of life—Jesus our Lord—and saw Christians living lives marked by peace, joy, power, treasure, fruitfulness, and a radiant quality of life that comes from letting Jesus shine through us in His beauty and power, we wouldn't need to fear that the horrible scenario painted in *The Last Christian* will come to pass.

Party on!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/the_last_christian
on Jan. 18, 2011.