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{9}," 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*."{10} 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*."{11}

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, 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, 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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Pew Research on Religious

Beliefs of American Christians

Looking across the seven-year period from 2007 to 2014, we find that the percentage of Evangelicals holding a biblical worldview is continuing to decline, and the percentage of Mainline and Catholics holding such a worldview is declining at an even higher rate.

Overall, 13.3% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 27 held a biblical worldview in 2007. By 2014, for the same segment of Americans who are now between the ages of 25 and 34, this number had dropped to 11.5%.

In this post, I continue my exploration of the two large surveys by Pew Research entitled U. S. Religious Landscape Surveys, taken seven years apart (i.e., 2007{1}] and 2014{2}). In prior posts, I looked at the growing number of Nothing at All respondents and at the breakdown of Americans by religious affiliation{3}. Now, I want to look more deeply at the religious beliefs of Evangelicals and Other Christians (i.e., Mainline Protestants and Catholics).

Using these surveys, we can look at five key questions on religious beliefs. The first four questions we will call Basic Doctrine. The questions are:

1. Do you believe in God or a universal spirit? *Absolutely or fairly certain.* Which comes closest to your view of God? *God is a person with whom people can have a relationship and is not an impersonal force.*
2. Which comes closest to your view: The Bible is the word of God. (versus the Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God.)
3. Do you think there is a heaven, where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded? *Yes.*

4. Do you think there is a hell, where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished? *Yes.*

Clearly these questions do not express Evangelical doctrine perfectly, but they are worded the way that Pew Research chose to express them and I can't go back and fine tune them.

The fifth question is:

5. When it comes to questions of right and wrong, which of the following do you look to most for guidance? Religious teachings and beliefs{4}

We will refer to all five questions combined as a Biblical Worldview (BWV).

Let's begin by looking at Evangelicals. In Table 1, the percentages of each age group for both survey years are tabulated.

Table 1 – Christian Beliefs for Evangelicals

Evangelical (All)					
Survey	2007 Survey		2014 Survey		
Age Range	18 – 27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
Basic Doctrine	59.1%	56.2%	61.1%	53.1%	57.6%
Biblical Worldview	33.6%	33.6%	36.2%	31.7%	39.5%

Note: Those 18-27 in 2007 would be 25-34 in 2014, which is why 2014 is broken up differently than 2007

And we see that the youngest group in each survey tends to be slightly higher the older respondents in most areas. In 2014, we see a significant dip for those 25 to 34 years of age versus those younger and those older. It also appears that there is a slight uptick in both basic doctrine and BVW belief in 2014 over 2007. However, we need to look at the percentage of the entire age group to get the full picture.

Table 2 – Percentage of an Entire Age Group for Christian Beliefs of Evangelicals

Evangelical (All)					
Survey	2007 Survey		2014 Survey		
Age Range	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
% of All People in Age Group	28.0%	32.7%	23.8%	26.5%	32.9%
Basic Doctrine	16.6%	18.4%	14.6%	14.1%	19.0%
Biblical Worldview	9.4%	11.0%	8.6%	8.4%	13.0%

Now we see that against the entire population, the percentage of those in 2014 with a Basic Doctrinal view and a Biblical Worldview and younger than 35 is less than the 18–27 year-olds from 2007. They went from higher in Table 1 to lower in Table 2 because of the fairly significant decrease in the percentage of Evangelicals in those age groups. In fact, comparing 18-27 in 2007 with 25-34 in 2014, we find the number affirming Basic Doctrine goes down by 15% and the number affirming a Pew Biblical Worldview goes down 10%.

When you think about it, the results from these two tables are what you would expect to see. Those who were marginal Evangelicals in 2007 were more likely than those with stronger Evangelical beliefs to identify as something other than an Evangelical by 2014. This action would make the percentages in Table 1 go up in 2014. But there was still some reduction in the number of people who believed in Basic Doctrine and a Biblical Worldview in 2014. Thus, the percentages in Table 2 went down a significant amount.

Now let’s see how Other Christians (i.e. Non-Evangelicals) compare.

Table 3 – Christian Beliefs for Other Christians

Other Christians (Mainline and Catholic)					
Survey	2007 Survey		2014 Survey		
Age Range	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus

Basic Doctrine	32.8%	30.6%	39.0%	30.5%	32.8%
Biblical Worldview	10.5%	11.6%	14.5%	11.1%	16.1%

Comparing Table 3 with Table 1, we see that the percentage of Other Christians holding a Basic Doctrine is just over one half of the rate with Evangelicals. For a Biblical Worldview, it drops to about one third of the rate expressed by Evangelicals. Given that these respondents self-identified with a Mainline Protestant or Catholic denomination, it is disheartening to see that only around 10% of them ascribe to a Biblical Worldview.

Table 4 – Percentage of an Entire Age Group for Christian Beliefs of Other Christians

Other Christian					
Survey	2007 Survey		2014 Survey		
Age Group	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
% of All People in Age Group	36.9%	46.0%	29.5%	28.3%	41.3%
Basic Doctrine	12.1%	14.1%	11.5%	8.7%	13.5%
BWV	3.9%	5.4%	4.3%	3.1%	6.6%

Once again, we see a similar effect when we look at the population as a whole. Given the significant drop in the number of people identifying as Other Christians in 2014 when compared with 2007, we see a large drop (as a percentage) in those professing a Basic Doctrine and a Biblical Worldview. In fact, comparing 18-27 in 2007 with 25-34 in 2014, we find the number affirming Basic Doctrine goes down by 30% and the number affirming a Pew Biblical Worldview goes down 20%. Perhaps more importantly, we see only about 3–4% of the population under 35 are Mainline/Catholics with a Biblical Worldview.

Impact of Pluralism on a Christian Biblical Worldview

Surprisingly, it appears to be possible to have a pluralistic view (i.e. there are multiple ways to heaven) and have a

Biblical Worldview as defined by the questions in the two Pew surveys. Let's look at the relationship between these two important views. In an earlier blog post, *Measuring Pluralism: A Needed Correction*, we looked at the number of people who did not take a pluralistic view. In fact, they said,

1. My religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life. OR
2. Many religions can lead to eternal life, but only Christian religions can lead to eternal life. (That is: Many Christian religions can lead to eternal life.)

As reported in the earlier post, those who stated either of the items above were as shown below:

Table 5 – Christians Who Are Not Pluralistic

	Evangelical			Other Christian		
Age Range	18-24	25-34	35 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
Not Pluralistic	60%	54%	59%	27%	27%	25%

What we want to consider in this post is the relationship between one's view of pluralism and one's view of basic Christian doctrine.

Table 6 – Probability of Holding Christian Doctrine Given One's View on Pluralism

	Evangelical			Other Christian		
Age Range	18-24	25-34	35 plus	18-24	15-34	35 plus
One True with Basic Doctrine	72.9%	65.3%	66.8%	56.3%	50.5%	52.3%
Pluralist with Basic Doctrine	43.8%	38.6%	44.6%	32.6%	23.2%	26.3%
One True with Biblical Worldview	47.8%	45.1%	50.4%	27.9%	25.3%	30.7%
Pluralist with BWV	19.0%	16.0%	23.9%	9.5%	5.9%	11.2%
Note: One True = Not Pluralistic						

First, let's look at the impact of pluralism on belief in Basic Doctrine as defined above. For Evangelicals who are not pluralistic, we can see that about two out of three hold to the Basic Doctrine. For Other Christians, it drops to about one in two (or 50%). For Evangelicals who are pluralistic we see a drop down to about 40% across all ages. For Other Christians, the drop is down to around 25% which is only half of the percentage of those who are not pluralistic.

However, when we add in the idea of making decisions on what is right or wrong, we see a significant drop. For Evangelicals who are not pluralistic, about one in two (50%) hold to this Biblical Worldview, a drop of about 30%. For Other Christians, we see an even larger drop down to about half of the level for a Basic Doctrine, i.e. down to about 25%.

We see an even greater reduction in comparing those who are pluralistic with those who are not. For Evangelicals, they are about a third as likely (e.g., 16% compared to 45% for those age 25-34) to hold to a Biblical Worldview. For Other Christians, generally less than 10% of those with a pluralistic view hold to a Biblical Worldview, or less that one third of the rate among those who are not pluralistic.

It is most disturbing, but unfortunately true that the percentage of Evangelicals holding a biblical worldview is continuing to decline, and the percentage of Mainline and Catholics holding such a worldview is declining at an even faster rate. This does not bode well for the future of the church of Jesus Christ in America.

Notes

1. **The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data

Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.
2. The **U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.
3. **Religious Affiliation of American Emerging Adults: 1996 to 2014**
4. Other choices were Philosophy and reason, Practical experience and common sense, and Scientific information

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Changing Religious Affiliations from Childhood to Young Adulthood

As we have seen in previous blogs, the percentage of young adults who identify as Nones has been increasing rapidly over the last two decades. During the same time, Christian groups have seen a decline in the percentage of young adults who identify with them. But looking back at their childhood affiliations, we want to know 1) Where did these Nones come from and 2) Did any who grew up in a None household become Christians.

Looking at the Pew Research, **U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**{1}, we can answer these questions and others about the transition from childhood faith to adult faith.

In the first part of this post, we will consider Americans who were 25 to 34 years old in 2014. This age group is of interest because they represent those from post-college through the beginning of child rearing and because we can compare them with 18 to 24-year-olds from the 2007 Pew Research survey.

The two tables below look at the change from two different perspectives. The first looks at where young adults with a particular religious affiliation came from as children. The second looks at where children of a particular religious affiliation ended up as young adults.

Let’s consider a simple example to understand the difference between these two tables. Assume that there were 200 Evangelicals and 200 Nones in 2014 and there were 100 Evangelicals and 300 Nones among the same group as children. Finally, assume that there were 25 people who were Nones as children who became Evangelical as an adult. That tells us that 125 Evangelical children became Nones as an adult.

Given this data, the first table would be:

	Evangelical Adult	None Adult
Evangelical as Children	75%(75/100)	41.7% (125/300)
None as Children	25% (25/100)	58.3% (175/300)
Total	100%	100%

And the second table would be:

Example 2: Religion Children Became as Adults

	Evangelical Adult	None Adult	Total
Evangelical as Children	37.5% (75/200)	62.5% (125/200)	100%
None as Children	12.5% (25/200)	87.5% (175/200)	100%

With that as background, let’s look at our two tables.

Table 1: Religion 25 to 34-year-old Adults Came From as Children

Religion as a Child	Evangelical	Mainline	Black	Catholic	Other	None	Change	% Leaving
Evangelical-C	62.7%	19.2%	6.2%	1.5%	5.4%	16.0%	98.1%	38.4%
Mainline-C	10.5%	53.0%	2.4%	1.9%	8.2%	17.7%	69.1%	63.4%
Black-C	3.8%	2.1%	73.5%	1.0%	3.4%	5.4%	77.3%	43.2%
Catholic-C	13.5%	13.7%	6.5%	92.6%	10.3%	27.1%	54.6%	49.4%
Other-C	1.7%	2.9%	3.1%	0.5%	65.4%	11.1%	91.3%	40.3%
None-C	7.7%	9.1%	8.4%	2.5%	7.4%	22.7%	280.8%	36.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		
Evangelical-C stands for “Evangelical as a child” and so on								

Table 2: Religion Children Ended Up Affiliating with as 25 to 34-year-old Adults

Religion as a child	Evangelical	Mainline	Black	Catholic	Other	None	Total
Evangelical-C	61.6%	9.0%	1.7%	1.1%	2.6%	24.1%	100%
Mainline-C	15.2%	36.6%	0.9%	2.2%	5.7%	39.4%	100%
Black-C	10.6%	2.8%	56.8%	2.1%	4.5%	23.2%	100%
Catholic-C	9.8%	4.7%	1.3%	50.6%	3.6%	30.1%	100%
Other-C	3.2%	2.6%	1.6%	0.7%	59.7%	32.3%	100%
None-C	14.2%	8.0%	4.2%	3.5%	6.5%	63.7%	100%
Evangelical-C stands for “Evangelical as a child” and so on							

First, let’s consider the Nones.

Looking at Table 1, we see that the greatest percentage of Nones were affiliated with the Catholic church as children (27.1%) while a smaller percentage were actually Nones as children (22.7%). But lest we think this is only a Catholic issue, we find almost 34% (16.0% + 17.7%) of them were affiliated with a Protestant church as children.

From Table 2, we see that almost 40% of Mainline Protestant children became Nones by the time they were 25 to 34-year-olds. Shockingly, more Mainline Protestant children became Nones than stayed affiliated with a Mainline denomination (39.4% to 36.6%). Strikingly, every other religious grouping lost at least one in four of their childhood affiliates to the Nones; with Catholics and Other Religions losing about one out of three. It is important to highlight that one out of four children raised as Evangelicals chose to be characterized as a None as young adults. Even though that percentage is smaller than other religious groups, one of four is still a significant percentage.

Now let's look at the columns in Table 1 labeled Change and % Leaving. For this age group, there are almost three times as many Nones as adults as there were as children (i.e. 280.8%). Comparing it with other religious groups, we see that all other groups fell in size. Interestingly, over one third of those who were Nones as children are now affiliated with another religious group. But that group is overwhelmed by the number becoming Nones from other groups.

What about Evangelicals, Mainlines and Catholics?

From Table 1, we see that two-thirds of adult evangelicals age 25 to 34 were evangelical as children. Most of the remaining one third came from either Catholic (13.5%) or Mainline (10.5%) backgrounds. However, looking at Table 2, we note that 14% of those who selected None as children were affiliated with an Evangelical church as young adults. This group makes up only 8% of the Evangelical young adults because the Evangelicals are a larger group than the Nones were as children.

The group that **lost almost two-thirds of childhood affiliates is Mainline** Christian churches. From Table 2, we see that almost 40% of them became Nones and another 15% became Evangelical. Looking at the Change column for Table 1, we note

that the number of Mainlines is down to less than two-thirds of the number who affiliated with Mainline churches as children.

However, the Catholics do even worse. The Change column shows that the **number of young adult Catholics is barely one half** of the number who said they were affiliated with a Catholic church as children. The Mainlines do a little better because they picked up a significant number of Evangelical and Catholic children while the Catholic faith picks up very few from any other religion (compare Table 1 the column labeled Mainline with the column labeled Catholic to see this difference).

Conclusion

The vast majority of young adult Nones are not raised in households directly promoting that viewpoint. In fact, only 23% of young adult Nones said they were Nones as children. Clearly, the teaching of the culture at large and the lack of a compelling argument from their families is causing the other 77% of young adult Nones to leave their childhood faith to embrace nothing at all.

Relative to their childhood affiliation, the number of Nones is exploding among American young adults. If we, as Evangelicals in America, want to change this trend we need to be equipping our teenagers and emerging adults with a deep understanding of why we know the gospel of Jesus Christ is true and worth giving your life in service to. I encourage you to check out Probe's Periscope material at upPeriscope.com as a good place to start the process

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Note

1. **The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center).

The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

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 nones**. In 2008, the percentage of emerging adults (18- to 29-year-olds) who self-identified as **nones** 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 **nones** was now up to **one third** of the population. The Pew Religious Landscape{2} survey of over 35,000 Americans tallied **35% identifying as nones.**

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 "**nones**" 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 alls," their percentages would still be very small.

Clearly, the vast majority of **nones** and "nothing at alls" 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 that 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 is 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 at 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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The True State of American Evangelicals

Steve Cable analyzed the data concerning 18- to 40-year-old born-agains 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-agains (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-agains 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-agains (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-agains. 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-agains, 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-agains

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-agains 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-agains 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-agains 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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Does It Matter What We Believe?

Does *what* we believe matter, or just *that* we believe? A study recently released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, suggests that most religious people in America think *what* they believe isn't so important.{1}

According to the report, eighty-three percent of people identifying themselves with mainline Protestant churches believe that many religions can lead to eternal life. That might not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with the changes in mainline churches over the last century.

But what would you say if you knew that fifty-seven percent of people identifying themselves as evangelicals believe that many religions can lead to eternal life? Fifty-seven percent! That means the majority of evangelicals are what we call "religious pluralists." Are you surprised? To add to our embarrassment, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have stronger convictions about their beliefs being the true ones than do evangelicals.

Some findings in the survey were real head-shakers. For example, thirteen percent of evangelicals surveyed believe God is an impersonal force. It might be a little reassuring to learn that evangelicals don't have a corner on the "confused beliefs" market. Six percent of atheists surveyed believe in a personal God, and twelve percent believe in heaven! What are we to make of this?

Whatever it might mean precisely, it at least means that specific beliefs are the property of the believer, not of the religion itself. Fidelity to the beliefs of particular religions (or irreligion, in the case of atheism) means much less today than in the past. I can associate myself with a given group, but I retain the right to decide for myself what I should believe.

It's understandable, in a sense, why people think this way, including evangelicals. This pluralistic mentality infuses our social consciousness. We aren't to exclude people of other races or the other gender from all the multitudinous areas of society. Businesses are forbidden to discriminate on the basis of "race, color, national origin, religion, or sex."{2} I'm not arguing against any of this. I'm simply pointing to our social mentality which requires (or aims at) the leveling out of differences. The refusal to extend special status is applied to religious beliefs as well. But this doesn't mean we simply tolerate people of different beliefs; now we're supposed to affirm their beliefs!

In addition to this pluralist mentality there is the serious problem for evangelicals of the reduction of doctrinal teaching in churches. David Wells lamented this loss in his 1993 book, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* He was spurred on to write the book after having a student in his seminary class on theology ask him how he could justify spending so much money on a class that "was so irrelevant to his desire to minister to people in the Church."{3}

One problem some people have with a strong concern for doctrine is that it tends to divide Christians. In so far as we *do* segregate ourselves from other Christians over non-essential beliefs we are in error. Unity is very important. But nowhere in Scripture are we taught that unity is to be preserved regardless, at the expense of truth. After exhorting the Ephesians to be unified in the bond of peace, Paul lists what we are to be unified around: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (4:3-6). We aren't to be united around the conviction that when it comes to religion, to each his or her own.

Another reason for a reluctance to insist on doctrinal integrity is the postmodern mentality about truth. This issue is being played out now in discussions about what is called the "emerging church." The desire to correct an overzealous modernism in its confident claims of truth is showing itself in *some* Christians who align themselves with this movement in a diminishing of the importance of doctrinal commitments. The attempt to avoid both absolutism and relativism has them walking a tightrope which too easily swings toward a pluralist mentality.

What does it mean to give up on the importance of specific doctrinal beliefs? First, and very obviously, we have abandoned biblical Christianity. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul states specific beliefs that are essential: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was

buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (verses 3-5). Jesus made the bold and definitely non-politically correct claim that he was the *only* way to God (John 14:6). Paul says that salvation comes to those who confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9). Throughout both Old and New Testaments, we are presented with claim after claim presented as being true.

Second, we must hold fast to the historic teachings of biblical Christianity if we are to have anything to offer the world. One of the most significant results of liberal watering down of Christian distinctives is that, over time, attendance in mainline churches dwindled; they had nothing to offer that was different from what people could get outside the church.

Wells notes that "the great sin of Fundamentalism is to compromise; the great sin in evangelicalism is to be narrow." Whereas evangelicals once strongly opposed doctrinal decline in liberalism, now, Wells says, "evangelicals, no less than the Liberals before them whom they have always berated, have now abandoned doctrine in favor of 'life'."{4} We're doing well in the arena of social relief; we're doing very poorly in training our people in basic Christian beliefs *as beliefs that are true for all people for all time.*

Wells notes these consequences of the loss of doctrinal conviction. First is simply the loss of conviction. What do we stand for? You've heard it before: A person [or church] that stands for nothing will fall for anything. Second is the loss of what might be accomplished when spurred on by a theological vision. Is being nice and doing good the substance of our marching orders? Third is the loss of any really meaningful sense of what "evangelical" means. Fourth is the loss of unity with the spinning off of individual interests.

If Christianity doesn't have *the* truth about how one might obtain eternal life, it has nothing more to offer than

religious experience (whatever that might be for a given individual). It has lost all its substance. Since it *claims* to be the only way to God, what has been aptly said many times bears repeating: either it is true *for* all, or it is not true *at* all.

Notes

1. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant, June 2008; religions.pewforum.org
2. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, www.eeoc.gov/facts/qanda.html.
3. David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 4.
4. Ibid., 129, 131.

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That They May Be One: Evangelicals and Catholics in Dialogue

What began as a coming together to fight abortion has become a serious dialogue between evangelicals and Catholics. Rick Wade introduces the conversation.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Cultural Crisis and the Plea of Jesus

Sometime in 1983 I began working with the Crisis Pregnancy

Center in Chicago. A few times I participated in sidewalk protests in front of abortion clinics. I son realized that many of those I stood with on the sidewalks were Roman Catholics! I even had the opportunity to speak before a group of Catholics once. As I soon learned, Catholics had been fighting abortion for some time before such people as Francis Schaeffer made evangelical Protestants aware of the situation.

Roman Catholicism was a bit of a mystery to me then. There weren't many Catholics in southeast Virginia where I grew up. All I knew was that they had a Pope and they prayed to Mary and they sometimes had little statues in their front yards. The lines were pretty clearly drawn between them and us. Now I was being forced to think about these people and their beliefs, for here we were standing side by side ministering together in the name of Jesus.

Cultural/Moral Decline

At the grassroots level, Christians of varying stripes have found themselves working to stem the tide of immorality together with those they never thought they'd be working with. In the 1980s, abortion was perhaps *the* most visible example of a gulf that was widening in America. Not only abortion, but illegitimacy, sexual license in its various forms, a skyrocketing divorce rate and other social ills divided those who accepted traditional, Judeo-Christian morality from those who didn't. People began talking about the "culture war." Because our influence has waned, we have found that we no longer have the luxury of casting stones at "those Catholics over there," for we are being forced by our cultural circumstances to work at protecting a mutually held set of values.

In the book *Evangelicals and Catholics: Toward a Common Mission,* Chuck Colson reviews the social/ethical shift in America.{2} With the loss of confidence in our ability to know universal, objective truth, we have turned to the subjective

and practical. Getting things done is what counts. Power has replaced reason as the primary tool for change. Liberal politics determines the readings offered in literature courses in colleges. Radical multiculturalism has skewed representations of the West to make us *the* source of oppression for the rest of the world. "Just as the loss of truth leads to the loss of cultural integrity," says Colson, "so the loss of cultural integrity results in the disintegration of common moral order and its expression in political consensus."{3} Individual choice trumps the common good; each has his or her own rules. Abortion is a choice. The practice of homosexuality is a choice. Self-expression is the essence of freedom, regardless of how it affects others. And on it goes.

One of the ironic consequences of this potentially is the loss of the freedom we so desperately seek. This is because there must be some order in society. If everyone goes in different directions, the government will have to step in to establish order. What are Christians to do? Evangelicals are strong in the area of evangelism. Is there more that can be done on the cultural level?

The Grassroots Response

Back to the sidewalks of Chicago. "In front of abortion clinics," says Colson, "Catholics join hands with Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians to pray and sing hymns. Side by side they pass out pamphlets and urge incoming women to spare their babies." This new coming together extends to other areas as well. Colson continues:

> Both evangelicals and Catholics are offended by the blasphemy, violence, and sexual promiscuity endorsed by both the artistic elite and the popular culture in America today. On university campuses, evangelical students whose Christian faith comes under frequent assault often find Catholic professors to be their only allies. Evangelicals cheer as a

> Catholic nun, having devoted her life to serving the poor in the name of Christ, boldly confronts the president of the United States over his pro-abortion policies. Thousands of Catholic young people join the True Love Waits movement, in which teenagers pledge to save sex for marriage, a program that originated with Baptists.{4}

This has provided the groundwork for what is being called the "new ecumenism," a recent upsurge in interest in finding common cause with others who believe in Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God. Having seen this new grassroots unity in the cause of Christian morality, scholars and pastors are meeting together to see where the different traditions of Christians agree and disagree with each other, with a view to presenting a united front in the culture war.

Jesus' Prayer

Speaking of His church, Jesus asked the Father, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:21-23 ESV) In addition to the culture war, Christians have as a motive for unity the prayer of Jesus. Division in the Church is like a body divided: how will it work as a unit to accomplish its tasks? Jesus was not talking about unity at any price, but we can't let that idea prevent us from seeking it where it is legitimate in *God's* eyes.

The New Ecumenism

The cultural shift and the prayer of Jesus have led thinkers in the different Christian traditions to come together to see what can be done to promote the cause of unity. A conversation which began in earnest with the participants of Evangelicals

and Catholics Together in the mid-'90s has branched out resulting in magazines, books and conferences devoted to this issue. In fact, in November 2001, I attended a conference called "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," which included Evangelicals, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers.{5}

Participants in these discussions refer to themselves as "traditional" Christians. By "traditional" they mean those who "are freely bound by a normative tradition that is the bearer of truth," in the words of Richard John Neuhaus.{6} Traditional Christians trace their heritage back to the apostles, rather than adopting as ultimately authoritative the ideas of modern scholarship. They accept the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and the great creeds of the early centuries as summaries of authentic apostolic teaching. They agree on such things as the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and salvation through Jesus Christ the divine Son of God. Because of their acceptance of such fundamental truths, it is often noted that a traditional Evangelical has more in common with a traditional Catholic than with a liberal Protestant who denies the deity of Christ and other fundamental Christian truths.

20th Century Ecumenical Movement

For some of our older readers the word *ecumenical* probably brings to mind the movement of the 20th century spearheaded by the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, which took a decidedly unbiblical turn in the mid 1960s. I can remember hearing people in my church speak of it is very disparaging tones. Is this new ecumenism like the old one?

Participants take great pains to distinguish the new ecumenism from the old one. The latter began in 1910 in Edinburgh for the purpose of bringing Protestants together, primarily for missions.{7} At first its aims were admirable. After World War II, however, the focus shifted to the social and political. In

1966 at theWorld Conference on Church and Society the shift became public. “Thereafter the ideological radicals increased,” says theologian Tom Oden. The movement took a turn “toward revolutionary rhetoric, social engineering, and regulatory politics.”{8} It tried to form alliances around the “edges” of Christian life and belief, so to speak. In other words, it was interested in what the Church’s role was in the world on the social and political level. Orthodox doctrine became expendable when inconvenient. Today that movement is floundering, and some predict it won’t last much longer.

The New/Old Ecumenism

The new ecumenism, on the other hand, rejects the demands of modernity, which seeks to supplant ancient apostolic truth with its own wisdom, and instead allows apostolic truth to become modernity’s critic. Oden says that, “We cannot rightly confess the unity of the church without re-grounding that unity in the apostolic teaching that was hammered out on the anvil of martyrdom and defined by the early conciliar process, when heresies were rejected and the ancient orthodox consensus defined.”{9}

The new ecumenists look to Scripture and to the early ecumenical creeds like the Apostles Creed as definitive of Christian doctrine. With all their differences they look to a core of beliefs held historically upon which they all agree. From this basis they then discuss their differences and consider what they together might do to influence their society with the Christian worldview.

In this day of postmodern relativism and constructivism, it would be easy to see this discussion as another example of picking and choosing one’s truths; or putting together beliefs we find suited to our tastes with no regard for whether they’re really *true.* This isn’t the attitude being brought to this subject; the new ecumenism insists on the primacy of truth. This means that discussions can be rather intense, for

the participants don't feel the freedom to manipulate doctrine in order to reach consensus. At the "Christian Unity" conference speakers stated boldly where they believed their tradition was correct and others incorrect, and they expected the same boldness from others. There was no rancor, but neither was there any waffling. I overheard one Catholic congratulate Al Mohler, a Baptist, on his talk in which Mohler made it clear that, according to evangelical theology, Rome was simply wrong. "May your tribe increase!" the Catholic priest said. Not because he himself didn't care about theological distinctions or was trying to work out some kind of postmodern mixing and matching of beliefs. No, it was because he appreciated the fact that Mohler was willing to stand firm on what he believes to be true. This attitude is necessary not only to maintain theological integrity within the Church but is essential if we wish to give our culture something it doesn't already have.

This is the spirit, says Tom Oden, a Methodist theologian, of the earliest ecumenism—that of the early Church—which produced the great creeds of the faith. Oden provides a nice summary of the differences between the two ecumenisms. Whereas the old ecumenism of the 20th C. distrusted the ancient ecumenism, the new one embraces it. The old one accommodated modernism uncritically, whereas the new is critical of the failed ideas of modernism. The former was utopian, the latter realistic. The former sought negotiated unity, whereas the latter is based on truth. The former was politics-driven the latter is Spirit-led.{10}

Meetings and Documents

How did this movement shift from abortion mill sidewalks to the conference rooms of Christian scholars? In the early '90s, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus began leading a series of discussions between Evangelical and Catholic scholars which produced in 1994 a document titled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium."{11}

In the introductory section one finds this statement summarizing their fundamental conviction:

> As Christ is one, so the Christian mission is one. That one mission can be and should be advanced in diverse ways. Legitimate diversity, however, should not be confused with existing divisions between Christians that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission. There is a necessary connection between the visible unity of Christians and the mission of the one Christ. We together pray for the fulfillment of the prayer of Our lord: "May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." (John 17)

Based upon this conviction they go on to discuss agreements, disagreements, and hopes for the future. Participants in the discussion included such Evangelicals as Kent Hill, Richard Land, and John White. Such notables as J.I. Packer,{12} Nathan Hatch, Thomas Oden, Pat Robertson, Richard Mouw, and Os Guinness endorsed the document.

This document was followed in 1998 by one titled "The Gift of Salvation," which discusses the issues of justification and baptism and others related to salvation. The level of agreement indicated drew some strong criticisms from some Evangelical scholars,{13} the main source of contention being the doctrine of justification, a central issue in the Reformation. Critics didn't find the line as clearly drawn as they would like. Is justification purely *forensic*? In other words, is it simply a matter of God declaring us righteous apart from anything whatsoever we do (the Protestant view)? Or is it *intrinsic*, in other words, a matter of God working something *in* us which becomes part of our justification(the Catholic view)? To put it another way, is it purely external or internal? Or is it both?{14}

In May, 1995, the Fellowship of St. James and Rose Hill

College sponsored a series of talks between evangelical Protestants, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics with a view to doing much the same as Evangelicals and Catholics Together except that Orthodox Christians were involved.{15} Participants included Richard John Neuhaus, Harold O.J. Brown, Patrick Henry Reardon, Peter Kreeft, J.I. Packer, and Kallistos Ware. As James Cutsinger writes, the purpose was "to test whether an ecumenical orthodoxy, solidly based on the classic Christian faith as expressed in the Scripture and ecumenical councils, could become the foundation for a unified and transformative witness to the present age."{16} An important theme of this conference, as with ECT, was truth. Says Neuhaus: "The new ecumenism, as reflected also in ECT, is adamant that truth and unity must not be pitted against one another, that the only unity we seek is unity in the truth, and the only truth we acknowledge is the truth by which we are united."{17}

Two Projects

There are two projects guiding this discussion which sometimes overlap but often don't. The first is the culture war. Some are convinced that there cannot be full communion between the traditions because our doctrinal differences are too significant, so we should stick to doing battle with our culture over the moral issues of the day. After all, this is where the conversation began. Here, it is the broader Christian worldview which is important, not so much detailed questions about justification and baptism and so on. What these scholars hope to do is make us aware of our commonalities so we feel free to minister together in certain arenas, and then to rally each other to the cause of presenting a Christian view in matters of social and cultural importance today

The second project is shaped by Jesus' prayer that we be united. Having seen that we *do* believe some things in common, as evidenced by the fight against abortion, the next step is

to dig more deeply and see if we can find a more fundamental unity. The focus here is on theological agreements and disagreements. The beliefs of all involved come under scrutiny. Some scholars will be satisfied with discovering and clarifying beliefs held in common. Others state boldly that the goal can be none other than full communion between traditions if not the joining of all into one.

Impulse of the Holy Spirit

Participants are convinced that this is a move of the Holy Spirit. How else could those who have battled for so long and who are so convinced of the truth of their own tradition be willing to discuss these matters with the real hope of being drawn closer together? Theologian Tom Oden says this: "What is happening? God is awakening in grass roots Christianity a ground swell of longing for classic ecumenical teaching in all communions. There are innumerable lay embodiments of this unity."{18} There is a new longing to go back to our roots to rediscover our historical identity in the face of a world that leaves identity up for grabs. Could it be that the Spirit is indeed working to bring the church closer together in our day?

Theological Agreements and Disagreements

As noted previously, those who participate in the new ecumenism refer to themselves as "traditional Christians." They look to the early church to rediscover their roots. They hold to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds and others of the early ecumenical creeds.

J.I. Packer provides a helpful summary of the doctrines traditional Christians hold. They are:

- The canonical Scriptures as the repository and channel of Christ-centered divine revelation.
- The triune God as sovereign in creation , providence and grace.

- Faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the one mediator between God and man.
- Seeing Christians as a family of forgiven sinners . . . empowered for godliness by the Holy Spirit.
- Seeing the church as a single supernatural society.
- The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion "as necessities of obedience, gestures of worship and means of communion with God in Christ."
- The practice of prayer, obedience, love and service.
- Dealing appropriately with the personal reality of evil.
- Expecting death and final judgment to lead into the endless joy of heaven."{19}

Because Roman Catholicism is such an unknown to many evangelicals, it is just assumed by many that its teachings are all radically different from our own. The list of doctrines just given, however, proves how close we are on central issues. In fact, the well-respected Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen said this in the context of his battles with liberalism:

> How great is the common heritage that unites the Roman Catholic Church, with it maintenance of the authority of Scripture and with it acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own church.{20}

With all this in common, however, we must recognize our differences as well since they are significant. Roman Catholics believe the church magisterium is the ultimately authoritative voice for the church since it is the church that has been made the pillar and ground of the truth. At the very head, of course, is the Pope who is believed to be the successor of Peter. Protestants emphasize the priesthood of the believer for whom Scripture is the final authority.

Catholics believe the grace of God unto salvation is mediated through baptism while Protestants see baptism more as symbolic than as efficacious. Catholics revere Mary and pray to her and the saints. Evangelicals see Mary as a woman born in sin who committed sin herself, but who was specially blessed by God.{21}

Probably the most important difference between Catholics and Protestants is over the matter of how a person is accepted before God. What does it *mean* to be justified? *How* is one justified? This was the whole issue of the Reformation for Martin Luther, according to Michael Horton.{22} If one's answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is deficient, does it matter what else one believes? The answer to this will be determined by what one's goals are in seeking unity. Are we working on the project of ecclesial unity? Or are we concerned mostly with the culture war? Our disagreements are more significant for the former than for the latter.

What is the significance of our differences? The significance will relate to our goals for coming together. The big question in the new ecumenism is in what areas can we come together? In theology and then in cultural involvement? Or just in cultural involvement? Some are working hard to see where we agree and disagree theologically, even to the point of examining their own tradition to be certain they have it correct (at least, as they see it). Others believe that while we share many fundamental doctrinal beliefs, the divisions can't be overcome without actually becoming one visible church. Cultural involvement—cultural cobelligerency it has been called—becomes the focus of our unity.

Some readers might have a question nagging at them about now. That is this: If Catholics have a deficient understanding of the process of salvation, as we think they do, can they even *be* Christians? Shouldn't we be evangelizing them rather than working with them?

Surely there are individuals in the Catholic Church who have no reason to hope for heaven. But the same is true in Evangelical churches. Although of course we want to understand correctly and teach accurately the truth about justification, we must remember that we come to Christ through faith in Him, not on the basis of the correctness of our detailed doctrine of justification. How many new (genuine) converts in *any* tradition can explain justification? J.I. Packer chastises those who believe the mercy of God "rests on persons who are notionally correct."{23} Having read some Catholic expositions of Scripture and devotional writing—even by the Pope himself—it is hard to believe I'm reading the words of the anti-Christ (something Protestants have been known to call the Pope) or that these writers aren't Christians at all. Again, this isn't to diminish the rightful significance of the doctrine of justification, but to seek a proper understanding of the importance of one's understanding of the doctrine before one can be saved.

There is no doubt that there are Christians in the Roman Catholic Church as assuredly as there are *non*-Christians in Evangelical churches. We should be about the task of evangelism everywhere. As with everyone our testimony should be clear to Catholics around us. If they indicate that they don't know Christ then we tell them how they can know him. What we dare not do is have the attitude, "Well, he's Catholic so he can't be saved."

Options for Unity

I see three possible frameworks for unity. One is unity on the social/cultural/political level. In these areas we can bring conservative religious thinking to bear on the issues of the day. I think this is what Peter Kreeft is calling for in an article titled "Ecumenical Jihad," in which he broadens the circle enough to include Jews and Muslims.{24}

The second option is full, ecclesial unity. The focus here is

on Jesus' prayer for unity. As Christ is one, we are to be one. This goes beyond cooperation in the public square; this is a call for one Church—one visible institution. Neuhaus says we *are* one church, we just aren't acting like it. One writer points out that this kind of unity "is a 'costly act' involving the death and rebirth of existing confessional churches."{25} Catholic theologian Avery Dulles believes that such full unity might be legitimate between groups that have a common heritage, such as Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. "But that goal is neither realistic nor desirable for communities as widely separated as evangelicals and Catholics. For the present and the foreseeable future the two will continue to constitute distinct religious families."{26} The stresses such a union would create would be too much.

A third possibility is a middle way between the first two. It involves the recognition of a mutually held Christian worldview with an acknowledgement and acceptance of our differences, and with a view to peace between traditions and teamwork in the culture war. Here, theology is important; evangelicals share something with Catholics that they don't with, say, Muslims who are morally conservative. These could stand with Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of Holland in the late 19th century who said,

> Now, in this conflict [against liberalism] Rome is not an antagonist, but stands on our side, inasmuch as she recognizes and maintains the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Cross as an atoning sacrifice, the scriptures as the Word of God, and the Ten Commandments. Therefore, let me ask if Romish theologians take up the sword to do valiant and skillful battle against the same tendency that we ourselves mean to fight to death, is it not the part of wisdom to accept the valuable help of their elucidation?{27}

Kuyper here was dealing with liberal theology. But the principle holds for the present context. If Kuyper could look to the Catholic Church for support in theological matters to

some extent against liberal Protestants, surely we can join with them in speaking to and standing against a culture of practical atheism.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has proposed a two-prong strategy for achieving church unity. The first task is complete, visible unity as called for in the "Decree on Ecumenism." Full unity, however, can only come about by a special work of the Holy Spirit. "The second task . . . is to pursue intermediate goals." He says:

> It should be clear that we do not create unity, no more than we bring about righteousness by means of our works, but that on the other hand we should not sit around twiddling our thumbs. Here it would therefore be a question of continually learning afresh from the other as other while respecting his or her otherness.{28}
>
> Avery Dulles says that the heterogeneous community of Catholics and evangelicals still has much to do together. "They can join in their fundamental witness to Christ and the gospel. They can affirm together their acceptance of the apostolic faith enshrined in the creeds and dogmas of the early Church. . . . They can jointly protest against the false and debilitating creeds of militant secularism. In all these ways they can savor and deepen the unity that is already theirs in Christ."{29}

Dulles offers some advice on what to do in this interim period.{30} I'll let them stand without comment:

- Seek to correct misunderstandings about the other tradition.
- Be surprised at the graciousness of God, who continues to bestow his favors even upon those whose faith comes to expression in ways that we may consider faulty.
- Respect each other's freedom and integrity.
- Instead of following the path of reduction to some common denominator, the parties should pursue an

ecumenism of mutual enrichment, asking how much they can give to, and receive from, one another.

- Rejoice at the very significant bonds of faith and practice that already unite us, notwithstanding our differences. (Reading the same Scriptures, confessing the same Triune God and Jesus as true God and true man, etc.)
- We can engage in joint witness in our social action.
- Pray for the work of the Spirit in restoring unity, and rest in knowing it has to be His work and not ours.

Protesting Voices

Not all Evangelical scholars and church leaders are in favor of the Roman Catholic/Evangelical dialogue, at least with the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Such well-known representatives as R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Michael Horton, and D. James Kennedy have taken issue with important parts of this document.

The basis of the *ECT* dialogue was the conviction that "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ."{31} It was upon this foundation that the two groups came together to consider a Christian response to current social issues. But some question whether such a sweeping statement is correct. Are we really "brothers and sisters in Christ"?

MacArthur presents the central concerns in an article in the journal of The Master's Seminary, of which he is president. He believes "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" was so concerned about social issues that it downplayed and compromised key doctrines.

The fundamental issue is the matter of justification. Are we saved by faith plus works, or by faith alone? Is justification *imputed* or *infused* (Are we *declared* righteous or are we *made* righteous?)? The Council of Trent, convened by the Roman

Church in the late 16th century, anathematized those who believe "that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace" (*Trent,* sess. 7, canon 8)."{32} *Trent* also made plain that justification is obtained through the sacrament of baptism (*Trent,* sess. 6, chap. 7).{33} Furthermore, the Roman Church holds that justification is an ongoing process by which we are *made* righteous, not a declaration that we *are* righteous. MacArthur contends that this constitutes a different gospel.

R.C. Sproul says this: "The question in the sixteenth century remains in dispute. Is justification by faith alone a necessary and essential element of the gospel? Must a church confess *sola fide* in order to be a true church? Or can a church reject or condemn justification by faith alone and still be a true church? The Reformers certainly did not think so. Apparently the framers and signers of ECT think otherwise."{34}

MacArthur insists that, even though we might all be able to recite the Apostles' Creed together, if we differ on the core matter of the Gospel we're talking about different religions altogether. If Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism are different religions, how can we claim to be "brothers and sisters in Christ"?{35}

Thus, there are some who believe the dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to be a misbegotten venture. However, even among those who take a strong position on the Reformation view of justification, there are some who still see some value in finding common cause with Catholics on social matters. For example, a statement signed by John Armstrong, the late James Montgomery Boice, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul among others—who also signed "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification—says this: "The extent of the creedal consensus that binds orthodox Evangelicals and Roman Catholics together warrants the making of common cause on moral and

cultural issues in society. Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have every reason to join minds, hearts, and hands when Christian values and behavioral patterns are at stake." This doesn't preclude, however, the priority of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.{36}

The Importance of the Issue

There are several reasons why the current conversations between Evangelicals and Catholics (and Eastern Orthodox as well) are important. First is simply the reaffirmation of what we believe. In this day of skepticism about the possibility of knowing what is true at all, and the practice of many of picking and choosing beliefs according to their practical functionality, it is good to think carefully through what we believe and why. A woman I know told me she doesn't concern herself with all those denominational differences. "I just love Jesus," she said. "Just give me Jesus." One gets the sense from all that is taught us in Scripture that *Jesus* wants us to have more, meaning a more fleshed-out understanding of God and His ways. As we review our likenesses and differences with Roman Catholics we're forced to come to a deeper understanding of our own beliefs.

We also have Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he prays fervently for unity in his body. Was he serious? Is it good enough to simply say "Well, the Roman Church differs in its doctrine of justification so they can't be Christians," and turn away from them? Or to keep a distance from them because they believe differently on some things? While not giving up our own convictions, isn't it worthwhile taking the time to be sure about our own beliefs and those of others before saying Jesus' prayer doesn't apply?

J.I. Packer says this: "However much historic splits may have been justified as the only way to preserve faith, wisdom and spiritual life intact at a particular time, continuing them in complacency and without unease is unwarrantable."{37} A simple

recognition of the common ground upon which we stand would be a step forward in answering Jesus' prayer. The debates which will follow as our differences are once again made clear can further us in our theological understanding and our kingdom connectedness.

Of course, the culture war which brought about this discussion in the first place is another good reason for coming together. Discovering our similarities in moral understanding will open doors of cooperative ministry and witness in society. Chuck Colson believes that the only solution to the current cultural crisis "is a recultivation of conscience."{38} How can the conscience be recultivated? "At root, every issue that divides the American people," Colson says, "is religious in essence."{39} It will take a recultivation of the knowledge of God to bring about change. Sharing the same basic worldview, we can speak together in the public square on the issues of the day.

Finally, consider what we can learn from one another. Evangelicals can profit from the deep theological and philosophical study of Catholic scholars, while Catholics can learn from Evangelicals about in-depth Bible study. Evangelicals can learn from Catholics what it is to be a community of believers since, for them, the Church has the emphasis over the individual. Catholics, on the other hand, can learn from Evangelicals what it means to have a personal walk with Christ.

In sum, there are important, legitimate discussions or debates which must be held in the Church over theological issues. But such discussions can only be held if we are talking to each other. We are obligated to our Lord to seek the unity for which He prayed. This isn't a unity of convenience, but a unity based upon truth. If one studies the issues closely and determines that our differences are too great to permit any coming together on the ecclesial level, at least one should see the value of joining together on the cultural level—of

speaking the truth about the one true God who sent his only Son to redeem mankind, and who has revealed his moral standard in nature and Scripture, a standard which will be ignored to our destruction.

Notes

1. The Evangelical/Roman Catholic dialogue is a serious matter. Although this article isn't presented as a critique, it was thought that the lack of a protesting voice in the original article might imply this writer's (and Probe's) full endorsement of the dialogue, or even an implicit endorsement of ecclesial unity. A conversation that brings into question the central issue of the Reformation, justification by faith, deserves close scrutiny. Thus, a revision was made to the original article to include a few protesting voices.
2. Charles Colson, "The Common Cultural Task: The Culture War from a Protestant Perspective, " in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), 7ff.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Although this movement now includes the Eastern Orthodox Church, in this article I'll focus on Evangelical/Catholic relations.
6. Richard John Neuhaus, "A New Thing: Ecumenism at the Threshold of the Third Millennium," in James S. Cutsinger, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 54-55.
7. Richard John Neuhaus, "That They May Be One: Prospects for Unity in the 21st Century," a paper delivered at the conference "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," Nov. 9, 2001. Tom Oden puts the starting date for the old ecumenism as 1948.
8. Tom Oden, "The New Ecumenism and Christian Witness to

Society," Pt. 1, a revision of an address delivered Oct. 1, 2001 on the 20th anniversary of the founding of The Institute on Religion and Democracy. Downloaded from www.ird-renew.org/news/NewsPrint.cfm?ID=214&c=4 on December 3, 2001.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," First Things 43 (May 1994) 15-22.
12. Packer defended his decision to sign the document in "Why I Signed It," *Christianity Today*. December 12, 1994, 34-37.
13. For example, R.C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).
14. For a different twist on the doctrine from an evangelical Protestant, see S. M. Hutchens, "Getting Justification Right," *Touchstone*, July/August 2000, 41-46.
15. Rose Hill College is closely tied to the Orthodox tradition.
16. James S. Cutsinger, "Introduction: Finding the Center, in Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming*, 10.
17. Neuhaus, "A New Thing," 57.
18. Oden, "The New Ecumenism."
19. J.I. Packer, "On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism and Incarnational Ontology," in Cutsinger, 156.
20. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 52; quoted in Colson, 39-40.
21. From discussions with former Catholics I have gotten the impression that there is a difference between authoritative Catholic theology and the beliefs of lay Catholics. We cannot take up this matter here. I'll just note that I am looking to the writings of Catholic theologians and, in particular, to the Catholic catechism for the teachings of the Church.
22. Michael S. Horton, "What Still Keeps Us Apart?" in John Armstrong, ed., *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody, 1994),

251.
23. Packer, “On from Orr,” 174.
24. Peter Kreeft, “Ecumenical Jihad,” Cutsinger, ed., chap. 1.
25. Avery Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” in Colson and Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics*, 116-17. Dulles here provides a more detailed description of this kind of unity. Dulles discusses six different kinds of unity.
26. Ibid., 143.
27. Abraham Kuyper, Calvinism and the Future (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1898), 183-84; quoted in Colson, 39.
28. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 98, quoted in Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” 137-38.
29. Dulles, “Unity,” 144.
30. Ibid., 138-140. He gives ten; I’ve included seven.
31. Colson, *Evangelicals and Catholics,* xviii.
32. John F. MacArthur, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” The Master’s Seminary Journal 6/1 (Spring 1995): 30. See also R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
33. MacArthur, 28.
34. Sproul, *Faith Alone,* 30.
35. It should be noted that, because of protests such as those of MacArthur, Sproul and others, key signers of the document later issued a statement in which they affirmed their commitment to the doctrines of “substitutionary atonement and [the] imputed righteousness of Christ, leading to a full assurance of eternal salvation; . . .” and to “the Protestant understanding of salvation by faith alone.” See “Statement By Protestant Signers to ECT,” available at www.leaderu.com/ect/ect2.html. This writer also commends for your reading the statement, “Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue,” drafted by Michael Horton and revised by J.I. Packer, and issued by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals in 1994, available at http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.ECTresolutions.

html.
36. “Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue.” See also “An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals,” a strong statement against the Roman view of justification available at www.alliancenet.org/month/98.08.appeal.html.
37. In another vein, Donald Bloesch believes that R.C. Sproul, in his criticism of ECT, has not “kept abreast of the noteworthy attempts in the ongoing ecumenical discussion to bridge the chasm between Trent and evangelical Protestantism.” He believes that “Sola fide still constitutes a formidable barrier in Catholic-Protestant relations, but contra Sproul, it must not be deemed insurmountable.” See his comments in “Betraying the Reformation? An Evangelical Response,” in *Christianity Today,* Oct. 7, 1996.
38. Packer, “On from Orr,” 157.
39. Colson, “The Common Cultural Task,” 13.
40. Ibid., 14.

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Christian Cliches

Conversations and Clichés

Do you ever use clichés? Do you hear them often? No doubt you can answer “Yes” to either question. But have you stopped to consider what they may mean? Christians often use clichés among themselves and even with non-Christians, but there may be a need to give thought to the meanings of these oft-repeated phrases. That is the intent of this essay. We will investigate what is behind the “Christian clichés” that tend to become so much a part of our conversations.

Let’s begin by considering a dictionary definition of the word *cliché*. A cliché is a “trite, stereotyped expression; a sentence or phrase, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea, that has lost originality, ingenuity, and impact by long overuse.”{1}

My ministry has put me in touch with Christians all over this country. As I engage in conversation with these Christians, invariably I will hear language about Christian things that has become “stereotyped” and has “lost impact by long overuse.” This doesn’t mean there isn’t truth contained in the clichés. Indeed, often there is truth of great importance for Christian theology and life. The problem is that frequently we use these clichés while thinking we know what we are saying. But do we? Could we explain these phrases if someone were to ask us to define them? My experience is that Christians have difficulty when asked to explain themselves.

Let’s listen to the following conversation and hear how a Christian named Tom responds to questions from a non-believer named Sam.

Tom: Hi, Sam!

Sam: Hello, Tom. Remember when you were to talking to Jim yesterday?

Tom: You mean before the sales meeting?

Sam: Yeah. I hope you aren’t offended, but I was listening to your conversation.

Tom: Oh, that's okay. We weren't having a private conversation. We were just sharing our beliefs.

Sam: Well, I'm curious about some of the things you discussed.

Tom: Like what?

Sam: Like when you said you have Jesus in your heart. Were you referring to the Prophet who lived so long ago? If so, how can you possibly have Him in your heart?

Tom: Well, yes, I was referring to the Jesus of long ago. But He is alive now, and He has saved me.

Sam: What do you mean, He's alive now? That's not possible. And what do you mean when you say He saved you? These are weird ideas.

Tom: I guess they sound weird, but they really aren't. You see, Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and His spirit lives in me.

Sam: Tom, I don't mean to be rude, but such things sound ludicrous to me. Hey, my phone's ringing and I'm expecting an important call. Maybe we can talk again later.

Sam asked some good questions. They deserved answers. But was Tom able to explain himself? He had a difficult time, didn't

he? For example, the phrase, “I have Jesus in my heart” had become a cliché for Tom. He was able to converse with a fellow Christian with the assumption that they understood one another. But it was a different matter when a non-Christian expressed his curiosity about the conversation he had heard the previous day.

I have Jesus in my heart is one of several clichés we will consider. The goal of this article is to motivate Christians to give attention to our conversations and see if you find clichés lurking there.

I Have Jesus in My Heart

Why are you a Christian? How do you answer that question? In my experience many people have responded by stating that they have *Jesus in their heart.* As important as this response may be, too often it is a cliché that belies its meaning. The Christian who acknowledges the importance of thinking through his beliefs will want to consider its implications for those who hear him. After all, the one who hears has every right to ask what such a statement might mean.

In the third chapter of Paul’s Ephesian letter he prayed that his readers would “be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . .” (Eph. 3:16-17, NASB). Galatians 2 contains one of the most powerful expressions of the indwelling Christ in Paul’s life. Paul wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me . . .” (Gal. 2:20, NASB). In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul asks, “do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?” (2 Cor. 13:5, NASB). These passages, and many more, serve to show that

the New Testament affirms that Jesus indwells His followers. Thus it is important to stress that when someone says *I have Jesus in my heart* it has biblical merit. A problem arises, though, when we use this expression without attention to its profound message. When this happens we are using a cliché.

So how can we go beyond the cliché in order to describe its significance in our lives? The first point of reference centers on the fact that Christians are Trinitarian, not Unitarian. We believe God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a difficult doctrine to understand and share, but it must be upheld if one is using the Bible as the guide for beliefs. If God exists in three persons, and one of those persons is Jesus, God the Son, then we can better understand *Jesus in my heart* by observing that there is a unity between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For example, in Romans 8 "the indwelling of the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ are the same thing."{2} This doctrine permeates the writings of Paul. He asserted "that Jesus is no mere fact in history, no towering personality of the past, but a living, present Spirit, whose nature is the very nature of God."{3} In addition, we should realize that Paul's favorite expression revolved around the phrase "in Christ." This phrase "(or some cognate expression, such as "in the Lord," "in Him," etc.) occurs 164 times in Paul."{4} Thus we can conclude that Jesus is very much alive in the Christian's life through the Spirit.

The second point of reference concerns the word *heart*. The Bible refers to the heart of man frequently. "The heart is the focus of mind, feeling, and will; it stands for the whole personality."{5} Jesus is to "take up residence" in our whole personality. So when a Christian says *Jesus is in my heart* there is a literal implication. Jesus resides supernaturally in the believer through His Spirit. This is an astounding doctrine that indicates a transformed person! May our Lord lead us to continue sharing His presence in our lives by

indicating that we understand truly what it means to say *I have Jesus in my heart.*

I Have Faith

Is a Christian the only person who has faith? Many Christians seem to think so. On many occasions I have played "the devil's advocate" among Christian groups by asking them to describe and defend their beliefs. One of the most frequent responses I get is *I have faith*. When I hear this I usually retort by saying "So what? Do you think that because you are a Christian you are given sole ownership of the idea?" After this I encourage them to think about the implications of the phrase. It is much more than a cliché.

All people, Christians and non-Christians, even atheists, exercise faith. That is, each day of our lives we apply faith in simple and profound ways. For example, you may take a pill of some kind today. That requires faith that the pill will help you rather than hurt you. If you travel on an airplane, that requires faith that you will arrive safely at your intended destination. Usually you don't even see the pilots until you have landed. These are everyday illustrations of faith. But just what does this word mean?

A major dictionary provides us with intriguing definitions. The first entry states that faith is "confidence or trust in a person or thing." The second entry says faith is "belief which is not based on proof." And then in the eighth entry the dictionary declares faith is "trust in God and in His promises as made through Christ by which man is justified or saved."{6} Obviously the eighth entry comes closest to a Christian understanding of faith. The first entry is also important to a Christian because it includes the idea of trust in a person. But it is the second entry that causes the most problem among Christians. Too many Christians use *I have faith* to mean they believe in something that is not based on proof. Unfortunately, this is when the phrase becomes a cliché.

For over 100 years, naturalism has been the dominant worldview in our culture. Among other things, this worldview bows at the altar of modern science to the extent that many believe that nothing can be true until it can be proven scientifically. Many Christians have been highly influenced by this concept. Thus they tend to say *I have faith* when they can't "prove" their beliefs in a scientific manner. This reaction is not legitimate within a Christian worldview. It is important to realize that even an atheistic scientist takes faith into the laboratory. There are facets of his own life that cannot be "proven" scientifically. If he is married, he may say he loves his wife. Can that be proven scientifically?

The key word in discussing faith is *in*, a small but crucial preposition for all people. Remember, the first dictionary definition we quoted said that faith includes the idea of "trust *in* a person or thing" (emphasis added). Hebrews 11:1, perhaps the most succinct definition of faith in the Bible, states that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When we read the rest of chapter 11 we realize that *assurance* and *conviction* are words that are alive. They refer to the reality of the living God in the lives of those who put faith *in* His reality. God was already "proven" to them. He was to be trusted with their very lives.

The same is true for one who claims to be a Christian in our day. When we say we have faith, we should continue by declaring faith *in* the living God.

I'm Saved!

When you say *I'm saved!*, have you ever considered what someone may be thinking? People who hear you may have a number of questions. For example, they may ask why you are speaking in present tense. If you are saved now, does that mean you were actually saved at some point in the past? If so, does the present connect with the past in some way? Or they may want to

know why you needed to be saved in the first place. Were you drowning and someone rescued you? Maybe they would even like to know if you are saved *for* something or someone. Proclaiming *I'm saved!* can be a strange expression if it is not explained. If someone asks for an explanation and we can't respond, we may be guilty of using a cliché. We think we know what we mean, and our fellow Christians may think they know what is meant, but a lack of articulation implies a lack of understanding.

Salvation, of course, permeates the Bible. And innumerable volumes have been written about what the Scriptures tell us about this crucial doctrine. For our purposes the clearest emphases are centered on the person of Jesus, the Savior. When we say *I'm saved!* we imply that Jesus is at the center of salvation.

Before Jesus was born, an angel told Joseph the shocking news that Mary was carrying the center of salvation. "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21, NASB). Take note of the last portion of this verse. It states that *Jesus will save*, and that He will save *from* sins. When Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple for the Jewish rites of redemption of the firstborn, and the purification of his mother. . . ."{7} While there, they were approached by a righteous and devout man named Simeon who took Jesus into his arms and declared to God that he was now ready to die, "For my eyes have seen Thy salvation . . ." (Luke 2:30, NASB). Another amazing declaration! Mary and Joseph's son was being called God's salvation. During His earthly ministry Jesus asserted many things about Himself, including this famous proclamation: "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9, NASB). Because Jesus is the door, there is a present reality concerning salvation that applies to those who enter through the door.

Through these and numerous other verses we have a more complete picture of what *I'm saved!* entails. But there is a crucial question leaping from such passages. If sin creates the need for salvation, then what is it? To put it simply, when the Christian proclaims *I'm saved!* his hearers should understand that ". . . sin is not only an act of wrongdoing but a state of alienation from God"{8} affecting everyone (Rom. 3:23). This is a crucial concept in contemporary culture that is generally misunderstood and rejected. In addition, such alienation from God cannot be rectified by "rightdoing." It can only be rectified through Jesus' sacrificial payment for sin on the cross. I'm saved because of what Jesus did for me. In an amazing, life-changing way an event of the past brings salvation into the present. Praise God, we have been saved! Now we can live knowing salvation is in the present.

What Would Jesus Do?

What Would Jesus Do? is a question that can be seen and heard virtually everywhere in the evangelical Christian community. "The slogan has appeared on coffee mugs, lapel pins, paperweights, and a host of other knickknacks. There are now devotionals, Bibles, books and CDs based on WWJD."{9} With all of this exposure, does the phrase still have meaning? Or has it become a cliché without proper impact? Or does it carry the correct content in the first place? Lets consider what the expression tells us.

One of the more positive aspects of *What Would Jesus Do?* is that it can serve as a simple reminder of the Christian's moral life. Surely each Christian has a perspective of Jesus that includes the moral perfection that permeated His earthly life. There is no greater model to emulate than Jesus. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15, NASB). The same writer tells us He "offered Himself without blemish to God . . ." (Heb. 9:14, NASB). Jesus was and is the only one who could

make such an unblemished offering. So asking *What Would Jesus Do?*, whether audibly or inaudibly, can awaken us to our need for a moral model.

But can we always know what Jesus would do in all circumstances? Perhaps it would be more accurate to ask What *did* Jesus do? in certain circumstances. Through a study of the gospels of the New Testament we can learn exactly how Jesus acted and reacted to specific challenges He faced. For example, He was faced with "moral conflicts between obedience toward parents and God (Luke 2), Sabbath regulations and healing (Mark 2), and government and God (Matt. 22)."{10} More importantly, on the cross "he was squeezed between the demands of justice for the innocent (himself) and mercy for mankind (the guilty). This conflict was without question the greatest ever faced by man. . . ."{11} These examples usually have entered our consciousness to the point that they ring in our minds like bells tolling the truth. It is as if we would not have expected Jesus to have done or said anything other than what we know from the gospels.

Were Jesus' disciples ever surprised, if not shocked, by what Jesus did? Of course we know they often were stunned as they watched and heard Jesus do and say unusual things. The words *amazed* and *astonished* are found frequently in the Gospels. The story of the rich young ruler, for example, relates the disciples' reaction after hearing Jesus' teaching. He said, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23, NASB). And the disciples were "amazed" at His words. Jesus continued by stating, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they were "even more astonished" and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" (Mark 10:23-26, NASB).

The actions and words of Jesus and the reactions of the disciples remind us of the deity of Jesus. Think of this in present time. If Jesus physically walked beside you, would you

always know what He was about to do? “Jesus is unique in his identity as the incarnate Son of God, and we should not assume that we could do or should do everything he did.”{12} Thus, caution is urged when we assume we always know what Jesus *would* do while we affirm what Jesus *did* do.

Notes

1. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1967.
2. Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 114.
3. James Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, n.d.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 154.
4. Ibid., 155.
5. A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians,” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Regency, 1978), 51.
6. The Random House Dictionary.
7. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 194.
8. Donald G. Bloesch, “Sin,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984).
9. Albert Hsu, “What Would Jesus Do About WWJD?”, *re:generation quarterly* (Winter, 1998/99), 6.
10. Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 125.
11. Ibid.
12. Hsu, “What Would Jesus Do About “WWJD”, 6.

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