

Biblical Worldview Beliefs from PALS Survey of 2012: No Rebound Seen

More Cultural Research from Steve Cable

In my [previous blog post](#), we looked at the *Faith Matters* survey taken in 2011 to see if the trend was continuing toward fewer people holding a biblical worldview. In this post, we ask a similar question looking at the *Portraits in American Life Survey* (PALS) taken in 2012^[1]. The PALS is an extensive, national-level panel study focused on religion in the U.S., with a particular focus on capturing ethnic and racial diversity. In this survey of over 1400 people across America, a set of questions was asked which are very similar to the biblical worldview questions asked in the Probe and Barna surveys.

The questions used to establish a basic biblical worldview are as follows:

- 1. I definitely believe in God***
- 2. Jesus Christ is the Son of God and physically rose from the dead***
- 3. The bible was fully inspired by God***
- 4. I believe in Heaven where people live with God forever***
- 5. I believe there is a Hell where people experience pain as punishment for their sin***
- 6. The devil, demons or evil spirits exist***
- 7. Moral right or wrong should be determined by God's law***

Let's begin by looking at how many have a biblical worldview; i.e., agreeing with all the statements above. The results look like this (where Evan/BP stands for Evangelical or Historically Black Protestant):

Biblical Worldview					
Evan/BP		Not Evan/BP		All	
20-29	30+	20-29	30+	20-29	30+
32.5%	46.2%	5.4%	11.4%	14.7%	22.9%

Note that the youngest respondents in this survey are 20 years old rather than 18 as in the other surveys. As you can see, about one in three evangelical or black Protestant believers under the age of 30 profess to holding a biblical worldview and only about one in 20 of those who do not affiliate with an evangelical or black Protestant denomination. These results are very similar to those reported in my book, [*Cultural Captives*](#), one area of focus was the number of people possessing a biblical worldview. The worldview questions formulated by the Barna Group were used in the *Probe Ministries Culturally Captive Christian* survey of 2010. For the other surveys used in the book, I selected a similar set of questions to define a biblical worldview for each survey. Looking across those surveys, we saw that about one in three evangelical emerging adults and about one in ten non-evangelical emerging adults held a biblical worldview.

In this post, we want to look at a newer survey to see what light it sheds on the worldviews of Americans. The survey is called *Faith Matters 2011*^[1], conducted on behalf of Harvard University and the University of Notre Dame. They surveyed over 2,600 people, asking them about their religion (beliefs, belonging and behavior) and their social and political engagement. The questions we 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) existence of hell, and 6) how one determines what is right or wrong in a particular situation.

Let's begin by looking at how many have a biblical worldview on all of the questions above except for the question about the correct path to salvation. The results look like this

(where Evan/BP stands for Evangelical or Historically Black Protestant):

Biblical Worldview w/o Salvation Question					
Evan/BP		Not Evan/BP		All	
18-29	30+	18-29	30+	18-29	30+
50.0%	54.8%	15.1%	21.8%	25.6%	32.7%

So we see that about half of those with an Evangelical or Historically Black church affiliation take a stand on these questions consistent with biblical teaching. And, about a quarter of all emerging adults (those 18-29) take a biblical view.

Now let's see what happens when we add the question about the path to salvation.

Biblical Worldview w/ Salvation by Faith Alone					
Evan/BP		Not Evan/BP		All	
18-29	30+	18-29	30+	18-29	30+
5.1%	2.7%	1.4%	2.4%	2.5%	2.5%

Wow, we observe a massive reduction among the Evan/BP group from 50% down to around 5%. The question that caused this reduction was worded as follows: "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 to this survey were unwilling to say that salvation is by faith alone even though the Bible clearly states this is the case (see for example Ephesians 2:8-9).

Interestingly enough, many of the respondents volunteered another answer, saying that salvation comes through a mixture

of faith and actions. If we allow this answer as well as the faith alone answer, the results for a biblical worldview look like this:

Biblical Worldview w/ Salvation by Faith & Actions					
Evan/BP		Not Evan/BP		All	
18-29	30+	18-29	30+	18-29	30+
40.9%	46.6%	9.7%	13.5%	13.3%	24.4%

Note that in all of the cases, there is only a small difference between emerging adults and those 30 years old and older. It appears that evangelicals across the board are unwilling to fully accept the position that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and no set of good works is going to change that.

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

In the Probe survey of 2010, we asked a similar question worded as follows: "Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement: if a person is generally good enough, or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in Heaven." We found that around half of emerging adults disagreed strongly with this statement. This result correlates very well with the result from *Faith Matters* when we allow the answer "salvation comes through a mixture of faith and actions." If you think about it, someone who answered that salvation comes through faith and actions could

also be a person who would disagree strongly with the Probe survey statement. So perhaps the Probe survey was overestimating the number of people who correctly believed that salvation came through faith alone.

Note

1. 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.

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An Update on Pluralism in America

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In my book, [*Cultural Captives*](#), I talk about the state of pluralistic beliefs among American young adults. Pluralism is the belief that there are multiple ways by which one can obtain eternal life, e.g. Christianity and Islam both provide valid paths to eternal life. Looking across multiple surveys taken from 2005 through 2010, I found that approximately 90% of young adults who were not evangelical ascribed to pluralistic beliefs. Among those young adults who were evangelical (or born again depending upon the survey), the percentage dropped to about 70%. So, in the first decade of this century, the vast majority of young American adults believed that there are multiple ways to reach heaven.

Has that position changed over the last six years? To answer this question, I analyzed data from two newer surveys: the *Portraits of American Life Survey 2012*[\[1\]](#) and the *Faith Matters Survey 2011*[\[2\]](#). In the PALS survey, if a person disagreed strongly with the following two statements, 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 *Faith Matters* survey, if a person agreed strongly with the following statement, we categorized them as not pluralistic:

1. One religion is true and others are not.

Using these survey questions, we found the following:

For 18- to 29-year-olds, emerging adults who were not evangelical, we found that 93% were pluralistic according to the PALS and 91% were pluralistic according to the Faith Matters survey. For those who are evangelical, the numbers were 76% and 77% respectively. These numbers are slightly higher than the numbers I reported in 2010. But, the number were

already so high in 2010, these new numbers just continue a trend. The PALS survey indicates that for those thirty and over the number of evangelicals who are pluralists drops to 64%, which is still a disturbing majority of those who are called to evangelize their fellow citizens.

The apostle Peter told the Jewish Sanhedrin under the threat of imprisonment or death, "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which 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.” (Acts 4:11-12)

God chose to send His Son to die for our sins because there was no other way to provide forgiveness for our sins. Many Americans claiming to be evangelical Christians do not seem to appreciate that the great sacrifice God made for us is not one of many ways to reconciliation. As Jesus told us, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. **No one** comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Notes

1. Data downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected on behalf of Emerson, Michael O., and David Sikkink. Portraits of American Life Study, 2nd Wave, 2012.

2. 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.

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