

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 BWV 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 than 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

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