

AMERICAN CHRISTIANS ARE REDEFINING THE FAITH

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American Christianity is undergoing a “post-Christian Reformation”—with the nation’s major Christian groups rapidly replacing traditional theological beliefs with the culture’s secular values.

A new study from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University finds that the nation’s four main Christian groups—evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatics, mainline Protestants, and Catholics—are creating new worldviews that are only loosely tied to the biblical teachings that have traditionally defined them.

The American Worldview Inventory 2020, conducted by CRC Director of Research Dr. George Barna, surveyed 51 beliefs and behaviors among Christian groups and found that rather than transforming the culture around them with biblical truth, the opposite is happening. American Christianity is rapidly conforming to the values of the post-Christian secular culture. Key findings of the survey include:

- Evangelicals are embracing secularism: A majority (52%) of evangelicals reject absolute moral truth; 61% do not read the Bible on a daily basis; 75% believe that people are basically good. The study found that one-third to one-half of evangelicals in the survey embrace a variety of beliefs and behaviors counter to biblical teaching and longstanding Evangelical beliefs.
- Pentecostals and charismatics take secularization a step further: Two-thirds (69%) reject absolute moral truth; 54% are unwilling to define human life as sacred, with half claiming the Bible is ambiguous in its teaching about abortion; and 69% say they prefer socialism to capitalism. A full 45% did not qualify as born-again Christians.
- Mainline Protestants are the most secular of the four faith families: Sixty percent (60%) of mainline Protestants’ beliefs directly conflict with biblical teaching. Three key values define this group: truth and morality are relative; life has no inherent value or purpose, so individuals should pursue personal happiness or satisfaction; and traditional religious practices are no longer seen as central or essential to their Christian faith. Only 41% of mainline Protestants are born-again.
- Catholics are increasingly secular and permissive: Catholics’ beliefs are surprisingly similar to those of mainline Protestants, but considerably different from that of evangelical and charismatic Protestants. They are most likely to believe in salvation through works or living a good life, and least likely (28%) to be born again. Today’s Catholics are more permissive than other groups, being most likely to accept sexual relations outside of marriage, lying, speeding, and refusal to repay a loan as morally acceptable behaviors.

AMERICAN WORLDVIEW INVENTORY

2020 RESULTS – FULL RELEASE #11:

Over the past three centuries, more than 200 denominations have launched Christian churches in America based on differences in doctrine, theology, and practice. All of them claim to be motivated by the pursuit of biblical integrity.

Americans who think of themselves as Christian have followed in those entrepreneurial footsteps, essentially customizing Christianity to their liking and ignoring the historical distinctives of the churches to which they belong. These insights are the latest produced from the American Worldview Inventory 2020, the seminal national research project undertaken by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

“The irony of the reshaping of the spiritual landscape in America is that it represents a post-Christian Reformation driven by people seeking to retain a Christian identity,” noted Dr. George Barna, Director of Research at the Cultural Research Center.

“Unfortunately, the theology of this reformation is being driven by American culture rather than biblical truth. The worldviews embraced by the adherents of these distinct religious communities reflect contemporary, worldly influence, rather than biblical influence.”

The American Worldview Inventory 2020 (AWVI) provides a look at some of those distinctions between the four major categories or “families” of Christian churches in the United States: evangelical, Pentecostal or charismatic, mainline Protestant, and Catholic churches.

Evangelicals Embracing Secularism

The most startling realization regarding the theological reformation in progress is how many people from evangelical churches are adopting unbiblical beliefs. What makes that trend so significant is that evangelical churches, by definition, teach that the Bible is the authoritative word of God that teaches not only salvation by grace alone but also an array of life principles that are meant to drive one’s thoughts and actions.

Perhaps the most alarming of the shifts is that a majority of adults aligned with an evangelical church (52%) contend that there is no absolute moral truth; in their view, truth is uniquely determined by each individual according to their preferences and circumstances. That perspective equates to most evangelicals believing that the Bible is either not inerrant or trustworthy in its content—or that the Bible is neither completely true nor reliable. That stand is a radical and critical departure from the traditional teachings and biblical reliance of evangelicals.

That arm's-length relationship with the scriptures is further evidenced in the dramatic decline in Bible reading among adults who associate with evangelical churches. A majority (61%) do not read the Bible on a daily basis, despite such churches describing the Bible as the ultimate life guide and source of enlightenment.

The worldview of adults who attend evangelical churches also reflects a different understanding of deity and humanity. For instance, three-quarters of adults attending evangelical churches (75%) believe that people are basically good—a contradiction to the traditional evangelical teaching that because people are sinners, they are not essentially good, and therefore need a savior, identified as Jesus Christ. However, many of these same adults have non-biblical views about the Christian Trinity, as well. While elevating the essence of man to goodness, they have also radically humanized Jesus Christ—43% believe He sinned while on earth—and demoted the Holy Spirit to symbolic status (58%).

Among the consequences of this distancing from Scripture and refashioning the nature of the tripartite God is that nearly two out of three evangelical church attenders (62%) say it is more important to have some type of faith—Christian or otherwise—than to specifically align with the Christian faith.

All of these changes have contributed to the development of a new moral code among those associated with evangelical churches. For instance, a majority do not consider breaking the law through actions such as speeding to be sin. Half of them do not consider sexual relations between unmarried couples to be sinful. A large minority (40%) do not view lying as sinful behavior.

The centrality of obedience to the Scriptures is absent among most of the nation's adults associated with evangelical churches. A majority (53%) now deems practices other than consistent obedience to God to reflect the heart of success in life.

And while some of the ideas gaining traction in evangelical congregations may not reflect a majority perspective, the fact that one-third to one-half of those adults embrace these ideas can only be viewed as alarming for evangelicalism. Those beliefs and behaviors include:

- 48% believe a person who is good enough or does enough good works can earn eternal salvation
- 44% do not believe that history is the unfolding narrative of God's reality
- 44% claim the Bible is ambiguous in its teaching about abortion
- 43% maintain that when Jesus was on earth, He sinned
- 43% do not believe that there is a common, God-given purpose to humanity (i.e., to know, love and serve Him)
- 42% seek moral guidance primarily from sources other than the Bible
- 42% do not identify and confess their sins on a daily basis
- 40% do not believe that human life is sacred

- 40% accept lying as morally acceptable if it advances personal interests or protect one's reputation
- 39% identify the people they always respect as being only those who have the same beliefs as they possess
- 36% prefer socialism to capitalism
- 36% fail to seek and pursue God's will for their life each day
- 34% reject the idea of legitimate marriage as one man and one woman
- 34% argue that abortion is morally acceptable if it spares the mother from financial or emotional discomfort or hardship
- 32% do not thank or worship God each day

Evangelical churches, long known for their emphasis on the importance of being born-again—that is, salvation through grace along—appear to have lost momentum on that point. Currently, more than one-quarter of those who attend evangelical churches (28%) are not born-again.

Pentecostals Following Suit

The American Worldview Inventory 2020 also shows the theological demise of those who attend Pentecostal and charismatic churches. In some cases, their departure from traditional biblical teachings is even more pronounced than that witnessed among evangelicals. For instance, while a slight (but growing) majority of those at evangelical churches embrace relativism, more than two-thirds of those in Pentecostal congregations (69%) reject absolute moral truth.

Adults in Pentecostal congregations have taken some of the theological shifts of evangelical church attenders a step farther. For instance, they are less likely to value human life, with a majority (54%) unwilling to define human life as sacred and half claiming that the Bible is ambiguous in its teaching about abortion.

Fitting with the Pentecostal tendency to seek special experiences, that preference has led a majority of this group (54%) to also embrace a willingness to try anything once.

Perhaps the most unexpected perspective among Pentecostals, though, is their widespread acceptance of the government's intervention in, and control of, their lives. Adults associated with a Pentecostal or charismatic church were among the most likely self-identified Christians (along with Catholics) to say they prefer socialism to capitalism, with more than two-thirds of the group (69%) expressing such a view. Pentecostals were notably less likely than evangelicals to hold conservative views on fiscal issues, social issues, and governance issues. In fact, while one-third of adults aligned with evangelical churches (34%) were consistently conservative in their views on fiscal, social, and governance policies, just one-fifth of the adults aligned with Pentecostal churches (21%) were consistently conservative in such views.

An unexpectedly large proportion of people in Pentecostal churches (45%) did not qualify as born-again Christians.

Mainline Protestants Are on a Different Path

There were 31 variables identified in the Inventory for which a majority of participants in one of the six mainline Protestant denominations held a view or engaged in a behavior at odds with biblical teaching—more than three times the number of biblical conflicts as were identified among either evangelicals or Pentecostals. That represents about 60% of the worldview attributes evaluated in the American Worldview Inventory 2020 for which there is a significant conflict with biblical principles.

The worldview possessed by most mainline church attenders revolves around three concepts.

1. Truth and morality are determined by the individual, not by God or the Bible. Solid majorities of mainline adherents believe that there is no absolute moral truth (58%), and that God is not the standard or provider of truth (63%). A large proportion of mainline church attenders believe that people are essentially good (81%), are able to determine right from wrong apart from biblical guidance (71%), and generally know what's best for their lives, without God's guidance. They tend to believe that the Bible is a good book and contains wisdom for life, but it cannot be trusted to be absolutely representative of God's truth principles for humankind (63%). Mainline adults contend that history is not God's unfolding narrative that provides insights or wisdom for humanity; in fact, human beings cannot even be certain that God exists. Such belief is personal, they argue, and embracing Christianity is less important than embracing some faith.
2. Life has no inherent value or purpose, but we can make the most of it by doing things that produce personal happiness or satisfaction. Adults attending mainline Protestant congregations believe that life is what you make it—and that means success is based on doing things that deliver whatever makes you feel happy or satisfied. In their view, humans are not imbued with a common, God-given purpose. In fact, they consider life to be fragile and temporary, so we must do our best to maximize the enjoyment and benefit of our experiences without letting other people limit potential outcomes. Therefore, even moral choices should reflect one's freedom to do whatever feels right or is good for the individual, whether that relates to abortion, sexual relations, or relationships.
3. Traditional religious practices are neither considered to be central or essential to their Christian faith. Surprisingly, few mainline adherents engage in traditional Christian practices. In fact, of six commonly practiced religious activities, there was not one for which half or more of the mainline congregants were participants. Those religious practices include reading the Bible each day (13% do so), seeking God's will on a daily basis (38%), confessing personal sins and asking for God's forgiveness every day (33%), thanking, praising or worshiping God each day (43%), or even praying to God every day (49%). Mainline-affiliated adults ranked lowest in levels of participation in each of these activities compared to adults aligned with the other major Christian church families (i.e. evangelical, charismatic, Catholic).

Within the three families of Protestant churches, adults associated with a mainline church were the least likely to be born-again (41%).

The Catholic Approach

The faith profile of Catholics is surprisingly similar to that of mainline Protestants and therefore considerably different from that of evangelical and charismatic Protestants. Catholics reflect the same worldview outlook attributed to mainline adherents. However, they generally differ from their Protestant counterparts in several significant ways.

- Catholics, based on their church’s teaching, are less likely to be born-again (i.e., believe that they are sinners who need a savior, that Jesus Christ is that savior, and have therefor personally confessed their sins and asked Jesus Christ to save them from the penalty for their sins). They are also less likely to believe in the importance of interpersonal evangelism and to believe that salvation is accessible only through God’s grace extended through Jesus Christ. They are the segment of the Christian community most likely to believe that a person can earn salvation by being a good enough person or by doing enough good deeds throughout their lifetime. That mentality of self-reliance and earning positive outcomes also influences their view of success. Rather than saying success is primarily about obedience to God, Catholics are more likely to define success in terms of achievements or emotional fulfillment.
- The worldview of Catholics is also more permissive— that is, it embraces a wider range of behaviors than the Bible might encourage. For instance, Catholics are the segment among the four denominational families to embrace the idea of trying anything once. They are the most likely to accept speeding, sexual relations outside of marriage, lying, and refusal to repay a loan as morally acceptable behaviors. Catholics were substantially more likely than other Christians to believe that having some faith is more important than which faith a person adopts.

Examples of Christians' Beliefs That Differ from Biblical Teaching (Percent who reject the biblical teaching specified)				
Biblical teaching	% <i>reject</i> this biblical teaching			
	Evang	Pentec	Main	Catholic
People are not basically good; we are sinners	75%	76%	81%	84%
Which faith you embrace matters as much or more than simply having some faith	62	71	76	84
The Holy Spirit is not just a symbol of God's power, presence or purity, but is a real, influential being	58	66	73	74
Success is consistent obedience to God	53	48	77	84
There are absolute moral truth that apply to everyone, all the time	52	69	58	69
People cannot earn a place in Heaven by being good or by doing enough good works	58	49	61	85
History is story of God's plan for humanity moving toward fulfillment	44	59	79	76
Bible is unambiguous in its teaching about abortion	44	49	62	58
When Jesus Christ was on earth He was fully human but He did not sin	43	44	59	66
The Bible is the primary source of moral guidance	42	38	71	77
Human life is sacred	40	54	55	57
Personally certain to have eternal salvation only because have confessed sins and accepted Jesus Christ as savior	28	45	59	72
God is the basis of all truth	28	30	63	57
Bible is the word of God, is trustworthy and reliable	26	32	63	53

Abbreviations:
 Evang = Evangelical church attender
 Pentec = Pentecostal or charismatic church attender
 Main = Mainline Protestant church attender
 Catholic = Catholic church attender

Source: *American Worldview Inventory 2020*; N=2,000 adults, 18 or older; conducted by the [Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University](#).

Realities of the Post-Christian Reformation

When Martin Luther instigated what has become known as the Protestant Reformation in the early 16th Century, he was motivated by a desire to restore biblical truth and purity to the Church and the spiritual experiences and development of the people. He was driven by a compulsion to raise the acceptance of biblical authority rather than tradition and institutional authority, and to focus people's ideas about salvation on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ rather than placing faith on one's personal efforts and goodness.

America would do well to return to such basics of the faith, according to Barna.

“American society has historically relied upon its Christian churches to educate people about morality, values, meaning and purpose, and many of the practical realities about leading a good life,” Barna explained. “If the views of the people attending our Christian churches these days are any indication, we need to redirect our efforts for greater impact.”

The veteran researcher noted, “While the survey cannot determine if churches are failing to teach biblical truth or whether congregants are exposed to such teaching but rejecting it, the bottom line is that we are a society that has strayed far from the path of biblical truth. It certainly seems as if the culture is influencing the Church more than the church is influencing the culture.”

“It's one thing for Americans to be confused on the finer points or even hotly debated elements of theology,” Barna said. “But for Americans to misunderstand or to flat out reject the Bible as a foundational source of truth and moral guidance, to reject salvation by grace alone, and to reject core doctrines of the Christian faith points to a major crisis in our society. Hopefully, bringing these issues to light can generate greater attention being paid to what matters and how to fix what's clearly broken.”

About the Research

The American Worldview Inventory 2020 (AWVI) is an annual survey that estimates how many adults have a biblical worldview. The assessment is based on 51 worldview-related questions drawn from eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior. AWVI 2020 was undertaken in January 2020 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of indeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity.

The six denominations that are considered to be part of the “mainline Protestant” denominations include American Baptist Church U.S.A.; Episcopal Church; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Presbyterian Church U.S.A.; United Churches of Christ; and United Methodist Church.

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University is located on the school's campus in Glendale, Arizona. CRC conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares the information with organizations focused on impacting the spheres of cultural influence in order to transform American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith but remains non-partisan and inter-denominational. Dr. Tracy Munsil serves as the Executive Director of the Center. More information about the Cultural Research Center is available at the Center's website, located at www.culturalresearchcenter.com, or contact us at: info@culturalresearchcenter.com