

MOST PEOPLE THINK SALVATION CAN BE ‘EARNED’

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With American adults increasingly rejecting biblical answers to key questions of life—from meaning and purpose, to understanding the intrinsic value of human life, to the existence of objective truth—it is little surprise that current views of sin and salvation are increasingly void of biblical understanding.

New research shows that unlike past generations, who readily recognized the reality of sin and the need for salvation through Jesus Christ, American adults today increasingly adopt a “salvation-can-be-earned” perspective, with a plurality of adults (48%) believing that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things during their life, they will “earn” a place in Heaven. Only one-third of adults (35%) disagree, according to findings from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

Most surprising in the latest findings from the American Worldview Inventory 2020 is that a majority of people who describe themselves as Christian (52%) accept a “works-oriented” means to God’s acceptance. More shocking, huge proportions of people associated with churches whose official doctrine says eternal salvation comes only from embracing Jesus Christ as savior believe that a person can qualify for Heaven by being or doing good. That includes close to half of all adults associated with Pentecostal (46%), mainline Protestant (44%), and evangelical (41%) churches. A much larger share of Catholics (70%) embrace that point of view.

The research also shows that the relevance of sin is on the wane, with only slightly more than half of U.S. adults (56%) saying they consciously and consistently attempt to avoid sinning because they know it offends God, according to the research conducted by Dr. George Barna, CRC Director of Research. This shift in worldview may be negatively affecting individual commitment to personal evangelism. Fewer Americans (49%) believe they have a personal responsibility, in appropriate situations, to share their religious beliefs with people who possess different religious beliefs. That is down slightly since 1991, when 53% of adults felt they had such an obligation, according to the findings.

Other key findings from the latest AWVI 2020 release:

- Only half of Americans (54%) believe they will experience Heaven after they die; 15% said they don’t know what will happen after they die; 13% said there is no life after death; 8% expect to be reincarnated; another 8% believe they will go to a place of purification prior to entering Heaven. Just 2% believe they will go to Hell.

- Born-again Christians, defined as people who not only claim to be Christian but also believe that when they die they will go to Heaven only because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, were least likely to hold the “salvation-can-be-earned” view.
- Born-again Christians, defined as people who not only claim to be Christian but also believe that when they die they will go to Heaven only because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, were least likely to hold the “salvation-can-be-earned” view.
- Conservatives are much more likely (75%) to “consciously and consistently attempt to avoid sinning because they know it offends God,” compared to liberals (41%) or moderates (49%).

Full results of the eighth of 10 biweekly releases of the American Worldview Inventory 2020 follow.

AMERICAN WORLDVIEW INVENTORY 2020 RESULTS

Salvation through Christ Attracts Just One in Three Adults; Majority Believe It Can Be ‘Earned’

The Rev. Billy Graham was among the 10 most admired men in the world a record 61 times during his lifetime, according to the annual Gallup survey. If the late evangelist was preaching about sin and salvation today, he might find a less receptive public. Trusting Jesus for salvation and the importance of evangelizing non-believers are perspectives now embraced by a minority of the U.S. population, according to the American Worldview Inventory 2020 from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

Just Have Faith

The context for the changing views on faith in America is exemplified by the fact that almost two out of every three adults (63%) say that having some type of religious faith is more important than which faith a person aligns with.

Shockingly, a large majority of people who describe themselves as Christians (68%) embrace that idea, including those who attend evangelical (56%) and Pentecostal (62%) churches, even though such thinking conflicts with the teaching typical of such churches. Even higher percentages of people attending mainline Protestant (67%) and Catholic (77%) churches believe that having some type of religious faith matters more than one’s choice of faith. Six out of ten people who are aligned with non-Christians faiths (61%) reflected that same sentiment.

The Irrelevance of Sin

Concern about personal sin is on the wane in the United States. Even though seven out of ten adults claim to be Christian, and another one out of ten adults belongs to some other faith group that discourages sinful behavior, only slightly more than half of U.S. adults (56%) say they consciously and consistently attempt to avoid sinning because they know it offends God.

The lack of concern about breaking God’s laws is further witnessed by the finding that a plurality of adults (48%) believes that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things during their life, they will “earn” a place in Heaven. Only one-third of adults (35%) disagree with that notion. Amazingly, a majority of people who describe themselves as Christian (52%) accept a works-oriented means to God’s acceptance. Even more shocking, however, is that huge proportions of people associated with churches whose official doctrine says eternal salvation comes only from embracing Jesus Christ as savior, and not from being or doing good, believe that a person can qualify for Heaven by being or doing good.

That includes close to half of all adults associated with Pentecostal (46%), mainline Protestant (44%), and evangelical (41%) churches. As expected, a much larger share of Catholics (70%) embrace that point of view.

This salvation-can-be-earned perspective fits well with other widely held views identified in the American Worldview Inventory 2020 that are at odds with biblical teaching. That includes the popular beliefs that:

- there is no absolute moral truth (58%);
- basis of truth are factors or sources other than God (58%);
- right and wrong is determined by factors other than the Bible (77%);
- the Bible is not the authoritative and true word of God (59%);
- people are basically good (69%);
- and the personal definition of success is not based on consistent obedience to God (79%)

Eternal Destination

The survey also revealed that only half of Americans (54%) believe they will experience Heaven after they die, and just one-third of adults (33%) believe they will go to Heaven solely because of confessing their sins and embracing Jesus Christ as their savior. The other one in five who expect to experience Heaven are counting on earning their way in or being granted a place in Heaven because God will let all people in.

Among those with other views, 15% said they don’t know what will happen after they die; 13% said there is no life after death; 8% expect to be reincarnated; another 8% believe they will go to a place of purification prior to entering Heaven. Just 2% believe they will go to Hell.

In an interesting side note, the survey revealed that a minority of adults (46%) who describe themselves as “Christian” expect to experience eternal salvation because of their confession of sin and acceptance of Christ as their savior.

A different perspective on the data emerges from examining the percentage of people groups that qualify as “born-again Christians” – defined as people who not only claim to be Christian but also believe that when they die they will go to Heaven only because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Nationally, that proportion is 33%. However, it is considerably higher among those who attend evangelical (72%) or Pentecostal (55%) churches. Less than half of mainline Protestant church attenders (41%) qualify, and barely more than one-quarter of Catholic adults (28%).

There are also notable differences by demographic segments. Studying age groups reveals that just 20% of people age 18 to 29 are born-again; 30% of those 30 to 49 qualify; and 40% of adults 50 or older meet the standard. Women were more likely than men to qualify (36% versus, 30%, respectively). Politically, those who have conservative views were much more likely to be born-again (52%) than were political moderates (28%) or liberals (16%).

More than one-third of whites and blacks (35% each) satisfied the born-again criteria but only one-quarter of Hispanics did (25%). The low figure among Hispanics is related to the fact that more than one-third of them (36%) align with the Catholic church, compared to just 20% of whites and 9% of blacks.

Evangelistic Fervor is Missing

Surveys over the past three decades have consistently shown that the most effective form of evangelism is through conversations about God’s forgiveness and offer of salvation through Jesus Christ that occur within the context of a trusting relationship.

Views on Faith, Sin and Salvation											
Perspective	Type of Church You Attend Most								Political Ideology		
	All Adults	Evan	Pent	MLP	Cath	BAC	Other	Skep	Con	Mod	Lib
Having faith matters more than which faith you have	63%	56%	62%	67%	77%	62%	61%	45%	59%	63%	69%
You consciously and consistently try to avoid sinning because you know your sins break God’s heart	56	85	82	58	65	82	36	16	75	49	41
You have a personal responsibility, in appropriate situations, to share your religious beliefs with people who believe differently than you	49	74	74	48	54	71	38	20	67	43	38
A person who is generally good, or does enough good things for others, will earn a place in Heaven	48	41	46	44	70	38	54	32	42	49	54
You consider yourself to be a Christian; and when you die you will go to Heaven only because you have confessed your sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as your savior	33	72	55	41	28	100	0	0	52	28	16
Abbreviations: Evan – attend evangelical church Pent – attend Pentecostal church Cath – attend Catholic church BAC – born again Christian Other – faith other than Christianity Skep – Spiritual Skeptic MLP – attend mainline Protestant church Con – politically conservative Mod – politically moderate Lib – politically liberal											
Source: American Worldview Inventory 2020; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,000 adults 18 or older.											

Findings from the American Worldview Inventory 2020, however, indicate that the likelihood of such interpersonal sharing of the gospel is not increasing. Currently, only half of adults (49%) believe that they have a personal responsibility, in appropriate situations, to share their religious beliefs with people who possess different religious beliefs. That is down slightly since 1991, when 53% of adults felt they had such an obligation.

Three out of four people who usually attend an Evangelical church claimed a commitment to interpersonal gospel outreach. The reported commitment levels were much lower among those who attend Catholic (54%) or mainline Protestant (48%) churches.

Searching for Reliable Foundations

Dr. George Barna, CRC Director of Research and author of the American Worldview Inventory 2020 called this latest survey discouraging but consistent with prior findings.

“If you step back and look at the big picture painted by all of the outcomes in this research project it seems to suggest that people are in an ‘anything goes’ mindset when it comes to faith, morals, values, and lifestyle,” Barna commented. “Americans appear to be creating unique, highly customized worldviews based on feelings, experiences and opportunities rather than working within the boundaries of a comprehensive, time-tested, consistent worldview.”

“If you look at some of the dominant elements in the American mind and heart today, as illuminated by the Inventory, we find that most people say that the objective of life is feeling good about yourself; that all faiths are of equal value; that entry into God’s eternal presence is determined by one’s personal means of choice; and that there are no absolutes to guide or grow us morally,” explained the author of numerous books about cultural conditions and development.

“That philosophy of life contradicts a fundamental basis of what may be the two most significant documents to the longevity and success of America – the Bible and the Constitution of the United States. Those documents agree that this nation will only be healthy and fruitful if it is populated by moral people,” Barna concluded.

“By abandoning our moral standards and traditions, and replacing them with inclusive and conditional preferences, we are losing the foundations that have enabled the ‘American experiment’ to succeed for more than two centuries. We can only hope that our critical moral institutions – particularly the family and churches – will wake up and help the nation to get back on track.”

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.

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) is under the auspices of Arizona Christian University and 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 that information with organizations dedicated to transform American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith, as described in the Bible, but remains inter-denominational and non-partisan. Access to past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is available at www.culturalresearchcenter.com. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.arizonachristian.edu.