

## *American Worldview Inventory 2020 – At a Glance*

### **AWVI 2020 Results – Release #5: Perceptions of Truth**

#### **Survey Finds Americans See Many Sources of Truth—and Reject Moral Absolutes**

May 19, 2020

Past generations of Americans viewed God as the basis of truth and morality. Not anymore. A new study shows that most Americans reject any absolute boundaries regarding their morality, with a majority—58% of adults surveyed—believing instead that moral truth is up to the individual to decide.

According to findings from Dr. George Barna, Director of Research at the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, belief in absolute moral truth rooted in God’s word is rapidly eroding among *all American adults*, whether churched or unchurched, within every political segment, and within every age group. Even among those who do identify God as the source of truth, there is substantial rejection of any absolute standard of morality in American culture.

Perhaps most stunning, this latest research shows a rejection of God’s truth and absolute moral standards by American Christians, those seen as most likely to hold traditional standards of morality. Evangelicals, defined as believing the Bible to be the true, reliable word of God, are just as likely to reject absolute moral truth (46%) as to accept its existence (48%). And only a minority of born-again Christians—43%—still embrace absolute truth.

The study found that the pull of secularism is especially strong among younger Americans, with those under age 30 much less likely than older adults to select God as the basis of truth (31% compared to 45%), and more likely to say that moral standards are decided by the individual (60%).

So where are Americans finding “truth”? The survey found that the most common notion is that God is the basis of truth—but it was a minority of only four out of ten adults (42%). Another four out of ten believe that either inner certainty (16%), scientific proof (15%), tradition (5%), or public consensus (4%) leads to knowing truth. The remaining two out of every ten adults said that either there is no such thing as truth (5%) or that they do not know the basis of truth (13%).

Other key findings from the latest release from the *American Worldview Inventory 2020*:

- Those mostly likely to see God as the basis of truth are SAGECons, defined as Spiritually Active Governance Engaged Conservative Christians, with nearly nine out of ten (87%) pointing to God as the source of truth and 62% recognizing the existence of absolute moral standards
- Members of the LGBTQ community, political liberals, Hispanics, blacks, Democrats and people under 50 reject absolute moral standards in the greatest numbers, while those most likely to embrace absolute moral standards include political conservatives (42%), Republicans (42%), college graduates (39%), and people 50 or older (37%)

This latest report, “AWVI 2020 Release #5: Perceptions of Truth,” is the fifth of 12 biweekly releases from the *American Worldview Inventory 2020*. The full results follow.

## **American Worldview Inventory 2020 Results – FULL Release #5: Perceptions of Truth**

### **Survey Finds Americans See Many Sources of Truth—and Reject Moral Absolutes**

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research, Cultural Research Center

Released: May 19, 2020

When Pontius Pilate, the Roman official who allowed Jesus Christ to be unjustly crucified, was interrogating Christ, he famously ended their exchange by asking, “What is truth?” According to newly released results from the *American Worldview Inventory 2020*, Americans are still wrestling with that question. Findings from the survey, conducted by Dr. George Barna and the Cultural Research Center, show that most Americans refuse to accept any kind of absolute boundaries regarding their morality. The research also reveals that people who attend an evangelical church are just as likely to reject absolute moral truth as to accept its existence.

And even though the most commonly acknowledged basis of truth is God, a majority of Americans believe that sources other than God are the basis of truth.

#### **Absolute Moral Truth**

Almost six out of every ten adults (58%) agree that “identifying moral truth is up to each individual; there are no moral absolutes that apply to everyone, all the time.” Just one-third of adults (32%) disagree with that view, and the remaining one out of ten adults say they do not know.

As might be expected, beliefs regarding truth are strongly related to whether a person has a biblical worldview. Nearly nine out of ten adults (85%) who have a biblical worldview reject the idea that moral absolutes do not exist and therefore people must create their own moral standards.

An unexpected result is that people who attend evangelical churches—which, by definition, believe that the Bible is the word of God and its content is reliable and true—are as likely to reject the existence of absolute moral truth as they are to accept it. Overall, 46% say moral truth is dictated by the individual; 48% say there are absolute moral truths that apply to all people, all the time. Another church-related surprise was that people who attend mainline Protestant churches are significantly more likely than those attending Pentecostal churches to accept the existence of absolute moral truth. Although it was a minority of people within both of those church segments who embrace absolute morality, 42% of mainline attenders endorsed moral absolutes versus less than one-third (31%) of those associated with Pentecostal or charismatic churches. Like their Pentecostal brethren, less than one-third of those aligned with the Catholic church accept the existence of absolute moral truths (31%).

Other segments among whom a majority denied the existence of absolute moral truth included:

- LGBTQ adults (73%)
- Political liberals (67%)
- Hispanics (65%)
- Blacks (63%)
- Democrats (63%)
- People under age 50 (62%)

Agreed: Identifying moral truth is up to each individual; there are no moral absolutes that apply to every person, all the time			
All adults	58%	Republican	51%
Attend evangelical church	46%	Democrat	63%
Attend Pentecostal church	63%	Independent	60%
Attend mainline Protestant church	50%	Not registered to vote	62%
Attend Catholic church	62%	Political conservative	51%
Born-again Christian	48%	Political moderate	59%
Faith other than Christianity	70%	Political liberal	67%
Spiritual Skeptic	64%	SAGECon	33%
Source: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2020</i> ; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. N=2,000 adults 18 or older.			

Another telling sign about the rapid theological transitions in the Christian community these days was the finding that a minority of born-again Christians (4%) believe in absolute moral truth.

### The Basis of Truth

On what basis is truth determined? That question generates a variety of responses from the public. The survey found that the most common notion is that God is the basis of truth—yet that was the view of only four out of ten adults (42%). Another four out of ten believe that either inner certainty (16%), scientific proof (15%), traditional (5%), or public consensus (4%) is the means of knowing truth. The remaining two out of every ten adults said that either there is no such thing as truth (5%) or that they do not know the basis of truth (13%).

Within the Christian community, there are substantial fissure lines. Merely half of those who call themselves Christian (54%) identify God as the basis of truth. Within a segment of that group—those who theological beliefs position them as “born again” Christians—seven out of ten (69%) contend that God is the basis of truth. While a similar proportion adopts that same belief among those who attend either evangelical (72%) or Pentecostal (70%) churches, the percentage drops precipitously among those who attend either a mainline Protestant (37%) or Catholic (43%) church.

Adults who affiliate with non-Christian religious groups were about equally likely to identify the basis of truth as being God (25%), scientific proof (22%) and inner certainty (19%). Those in the Skeptic category, i.e., people who say God does not exist, God might exist but we cannot know for sure, and those who don’t care if God exists, were most likely to say that scientific proof is the basis of truth (33%), although a significant share of that segment also pointed to inner certainty as their determinant of choice (22%).

Question: What is the basis of truth?													
	All	Evan	Pent	MLP	Cath	BAC	Other	Skep	GOP	Dem	Indy	Con	Lib
God	42%	72%	70%	37%	43%	69%	25%	7%	59%	36%	34%	62%	26%
Scientific proof	15	7	6	13	12	6	22	33	10	19	17	8	25
Inner certainty	16	9	11	17	20	12	19	22	12	19	17	10	21
Tradition	5	3	2	7	9	3	4	4	6	5	5	6	3
Public agreement	4	3	7	4	4	2	10	4	3	6	4	3	8
There is no truth	5	1	*	7	3	1	7	11	2	4	6	2	6
don't know	13	5	3	16	11	7	14	20	9	12	17	9	11

Abbreviations:  
Evan – attend evangelical church  
Pent – attend Pentecostal church  
MLP – attend mainline Protestant church  
Cath – attend Catholic church  
BAC – born again Christian  
Other – faith other than Christianity  
Skep – Spiritual Skeptic  
GOP – Republican  
Dem – Democrat  
Indy – Independent  
Con – politically conservative  
Lib – politically liberal

Source: *American Worldview Inventory 2020*; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,000 adults 18 or older.

Other interesting outcomes related to this matter included:

- Adults under age 30 were notably less likely than older adults to select God as the basis of truth (31% compared to 45% among older adults).
- A majority of Republicans (59%) chose God as the basis of truth, compared to only one-third of those who are Democrats, independents, or not registered to vote.
- Adults who are politically conservative were far more likely than those who are ideologically moderate or liberal to identify God as the basis of truth (62% compared to 36% and 26%, respectively). Liberals were equally likely to name God (26%), scientific proof (25%), and inner certainty (21%) as their basis of truth.
- Nearly nine out of ten (87%) SAGECons – the Spiritually Active Governance Engaged Conservative Christians – selected God as their basis of truth, while less than half that proportion (37%) did so among the rest of the nation.
- Unexpectedly, those who describe themselves as part of the LGBTQ community were twice as likely to identify God as the basis of truth (34%) as they were to list either scientific proof (17%) or inner certainty (15%).
- There was no region in the country where a majority of people chose the same basis of truth. However, almost half of the residents of the southern states (48%) said God is the source of truth, compared to an average of 38% in the other three regions of the United States.
- Adults who have a biblical worldview are two-and-a-half times more likely than other people to say that God is the basis of truth (96% compared to 38%).

## The Slow Separation

Dr. George Barna, who directed the study, noted that the research suggests Americans are radically redefining how life works. “Americans have historically held the biblical view that God created our world and the life within it, and He gave specific guidelines that promote our well-being when we stay within those boundaries. Those principles were delivered to humanity through the Bible,” Barna explained.

“Because God was described as the pure, perfect, and just creator whose character and motivations are impeccable, He served as the basis of all truth. The truth principles He provided to us in the Bible are consistent and pertinent to everyone, in all situations, at all times,” Barna said. “Knowledge of good and evil, meaning and purpose, and everything else that matters was accessible by studying the Bible and gleaning the truth God had provided for our well-being.”

“But things are changing,” the veteran researcher continued. “Only half of Americans now believe in an all-knowing, all-powerful, loving and forgiving God. Less than half believe the Bible is completely true and relevant to modern life.”

Barna said the result of this seismic shift is that most Americans are defining their life purpose apart from the intent of God. As he explained, “Now we see that Americans have rejected the idea that God is truth and that the truth principles He has given for our good are reliable and relevant. As a nation we are becoming increasingly self-reliant. We trust ourselves or our discoveries rather than the truth principles God provides.”

“The diminished role of God in peoples’ lives highlights why just 6% of American adults possess a biblical worldview,” Barna added. “It’s one thing to lack theological clarity regarding biblical perspectives on immigration policy or the end times. It’s a much more serious condition when the general public outright rejects God as the source of truth, the Bible as the conveyance of truth, and the very importance of integrating a known, proven and stable source of truth into our daily decision-making and lifestyle.”

Dr. Tracy Munsil, Executive Director of the CRC, noted, “The implications of these findings are staggering, especially for young people and college students.”

Munsil explained, “Like every generation before them, this next generation is seeking guidance for how to live, how to understand truth and morality. They look to the older generation, to parents, mentors, their professors. But even these groups are rejecting absolute moral truth rooted in God.”

“Increasingly, they find themselves in a culture that, from top to bottom, rejects God’s truth and says to them, ‘you are free to determine your own morality. Look to yourselves, to science, to whatever you can find, for guidance on how to live your lives,’” she explained.

Munsil, also an associate professor of political science at Arizona Christian University, said these findings point to a desperate need for greater engagement by older generations of Christians. “We are

seeing an untethered generation, young people completely adrift, with no foundation in God, biblical truth, or standards of morality—the very things that enabled generations before them to live well and flourish. Those who still recognize the truth of God and His standards have a responsibility to share these with the next generation. Or they will be lost to this next generation, and maybe to our nation forever.”

### **About the Research**

The *American Worldview Inventory 2020 (AWVI)* is the first wave of an annual series of surveys that estimates how many adults have a biblical worldview. The assessment is based on 51 worldview-related questions that are drawn from eight categories of worldview application. Those questions are divided into queries regarding both beliefs and behavior. In addition to the worldview questions, the survey also contains an array of demographic and theolographic questions. In total, the *AWVI* instrument incorporates 68 questions and took respondents an average of 16 minutes to complete.

*AWVI 2020* was undertaken in January 2020 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults. The survey included 1,000 interviews with a nationwide random sample of adults via telephone, plus another 1,000 adults interviewed online through a national panel of adults. A survey of 2,000 individuals has 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) 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 spheres of societal influence in order to transform American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith but remains non-partisan and inter-denominational. In addition to Dr. George Barna, the Director of Research, 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](http://www.culturalresearchcenter.com).