

# Cultural Research Center

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## American Worldview Inventory 2023

### Release #3: How the Faith of Americans Has Shifted Since the Start of the Pandemic

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The impact of the pandemic is still being felt in many ways. The deadly virus and the government actions it caused have affected many aspects of people's lives. When it comes to faith, the shifts for Americans are both negative and positive.

The first national post-pandemic study of Americans' worldview has found that not only has the incidence of biblical worldview dropped slightly (from 6% to 4%), but there have been more changes than usual in people's religious beliefs and behaviors.

The *American Worldview Inventory 2023*, the annual tracking study of the worldview of U.S. adults conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University under the direction of researcher Dr. George Barna, identified 14 measures in which substantial change has been identified.

Based on the standard measures used in that tracking survey, there were four beliefs for which more people embrace biblical perspectives now than was the case in 2020 (just before the pandemic changed life around the world). There were another four instances in which people are now less likely to hold biblical beliefs.

And looking at behaviors associated with worldview, the *AWVI 2023* identified two instances of more people behaving in ways that are biblically consistent than was the case three years ago. But another four indicators showed that fewer people are behaving in accordance with the Bible than was true in 2020.

### **Positive Change in Beliefs**

Among more than four dozen beliefs and behaviors evaluated in the tracking study, four beliefs generated significant movement toward biblical thinking. The biggest change among those four relates to truth. Whereas just one-third of the adult population in 2020 dismissed the idea that there are no moral truths that are the same for everyone, the proportion of people who rejected that notion rose to almost half of the population in 2023 (46%).

Another similar sizeable shift occurred in how many adults now reject the belief that eternal salvation can be earned through good works. That numbered jump to just under half of adults (45%) from the one-third (35%) who denied that possibility in 2020.

The research also showed a 7-percentage point increase in the number of adults who accept the idea that the purpose of life is to know, love, and serve God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength—one of the [Seven Biblical Worldview Cornerstones](#). Despite the 7-point rise, only about one-third of adults (36%) currently accept that idea.

The final significant positive change was a 5-point increase in adults who contend that the Bible is the true and completely accurate words of God. Since the start of the pandemic that proportion has climbed closer to the halfway mark, with 46% now holding that belief.

### **Losing Ground with Beliefs**

Just as there were four beliefs for which more adults have adopted biblical perspectives, the Cultural Research Center's survey also identified four beliefs for which significant numbers of adults moved away from biblical teaching.

The biggest statistical change noted between 2020 and 2023 was a 20-percentage point decline in adults who believe they have a unique, God-given calling or purpose for their life. Before the pandemic, two-thirds of adults (66%) embraced that point of view, compared to slightly less than half of adults (46%) today who do.

Another double-digit decline related to people describing human life as sacred. A minority of Americans (39%) held that view in 2020, but that number has plummeted to just 29% in 2023.

Ironically, while there was a large jump in the number of people accepting the idea of absolute moral truth, there was a concurrent drop of 6-percentage points in the number of adults who believe that God is the basis of all truth. That suggests that even as more people believe there may be a source of absolute truth, fewer people believe that source is God.

Another noteworthy decline is a 4-point drop in the number of adults who now identify themselves as Christian. That dipped from 72% in 2020 to 68% in 2023, a continuation of the pattern over the past two decades.

### **Growth in Biblical Behaviors**

Two specific behaviors among those tested showed more people engaging in a biblical approach than three years ago. The most significant growth was an increase in adults who believe sexual intercourse between two people who are not married to each other is morally unacceptable. While the increase is unusually large (11 percentage points), less than two out of five adults (38%) side with the Bible's teaching that sexual intercourse is only morally acceptable between a man and woman who are married to each other.

The other positive shift was a 6-point increase in adults agreeing that it is morally unacceptable to intentionally lie to protect your reputation or best interests. The 2023 survey was the first time since the start of the *American Worldview Inventory* that a majority of adults agreed that lying is wrong.

### **Behavioral Declines Identified**

The research identified four behaviors that have become less consistent with biblical teaching in the past three years.

One of the four unfortunate behavioral transitions concerned whether people describe themselves as "deeply committed to practicing" their religious faith. Prior to the start of the pandemic, six out of 10 adults (60%) made that claim. Today, less than half (48%) claim to be deeply committed.

One of the most frequently measured religious behaviors is church attendance. The *AWVI 2023* found that church attendance has declined since the start of the pandemic by about 6 percentage points. Just one out of three adults (33%) currently attends a church service during a typical week—a decline representing the loss of about 15 million churchgoing adults each week.

<b>Changes Since 2020 in Adult's Religious Beliefs and Behavior</b>			
<b>More people embracing biblical beliefs:</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>Change</b>
There are moral absolutes that apply to everyone, all the time	32%	46%	+ 14 points
Even if a person is good or does good things for other people, they cannot earn a place in Heaven	35	45	+ 10 pts.
The purpose of life is to know, love, and serve God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul	29	36	+ 7 pts.
The Bible is the true and completely accurate words of God	41	46	+ 5 pts.
<b>Fewer people embracing biblical beliefs:</b>			
You have a unique, God-given calling or purpose for your life	66%	46%	- 20 points
Human life is sacred	39	29	- 10 pts.
God is the basis of all truth	42	36	- 6 pts.
You consider yourself to be a Christian	72	68	- 4 pts.
<b>More people adopting biblical behaviors:</b>			
Sexual intercourse between two people who are not married to each other is morally unacceptable	27%	38%	+ 11 points
Intentionally lying to someone to protect your reputation or best interests is morally unacceptable	47	53	+ 6 pts.
<b>Fewer people adopting biblical behaviors:</b>			
You are deeply committed to practicing your religious faith	60%	48%	- 12 points
You attend a church service, either in-person or online, at least once a week	39	33	- 6 pts.
You read or study the Bible at least once a week	37	33	- 4 pts.
You acknowledge your sins and ask for God's forgiveness at least once a week	54	50	- 4 pts.
Source: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2023</i> , Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults, nationally representative sample of adults 18 or older, mixed-mode data collection; and <i>American Worldview Inventory 2020</i> , Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults, nationally representative sample of adults 18 or older, mixed-mode data collection. Estimated maximum sampling error for each survey is +2.2 percentage points.			

Bible reading also experienced a noteworthy decline, dropping from 37% of adults reading or studying the Bible during a typical week prior to the pandemic to 33% today.

The study also found a decline from 54% to 50% of adults who say that they acknowledge their sins and ask for God's forgiveness at least once a week.

## Changes among Born-Again Christians

One of the more significant religious groups in America is born-again Christians, who constitute about one-third of all U.S. adults. Not only are they often seen as the backbone of local church activity because of their higher level of commitment to the Christian faith, as a group they are also three times more likely than the national norm to possess a biblical worldview.

Changes in Religious Beliefs and Behavior Among Born-Again Christians Since the Start of the Pandemic			
More people embracing biblical beliefs:	2020	2023	Change
The purpose of life is to know, love, and serve God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength	56%	65%	+ 9 points
Success can best be described as consistent obedience to God	45	50	+ 5 pts.
<b>Fewer people embracing biblical beliefs:</b>			
You have a unique, God-given calling or purpose for your life	88%	46%	- 42 points
Bible is unambiguous in its teaching about abortion	58	44	- 14 pts.
Jesus did not commit sins during His time on Earth	58	44	- 14 pts.
Human life is sacred	60	48	- 12 pts.
Even if a person is good or does good things for other people, they cannot earn a place in Heaven	54	48	- 7 pts.
God is the basis of all truth	69	63	- 6 pts.
<b>More people adopting biblical behaviors:</b>			
Sexual intercourse between two people who are not married to each other is morally unacceptable	47%	59%	+ 12 points
Intentionally lying to someone to protect your reputation or best interests is morally unacceptable	61	66	+ 5 pts.
<b>Fewer people adopting biblical behaviors:</b>			
You are deeply committed to practicing your religious faith	85%	50%	- 35 points
You read or study the Bible at least once a week	60	55	- 5 pts.
<p>Source: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2023</i>, Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults, nationally representative sample of adults 18 or older, mixed-mode data collection; and <i>American Worldview Inventory 2020</i>, Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults, nationally representative sample of adults 18 or older, mixed-mode data collection. The 2023 survey included a base of 650 born-again Christians; the 2020 survey included 671 born-again Christians. Born-again Christians were <b>not</b> based on self-identification. They were identified on the basis of saying that they believe they will go to Heaven after they die on Earth, but only because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior.</p>			

The *AWVI 2023* discovered that the born-again segment experienced change in an unusually large number of their worldview beliefs and behaviors. Those shifts included some changes that altered their faith in ways that moved into closer alignment with biblical principles and a few that pushed them farther away from biblical perspectives. But the net result was negative, as the incidence of biblical worldview among them fell from 19% in 2020 to 13% in 2023.

All told, there were 13 statistically significant changes identified among the born-again population—and the magnitude of the shift for two of them is quite astonishing.

First, the percentage of born-again adults who believe that they have a unique, God-given calling or purpose for their life was sliced nearly in half, from 88% to 46%. The second major reorientation was a 35-point swing regarding born-again individuals claiming that they are deeply committed to practicing their religious faith. The proportion dropped from a very robust 85% in 2020 to merely half of the group (50%) in 2023. Interestingly, the faith commitment of non-born-again adults showed little change during the same period.

There were five factors posting significant changes in the national average but an insignificant level of movement among born-again people. These include belief in moral absolutes, belief that the Bible being the true and completely accurate words of God, and considering themselves to be a Christian.

The two behavioral changes embraced by non-born-again adults but not by born-again adults included acknowledging their sins and asking for God's forgiveness and attending church services. The study also found a significant drop in the proportion of born-again adults attending an evangelical church, down from 28% pre-pandemic to 21% post-pandemic.

### **Increased Belief among Born-Agains**

While there was a jaw-dropping decrease in the proportion of born-again adults regarding possession of a unique purpose provided to them by God, the research shows a 9-point increase in the percentage of born-again Christians who believe that the purpose of life for everyone is to know, love, and serve God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Currently about two out of three adults in the born-again community (65%) endorse that teaching.

A smaller but significant increase of born-again adults embraced the belief that success is best described as consistent obedience to God, growing from 45% to 50% during the pandemic era.

### **Indefensible Shifts in Born-Again Beliefs**

Six beliefs of born-again Christians endured significant decline in the past three years. In addition to the massive reduction in them acknowledging a unique God-given purpose, born-again believers posted three other double-digit declines.

Decreases in biblical beliefs included a 14-point drop in the number contending the Bible is unambiguous in its teaching about abortion and a 14-point decline in those who believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life during His time on Earth. The other double-digit decline was a 12-point downturn in people saying human life is sacred.

Perhaps the most paradoxical change is the 7-point drop among born-again Christians rejecting the idea that it is not possible to gain eternal life through good works completed on Earth. The very definition of a born-again Christian is that they claim assurance of their personal salvation solely on the work of Christ on their cross, not their own goodness or performance.

The sixth decline among born-again adults is the 6-point loss in the proportion who believe that God is the basis of all truth.

### **Increases in Biblical Behavior among the Born-Again**

The study identified a pair of hopeful shifts in the behaviors of born-again believers. One was the expansion of those who support the teaching that sexual intercourse between two people who are not married to each other is morally unacceptable. Support for that position rose from less than half (47%) to almost six out of 10 (59%).

The other encouraging change was the bump in those who deem intentionally lying to someone to protect one's reputation or best interests to be a morally unacceptable behavior. The percentage of born-again adults backing that stand moved from 61% to 66%.

### **Declines in Biblical Behavior**

Still, there was a dramatic drop among born-again adults in being deeply committed to practicing their religious faith. Another decline is in studying or reading the Bible during a typical week, which declined 5 points, from 60% in 2020 to 55% in 2023.

### **Thoughts on the Unusual Levels of Change**

While it is not unusual to find significant changes in beliefs or behavior related to politics, entertainment preferences, or lifestyle preferences, religious beliefs and behaviors have typically been a hallmark of consistency. The significant changes found in the study are highly unusual, according to researcher George Barna.

"Most religious beliefs change over the course of generations, not a few years," Barna explained. "However, we know that major life crises have the capacity to introduce substantial change quickly in the foundations of people's faith."

He continued, "The pandemic was certainly a life crisis for our nation, so even though this magnitude of spiritual shift was not expected, it is feasible given the physical and psychological effects of COVID along with the economic, relational, and lifestyle effects of the government's drastic policies."

Barna also noted the sometimes-contradictory nature of the changes identified.

"Although some of the belief and behavior shifts seem to conflict with each other, this is precisely what happens when the prevailing worldview of the nation is Syncretism," he commented, referring to the [most widespread worldview choice of Americans](#), which entails combining beliefs from a variety of worldviews into an unpredictable, customized blend that satisfies the emotional needs of the individual.

"Syncretism does not rely upon logic or consistency," Barna continued. "Over time, many people struggle with the conflicts inherent in their syncretistic belief system, and the strange jumble of behaviors that emerge from those beliefs. But for the foreseeable future it is likely most people will ignore their incompatible philosophies and make do the best they can. They are seeking comfort and security more than spiritual and intellectual consistency."

Barna explained the implications of the most prolific changes identified in the survey—the 42-point decrease in born-again adults claiming to have a unique, God-given calling or purpose for their life, and the 35-point drop within that segment saying they are deeply committed to practicing their religious faith.



“The impact of the pandemic and the strong-arm tactics of government during the lockdown years may have shaken the faith of many Christians. The huge drop in foundational perspectives among born-again adults may foretell local churches being less able to rely on the active and reliable support of that critical niche of the church body.”

As Barna noted, “This is a time when pastors would be wise to return to many basic Christian principles to rebuild the spiritual foundation of congregants and to celebrate the blessings of God, reminding people how great their God really is.”

### **About the Research**

The data referred to in this report are taken from the *American Worldview Inventory (AWVI)*, an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over). Begun as an annual tracking study in 2020, the assessment is based on several dozen worldview-related questions that fall within eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

The *American Worldview Inventory* is the first-ever national survey conducted in the United States measuring the incidence of both biblical and competing worldviews.

The current wave of worldview research, the *American Worldview Inventory 2023*, was undertaken in January 2023 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 both sampling and non-sampling activity. Larger levels of statistical error may occur in relation to subgroups of the aggregate sample attributable to the smaller sample size of those subgroups.

### **About the Cultural Research Center**

The Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University in Glendale, Arizona, conducts the annual *American Worldview Inventory* as well as other nationwide surveys regarding cultural transformation. Recent national studies completed by the Cultural Research Center (CRC) have investigated topics related to family, values, lifestyle, spiritual practices, and politics.

One of the groundbreaking efforts by CRC has been the worldview-related surveys conducted among the ACU student population. The first-of-its-kind ACU Student Worldview Inventory is administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, and a final administration just prior to graduation. The results of that student census enable the University to track and address the worldview development of its students.

CRC is guided by Dr. George Barna, Director of Research, and Dr. Tracy Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity. CRC works in cooperation with a variety of Bible-centric, theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. Results from past surveys conducted by CRC and information about the Cultural Research Center are available at [www.CulturalResearchCenter.com](http://www.CulturalResearchCenter.com). Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at [www.ArizonaChristian.edu](http://www.ArizonaChristian.edu).