

Cultural Research Center



American Worldview Inventory 2023

Release #5: How the Pandemic Reshaped Christian Beliefs and Behaviors

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We are learning more about the effects of COVID-19 on the religious faith of Americans, and a new research report from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University identifies a series of significant shifts in people's beliefs and behaviors during the pandemic. Noteworthy changes were found in church attendance, church affiliation, and core beliefs, according to data from the latest report from the annual *American Worldview Inventory 2023*.

Church Attendance

One of the most widely watched measures of the nation's faith is attendance at Christian churches—and that measure has dropped significantly since the pandemic. The proportion of adults who attend church services on a weekly basis has fluctuated between 30% and 40% over the past decade. At the start of the pandemic 39% of adults attended a Christian church service at least once a week. The 2023 statistics indicate a notable decline in such attendance, dipping to 33%.

More significant, however, is the rapid growth among adults who attend church services infrequently (i.e., less than once a month) or never. That segment has jumped from 35% to 56% in the past six years, with most of the growth since the start of the pandemic. In 2020, 41% of adults attended services infrequently or not at all; by 2023, that figure rose to 56%—a majority of the nation.

Pandemic-related growth among people who are absent or infrequent attenders is largely attributable to certain population segments. The segments least likely to attend Christian church services these days include Millennials (58%) and Gen Xers (61%); Hispanics (60%); residents of the Northeast (63%); adults who identify as liberal (79%); and people who are not SAGE Cons (spiritually active, governance engaged conservative Christians—73%).

Another way of looking at the data is to identify the people groups who experienced the largest decline in regular church attendance since the start of the pandemic. The biggest declines in attendance were registered among residents of New York (down by 49 percentage points), people who are not SAGE Cons (down 29 points), residents of California and Florida (down 29 points in each), self-identified liberals (29 points), Pentecostals (26 points), 30-to-49-year-olds (25 points), residents of the Northeast (24 points), and Hispanics (23 points).

Bible Reading

The incidence and frequency of Bible reading appears to have remained relatively stable during the recent years of religious upheaval. After peaking in the 1990s, the new millennium ushered in an era of fewer people reading the Bible, but they reflect a relatively committed core of readers.

Between 2010 and 2019, the average percentage of adults reading the Bible at least once a week, outside of church events, hovered in the 31% to 38% range, down roughly 10 percentage points from two decades earlier. At the start of the pandemic, 37% of adults were reading the Bible each week. That number dropped slightly to 33% in 2023. That dip is within the range of the norm during the course of the last few years.

Changes in Religious Behavior, 2017-2023			
	2017	2020	2023
Attend Christian church services weekly	34%	39%	33%
Read Bible weekly, other than at a church event	36%	37%	33%
<u>Sources:</u> 2017: FullView, American Culture & Faith Institute, N=5,000 adults 18+. 2020: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2020</i> , Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults 18+. 2023: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2023</i> , Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults 18+.			

Faith Connections

Even prior to the arrival of COVID-19, the Christian faith had been losing adherents across America. In 2017, 77% of adults associated with the Christian faith. That number was down to 72% just three years later (in 2020). By the end of the pandemic, only 68% self-identified as Christians.

Changes in Religious Affiliation, 2017-2023			
	2017	2020	2023
Self-identified Christian	77%	72%	68%
Protestant	55	51	50
Catholic	22	21	17
Non-Christian faith	8	8	10
Don'ts	15	20	22
Protestant Denominational Groups			
Evangelical	18	13	15
Mainline	13	8	21
Pentecostal/Charismatic	5	6	5
Non-denominational/Independent	19	21	16
<u>Sources:</u> 2017: FullView, American Culture & Faith Institute, N=5,000 adults 18+. 2020: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2020</i> , Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults 18+. 2023: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2023</i> , Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults 18+.			

From 2017 to 2023, adults aligned with a Protestant church had fallen from 55% to 50%. Adults associated with a Catholic church declined from 22% to 17%. During that same time frame, connection to faiths other than Christianity barely changed (8% in 2017, 10% in 2023). The niche that grew the most while Christianity has faltered has been the “Don’ts” category—people who don’t believe in God, don’t know if there is a God, or don’t care one way or the other. This non-religious segment expanded from 15% to 22%.

Within the Protestant family of churches, some types of churches fared better than others. From the start of the pandemic until now, the proportion of adults associated with an evangelical church has remained about the same (13% in 2020, 15% in 2023). The same relative stability characterizes Pentecostal and charismatic churches (moving from 6% to 5%). Non-denominational and independent

congregations experienced a small decline in popularity (21% down to 16%). The big winner over the course of the pandemic appears to be mainline churches. That group of denominations shot up from 8% to 21%.

An important note to add is despite its comparatively small size, the Islamic faith has continued to steadily grow in America. Blossoming from a statistical asterisk prior to 1990 (meaning less than one-half of 1% of the adult population), Islam now constitutes almost 2% of the adult public. That is still a tiny proportion, but the Muslim faith is now on par with the size of the Jewish, Mormon, and Pantheistic populations of the nation—and is continuing to expand.

The Worldview-Church Connection

As discussed in a [previous report](#) from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, the national incidence of adults possessing a biblical worldview declined by one-third over the course of the pandemic, decreasing from 6% to 4%.

Examining the relationship of church affiliation and worldview, the research indicates that the incidence of biblical worldview declined among attenders of evangelical churches from 21% to 14% since 2020—a decline of one-third, equal to the national pattern. Among adults attending a mainline church the incidence slipped from 8% to 6%. People who attend churches associated with Pentecostal or charismatic denominations are also less likely to have a biblical worldview now, showing a decrease from 16% to 13%. Adherents of the Catholic church remained unchanged, with just 1% holding the biblical worldview both before and after the COVID years.

Beliefs among Evangelicals

Over the last few decades, the theological consensus among evangelicals has dramatically eroded. Based on a study of 20 core attributes tested in the *American Worldview Inventory*, there were only two beliefs or behaviors for which at least four out of five evangelical church attenders conformed to the biblical view—80% believe God created the universe and 79% hold an orthodox, biblical view of God.

The survey identified a number of biblical perspectives that fail to resonate with most of the adults who attend evangelical churches. For instance, less than one out of three (31%) reject the claim that determining moral truth is up to each individual and that there are no moral absolutes. Another shocking revelation is that only four out of 10 attenders of evangelical churches (41%) contend that human life is sacred. That fits with the finding that barely half of evangelicals (55%) believe that having an abortion for any reason other than protecting the life of the mother or child is morally unacceptable.

Other biblical perspectives rejected by most evangelicals include the view that the best indicator of a successful life is consistent obedience to God (44%) and that world history is God's story and is consistently moving toward the fulfillment of His plan for humanity (48%).

Amazingly, barely half of evangelicals (55%) believe that people are born as sinners and can only be rescued from the consequences of that condition by Jesus Christ. The study also noted that one-third of the people who regularly attend evangelical churches are not born-again Christians—that is, people who believe they will live eternally in God's presence only because they confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior.

Beliefs among Mainline Adherents

Mainline Protestants generally do not hold views that reflect biblical teaching. Of the 20 beliefs and behaviors examined for this report, a majority of mainline-church attenders displayed a biblical point of view related to just six of those factors.

Some of the most exaggerated differences between mainline and biblical views included the following:

- 27% reject the teaching that moral truth must be determined by each individual because there are no moral absolutes.
- 39% believe human life is sacred. In fact, a minority of mainline adherents (42%) considers an abortion undertaken for any reason other than protecting the life of the mother or child to be morally unacceptable. And a mere 37% believe that human dignity comes from being a child of God.
- Mainline adults are more likely to deem life accomplishments to be an indicator of a successful life. Just one out of four (24%) considers consistent obedience to God to be the best indicator of success.
- Although they are historically connected to the Protestant Reformation, just one-third of mainline attenders (34%) believe that people are born into sin and can only be saved from their sins by Jesus Christ. In fact, a minority of mainline adults (46%) are classified as born-again Christians—individuals who will go to Heaven after they die solely because they confessed their sins to Jesus Christ and accepted Him as their savior.

Disturbing Belief Profile of Three Largest Christian Church Families				
Description of religious belief	All adults	Catholics	Evangelicals	Mainline
Strongly disagree that determining moral truth is up to each individual and there are no moral absolutes that apply to everyone, all the time	25%	27%	31%	27%
The best indicator of a successful life is consistent obedience to God	23	20	44	26
The universal purpose of life for all people is to wholeheartedly know, love, and serve God	36	34	61	42
People are born into sin and can only be saved from its consequences by Jesus Christ	27	21	55	34
When you have to decide right and wrong, source of guidance you're most likely to rely on is Bible	32	24	68	43
Human life is sacred.	29	35	41	39
The Bible is the true word of God that has no errors	46	56	70	55
God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect, just creator of the universe, rules that universe today	50	60	79	61
After death you will go to Heaven, only because confessed your sins, accepted Jesus as savior	35	31	66	46
<i>Source: American Worldview Inventory 2023, Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults 18+.</i>				

Beliefs among Catholics

The largest single denomination in the nation incorporates one out of every six adults (17%). Not only has the theological profile of the typical Catholic evolved in substantial ways over recent years, but most of that evolution has seen Catholics stray from scriptural perspectives.

Of the 20 beliefs and behaviors examined for this report, a majority of Catholics embraced the biblical point of view for just five of those measures. Those were acknowledging God as the creator of the universe (63%), describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful creator and ruler of the universe who is perfect and just (60%), citing humans as created by God but spiritually fallen (59%), believing the Bible is the true, error-free words of God (56%), and contending that telling a falsehood of minor consequence in order to protect one's best interests is morally unacceptable (51%).

The dismissal of biblical principles by Catholics is widespread and serious. One-quarter or less of Catholics believes the following:

- There are absolute moral truths; defining truth is not up to each individual.
- History is the story of God, and that story is moving toward fulfillment according to God's plan.
- A successful life is best described by consistent obedience to God.
- People are born sinners and can only be restored spiritually by Jesus Christ.
- Their primary source of moral guidance is the Bible.
- Human dignity comes from being a child of God.
- They are personally committed to serving God based on biblical principles and their spiritual calling and gifts.

Back to Basics

The Cultural Research Center report clearly demonstrates how far the present-day Christian Church has strayed from its biblical and historical foundations. It is no wonder that churches are struggling to have a positive influence on the culture when they hold beliefs and lifestyles that bear such a striking resemblance to those of people outside the Church.

There are certainly numerous failings that the Christian community in America must address with haste and intensity, one of which is the teaching and leadership provided by pastors of local churches.

"These statistics are a direct reflection of the theological perspectives of the teachers influencing American Christians," explained Dr. George Barna, who directed the research. "There is a striking parallel between the syncretistic views of pastors and those embraced by congregants. The world has clearly left its mark on the American Church. We desperately need a new era in which the Bible-believing portion of the body of Christ impresses that world through its commitment to godly truth and morals."

Barna emphasized the urgent need for Christian pastors to clean up their own theology and to provide strategic guidance that will restore influence to Christians in American society.

"Churches driven by numerical growth, national reputation, financial comfort, and safe programs are not what Jesus died on the cross to facilitate," the veteran researcher and author lamented. "We may be in the last days of the opportunity to freely pursue Jesus's call to make disciples. We are well past the time when we should abandon the emphasis on information transmission rather than life transformation. The last three decades have consumed the margin for error in ministry. We have

reached the point of ‘all hands on deck’ to rescue a hollowed-out Church. What is it going to take for Christ’s followers?”

As a first step toward helping American Christians reclaim the substance of their faith, Barna suggested that pastors launch a campaign to help people understand, embrace, and model what he calls the Seven Cornerstones of the Biblical Worldview.

“It’s a simple way to ease people into biblical faith while providing a solid foundation on which to expand and nurture their faith,” he explained. “What we have been doing for decades—topical preaching series, small group discussions, and the like—clearly is not working. We’re at 4% of the adult public, and just one out of every seven born-again Christians, owning a biblical worldview. What do we have to lose by changing our strategy?”

More information about the Seven Cornerstones of the Biblical Worldview can be found [here](#).

About the Research

This report examines data from the research through the lens of the nation’s four adult generations. For the study, people were assigned to generations based on specific age categories. Millennials were those born between 1984 and 2002, making them age 20 through 38 at the time of the survey. Gen X was defined as people born from 1965 through 1983, i.e., adults of ages 39 to 57 when the survey was conducted. Baby Boomers are those born between 1946 and 1964, constituting ages 58 through 76 in January of this year. Elders are represented by people born prior to 1946, covering everyone 77 or older.

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 2023 wave 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.

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

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. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.ArizonaChristian.edu.