

Survey Finds Most American Christians Are Actually Heretics

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OCTOBER 10, 2016

Evangelical writer **Eric Metaxas** remarked on **BreakPoint** last week that if Americans took a theology exam, their only hope of passing would be if God graded on a curve. He's right. In knowing both the content of the Bible and the doctrinal foundations of Christianity, we Americans aren't just at the bottom of our class. We are, as Ross Douthat argues in his book, "Bad Religion," a nation of heretics.

A survey of 3,000 people conducted by **LifeWay Research** and commissioned by Ligonier Ministries found that although Americans still overwhelmingly identify as "Christian," startling percentages of the nation embrace ancient errors condemned by all major Christian traditions. These are not minor points of doctrine, but core ideas that define Christianity itself. The really sad part? Even when we're denying the divinity of Christ, we can't keep our story straight. Americans talking about theology sound about as competent as country singers rapping.

We're an Embarrassment to Heretics Everywhere

Seven out of ten respondents in LifeWay's survey affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity—that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three Persons but one God, and six in ten agreed that Jesus is both human and divine. Their orthodoxy—and consistency—ended there. More than half went on to indicate that Jesus is "the first and greatest being created by God," a heresy known as Arianism, which the Council of Nicaea condemned in 325 A.D.

Of course, most of these accidental blasphemers aren't preparing to revise the resulting Nicene Creed and preach a creaturely Christ. Rather, bizarre contradictions like this illustrate how many Americans don't understand or even care what the Trinity means (although they say they believe in it, likely out of habits learned growing up in church).

The responses to other questions were no less heterodox or headache-inducing. Seventy percent of participants—who ranged across socioeconomic and racial backgrounds—agreed there's only one true God. Yet sixty-four percent also thought this God accepts the worship of all religions, including those that believe in many gods.

Two-thirds admitted that everyone sins a little bit, but still insisted that most people are good by nature, which directly contradicts scripture (See "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," and "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"). Over half said it's fair for God to exercise his wrath against sin, but seemed to waffle about which sins deserved wrath (not theirs!). Seventy-four percent said the "smallest sins" don't warrant eternal damnation, **in contrast to Jesus' brother**, who when writing at the Holy Spirit's inspiration taught that even one infraction of God's law is enough to sink someone. But really, what did he know?

A full 60 percent agreed that "everyone eventually goes to heaven," but half of those surveyed also checked the box saying that "only those who believe in Jesus will be saved." So either these folks are saying everyone will eventually believe in Jesus, or they hired a monkey to take the survey for them.

Evangelicals Didn't Even Study for This Test

It's one thing for Americans in general to lack basic theological knowledge. After all, many of the **75 percent of the country who call themselves Christians** don't take their faith that seriously, and the rest are either members of other religions, or have no religion. But what about those who wear their Christianity on their

sleeve? Surely such a group—evangelicals, for instance—would perform much better.

That's what the folks at LifeWay thought, too. In a similar project conducted two years ago, researchers asked participants to self-identify, resulting in an inflated number of professing "evangelicals. Not surprisingly, this group Christmas-treed the survey, espousing all kinds of unorthodox views.

So this year, LifeWay used more stringent criteria for evangelical faith, as defined by some group called the National Association of Evangelicals. Only participants who called the Bible their highest authority, said personal evangelism is important, and indicated that trusting in Jesus' death on the cross is the only way of salvation, were labeled "evangelical." They totaled 586 survey-takers.

Everyone expected them to perform better than most Americans. No one expected them to perform *worse*. Seven in ten evangelicals—*more than the population at large*—said that Jesus was the first being God created. Fifty-six percent agreed that "the Holy Spirit is a divine force but not a personal being." They also saw a huge increase in evangelicals (28 percent, up from 9 percent) who indicated that the Third Person of the Trinity is not equal with God the Father or Jesus, a **direct contradiction of orthodox Christianity**. The Holy Spirit is, of course, used to being overlooked. But sources say he seemed bummed about these results.

As before, it's really the contradictory answers, not the outright heresies, that should most concern us. By definition, the evangelicals in this survey believed that "only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation." Yet nearly half agreed that "God accepts the worship of all religions including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam."

Two-thirds of evangelicals—more than Americans in general—said heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones. That such a high percentage of Billy Graham's camp is now **talking like Rob Bell** isn't even the real story. The most striking thing is how many of these folks evidently

see no contradiction between their casual universalism and the evangelical creed that salvation comes through faith in Christ alone.

“There is a lot in this survey which shows that the respondents are not even being internally consistent,” Timothy Larson, a professor of Christian thought at Wheaton College, told *Christianity Today*. He suspects the wording of the survey, itself, may have thrown off the participants.

But could it also have something to do with the fact that two out of five evangelicals say “worshipping alone or with family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church”? Come to think of it, should we marvel that so many Christians shrug off church when so few congregations teach the foundational doctrines of the faith, or even delve very deeply into the book from which those doctrines come?

The Bible Ain’t a Lucky Rabbit’s Foot

Former *Newsday* religion reporter Kenneth Briggs [recently told Religion News Service](#) that the faith he finds in “mega-type churches” is a “Bible-less,” “alternative version of Christianity.” Scripture, he says, has become “a museum exhibit, hallowed as a treasure but enigmatic and untouched.”

In his book, “The Invisible Bestseller: Searching for the Bible in America,” he describes a two-year pilgrimage across the country, visiting hundreds of churches to find Christians who were still literate in their own sacred text.

The Bible remains phenomenally popular, of course. Practically everyone has one in his or her home, and many families own four or five. But Briggs characterizes our love for the Bible as love for an “artifact,” a “keepsake,” or a lucky “rabbit’s foot.” This talisman of faith mainly stays on the shelf or mantle next to the urn filled with grandpa’s ashes.

Briggs says it was in a prison, not a church, where he encountered the most vibrant and intimate familiarity with God’s Word. Most everywhere else, his observations confirmed a [recent Barna survey](#) conducted for the American Bible Society, which found that less than half the country can name the first five books

of the Old Testament, and that a similar number think John the Baptist was one of Jesus's twelve disciples.

Why does it matter that we've become a nation of doctrinal dunces? What harm is there in flunking Christianity 101? Well, for Christians, the answer is obvious. If we really believe what we profess—that the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the single most important fact of history and eternity—then we'd better improve our grade. Knowing who the God we claim to worship is can no longer be a third priority if we want the world to take us seriously as his followers.

Recall also that Jesus told us knowing the truth sets us free. Believing lies enslaves people. It should be a priority for us to continually seek truth, rather than comfort. Christ also told us the greatest commandment **includes loving God with our minds**. That means dusting off grandpa's Bible, and revisiting a catechism or confession.

For those who don't profess Christianity, gaining a basic understanding of the creeds and Scriptures of the religion **that built our civilization** isn't a bad idea, either. As Indian Christian philosopher Vishal Mangalwadi writes, the Bible created the modern world by making the West a reading and thinking civilization, and by grounding this reading and thinking in the idea that truth is knowable.

In the subduction zone between a nominally Christian culture and a distinctly post-Christian one, sparks are flying—in florist's shops, bakeries, universities, legislatures, and bathrooms nationwide. Those who want to live in peace with the still-sizeable Christian remnant need to move past lazy dismissals of religious "bigotry," and learn why Christians have come to the conclusions we have for 2,000 years.

The results of this survey ought to embarrass all of us. But they should also serve as a kick in the pants to re-familiarize ourselves with our own religion—or at

least our own history. There's no excuse to be a nation of heretics. But even that is preferable to being a nation of ignoramuses.