



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on November 28, 2011

Barna Study: 41% Can't Point to a Most Influential Christian Leader

Barna's latest study —based on telephone interviews of a random sample of 1,007 adults in the continental United States, aged 18 and older — reveals that no single Christian leader has emerged to a level of influence that captures the attention of the nation. Indeed, when asked to identify the single most influential Christian leader today, 41 percent of respondents were unable to think of anyone meeting that description.



The researchers relied heavily on what they called “top-of-mind” awareness measures, according to Lynn Hanacek, Barna Group vice president of research and project director:

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It is a type of unaided awareness measurement — meaning that respondents answer on their own with no response options presented to them. It reflects the very first name that comes to mind — and is typically given even greater importance since it suggests that the person, brand or organization has made a lasting impression.

Consequently, most Americans can name someone they consider to be a highly influential Christian leader, but few leaders have made that type of impression. Therefore, the list of influential Christians is a short one. Hanacek continued,

Looking at the big picture, only a limited number of individuals come to mind when Americans consider leadership of Christians on a national scale. However, bear in mind that a different type of measurement such as aided awareness, in which respondents are asked if they ever heard of a specific name, may have yielded different results.

That short list includes what many could consider dubious entries. While 19 percent of Americans named Billy Graham (chosen more by those aged 66 or older) as the most influential Christian leader, followed by nine percent naming Pope Benedict, some people that respondents opted for are not church leaders at all, but rather public figures. George W. Bush, Oprah Winfrey, and Maya Angelou each claimed one percent of U.S. adults who considered them Christian leaders. And, surprisingly, eight percent (nearly the same proportion as those who think the Pope is the most influential) consider President Barack Obama to fill this role.

Five percent, or one in every 20 U.S. adults, think Joel Osteen is the most significant Christian leader — more than double the two percent garnered by both Charles Stanley and Joyce Meyer.

The results were alarming for those who hold Christianity to be essential for their lives and for the



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functioning of the nation. Forty-one percent of those responding were either unsure, or did not name a single influential Christian leader. This statistic suggests that the church has become too secularized or too watered-down to be effective. Agnostics, atheists, or those of a non-Christian faith were unable to point to anyone as a Christian leader of influence.

The relevance of a healthy spiritual life is waning, and the role of Christianity in America is taking a back seat. But Barna's study did show that the top leaders named have a strong media presence, and that those aspiring to lead on a national scale must make effective use of all technologies.

Other studies illustrate that [religious advocacy](#) in Washington is increasing, as reported by Dave Bohon in *The New American*. But another Barna survey reveals that Americans who call themselves Christians still [wrestle](#) with important spiritual questions. In that study, only one out of five professing Christians claims to be "totally committed to investing in their spiritual development," and relatively few of those confessing sin are serious about abandoning sin and submitting control of their lives to God. As the number of [broken homes](#) is rising at an alarming rate, the level of confusion and uncertainty about spiritual life becomes proportionately more apparent. And the consequences are being felt across the nation.

Indeed, the inclusion of Oprah Winfrey, who casts a very wide net in her efforts to appeal to people "who don't want to be religious," illustrates the widespread lack of understanding of Christianity. According to the [Washington Post](#) for May 24, Winfrey said of her self-described role as spiritual leader,

I'm very clear about what my role and purpose is. This isn't about me. I am the messenger to deliver the message of redemption, of hope, of forgiveness, of gratitude, of evolving people to the best of themselves. So I am on my personal journey. My personal journey is to fulfill the highest expression of myself here as a human being here on earth.

Critics have noted that this statement is a far cry from the biblical mandate that man's only purpose on earth is to glorify God. Winfrey has also promoted the decidedly un-Christian book, *The Secret*, which claims that human thought is the source of all human reality.

If nearly half of Americans cannot name an influential Christian leader, analysts question if it is the result of failed leadership in the churches, or failure on the part of individual Christians to know and understand the role of Christ in their lives. Or both. The American Founders were not confused about the role of Christ in their lives, or the necessity of Christianity in the operations of the new republic they established. In a *New American* article entitled [Revolutionary Virtue](#), the idea of the new nation's inherent connection to religion was explored, beginning with the famous 1798 quote by John Adams, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."



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