



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on April 14, 2015

New Research: What Do Americans Really Think About Jesus?

Christians may be under physical attack in much of the world and under legal attack in America, but Jesus Christ continues to inspire interest. Yet with modern portrayals of Him ranging from the reverent to the irreverent to the risible, what do Americans really think about Jesus? The Barna Group research company aimed to find out, and it has [just released data](#) on five key questions on the matter.



Did Jesus exist?

While a few militant secularists will insist Jesus is akin to a mythological figure, the vast majority of Americans — 92 percent — acknowledge He existed. And this belief is high across age groups. The figures are: Among the oldest demographic (“Elders”), 96 percent; Baby Boomers, 95; Generation X-ers, 91; and Millennials, 87.

Is Jesus Divine?

It’s not surprising in our secular age that, while 83 percent of Americans [describe themselves](#) as “Christian,” many of them don’t accept their faith’s central tenet: Jesus’ divinity. Writes Barna, “Most adults — not quite six in 10 — believe Jesus was God (56%), while about one-quarter say he was only a religious or spiritual leader like Mohammed or the Buddha (26%). The remaining one in six say they aren’t sure whether Jesus was divine (18%).”

Also not unexpected is that Christian faith has waned through recent generations. The figures, the first reflecting belief in Jesus’ divinity, the second that he was merely a religious leader, and the third the unsure category (all figures in this piece represent percentages, unless otherwise indicated), are:

- Elders — 62, 18, 20
- Boomers — 58, 25, 17
- Generation X-ers — 55, 28, 17
- Millennials — 48, 35, 17

Was Jesus Sinless?

With only 46 percent of Americans saying Jesus was sinless but, as mentioned, 56 percent believing He is God, it seems some citizens have a strange conception of “godly behavior” (of course, we could also wonder how some people conceptualize “divine”). Interestingly, however, the generational differences on this issue are mostly negligible, though Millennials do deviate from the faith-oriented position somewhat more than do the other demographics. The first figure below indicates the percentage of respondents who agree, strongly or somewhat, with the statement “When He lived on Earth, Jesus Christ was human and committed sins, like other people”; the second figure represents those who disagree, strongly or somewhat.



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- Elders — 52, 45
- Boomers — 52, 46
- Generation X-ers — 49, 48
- Millennials — 56, 41
- All adults — 52, 46

Have you made a personal commitment to Jesus?

While 62 percent of Americans answer yes to the above, this is where great variation among demographic groups, and interesting trends, become apparent. Women, blacks, the poor, and elders are significantly more likely to answer in the affirmative than, respectively, are men, whites, the wealthy, and the young. The percentages of those answering yes are:

- Elders — 71
- Boomers — 65
- Generation X-ers — 59
- Millennials — 46
- Men—56
- Women — 68
- Whites — 60
- Blacks — 80
- Hispanics — 61
- All non-white Americans — 65

Annual Income:

- Less than \$50K — 65
- \$50K-\$100K — 63
- Greater than \$100K — 53

What gets one to Heaven: faith, works, or God's love for man?

Barna found that, among Americans who haven't "made a commitment to Jesus," the most common perception is that their good deeds will earn them their stripes in the afterlife. As for Americans who have made such a commitment, there was varied opinion. Sixty-three percent believe they'll go to Heaven because they've confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as savior; 5 percent believe they'll enter Paradise because they try to obey the Ten Commandments; 8 percent because they're "basically a good person"; 7 percent "because God loves all people and will not let them perish"; and 15 percent say they don't know whether they'll go to Heaven or not. There also were two percent of respondents who said they were not going to Heaven; presumably, these are leftists in the midst of an epiphany (yes, that's a joke ... I think).

There were some generational differences on this question as well, a main one being that Millennials "committed" to Jesus are less likely than previous generations to believe He is the path to Heaven. The complete data set can be found at [Barna](#).



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As to the research's meaning, Barna Group president David Kinnaman says that while some suggest younger Americans may become more serious about church and faith as they age, they simply are not as connected to Christ as are older generations. But, really, the apple isn't falling far from the tree. As Kinnaman also points out, "As much of our previous research shows, Americans' dedication to Jesus is, in most cases, a mile wide and an inch deep."

And older Barna research sheds light on the reason why. In 2002, the company conducted a survey revealing that "If it feels good, do it" is no longer just a counter-culture rallying cry — it's the governing principle for most modern Americans. Finding that moral relativism reigns today, Barna [wrote](#) at the time, "By a 3-to-1 margin (64% vs. 22%) adults said truth is always relative to the person and their situation. The perspective was even more lopsided among teenagers, 83% of whom said moral truth depends on the circumstances, and only 6% of whom said moral truth is absolute." The company also found that "the most common basis for moral decision-making was doing whatever feels right or comfortable in a situation."

As the above generational divide indicates, the problem of relativism is worsening rapidly. Even more to the point here, only 32 percent of "born again" adults believed in moral absolutes. More shockingly, a mere nine percent of "born again" teens did. (Among secular teens the figure was four percent.) This reflects modern society's complete failure to teach "First Things," and it points to a deeper philosophical problem that strikes at the essence of faith.

There have been many articles over the years asking why, for instance, evangelical youth fall away from Christianity. The usual points relating to secular messages in media, entertainment, and academia, and to the corruptive nature of our culture are made, but the heart of the matter is invariably missed: Moral relativism renders Christianity irrelevant and incomprehensible.

After all, the very basis of the faith is that Jesus died on the cross for man's sins and thus redeemed us. But if everything is relative, there can be no sin — only perspective or preference.

And then there was no reason for Jesus to sacrifice himself in the first place.

Moreover, Christianity may teach that Jesus is the way, the life, and the Truth, but how likely are people to believe this if they don't believe in Truth to begin with? In fact, why would they even search for Truth — a process otherwise known as philosophical pursuit — if they don't believe it exists? This is why moderns' ignorance of, and disinterest in, moral philosophy is wholly explicable: Such pursuit makes no more sense than seeking a treasure in the cold depths while convinced no treasure exists. It would be an exercise in futility — and insanity.

And this explains Americans' decision-making process of choice and why moderns are so bereft of reason. Reason is not an answer but a method by which answers may be found; if there were no Truth, however, there would be no answers to be found in the moral realm (in fact, there'd be no moral realm) and, therefore, no reason for reason. And without Truth to use as a decision-making yardstick, moderns use the best measure they have left: emotion.

Ergo, if it feels good, do it.

And without a need to be redeemed from sin or a need of moral teaching (because there is no perceived morality), there's no perceived need for Christianity. And people generally discard what they don't need.

Besides, if emotion is the ultimate arbiter, Christianity and its limits on man's appetites aren't very



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appealing. One might rather be a hedonist.

So Americans may say they're committed to Christ because that feels right. But abiding by what some medieval types still call "God's laws" doesn't feel right. Thus, at the end of the day we're epitomized by an old *New Yorker* cartoon in which the Devil greeted some new arrivals in Hell by saying, "Down here, we just want you to know, there is no right or wrong; only what works for you."



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