



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 30, 2010

Study Finds Faith Less Important to Americans Than Health, Wealth, Leisure

As individuals and families face tough economic times and uncertain futures, how have priorities shifted for Americans? A recent study by the Barna Group, a polling organization that researches the nation's faith trends, offers some surprising — and potentially troubling — findings.

While family and faith have traditionally been cited as key priorities in the lives of Americans, the latest Barna survey, which randomly queried around 1,000 adult Americans in late January and early February, found that these two essential elements of stable society have taken a hit over the last four years.



While family continues to be the top concern for a majority of Americans, its importance has weakened somewhat in the last four years, with 45 percent calling it the most important priority in their lives, compared to 51 percent in 2006. Nonetheless, Americans continue to count solid marriages and families as their chief priority.

Perhaps most alarming is the finding that while a majority of Americans call themselves Christians, only 12 percent now cite faith as the chief priority in their lives. What the researchers found surprising was that as the economy has tightened significantly, Americans seem to be looking elsewhere for answers. "Despite the fact that more than three-quarters of adults identify themselves as Christians and nearly nine out of 10 Americans believe in God," noted the Barna report, "matters of 'faith' are surprisingly rare when Americans choose their highest priority in life."

Even among those groups considered active Christians, faith was not listed as a high priority, with less than one-fifth of those self-identifying as Protestants, churchgoers, and non-evangelical born again Christians calling faith a top concern. Among those identifying themselves as Catholic, only four percent said faith was their highest concern, which is only slightly higher than those the poll identified as "unchurched adults" (two percent).

Only those identifying themselves as evangelical Christians seemed to embrace their faith as an important concern, with 39 percent saying it is their chief priority in life.

Of the surprisingly small proportion of Americans who place a priority on faith, David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group and leader of the study said: "The gap is vast between self-described affiliation with Christianity and ascribing highest priority to that faith. When it comes to why so much of American religion seems merely skin-deep, this gap between what people call themselves and what they prioritize is perhaps most telling."

Of other priorities, the Barna research found that more Americans are focusing their attention on



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health, leisure, personal comfort, and lifestyle than just a few years ago, with these cumulative elements rising from only 13 percent in 2006 to 20 percent in the most recent Barna polling.

Similarly, more Americans have been prioritizing wealth, financial stability, money, career success, and paying bills, with these priorities rising from nine percent in 2006 to 17 percent in the current Barna research.

Although conventional wisdom says that individuals focus on the “basics” of faith and family in difficult financial times, the Barna study suggests this may not be so. “This research either calls that thinking into question or it tells us that the economy has not been bad enough to cause a significant reprioritization of family and faith,” said Kinnaman.

While the reasons remain unclear, Americans appear to be “focusing increasingly on themselves, trying to solve their problems by being more ‘balanced’ or by simply working harder,” Kinnaman said. “Since the nation’s character is shaped by the collective aspirations of its residents, the economy has revealed Americans’ fixation with individualism and their illusions of being self-made.”

Kinnaman pointed out that the latest study only measures how the economy has impacted Americans’ top priorities, and said the Barna Group is currently compiling a broader body of data to determine how the economy may be impacting the religious beliefs and behaviors of Americans.



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