



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on February 17, 2011

Study: Why Your Church Is the Way It Is

Research conducted in 2010 by The Barna Group (TBG) revealed six “megathemes” indicating patterns that shape the Christian Church in America.

TBG, a California-based market research firm providing primary research, is best known for tracking the role of faith and religion in America. Its December report analyzed findings of the year’s research into America’s current religious environment.

The insights were drawn from more than 5000 interviews. Here’s what it found:



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- The Christian Church is becoming less theologically literate.
- Christians are becoming more ingrown and less outreach-oriented.
- Growing numbers of people are less interested in spiritual principles and more desirous of learning pragmatic solutions for life.
- Among Christians, interest in participating in community action is escalating.
- The postmodern insistence on tolerance is winning over the Christian Church.
- The influence of Christianity on culture and individual lives is largely invisible.

Many of the group’s findings highlighted the disparate beliefs between older Americans and the generations known as “Mosaics” and “Baby Busters.” To understand the research, it helps to understand Mosaics.

Dr. Michael England, in his research transcript [Meet the Mosaics](#), defined them as individuals born between 1984 and 2002, and as having lives more multi-faceted and consequently more stressful than ever. They’re non-linear thinkers, rather than users of logic and rationale, and embrace a “whatever works” attitude, believing there’s no absolute truth, and tending to “customize” their spirituality accordingly.

The transcript of interviews with this generation’s members notes a non-negotiable facet of the Mosaic lifestyle — the desire for fresh and stimulating experiences. Consequently, they live in a state of instability, and are constantly changing heroes and role models.

.....they also adopt contradiction such as this, Most consider themselves deeply spiritual, but few are pursuing depth beyond attending church. 75 percent say they are searching for life purpose, but half believe the main purpose of life is enjoyment.

They seldom develop personal philosophies without bouncing them off members of what England calls their “tribes,” small, constantly changing groups of friends. Instead of a church family, the “tribe” brings some sense of order and stability to their otherwise chaotic world. Mosaics are not surprisingly, driven by electronic media, and demand instant gratification.



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Who woulda seen that coming?

The “whatever works” approach to making moral decisions like cheating, viewing online porn, having sex, or experimenting with alcohol or drugs played out like this: 53 percent of those teens claiming to be “born again” admit to participating in at least one of these risky behaviors in the last three months, compared to 59 percent of unbelievers. Not much difference.

Mosaics have little positive feedback from parents or church leaders about how to understand the supernatural. Despite widespread participation in churches, only one of every five teens recall church teaching in the last year that helped shape their understanding of the supernatural.

Today’s teenagers have a higher likelihood of participating in the life of a local church than adults do, yet we also found that they’re not coming to the church for a religious experience per se. They’re coming for a relational experience with their tribe — that’s the group of anywhere from a half dozen to a dozen people who are their closest friends. The key thing in the lives of Mosaics is experiences, and they want to share those experiences with people they know and trust. So, if their tribe meets at the church, maybe they have a spiritual experience, maybe not. It doesn’t matter because ultimately they’re doing it for relational purposes.

When considering that as Mosaics mature, they comprise a larger portion of the population, Barna’s findings start to make sense. But these are disturbing thoughts for church leaders and parents.

The beliefs espoused by Mosaics and Busters contribute heavily to the weakening of Christians’ theological literacy. For instance, “while most people regard Easter as a religious holiday, only a minority of adults associate Easter with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Or, “few adults believe that their faith is meant to be the focal point of their life or to be integrated into every aspect of their existence. Further, a growing majority believe the Holy Spirit is a symbol of God’s presence or power, but not a living entity.”

Alarmingly, TBG posits:

...as Busters and Mosaics ascend to numerical and positional supremacy in churches across the nation, the data suggest that biblical literacy is likely to decline significantly. The theological free-for-all that is encroaching in Protestant churches nationwide suggests the coming decade will be a time of unparalleled theological diversity and inconsistency.

Barna’s findings also revealed that in spite of technological advances, Christians are becoming more isolated, and less likely to converse about faith. And to top it off, TBG states that atheists are becoming more *strategic* in their worldview, and that religious plurality is increasing, driven by education and immigration, a trend given little attention in research.

Americans tend to compartmentalize their spirituality, separating it from other areas of life, and have developed a superficial approach to faith.

Among adults the areas of growing importance are lifestyle comfort, success, and personal achievements. Those dimensions have risen at the expense of investment in both faith and family. Spiritual practices like contemplation, solitude, silence, and simplicity are rare. Americans consider survival in the present to be much more significant than eternal security and spiritual possibilities.

Christians are becoming more open to community service activities, but TBG warns that unless they develop a strong spiritual base for such services, doing good works because it’s socially “good” will



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produce little staying power, an idea expressed in the Bible itself.

The most alarming findings surfaced in what the group termed “postmodern insistence on tolerance.” Christians are largely biblically illiterate, and afraid of appearing judgmental. The result is an environment of limited accountability, and a decrease in the number of issues where Christians believe the Church should be uncompromising, instead of adherence to the exacting New Testament model that Christ demanded of his Church. The resulting modern Church is tolerant of a sweeping collection of morally and spiritually suspect behaviors and philosophies, and fuzzy boundaries.

TBG continued with another revealing idea, “The idea of love has been redefined to mean the absence of conflict and confrontation, as if there are no moral absolutes that are worth fighting for. That may not be surprising in a Church in which a minority believes there are moral absolutes dictated by the scriptures.”

In contrast, the Scriptures demand obedience, and present non-negotiable stands on certain issues, but modern Christians are losing sight of where to draw the line.

Perhaps saddest of all, TBG found that Americans find little “value added” to society by their Christian counterparts, yet have no problem identifying faults of the Church.

Barna concluded that what used to be “universally known truths about Christianity” are now unknown mysteries to a large, growing number of Americans, that Christians are becoming more spiritually isolated from non-Christians, that Christians are more self-indulgent than self-sacrificing, that each Christian does not know his faith well enough to defend it, and that in our fast-paced culture we make important snap decisions in everyday life with incomplete biblical information.

Kenda Creasy Dean, author of [Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church](#), came to similar conclusions about teens:

Here is the gist of what you are about to read: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith — but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.

One more thing: we’re responsible.

TBG’s research adds the scientific data to support Dean’s position, but what do we do?

Kevin Withem, pulpit minister at the Westover Hills Church of Christ in Austin, Texas, had this to say:

When reading Barna’s report, I was initially struck by the importance of the first of his six themes. The lack of biblical literacy in the Church undergirds why we have problems with the other five points, and is the reason, in large part, behind most Church problems. The prophet Hosea warned “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge,” and his words were partly directed at the priests who had failed to teach God’s word. We live in a world of bullet points and summaries, but the Bible can’t be studied that way. And if the Word informs our faith, it follows that our faith suffers when we’re not informed. Biblical illiteracy is a huge problem.

The obvious solution is seen in Biblical and Christian history, to return to God and his infallible and perfect teaching. To know that, knowledge of the Word is paramount.



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