

# Postmodern Christians

## *Evangelicals More Likely to Conform to Culture Than to Influence It.*

George Barna, director of research at Arizona Christian University's Cultural Research Center, released new data earlier this month that "reveals the limitations of Christian evangelicalism in American society."

The events from recent years have caused "millions of Americans to realize just how depraved American society has become," the report stated. "Corrupt politicians, dishonest journalists and media outlets, broken social institutions, immoral religious leaders, unconstitutional government programs and policies, and more, have generated non-stop headlines highlighting the decadence of American society and the demise of the United States."

It went on to contend that "The depth of the depravity is shocking" and that it's "indisputable" that the "decline is a direct result of the spiritual collapse of Christianity in the nation"—particularly the way in which the evangelical community has changed over time.

According to Barna, not only are there fewer evangelicals than some reports have claimed there to be, but many of them "are far less biblical in their thinking . . . and tend to vote in far fewer numbers than expected."

The data, said guest host and former Rep. Jody Hice on Thursday's "Washington Watch," "also strongly suggests that evangelicals are more likely to be shaped by the culture around them than they are to influence or evangelize it." These results are "devastating," he sighed. And it begs several questions: What led to this? What does it say about the current church? And what is the way forward?

Barna, who also serves as a senior fellow for Family Research Council, joined Hice to discuss the research. He explained how, unlike some data that finds up to 40% of people (or 100 million Americans) could be evangelical, his own research found that only "10% of adults actually meet the theological criteria for what makes somebody an evangelical," which is "closer to maybe 25 million people." And so, while that's still a significant num-

ber, it's clearly a big difference in terms of how many evangelicals there are in American society.

But even for those who do meet the theological criteria, part of today's issue is that many evangelicals "don't really buy the Bible at face value. Many of their beliefs are not consistent," argued Barna.

He continued, "I'm not saying [they're] a lost cause or they're bad people, but there's a lot of misinformation in the minds and hearts of people who, even when you define them theologically as evangelicals, they're not buying into what the Bible teaches and they're not living it out." This comes in conflict with the heart of what evangelicalism is supposed to do, Barna contended.

According to the study, Hice emphasized, "Many evangelicals perhaps get the big picture of Christianity, but they struggle in the sense of trying to apply those core principles of the Bible to everyday situations." As a result, they fall victim to using secular strategies, such as using the "catchy slogans of feel-good behaviors as promoted by our culture in which we live."

Barna agreed, and he noted how these same people will "believe in the biblical notion of God," as well as the fact "that God is the basis of all truth," and "that the purpose of life is to know, love, and serve God with all their heart, mind, and soul."

"They believe," he continued, that "the universe was created by God . . . [and] the reality of Jesus Christ, that He lived on earth . . . [and] that Satan exists." The issue is not necessarily in what they believe, Barna explained, but that the fact is, "once you get away from those kind of Sunday School 101 teachings . . . things get pretty murky."

The nature and application of moral truth, the definition of what the gospel is, and the deeper theological questions that shape our passions and



behaviors are "things that don't get talked about quite as much in our churches. And those are the kinds of issues that relate to not only our lives, but also the political issues of the day."

Digging a little deeper, Barna specifically mentioned how "issues such as abortion, transgenderism, and so forth" are "where evangelicals really struggle to make the connection between biblical truth" and questions of identity, purpose, and Kingdom advancement. "There's a degree where their theology comes from the Bible," Hice analyzed, "but [then] taking that theology into the world is a different matter altogether."

Barna further discussed how evangelicals are often stereotyped as people who get in your face about their Christian beliefs. But as he then pointed out, "Our data is showing [that] things have changed over the last 40 years," and "that's not what theological evangelicals are like anymore, if they were that way previously."

For instance, the research shows that evangelicals are significantly unlikely to speak with people who hold different opinions than them. And when it comes to voting, "[W]e find that . . . more than a third of them are not likely to vote currently in this

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upcoming election.”

These realities caused Barna to take a step back and compare evangelicals to another group of Christians called SAGE Cons (*spiritually active, governance engaged conservatives*). As opposed to evangelicals, data demonstrates that SAGE Cons are far more likely to consistently promote their faith—not just through evangelism, but in all aspects of life.

“Well over 90% of SAGE Cons voted in each of the last two elections,” Barna stated, whereas evangelicals didn’t even come “close to that number.” Additionally, he emphasized that SAGE Cons were much more likely to be the ones “doing things like boycotting products or services that support a progressive ideology. Most evangelicals aren’t willing to do that.”

These are only “some of the ways where, [when] we look at ... the reality of evangelicalism in America today,” we can see that it’s “far different than the fear-mongering going on in the journalistic realm related to evangelicals, but also perhaps pretty far removed from what many of our pastors and church leaders think is happening with” this specific group.

And frankly, Barna added, the data also revealed that “most evangelicals don’t even attend what’s usually thought of as being an evangelical church.”

But perhaps most notable about these findings, Hice highlighted, is that if “professing evangelicals ... don’t have a biblical worldview, and they are not being salt and light in their communities ... [then] they’re not evangelizing.” He posed the question, “Did [the] study in any way determine what kind of impact that [lack of spiritual engagement] is having on our current culture and society?”

Unfortunately, Barna responded, it’s allowed “the media [to] ... become the evangelists of America, rather than disciples of Jesus,” who are called to go “out and [do] everything they can to share the love and the saving grace of Jesus with lost sinners.”

But in reality, “what’s happening is ... there’s now an evangelistic vacuum in American society,” where both evangelicals and the rest of society are “taking their cues from the media”—which also happens to be one of the primary forces seeking to silence Christianity. This, Hice stated, is an “indescribably frightening” thought.

Ultimately, Barna contended, “[I]f the followers of Jesus aren’t willing to go out and talk about Him, who’s going to do it?” Evidently, he added, the “journalists aren’t going to be the ones who are professing the gospel to America.” All this points to the fact that “we’ve got some major issues ... to address.” As for first steps, Barna urged, “The best place to start is

within our families.”

It’s parents, he underscored, who have the responsibility of “doing everything they can ... to raise their children up to be spiritual champions, to hear the gospel, to know the gospel, to embrace the gospel, to live the gospel, to share the gospel. That’s our job as parents and grandparents. Churches can support us in doing that, but it’s got to start in the home.”

Beyond the home, Barna expressed it’s necessary for Christians to use their voices in the public square—which, as previously acknowledged, is where the difference between SAGE Cons and evangelicals becomes most obvious.

Barna went on to point out that one of the most significant distinctions is that SAGE Cons are committed to the belief that “they should take their faith into every dimension of our culture, and so they vote at much higher rates than other people. They talk about issues with other people. They study the issues much more deeply.”

Barna also explained how SAGE Cons tend to “read the Bible consistently” and better apply it to “today’s issues, to current events, to what political leaders are saying and doing.” These factors are crucial to consider, Barna argued, because “today’s political leaders are major shapers of our culture. They have a dramatic level of influence on people’s minds and hearts and souls, whether we want that to be the case or not.”

“Biblical truth is vitally important to SAGE Cons,” he asserted. “And when they vote ... they’re concerned about” getting “biblical perspectives better represented in our public policies, in our laws, in our public institutions that we fund.”

Again, Barna insisted, “There’s a growing distinction between” SAGE Cons and evangelicals. “And frankly, a lot of it is because theologically, evangelicals are not buying everything that the Bible has to sell. They’re not willing to represent the Kingdom of Christ with power and authority and confidence and consistency in the way that they used to.”

Considering this, Hice asked, “What’s the greatest need for the Christian community in America today?” According to Barna, we need to “sit back and take a deep and intense and realistic look at your own faith.”

In the Bible, he concluded, there are a few ways in which “Jesus identified what it takes to be a disciple of His.” By applying that to Christian communities, Barna insisted, believers concerned about being bold in their faith can understand how they must strive to center their lives on “obeying biblical principles ... loving other disciples ... producing spiritual fruit,” and “loving God far beyond anything else in” their lives.