

## **Fewer Christians—Lessening Christian Beliefs**

By Bob Young

The second week of March 2009 marked the release of the results of two new surveys which address the state of Christianity in the U.S.

First, the Barna Group released the results of a survey related to biblical worldview. Among items included in the definition of a biblical worldview were whether absolute moral truth exists, the accuracy of the Bible, whether Satan is real, and the identity and character of Jesus. Similar surveys have been done at 5-year intervals, providing comparisons.

For a person to have a biblical worldview, it was necessary to affirm all of the items included in the survey. The results show that only 9% of American adults have a biblical worldview. Among “born again Christians” only 19% held such a view. The same questions were asked in past surveys. The percentage of adults with a biblical worldview, as defined in the survey, has remained generally unchanged for more than a decade.

Some of the results comparing the general population and the “born again” group are interesting.

- 34% believe that moral truth is absolute and unaffected by the circumstances; 46% of the “born again” group believes in absolute moral truth.
- Half of adults believe the Bible is accurate in its principles; 79% of the “born again” concur.
- 27% of adults are convinced Satan is a real force; 40% of the “born again” hold that perspective.
- 40% of the respondents believe Jesus Christ lived a sinless life compared to 62%.

While worldview changes are minimal, the sense is that our nation is slowly becoming less certain of basic truths that define Christianity. One indication of this fact is that less than one-half of one percent (5 of every 1000) of adults aged 18 to 23 have a biblical worldview.

A second study, conducted by researchers at the Program on Public Values at Trinity College (Hartford, CT) and funded by Lilly Endowment and Posen Foundation, asked about the percentage of Americans identifying as Christians. The number has dropped dramatically from 86% in 1990 to 76% in the most recent study. Those who identify themselves as Christians are increasingly dropping denominational labels in favor of less specific labels such as nondenominational, evangelical, or born again. Those with no religion are the fastest growing group in the U.S.—now 15%.

The increase in people labeling themselves in generic Christian terms corresponds to the decline in people identifying themselves as Protestant. The number of people calling themselves mainline Protestants dropped from 19% in 1990 to 13%. The number of people calling themselves generically Protestant dropped from 17 million in 1990 to 5 million. Every Christian group has decreased as a percentage of the U.S. population. The number of people

who use nondenominational terms has gone from 194,000 in 1990 to more than 8 million. This represents a shift toward a “generic ‘soft’ evangelicalism”. The survey also substantiated several general trends: the slipping importance of denominations, the growing number of people who say they have no religion and the increase in religious minorities including Muslims, Mormons, Wicca and paganism.

The only group that grew in every U.S. state since the 2001 survey was people saying they had no religion; the survey says this group is now 15% of the population. The report says that the country has a "growing non-religious or irreligious minority" (27% said they did not expect to have a religious funeral or service when they died, 30% of those who had married said their service was not religious).

In sum, the findings show or lead to the conclusion that...

- 1) Christianity is on the decline in the U.S.
- 3) Mormonism is keeping up with population growth, and Islam and New Age/Wicca are exceeding it.
- 4) Atheism, while still a small percentage of the population, is on the rise.
- 5) Spirituality (belief in God outside the context of organized religions) is vibrant in the U.S.

What implications does this have for the church? Here are five.

Attractional methods alone have decreasing effectiveness.

The church must become missional in nature and make changes in resource allocation.

This suggests moving some activities off site to meet people where they are.

Members must be trained in knowledge of other faiths and atheism.

Churches must address their priorities, especially the historic focus on doctrinal issues, in the face of a nation and world hopelessly lost.