

WHAT DOES IT MEAN WHEN PEOPLE SAY THEY ARE “CHRISTIAN”?

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When someone says they are an American, the meaning of that term is clear. Someone who claims to be a policeman leaves little doubt as to their job. But when people describe themselves as “Christian,” what does that mean?

The latest report from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University shows that the meaning of “Christian” in America today is far from monolithic, with a number of diverse and often-conflicting theological views—even beliefs that are thoroughly unbiblical perspectives—among those who embrace the label.

And these differences in beliefs often lead to widely divergent views on questions of morality and politics among American Christians, depending on how closely and consistently they are aligned with basic biblical teachings.

For example, the vast majority of American adults (69%) self-identify as “Christian” and embrace many basic tenets of the faith. But a closer look shows that at the same time, many in this group hold views clearly in conflict with traditional teachings and only 9% actually possess a biblical worldview, according to George Barna, CRC Director of Research.

And within this larger universe of self-identified Christians is a segment known as “Integrated Disciples,” a minority of American adults (6%) who possess a biblical worldview, and demonstrate a consistent understanding and application of biblical principles.

When it comes to social, moral, and political issues, Integrated Disciples tend to be more conservative than other self-identified Christians.

The latest report from CRC’s American Worldview Inventory 2021 examines different groups of people labeled as “Christian” and compares the spiritual leanings of each group. The segments explored include those who call themselves Christian; self-identified born-again Christians; self-described evangelical Christians; people whose theological beliefs establish them as born-again Christians; and people who possess a biblical worldview (referred to as Integrated Disciples). The differences in the belief and behavioral profiles of these groups are revealing.

Size of the Christian Universe

The first distinction that grabs one’s attention is the dramatic range in the number of people who might be described as Christian, depending upon the definition used. The most inclusive definition is self-identification: people who simply say they are Christian. That proportion currently stands at 69%. At the opposite end of the continuum are those who contend they are Christian by virtue of possessing a biblical worldview. That segment is just 6% strong. The other three definitions examined in the study finds anywhere from 28% to 35% of adults meeting the established criteria.

The total head count, therefore, ranges from a high of an estimated 176 million self-professed Christians to a low of about 15 million adults who have a biblical worldview.

How Many Adults Fall Within These Faith Categories?		
Description of the category	Percent of adults	Number of adults
Self-identified Christians	69%	176 million
Self-identified born-again Christians	35	89 million
Self-identified evangelical Christians	28	71 million
Theologically born-again Christians	28	71 million
Integrated Disciples - possess a biblical worldview	6	15 million

Source: National research conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

Self-Identified “Christian” Adults

Not surprisingly, individuals who call themselves Christian are the largest of the various “Christian” segments evaluated and also include the broadest spectrum of theological points of view. In total, currently about seven out of every 10 adults (69%) adopt the label “Christian” to identify their faith.

A large share of this population embraces various biblical principles and truths. For instance:

- 79% believe that God has a reason for everything
- 77% say they have a unique, God-given calling
- 74% say they intentionally try to avoid sinning because they know it hurts God
- 72% claim that every moral choice either honors or dishonors God
- 62% agree that the universe was designed and created, and is sustained by God
- 61% believe that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect and just Creator of the universe who still rules the universe today

But this large group entertains a wide range of perspectives that are not in harmony with biblical teachings. Among the errant perspectives most widely embraced are:

- 72% argue that people are basically good

- 71% consider feelings, experience, or the input of friends and family as their most trusted sources of moral guidance
- 66% say that having faith matters more than which faith you pursue
- 64% say that all religious faiths are of equal value
- 58% believe that if a person is good enough, or does enough good things, they can earn their way into Heaven
- 58% contend that the Holy Spirit is not a real, living being but is merely a symbol of God's power, presence, or purity
- 57% believe in karma
- 52% claim that determining moral truth is up to each individual; there are no moral absolutes that apply to everyone, all the time

Self-identified Christians are also likely to reject a number of biblical teachings and principles. For example, slightly less than half (46%) believe that the marriage of one man to one woman is God's plan for humanity, across all cultures; just 40% believe that when they die they will go to Heaven, but only because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior; only one-third (34%) believes that people are born into sin and can only be saved of the consequences by Jesus Christ; just one-third (32%) believes premarital sex is morally unacceptable; and about one out of every four (28%) believes that the best indicator of a successful life is consistent obedience to God.

Overall, only 9% of self-identified Christians have a biblical worldview.

The narrative driving the faith of the self-identified Christian population, then, is not consistently in tune with biblical perspectives. It might best be described as acknowledging that God is real, powerful, and caring, and is worthy of worship and consideration. He is open-minded and tolerant. Our moral choices are important but primarily because of their effect on other people. Those choices are best influenced by human experience and personal expectations. If we invest in being happy, God will bless those efforts. Toward that end, the best advice we can live by is the wisdom developed and shared by other people.

Self-Identified Born-Again Christians

Many polling organizations shortcut the spiritual classification process by simply asking people if they embrace a particular religious label. One common measure along those lines is to ask people if they consider themselves to be born-again Christians. The typical range of people who fit this self-classification is 30% to 40%. The Cultural Research Center norm for this measure is currently 35%. Note that this represents about half of the people who call themselves Christian.

How does this tighter definition of being a Christian differ theologically from the broader measure? A majority of self-identified born-again Christians believes many principles taught in the Bible, including the following:

- 78% believe that the marriage of one man to one woman is God’s plan for humanity, across all cultures
- 72% believe that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful and just Creator of the universe who still rules the universe today
- 60% believe that the Bible is the accurate and reliable words of God

But there are numerous outlooks this group accepts that conflict with biblical teachings:

- 77% say that having faith matters more than which faith you pursue
- 69% accepted feelings, experience, and the input of friends and family as their most trusted sources of moral guidance
- 65% say there is no absolute moral truth
- 62% contend that the Holy Spirit is not a real, living being but is merely a symbol of God’s power, presence, or purity
- 61% say that all religious faiths are of equal value
- 60% believe that if a person is good enough, or does enough good things, they can earn their way into Heaven

Interestingly, just 44% believe that when they die they will go to Heaven, but only because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. In other words, nearly six out of 10 people who claim to be born-again do not meet the widely accepted, biblical definition of born-again. Overall, this segment is comprised of people who are somewhat more likely than those in the broader, self-identified “Christian” category to possess biblical perspectives. However, people in this segment are also likely to possess a large number of unbiblical beliefs.

The grand faith narrative that characterizes self-described born-again Christians seems to be that God is real and powerful, as well as broad-minded, forgiving, and tolerant. They believe in the reality of sin but also contend that they can either earn their salvation or receive it through a relationship with Christ. In their view, moral choices matter, but we are inevitably captives of karma. They consider the Bible to be a critical guide to life but not to contain absolute moral or comprehensive and indisputable spiritual truth, so their best sources of guidance are feelings, experience, and interpersonal advice.

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Self-Identified Evangelical Christians

From a sociological standpoint, self-identified born-again Christians are the siblings of self-identified evangelicals. There is tremendous overlap between the two niches: in fact, roughly seven out of 10 consider themselves to be part of both segments. They are not interchangeable, though. There are slightly fewer of the self-identified evangelicals than self-identified born-again: 28% versus 35%, respectively.

Despite using different terminology to identify themselves, self-identified born-again and self-identified evangelical Christians possess nearly identical views on most of the beliefs evaluated. Across more than a dozen attributes studied, the average difference was only two percentage points, with the largest gap being only four percentage points.

Comparison of Religious Beliefs of Five “Christian” Segments					
	—Self-identified Faith Segment—Theologically				
Belief	Christian	Born-again Christian	Evangelical Christian	Born-again	Integrated Disciple
Bible is the accurate, reliable word of God	52%	60%	58%	74%	99+%
Determining moral truth is up to each individual; there are no moral absolutes that apply to everyone, all the time	52	65	65	40	25
God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect and just creator of the universe who rules that universe today	61	72	69	83	99+
Having faith matters more than which faith you have	66	77	74	56	42
Your most trusted, primary source of moral guidance is your feelings, experiences, or advice from friends and family	71	69	65	54	4
A person who is generally good, or does enough good things for others, will earn a place in Heaven	58	60	61	37	5

Source: Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=5,000 adults 18 or older, nationally representative sample.

Theological Born-Again Christians

One might expect those who call themselves “born-again” and those whose theological positions place them in the “born-again” category to be very similar. They’re not.

“Theological born-again Christians” are those who say that when they die they will go to Heaven, but only because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. That reliance on Jesus Christ as their savior is definitely a game-changer. Compared to the self-identified born-again believers, the theologically-defined group is substantially more likely to believe the following:

- 84% believe that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful and just Creator of the universe who still rules the universe today
- 74% believe that the Bible is the accurate and reliable words of God

Continuing the comparison, theologically-defined born-again adults are significantly less likely than self-identified born-again believers to adopt counter-biblical beliefs, such as the following:

- 56% say that having faith matters more than which faith you pursue
- 54% accepted feelings, experience, and the input of friends and family as their most trusted sources of moral guidance
- 51% say that all religious faiths are of equal value
- 50% contend that the Holy Spirit is not a real, living being but is merely a symbol of God’s power, presence, or purity
- 40% say there is no absolute moral truth
- 37% believe that if a person is good enough, or does enough good things, they can earn their way into Heaven
- 31% believe that the Bible is ambiguous in its teaching about abortion

Notice, however, that while the theologically-driven segment features a larger proportion of members who are aligned with biblical perspectives on a substantial number of beliefs, most of the theologically-defined born-again group holds a variety of views that contradict biblical teaching. Some of the most pervasive examples include their rejection of the exclusivity of Christianity; denying the Bible as their primary source of moral guidance; accepting other faiths as being of equal value to Christianity; deeming the embrace of some religious faith to be more important than which faith they embrace; and not believing in the existence of the Holy Spirit.

The two segments do hold virtually identical points of view regarding traditional marriage.

Overall, one-third of those who qualify as born-again based on their theological views (31%) do not embrace the term “born-again” to describe themselves. Similarly, among those who consider themselves to be born-again, 57% do not qualify for that term theologically.

The theologically born-again body is the most likely of the four segments examined thus far to reflect biblical perspectives, yet only 19% the group has a biblical worldview.

Integrated Disciples: The Biblical Worldview Cohort

As the groundbreaking American Worldview Inventory surveys have demonstrated, just 6% of U.S. adults possess a biblical worldview. Labeled “Integrated Disciples” for their demonstrated ability to assimilate their beliefs into their lifestyle, this group consistently—albeit imperfectly—comes closest to reflecting biblical principles into their opinions, beliefs, behaviors, and preferences.

Compared to the other four “Christian” segments, individuals holding the biblical worldview are more likely to hold biblical beliefs regarding a range of issues:

- 99+% believe that the Bible is the accurate and reliable words of God
- 99+% believe that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful and just Creator of the universe who still rules the universe today
- 99+% say they have a unique, God-given calling
- 99+% say they intentionally try to avoid sinning because they know it hurts God
- 96% claim that every moral choice either honors or dishonors God
- 88% believe that God has a reason for everything

And while they are not in perfect unison with the scriptures on some issues, only small minorities of Integrated Disciples—less than one out of every 10—hold unscriptural positions on a variety of matters such as:

- 4% accepted feelings, experience, and the input of friends and family as their most trusted sources of moral guidance
- 5% believe that if a person is good enough, or does enough good things, they can earn their way into Heaven
- 8% believe that the Bible is ambiguous in its teaching about abortion
- 9% say that all religious faiths are of equal value

The issues for which a shockingly large minority of Integrated Disciples challenges biblical principles include the following beliefs:

- 25% say there is no absolute moral truth
- 33% believe in karma
- 39% contend that the Holy Spirit is not a real, living being but is merely a symbol of God’s power, presence, or purity
- 42% believe that having faith matters more than which faith you pursue 52% argue that people are basically good
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Lifestyle Implications

The Cultural Research Center analysis also revealed that each of the “Christian” segments stakes out divergent positions on political and moral matters. Here are a few examples of those differences.

Presidential Vote

Just one out of five Integrated Disciples (20%) voted for Joe Biden in the 2020 election. That was less than half as many who voted for President Biden among self-identified born-again (41%), self-identified evangelicals (43%), and self-identified Christians (46%). In between the ends of the continuum were the theological born-again, among which 30% voted for the current president.

Interestingly, no Christian segment had a majority voting for Joe Biden. His victory was the result of a broad array of non-Christian segments—Jews, Muslims, adherents of eastern religions, the irreligious, and other non-Christian faith groups—supporting him by substantial margins, overcoming the division within the “Christian” vote.

Election Media Coverage

Only one out of five Integrated Disciples (20%) contended that media coverage of the 2020 election was fair and objective. Slightly less than half of the theologically-born again segment (48%) held that view. However, a substantial majority felt the coverage was fair and objective among self-identified Christians (61%), self-identified born-again adults (65%), and self-identified evangelicals (66%).

Social Issues

The most contentious issues in political elections tend to be those categorized as social issues: e.g., abortion, gay rights, gun policy, environmental protection, law and order, immigration laws, etc. The various segments of Christians hold distinctly different places on the ideological spectrum concerning social issues.

Self-identified Christians were the group most likely to claim liberal or progressive positions on social issues, although just one-third of them (32%) embraced that ideology, compared to 42% from the same group that identified as conservative.

The other pair of self-identified segments—the self-identified born-again Christians and the self-identified evangelical Christians—were much more likely to say they were conservative than to label themselves liberal or progressive regarding social issues. Just more than one-quarter of each segment identified as liberal on social issues, while roughly half of each group claimed to be socially conservative.

The theologically born-again Christians were two-and-a-half times more likely to self-identify as conservative than liberal/progressive. In four out of five cases, Integrated Disciples were in the conservative camp; only one out of every 20 of them identified as liberal/progressive.

The Different Christian Segments Have Divergent Ideological Positions on Social Issues			
Description of the category	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Self-identified Christians	32%	26%	42%
Self-identified born-again Christians	28	27	45
Self-identified evangelical Christians	27	23	50
Theologically born-again Christians	23	20	57
Integrated Disciples – possess a biblical worldview	5	13	82

Source: Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=5,000 adults 18 or older, nationally representative sample.

Moral Choices

The American Worldview Inventory surveys discovered that moral behaviors vary according to the individual’s Christian niche, too. For instance, self-identified Christians are barely half as likely as Integrated Disciples to contend that lying—described in the survey as “telling a falsehood of minor consequence in order to protect their personal best interests or reputation”—is not morally acceptable.

Similarly, Integrated Disciples were about twice as likely as self-identified Christians to consider aborting an unborn child—described as “having an abortion because their partner has left and the parent knows they cannot reasonably take care of the child”—to be morally unacceptable.

“Having sexual relations with someone that you love and expect to marry in the future” was considered morally unacceptable to three times as many Integrated Disciples as self-identified Christians.

While six out of 10 self-identified Christians deemed “declaring small tax deductions you are not eligible for, but will not be discovered by the IRS, to lower your tax bill” to be morally unacceptable—substantially fewer than the nearly unanimous rejection of that behavior among Integrated Disciples.

In each situation explored, the proportion of theologically born-again Christians who rejected the behavior was roughly halfway between that of the self-identified Christians and the Integrated Disciples.

Morally Unacceptable Behaviors According to Different Christian Segments				
Description of the category	Lying	Abortion	Unmarried Sex	Tax Cheating
Self-identified Christians	53%	55%	32%	59%
Theologically born-again Christians	67	72	51	71
Integrated Disciples - have a biblical worldview	99+	98	97	99+

Source: Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=5,000 adults 18 or older, nationally representative sample.

Socialism

When asked if they would prefer socialism or capitalism, three out of 10 self-identified Christians (29%) favored socialism. About four out of 10 of the other self-identified segments—the self-identified born-again Christians (37%) and the self-identified evangelical Christians (40%)—noted a preference for socialism. Just two out of 10 of the theologically born-again Christians (21%) opted for socialism. By far the least likely advocates of the Marxist approach were Integrated Disciples: a paltry 4% of them favored socialism rather than capitalism.

Biblical Guidance on Taking Up the Name of Christ

It's one thing to call yourself a fan of a sports team or a devotee of a particular brand. It's something else altogether to call yourself by the name of the savior of humankind.

Jesus spoke to this issue during what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. During that exposition He admonished people to claim to be one of His followers only if they were seriously applying His principles in their life. "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'" (Matthew 7:21-23, NLT)

Obedience is of paramount importance to Jesus. He noted that a person would be His disciple if they obey His teachings (John 8:31). It follows, then, that when a person takes on the name "Christian" it refers to one who is striving to know and follow the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

That is not always the case in contemporary America, as the Cultural Research Center data persuasively demonstrate.

"Too often, it seems, people who are simply religious, or regular churchgoers, or perhaps people who want a certain reputation or image embrace the label 'Christian,' regardless of their spiritual life and intentions" explained George Barna, the lead researcher at the Cultural Research Center. "'Christian' has become somewhat of a generic term rather than a name that reflects a deep commitment to passionately pursuing and being like Jesus Christ.

“The survey results clearly demonstrate how careful you have to be when interpreting data associated with a particular segment of people who are labeled as Christians.” Barna cautioned. “Political polling, in particular, may mislead people regarding the views and preferences of genuine Christ-followers simply based on how those surveys measure the Christian population.”

About the Research

The American Worldview Inventory (AWVI) is an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over). Begun as an annual tracking study in 2020, the assessment is based on several dozen worldview-related questions drawn from eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

AWVI 2021 is the first-ever national survey conducted in the United States measuring both biblical and competing worldviews. It was undertaken in February 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of indeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity. Similarly, the 2020 version of the AWVI was also a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points. In all surveys, subgroups of the sample that are analyzed will experience higher levels of sampling error due to the smaller number of respondents contained in those segments.

To round out the analysis, this report also incorporates some data from the 2020 Post-Election Survey conducted by the Cultural Research Center, in addition to the results from the American Worldview Inventory surveys. That nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults was conducted in November 2020, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 4 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval.

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) is under the auspices of Arizona Christian University and is located on the school’s campus in Glendale, Arizona. CRC conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to transform American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith but remains non-partisan and inter-denominational. Access to past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is available at www.culturalresearchcenter.com.