

The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience

Why don't Christians live what they preach?

By Ronald J. Sider

Once upon a time there was a great religion that over the centuries had spread all over the world. But in those lands where it had existed for the longest time, its adherents slowly grew complacent, lukewarm, and skeptical. Indeed, many of the leaders of its oldest groups even publicly rejected some of the religion's most basic beliefs.

In response, a renewal movement emerged, passionately championing the historic claims of the old religion and eagerly inviting unbelievers everywhere to embrace the ancient faith. Rejecting the skepticism of leaders who no longer believed in a God who works miracles, members of the renewal movement vigorously argued that their God not only had performed miraculous deeds in the past but still miraculously transforms all who believe. Indeed, a radical, miraculous "new birth" that began a lifetime of sweeping moral renewal and transformation was at the center of their preaching. Over time, the renewal movement flourished to the point of becoming one of the most influential wings of the whole religion.

Not surprisingly, the movement's numbers translated into political influence. And the renewal movement was so confident of its beliefs and claims that it persuaded the nation's top political leader to have the government work more closely with religious social service organizations to solve the nation's horrendous social problems. Members of the renewal movement knew that miraculous moral transformation of character frequently happened when broken persons embraced the great religion. They also lobbied politicians to strengthen the traditional definition of marriage because their ancient texts taught that a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman was at the center of the Creator's design for the family.

Then the pollsters started conducting scientific polls of the general population. In spite of the renewal movement's proud claims to miraculous transformation, the polls showed that members of the movement divorced their spouses just as often as their secular neighbors. They beat their wives as often as their neighbors. They were almost as materialistic and even more racist than their pagan friends. The hard-core skeptics smiled in cynical amusement at this blatant hypocrisy. The general population was puzzled and disgusted. Many of the renewal movement's leaders simply stepped up the tempo of their now enormously successful, highly sophisticated promotional programs. Others wept.

This, alas, is roughly the situation of Western or at least American evangelicalism today.

Scandalous behavior is rapidly destroying American Christianity. By their daily activity, most "Christians" regularly commit treason. With their mouths they claim that Jesus is Lord, but with their actions they demonstrate allegiance to money, sex, and self-fulfillment.

The findings in numerous national polls conducted by highly respected pollsters like The Gallup Organization and The Barna Group are simply shocking. "Gallup and Barna," laments evangelical theologian Michael Horton, "hand us survey after survey demonstrating that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit

as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general."¹ Divorce is *more* common among "born-again" Christians than in the general American population. Only 6 percent of evangelicals tithe. White evangelicals are the *most* likely people to object to neighbors of another race. Josh McDowell has pointed out that the sexual promiscuity of evangelical youth is only a little less outrageous than that of their nonevangelical peers.

Alan Wolfe, famous contemporary scholar and director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, has just published a penetrating study of American religious life. Evangelicals figure prominently in his book. His evaluation? Today's evangelicalism, Wolfe says, exhibits "so strong a desire to copy the culture of hotel chains and popular music that it loses what religious distinctiveness it once had."² Wolfe argues, "The truth is there is increasingly little difference between an essentially secular activity like the popular entertainment industry and the bring-'em-in-at-any-cost efforts of evangelical megachurches."³

It is not surprising that George Barna concludes, "Every day, the church is becoming more like the world it allegedly seeks to change."⁴ We have very little time, he believes, to reverse these trends. African Christian and famous missions scholar Professor Lamin Sanneh told *Christianity Today* recently that "the cultural captivity of Christianity in the West is nearly complete, and with the religion tamed, it is open season on the West's Christian heritage. I worry about a West *without* a moral center facing a politically resurgent Islam."⁵

Our first concern, of course, must be internal integrity, not external danger. What a tragedy for evangelicals to declare proudly that personal conversion and new birth in Christ are at the center of their faith and then to defy biblical moral standards by living almost as sinfully as their pagan neighbors.

Graham Cyster, a Christian whom I know from South Africa, recently told me a painful story about a personal experience two decades ago when he was struggling against apartheid as a young South African evangelical. One night, he was smuggled into an underground Communist cell of young people fighting apartheid. "Tell us about the gospel of Jesus Christ," they asked, half hoping for an alternative to the violent communist strategy they were embracing.

Graham gave a clear, powerful presentation of the gospel, showing how personal faith in Christ wonderfully transforms persons and creates one new body of believers where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, rich nor poor, black nor white. The youth were fascinated. One seventeen-year-old exclaimed, "That is wonderful! Show me where I can see that happening." Graham's face fell as he sadly responded that he could not think of anywhere South African Christians were truly living out the message of the gospel. "Then the whole thing is a piece of sh—," the youth angrily retorted. Within a month he left the country to join the armed struggle against apartheid—and eventually giving his life for his beliefs.

The young man was right. If Christians do not live what they preach, the whole thing is a farce. "American Christianity has largely failed since the middle of the twentieth century," Barna concludes, "because Jesus' modern-day disciples do not act like Jesus."⁶ This scandalous behavior mocks Christ, undermines evangelism, and destroys Christian credibility.

If vital Christian faith is to survive, we must understand the depth of the crisis, discover why it has happened, and develop obedient, faithful correctives. My prayer is that just as Mark Noll's book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* did much to strengthen evangelical thinking, so a forthright acknowledgment of this sorry state of affairs will renew evangelical resolve to live what we preach.

The Depth of the Scandal

How bad are things? What is the depth of the scandal? Unless we face these questions with ruthless honesty, we can never hope to correct the problem.

Whether the issue is divorce, materialism, sexual promiscuity, racism, physical abuse in marriage, or neglect of a biblical worldview, the polling data point to widespread, blatant disobedience of clear biblical moral demands on the part of people who allegedly are evangelical, born-again Christians. The statistics are devastating.

- Divorce

In a 1999 national survey, George Barna found that the percentage of born-again Christians who had experienced divorce was slightly *higher* (26 percent) than that of non-Christians (22 percent).⁷ In Barna's polls since the mid-1990s, that number has remained about the same.⁸ In August 2001, a new poll found that the divorce rate was about the same for born-again Christians and the population as a whole; 33 percent of all born-again Christians had been divorced compared with 34 percent of non-born-again Americans—a statistically insignificant difference. Barna also found in one study that 90 percent of all divorced born-again folk divorced *after* they accepted Christ.⁹

Barna makes a distinction between born-again Christians and evangelicals. Barna classifies as born-again all who say "they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today" and who also indicate that they "believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior."¹⁰ In Barna's polls anywhere from 35 to 43 percent of the total U.S. population meet these criteria for being born-again.

Barna limits the term "evangelical" to a much smaller group—just 7 to 8 percent of the total U.S. population. In addition to meeting the criteria for being born-again, evangelicals must agree with several other things such as the following: Jesus lived a sinless life; eternal salvation is only through grace, not works; Christians have a personal responsibility to evangelize non-Christians; Satan exists. Obviously this definition identifies a much more theologically biblical, orthodox group of Christians.

What is the divorce rate among evangelicals? According to a 1999 poll by Barna, exactly the same as the national average! According to that poll, 25 percent of evangelicals—just like 25 percent of the total population—have gone through a divorce.¹¹ Does it make no difference to evangelicals that their Lord and Savior explicitly, clearly, repeatedly condemned divorce?

"Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."
Matthew 19:4–6 (NRSV)

Professor Brad Wilcox is a Princeton-trained, Christian sociologist who specializes in family issues. Wilcox has studied two sets of national data: *The General Social Survey* and *The National Survey of Families and Households*. The result? "Compared with the rest of the population, conservative Protestants are *more* likely to divorce." He also points out the divorce rates are higher in the southern U.S., where conservative Protestants make up a higher percentage of the population than elsewhere in the country.¹²

A story in the *New York Times* in 2001 underlined Wilcox's findings about the unusually high divorce rates in the South. In many parts of the Bible Belt, the divorce rate was discovered to be "roughly 50 percent *above* the national average" (italics mine).¹³ Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma pointed out the irony that these unusually high divorce rates exist in his state, where 70 percent of the people go to church once a week or more. "These divorce rates," Gov. Keating concluded, "are a scalding indictment of what isn't being said behind the pulpit."

- Materialism and the Poor

John and Sylvia Ronsvalle have been carefully analyzing the giving patterns of American Christians for well over a decade. Their annual *The State of Christian Giving* is the most accurate report for learning how much Christians in the richest nation in human history actually give. In their most recent edition, they provide detailed information about per-member giving patterns of U.S. church members from 1968 to 2001. Over those thirty-plus years, of course, the average income of U.S. Christians has increased enormously. But that did not carry over into their giving. The report showed that the richer we become, the less we give in proportion to our incomes.

In 1968, the average church member gave 3.1 percent of their income—less than a third of a tithe. That figure dropped every year through 1990 and then recovered slightly to 2.66 percent—about one quarter of a tithe.¹⁴

Even more interesting is what has happened to evangelical giving. The Ronsvalles compare the giving in seven typical mainline denominations (affiliated with the National Council of Churches) with the giving in eight evangelical denominations (with membership in the National Association of Evangelicals). In 1968 the eight evangelical denominations gave considerably more than the seven mainline denominations. While the mainline denominational members gave 3.3 percent of their income, evangelicals gave 6.15 percent. While this is significantly more, the evangelicals on average still gave less than two-thirds of a tithe. By 1985 mainline folk had dropped their giving to 2.85 percent of their income and evangelicals to 4.74 percent. By 2001, mainline members had recovered slightly to 3.17 percent, but evangelical giving kept dropping and was at a mere 4.27 percent.¹⁵

As we got richer and richer, evangelicals chose to spend more and more on themselves and give a smaller and smaller percentage to the church. Today, on average, evangelicals in the U.S. give about two-fifths of a tithe.

In 2002, Barna discovered that only 6 percent of born-again adults tithed—a 50 percent decline from 2000, when 12 percent did. And in 2002, just 9 percent of Barna's narrow class of evangelicals tithed.¹⁶

One can see a related problem in another area. Examine the public agenda of prominent evangelical political movements and coalitions. Virtually never does justice for the poor appear as an area of significant concern and effort.

American Christians live in the richest nation on earth and enjoy an average household income of \$42,409.¹⁷ The World Bank reports that 1.2 billion of the world's poorest people try to survive on just one dollar a day. At least one billion people have never heard the gospel. The Ronsvalles point out that if American Christians just tithed, they would have another \$143 billion available to empower the poor and spread the gospel.¹⁸ Studies by the United Nations suggest that just an additional \$70–\$80 billion a year would be enough to provide access to essential services like basic health care and education for all the poor of the earth.¹⁹ If they did no more than tithe, American Christians would have the private dollars to foot this entire bill and still have \$60–\$70 billion more to do evangelism around the world.

As evangelicals we claim to embrace the Bible as our final authority. One of the most common themes in the Scriptures is that God and his faithful people have a special concern for the poor. Why this blatant contradiction between belief and practice?

In the late 1970s, I attended a national conference of evangelical leaders. My small group, as I recall, included prominent persons like Carl Henry, the first editor of *Christianity Today*; Hudson Armerding, the president of Wheaton College; and Loren Cunningham, the founder of Youth with a Mission. Several times in our small group, different persons referred to the issue of a simple lifestyle, urging its importance. Finally, Loren Cunningham said something like the following: "Yes, I think the evangelical community is ready to live more simply—if we evangelical leaders will model it." That ended the discussion. There were no further recommendations to live more simply!

- Sexual Disobedience

A story in the *New York Times* reported that, according to census data, in the 1990s the number of unmarried couples living together jumped a lot more in the Bible Belt (where a higher percentage of the total population are evangelicals) than in the nation as a whole. Nationwide, the increase was 72 percent. But in Oklahoma it was 97 percent, in Arkansas 125 percent, and in Tennessee 123 percent.²⁰

Popular evangelical speaker Josh McDowell has been observing and speaking to evangelical youth for several decades. I remember him saying years ago that evangelical youth are only about 10 percent less likely to engage in premarital sex than nonevangelicals.

True Love Waits, a program sponsored by the Southern Baptist Convention, is one of the most famous evangelical efforts to reduce premarital sexual activity among our youth. Since 1993, about 2.4 million young people have signed a pledge to wait until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse. Are these young evangelicals keeping their pledges? In March 2004, researchers from Columbia University and Yale University reported on their findings. For seven years they studied 12 thousand teenagers who took the pledge. Sadly, they found that 88 percent of these pledgers reported having sexual intercourse before marriage; just 12 percent kept their promise. The researchers also found that the rates for having sexually transmitted diseases "were almost identical for the teenagers who took pledges and those who did not."²¹

Barna found from a 2001 poll that cohabitation—living with a member of the opposite sex without marriage—is only a little better among born-again adults than the general public. Nationally, 33 percent of all adults have lived with a member of the opposite sex without being married. The rate is 25 percent for born-again folk.²²

Professor John C. Green is an evangelical political scientist and director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron. Green is one of the best statisticians in his field and has studied how Americans feel about morals and ethics using several national surveys. He divides those he labels evangelicals into two categories: traditional evangelicals (who have higher church attendance, a higher view of biblical authority, etc.) and nontraditional evangelicals.²³ What are their attitudes on premarital and extramarital sex? Fully 26 percent of traditional evangelicals do *not* think premarital sex is wrong, and 46 percent of nontraditional evangelicals say it is morally okay.²⁴

And extramarital sex? Of traditional evangelicals, 13 percent say it is okay for married persons to have sex with someone other than one's spouse. And 19 percent of nontraditional evangelicals say adultery is morally acceptable.²⁵ Fortunately, Green finds that evangelicals fare better than mainline Protestant and Catholic Christians on these issues, but the number of evangelicals that blatantly reject biblical sexual norms is astonishing.

What about pornography? Citing a recent survey in *Leadership* magazine, Steve Gallagher says, "Tragically, the percentage of Christian men involved [in pornography] is not much different that that of the unsaved."²⁶

- Racism

In 1989 George Gallup Jr. and James Castelli published the results of a survey to determine which groups in the U.S. were least and most likely to object to having black neighbors—surely a good measure of racism. Catholics and nonevangelical Christians ranked least likely to object to black neighbors; 11 percent objected. Mainline Protestants came next at 16 percent. At 17 percent, Baptists and evangelicals were among the most likely groups to object to black neighbors, and 20 percent of Southern Baptists objected to black neighbors.²⁷

It is common knowledge that during the Civil Rights movement, when mainline Protestants and Jews joined African Americans in their historic struggle for freedom and equality, evangelical leaders were almost entirely absent. Some opposed the movement; others said nothing. When Frank Gaebelin, then a coeditor of *Christianity Today*, not only covered Martin Luther King's March on Selma but also endorsed and joined the movement, he experienced opposition and hostility from other evangelical leaders.²⁸ My own school, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, was founded in 1925 as an evangelical alternative to theological liberalism in American Baptist circles. But racism was part of our early history. We always accepted African Americans as students but refused to allow African American men to sleep overnight on campus. One African American student, who much later was elected to the seminary's board of trustees, had to sleep five miles away at Thirtieth Street Train Station. Thank God for Cuthbert Rutenber, who helped the seminary abandon its racist policies in about 1950.

More recently, evangelicals have taken several important steps to confess past racism and call for change. Coach Bill McCartney, the founder of the national

evangelical men's movement called Promise Keepers, was one of the outstanding evangelical leaders in this change. McCartney went on a national speaking tour, regularly calling evangelicals to racial reconciliation. In his book *Sold Out*, McCartney recalls what happened. When he finished speaking, he reports, "There was no response—nothing. . . . In city after city, in church after church, it was the same story—wild enthusiasm while I was being introduced, followed by a morgue-like chill as I stepped away from the microphone."²⁹ McCartney thinks a major reason attendance dropped dramatically in Promise Keepers' stadium events was their stand on racial reconciliation.

Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith have written a crucial book, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, exploring ongoing racial attitudes in the evangelical world. Their conclusion? "White evangelicalism likely does more to perpetuate the racialized society than to reduce it."³⁰ White conservative Protestants are more than twice as likely as other whites to blame lack of equality (e.g., income) between blacks and whites on a lack of black motivation rather than discrimination. Conservative Protestants are six times more likely to cite lack of motivation than unequal access to education!³¹

Evangelicals may have some good biblical theology about the body of Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, black nor white. But if they do not work out this theology in practice, such that white evangelicals welcome black neighbors and work to end racist structures, then, as was made clear by the young South African Communist, the whole thing stinks.

To say there is a crisis of disobedience in the evangelical world today is to dangerously understate the problem. Born-again Christians divorce at about the same rate as everyone else. Self-centered materialism is seducing evangelicals and rapidly destroying our earlier, slightly more generous giving. Only 6 percent of born-again Christians tithe. Born-again Christians justify and engage in sexual promiscuity (both premarital sex and adultery) at astonishing rates. Racism and perhaps physical abuse of wives seems to be worse in evangelical circles than elsewhere. This is scandalous behavior for people who claim to be born-again by the Holy Spirit and to enjoy the very presence of the Risen Lord in their lives.

In light of the foregoing statistics, it is not surprising that born-again Christians spend seven times more hours each week in front of their televisions than they spend in Bible reading, prayer, and worship.³² Only 9 percent of born-again adults and 2 percent of born-again teenagers have a biblical worldview.³³

Perhaps it is not surprising either that non-Christians have a very negative view of evangelicals. In a recent poll, Barna asked non-Christians about their attitudes toward different groups of Christians. Only 44 percent have a positive view of Christian clergy. Just 32 percent have a positive view of born-again Christians. And a mere 22 percent have a positive view of evangelicals.³⁴

Evangelicals rightly rejected theological liberalism because it denied the miraculous. In response, we insisted that miracle was central to biblical faith at numerous points including the supernatural moral transformation of broken sinners. Now our very lifestyle as evangelicals is a ringing practical denial of the miraculous in our lives. Satan must laugh in sneerful derision. God's people can only weep.

Rays of Hope

No biblical passage speaks as powerfully to our situation as the message to the church at Laodicea. Like the American church today, the Laodicean church was rich, self-confident—and lukewarm.

The city of Laodicea (in Asia Minor, now Turkey) was famous in the first century. It was a major banking center and proud of its wealth. The city was especially famous for its wool exports and a highly regarded eye salve.³⁵ Apparently the Laodicean church shared their fellow citizens' sense of wealthy self-confidence. But knowing they were half-hearted, lukewarm Christians, the Lord said to them,

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. —Revelation 3:14–20

This passage could just as well have been written to contemporary American evangelicals. Enormously wealthy, and proud of it, we think that most things are going well in spite of our blatant disobedience. But our Lord's word to us is simple: Repent!

Evangelicals have used the image of Christ knocking at the heart's door as a symbol of our vigorous evangelistic programs. But in truth, it is we, by our behavior, who have excluded him from our hearts and lives. He stands at the doors of *our* hearts, begging us to welcome his total Lordship.

Weeping and repentance are the only faithful responses to the sweeping, scandalous disobedience in the evangelical world today. We have defied the Lord we claim to worship. We have disgraced his holy name by our unholy lives. Yes, we believe he is the Savior. We are Christians, not pagans. But our beliefs are not strong enough to produce righteous lifestyles. We want Jesus *and* mammon. Unless we repent, our Lord intends to spit us out.

Biblical repentance is more than a brief liturgical phrase or a hasty superficial tear. It is a deep, heartfelt sorrow for offending the Holy Sovereign of the universe and a strong inner resolve to embrace the conversion—the complete reversal of direction—that our forgiving Savior longs to bestow. We cannot manufacture this radical change using our own strength. But we can beg our Holy God not only to forgive but also to change us. Daily, we can pray to the Lord to transform us more and more into the very likeness of Jesus.

Anguished, persistent prayer for revival must become more central in evangelical life. It is true that for a couple of decades, there have been major prayer movements in the evangelical world. But our behavior has not become more holy. The revival tarries. Richard Lovelace has said that we cannot close "the sanctification gap" until

"the same fear and trembling, the same prayer to be endued with power from on high that characterized the first apostles" becomes a part of our lives.³⁶ Please God, may that happen.

Facing the depth of the scandal could easily provoke despair. Thank God, belief in the gospel warrants a more hopeful response. At the heart of evangelical belief is the glorious biblical truth that new birth, radical transformation, is possible at any moment. We have regularly promised even the most wretched, most broken sinners that the Lord stands ready to forgive and change them if they will only open their hearts to him. Again and again, we know from our own history, the Savior has done just that. Criminals, adulterers, and murderers have been radically transformed into new persons in Christ Jesus. That is the perennial promise of the gospel.

That is precisely the promise which we must claim for ourselves. The Savior longs to forgive even scandalously unfaithful contemporary evangelicals if we will just repent.

And pray. We need to pray mightily for a sweeping movement of revival. The history of evangelical awakenings in the last three centuries shows that again and again God has responded with powerful movements of revival in the church when God's people united in intense, sustained periods of prayer.³⁷

The incredible promises Jesus attached to his words about prayer strengthen our hope. If we pray for revival and sanctification, the Lord of the universe pledges to hear us. Listen to his reassuring promise:

Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. —Mark 11:24

I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there" and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. —Matthew 17:20–21

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. —John 15:7

Does anyone doubt that our Lord longs to answer our pleas for revival? And sanctifying power?

As we pray, we need to remember an important condition that Christ attached to these promises. We must *obey*. John 15:7 says that Jesus will hear our prayers if we abide in him and his words abide in us. We must make every effort to embrace the righteous way of life that the New Testament commands and promises is possible.

Obedience means unconditional submission to Jesus as Lord as well as Savior. It means abandoning our one-sided, unbiblical conceptions of sin, the gospel, salvation, and conversion, and returning to the full-blown biblical understanding of these glorious truths. It means recovering the biblical reality of the church as community. It means living the truth that orthodoxy and orthopraxis—right theology and right behavior—are equally important.

If we do that, I believe we dare hope and expect that a longing for holiness will sweep through our churches. Our sexual practices will reflect biblical standards much more faithfully. Joyful, lifelong fidelity will make our homes and marriages powerful signs of an attractive alternative to today's brokenness and agony. Biblical Christians will lead the way in more vigorous efforts to reduce dramatically domestic abuse, racism, materialism, and poverty.

Could that really happen? The promise of the gospel is that it can and does—whenever people truly surrender to the biblical Christ. Fortunately, there are even some rays of hope in some of the polling data. When pollsters make careful distinctions between nominal Christians and devout believers, there is evidence that deeply committed Christians do live differently.

In 1992, George Gallup Jr. and Timothy Jones published a book called [*The Saints Among Us*](#). They used a 12-question survey to identify what they called "heroic and faithful individual" Christians. Some of the questions identified people who believed in the full authority of the Bible and practiced evangelism. But others identified costly behavior: "I do things I don't want to do because I believe it is the will of God" and "I put my religious beliefs into practice in my relations with all people regardless of their backgrounds." They labeled "saints" those who agreed with every question. And they called "super-saints" those who agreed *strongly* with every question.³⁸

The good news is that the "saints" lived differently. Only 42 percent of the strongly *uncommitted* spent "a good deal of time" helping people in need, but 73 percent of the "saints" and 85 percent of the "super-saints" did.³⁹ Only 63 percent of the spiritually *uncommitted* reported that they would *not* object to having a neighbor of a different race. But 84 percent of the "saints" and 93 percent of the "super-saints" said they would not object.⁴⁰ Interestingly, a disproportionate share of the saints were women, African Americans, and persons earning less than \$25,000 per year.

Sociologist Christian Smith's study comparing the attitudes and behavior of evangelical, fundamentalist, mainline, liberal, and Catholic Christians as well as those of the "non-religious" found that over the previous two years, evangelicals were more than three times more likely to have given "a lot" of money to help the poor and the needy than the non-religious.⁴¹ In fact, evangelicals scored higher than any other Christian group. Of all evangelicals, 29 percent gave a lot. But only 23 percent of fundamentalists, 22 percent of mainline churches, 25 percent of liberals, 22 percent of Catholics, and 9 percent of the non-religious gave a lot. Even so, only 29 percent of the evangelicals gave a lot. That means 71 percent of evangelicals did not!

A Pew Center poll in 2001 supported Smith's findings. In this survey, those with a high religious commitment were a little more than three times as likely as those with a low religious commitment to have volunteered to help poor, sick, and elderly people in the last month (35 percent vs. 11 percent).⁴² But again only one third (35 percent) of the highly religiously committed had volunteered. Sixty-five percent had not. Another question in the same poll found that those who were "heavily involved in activities at their church or house of worship" were almost four times more likely to volunteer to help the poor, sick, and homeless in settings outside church than were those of low religious commitment (44 percent vs. 12 percent).⁴³

George Barna has developed a set of criteria to identify people with a "biblical worldview." These people believe that "the Bible is the moral standard" and also think that "absolute moral truths exist and are conveyed through the Bible." In addition, they agree with all six of the following additional beliefs: God is the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator who still rules the universe; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life; Satan is a real, living entity; salvation is a free gift, not something we can earn; every Christian has a personal responsibility to evangelize; and the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches.

Barna's criteria for identifying people with a biblical worldview are not identical to his criteria for identifying evangelicals. Barna's "born-again" category is much broader; about 40 percent of the total population are born-again, but only 7–8 percent are evangelicals. Using his definition of those with a biblical worldview, Barna has discovered that only 9 percent of all born-again adults have a biblical worldview and only 2 percent of born-again teenagers.⁴⁴ That is the bad news.

The good news is that the small circle of people with a biblical worldview demonstrate genuinely different behavior. They are nine times more likely than all the others to avoid "adult-only" material on the Internet. They are four times more likely than other Christians to boycott objectionable companies and products and twice as likely to choose intentionally not to watch a movie specifically because of its bad content. They are three times more likely than other adults not to use tobacco products and twice as likely to volunteer time to help needy people.⁴⁵ Forty-nine percent of all born-again Christians with a biblical worldview have volunteered more than an hour in the previous week to an organization serving the poor, whereas only 29 percent of born-again Christians *without* a biblical worldview and only 22 percent of non-born-again Christians had done so.⁴⁶

In a 2000 poll Barna discovered that evangelicals are five times less likely than adults generally to report that their "career comes first."⁴⁷ And there is accumulating evidence that theologically conservative Protestant men who attend church regularly have lower rates of domestic abuse than others.⁴⁸

Not surprisingly, this better behavior is closely correlated with higher religious activity. Those with a biblical worldview are almost twice as likely as other Christians to read the Bible each week.⁴⁹ Nationwide, only 19 percent of adults attend Sunday school each week, but 33 percent of all born-again adults do. And the figure jumps to 60 percent for evangelicals.⁵⁰ While only 17 percent of all adults attend a small group for prayer and Bible study each week, 30 percent of born-again Christians do. And 55 percent of all evangelicals do.⁵¹

Other pollsters have discovered a similar correlation between evangelical faith and religious activity. Christian Smith found that evangelicals were much more likely to attend church each week or share the gospel than other Christians.⁵² The same pattern emerged in a study in 2001 by the Pew Research Center.⁵³

These statistics offer some substantial hope. People with a biblical worldview, and this category largely overlaps with that of evangelical, do exhibit better moral behavior at several points. We cannot be satisfied with studies that show that only 29 percent of all evangelicals gave a lot to help the poor and needy. But that is at least a lot better than the statistics for the non-religious, where only 9 percent do a lot to help the poor. When we can distinguish nominal Christians from deeply

committed, theologically orthodox Christians, it is clear that genuine Christianity does lead to better behavior, at least in some areas.

Barna's findings on the different behavior of Christians with a biblical worldview underline the importance of theology. Biblical orthodoxy does matter. One important way to end the scandal of contemporary Christian behavior is to work and pray fervently for the growth of orthodox theological belief in our churches.

Barna reports one final finding that offers additional hope. He discovered that even though 91 percent of all born-again Christians lacked a biblical worldview, they were nonetheless open, even desirous, of spiritual growth. Eighty percent of all born-again Christians said that having a "deep, personal commitment to the Christian faith is a top priority for their future."⁵⁴ And nine out of ten Christians of every stripe said that if their churches specified things they should personally do to grow spiritually, they would at least listen to the advice and follow most of the recommendations.⁵⁵ That suggests a lot of openness to more solid biblical discipling.

Things are not quite as hopeless as they first appeared. Biblical faith makes a substantial (though not enough) difference in the lives of deeply committed Christians. Most nominal Christians seem open to spiritual growth.

More importantly, the gospel is true! The carpenter from Nazareth burst from the tomb and now reigns as the Lord of the universe. His promise to transform into his very own likeness all who truly believe in him still stands. The Holy Spirit is still alive and powerful today, radically remaking broken people who unconditionally open their hearts and lives to his mighty presence.

At any time in history, no matter how bad the current mess, no matter how unfaithful the contemporary church, God stands ready to keep his promises. God is eager to do the same mighty deeds today that he has done in the past. All we must do is trust and obey.

The Lord we claim to love and worship stands at the door and knocks. He longs to be truly invited in. We cannot invite only half of him. But if today we dare to embrace and surrender to the full biblical Christ, he will perform mighty deeds that transcend what we dare ask or imagine. He will turn our weeping into joy. He will end the scandal of blatant disobedience in the people who call on his name.

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