



## The State of the Church

What follows is an examination of selected religious beliefs and practices within American Christianity. Among the beliefs and practices discussed below are: commitment to the Christian faith; belief about God; the accuracy of the Bible; the frequency of prayer, Bible reading and attendance of religious services. Two data sources were used for following discussion: the Barna Group's *The State of the Church: 2006* and the Pew Forum's "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey."

The Barna Group conducts a yearly national survey each January to evaluate the state of faith and religious activity in the U.S. The data from the survey is then used within the web site's Barna updates, which are free; and ministry Resources, like *The State of the Church*, which are not. *The State of the Church: 2006* is the latest available comprehensive discussion of their yearly survey results. See the Barna Group website for more information on their research: <http://barna.org>. The Pew Forum has made the data from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey available for free on their website: <http://religions.pewforum.org>. If you are interested in statistics on religious beliefs and practices in the U.S., visit the site. You can do in depth analysis and comparisons of beliefs and practices by religious faith traditions. They survey non-Christian faiths as well as Christian traditions in the U.S.

At several points, a comparison of the data showed differences between the survey by the Barna Group and the Pew Forum. These differences will periodically be discussed. Since the questions of the questions the two surveys were typically worded differently, caution in drawing conclusions from the differences is warranted. Nevertheless, some interesting contrasts occurred.

## **Religious Beliefs**

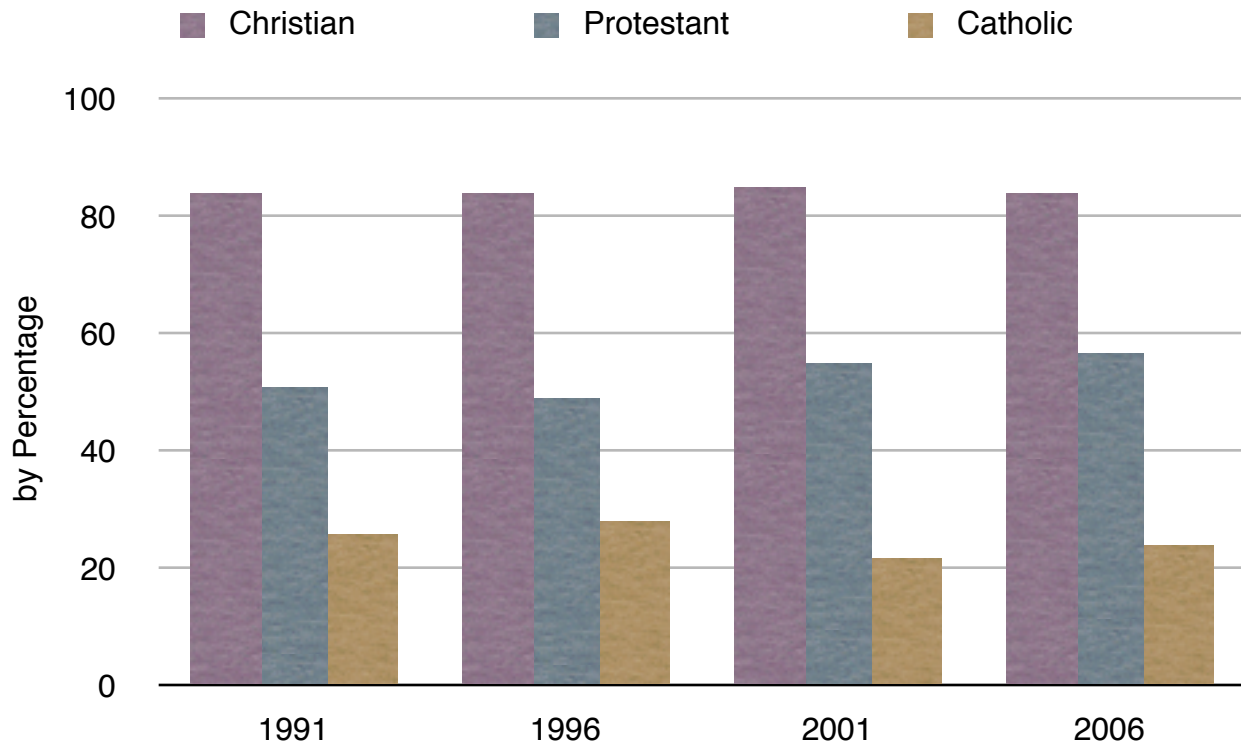
### **Faith Identity and Affiliation**

Americans consistently identify themselves as being of the Christian faith (84%), a pattern that has existed since the country was founded. Barna's numbers are slightly higher than those reported by the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey for the number of Christians in the U.S. (76.1%), but the Barna survey question (Do you consider yourself to be Christian, Jewish or some other faith?) could lead some respondents to report themselves as "Christian," while the Pew Forum has them classified as unaffiliated, or another faith tradition with close ties to Christianity, like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Residents of the South (92%) and Midwest (89%) were more likely to say they were Christians than the Northeast (79%) or West (75%). A partial answer may be that a majority of non-Christian faiths (Jews, Mormons, Hindus, Buddhists and others) tended to live in the Northeast or West, as noted in the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.

A majority of Americans (57%) report attending a Protestant church most often in 2006; while 24% report attending a Catholic church. Although attendance is not the same thing as affiliation, both figures are close to the affiliation percentages found by the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey for Protestants (51.1%) and Catholics (23.9%). See Figure 1 for further examination of the Barna Group data.

**Figure 1**



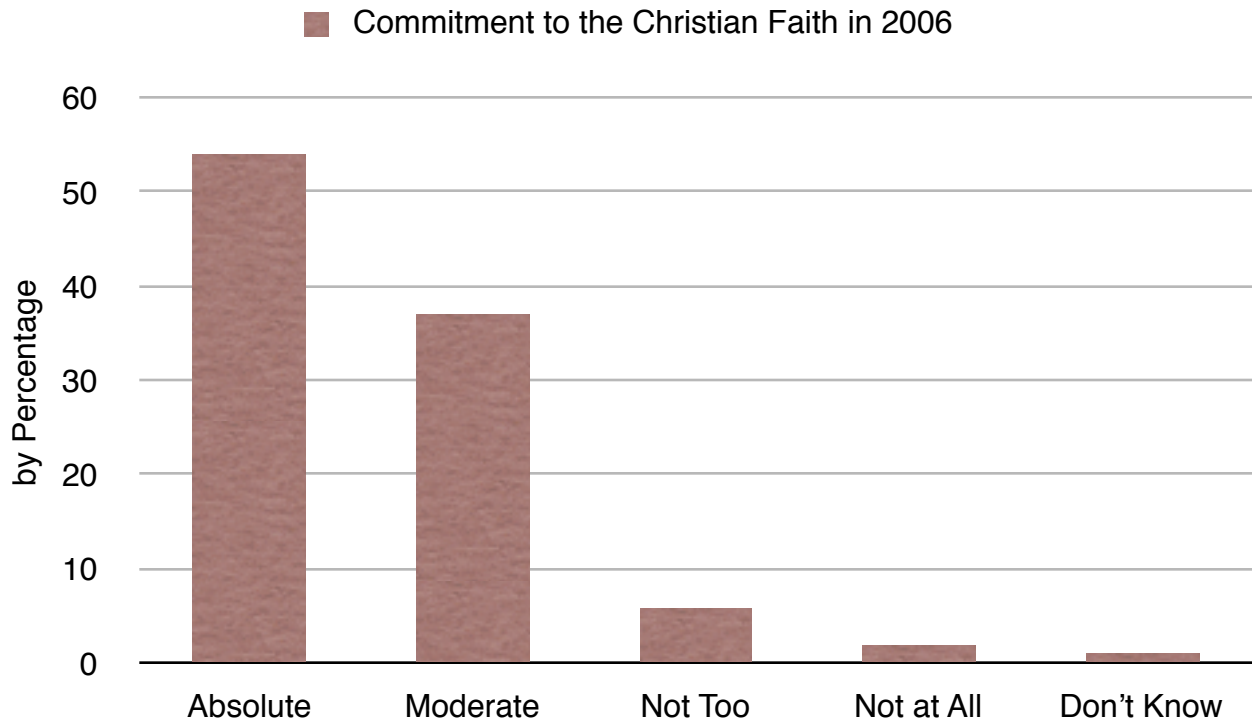
### **Commitment to the Christian Faith**

The level of absolute commitment to the Christian faith in 2006 (54%) was the highest since the measure was introduced by the Barna Group in 1996 (44% in 1996; and 49% in 2001). The wording of the survey question is: “Overall, how committed are you to the Christian faith?” 2006 data indicated that another 37% were moderately committed; 6% were not too committed; with 2% not at all committed and 1% not knowing. This also corresponds to those in the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey who felt that religion was very important in their life (56%). See Figure 2 for comparison of the Barna Group data.

The Barna Group also noted clear age-related patterns to faith commitment, where 67% of Builders (born between 1927 and 1945), 58% of Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), 42% of Busters (born between 1965 and 1983) and 27% of Mosaics (born between 1984 and 2002) were “absolutely committed” to the Christian faith. “If these patterns remain stable for a number of years, they spell trouble for the Christian church.” However, the Boomers and Busters have drastically increased their reported commitment levels since the mid 1990s. In 1996 their reported levels of absolute

commitment were 43% and 27% respectively. The effects may indicate a growing willingness to commit to a religious faith as people age.

**Figure 2**



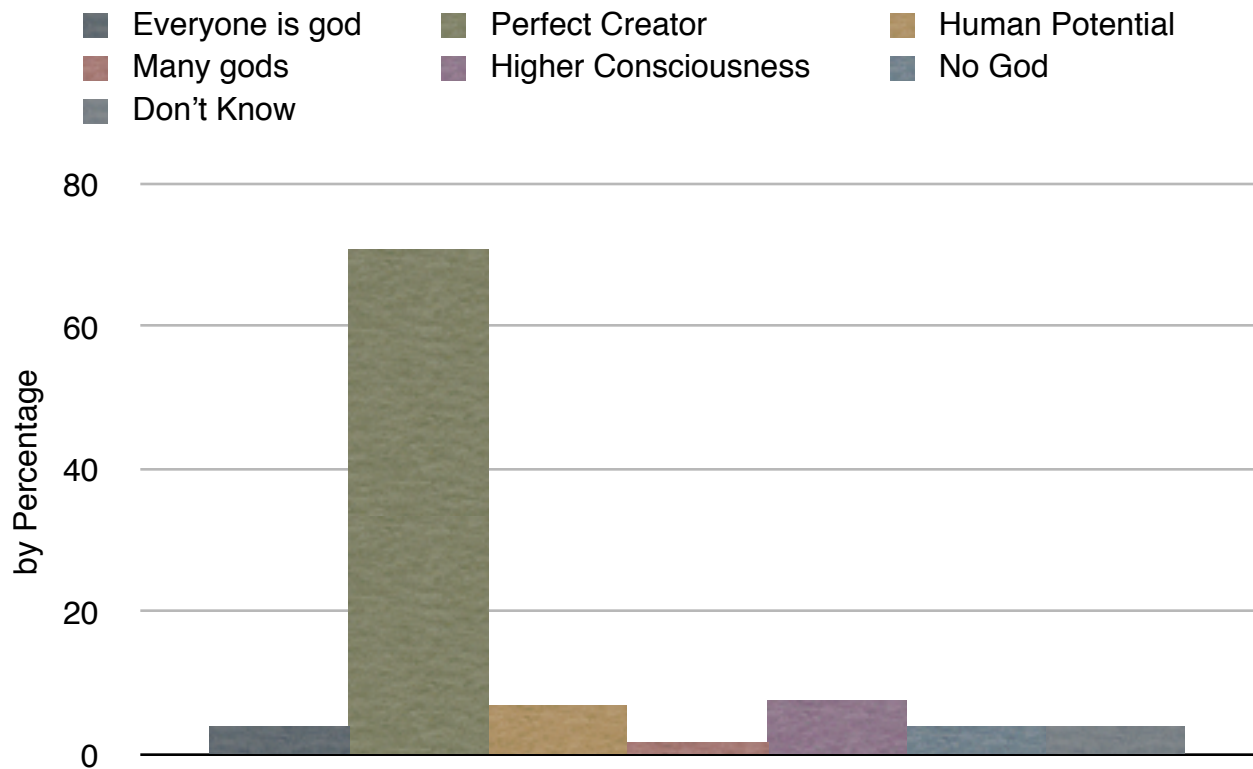
### **Belief About God**

The Barna Group asked respondents to indicate which of the following descriptions came closest to what they personally believed about God: 1. Everyone is god (4%). 2. God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today (71%). 3. God refers to the total realization of personal, human potential. 4 (7%). There are many gods, each with different power and authority (2%). 5. God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach (8%). or 6. There is no such thing as God (4%). There has been little change over the past decade in how people view God. But the Barna Group did note that more than one-quarter of all adults hold a less-than orthodox view of the nature of God.

We need to tread lightly before saying that almost 3/4 of Americans have an orthodox Christian view of God. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey similarly found that 71% of its respondents were “absolutely certain” there was a God or Universal

Spirit. So while the language of the Barna questions resonates with orthodox Christian theology, God as Universal Spirit also fits best with God as “ the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today” from the Barna descriptions. See Figure 3 for comparisons of the Barna Group data.

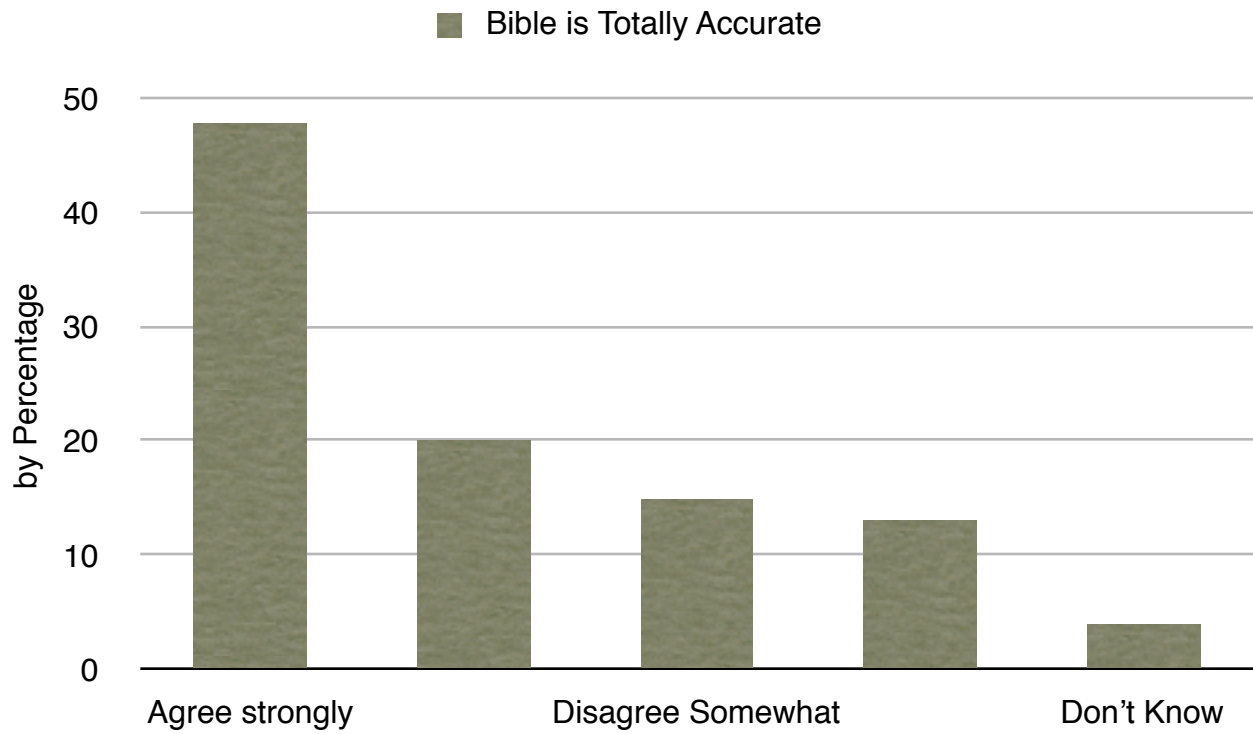
**Figure 3**



**Accuracy of the Bible**

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: “The Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches.” Forty eight percent strongly agreed with the statement; 20% somewhat agreed; 15% disagreed somewhat; 13% strongly disagreed; and 4% didn’t know. There has been a slight growth in the percentage of adults who accept the teachings of the Bible as totally accurate in all its principles: 46% strongly agreed with the above statement in 1991; 47% strongly agreed in 1996; and 45% strongly agreed in 2001. Protestants were twice as likely as Catholics to accept the accuracy of the Bible (64% vs. 33%). See Figure 4 for comparisons of the Barna Group data.

Figure 4

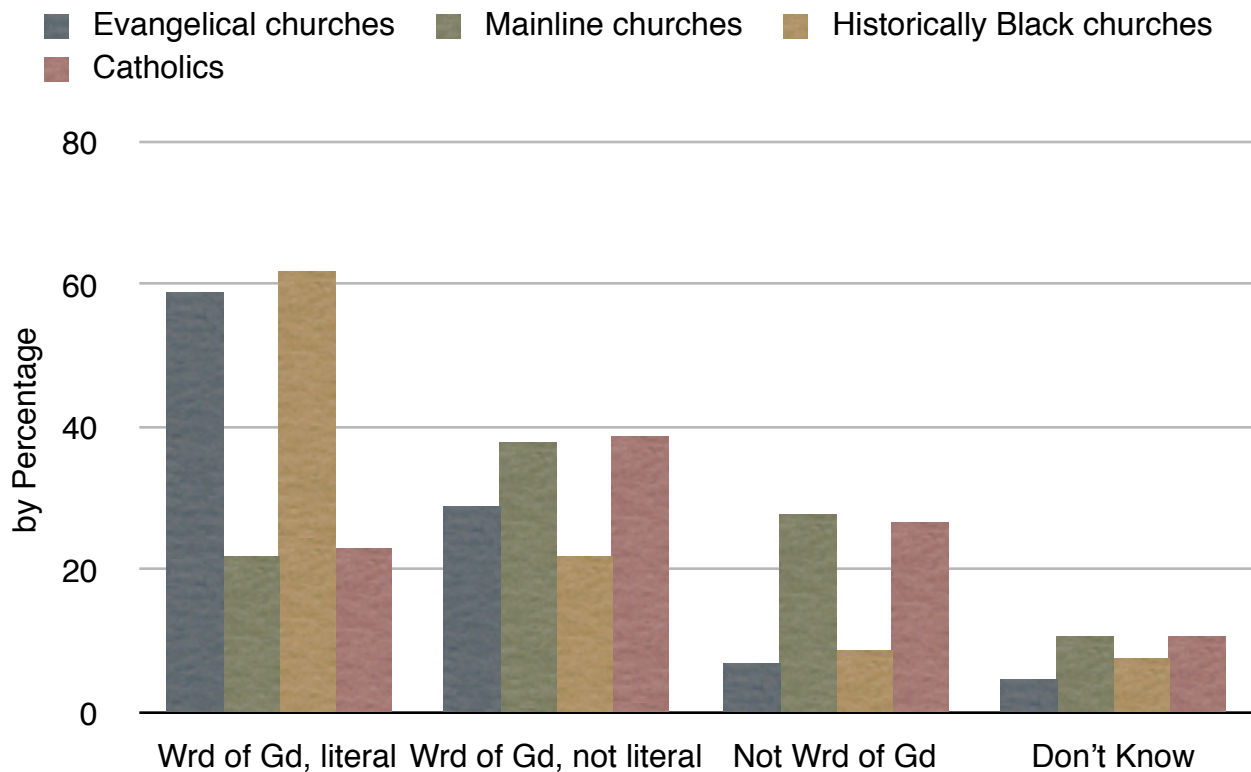


The Barna Group pointed out that “we have yet to reach a point where a majority of Americans are convinced of the Bible’s veracity. They were surprised that such a small percentage of non-evangelical born again Christians (61%) strongly agreed in the Bible’s accuracy in what it teaches; and noted that the South was the only region in which a majority of adults accepted the Bible as accurate (59%). But I’d suggest the wording of the question was a factor in the percentages being as low as they were. By asking if the Bible is accurate in all the **principles** it teaches, the Barna question confounded the literalist issue of word-for-word interpretation of Scripture with whether the Bible is God’s Word.

Turning to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 59% members of Evangelical churches thought that the Bible was the Word of God, and was to be taken literally, word for word. This contrasts with members of mainline churches (22%) and Catholics (23%), who thought the Bible was the Word of God, literally true word for word. But when you also include those who believe the Bible to be the Word of God, but that not everything in the Bible should be taken word for word, 88% of Evangelicals thought

the Bible was the Word of God (literalists and non-literalists combined); as did 60% of Mainline churches and 62% of Catholics. 84% of historically Black churches saw the Bible as the Word of God. See the data reported from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey on the literal interpretation of Scripture in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**



A further issue with some possible influence here could be whether or not respondents believed that there was more than one true way to interpret the teachings of the Bible. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey found that 53% of Evangelical church members thought there was more than one true way to interpret the teachings of the Bible; 82% of Mainline churches; 77% of Catholics; and 57% of Historically Black churches.

Simply asking if the Bible is accurate in all the principles it teaches, as did the Barna Group, does not adequately account for the issues of literalism and multiple Christian theological systems that claim to be based on an understanding of the Bible as the Word of God—Catholicism, Calvinism, and Orthodoxy to name just a few.

## **Born Again and Evangelical**

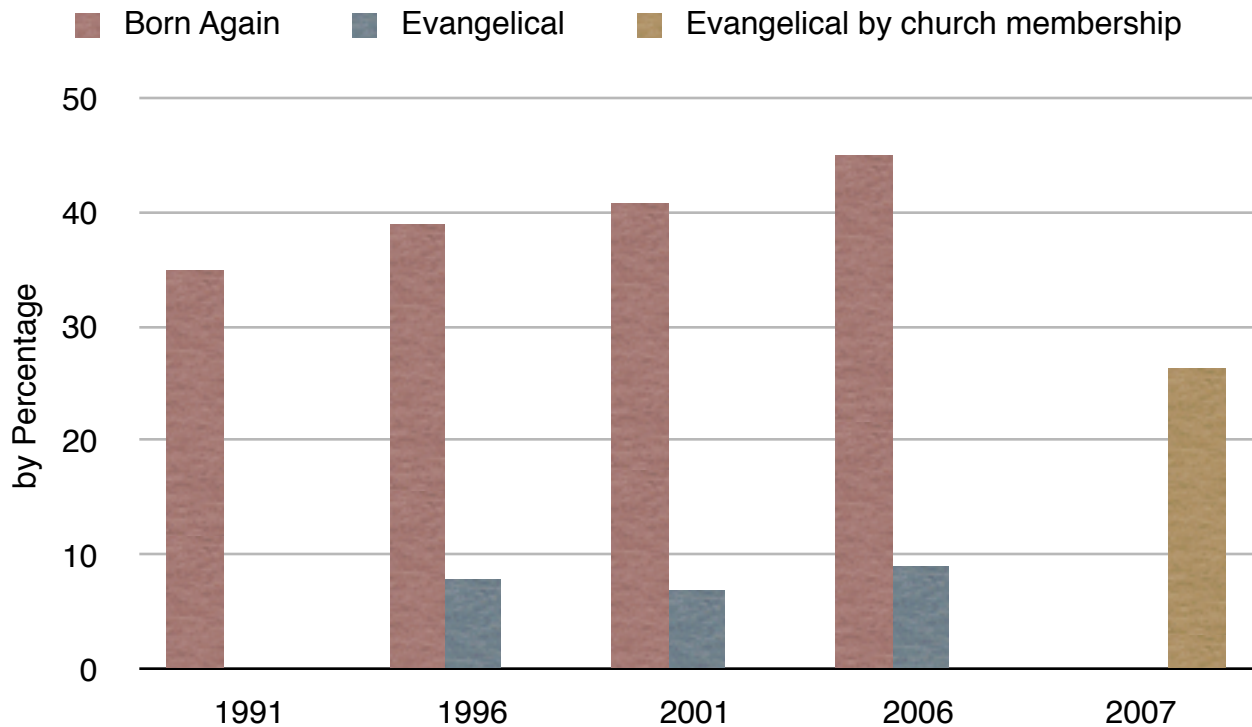
The Barna Group does not simply ask a person if they are “born again” and then report the statistics for self-identified born again individuals. They ask if you have ever made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in your life today. If the respondent says yes; they then have to select option 3: “When you die you will go to Heaven because you have confessed your sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior” out of six possibilities. Forty five percent of respondents met this criteria for being born again in 2006; 35% in 1991; 39% in 1996; and 41% in 2001.

Similarly, “evangelical” began with agreeing to the born again criteria, plus:

- Strongly agreeing that the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches.
- Strongly agreeing that they, personally, have a responsibility to tell other people their religious beliefs.
- Strongly agreeing that their religious faith is very important in their life.
- Strongly disagreeing that the devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.
- Strongly disagreeing that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in Heaven.
- Strongly disagreeing that when He lived on earth, Jesus Christ was human and committed sins, like other people.
- Believing that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.

In 1996, 8% of respondents met the Barna Group’s nine criteria for being evangelical; 7% in 2001; and 9% in 2009. Three-quarters of the evangelical population is over the age of 40. A mere 1% of Catholics meet this criteria, while 15% of Protestants do. This corresponds to the 26.3% of the U.S. population reporting membership in an Evangelical Protestant church within the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. See Figure 6 for comparisons.

**Figure 6**

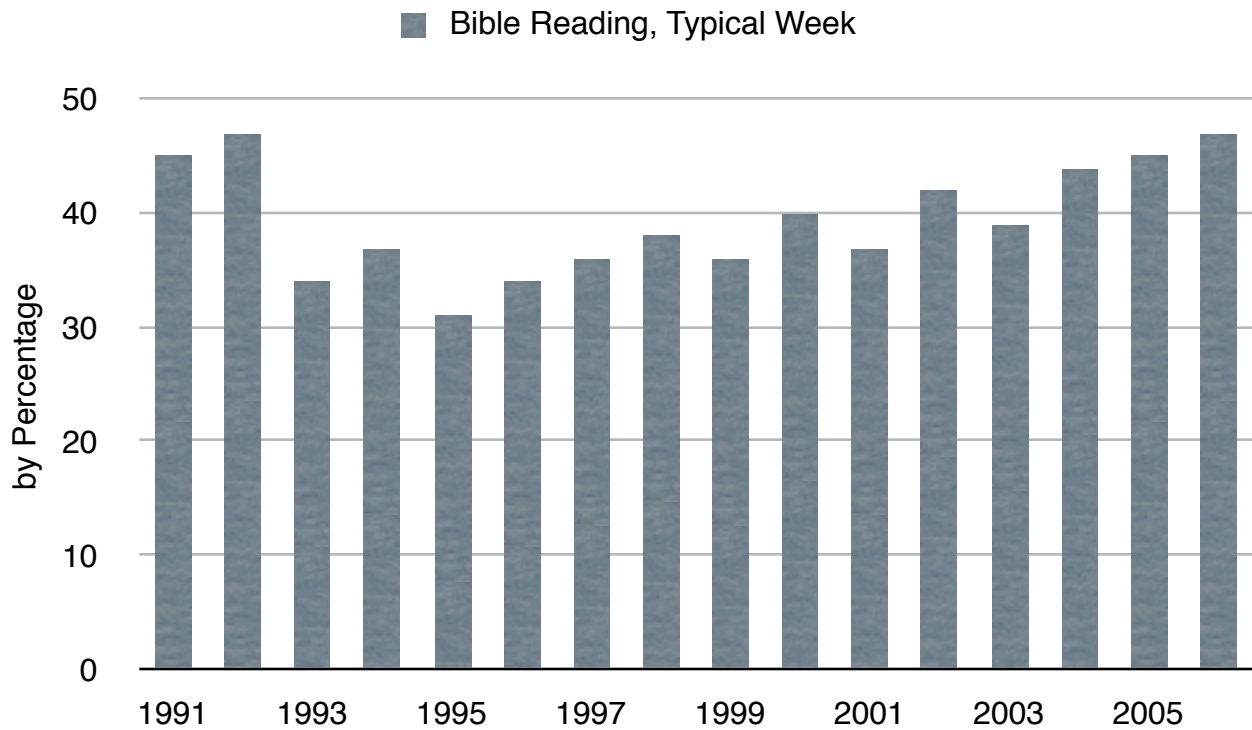


### **Religious Behavior**

#### **Bible Reading**

Bible reading in a typical week has had its ups and downs since 1991, when 45% reported they read the Bible. From 1993 until 2001, the percentage of people who read the Bible outside of church in a typical week ranged from 34% to 40%; with a low of 31% in 1995. There has been a slow, but steady rise from 2001 through 2006 to reach the current level of 47%. The older a person is, the more likely it is that they will read the Bible. The same tendency is present for women over men. People living in the South were the only region to report a majority who read the Scriptures in an average week (57%); and Blacks were the only ethnic group with a majority of people who reported reading the Bible (66%). See Figure 7 for comparisons of the data from the Barna Group.

Figure 7



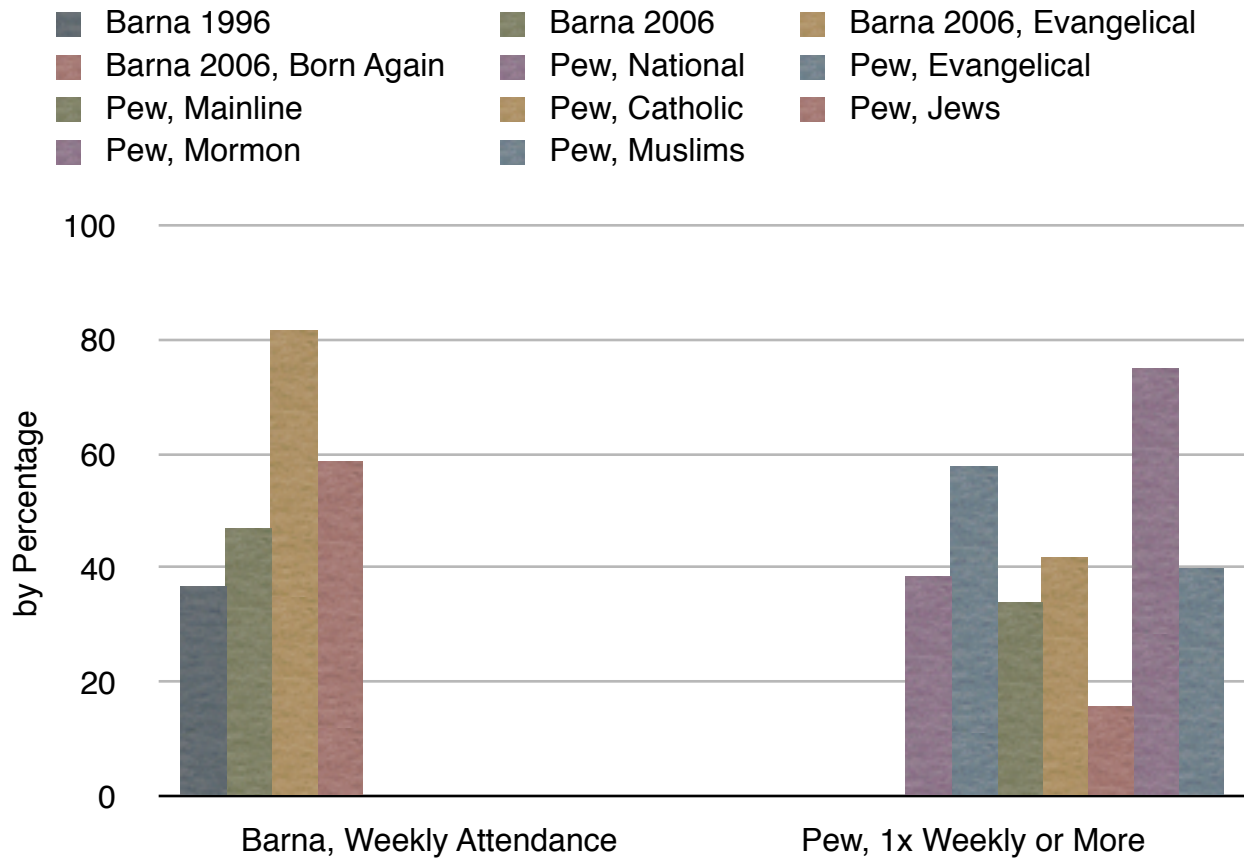
### Church Attendance

The Barna Group found that church attendance in the past week is also up to 47% in 2006, the highest level since 1992. Women were more likely to attend church than men; and people in the South and the Midwest outperformed those in the Northeast and West. Among religious segments, 82% of evangelicals and 59% of non-evangelical born again adults attended church in a typical week. Catholics and Protestants run even on this measure (the Barna Group did not provide data to support this statement), which was a huge reversal from the distinct commitment Catholics held to church attendance several decades ago. Interestingly, 3% of the atheists or agnostics report they attended church in a typical week.

Attendance data from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum asked for typical attendance at religious services, not attendance in the last seven days, as the Barna Group asked; and their frequencies were higher for a couple religious traditions than *The State of the Church: 2006* overall; but lower than data for Barna Evangelicals. Pew Forum data on at least weekly church attendance was: Evangelical (54%),

Mainline (34%), Catholic (42%), Jews (16%), Mormon (75%) and Muslims (40%). See Figure 8 for comparisons.

**Figure 8**



### Frequency of Prayer

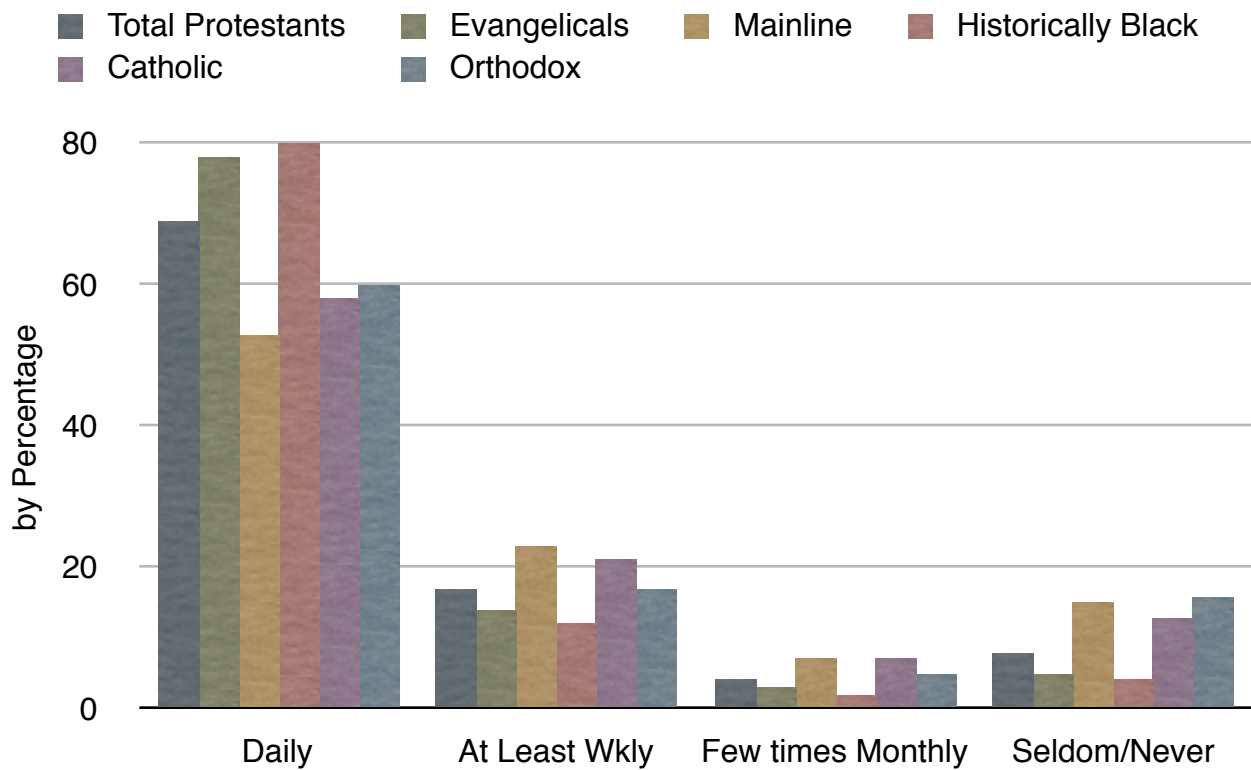
Consistently since 1993, the Barna Group found that four out of five adults report that they prayed to God in the past week. In six of the last seven years, every Evangelical person reported that they had prayed in the past week. Non-evangelical born again Christians came close to that rate at 98%. Even three of ten atheists and agnostics admit to praying! Three out of four adults associated with non-Christian faiths also report they had prayed in a typical week.

The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey asked how often people prayed: once a day or more; once or a few times weekly; a few times a month; seldom and never. Seventy-eight percent of the members of Evangelical churches said they pray at least once a

day; 14% pray once or a few times weekly; 3% pray a few times per month; 4% seldom pray; and 1% never pray. Five percent of atheists said they prayed at least once daily; 9% of agnostics admitted to the same frequency of prayer. Ten percent of atheists and 18% of agnostics report praying at least once per week. See Figure 9 for comparisons of the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey data.

The data on prayer from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, is lower than that from the Barna Group. However, a significant percentage of American Christians still report that they pray at least weekly: Evangelical Church members, 92%; Mainline Protestant church members, 76%; members of Historically Black churches, 92%; Catholics, 80%; and members of an Orthodox church, 77%.

**Figure 9**



## **Conclusion**

The Barna group commented that we must be cautious about reading too much into increases in religious behaviors such as Bible reading and church attendance. Their data for 2006 indicated that “God is hot” at the moment, noting observable behavior change but without much change in core religious beliefs. This suggested we may be seeing evidence of a brief, superficial interest in spirituality rather than genuine lasting change in people’s relationship with God. Behavior is driven by core beliefs, and lasting change only occurs when there is change in the underlying beliefs. The changed behavior may revert back to its original state because there wasn’t a true heart change to sustain new activities like Bible reading and church attendance. While changes in people’s behavior may happen rapidly on a personal level, evidence for collective change accumulates slowly over time. We have to see if the changes in behavior produce more permanent changes in beliefs.