

## *American Worldview Inventory 2020 – At a Glance*

### **AWVI 2020 Results – Release #7: Perceptions of the Value of Human Life**

**Survey: Majority of Americans No Longer See Human Life as ‘Sacred,’ Yet See Humanity as ‘Basically Good’**  
June 23, 2020

As our nation’s biblical foundations continue to erode, Americans’ understanding of the fundamental nature of humanity and the value of human life is shifting significantly—with a large majority of Americans today believing that human beings are “basically good,” and less than 40% seeing human life as having intrinsic value or as being “sacred.” Although they conflict with traditional biblical teaching, these views increasingly have permeated well beyond the secular culture to all but the most conservative, deeply religious segments of American society.

According to new research from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, the majority of Americans no longer believe that human life has intrinsic value, with six out of ten rejecting the idea that “human life is sacred.” Only 39% of Americans today view human life as “sacred,” or as having unconditional, intrinsic worth.

Only a few conservative, deeply religious groups continue to claim a majority who view human life to be “sacred.” These include adults with a biblical worldview (93%); those attending an evangelical church (60%); born-again Christians (60%); political conservatives (57%); people 50 or older (53%); and Republicans (53%). Some religious groups had only a minority who viewed life as sacred, including those attending Pentecostal (46%), mainline Protestant (45%), or Catholic (43%) churches.

The research also shows that almost seven out of ten—a whopping 69%—of Americans see human beings as “basically good.” This view is so pervasive that a majority of every population subgroup examined adopted that view, ranging from just over half to more than three-quarters of those groups. The segment *least* likely to say “people are basically good” are people with a biblical worldview (52%).

Seeing human beings as “basically good” runs counter to the foundational biblical teaching that human beings are created by God and made in His image but are fallen and in need of redemption. Only a slight majority of Americans—56%—hold this biblical view.

Instead, one-third of Americans possess alternative views about humanity, according to the *AWVI 2020*. For instance, one out of eight (12%) claims that people are simply “material substance – biological machines.” Another one-eighth (12%) argues that people are “part of the mind of the universe.” Smaller numbers describe humans as “an illusion,” claim we do not exist; or as “sleeping gods, part of the soul of the universe.”

According to Dr. George Barna, CRC Director of Research who directed the *American Worldview Inventory 2020* and has conducted other worldview research for more than three decades, one possible bright spot in this latest study is the marked decline in the optimistic view of humanity as “basically good”—down 14 percentage points from 83% of Americans in the past 30 years.

Full results of the seventh of 10 biweekly releases of the *American Worldview Inventory 2020* follow.

**American Worldview Inventory 2020 Results –**  
**FULL Release #7: Perceptions of the Value of Human Life**

**Survey: Majority of Americans No Longer See Human Life as ‘Sacred,’ Yet See Humanity as ‘Basically Good’**

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research, Cultural Research Center

Released: June 23, 2020

At a recent fundraiser, likely Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden claimed that “10 to 15 percent” of Americans are “just not very good people” in a nation filled with individuals that are good and virtuous.

The *American Worldview Inventory 2020*, the groundbreaking survey by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, indicates that Biden’s optimistic view of humanity is embraced by most citizens. An overwhelming majority of U.S. adults contend that people are good, yet simultaneously maintain conflicting and uncertain views about the value of human life itself. The diversity of public opinion and behavior related to those events stems from divergent worldviews and the associated perspectives about the nature and worth of human beings.

**Are People Good?**

Seven out of ten adults (69%) believe that “people are basically good.” In fact, that perspective is so pervasive that a majority of every population subgroup examined adopted that view, ranging from just over half to more than three-quarters of those groups.

And yet, this is a significant *decline* from 30 years ago, when research by Dr. George Barna, who also directed the *AWVI 2020*, discovered that 83% of U.S. adults believed that people are basically good.

The perception that people are good is most frequently based on feelings rather than facts and often reflects their self-view. There is also a smaller proportion of adults who defend the goodness of people based upon spiritual reasons, believing that human beings are basically good because they are all created in the image of God, have the ability to discern right from wrong, and have value in God’s eyes.

<b>Religious Preference Doesn’t Matter; Religious Adults Say “People are Basically Good”</b>	
<b>Agreed: “People are basically good”</b>	
<b>Church Affiliation</b>	
Evangelical church	70%
Pentecostal church	70
Non-Christian church*	71
Jewish	72
Mainline Protestant	75
Catholic Church	77

\*Other than Jewish  
Source: *American Worldview Inventory 2020*; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. N=2,000 adults 18 or older.

Providing a bit of a reality check, the segment *least* likely to claim that “people are basically good” are people with a biblical worldview (52%). Their comparative resistance to the notion of the goodness of humanity is based on the Bible teaching that all people are sinners who need to be saved from their sins and sinful nature, and are innately selfish. Numerous Bible passages are cited by adherents of this view as theological proof that God declares people to be consistently and entirely evil. That view can be summarized as characterizing people as tainted by original sin and because God is the standard of goodness—a standard that people cannot live up to—the only path to goodness is through salvation in Jesus Christ.

When challenged to explain how bad people can make good choices and demonstrate good behavior, they counter that even bad people do some good things, but that alone does not qualify them as inherently good.

### **What is a Human Being?**

The survey revealed that a small majority of Americans (56%) believes that human beings are created by God, and made in His image, but are fallen and in need of redemption.

One-third of Americans possess alternative views about humanity. For instance, one out of every eight (12%) claims that people are simply “material substance – biological machines.” Another one-eighth (12%) argues that people are “part of the mind of the universe.” Smaller numbers of people describe humans as “an illusion,” claiming we do not exist; or as “sleeping gods, part of the soul of the universe.”

Not surprisingly, the people *least* likely to perceive human beings to be God’s creation, reflecting His nature, and to be fallen and needing redemption, are spiritual Skeptics (just 13% of whom accepted this point-of-view) and those associated with non-Christian faiths (29%). Political liberals (36%) were also highly unlikely to adopt this perspective.

Similarly, it was no surprise to find that the people most likely to describe human beings as created by God, made in His image, fallen, and in need of redemption were the most devoted Christian segments: people associated with evangelical or Pentecostal churches, adults with a biblical worldview, born-again Christians, and SAGE Cons (i.e., Spiritually Active Governance Engaged Conservative Christians). More than four out of five of the people in each of those segments chose that description of human beings.

### **The Value of Life**

The biggest shock of the survey, though, may have been discovering that most Americans now believe that human life has no intrinsic or absolute value. While the most common reply to the question about the value of life was the 39% who said “human life is sacred,” more than six out of ten adults could not bring themselves to perceive life as sacred. Instead, a substantially larger share of the population combined to offer views such as “life is what you make it, but it has no absolute value” (37%); “life does not attain its full value until we reach our highest point of evolution and expression” (11%); or other, less popular points of view that concurred that life has no infinite, unconditional value. One out of ten adults admitted they did not know how to appraise the value of human life.

Only a handful of subgroups – all of which were conservative, deeply religious segments – were populated by a majority who construed human life to be “sacred.” Those groups were adults with a biblical worldview (93%); adults who attend an evangelical church (60%); born-again Christians (60%); political conservatives (57%); people 50 or older (53%); and Republicans (53%).

In contrast, some of the religious segments that did not generate a majority who viewed life as sacred included adults who attend Pentecostal (46%), mainline Protestant (45%), or Catholic (43%) churches.

Question: What is the value of human life?											
Perspective	Church Affiliation								Political Ideology		
	All	Evan	Pent	MLP	Cath	BAC	Other	Skep	Con	Mod	Lib
Human beings are God's creation, made In His image, fallen, needs redemption	56%	85%	81%	58%	66%	86%	29%	13%	77%	51%	36%
Human life is sacred	39	60	46	45	43	60	25	15	57	35	24
The Bible is ambiguous on abortion	37	30	41	40	41	28	46	39	27	38	51

Abbreviations:  
 Evan – attend evangelical church  
 Pent – attend Pentecostal church  
 Cath – attend Catholic church  
 BAC – born again Christian  
 Other – faith other than Christianity  
 Skep – Spiritual Skeptic  
 MLP – attend mainline Protestant church  
 Con – politically conservative  
 Mod – politically moderate  
 Lib – politically liberal

Source: American Worldview Inventory 2020; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,000 adults 18 or older.

Several subgroups emerged as having no more than one out of every four members willing to portray human life as sacred. Those segments were people associated with a non-Christian faith group (25%); political liberals (24%); adults 18 to 29 years old (19%); and spiritual skeptics (15%).

The value of life is reflected in the public's views about abortion, too. The public is nearly evenly divided as to whether or not the Bible gives an unambiguous perspective on the morality of aborting a child. In total 37% say the Bible is ambiguous about abortion while 41% say that it is not. Combining the 37% who say the Bible is ambiguous regarding abortion with the nearly one-quarter of adults who admit they do not know (22%) results in six out of ten adults for whom the Bible is not the arbiter of appropriate action on that hotly-contested issue. In raw numbers, that amounts to roughly 150 million adults who would not seek guidance from the Bible regarding abortion.

### We Are Protesting the Wrong Problem

In light of the current social unrest sweeping the nation, and the wealth of related political reforms proposed by the Congress, Dr. George Barna, CRC Director of Research, pointed to some of the underlying tensions and complexities involved.

“A movement to defund police departments might make sense if people are innately good. People with a humanistic worldview argue that crime and violence happen because of poverty, bad parenting, systemic discrimination, and other external forces,” the veteran researcher noted. “Yet crime statistics, political tensions, tendencies toward anger and hatred, and America’s moral deterioration and confusion suggest that we are neither innately good nor that emotional responses to empirical challenges will solve the problems.

“The underlying issues are ill-formed character and a broken moral compass. Economic, social and cultural depravity are outgrowths of our moral and character deficiencies, not causes,” he continued. “Poor people with godly character and biblical morals make good choices. Rich people with bad character and inappropriate morals make bad choices, despite their education, fame, wealth, and social class. An objective assessment of

history shows that adults, like children, need ethical and reasonable boundaries that are consistently and justly enforced. Remove those boundaries and you get the kind of anarchy that results in disrespect, violence, crime, and hatred.”

Barna suggested that the solution is not to have more or different laws but to invest in more effective human development. “You cannot change the hearts of people by outlawing racism. You will not create peace by passing laws and forcing compliance. Efforts to facilitate economic equality through resource redistribution have never successfully resulted in the expected or desired outcomes.

“From a biblical perspective, the problem is that we have a sin nature, pure and simple. We can deny it, but it still exists. Every society can benefit from specific systemic changes, present-day America included. But any systemic changes designed to transform the culture will be short-lived and of limited impact unless the hearts and minds of the people who populate that system are transformed first.

“Logically, given that a person’s worldview is largely in place by the age of 13 and then is refined and expanded during a person’s teens and twenties, focusing on the moral development of young people and college students will be an effective, lasting strategy,” Barna continued. “Raising our future leaders to experience and understand love, compassion, mercy, truth, and goodness will make a massive difference.”

“It’s not popular to admit, but our baseline problem is rebellion against goodness and holiness, driven by our arrogance and selfishness. Our problem is spiritual rather than political or economic,” Barna said. “Given the cultural challenges we are facing today, our best strategy is to collectively turn to God, humble ourselves before Him, earnestly seek His love and forgiveness, and follow His wisdom and guidance.”

### **About the Research**

The *American Worldview Inventory 2020 (AWVI)* is an annual survey that estimates how many adults have a biblical worldview. The assessment is based on 51 worldview-related questions drawn from eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior. *AWVI 2020* was undertaken in January 2020 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.

### **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, as described in the Bible, but remains inter-denominational and non-partisan. Access to past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is available at [www.culturalresearchcenter.com](http://www.culturalresearchcenter.com). Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at [www.arizonachristian.edu](http://www.arizonachristian.edu).