

# Cultural Research Center

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## *American Worldview Inventory 2023*

### Release #2: Research Identifies the Best Starting Point for Developing a Biblical Worldview

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Bible-driven Christians have a responsibility to live in harmony with biblical principles and to help shape the worldview of their children in accordance with those same principles. Many adults, however, consider that challenge to be overwhelming. They often wonder where they would start the process, given all of the important life guidance contained within the Bible.

The latest research from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University provides a simple response to that challenge, based on empirical evidence.

Focusing on what lead researcher George Barna describes as “the seven cornerstones of a biblical worldview,” the new research identifies seven particular beliefs without which a person is very unlikely to develop a consistently biblical life of thought and action. More than four out of five adults who embrace these seven basic biblical teachings possess a biblical worldview. In comparison, only a relative handful of people who do not believe the seven foundations hold a biblical worldview.

### **Buying Into the Basics**

Research from the Cultural Research Center consistently demonstrates that surprisingly few people have a pure worldview, whether their choice of worldview is Biblical Theism (the biblical worldview), Postmodernism, Marxism, Eastern Mysticism, Secular Humanism, or another.

Among the tens of thousands of adults interviewed over the years in Barna’s worldview studies, almost all have some elements of inconsistent thinking blended into their worldview of choice. The same is true even among people who possess a biblical worldview. There are typically some unbiblical perspectives that taint the philosophy of life of individuals committed to following the dictates of the Bible.

So how can a person develop a biblical worldview—how can they successfully think and act like Jesus? The research shows that worldview clarity depends on the strength and purity of the philosophical or theological foundation of a person’s worldview.

The new research persuasively shows that very few people are able to overcome the influence of competing perspectives—unless they embrace all seven of the biblical cornerstone principles. One’s response to the seven cornerstones essentially determines one’s ability and likelihood of developing a biblical mind and lifestyle.

What beliefs are necessary to have a strong foundation for a biblical worldview? The answer is surprising in that the required beliefs are basic Christian tenets, not advanced or sophisticated theological constructs.

Yet, despite their deceptive simplicity, establishing the seven beliefs as the foundation of a worldview takes more than casual verbal assent. The worldview research indicates that for these principles to qualify as personal foundations of life it requires both an understanding of the principles and a passionate, thoughtful ownership of those beliefs in order to be translated into personal behavior that is consistent with those principles.

What are these biblical cornerstones and how do American adults understand each one?

### **Cornerstone #1: An orthodox, biblical understanding of God**

A basic understanding of the existence and nature of God is a crucial building block for a biblical worldview. Many worldviews do not believe in the existence of a higher power or Supreme Being. Christianity is among the faiths that do, but there are also other perspectives about deities held by other faiths and life philosophies.

What distinguishes the God of Israel from other alleged deities? The Bible identifies some of His attributes as being the creator of all things; the sustainer of humankind and the universe; omnipotent; omniscient; omnipresent; loving; just; merciful; and relational. He is a unique presence who wants us to thrive and makes provisions for that outcome. He created humanity to be in relationship with Him, and to focus our life on engaging with, serving, and ultimately answering to Him. Our eternal destiny is in His hands.

The *American Worldview Inventory 2023 (AWVI 2023)* shows that just half of all adults (50%) believe in this God. That figure is a steep decline from the 69% who believed in that God in 1995, when Barna first began measuring worldview in America.<sup>1</sup>

### **Cornerstone #2: All human beings are sinful by nature; every choice we make has moral considerations and consequences.**

The biblical narrative explains that every person begins life with a sinful nature inherited from Adam (sometimes called "original sin") and that the temptation to sin is always present in our lives. The narrative also notes that God provides people with power delivered through His Holy Spirit to give us the authority and will to deny the lure of sin in favor of righteous choices that honor God.

Each day we have hundreds of opportunities to demonstrate our commitment to being like Jesus through the decisions we make; each of our choices either pleases or displeases God. No human being has ever lived a sin-free life or consistently makes honorable choices. Regardless of our intentions, we are all guilty of sin and are incapable of eliminating that tendency.

However, the latest *AWVI 2023* findings show that barely one out of every four adults (27%) concurs with this biblical foundation. On the contrary, a large majority of Americans contends that people are basically good.<sup>1</sup>

### **Cornerstone #3: The consequences of our sin can only be forgiven and eliminated through Jesus Christ. That forgiveness is available only by our personal, sincere acknowledgment and confession of our sins and complete reliance on His grace for the forgiveness of those sins.**

Every human being sins and is therefore incapable of earning God's favor based on merit. As the Apostle Paul explained the situation, every human sins and thereby falls short of God's standards. (Romans 3:23) But, as our loving Creator, God made a way out of our sin dilemma by sending Jesus Christ to take on the sins of the human race and to die under their weight on our behalf. Through that act of penance, every person has access to forgiveness and righteous in God's eyes. But this is not

an automatic and universal provision of grace; it requires our admission of sin and prayer for Jesus’s forgiveness.

Our contrition before the Savior is the only means for gaining righteousness in God’s eyes. Through Him we may receive eternal salvation, but it is a gift of grace, love, mercy, and compassion. Absent that gift we remain condemned and hopeless. Thanks to that gift we have hope and a pathway to glory.

How do American adults fare in this biblical cornerstone? Only one-third of adults (35%) avail themselves of that gift of forgiveness and eternal life in the presence of God. Nearly two out of three adults believe that there is no such thing as a spiritual life after death, punishment for sinfulness, or that Jesus Christ has the power and authority to forgive people’s sins.

Percentage of U.S. Adults who Have a Biblical View of Each of the Seven Cornerstones		
Description of the cornerstone evaluated	Percentage of U.S. adults:	
	who have a biblical view for this factor	who do not have a biblical view for this factor
Believing God is omniscient, omnipotent, perfect, and just, and is the Creator and eternal ruler of the world.	50%	50%
Realizing that all humans are not basically good; everyone, including you, is a sinner	27%	73%
Knowing Jesus Christ is the only means to salvation, through our confession of sin and reliance on His forgiveness	35%	65%
Believing the Bible to be the true, relevant, and reliable words of God that serve as a moral guide	46%	54%
Accepting the existence of absolute moral truth	25%	75%
Acknowledging your purpose in life: knowing, loving and serving with all your heart, soul, strength and mind	36%	64%
Understanding genuine success in life: consistent obedience to God	23%	77%
Source: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2023</i> ; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,000 adults, 18 or older; conducted January 2023.		

**Cornerstone #4: The entire Bible is true, reliable and relevant, making it the best moral guide for every person, in all situations.**

God’s desire is that we flourish on Earth. To do so, He provided us a blueprint for life: the Bible. While millions of Americans perceive the Bible to be a book describing an angry God who punishes people for their wrongdoing and is ripe with behavioral limitations and warnings, a more accurate view is seeing the Bible as a book of hope, encouragement, life principles, and practical lessons. The stories, commands, principles, warnings, and wisdom that God provides to us in the Bible point us in a right and better direction.

And because God is the embodiment of love and truth, following those words lead us to a moral life in ways that human emotion and reason cannot. Those who put their faith in His words—rather than personal emotions, societal norms, or public preferences—find guidance and victory while those who resist and reject the Scriptures pay the price for such ignorance and arrogance.

Today, less than half of Americans (46%) believe that the Bible is the true and accurate words of God to His people.

**Cornerstone #5: Absolute moral truth exists—and those truths are defined by God, described in the Bible, and are unchanging across time and cultures.**

Moral truth is the delineation of right and wrong. Absolute moral truth says that there are determinations of right and wrong that are independent of the individual's emotions, circumstances, or preferences. Moral truths exist whether or not we acknowledge them, like them, understand them, or apply them. The consequences of obeying or disobeying those absolutes vary, but the absolutes themselves do not change. In a world characterized by chaos, absolute moral truths are an aberration because they are completely predictable.

However, that predictability does not mean they are always obvious. The only sure way of identifying moral absolutes is by consulting the inerrant source of truth, and the ultimate source of inerrant truth is the God of Israel. He is truth. He cannot lie or deceive because that is against His nature and purposes. And because truth is central to His prized creation (human beings) experiencing a good life on Earth, He has provided an explanation of truth for us, words designed to enable us to thrive. Those words are the Bible. Those moral absolutes are made accessible to us through descriptions provided in various forms—principles, stories, warnings, and commands.

Truth, when properly understood and fully applied, leads to righteousness, which pleases God and empowers us to know, love, and serve Him better. Circumstances, emotions, norms, desires, and preferences change over time; truth does not. It is a fixed, reliable standard that is the same in all ages, in all places, for all people. You cannot know absolute truth by following the culture or your feelings; it is only available through the scriptures.

A shockingly small proportion of Americans accepts the existence of absolute moral truth. According to the recent *AWVI 2023*, just one out of four adults (25%) acknowledges the existence of absolute moral truths. That represents a significant decline from one out of three adults (32%) who supported the existence of absolute moral truth in 2020.

**Cornerstone #6: The ultimate purpose of human life is to know, love, and serve God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul.**

Jesus was clear in telling people that the most important of the commandments is that we love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. (Mark 12:29-30) In His mind, there is nothing more important than that commitment. To genuinely love Him we must know Him—and knowing everything we can about God produces a humbling, profound love for Him. That love, in turn, generates a deep desire to pursue everything we are capable of doing, in service to Him and His purposes. Satan works hard to distract or prevent us from investing in that a relationship. But human fulfillment and joy cannot be experienced until we clarify our true life's purpose and wholeheartedly devote ourselves to fulfilling that commitment.

Massive numbers of adults remain oblivious to this reality. A full three-fourths of Millennials (75%) admit to being uncertain as to their purpose or direction in life, according to research in a new book from George Barna, *Helping Millennials Thrive: Practical Wisdom for a Generation in Crisis* (published by Arizona Christian University Press in March 2023). Findings from *AWVI 2023* indicate that the younger adult generation is not alone in that ambiguity. Only 36% of all adults presently see their purpose for living as to know, love and serve their Creator with all of their heart, mind, strength, and soul.

**Cornerstone #7: Success on Earth is best understood as consistent obedience to God—in thoughts, words, and actions.**

If the purpose of a person’s life is to love God in every conceivable way, focusing on His truths, applying those principles every moment and in every situation, effectively worshiping and serving Him at all times, then obedience to His principles makes us “successful” here on Earth.

This is a difficult truth for millions of Americans to adopt because it renders the pursuits and outcomes that the world promotes—wealth, fame, achievement, power, sexual fulfillment, knowledge, prestige, happiness, comfort—to be unrelated to real success. The Creator alone determines the criteria for the success of those whom He creates. Jesus plainly stated that we will be His disciples when we obey His teachings. (John 13:34) That succinctly defines the parameters of human success.

Still, most people resist that simple but profound reality. Fewer than one out of four adults (23%) accept consistent obedience to God to be the determinant of success on Earth.

**Picking and Choosing**

Most people (80%) embrace one or more of the seven cornerstones, and 20% reject all seven. On the other hand, only 3% of adults currently adopt all seven cornerstones for their life. The remainder of the population falls within those extremes.

According to the *AWWI 2023*, the younger an adult is, the less likely they are to embrace all seven or even a majority of the cornerstones. Among adults 18 to 29 years old, just 1% agrees with all seven of these core life principles; only 10% accept four, five, or six of the seven as valid.

Perhaps the most startling insight, however, is the relationship between the seven cornerstones and possession of a biblical worldview.

The survey revealed that more than four out of five adults who embrace all seven cornerstones (83%) have a biblical worldview. Conversely, it is exceedingly unlikely that someone who does not embrace all seven cornerstones will develop a biblical worldview. Just 2% of adults who reject one or more of the cornerstones possess the biblical worldview.

Number of Biblical Worldview Cornerstones Accepted by American Adults						
	All Adults	----- Age Group -----			Parents of kids under 13	
		18-29	30-64	65+	Yes	No
All 7	3%	1%	3%	6%	2%	3%
4 to 6	20%	10%	20%	31%	20%	15%
1 to 3	57%	67%	57%	49%	66%	55%
None	20%	23%	20%	14%	17%	20%

Source: *American Worldview Inventory 2023*; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,000 adults, 18 or older; conducted January 2023.

## Important Shifts in the Seven Cornerstones

Despite the fact that the incidence of a biblical worldview in America declined slightly from 6% to 4% since 2020, there were some positive changes related to beliefs that form the seven cornerstones.

Four beliefs showed a statistically significant change in the past three years. Three of those beliefs moved toward a biblical point of view and only one of those decreased in reference to biblical teaching.

The largest shift was seen in how American adults define meaning and purpose, with the number adopting a biblical view of purpose increasing seven percentage points since 2020. The research identified an increase of five percentage points in the number of adults who recognize the sin nature of humans and of those who believe the Bible is true. The number of Americans recognizing the existence of absolute truth fell by five percentage points over the same period.

These shifts show that worldview beliefs are not static and remind us that it is possible to increase the incidence of biblical worldview in America.

While most people settle into a comfort zone with the beliefs they adopted during their first twelve years of life, the recent shifts underscore the possibility of positive change in worldview. Prior research by Barna points to times of personal crisis and pain as periods of vulnerability to such change. Among the types of worldview-altering suffering and instability he discovered were personal bankruptcy, the death of a loved one, sustaining a debilitating injury, imprisonment, job loss, an acrimonious divorce or disrupted relationship, and the loss of material goods due to a natural disaster.

<b>How Beliefs Related to the Seven Cornerstones Changed from 2020 to 2023</b>		
	<b>Percentage of U.S. adults who have a biblical view for this factor</b>	
<b>Description of the cornerstone evaluated</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2023</b>
Believing God is omniscient, omnipotent, perfect, and just, and is the Creator and eternal ruler of the world.	51%	50%
Realizing that all humans are not basically good; everyone, including you, is a sinner	22%	27%
Knowing Jesus Christ is the only means to salvation, through our confession of sin and reliance on His forgiveness	35%	35%
Believing the Bible to be the true, relevant, and reliable words of God that serve as a moral guide	41%	46%
Accepting the existence of absolute moral truth	32%	25%
Acknowledging your purpose in life: knowing, loving and serving with all your heart, soul, strength and mind	29%	36%
Understanding genuine success in life: consistent obedience to God	21%	23%
Source: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2023</i> ; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,000 adults, 18 or older; conducted January 2023.		

## Perspective on the Cornerstones

Researcher George Barna, who developed the *American Worldview Inventory* at Arizona Christian University just prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, expressed disappointment with the small number of Americans who have adopted these basic scriptural principles for their life.

“These rules for life were provided to us by a Creator who loves us and wants us to succeed even more than we do,” Barna noted. “What’s so shocking about these beliefs is how basic and simple they are—almost like an outline of what used to be the Sunday school lessons shared with elementary school children. These are not advanced theological principles; they’re straightforward principles of how to make the most of the gift of life.”

Barna also spoke about his discovery of the principles he labels “the seven cornerstones of the biblical worldview.”

“Reviewing the data made it clear that these principles, although simple, serve as a foundation on which you can build a more satisfying and influential life, and one that brings glory to God,” Barna said. “Statistically, we see that if this base is not solid, a person’s worldview will be an inconsistent and unpredictable mess. Since worldview is our decision-making filter, a person who has a weak foundation will be characterized by a life that is a constant struggle.”

Barna continued, “For people who put these seven commitments together as a foundation for their decision-making, these guidelines are both powerful and transformative. Rather than experiencing life as a continual surprise and a daunting challenge, they give us the strength and confidence to make solid decisions each time.”

He said, “Embracing the seven cornerstones is not just about developing a biblical worldview for its own sake. A biblical worldview is imperative because it is the only pathway to being able to consistently think like Jesus so that we can then live like Him.”

Bestselling author of more than 50 books, Barna also pointed out that the cornerstones are described in terms of beliefs, but that each belief entails behavioral correlates.

“A worldview is a set of beliefs that produce specific behaviors,” he explained. “People do what they believe; behavior is the tangible outcome of belief. If you believe what the Bible teaches, you will behave in harmony with those beliefs, but if you do not have biblical beliefs as a foundation, it is highly unlikely that you will behave biblically. If you have a set of fundamentally sound beliefs from which your behaviors will emerge, the chances are much greater that you will demonstrate biblically resonant actions.”

Barna identified a hopeful finding in this latest research.

“Among the four beliefs for which there was statistically significant change in the past three years, three showed movement toward a biblical point of view and only one of those decreased in reference to biblical teaching,” Barna explained. “Worldview is not static. We don’t often see adults initiating large shifts in their life philosophy, but these statistics remind us that such change is possible, especially in times of social instability and uncertainty, such as we have today.”

“People interested in helping others move toward a biblical worldview are likely to find greater receptivity during this cultural window of opportunity—especially if such conversations and encouragement occur within the context of a personal, trust-based relationship,” he said.

## About the Research

The data referred to in this report are taken from the *American Worldview Inventory (AWVI)*, 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 that fall within eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

The *American Worldview Inventory* is the first-ever national survey conducted in the United States measuring the incidence of both biblical and competing worldviews. The current wave of worldview research, the *American Worldview Inventory 2023*, was undertaken in January 2023 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, using a mixed-mode data collection process (i.e. both telephone and online). Like all surveys, the results have an unknown degree of sampling and non-sampling error associated with the outcomes. A sample of 2,000 randomly sampled individuals has an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. The average interview in this study lasted approximately 31 minutes.

## About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University in Glendale, Arizona, conducts the annual *American Worldview Inventory* as well as other nationwide surveys regarding cultural transformation. Recent national studies completed by the Cultural Research Center (CRC) have investigated topics related to family, values, lifestyle, spiritual practices, and politics.

One of the groundbreaking efforts by CRC has been the worldview-related surveys conducted among the ACU student population. The first-of-its-kind ACU Student Worldview Inventory is administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, and a final administration just prior to graduation. The results of that student census enable the University to track and address the worldview development of its students.

CRC is guided by George Barna, Director of Research, and Tracy Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity. CRC works in cooperation with a variety of Bible-centric, theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. Results from past surveys conducted by CRC and information about the Cultural Research Center are 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).

## Endnotes

1 George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators: A Statistical Report on the State of Religion in America* (Word Publishing, Dallas: 1996), 18, 30.