

What Protestant Pastors Think About Pope's Theology

Pope Francis is boosting the reputation of the Catholic Church among Protestant pastors in America.

Nearly 4 in 10 say the pope, known for his humility and concern for the poor, has had a positive impact on their opinions of the Catholic Church, LifeWay Research finds. Almost two-thirds view Pope Francis as a genuine Christian and "brother in Christ."

However, half of Protestant pastors say they do not value Pope Francis' opinion on matters of theology.

Changing Views

LifeWay Research asked 1,000 Protestant pastors in America about their views in a phone survey from Sept. 8-21, 2015, shortly before the pontiff's visit to the United States this week.

Pope Francis, who in March 2013 became the first non-European and first Jesuit priest to be named pope, has been outspoken on such issues as welcoming immigrants, shunning materialism and protecting the environment.

For 43 percent of Protestant pastors, Pope Francis has not changed their views of the Catholic Church. However, half say the current pope has affected their opinions—and almost three times as many cite a positive impact (37 percent) as a negative one (14 percent).

"Our sample itself—Protestant pastors—is named after the Protestant Reformation, so they are particularly interesting to survey," said Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research. "And the survey says that this pope does, indeed,

have a 'Francis effect,' even on a group of people named for protesting the very faith the pope leads."

Ninety percent of Protestant pastors agree Catholics can be "born-again Christians," but they are less certain whether Pope Francis is their "brother in Christ." Sixty-three percent believe he is a genuine Christian, while 22 percent disagree, and 16 percent are unsure.

Evangelical pastors report more skepticism about Pope Francis than their mainline Protestant counterparts. While 80 percent of mainline Protestant pastors believe the pope is a true Christian, only 58 percent of evangelical pastors agree.

"The fact that some pastors don't see the pope as their 'brother in Christ' seems strange to many outside Protestantism and evangelicalism, I imagine," Stetzer said. "However, the forerunners of most Protestant pastors—from Luther, to Wesley, to Spurgeon, to many others—certainly did not see the pope as their 'brother in Christ.'

"Within a few centuries, the pope has gone from anti-Christ to 'brother in Christ' for a lot of Protestants."

Protestant pastors are divided on whether they value Pope Francis' opinion on theological issues. More than 4 in 10 (42 percent) say they value the pope's opinion, but 50 percent say they do not. Mainline pastors (57 percent) are more likely than evangelical pastors (36 percent) to say they value Pope Francis' opinion.

Mainline pastors are also more likely to say Pope Francis has influenced their opinion of the Catholic Church, with 50 percent saying the impact has been positive and 9 percent saying it has been negative. In contrast, 30 percent of evangelical pastors say Pope Francis has boosted their opinion of Catholicism, while 15 percent say their opinion has declined.

Favorable views of Pope Francis are most pronounced among highly educated Protestant pastors and those in the Northeast, the survey finds.

Fifty-one percent of Protestant pastors in the Northeast say Pope Francis improves their opinion of the Catholic Church, compared to 38 percent in the Midwest, 34 percent in the South, and 31 percent in the West. Most Northeastern pastors (53 percent) also say they value the pope's opinions on theological matters, a view shared by fewer than half of pastors in the Midwest (45 percent), South (39 percent), and West (38 percent).

More than two-thirds of Protestant pastors with a master's degree or doctorate (69 percent) view Pope Francis as a genuine Christian and brother in Christ, compared to 42 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or no college degree.

Those with a master's degree or higher are also significantly more likely to say they value Pope Francis' opinions on theological matters (49 percent) and the pope improves their opinion of the Catholic Church (43 percent). Among those with less formal education, 22 percent value the pope's theological opinion and 18 percent say he has a positive impact on their view of Catholicism.