

New Research Reveals What Young People Actually Mean When They Say They're Christian

New Barna research seeks to discover what young people mean when they say they are "Christian." The study is particularly interesting to Southern Evangelical Seminary (SES), whose mission for 28 years has been to "train men and women, based on the inerrant and infallible written Word of God, for the evangelization of the world and defense of the historic Christian faith."

According to the Barna project that looks at four "digital exile groups," a small but significant number of young Christians run counter to the overall church dropout trend.

"The young person's place in our culture is forever changing, as society also changes drastically and rapidly," said SES president and evangelical leader Dr. Richard Land. "It is our desire to learn how and why young people believe the way they do, how much they are willing to share those beliefs, and if they are choosing professions or roles in their communities and families where their faith plays an important part. These insights help our leaders and faculty constantly adapt our curriculum and programming so that we can best serve this generation."

The four groups of 18- to 29-year-olds identified by Barna—Resilient Disciples (10%), Prodigals/Ex-Christians (22%), Nomads/Unchurched (30%) and Habitual Churchgoers (38%)—all have different answers when it comes to how they identify as Christian and how they view the centrality of Jesus in their life.

For example:

–97% of Resilient Disciples call themselves a “follower of Jesus,” while 61% of Nomads say the same.

–90% of Resilient Disciples say their “relationship with Jesus brings me deep joy and satisfaction;” 48% of Habitual Churchgoers and 25% of Nomads agree.

–86% of Resilient Disciples answered that their “relationship with Jesus impacts the way I live my life every day,” while just under half (49%) of Habitual Churchgoers and less than a quarter (23%) of Nomads felt the same way.

A separate study from Barna and World Vision also found that “nearly half of young adults worldwide who have a connection to Christianity feel that the church can’t answer their questions,” reported The Christian Post, where Land serves as executive editor.

In a response to the survey, Dr. Doug Potter, SES assistant professor of apologetics and theology, director of . program and registrar, shared a blog post about “Five Truths the Church Needs Today to Engage People’s Questions.”

“What is the church to do?” Potter asks. “My answer is simple: return to what Jesus emphasized and integrated: truth (John 14:6) and disciple-making (Matthew 28:16-20). You cannot separate the two, and you cannot practice one without the other. Christians near and far must not only know and live the truth; they must also build relationships that reproduce the truth in others.”

Potter listed these five truths for people in the church to study in order to answer their questions because this is the way people know and understand reality:

1. **Truth from Philosophy:** Those in the church must not forget that Paul’s opposition to philosophy (Col. 2:8)

is against bad philosophy, not good philosophy. Indeed, good philosophy, as the literary apologetic giant reminds us, must exist to answer bad philosophy. Good philosophy connects us with truth and reality that unlocks, enhances and sharpens our thinking about the world. Bad philosophy begins with skepticism and cuts the knower off from knowing reality; it keeps us in the fog of phenomenism. We live in a fallen world, and we know for a fact that natures in our world can cease to exist. Such a world shows us that one perfect, immaterial, eternal being must exist (Rom. 1:18-20). Thus, this kind of certain thinking about the world must find its way into the pulpits and pews, as well as into the lives of those we disciple.

2. **Truth from Apologetics:** Those in the church must not forget that Christianity is a faith that makes certain truth claims about God, miracles and history. However, unlike many other faiths, Christianity has a sound and valid answer. A defense is made (1 Pet. 3:15) that is not based on mythology, unverifiable history or experience alone. The ultimate being of good philosophy is identical to the God of the Bible, since it is impossible to have two eternal beings. This God communicated through prophets and their writings by making numerous prophecies about a coming Savior hundreds of years in advance of their fulfillment.
3. **Truth from the Bible:** Those in the church must not forget the power of God's Word, the necessity of discipleship and the reality of apostasy. The apostle Paul taught that in the last days, from time to time, even after being taught the truth, people will walk away (apostasy) from the truth (2 Tim. 3). There will be false teachers that arise even within the church and deceive people. As his mentor, Paul wrote to Timothy stating two things to emphasize and remember in preventing the church divorcing from the truth: first, the importance of beginning discipleship at the

youngest, possible age (2 Tim. 3:10-15); secondly, because it is the Word of God, the power of Scripture is valuable for instruction, illuminating sins, correcting error and giving us examples on how to live righteously (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, when the church engages in discipleship, it must be personal and corrective.

4. **Truth from Theology:** Those in the church must not forget the human attempt to present the highest and most complete expression of God's entire revelation: systematic theology. Using this, we can see the integration of what God has revealed through the world by (general revelation) and what He has revealed through His Word (special revelation). Through this we can see beginning to end, the difference between the Creator and His creatures, the total depravity of people and complete restoration by Christ, the need for the church and the longing for His return. This is the faith that the apologist attempts to defend and the pastor tries to teach. Such a study should move our faith into maturity and challenge us to live righteously. There is nothing else like it, and the church should not do its mission without it.
5. **Truth from Evangelism:** Finally, those in the church must not forget the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-8) and the experience of its converts to the faith (Acts 9). While experience can never be a test for truth, it can and should be an expression of truth. It does not matter if you were young or old when you found Christ, there was always a time when you moved from non-belief to belief—the moment you felt the conviction of your sin and the need for the Savior and when you realized your separation from God could only be restored by the love of Christ. Each individual story of faith is as unique as each person in the world, and yet the Gospel is the same for everyone. History can attest to the spread of Christianity from its beginning to today. From every tribe and tongue, they shall come, from the poorest to the wealthiest,

from the well-educated to the least educated, from the youngest to the oldest, from the greatest sinner to the holiest priest—as the gospel goes into the world it will bring forth salvation to all who believe and accomplish His will on earth as it is in heaven. Nothing can stop it!

Read more about Southern Evangelical Seminary and SES President Dr. Richard Land, as well as his radio feature, “Bringing Every Thought Captive,” which airs on nearly 800 stations nationwide, [here](#).