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## Taking the Temperature of America's Theological Health

A recent poll by LifeWay Research, sponsored by Ligonier Ministries, surveyed Americans on a variety of theological issues in order to, in the words of Stephen Nichols, “take the temperature of America’s theological health.”

Bob Smietana’s article, [“Americans Believe in Heaven, Hell, and a Little Bit of Heresy.”](#) walks us through the statistics and the study’s major findings. The research provides a fascinating snapshot of how churched and unchurched people understand theology.

I’d like to comment on a few of the findings and how they might impact our conversations with friends and neighbors.

### There Is Something Beyond

Your neighbor is likely to belong to the 67% of Americans who believe in heaven. If your neighbor identifies as evangelical, the number shoots up to 90%, which explains why books and movies on heaven find such an adoring audience. There’s little debate that heaven is for real.

Similar percentages reveal people believe in hell too, although few seem to be worried about going there. The same number of people who affirm belief in a heavenly afterlife also believe humans are basically good, even if they sin a little. And only 18% of Americans say small sins lead to hell.

In other words, your neighbor is more likely to believe in heaven and hell than not, but they’re not too worried about which destination they’re headed to.

**Takeaway:** *Use the common ground of belief in the afterlife to bring up questions of eternal significance. But don’t forget that most people who are lost won’t recognize themselves as lost. The heaven and hell conversation is likely to be an entry point into deeper spiritual matters. Your evangelism will need to probe deeper than the question, “What happens when you die?”*

### Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

The findings on salvation are distressing, especially when so many of these responses come from people who identify as evangelical or Catholic. Smietana summarizes:

Most Americans (71 percent), and in particular Black Protestants (82 percent) and Catholics (87 percent), say people must contribute some effort toward their own salvation. Two thirds (64 percent) say in order to find peace with God, people have to take the first step, and then God responds to them with grace.

The idea that Christianity teaches that salvation comes through keeping a moral code is prevalent today. Sociologist Christian Smith described America’s religious views as “moralistic therapeutic deism,” a worldview he explains in five statements:

1. "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth." *That's the "Deism" part. God created the world, watches things, but doesn't do much in the way of intervening in human affairs.*
2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions." *That's the Moralistic part. The goal of religion is to be a nice, moral person.*
3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself." *That's the Therapeutic part. The most important thing in life is to be happy and well-balanced.*
4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem." *Now, we see the Deistic view of God combine with God's therapeutic purpose. He exists to make us happy.*
5. "Good people go to heaven when they die." *Salvation is accomplished through morality.*

Along these lines, it's no wonder that so many Americans believe there are more ways than Jesus to get to heaven. The good news is, evangelicals are much more likely to affirm the Christian teaching that Jesus is the only way to God, a sign that despite offering moralistic understandings of salvation, they recognize there is something uniquely powerful about Jesus and His gospel.

**Takeaway:** *Realize that most gospel presentations are going to be interpreted from within a moralistic framework. Terminology like "Get right with God" and "make a decision for Christ" is likely to be heard by lost people as "get your act together" and "ask Jesus for help in being good." We must always stress our inherent sinfulness and Christ's gracious rescue in order to counter the moralistic assumptions of our culture.*

### **If It's Not Practical, We Don't Get It**

On fundamental Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the results are abysmal. Almost 60% of self-identifying evangelicals claim the Holy Spirit is a force, not a person. The findings get worse from there, even among the most religious.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this doctrinal confusion is that Americans are unlikely to have much patience for truths that don't provide immediate practical benefits. Churches, in turn, are less likely to see a doctrine like the Trinity as relevant to the Christian's daily life, thus leading to less emphasis on these matters in weekly teaching.

Americans respect the Bible, and evangelicals score well on affirming a concept similar to inerrancy (a sign that the battle for the Bible led to higher views of Scripture among many churchgoers). But the survey also shows that Americans are more likely to look to Scripture as "helpful" rather than see it as objectively true.

**Takeaway:** *We need to do a better job teaching the basic doctrines of the Christian faith and why they matter. The pastor should handle Scripture, not as a manual for life betterment and moral instruction, but as a grand narrative that gives us a worldview – a formative story that shapes our attitudes and actions.*

## The Afterthought Church

Americans love their independence. If the church wants to come alongside and strengthen their personal, individualized sense of spirituality, well and good, we say.

But church leaders shouldn't assume their congregants see attendance as essential to spiritual growth. Half of Americans think worshipping alone is just as good as going to church, and a staggering 82% say their local church has no authority to make a pronouncement about their Christian identity. (No wonder baptism gets reinterpreted as an individual expression of faith and church discipline is rare!)

According to this research, churchgoing is an afterthought. It's an optional exercise judged primarily by its usefulness in one's spiritual journey, not an essential part of faith and commitment.

**Takeaway:** *We need to ensure that when we invite people to respond to the gospel with repentance and faith, we are making it clear that we are calling them into a community. Repentance and faith entails belonging to the community of repentant believers in Jesus. Church attendance is not the fine print at the bottom of our gospel presentations.*

**What about you? What statistics stood out? How do they impact the way you consider your ministry?**

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