

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
October 15, 2016

Sound Doctrine in a Secular Age

Ligonier Ministries recently released a study entitled its “2016 State of American Theology Study” conducted by LifeWay Research. Among other things, the study focused on six key doctrinal areas and where Americans differ on each theologically. The results evidence confusion, inconsistency and a superficial understanding of basic doctrinal truths. From the “Executive Summary” part of the report, here is a brief summary of several salient results of the study:

1. Beliefs about God

Almost two-thirds of Americans believe God is perfect, and more than 6 in 10 accept the deity, humanity, and resurrection of Jesus. But half of Americans deny that Jesus has always existed and a similar number relegate the Holy Spirit to being a force rather than a personal being. Almost 7 in 10 Americans believe in one true God. Almost as many believe God accepts worship from all religions.

- 65% of Americans agree “God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake.”
- Two-thirds of Americans (66%) agree “God continues to answer specific prayers.”
- Six in 10 Americans (61%) agree with the doctrine that says “Jesus is truly God and has a divine nature, and Jesus is truly man and has a human nature.”
- 52% of Americans agree “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.”
- Nearly two-thirds of adult Americans (64%) agree “Biblical accounts of the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. This event actually occurred.”
- 56% of Americans agree “The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.”
- Almost 7 in 10 Americans (69%) agree “There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”
- But 64% of Americans agree “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.”

2. Beliefs about Goodness and Sin

Americans have great difficulty accepting that there are eternal consequences of sin or that people are incapable of turning to God on their own. Actually, the majority of Americans believe the good deeds they do will help them earn a place in heaven.

- 19% of Americans agree “Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.”
- 79% agree with the statement that says “People have the ability to turn to God on their own initiative.”

- Instead of acknowledging depravity, the majority of Americans believe the good in people can outweigh the bad.
- 65% agree “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.”
- More than half (52%) agree “By the good deeds that I do, I partly contribute to earning my place in heaven.”

3. Beliefs about Salvation and Religious Texts

Americans are split down the middle on doctrines related to the Bible. Half of Americans believe the Bible is the written word of God, but a similar number believe the Bible is open to each person’s own interpretation. While more than 4 in 10 agree the Bible is accurate, almost as many believe it is not literally true. A core evangelical doctrine is the exclusivity of belief in Jesus Christ for salvation. While the majority of Americans believe that salvation is in “Christ alone,” many also believe people can through their own effort contribute to salvation.

- 52% agree “The Bible alone is the written word of God.”
- 47% agree “The Bible is 100% accurate in all that it teaches.”
- 44% agree “The Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true.”
- 51% agree “The Bible was written for each person to interpret as he or she chooses.”
- 54% of Americans agree “Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.”
- Many Americans appear to put confidence in their own efforts for salvation rather than God’s grace. This is seen among 77% of Americans who agree “an individual must contribute his or her own effort for personal salvation.” Similarly, 69% of Americans agree “a person obtains peace with God by first taking the initiative to seek God and then God responds with grace.”

These survey results indicate that Americans are confused and sloppy in their theological thinking. In fact, the survey results indicate that some Americans are actually embracing heretical ideas. The study indicated that evangelicals generally are more orthodox in their theological beliefs, but still evidence a shallowness and lack of consistency.

The broader American religious community cited in this survey indicates the natural results when “religious” people give up the authority of the Bible. Christianity is thus reduced to feelings and sentiments, not orthodox theological beliefs. This is what occurred in the late 19th century on into the 20th century with theological liberalism. Difficult theological propositions such as the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the full authority and infallibility of the Bible and the understanding that God is Trinity were abandoned. To salvage the spiritual and moral value of Christianity, theological liberalism abandoned these propositional truths to “save” Christianity from irrelevance. The modern secular age makes it necessary to abandon those difficult truth claims and adjust the Christian faith accordingly. For theological liberalism, Christianity is a “feeling of absolute dependence on God”; it is not adherence to the central claims and doctrines of the Bible. The end result today is that in many (most?) mainline

denominational churches, Christianity is about feelings and sentiment, and not rigorous theology. To “save” Christianity, theology becomes sanitized, superficial and shallow. I believe that the Ligonier survey cited above manifests this very development.

One additional thought on the superficial nature of much of modern Christianity: The rise of personal autonomy and the reduction of almost all public discourse to what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls “the authority of instrumental reason.” Embracing the chief virtue of personal autonomy means that all sources of moral authority are rejected—but your own! Taylor writes:

“Once society no longer has a sacred structure, once social arrangements and modes of action are no longer grounded in the order of things or the will of God, they are in a sense up for grabs. They can be redesigned with their consequences for the happiness or well-being of individuals as our goal.”

Furthermore, theologian Albert Mohler summarizes Taylor’s important book, *A Secular Age*, in which he describes three sets of historical intellectual conditions:

1. In the premodern age of antiquity and during the medieval period (AD 500 to 1500), it was impossible not to believe. There was simply no intellectual alternative to theism in the West; no alternative set of explanations for the world, for ethics and for moral order.
2. With the advent of modernism, it became possible not to believe. A secular alternative to Christian theism emerged as a real choice. Choice now emerged as the chief virtue; the imperative was to choose one’s worldview, not based on whether it was true but whether it served your particular needs.
3. With Postmodernism, it was now impossible to believe. For the cultural leaders and for the Postmodern gurus, Christian theism is no longer a viable alternative. What characterizes this Postmodern secular age is unbelief in a personal God, one who holds and exerts authority. Mohler writes: “Secularization in America has been attended by a moral revolution without precedent and without endgame. The cultural engines of progress that drive toward personal autonomy and fulfillment will not stop until the human being is completely self-defining. Their progress requires the explicit rejection of Christian morality [and theology] for the project of human liberation.” “Individual authenticity” is the goal of this thoroughly secular age in which we now live. It does not matter which worldview you choose, as long as it “works for you.”

Today, theology is reduced to moral ditties where God is a handmaiden to the autonomous human seeking self-authentication. The survey summarized at the beginning of this *Perspective* provides evidence for these propositions. “Sound doctrine” is not rooted in God’s revelation; it is rooted in the choice of the autonomous individual.

See “2016 State of American Theology Study” sponsored by Ligonier Ministries and completed by LifeWay Research; Albert Mohler, “The Endgame of Secularism” in *Tabletalk* (September 2016), pp. 70-71; and www.albertmohler.com (3 October 2016).