

“Evangelical Stats”

By Dan Jensen (2023)

(In order to fully benefit from this essay, I recommend reading through my “works for beginners” first. They can be found on my website.)

It is very common today to read about certain “evangelical stats in America” from all manner of sources that allegedly make the church look rather bad. However, what is so often not understood is that these stats are exceedingly misleading. I am not saying that everyone who uses them is doing so intentionally, but the effect is the same nevertheless. The reason this is the case is because the term *evangelical*, like the term *Christian* unfortunately, is used very, very loosely in our culture today. For instance, I grew up believing I was a “Christian.” It never even occurred to me to question this belief or think through it more deeply until I was 14 years of age. But, based on the Bible (the written source for Christianity), I was anything but a follower of Jesus Christ.

Let me break down some of the misconceptions that are out there in case this just sounds like bias from a Conservative Evangelical who is irritated that his faith is not really a very positive force in the world today. The first piece of evidence is the massive Pew study that was undertaken in 2015. For nerds like me, that study is a wealth of information about the state of religion in our nation. If you Google “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” it comes right up. If you want the full source information for it, that can be found under #66 of the endnotes in my *A False Kind of Christianity*. I highly recommend familiarizing yourself with it to better understand much of what I will say in this essay. A similar study was undertaken by Pew 7 years prior. The information for how to find that study is provided in the 2015 study. In the 2015 study, it places the percentage of American Evangelicals at about 25% of the U.S. population. In the 2007 study, it places that same community at about 26% of the U.S. population. The 2015 study places the number of people in the unaffiliated category at about 23% of the U.S.

population. The previous study places the same community at about 16% of the U.S. population. That is a massive trend of growth for just 7 years. We truly are in the throes of apostasy in our nation right now.

Another major study was conducted by Gallup in 2018. I also highly recommend familiarizing yourself with this study as well.¹ According to this study, from 2006 to 2010, the unaffiliated made up 12% of the U.S. population. It then states that from 2011 to 2015, the unaffiliated made up 15% of the population. Those numbers are lower than Pew, but not wildly so and are probably reflective of more narrow criteria for what constitutes unaffiliated. Further, both Gallup and Pew show the unaffiliated rapidly growing from 2006 to 2015.

The study also highlights the confusion that exists in our country over the term *evangelical*. The study found that while 38% of the population said yes when asked if they are born again or Evangelical, only 21% said yes when only asked if they identified as Evangelical. It is quite clear that many believe that they are born again and thus are fine to say they are Evangelical if those two terms are presented as synonymous, but not nearly that many people said yes when the two terms are not presented as synonymous. It should also be noted that Pew and Gallup are not coming to these conclusions concerning Evangelical identity in the same manner. Gallup is merely asking bare questions about Evangelical identity, while Pew is going by those who self-identify as being part of a group or organization that Pew defines as Evangelical (for the most part, although certainly not entirely, I agree with Pew over the organizations and groups it labels as Evangelical).

An even more recent and interesting study was conducted by the Cultural Research Center.² It was extremely thorough, and it found that only 6% of the U.S. population had

¹ Frank Newport, "5 Things to Know About Evangelicals in America," *Gallup*, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/235208/things-know-evangelicals-america.aspx>.

² "What Does It Mean When People Say They Are 'Christian,'" *Cultural Research Center: Arizona Christian University*, accessed Jul 10, 2023, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CRC_AWVI2021_Release06_Digital_01_20210831.pdf.

a worldview that was in keeping with Historic Evangelicalism. This is precisely why I have long said that only about 10% of the population of the United States is truly Conservative Evangelical in heart. The only reason I am willing to bring the number that high in light of the 6% is because of the fact that there are many, many true believers that are stuck in mega-churches that do not regularly teach sound doctrine. These are not heretical churches. The leadership of these churches, generally speaking, are orthodox themselves. However, there is often little to no effort to teach orthodoxy across the board to the faithful in the pews (or chairs). Thus, there are a lot of genuinely saved people in our nation that are unfortunately still very confused about a number of key biblical doctrines.

Because of this, I place the visible church in our nation at around 15% of the U.S. population and the institutional church at about 18%. For an examination of how and why I make these distinctions, please see my *Doctrine: Going Deeper* (part 1). And that last number is much closer to the 21% we saw from Gallup, and the 25% we saw from Pew. But, it should be noted that because of the approach of Pew that we discussed above, you may have many people who claim to be part of an organization that Pew sees as Evangelical that make no effort to actually participate in that organization, either by beliefs or actions. Most of these people never or almost never even attend services that are part of these groups they claim to be within. Many of these people are not part of the true church in any sense of the word, but are merely part of Liberal Protestantism. Making matters even more complicated, many of the denominations that I think Pew rightly places as part of Mainline Protestantism (basically just another name for Liberal Protestantism), have many churches and people within them that are actually Conservative Evangelical, both in belief and practice. This is especially true of the United Methodist Denomination.

All of these discrepancies show that often when “evangelical stats” are cited, many of the respondents may be anything but truly Evangelical from a historical standpoint. You may retort, “You don’t get to define the term *evangelical*.” I understand this, but my definition really should not be anything controversial. The term goes back to the

Reformation as far as wide and specific usage is concerned. It was used to describe those that were part of the Magisterial Reformation. It is true that many within heretical groups, most notably the Anabaptists, did often use the term for themselves as well. But, during the Reformation era, many of them did not, and both Catholics and Protestants did not generally use the term for them. The more common term was *Radicals*.

Hence, I see no reason why my definition should not be seen as reasonable from a historical perspective. And my qualifier, namely *Conservative*, makes perfect sense in light of how confused people have become over the term. My definition of the term *Conservative Evangelical*, and my defense of it, can be found in the preface to my *A False Kind of Christianity*. I have also discussed and fleshed out this definition in many of my works on my website as well. Only reading all of my works for beginners will give the reader more than an adequate understanding of how and why I use that term.

Let us now move on to another study. This study was done by Pew in 2021.³ This study was not nearly as exhaustive as the studies done in 2007 and 2014. It mostly focuses on the unaffiliated in particular, and “Christianity” (especially “Protestantism”) secondarily. This study shows that the number of those identifying as unaffiliated in our nation today is much closer to around 30%. And that is in keeping with the historical trends we have seen in the studies cited so far in this essay. Further, the overall “Christian” and “Protestant” populations continue to decline. With all of this in mind, below is my best “guesstimate” as to the breakdown of religious affiliation in our nation today. In this breakdown I am only including under *Conservative Evangelical* those I believe to be sincerely saved. Many of those that I am including under the Liberal Protestant label below would probably self-identify as some version of “Evangelical” to one degree or another, and many would indeed be part of the institutional church (many

³ “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” *Pew Research Center*, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

would also be part of the visible church as well). But, they are in my strong estimation, Liberal Protestant in spirit, whether they realize this or not.

- 1.) No Religion - 30%
- 2.) Liberal Protestantism - 30%
- 3.) Catholicism - 15% (I believe that only about $\frac{1}{3}$ of Catholics are actually practicing; thus they make up only about 5% of the U.S. population)
- 4.) Conservative Evangelical - 10%
- 5.) Pseudo-Pentecostal/Charismatic - 5%
- 6.) Other - 10%

Main Categories in Other by Population

- 1.) "Christian" Fundamentalism - 3%
- 2.) Judaism - 2%
- 3.) The LDS Church - 2%
- 4.) Islam - 1%
- 5.) Jehovah's Witnesses - 1%
- 6.) Buddhist - .5%
- 7.) Hindu - .5%
- 8.) Eastern Orthodox - .5%
- 9.) New Age (many New Agers are part of the No Religion category; here I am including those that explicitly label themselves *New Age*) - .5%
- 10.) Nature Religion - .2%
- 11.) None of the Above - 1% (it is true that these 11 add up to about 12% of the U.S population according to my estimates; it should be remembered that the 10% number is merely a rough estimate)

Thus, it seems that for the first time in our nation's history, the unaffiliated have become the largest worldview in our land. All of this is why our nation seems so secular. People often ask me, "How come our country seems so secular when most Americans claim to

be Christians?" All of this is why. The No Religion category in our country is now 30%. Liberal Protestantism is at about the same number. And Liberal Protestants are very secular for the most part despite their claim to "Christianity." Even those that are spiritual still tend to agree with most secular people on most social policies. Catholics make up about 15% of our nation and almost 65% of them are very secular. And many in the *Other* category (only 10% of our society) only practice their religion for cultural reasons. Many of them are also very secular. Hence, despite almost 65% of our nation still claiming some form of "Christian," only about 30% of Americans are genuinely spiritual. Spiritual people are dwarfed by secular people in this nation. And as we have seen, only about 10% of the country is truly saved. So, if it seems like we are a small minority, it is because we are! Even further, most of the church is in the Old South (see my essay on Evangelicals Worldwide). Because of this, outside of the Old South, we are even more of a minority and we can all sense that.

Now, many may object to me giving "Christian" Fundamentalism such a small place. Surely it has a much larger following and impact than my categorization breakdown would seem to indicate. It is important to understand how I am defining this term. For this definition, please read my book on church history on my website. With that definition in mind, I understand that many Conservative Evangelicals lean Fundamentalist, especially among white Christians in the Old South. But, as long as they do not fully embrace any of the heresies that I have associated with "Christian" Fundamentalism, I am not going to place them in that category.

As far as those I would place in that category, I believe they make up about 3% of the American population. That is still around 10 million people. That is a lot of people. Further, these people are heavily, heavily concentrated in the rural Old South, especially among the white citizens of that demographic. Thus, they actually make up a large percentage of that particular part of the country and do indeed have an outsized influence in that part of the country.

Trying to come up with an exact number for rural Southerners is not easy. But, from my research, I would put the number at about 15 million people. And the white population within that demographic at about 12 million people. While it is certainly true that “Christian” Fundamentalists exist outside of this very narrow demographic, it is still true that they are heavily concentrated in that world. Even if we say that only half of all “Christian” Fundamentalists in America (and very few exist outside of the U.S.) exist in that narrowly defined world (and that number is almost assuredly low), they would account for about half of that entire world. This is why they have such a strong and powerful influence in that part of the country despite being such a small segment of the overall U.S. population.

While it is well beyond the scope of this essay to provide all of the various sources that I have used to come to my conclusions described in the previous paragraph, one helpful source that explains some of this comes from the Brookings Institution.⁴ I recommend it to you.

With all that has been detailed in this essay in mind, studies that cite “evangelical stats” have to be questioned. Are these “Evangelicals” merely those who identify as such? Are they those who only identify as such when the term is coupled with the label *born-again*? Are they those who only get placed in that category because they in some sense self-identify as being part of an organization that is considered by many to be Evangelical? Are they merely a part of the institutional church? Are they confused over many issues because they are part of poor mega-churches? Many in that last category are probably not even saved, but are merely a part of the visible church for the time being. All of these questions and distinctions are almost never asked or interacted with in the pieces on these stats. I’m sorry, but this renders most of these pieces utterly useless.

⁴ DW Rowlands and Hanna Love, “Mapping Rural America’s Diversity and Demographic Change,” *Brookings*, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/mapping-rural-americas-diversity-and-demographic-change/>.

Far more useful pieces would be those that examine the beliefs, practices, and lifestyles of those in the 6% category discussed earlier (those with a truly Historic Evangelical worldview). Even trying to go by the 10% that are probably genuinely Conservative Evangelical on some level (with about 40% [4% of the U.S. population] of that 10% being highly confused on certain points) would be far more fair. Both approaches would be far more reflective of true Christianity in our nation today. But, we all know this will rarely be done by skeptics because it will not yield the results they want.

Finally, it should be said that it is not only skeptics who often badly misuse these “evangelical stats,” whether intentionally or not. Many, many well-intentioned Christians use these stats to try to scare Christians as to how horrible the church in our nation is today. I fully agree that the church in America is not very healthy. Around 40% of the truly saved church being somewhat confused on some very crucial issues is entirely unacceptable. But, in many respects it is much healthier than a great deal of the church elsewhere in the world. While the American church tends to be more apathetic than the rest of the church worldwide, and this is no small sin (please don’t get me wrong), the American church (largely due to historical factors) does tend to be far more healthy theologically speaking when we are actually talking about the true church found in this nation.

Far too often, otherwise well-intentioned Christians are using these stats to spook lay Christians into further action. I’m all for spurring on Christians to greater action, but not at the expense of truth. And the unintended consequence of so many of these articles, speeches, presentations, sermons, etc., is that it only fuels the antinomianism that is already such a huge problem in the church today. It does so by making it sound like people can still be Christians while overtly holding to all sorts of heretical beliefs. I understand that many true Christians may be very confused for the reasons I’ve already detailed. But, the idea that a huge portion of the church could be so wildly unorthodox is to basically say that the church has ceased to be the church.

Many New Agers, many Roman Catholics, many LDS folks, and many others, would all claim to be born-again or “Evangelical” if the question was asked a certain way. And many Liberal Protestants, especially Progressive Christians, in our country today self-consciously call themselves “Evangelical” because they want to take over the true Evangelical church. When such people believe in blatantly heretical teachings, we should not be shocked by this at all. We need to do better when using these stats. In our zeal to spark Christians on to more action, we are actually confusing many of them further and unknowingly slandering Christ’s bride. It is already slandered enough by our enemies without us adding fuel to the fire.