

# Christians: More Like Jesus or Pharisees?

## ARE CHRISTIANS MORE LIKE JESUS OR MORE LIKE THE PHARISEES?

April 30, 2013 – One of the common critiques leveled at present-day Christianity is that it's a religion full of hypocritical people.

A new Barna Group study examines the degree to which this perception may be accurate. The study explores how well Christians seem to emulate the actions and attitudes of Jesus in their interactions with others.

The research project was directed by David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group, in conjunction with John Burke, author of *Mud and the Masterpiece*, a book exploring the attitudes and actions of Jesus in all of his encounters.

### Assessing Christlikeness

In this nationwide study of self-identified Christians, the goal was to determine whether Christians have the actions and attitude of Jesus as they interact with others or if they are more akin to the beliefs and behaviors of Pharisees, the self-righteous sect of religious leaders described in the New Testament.

In order to assess this, Barna researchers presented a series of 20 agree-or-disagree statements. Five actions and five attitudes that seem to best encapsulate the actions and attitudes of Jesus Christ during his ministry on earth. The researchers did the same for the Pharisees (10 total statements, five reflecting behaviors and five examining attitudes).

Kinnaman, president of Barna Group, directed the study. He commented on the creation of a “Christ-like” scale: “Our intent is to create some new discussion about the intangible aspects of following and representing Jesus. Obviously, survey research, by itself, cannot fully measure someone’s ‘Christ-likeness’ or ‘Pharisee-likeness.’ But the study is meant to identify baseline qualities of Jesus, like empathy, love, and a desire to share faith with others—or the resistance to such ideals in the form of self-focused hypocrisy. The statements are based on the biblical record given in the Gospels and in the Epistles and our team worked closely with a leading pastor, John Burke, to develop the survey questions.”

### Fleshing Out Christ-likeness

To flesh out the objectives of the study, a nationwide, representative sample of Christians was asked to respond to 20 statements. They could rate their agreement on a four-point scale. The 10 research statements used to examine **Christ-likeness** include the following:

#### **Actions like Jesus:**

- I listen to others to learn their story before telling them about my faith.
- In recent years, I have influenced multiple people to consider following Christ.

- I regularly choose to have meals with people with very different faith or morals from me.
- I try to discover the needs of non-Christians rather than waiting for them to come to me.
- I am personally spending time with non-believers to help them follow Jesus.

#### ***Attitudes like Jesus:***

- I see God-given value in every person, regardless of their past or present condition.
- I believe God is for everyone.
- I see God working in people's lives, even when they are not following him.
- It is more important to help people know God is for them than to make sure they know they are sinners.
- I feel compassion for people who are not following God and doing immoral things.

The 10 statements used to assess self-righteousness (like the **Pharisees**), included the following research items:

#### ***Self-Righteous Actions:***

- I tell others the most important thing in my life is following God's rules.
- I don't talk about my sins or struggles. That's between me and God.
- I try to avoid spending time with people who are openly gay or lesbian.
- I like to point out those who do not have the right theology or doctrine.
- I prefer to serve people who attend my church rather than those outside the church.

#### ***Self-Righteous Attitudes:***

- I find it hard to be friends with people who seem to constantly do the wrong things.
- It's not my responsibility to help people who won't help themselves.
- I feel grateful to be a Christian when I see other people's failures and flaws.
- I believe we should stand against those who are opposed to Christian values.
- People who follow God's rules are better than those who do not.

#### **How Christ-like are Christians?**

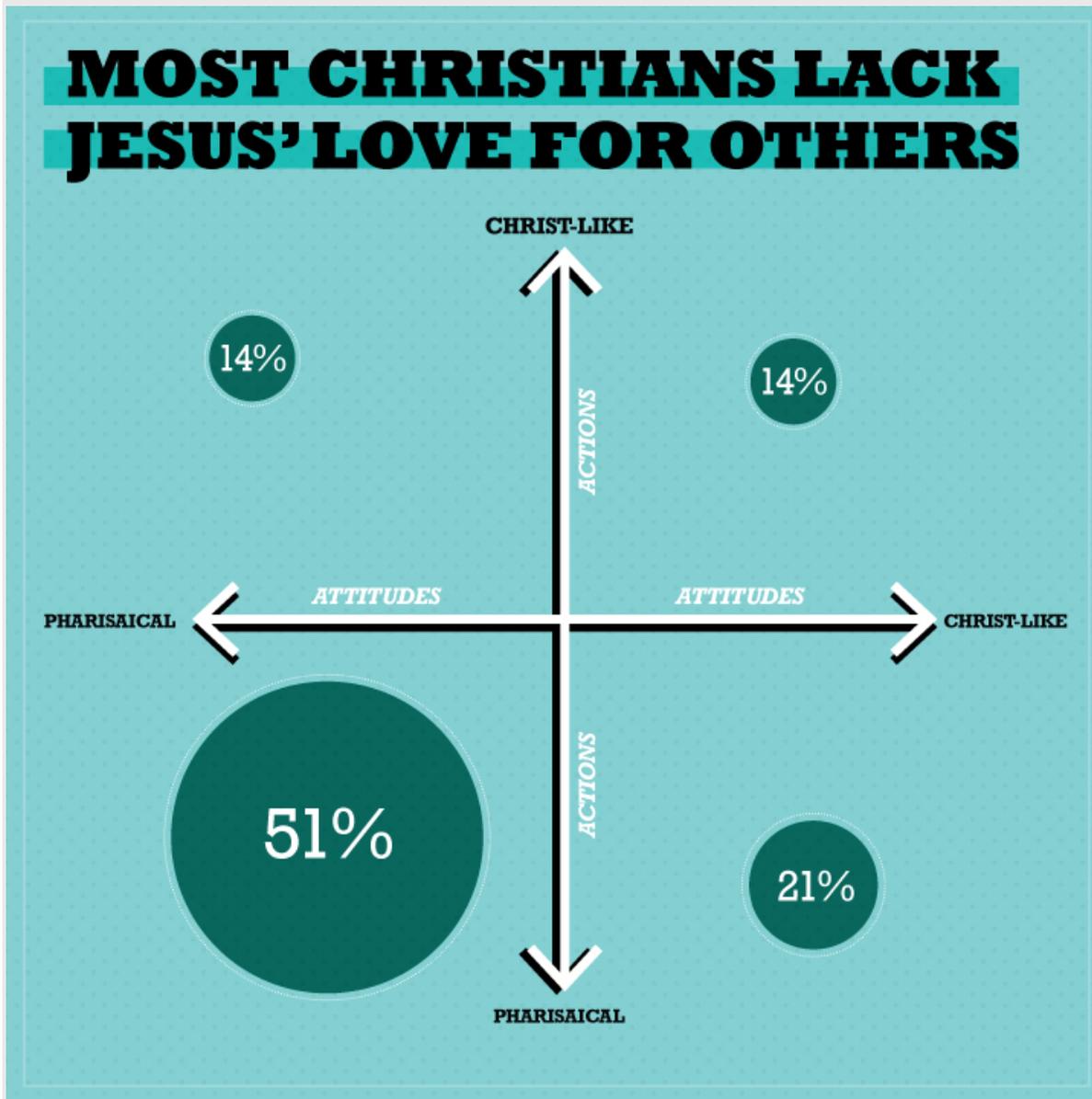
Using these 20 questions as the basis of analysis, the researchers created an aggregate score for each individual and placed those results into one of four categories, or quadrants. (Further definition of the way these findings were analyzed is found later in this article.) The four categories include:

- Christ-like in action and attitude
- Christ-like in action, but not in attitude
- Christ-like in attitude, but not action
- Christ-like in neither

The findings reveal that most self-identified Christians in the U.S. are characterized by having the attitudes and actions researchers identified as Pharisaical. Just over half of the nation's Christians—using the broadest definition of those who call themselves Christians—qualify for this category (51%). They tend to have attitudes and actions that are characterized by self-righteousness.

On the other end of the spectrum, 14% of today's self-identified Christians—just one out of every seven Christians—seem to represent the actions and attitudes Barna researchers found to be consistent with those of Jesus.

In the middle are those who have some mix of action and attitude. About one-fifth of Christians are Christ-like in attitude, but often represent Pharisaical actions (21%). Another 14% of respondents tend to be defined as Christ-like in action, but seem to be motivated by self-righteous or hypocritical attitudes.



### Evangelicals and Others

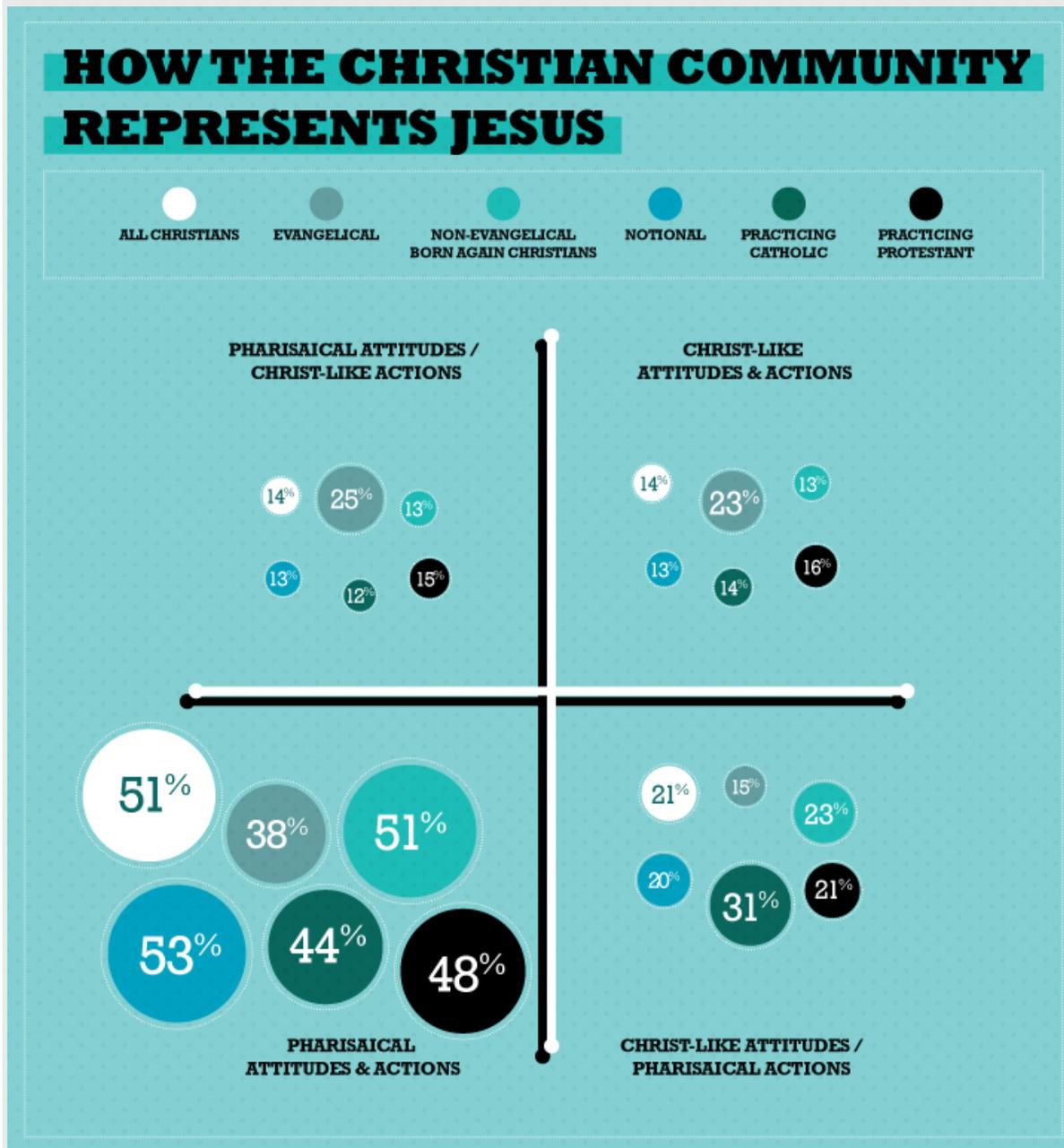
Looking at America’s evangelical community—a group defined by Barna Group based on its theological beliefs and commitments, not self-identification with the terms “evangelical”—38% qualify as neither Christ-like in action nor attitude, according to their responses to these 20 questions. About one-quarter (23%) of evangelicals are characterized by having Jesus-like actions and attitudes, which was higher than the norm. About half were a mixture of Christ-like actions and Pharisaical attitudes (25%) or vice versa (15%).

Evangelicals are notably distinct from the norms in two ways: first, they were slightly more likely than other Christians to be Christ-like in action and attitude. However, among those in the “middle ground,” with so-called jumbled actions and attitudes, evangelicals are the only faith group more likely to be Pharisaical in attitude but Christ-like in action.

Kinnaman explains: "This research may help to explain how evangelicals are often targeted for claims of hypocrisy; the unique 'sin' of evangelicals tends to be doing the 'right' thing but with improper motives."

The research shows that non-evangelical born again Christians and notional Christians were not much different from one another and not too distinct from national norms among all Christians.

Practicing Catholics were more likely than average to have Christ-like beliefs, but to demonstrate Pharisaical tendencies (i.e., they were 10 points above the average in terms of being Christ-like in attitude but Pharisaical in action).



### Who Exhibits Christ-likeness?

Despite their shortcomings in the study, evangelical Christians are the most likely Christian segment to be categorized as having both the Christ-like actions and attitudes (23%) identified by Barna researchers.

Interestingly, a similar proportion (22%) of Christians who have a more liberal political ideology claimed both Christ-like attitudes and actions. Non-mainline Protestants with a practicing faith are also more likely than average to be in this top category (19%), as are women (18%) and college graduates (18%).

Some population segments that are statistically less likely to have both Christ-like actions and attitudes are Elders, ages 67 or older (6%), Hispanics (6%), Christians with a conservative political ideology (8%), and men (9%).

### **What the Findings Mean**

Kinnaman has spent more than five years presenting to Christian leaders about the perceptions of Christians, based upon his bestselling book *unChristian*. “In the research for that book project, our team discovered that 84% of young non-Christians say they know a Christian personally, yet only 15% say the lifestyles of those believers are noticeably different in a good way. This new study helps to explain that gap. It is not surprising that believers miss the mark in terms of representing Jesus, because transformation in Christ is so **difficult and so rare**. In particular, evangelicals seem to know the right way to behave, but they often admit to harboring sanctimonious motives.

“Many Christians are more concerned with what they call unrighteousness than they are with self-righteousness. It’s a lot easier to point fingers at how the culture is immoral than it is to confront Christians in their comfortable spiritual patterns. Perhaps pastors and teachers might take another look at how and what they communicate. Do people somehow get the message that the ‘right action’ is more important than the ‘right attitude’? Do church leaders have a tendency to focus more on tangible results, like actions, because those are easier to see and measure than attitudes?

“Finally, the question of authentic faith—is a particularly sore topic for many Millennials—who are often leaving church due in large part to the hypocrisy they experience. Again, no research is a perfect measure, but this study points out a sobering possibility: that the perception so many young people have of Christians contains more than a kernel of truth. Just as the New Testament writer Paul demonstrates in Galatians 2:11-16, the responsibility of the Christian community is to challenge hypocrisy just as boldly as other kinds of sin.”

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### **About the Research**

The OmniPollSM included 1,008 telephone interviews conducted among a representative sample of adults over the age of 18 in each of the 50 United States. The interviews included 300 interviews conducted by cell phone, to help ensure representativeness of cell-only households. Of those surveyed 718 self-identified as Christians and were included in this study. The survey was conducted from November 11, 2012 through November 18, 2012. The sampling error for self-identified Christians is plus or minus 3.7 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level.

Based upon U.S. Census data sources, regional and ethnic quotas were designed to ensure that the final group of adults interviewed reflected the distribution of adults nationwide and adequately represented the three primary ethnic groups within the U.S. (those groups which comprise at least 10% of the population: white, black, and Hispanic).

To assess the results to 20 different questions, a numeric value was assigned to each response option and the results were tallied. A perfect score was 30 points on the action questions and 30 points on the attitude questions. The equal and opposite result represents Pharisaical actions and attitudes.

Furthermore, respondents were penalized if they agreed with multiple Pharisaical statements. If they did embrace these self-oriented perspectives, their score was downgraded. This was done because, in many cases, people often

got the “right” answer to Christ-like questions, but also harbored some self-righteousness in action or attitude. For example, depending upon one's total aggregate score, agreeing with two or more Pharisaical actions could remove a respondent from being categorized as having Christ-like actions; instead, he or she would be categorized as having Pharisaical actions.

The research was commissioned by Baker Books and John Burke, author of a new book, *Mud and the Masterpiece: Seeing yourself and others through the eyes of Jesus*. More about the book can be found [here](#).

## Definitions

People are identified as having a practicing faith if they have attended a church service in the past month and say their religious faith is very important in their life.

"Evangelicals" meet the born again criteria (described below) plus seven other conditions. Those include saying their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church attended. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as "evangelical."

"Non-evangelical born again Christians" is defined as people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. These adults are born again, but do not meet the additional evangelical criteria.

"Notional" Christians are individuals who identify themselves as Christian yet do not meet the criteria for being "born again."

Generations: Mosaics / Millennials are a generation born between 1984 through 2002; Busters, born between 1965 and 1983; Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964; and Elders were born in 1945 or earlier.

## About Barna Group

Barna Group (which includes its research division, the Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984.

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