

**American Worldview Inventory 2020 – At a Glance**  
**AWVI 2020 Results – Release #4: Seeking Purpose and Success**

**God is Absent from Most People’s Views of Purpose and Success**

May 6, 2020

An increasingly secular America insists that life has purpose and meaning, terms commonly associated with the historic Christian faith and biblical understanding, but doggedly refuses to include God as a possible route to finding either.

A new study from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University found that a whopping majority of 86% Americans (six out of seven adults) believe there is a universal, shared purpose of human life, and two out of every three (66%) believe they have “unique, God-given calling or purpose.” Yet few make any reference to God or the Christian faith in defining what these terms mean. Even among the 71% of Americans who consider themselves to be Christians, fewer than 20% adopt the biblical view that our purpose is to know, love and serve God.

“The disconnect is staggering,” said Dr. George Barna, CRC Director of Research and author of the *American Worldview Inventory 2020*. “As a nation we yearn for purpose and calling, ideas deeply rooted within our nation’s historical Christian faith and biblical understanding of God. Americans hold on to these basic biblical ideas of what makes human existence meaningful, yet, at the same time, we refuse to recognize reliance on God or His existence when talking about human success or purpose.”

Other key findings from the latest report, which follows below:

- The survey finds little consensus in how Americans define the purpose of life. The most widespread view, held by nearly one-quarter of adults (23%), identified “experiencing happiness and fulfillment” as the ultimate reason for living. Followed by “evolving to our full potential physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually” (18%); “knowing, loving, and serving God” (18%); “furthering the development of humanity” (10%) or “living a long, healthy life” (10%).
- The top definition of success was “living a healthy, productive, and safe life” (25%). One out of five adults selected either “being a good person” (22%) or “consistent obedience to God” (21%); 18% said “experiencing personal happiness or freedom.”
- Whether God is included as part of one’s life purpose differs sharply by age and political views. The older a person, the more likely they are to adopt a biblical view of life’s purpose. Conversely, the youngest (18 to 29) are least likely to include God. Political conservatives are three times as likely as political liberals to identify God as giving purpose to life.
- Among churchgoing adults, no Christian church affiliation claimed a majority who believed that success involved “consistent obedience to God.” Evangelicals came closest (47%), followed by those attending Pentecostal churches (42%), but only 23% attending mainline Protestant church and just 16% of Catholics include obedience to God in the definition of success.

## **American Worldview Inventory 2020 Results – FULL Release #4: Purpose & Success**

### **God Is Absent from Most People’s Views of Purpose and Success**

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research, Cultural Research Center  
Released: May 6, 2020

As reliance upon and trust in the Bible has diminished, Americans’ perceptions of life and the supernatural have taken some unorthodox turns. Further evidence of that trend is found in the latest report based on the *American Worldview Inventory 2020*. The nationwide survey undertaken by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University shows that few Americans view either their life purpose or measure of personal success to be related to living in harmony with God’s principles.

#### **Purpose in Life**

A huge majority of Americans – 86%, which amounts to six out of every seven adults – believe that there is a universal, shared purpose for life that every human being possesses.

However, there was a lack of consensus regarding the definition of that common life purpose.

The most widespread view, held by nearly one-quarter of adults (23%), is that experiencing happiness and fulfillment is the ultimate reason for living. That was followed by just less than one out of five adults who said the universal purpose is either evolving to our full potential physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually (18%); or knowing, loving, and serving God (18%). One out of ten adults said the universal purpose was either furthering the development of humanity (10%) or living a long, healthy life (10%). Another 7% said that advancing world peace and understanding is the universal purpose. The remaining respondents were divided among those who said there is no universal or common purpose (10%) or those who said they did not know what it is (4%).

<b>What is the universal, common purpose, or ultimate reason for living?</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>“experiencing happiness and fulfillment”</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>“evolving into our full potential, physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually”</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>“knowing, loving, and serving God”</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>“furthering the development of humanity”</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>“living a long, healthy life”</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>“advancing world peace”</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>“there is no universal or common purpose”</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>“unsure / don’t know”</b>	<b>4%</b>

Source: *American Worldview Survey 2020*, Cultural Research Center of Arizona Christian University (2020)

The Bible suggests that our universal purpose is to know, love, and serve God. Even though seven out of ten adults consider themselves to be Christian, fewer than two out of ten Americans have adopted that ideal.

While a majority of people associated with evangelical (57%) and Pentecostal (51%) churches have adopted the biblical understanding of their earthly purpose, less than one-third of the adults aligned with mainline Protestant (31%) or Catholic (27%) churches join them. Sadly, less than four out of ten

of all adults who describe themselves as Christian (38%) say their purpose in life is to know, love, and serve God.

The survey revealed that the older a person is, the more likely they are to adopt a biblical point of view regarding their life purpose. In addition, political conservatives were three times as likely as political liberals to embrace that description as their life’s purpose.

**Do You Have a Unique Calling?**

Two out of three adults (66%) believe that they have “a unique, God-given calling or purpose” for their life. That outcome seems inconsistent with the finding that just half of adults (51%) believe in a personal, all-knowing, and all-powerful God who is involved in peoples’ lives. The incidence of belief in a unique, God-given calling was similar across all age groups of people 30 or older (two-thirds acknowledged such a divine calling), but notably lower among those younger than 30 (57%).

Political ideology is related to peoples’ views on this matter. Four out of five conservatives (80%) admitted to having a unique, God-given calling, compared to three out of five moderates (62%) and slightly more than half of liberals (54%). That pattern corresponds to the views of God as the transcendent, personal deity, a belief held by 70% of conservatives, less than half of moderates (46%), and only one-third of liberals (35%).

As expected, the faith group with which a person was associated also related to their perceptions about calling or purpose. More than nine out of ten people who usually attend an evangelical church claimed to have such a calling, compared to slightly fewer among those attending a Pentecostal church (85%); three-quarters of Catholics (75%); and just two-thirds of those aligned with a mainline Protestant church. Meanwhile, half of the adults (52%) associated with non-Christian faith groups and just one-fourth (24%) of those who are not religious claimed a unique, God-given purpose or calling for life.

**Defining Success**

The survey also explored peoples’ thoughts about success in life. When given eight common descriptions of success to choose from, just four of those options accounted for the answers of nearly nine out of ten adults.

The most widely adopted view of success was “living a healthy, productive, and safe life”, a view adopted by one-quarter of the public (25%). One out of five adults selected either “being a good person” (22%) or “consistent obedience to God” (21%) as the best reflection of their view of success. Almost as many (18%) chose the description “experiencing personal happiness or freedom.”

How U.S. adults define success	Percentage
“living a healthy, productive and safe life”	25%
“being a good person”	22%
“consistent obedience to God”	21%
“experiencing personal happiness or freedom”	18%
being liked and respected by other people”	4%
“having or achieving things that society values”	3%
“whatever society deems success to be”	2%
“returning as a more evolved life form”	2%
“don’t know”	4%

Source: American Worldview Survey 2020, Cultural Research Center of Arizona Christian University (2020)

The other four possibilities offered to respondents were each chosen by less than one out of every twenty people. Those included “being liked and respected by other people” (4%); “having or achieving things that society values” (3%); “whatever society determines success to be” (2%); and “returning as a more evolved life form” (2%). The remaining 4% said they did not know how to define success.

The biblical concept of success relates to consistently obeying God. Amazingly, less than three out of ten individuals (28%) who describe themselves as Christian selected that perspective. Even among the one-third of the adult population whose beliefs qualify them as born again Christians – that is, they believe they will have eternal life in the presence of God solely because they have confessed their sins and have embraced Jesus Christ as their personal savior – less than half (45%) defined success as consistent obedience to God.

The notion of what constitutes success in life is not a widely-held belief among most churchgoing adults. None of the Christian church categories examined could claim a majority of adherents perceiving success to be about obedience. People associated with evangelical churches came closest (47%), followed by those attending Pentecostal churches (42%). There was a substantial decline after that, with only 23% of those attending mainline Protestant church and just 16% of Catholics defining success as consistent obedience to God.

Adults who are associated with non-Christian churches were most likely to perceive success to be living a healthy, productive and safe life (30%). Individuals who have no faith inclinations were equally as likely to describe success as “being a good person” or “living a healthy, productive and safe life” (each 27%) with “experiencing personal happiness or freedom” nearly as popular (25%).

Perspectives on success varied by the age of survey respondents. The youngest adults (18 to 29 years old) were most likely to describe personal happiness or freedom as success (31%). People in their thirties or forties were most likely to say that living a healthy, productive and safe life was the pinnacle of life (25%). Adults aged 50 to 64 were evenly divided, with identical numbers (26%) selecting being a good person; living a healthy, productive and safe life; and consistent obedience to God as the best definition of success. People 65 or older were most likely to deem consistent obedience to God as the meaning of success (30%).

<b>How Americans Define Success, by Age Groups</b>		
<b>Age group</b>	<b>Most common answer</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>18 to 29</b>	<b>“personal happiness or freedom”</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>30 to 49</b>	<b>“living a healthy, productive and safe life”</b>	<b>35%</b>
<b>50 to 64</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“living a healthy, productive and safe life”</b></li> <li>• <b>“being a good person”</b></li> <li>• <b>“consistent obedience to God”</b></li> </ul>	<b>26% (3-way tie)</b>
<b>65 and older</b>	<b>consistent obedience to God</b>	<b>30%</b>

Source: *American Worldview Survey 2020*, Cultural Research Center of Arizona Christian University (2020)

Among the segments least likely to perceive consistent obedience of God to be the mark of success were liberals (7%); adults under age 30 (10%); and Hispanics (14%).

## **A Biblical View**

While it might seem that maintaining the biblical point of view on both success and purpose would go hand in hand, the survey found otherwise. Overall, just 7% of adults believed both that the common purpose of humanity is to know, love and serve God and that the best indicator of success is consistent obedience to God.

## **Motivations for Godly Obedience**

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research for the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, noted that the research pointed to the importance of a dynamic personal relationship with God and the Bible as precursors to the ability and willingness to follow His commands and principles.

According to Barna, creator of the *American Worldview Inventory 2020*, “We found that people who have a thriving relationship with God were far more likely to perceive obedience to be a positive way of living than to see it as a rigid, constraining, joyless existence.”

“Having a tangible kinship with God facilitates the motivation to behave in ways that please Him and advance His agenda of love, acceptance, and forgiveness for humankind,” Barna explained. “Rather than perceiving obedience to be a burden, these people view following the guidelines that God has provided for our well-being to be a significant benefit.”

Barna acknowledged that most people pursue a life devoted to achievement, happiness, productivity, and striving for goodness and spoke to the disturbing reality of that pursuit. “Those are not evil outcomes, but when they become the ultimate objective of life, you miss out on the greatest possibilities. People who prioritize such outcomes miss the point that life flourishes when we become God-reliant rather than self-reliant. Being self-centered rather than dependent on God typically produces emptiness and disappointments, which in turn may lead to self-defeating choices such as substance abuse, broken relationships, loneliness, and even suicide.

“Millions of Americans misinterpret obedience to God to mean a life of limits, misery, and monotony. Yet those who pursue godly obedience report just the opposite,” Barna continued. “In fact, they are more likely to experience the very outcomes that most people are unsuccessfully pursuing through self-reliance and self-righteousness. Ironically, those who invest themselves in godly obedience are more likely than others to have lives that are healthy, safe, joyful, and free from oppressive burdens. Obedience does introduce boundaries, but those are limitations that God designed specifically for our success and well-being – boundaries that have proven to generate the life that most Americans have been looking for.”

## **About the Research**

The *American Worldview Inventory 2020 (AWVI)* is the first wave of an annual series of surveys that estimates how many adults have a biblical worldview. The assessment is based on 51 worldview-related questions that are drawn from eight categories of worldview application. Those questions are divided into queries regarding both beliefs and behavior. In addition to the worldview questions, the survey also contains an array of demographic and theolographic questions. In total, the *AWVI* instrument incorporates 68 questions and took respondents an average of 16 minutes to complete.

*AWVI 2020* was undertaken in January 2020 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults. The survey included 1,000 interviews with a nationwide random sample of adults via telephone, plus another 1,000 adults interviewed online through use of a national panel of adults. A survey of 2,000 individuals has an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of undeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity.

### **About the Cultural Research Center**

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school's campus in Glendale, Arizona. CRC conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares the information with organizations focused on impacting the spheres of cultural influence in order to transform American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith but remains non-partisan and inter-denominational. In addition to Dr. George Barna, the Director of Research, Dr. Tracy Munsil serves as the Executive Director of the Center. More information about the Cultural Research Center is available at the Center's website, located at [www.culturalresearchcenter.com](http://www.culturalresearchcenter.com).