

Nearly Half of Millennial Christians View Evangelism as Wrong, Study Says

The Wired Word for the Week of February 24, 2019

In the News

Drawing from the results of two nationally representative studies of U.S. adults conducted in 2018, the research company Barna Group concluded that nearly half of Millennial Christians say it is wrong to evangelize. And this is despite the finding that nearly three-quarters of Millennial Christians say they know how to respond when someone raises questions about their faith, and about the same percentage say they are gifted at sharing their faith.

Barna published the study results this month.

For purposes of the study, Barna defined Millennials as those born 1984 to 1998, making them between 20 and 34 years old at the time of the study. Other research groups may use slightly different beginning and ending years to identify who is in that generational cohort, but Millennials are generally understood as today's young adults, and as a whole, Millennials are poised to overtake Baby Boomers as the largest generation. Only a minority of U.S. Millennials are practicing Christians.

Barna defines practicing Christians as those who self-identify as Christian, agree strongly that faith is an important part of their lives and have attended church within the past month.

Other research has shown that almost all practicing Christians believe that part of their faith means being a witness about Jesus (ranging, Barna says, from 95 percent to 97 percent across all generational groups). And according to the new study, the percentage of Millennial Christians saying they know how to share their faith -- 73 percent -- is higher than for Christians in any other generational group alive today: Gen X (66 percent), Boomers (59 percent) and Elders (56 percent).

At the same time, however, some 47 percent of Christians who are in the Millennial cohort "agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith," the study found.

Interpreting these study results, the Barna Group said,

Younger Christians tend to be more personally aware of the cultural temperature around spiritual conversations. Among practicing Christians, Millennials report an average (median) of four close friends or family members who practice a faith other than Christianity; most of their Boomer parents and grandparents, by comparison, have just one. Sharing the gospel today is made harder than at any time in recent memory by an overall cultural resistance to conversations that highlight people's differences.

Society today also casts a negative light on proselytization that many older Christians do not fully appreciate. As Barna found in [previous] research ..., three out of five Christian Millennials believe that people today are more likely than in the past to take offense if they share their faith (65 percent) -- that's far higher than among Boomer Christians (28 percent). Millennials are also either two (Gen X) or three times more likely (Boomers and Elders) than any other generational group to believe that disagreement means judgment.

As to what all this means, David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group, said the study "highlights a need for Christians to bolster their confidence in certain convictions -- among them, the belief that 'evangelizing others is good and worthy of our time, energy and investment.'"

"Leaders who want to equip Christians today to share Jesus with non-believers face an unusual challenge: to first 'evangelize' Christians on the importance -- and morality -- of evangelism," the Barna report said.

Regarding this finding about Millennial Christians and evangelizing, *Christianity Today* commented that it was "disappointing news," and many Christian leaders, particularly those who consider themselves evangelicals, would agree.

Some observers, however, take a different view. Author Keith Giles, writing at *Patheos*, keyed in on the survey finding that Millennial Christians have four times as many non-Christian friends in their life as do Boomers or Gen X Christians. Giles said, "Millennial Christians are much more open to loving people who are not inside their circle of faith. They are in daily, constant relationships with non-believers. This is what it means to be 'salt and light.'"

Giles added, "This is very good news for the future of Christianity, in my opinion. I am very excited to learn that this next generation of Christ-followers is more interested in listening to people who think differently and less interested in having arguments about who is right or wrong."

Elizabeth Klein, an assistant professor of theology at the Augustine Institute in Denver, Colorado, commented that the statistic about half of Millennial Christians believing evangelism is wrong should be read in light of the other information also reported by Barna: that 96 percent of Millennials believe "part of my faith means being a witness about Jesus," that 94 percent said that "the best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to know Jesus."

Furthermore, Klein said, the survey's phrasing of the question about evangelization probably also affected the way millennials responded -- "it's about people who already have a religious faith," Klein said.

"I think Millennials are more likely to see someone of a different faith as more of an ally maybe than in the past," she said, "because we are in such a post-Christian, post-religious world that anyone else who is practicing a faith may be more likely to be seen as someone you have a lot in common with, rather than the chief object of evangelization for Millennials," she said.

Vince Sartori, a regional director with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, said of the survey findings, "I think some of it comes down to a misunderstanding of evangelization versus proselytization."

Proselytization, Sartori said, happens when "the person is preaching or going out to be heard, not listening to someone but rather just trying to get a point across." Evangelization, on the other hand, is "about building trust, encountering a person, understanding a person, and introducing them to Jesus and proposing ideas, as opposed to just telling them something."

One final thing: Members of the Millennial cohort are also known for overestimating their own capabilities. That a larger percentage than other age cohorts state that they know how to share their faith may also reflect this overestimating.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism Is Wrong. *Barna Group*

Half of Millennial Christians Say It's Wrong to Evangelize. *Christianity Today*

Barna Poll: Millennial Christians Have More Non-Christian Friends. *Patheos*

Are Millennial Christians Really Killing Evangelization? *CNA*

New Guidelines Redefine Birth Years for Millennials, Gen-X, and 'Post-Millennials.' *Mental Floss*

The Big Questions

1. How do you define evangelism? How do you view it? In what ways and how often do you practice it?
2. Should sharing our faith be something that we deliberately seek out opportunities to do? In what ways, if at all, is that different from sharing our faith with someone who happens to ask us to?
3. Do you think the Millennial Christians who view evangelism as wrong are objecting to faith sharing in any form or only to specific forms of evangelism?
4. In terms of the Christian faith, what benefits, if any, might result from Christians having friends who are followers of other faiths as well as some who have no faith at all?
5. To what degree, if any, should the cultural climate of the times affect how determinedly we seek to share Christ with others?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 28:18-20

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (For context, read 28:16-20.)

These are some of Jesus' last words to his disciples, and they are usually understood as being directed to the whole church right down to today. As such, these words are characterized as "the Great Commission," an instruction from Jesus to evangelize the world.

Questions: What reasons, if any, do we have to conclude that Jesus' words were meant for all Christians and not just for his 11 disciples? What reasons, if any, do we have to conclude that they were meant for all time until he returns? What reasons, if any, do we have to conclude that they were meant only for his disciples and only for their time?

Romans 10:13-15

For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? (For context, read 10:5-17.)

There's a simple logic in the series of rhetorical questions Paul poses in these verses.

Questions: What is the answer to each of the questions Paul asks here? In the context of Paul's words here, what does it mean to be "sent"? Is every Christian sent in this sense? Why or why not?

Acts 8:30-31

So Philip ran up to [the chariot] and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. (For context, read 8:26-39.)

The Philip in this story is not the apostle by that name, but one of the seven men chosen to assist the apostles in serving the church community (see Acts 6:1-5). Eventually, an angel directed this Philip to go to the Gaza road. There, he met an Ethiopian who was reading from the book of Isaiah. So Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The man said he did not, and invited Philip sit with him in the chariot and explain the text.

Philip's explanation led to a discussion about Christ, and the Ethiopian eventually asked Philip to baptize him.

This incident could be described as an intentional evangelistic encounter, but note the natural progression in it. Philip did have a sense of being "sent" to the Ethiopian, but Philip's question to him was a logical one in the circumstances. This was followed by an invitation from the Ethiopian for Philip to say more, and the man's subsequent receiving of Christ was his own idea without any pressure from Philip.

Questions: Assume that the Ethiopian had not invited Philip to join him and tell him more. What should Philip have done next? Or suppose that after Philip had told him about Christ, the Ethiopian had said, "I'm a Zoroastrian and am happy in my faith." What should Philip have said then?

Job 6:14

Those who withhold kindness from a friend forsake the fear of the Almighty. (For context, read 6:14-17.)

These words are from the long-suffering Job, intended as a complaint against his friend Eliphaz, whose words have not been comforting.

In terms of today's discussion, these words from Job might also be read as saying treating a friend as a target of evangelism without the kindness of respect and valuing the person's beliefs as honest expressions of his or her current position does not please God. With that thought in mind, consider an exceptionally handsome young man one TWW team member once knew who was a committed Christian and who easily found dates with young ladies. The young man dated a lot, but he once told his pastor that he sometimes dated women expressly for the purpose of witnessing about Christ to them.

Questions: Do you think the young man's dating-to-witness practice was an act of kindness toward a friend? Might the young woman receiving a witness on such a date feel misled or "used"? Why or why not? Or, could God use this young man's intention to work something unexpected to the young man and the young woman he was dating? How accurately can we judge?