

## DEFYING THE SECULAR CULTURE – CHURCHGOING CHRISTIANS ARE STICKING TO BIBLICAL TEACHING

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In any discussion about the future of religion in the West, especially as it relates to stalled growth in churches and denominations, those outside our religious communities find one theory especially compelling. This is the idea that young Evangelicals are frustrated with Christian orthodoxy's strict standards of sexual morality. We're told that these young Evangelicals will soon revolutionize our churches with liberalized views on same-sex marriage, premarital sex, gender identity, and so on. But a new study by a University of Texas sociologist finds that Evangelical Christians ages 18 to 39 are resisting liberalizing trends in the culture.

The suggestion of a shift in attitudes does sound plausible. Indeed, one of us has warned for years that conservative Evangelicals are often "slow-motion sexual revolutionaries," adjusting to the ambient culture on, for instance, divorce in ways that have harmed our witness and compromised the Biblical message. How much more vulnerable would Evangelicals be in a culture that is shifting roller-coaster fast on the definition of marriage itself and related issues? But recent data suggest otherwise. The research was introduced in Mark Regnerus's presentation "Sex in America: Sociological Trends in American Sexuality," unveiled at a recent gathering of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's leadership summit.

According to Regnerus, when compared with the general population and their non-observant peers, churchgoing Evangelicals are retaining orthodox views on Biblical sexuality, despite the shifts in broader American culture. Regnerus surveyed 15,378 persons between the ages of 18 and 60, but he focuses on respondents under 40. Significantly, Regnerus differentiates between those who merely identify with a particular religious tradition and those who actually attend church weekly. The survey distinguishes between someone who says "Catholic" or "Baptist" when asked for a religious identity and someone who actually shows up in the pews.

While support for same-sex marriage characterized a solid majority of those identifying as atheists, agnostics, liberal Catholics, and liberal Protestants, only 11 percent of young Evangelicals actively expressed support for same-sex marriage. Approximately 6 percent of religiously active Evangelicals expressed support for abortion rights, while over 70 percent of their non-believing peer group said they believed in abortion rights. While a large cross-section of all Americans believe in marriage's importance, Regnerus found that, for example, Evangelicals are less likely than most to perceive marriage as "outdated."

Evangelical Christians were also much less likely to believe that cohabitation is a good idea. While upward of 70 of those who claim no religious affiliation or those who are "spiritual but not religious" agree that cohabitation is acceptable, approximately 5% of Evangelicals agreed that cohabitation is acceptable. "While left-leaning Evangelicals have received considerable media attention lately, it pays to survey the masses and see just what's going on," says Regnerus. "This data suggest that while a modest minority of Evangelicals under 40 profess more sexually liberal attitudes, it's not a significant minority. Minorities can be vocal. Survey data help us understand just how large or small they really are."

Regnerus's research suggests that younger Evangelicals aren't hewing to the culture's expectation that they conform to its values. That's a welcome reality, especially given the significant cultural pressures that young Christians face in today's culture. This lines up with what we, as conservative Evangelicals, see happening in our own congregations across America.

As American culture secularizes, the most basic Christian tenets seem ever more detached from mainstream American culture. Those who identify with Christianity, and who gather with the people of God, have already decided to walk out of step with the culture. Beliefs aren't assumed but are articulated over and against a culture that finds them implausible.

Evangelical views on sexuality seem strange, but young Evangelicals in post-Christian America have already embraced strangeness by spending Sunday morning at church rather than at brunch. Moreover, sexuality isn't ancillary to Christianity. Marriage and sex point to a picture of the gospel itself, the union of Christ and his church. This is why the Bible spends so much time, as some would say, "obsessed" with sex. That's why, historically, churches that liberalize on sex tend to liberalize themselves right out of Christianity. The culture is changing, but it doesn't move on without dissent. On any Sunday morning, in your community, young Evangelicals are telling America that a sexual counter-revolution is ready to be born, again.

**Source:** Russell D Moore and Andrew Walker