

Research disputes 'facts' on Christian divorces

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [April 19, 2011](#) issue

It's been proclaimed from pulpits and blogs for years: Christians divorce as much as everyone else in America. But some scholars and family activists are questioning the oft-cited statistics, saying Christians who attend church regularly are more likely to remain wed.

"It's a useful myth," said Bradley Wright, a University of Connecticut sociologist who recently wrote *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've Been Told*.

"If a pastor wants to preach about how Christians should take their marriages more seriously, he or she can trot out this statistic to get them to listen to him or her."

The various findings on religion and divorce hinge on what kind of Christians are being discussed.

Wright

combed through the General Social Survey, a vast demographic study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, and found that Christians, like adherents of other religions, have a divorce rate of about 42 percent. The rate among religiously unaffiliated Americans is 50 percent.

When Wright examined the statistics on evangelicals, he found worship attendance has a big influence on the numbers. Six in ten evangelicals who never attend had been divorced or separated, compared to just 38 percent of weekly attendees.

Wright questions the approach of the Barna Group, evangelical pollsters based in Ventura, California. Barna's latest

published divorce statistics say one-third of all adults, including "non-evangelical born-again Christians," have ended a marriage.

Barna's

statistics are tied to its highly specific—and controversial—definitions of born-again Christians and evangelicals. For instance, Barna labels Christians "born-again" if they have made a personal commitment to Jesus and believe they will go to heaven because they have accepted him as their savior. Barna's evangelicals, on the other hand, are those who fit the born-again definition but also meet seven other conditions, including sharing their beliefs with non-Christians and agreeing that the Bible is completely accurate.

David

Kinnaman, president of the Barna outfit, said the statistical differences reflect varied approaches, noting that Wright looks more at attendance while his group's research dwells on theological commitments. "We've tried to measure it based on theological perspective, not merely [people's] church attendance or whether they call themselves Catholic or mainline," Kinnaman said.

Glenn Stanton of Focus on the Family

wrote a recent Baptist Press column highlighting Wright's interpretation of the state of divorce for Christians. "The divorce rates of Christian believers are not identical to the general population—not even close," he wrote. "Being a committed, faithful believer makes a measurable difference in marriage."

Brad Wilcox, director of the National

Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, agrees that there's been some confusion. "You do hear, both in Christian and non-Christian circles, that Christians are no different from anyone else when it comes to divorce, and that is not true if you are focusing on Christians who are regular church attendees," he said.

Wilcox's analysis of the

National Survey of Families and Households has found that Americans who attend religious services several times a month were about 35 percent less likely to divorce than those with no religious affiliation. But

nominal conservative Protestants were 20 percent more likely to divorce than the religiously unaffiliated, he said. —RNS