

AMERICA AT THE CROSSROADS

Explosive Trends Shaping America's Future
and What You Can Do about It

GEORGE BARNA



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INTRODUCTION

Dickens's famous opening to *A Tale of Two Cities* offers an intriguing juxtaposition of the good and the bad: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . ."

Despite the relative freedom and comfort that most Americans experience these days, surprisingly few would contend that they are living in the best of times. Millions of people would submit that these may well be the worst of times for a nation that has been extraordinarily blessed for more than a quarter of a millennium.

From the most hardened social critic to the most optimistic church lady, Americans recognize that they are living in dangerous and bewildering times. The evidence is everywhere, and it is undeniable. The gulf in perceptions and probable responses between elected officials and those who elected them is wider than at any previous time in memory. The possibility of terrorism striking near home has created substantial—and increasing—anxiety. Fewer American parents than at any time since scientific polling began believe their children will have a better life than they did. Violent crimes have become commonplace, while confidence in the police has plummeted. Distrust of government, social institutions, and businesses is at record-setting levels. People's sense of victimization, powerlessness, and social detachment is unprecedented. Climate change and other environmental challenges baffle people and add to their impression that the world

is out of control. The nuclear armament of America-hating nations like Iran, Russia, and North Korea adds to the public's sense of fear. Religion has shifted from providing a sense of peace, purpose, and order to becoming a source of division and confusion.

As the nation's leaders try to make sense of the turbulence and chart a course forward, the United States is mired in an uncomfortable transitional era. Nobody knows how long the transition will last or exactly what the next era will be like because the country is still immersed in an internal battle to define the new America. Nations tend to change incrementally, but some of those increments have a shorter shelf life than others. It may be that the new era will be upon us faster than many expected.

This is a book designed to help you understand some of the key hinge points in that transition, what kind of nation the new era will likely bring about, and how you can influence that outcome.

Why Pay Attention to Trends?

America has become a culture that seems more interested in being “in the moment” than one that focuses on understanding the connections between past, present, and future, and how people's choices can and should influence the future. While being in the moment may be the flavor of the month, it may not advance the country's long-term interests.

The very concept of being “in the moment” is drawn from the Buddhist philosophy of mindfulness. That concept promotes awareness of what is happening in the here and now, overcoming the natural human tendency to default to living in accordance with habits and routines that can deaden our senses and block our ability to be thoroughly alive to every experience. Being more fully present as we go through our day is a way of experiencing reality to its utmost potential.

It's not necessarily wrong to live completely in the moment, especially if the alternative is remaining oblivious to the important

facets of reality or operating with a dulled capacity. However, many people have run with the concept to the extent that they believe living in the moment is all there is, severing any ties between what happens in this moment and what will take place in the moments (and days, weeks, months, years) to come as a result of their immediate decisions. One can certainly become too obsessed with the future, investing too much time and energy into simply daydreaming or compulsively preparing for what is to come. The ideal is to seek a balance between grasping the historical realities that brought us to this moment, experiencing what is taking place now as fully as we can, and preparing to build a bridge from the past and present to a desired future.

That's where this book comes into play. Even a cursory understanding of cultural trends and patterns can help intentionally build a better bridge to an optimal future.

Another way of seeing the value of trend tracking is to realize that the future doesn't just happen; it is created by people committed to envisioning and facilitating specific outcomes in society. To have that kind of impact on the future, we have to understand where things are, glean lessons from the past, and then ascertain what it will take to generate a particular outcome or set of circumstances. The alternative is to let others create our future for us, rendering us victims of the future instead of shapers of tomorrow.

And if you are a Christian, *discovering and understanding cultural trends is both an assignment and a gift from God*. Consider some of the Bible passages that exhort us to discern what is happening around us so that we can be better stewards of the resources and opportunities God has entrusted to us.

1 Chronicles 12:32

The men of Issachar were effective leaders, and the other tribes of Israel sought their advice because those men “understood the signs

of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.” Historical documents help us understand that they were religious scholars who spent time studying both sacred literature and cultural teachings. Their purpose was the same as ours should be in examining trends: to become aware and then prepared to handle likely conditions. *The key is not to simply know what is coming but to determine how to most intelligently and strategically respond to emerging circumstances.* That is true wisdom.

Matthew 16:1–3

Jesus noted that the religious leaders gathered data to forecast the weather but failed to gather data about something more important: what was likely to happen in their society. He scolded them for their inability to “interpret the signs of the times,” intimating that being equipped to handle coming events was desirable. Jesus was alluding to His own resurrection and the coming of the kingdom of God. Among the principles we might draw from His statement, though, are that we should read the signs provided by God rather than waiting until we witness the sign of our choosing and recognize that even though such signs come in many forms—from the supernatural to the mundane—they are all significant and valuable.

Genesis 49:1–28

As Jacob prepared to die, he gathered his sons to give them his final words. He could have said anything at all but chose to tell them what would happen to them in the future, based on their established patterns of behavior he had observed. The knowledge Jacob passed along to each of his sons, whether an uplifting praise or a stinging rebuke, is described in the Scriptures as a blessing. By recognizing that the future is an extension of the past, he helped his progeny prepare for what was headed their way.

What Are Trends?

Sometimes the idea of trends takes on a mystique. But trends are simply patterns of thought and behavior that provide insight into the lives of people and their society. Trend tracking is nothing magical. It is simply the process of knowing what patterns of thought and behavior are important to follow, gathering relevant and reliable data about those factors, properly interpreting the information, and projecting what those thoughts and behaviors are likely to be in the future given the stability and transitions evident in the other important factors that concurrently influence a culture.

Hmm, maybe it's not such an easy or straightforward science after all. A bit of sociological art is surely involved in the process. Straight-line projections provide the simplest forecasts but they are rarely accurate. Life is a series of twists and turns, some we expect and some we do not, which makes trend tracking both more involved and challenging but also more interesting. In reflecting on the individuals and organizations that have historically done a laudable job of addressing emerging and shifting trends, I've concluded that adeptly tracking societal trends hinges on the realization that the future will not simply be more of the same. Effective trend estimation requires the ability to discern how a particular path may be altered by interference caused by unusual shifts in a plethora of related factors. The best trend trackers use multiple sources of relatively reliable data and then add a touch of professional instinct to guide their work.

But if you take a moment to consider the value of accurate trend tracking, you might begin to see the tremendous advantage provided by a more refined sense of the likely future. Knowledge about trends is not so much about amazing people with your predictions as it is about reading the signs of the times so as to live a more productive and impactful life. If you can interpret the signs appropriately, then you may gain multiple benefits, such as:

- assessing assumptions, knowing that assumptions are often misleading and dangerous
- identifying opportunities and obstacles, enabling you to prepare accordingly
- explaining cultural realities, and thus providing a chance to make the most of those realities due to such insight and understanding
- planning wisely, using your limited parcel of resources to their greatest effect

Such outcomes highlight the difference between tracking trends and promoting fads. Often, fads are the more interesting of the two—and they are certainly the less significant and enduring. Although some people use the terms fad and trend interchangeably, the two are quite different. *Fads* are characterized by short-lived, intense acceptance by a limited number of people. Fads gain their moment in the spotlight through concentrated media attention, suggesting that the behavior or item has widespread support or appeal. However, fads fade into obscurity after the craze has run its course. Examples of fads include things now viewed as silly, such as pet rocks, streaking, and flash mobs.

Change versus Transformation

It is also important to make the distinction between change and transformation. *Change* is short-term alteration that can occur rapidly—and can easily and quickly revert back to the original state of being or to yet a different point on the continuum. In contrast, *transformation* is a long-term shift that requires lots of time and resources before it takes root.

Most of the movement that reaps attention in our society is change, because it is easier to identify and moves rapidly enough to be news-

worthy and exciting. Transformation moves at a more glacial pace; therefore, it is a tougher narrative to convey. However, transformation is the more significant of the two types of transition because by nature it redefines the culture. To describe this with an analogy pertaining to personal appearance, change is like switching brands of makeup, whereas transformation is like getting plastic surgery.

So, for example, the recent decline in national church attendance is a reflection of change, while the drop in the proportion of people who believe Jesus Christ has anything to do with people's eternal destiny is transformation. They both matter, but transformation has extensive ramifications and a dramatic impact on the very nature of society.

This book will focus more on the elements of transformation than on examples of mere change. While change is significant, transformation is the real deal. By the way, keep in mind that change is inevitable and common. In contrast, transformation is exceptional and occurs infrequently—but when it does, it carries with it historic realities.

Regardless, both change and transformation are reshaping the national character. Assuming things will remain as they have been is not only ignorant but also a recipe for irrelevance and ultimate defeat.

Is This a New Approach?

Depending on your age and awareness, you may know that the 1980s were a kind of heyday for trend tracking. Numerous bestselling books released during that decade and featured the prognostications of various self-proclaimed cultural prophets. As you might imagine, some of them were better than others.

John Naisbitt wrote the groundbreaking book *Megatrends* in which he used a variety of information sources that were available to everyone—such as newspaper and magazine articles, as well as television newscasts—to identify a small number of trends he believed would radically alter the way we lived. Faith Popcorn was another

trend watcher and very adept self-marketer who wrote a book (*The Popcorn Report*) that laid out a variety of more complicated trends she believed would come to pass. Some more sophisticated research groups also produced trend reports and newsletters, ranging from the esteemed public opinion researchers at Yankelovich, Skelly and White (who published the *Yankelovich Monitor*, a sophisticated social-tracking report) to the work of various futurist organizations.

In fact, an entire industry was suddenly born out of the growing interest in the future and the trends shaping it, creating a number of people who called themselves futurists and who produced various media describing their projections and predictions. Fascinated with the coming of the new millennium and armed with new tools (such as powerful computers and near-universal ownership of telephones, which allowed public opinion surveys to proliferate), the new breed of trend trackers made the most of their window of opportunity.

The 1990s and beyond, however, saw a diminished interest in trend tracking as the nation embraced a new worldview—postmodernism. (By the way, the widespread acceptance of postmodernism was a powerful trend that most of the prognosticators missed; they identified the symptoms but not the precipitating cause.) This new philosophy of life, an updated version of existentialism, placed a premium on experience, adventure, risk-taking, authenticity, emotional fulfillment, and spontaneity. Consequently, interest in endeavors such as planning and establishing efficient procedures held little appeal to the population. Trend tracking gave way to new interests.

The flagging public interest in forecasting the future, however, did not minimize the value of identifying trends—it only made the act of doing so less mainstream. A deeper analysis of what has happened since the shift shows that the organizations that have had to stay on the cutting edge of change have continued to utilize trend-tracking capabilities. Entities such as the military, the intelligence community, and many leading corporations have continuously and unapologetically invested resources in estimating what was coming down the

pike. Through years of experience, those entities know that a critical dimension of effective leadership is anticipation and preparation.

The emergence of new technologies and technological applications has given new life to trend tracking. The current decade has ushered in the era of “Big Data”—the creation of massive data files on each person, built from a substantial number of data sources, combining every type of input imaginable to glean useful insights into people’s thoughts and behavior. The mountains of data collected and analyzed by Big Data practitioners would cause a researcher armed only with rudimentary computer programs and computing power to go insane. But the extraordinary power of today’s computing systems, using increasingly sophisticated software to crunch the data and make sense of patterns not discernible to the naked eye or the human brain, facilitates complex analyses and the development of clever communication strategies. The result is that many marketers and social scientists not only know more about us than we know about ourselves, but they also are able to develop solutions to needs and desires we don’t even know we have or will have, long before we figure it out and search for those solutions.

Good Data, Bad Data

The Constitution of the United States boldly proclaims that all people are created equal. The same cannot be said for data. You would be shocked at how much of the data (and related interpretation) to which you are exposed is what might be labeled “bad data”—statistics that are either wrong, out of context, or misinterpreted. This has created a new skill that good researchers must possess: the ability to discern the good from the bad. The mere existence of a statistic does not make it valid. And despite the popularity of the huge volume of information introduced by the wizards of the Big Data movement, a greater quantity of bad data does not convert it into good data. Good researchers do not automatically assume that any piece of

data is viable or accurate; they turn to various tests to ascertain the legitimacy and reliability of various bits of available information.

Here, for instance, are some of the principles that enable us to determine if specific facts or interpretations are trustworthy:

- Information that is descriptive but does not help explain or predict behavior is simply interesting noise. In other words, all information needs to pass the “so what?” test. Measures of attitudes, values, opinions, or behaviors that fail to shed light on how or why specific outcomes occur is, at best, simply entertainment and, at worst, a nuisance.
- Numerical data may all look the same, but they are not the same. Based on how the information was collected, why it was collected, when it was generated, and the various statistical treatments to which the information was subjected, the resulting data may or may not be sufficiently valid or accurate to justify consideration.
- The importance of having current, reliable, and accurate data cannot be overstated. Bad data leads to bad decisions. It is sometimes possible to mask how unreliable certain data are by providing them in massive quantities. Having a lot of statistical garbage does not change the fact that it is garbage, regardless of how much garbage you possess.
- Context is critical. No piece of information exists within a vacuum. Grasping the context of the information—both in terms of its genesis and its implications—is challenging but important.

With these principles in mind, know that the sources of information used in this book are intentionally limited. I firmly believe that most of the data to which you and I are exposed are garbage—more misleading and harmful rather than helpful. For instance, more than three thousand public opinion research companies exist in this

country, but my experience with many of them has led me to be extremely careful about whose data I trust. I encourage you to also become a wise data consumer so you do not get misled by facts and figures that look professional but are not trustworthy.

The Content of This Book

We could study hundreds of cultural trends and trend dimensions in these pages. But in the interest of keeping things lively and interesting, if not comprehensive, the parameters of our evaluation are restricted to three significant areas: lifestyles and perspectives, faith and spirituality, and government and politics. That limits our scope of understanding to some degree, but by investigating these areas, we will get a solid handle on where things are today and where they may be tomorrow in American society. If you become interested enough to pursue trend tracking even further, additional sources of information are accessible. But this book should provide a broad-based, useful portrait of the recent past, the present, and my perception of our likely future.

Numerous areas of cultural development are fascinating but not germane to our discussion here. These include:

- new technologies (self-driving cars, for instance, are just around the corner)
- demographic shifts (e.g., the rapid expansion of the Asian-American population)
- consumption behavior (such as the adoption of Bitcoin and mobile payments)

Instead, we will concentrate on dimensions of American life that relate to the heartbeat of the culture and are more likely to define who Americans will be as a people and the implications of that national character.

Since this book is unique among the trend books I have seen, let me explain the format.

Research indicates that most people do not have or allow for prolonged periods of time for reading anymore. America also has been described as an ADD society—a people who have shorter attention spans and are more comfortable jumping from activity to activity without a felt need for completion. That is one of the reasons why book chapters, news and magazine articles, and many other media forms (think texting, Twitter, and Snapchat) are getting briefer. Even research reports are shorter and more direct than traditionally has been the case.

Consequently, my goal for the organization of this book is twofold. First, I want to provide information in bite-size pieces without compromising the quality of the information. Second, I want to divide the information into categories that help you more easily organize the information in your mind and thus be able to absorb a greater breadth and volume of information.

Each chapter is divided into three sections. The initial portion, labeled Summary, describes the recent past and current state of affairs related to the chapter's topic. Because society now seems to move in three- to five-year trending cycles, I have chosen not to give data comparisons that amount to ancient history. In most cases, the comparative data I will rely on go back as far as 1990, but rarely prior to that. The pace of change in America is so rapid, and the depth of change so substantial, that you can usually grasp the magnitude of change by looking back twenty-five years or less. In fact, comparing what is happening today with what took place in 1960—a time that is well within the memory of many of the people likely to read this book—is in many ways irrelevant. Americans have not lived in a cultural context that resembles 1960 for several decades, making data comparisons with that period an exercise in historical exegesis rather than cultural pertinence.

The second section of each chapter, called Key Facts, is a straightforward listing of some of the central bits of data related to the

chapter's discussion. While the Summary contains a narrative that incorporates some facts and figures to make the case for where we are today, the Key Facts section bridges the opening and closing portions of each chapter with a quick and simple display of the statistics central to the argument.

The closing section of the chapter is titled Outlook and Interpretation. Whereas the first two portions provide an objective recitation of reliable information, the third section is my subjective assessment of what I think the data are telling us—the future outcomes that the trends and patterns previously described are leading me to expect. Also, some chapters include a graphic element to help you visualize the data—a chart or graph that communicates the information from a different angle.

You May Not Agree

I fully expect that you will disagree with my conclusions in portions of the Outlook and Interpretation sections. In my younger days, such disagreements would have frustrated me. These days I view them as a reasonable outcome and a positive indication that you are conscientiously reflecting upon the content! Please know I have come to the conclusions on these pages based on the data provided as well as a macro-level perspective on all the trends being explored in this book. I say that not to discourage you from challenging my conclusions but to diffuse possible concerns that you feel the data presented do not lead to the stated outcome. Thinking critically about the information presented is important to move beyond simply being informed toward making wise and strategic decisions based on what you know.

Let me also note that the final section—Standing at the Crossroads—provides some of the macro-level thinking that underlies much of this book. It is based not only on the data presented in these pages but also on reams of additional data that I analyze in

my research for the nonprofit American Culture & Faith Institute (a division of United in Purpose) and for my own firm, Metaformation. This section is also a subjective perspective on the future of America. It is founded on a very specific point of view influenced heavily by my faith in Jesus Christ.

For purposes of full disclosure, understand that I believe America will be a better nation if its people live in harmony with the life principles God has provided in the Bible. I am not arguing for a theocracy or for Christianity to be instituted as the state-sanctioned religion of the land. I am, however, suggesting that when people embrace God's principles and hold themselves accountable to them, everyone is better off. I envision a country in which Christianity is respected and able to be practiced without government interference; the traditional family is unimpaired by the law when it reflects biblical values and behavior; success is defined according to spiritual rather than material outcomes; the Christian Church is vibrant and healthy and unapologetic for its beliefs and related behaviors; and our national values and objectives reflect those described in Scripture.

Again, you and I may have some divergent views, but a healthy and free society benefits from such exchanges. Respectful critical thinking that leads to sharper dialogue and superior decision-making will serve all of us well. My driving value in life is the desire to know and convey truth. It shapes everything I do in research, business, ministry, and writing, but I realize trend tracking is an art, leaving room for discussion, reconsideration, and even agreeing to disagree on some factors. Hopefully, our mutual efforts to lead America to a better future will also allow us to sharpen one another's abilities, insights, and choices.

The bottom line is that I hope this book will enlighten you, surprise you, affirm you, challenge you, and help you. People who succeed in life are inevitably those who anticipate rather than react. Tracking cultural trends is the process of anticipating what is coming down the road. May you see the changes coming before they happen and be ready to deal with them.

PART 1

FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY

1

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Summary

Religious beliefs are the Rodney Dangerfield of cultural analysis: they get little attention and even less respect. Yet, those beliefs constitute the centerpiece of people's decision-making in virtually every aspect of life. What we believe about the existence and nature of God, the veracity and reliability of the Bible, the means to and nature of eternal salvation, the concepts of truth, love, forgiveness, power, purpose, and sin—these are the fundamental perspectives on which our moment-to-moment choices are based. The failure to grasp what is happening with people's core beliefs severely limits the ability to understand the present and future conditions of a society.

A careful study of Americans' core beliefs reveals a nation in transition, moving from a predominantly Judeo-Christian point of view to a mostly postmodern, secular worldview. The transition has been both rapid and monumental in its ramifications, as seen in the breathtakingly quick acceptance of same-sex marriage and the

widespread acceptance of expanding government authority. Those who have strategically tracked the shift in our central faith tenets have seen the cultural earthquake coming for some time.

It is clear that the faith realm is in turmoil. In 2005, two-thirds of American adults said their religious faith was very important to them. Just ten years later that had slipped to only half. While millions of Americans contend, often defensively, that they are “spiritual but not religious,” their notion of being spiritual is typically tied more to their sense of self-determination and spiritual independence than to a historic faith steeped in truth, tradition, or orthodoxy. In fact, the number of adults who label themselves “deeply spiritual” has declined by almost 40 percent since 2005.¹

Nine out of ten adults believe in “God.” However, only six out of ten believe in the God of the Christian Bible—a deity who is all-knowing, omnipresent, has unlimited power, created the universe, and rules that universe today and forever. Belief in such a God has dropped by seven percentage points in the past decade.²

Most Americans (78 percent) accept the idea that Jesus Christ was a real person,³ but fewer than four out of ten believe that He was both human and divine and that He lived a sinless life on Earth. A growing proportion of Americans are uncertain about the nature and ministry of Jesus. Compared to a decade ago, fewer people have made a “personal commitment” to Jesus Christ that is important to them. Some have made that commitment to the person of Christ, while others have made it to the idea of a savior or spiritual protector. Combined, only six out of ten now say they have made such a commitment, down from nearly three-quarters of Americans just ten years ago. Further, fewer than half of all Americans (45 percent) contend that Jesus Christ is actually alive today.⁴

During the past decade, Americans have become more lukewarm about eternal salvation. While the same proportion of adults (three out of every ten) reject the idea that a good person can earn a place in Heaven, a larger and growing share of the public (about half)

doesn't know what to think about what happens after they die. This rise in uncertainty corresponds to the decline in the percentage of born-again Christians who believe they have a responsibility to share the gospel with nonbelievers during the course of the year—a twelve-point decline in the last ten years. Meanwhile, the percentage of believers who have shared their faith with nonbelievers has dropped from two-thirds to less than one-half in the last decade.⁵

Perceptions about Satan are another point of theological murkiness for millions of Americans. Barely one-quarter of the public believes Satan is a living entity. A similar proportion believes Satan is merely a symbol of evil but not a living entity. The other half of the public is not sure what to make of the idea of the devil. Overall, Satan is not a being or a spiritual concept that most Americans take seriously.⁶

The Bible no longer holds the revered place in society that it once had. Most households (91 percent) still own one or more copies of the Bible, but barely one-third of all adults firmly believe that it is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches. Not quite one-half of the public confidently embraces the view that the Bible contains everything you need to know to live a meaningful life.⁷

Overall, slightly more than one-half of the public believes the Bible is either the actual word of God, to be taken literally (22 percent), or the inspired and inerrant word of God, containing symbolism (33 percent). Almost one-half of the population (44 percent) contends that the Bible contains historical errors or personal interpretations that prevent it from being a trustworthy document. Some of the doubt about the Bible's reliability relates to the miracles it describes; just half of all adults believe they actually occurred.⁸

As for sacred literature, a majority of people aren't sure what to make of the documents relied on by the world's most popular religions. Most people lean toward believing that the Bible, Koran, and Book of Mormon are simply different expressions of the same spiritual truths. It is not surprising, then, that only one out of eight

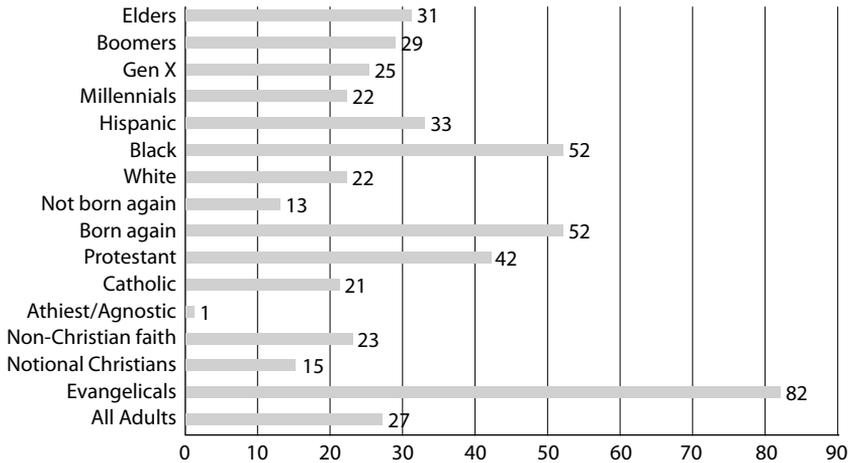
adults considers themselves to be “highly knowledgeable” about the content of the Bible.⁹

Key Facts

Spiritual Indicator	2005	2015
Self-description: deeply spiritual	58%	37%
“My religious faith is very important to me”	68	52
Have a personal responsibility to share religious beliefs with nonbelievers	34	25
God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the universe who still rules it today	69	62
Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches	45	36
Bible is neither the actual nor inspired Word of God; it is written by men	22	30
Have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today	72	60

Sources: OmniPoll™1-05, Barna Group, Ventura, CA, N=1,003, January 2005; OmniPoll™1-15, Barna Group, Ventura, CA, N=2,005, January 2015.

Adults Who Say Faith Is Their Highest Priority in Life



Source: Barna Group, OmniPoll™1-15OL, N=989, January 2015.

Outlook and Interpretation

Clearly, orthodox Christianity is much less popular in America today than it was just one decade ago. The continued questioning if not rejection of the Bible as a standard of truth has led tens of millions of people to adopt new morals, values, and behaviors. People are confused regarding what to believe and how to integrate their faith into the fabric of their lives, which is a testimony to the different voices and perspectives influencing their worldview.

Can you identify any nation in world history that abandoned biblical beliefs for a more secular worldview, only to quickly realize the error of its ways and return to biblically orthodox beliefs? Such transitions usually occur, if they happen at all, after a prolonged era of pain and decline. The United States is in the early stages of biblical abandonment and the consequent cultural decline. Increasing numbers of people are comfortable with faith as long as it provides the benefits they seek and is neither demanding nor constraining. This shift began tentatively more than four decades ago and has been gathering momentum ever since. Millennials, the generation whose choices will ultimately determine the nature of Christianity and the Church in America for several decades, appear poised to wholeheartedly support the shift away from biblical Christianity and toward new belief patterns.

The biblical warning that best captures the condition in America comes from the book of Judges, which tells us: “In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes” (17:9). Substitute “United States” for “Israel” and you have an accurate reflection of the present situation: a nation with no acknowledged King or deity, a nation in which its people have declared themselves in charge of their lives and destinies. Paul’s warning that the world will enter a time when people will “no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching” (2 Tim. 4:3) but instead will “follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them

whatever their itching ears want to hear” (v. 4) and “reject the truth and chase after myths” (v. 4) is an apt description of America at the start of the twenty-first century.

A fundamental principle of human behavior is that you do what you believe. The country’s present situation suggests that Americans are on a course to engage in an increasing body of unbiblical behaviors without guilt or restraint. Almighty God can cause us to repent instantly should He so desire, but His preference is to give us the consequences of the exercise of our free will. It seems that we have a small window of opportunity to imagine what a twenty-first-century nation beholden to biblical principles might look like and how to foster such a transformation, but with each passing day the chance of successfully doing so seems to shrink.