



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS WITH BRADLEY R.E. WRIGHT

1. Is there one specific topic that led you to write a book about myths that both the Christian and secular media have reported?

For a long time I have heard the statistic that Christians get divorced as often, if not more often than others, and this didn't make sense to me. When my wife and I went through some hard times early in our marriage, our friends and church leaders did so much to help us that I'm keenly aware of the benefits of the church in this area. Several years ago, I looked at the best available data, and sure enough, Christians have significantly lower divorce rates than the religiously unaffiliated, and Christians' divorce rates get lower with increased church attendance. This piqued my interest about what other statistically based misconceptions there are about Christianity in America.

2. Is it true that Evangelical Christianity is on the verge of collapse because so many Christian young people are dissatisfied with religion?

I haven't seen any convincing evidence that Evangelical Christianity is on the verge of collapse; in fact, the percentage of Americans who affiliate with Evangelical churches has remained rather stable for the last 30 years. It is the case that today's young people are less likely to affiliate with Evangelical Christianity than are we older people, but that's the case in every generation, for young adults typically become more religious as they age. This happened with Americans born throughout the twentieth century, and it appears to be happening with today's youth as well.

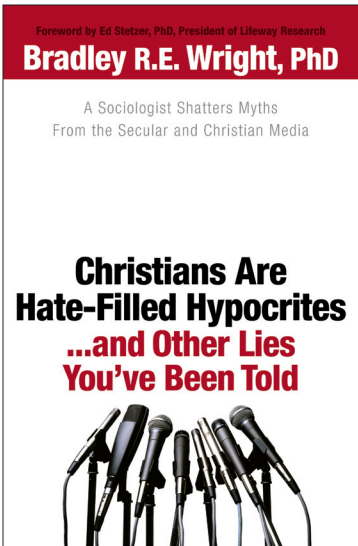
3. You say that Christian parents need not fear sending their children off to a secular college? Isn't it common for Christians to grow weaker in their faith this way?

It's typical for young people to be less involved in religious activities than are older people, and this holds true whether they go to college or not. Among Evangelical young people, however, those who go to college are more likely to believe in God, pray more often, and go to church more often than those who stop at high school. This suggests that going to college does not weaken faith anymore than not going to college. In fact, evidence shows that the pressures of secular colleges often *strengthen* the Christian student's faith because he or she has to stand up to the opposition!

4. Are the majority of Evangelical Christians poor and uneducated like it has been famously reported by *The Washington Post*?

On average, Evangelical Christians are less well educated than other Christians, such as mainline Protestants and Catholics, as well as the religiously unaffiliated. However, there is wide variation among Evangelicals, ranging all the way from high school dropouts to PhDs. While Evangelicals are below the national average, it overstates the case to say that a majority of them are poor and uneducated.

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Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites... and Other Lies You've Been Told
A Sociologist Shatters Myths From the Secular and Christian Media
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5. Is the prayer life of Evangelicals growing or diminishing?

It turns out that evangelicals are praying more often now than they were in past decades. For example, 75% of Evangelicals today pray on a daily basis, compared to only 64% of those in the 1980s. We see this increase among Evangelical youth as well. It's not entirely clear why this is happening, but one possibility is that as society has become more accepting of people not affiliated with a religion, those most likely to leave Evangelical Christianity were those only marginally committed to it in the first place, leaving behind the more devout, more prayerful followers.

6. You say that “racial separation in our churches occurs as the unintended, and often unwanted, by-product of the very things that make churches strong.” Please explain.

Sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith have made the case that churches are successful in part by focusing on a certain type of people. For example, a church might attract wealthy people or people who like rock music or people who enjoy liturgy. While this specialization can help a church grow, it can also exclude people who don't fit a specific profile, and this profile can sometimes inadvertently include race and ethnicity. I don't imagine that many churches seek racial segregation, but their efforts to reach a particular segment of the population might produce it nonetheless.

7. What does the research show in the area of evangelism? Are we actively sharing our faith?

About half of all Evangelicals report regularly sharing their faith with non-believers, and rates of evangelism have held rather steady over the past several decades. This is more than double the rate of mainline Protestants and Catholics, and it's more than most other religions. I'm sure that church leaders would like Evangelicals to do even better, but compared to other groups, we're doing rather well.

8. There has been much concern about how there are many more women in churches than men. Does your research (and history) show this to be a good thing?

Yes, women are more active in Christianity than are men, and while I don't know that I would say that this is a good thing, it has had its advantages. Sociologist Rodney Stark has made the point that early Christianity attracted many women because it treated them with more value and respect than did other religions of the time. Because there were more women than men in the church, the women would marry outside of the faith, and their husbands would frequently convert to Christianity. This dynamic appears to have prompted considerable growth in the early Church. This also makes sense to me personally. In high school I went to a youth group meeting the first time because a friend invited me, but I went the second and subsequent times because I was attracted to one of the girls in the group. Eventually I discovered God (but didn't get the girl).

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9. You note that any negative resulting research about the church is covered far more widely than any research yielding positive results. Why is that? Can you give an example of some research that was widely reported but then shown to be faulty research?

Research that portrays Christianity negatively seems to get a lot more coverage, perhaps because it is seen as more “interesting.” We expect Christians to get good, and so it is newsworthy when they are not. It’s similar to airplanes—thousands of flights land safely every day, but they are not interesting in the way a plane crash is. Similarly, a Christian acting immorally makes news, especially if they are a leader. Among Christians, we have a somewhat different process. We tend to use negative news to sell our books, sermons, and seminars. If we can convince Christians that they are doing poorly in a given area, they might become more willing to listen to what we have to say. Ironically, in service of building up the church, we actually can work to tear it down.

An example of perhaps misguided research regards non-Christians’ perceptions of Christians. Rather than spiraling into negativity, it turns out that these perceptions have gotten more positive in the last decade, and it appears that non-Christians think more positively of Evangelicals than we think of some of them. This doesn’t fit with the “everyone hates us” message that is currently popular.

10. Is it true that two-thirds of the religiously unaffiliated believe in absolute truth? That seems surprising.

While the religiously unaffiliated rarely attend church and participate in other religious activities, many of them have strong spiritual beliefs. About half believe in God and believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and two-thirds believe in life after death. This suggests that most of the religiously unaffiliated are not adamant atheists, and they might be more receptive to various aspects of Christianity than we would have otherwise expected.