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Many Paths to Heaven?

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Are American evangelicals abandoning the exclusivity of the Gospel? A new report out from the [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#) suggests that many evangelical Christians are, at the very least, badly confused about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As Cathy Lynn Grossman of [USA Today](#) reports:

Most American religious believers, including most Christians, say eternal life is not exclusively for those who accept Christ as their savior; a new survey finds. Of the 65% of people who held this open view of heaven's gates, 80% named at least one non-Christian group - Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists or people with no religion at all- who may also be saved, according to a new survey released today by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

This most recent report, released today, clarifies a report issued earlier this year. That earlier report became the cause of some controversy because some researchers questioned the accuracy of the responses, since some of those surveyed may have confused other Christian denominations for other religions.

In releasing this updated report, the Pew Forum isolated the question and made it far more specific. Those who affirmed other ways of salvation were then asked to specify what they meant. As [USA Today](#) reports, the vast majority of those who affirmed other ways of salvation went on to specify "Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists or people with no religion at all" as valid options.

The report indicates that 52% of those belonging to churches and denominations that teach that Jesus is the only way of salvation reject that teaching.

More from [USA Today](#):

Christian believers who named at least one non-Christian faith that could lead to salvation included 34% of white evangelicals, even though evangelical doctrine stresses that salvation is possible only through Jesus.

Higher levels of church attendance made some difference, particularly among white evangelical protestants. But an overall majority (54%) of people who identified with a religion and who said they attend church weekly also said many religions can lead to eternal life. This majority included 37% of white evangelicals, 75% of mainline Protestants and 85% of non-Hispanic white Catholics.

This survey cannot easily be dismissed. The specificity of the responses and the quality of the research sample indicate that we face a serious decline in confidence in the Gospel. When 34% of white evangelicals reject the truth that Jesus is the only Savior, we are witnessing a virtual collapse of evangelical theology.

There is also additional cause for concern. As Cathy Lynn Grossman reports, "Pew's new survey also found that many Christians (29%) say they are saved by their good actions; 30% say salvation is through belief in Jesus, God or a higher power alone, which is the core teaching of evangelical Protestantism; and 10% say salvation is found through a combination of behavior and belief, a view closer to Catholic teachings."



I was interviewed for the *USA Today* story and expressed my concern:

Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, calls the findings “a theological crisis for American evangelicals. They represent at best a misunderstanding of the Gospel and at worst a repudiation of the Gospel.”

And:

Overall, the new findings are “an indictment of evangelicalism and evangelical preaching,” said Mohler. “The clear Biblical teaching is that Jesus Christ proclaimed himself to be the only way to salvation.”

Mohler sees behind the statistics the impact of pluralism and secularism in U.S. society and the challenge of facing family and friends with “an uncomfortable truth.”

“We are in an age when we want to tell everyone they are doing just fine. It’s extremely uncomfortable to turn to someone and say, ‘You will go to hell unless you come to a saving knowledge of Jesus,’” Mohler says.

Over twenty years ago, Professor James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia sounded a similar alarm in *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. In that work, Hunter warned that the rising generation of younger evangelicals — then mostly college age — were increasingly uncomfortable with the claim that Jesus is the only Savior and that belief in Christ is necessary in order for a person to go to heaven. Now, those students are old enough to be parents and their influence is becoming more evident year by year. One can almost draw a straight line between Hunter’s analysis of 1987 and the Pew report released today.

As I told *USA Today*, this report reveals that a good number of those who attend evangelical churches either misunderstand or repudiate the Gospel. The New Testament reveals not only that Jesus claimed to be the only way to the Father [see John 14:6] but also that the Gospel of Christ is the only message that saves [see Romans 10]. This claim has been central to evangelical conviction — at least until now.

I am confident that much of this confusion can be traced to the superficiality that marks far too many evangelical pulpits. The disappearance of doctrinal understanding and evangelical demonstration can be traced directly to the decline in expository preaching and doctrinal instruction. A loss of evangelistic and missionary commitment can be fully expected as a direct result of this confusion or repudiation of the Gospel.

This new survey should be received with great concern. Will it awaken today’s generation of evangelicals to the catastrophe before our eyes?

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