

God's People Want to Know

**Results of National Surveys among
Spiritually Active Christian Conservatives and
Theologically-Conservative Protestant Pastors
Regarding the Need for Churches to Teach
Congregants What the Bible Says Concerning
Today's Social and Political Issues**

**Research Conducted by American Culture & Faith Institute
(Dr. George Barna, Executive Director)
A division of United in Purpose – Education
Woodside, California**

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Introduction

To evaluate the potential role of the Christian Church in the 2016 election, a national survey among spiritually active Christians who are politically conservative or moderate was conducted during July and August of 2015. The research was conducted by the American Culture & Faith Institute, a division of United in Purpose – Education, a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization located in northern California. The research was directed by George Barna.

The objective of the research was to determine what role Christian churches have played in recent elections, what issues pastors are most likely to consider important in the 2016 election, and what kind of issue-related teaching Christians want from their churches during the 2016 election cycle. The target group was adults active in their Christian faith and who are engaged in the political process from an ideologically conservative or moderate perspective. The churches studied were Protestant congregations whose pastors are theologically conservative.

The first phase of the study was a qualitative survey among 150 respondents, designed to identify the topics of potential interest among the target group. The next phase was a quantitative survey conducted among 2,868 respondents, following up on the insights gleaned from the qualitative phase. (Conservatives represented 92% of the total respondents.) Based on the qualitative research, the quantitative survey examined people's desire to receive biblical teaching related to each of the 22 social and political issues that were mentioned most frequently in the qualitative study as being of special interest. In addition, an unrelated online survey was conducted among a national sample of 843 theologically conservative Protestant pastors that identified their church's recent engagement in the political process and their assessment of the issues that will be involved in the 2016 election.

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Synopsis

Spiritually active Christians who hold politically conservative views believe that churches should be more involved in the political process. In particular, they are eager for their pastors to teach them what the Bible says about today's social and political issues. While most conservative churches have provided some biblical teaching on current issues to congregants, it clearly has not satisfied the appetite of those adults. In fact, a majority of these church-goers said it is extremely or very important for their church to teach them biblical truths related to each of the 22 different issues studied in this research!

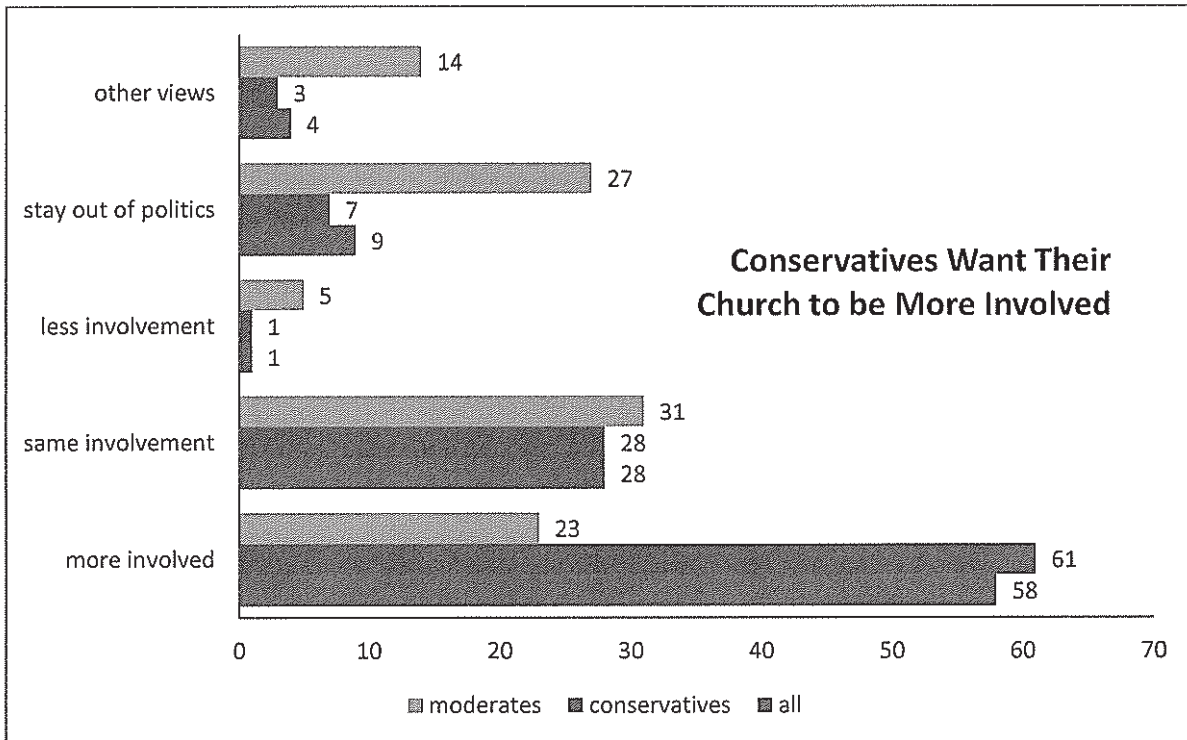
However, the survey of pastors revealed that most conservative pastors addressed one or two of these kinds of topics during the mid-term election season – and that those were usually the theologically safest and most predictable topics (e.g., abortion and same-sex marriage). Pastors agreed that most of the issues tested were critical or very important to America; yet, they had chosen not to address what the Bible teaches about those issues, despite congregations eager to receive such wisdom.

Executive Summary

Church Involvement in Elections, According to Congregants

Among the national sample of spiritually active Christian conservatives and moderates, only one in ten people (10%) said their church has been very involved in the election process in the last two voting cycles (2012, 2014). Four out of ten said their church was somewhat involved. The remaining one-half said their church was not involved.

According to congregants, just one out of every five spiritually active Christian conservatives and moderates (22%) said their church has provided a lot of information about what the Bible teaches related to current issues during recent election cycles. About one-third (36%) said their church has provided some of that kind of information, while the rest said their church provided little or none of that type of insight. Conservatives were twice as likely as moderates (23% versus 10%, respectively) to indicate their church provided a lot of biblical insight on the issues involved in recent elections.

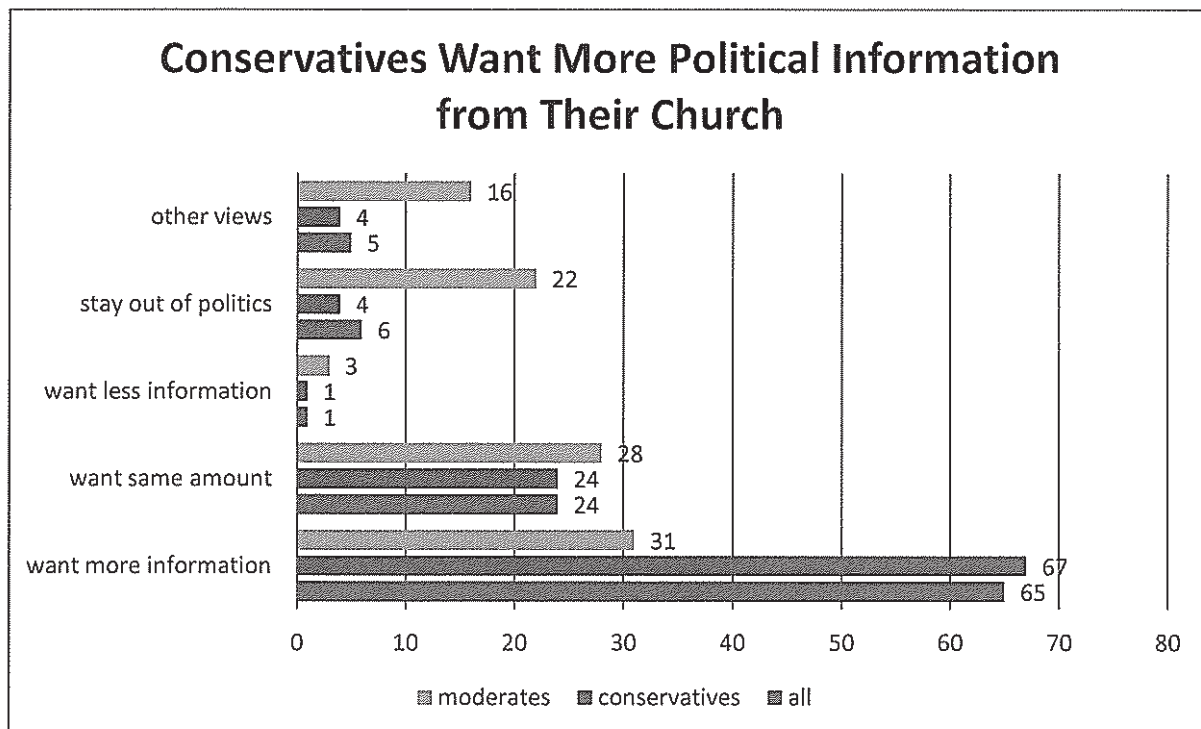


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Congregants' Desired Church Involvement

Christian conservatives indicated they want their church to get in the game: six out of ten (58%) said they want their church to be more involved in the election process. Among the Christian conservatives, 61% want greater involvement; among the politically moderate Christians only one-quarter (23%) want heightened church engagement.

Two out of three respondents (65%) said they want more information from their church about what the Bible teaches in relation to current social and political issues. Christian conservatives were twice as likely as Christian moderates to desire more information (67% vs. 31%). Christian moderates, in contrast, were five times more likely to say that churches should not be involved in politics at all (22% versus, 4%, respectively). Overall, almost none of the respondents (1%) said they want less information than they have received in the past about current social and political issues.



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Issues of Interest to Conservative Voters

A majority of the survey respondents said it is “extremely important” for their pastor to preach or teach the congregation about the following issues:

- Abortion 71%
- Religious persecution 61%
- Sexual identity 56%
- Israel 54%
- Poverty 54%
- Cultural restoration 53%

When exploring all 22 issues, and combining those who said it is either “extremely important” or “very important” for their pastor to teach them what the Bible says about each of those issues, the data emerged in three echelons of felt need.

The greatest need for information related to the following six issues, each of which was assigned high importance by at least 80% of the respondents:

1. **Abortion**: beginning of life, right to life, contraception, adoption, unwed mothers 91%
2. **Religious persecution/liberty**: personal duty, government duty, church response, global conditions 86%
3. **Poverty**: personal duty, government role, church role, homelessness, hunger, dependency 85%
4. **Cultural restoration**: appropriate morals, law and order, defensible values and norms, self-government 83%
5. **Sexual identity**: same-sex marriage, transgenderism, marriage, LGBT 82%
6. **Israel**: its role in the world, Christian responsibility to Israel, US foreign policy toward Israel and its enemies 80%

The middle tier of issues in terms of congregant interest was considered to be extremely or very important by less than 80% but at least 70%. These eight issues included:

1. **Christian heritage**: role of Christian faith in American history, church role in US development, modern-day relevance 79%
2. **Role of government**: biblical view, church-state relationship, personal responsibility, limitations 76%

3. **Bioethics:** cloning, euthanasia, genetic engineering, cryogenics, organ donation, surrogacy 76%
4. **Self-governance:** biblical support, personal conduct, impact on freedom, national sovereignty 75%
5. **Church in politics/government:** separation of church and state, legal boundaries, church resistance to government 73%
6. **Islam:** core beliefs, response to Islamic aggression, threat to US peace and domestic stability 72%
7. **Media:** influence on public, content responsibility, truth, moral standards, choices for exposure, resistance 70%
8. **Senior citizens:** end of life issues; family responsibilities to the elderly; government programs for the aged 70%

The eight issues deemed least interesting to congregants are listed below. They ranged from 69% who labeled the issue to be either extremely or very important to receive biblical teaching about down to 51%.

1. **Patriotism:** national support, Christian duty, compassionate conservatism, civic duty 69%
2. **War:** justification, personal duty, Church duty, pursuing peace 68%
3. **Government authority:** Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, three branches, church response 68%
4. **Public school education:** allowing Bible reading and prayer; teaching religious content; alternative schools 68%
5. **Political participation:** voting, advocacy, volunteering, donating, running for public office 67%
6. **Rule of law:** constitutional basis, cultural impact, personal obligations, lawlessness 65%

7. **Civil disobedience**: justification, biblical examples, limits to use 64%
8. **Government accountability**: size of government, spending habits, limits to power, public accountability 51%

An alternative examination of the 22 issues is provided in the data table below, which includes the responses *only of conservatives*, and shows the full range of their responses using the five-point Likert scale, ranging from “extremely important” and “very important” to the decidedly lower levels of interest such as “somewhat important,” “not too important,” and “not at all important.”

Issue	How Important It Is for the Congregation to Receive Biblical Teaching on this Specific Issue:				
	Extremely	Very	Somewhat	Not Too	Not at All
Abortion	74%	20%	4%	1%	1%
Religious persecution/liberty	64	26	8	2	2
Sexual identity	59	27	8	3	3
Cultural restoration	56	30	11	3	1
Poverty	55	31	11	2	2
Israel	56	26	11	5	2
Christian heritage	49	33	12	3	2
Role of government	46	33	16	4	2
Bioethics	51	27	15	4	2
Self-governance	44	34	15	5	2
Church in politics/government	43	33	17	4	3
Islam	45	29	16	6	4
Media	40	32	18	6	4
Senior citizens	36	36	20	5	3
Patriotism	40	31	21	5	2
Public school education	40	32	19	6	4
Government authority	42	29	19	7	3
Political participation	38	32	20	6	4
War	33	36	25	5	2
Rule of law	35	32	21	8	5
Civil disobedience	31	35	24	7	4
Government accountability	25	27	26	13	9

It is helpful to note that there are huge differences in the opinions of conservative Christians and moderate Christians on the importance of receiving biblical teaching on these matters from their church. Comparing their answers on the dozen most important issues to conservatives, realize that the average gap between the two segments is 30.2 percentage points, with the conservatives indicating a higher level of interest on each of these twelve subjects. (In fact, conservatives were more interested in receiving biblical teaching on each subject tested by a minimum gap of 13 percentage points.)

Issue	How Important for the Congregation to Get Biblical Teaching on this Issue:				% -point Difference
	Conservatives		Moderates		
	Extrem	Extr+Very	Extrem	Extr+Very	
Abortion	74%	94%	36%	58%	36 points
Religious persecution/liberty	64	90	36	59	31
Sexual identity	59	86	28	47	39
Cultural restoration	56	86	27	56	30
Poverty	55	86	47	73	13
Israel	56	82	28	53	29
Christian heritage	49	82	25	49	33
Role of government	46	79	24	49	30
Bioethics	51	78	25	47	31
Self-governance	44	78	24	49	29
Church in politics/government	43	76	22	43	33
Islam	45	74	26	46	28

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Additional Insights:

Only one of the 22 issues (government accountability) was deemed to be extremely or very important to be addressed from the pulpit by only half of the respondents – the other 21 issues were considered important to teach on by at least 64%. The implication is that a substantial majority of conservative Christians are eager to hear their pastors teach what the Bible has to say on today’s leading social and political issues.

The responses of men and women were statistically identical in terms of interest for 18 of the 22 issues. Regarding those exceptions, none revealed more than six percentage points of difference between men and women, and in each case women were more interested in the topic than were men. Specifically, women were slightly more interested in learning the biblical perspective regarding bioethics, poverty, senior citizens, and civil disobedience.

Differences in levels of interest based upon respondent age were also minimal. Those worth noting are:

- Those under 50 were the age group least interested in gaining a biblical perspective on government authority, patriotism, Israel, and government accountability. In fact, that age group was the least interested in receiving a biblical view on any issue.
- Those who were 65 or older were the most likely to express interest in teaching on the beliefs and threat of Islam, our Christian heritage, and on the rule of law. They were the age group least interested in hearing about poverty.

Personal ideology greatly affected interest levels. Conservatives were more interested in receiving biblical teaching on every one of the 22 issues tested than were moderates! The average gap in interest between the two groups was huge: 28 percentage points.

The gap in interest levels between Protestant and Catholic respondents was also substantial. Protestants were more interested than Catholics in receiving biblical teaching related to 16 of the 22 issues tested; Catholics were more interested than Protestants in relation to one issue (bioethics). There were eight issues for which the number of Protestants interested in such teaching exceeded the percentage of interested Catholics by at least 15 percentage points: rule of law, education, civil disobedience, sexual identity, Israel, government accountability, Islam, and self-governance.

One of the most significant observations may be the distinction between the issues that the media and candidates emphasize in comparison to the issues that conservative Christians say they want to know more about. The 22 issues included in the survey of conservatives were based on the issues a national sample of 150 of them listed without suggestions. Consequently, notice the issues that did not make the list because they were not matters that are top-of-mind issues to conservative Christians:

- Healthcare
- Foreign policy
- Jobs and unemployment
- Immigration reform
- Taxes
- Gun rights
- Military spending
- Campaign finance reform

Interestingly, when you ask Christians directly about these issues, the issues are typically regarded as highly important, but they simply do not grab the hearts of conservative Christians. For instance another recent national survey we conducted among spiritually active Christians who are conservative revealed that 93% claimed healthcare is an extremely or very important issue; 90% similarly listed both tax policy and immigration reform; and 82% categorized jobs and unemployment in that way.

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Church Engagement, According to Pastors

During the six months prior to the 2014 mid-term election in November, there were only two actions which at least half of the nation's theologically conservative Protestant pastors participated: strongly encouraging congregants to vote (81% did so) and preaching or teaching about one of the issues raised during the campaign season (75%).

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| 1. strongly encourage congregants to vote | 81% |
| 2. distribute voter guides to congregation | 39% |
| 3. encourage congregants to get involved | 26% |
| 4. process to get people to the polls | 21% |
| 5. sponsor a voter registration drive | 16% |
| 6. post election related information on website | 5% |
| 7. invite candidates to speak | 4% |

It is unfortunate that one out of every five conservative pastors did not even encourage their congregants to vote in November. It is similarly alarming that one-quarter of conservative pastors did not teach their congregants biblical principles about important social and political issues during the six months preceding the election.

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Political Issues and Preaching Topics

The survey asked theologically conservative pastors which, if any, of eight issues they had preached about during the six months before the mid-term election. A majority of these pastors claimed to have preached on just two of those issues: same-sex marriage (67%) and abortion (59%).

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| 1. Same-sex marriage..... | 67% |
| 2. Abortion..... | 59% |
| 3. US-Israel relations..... | 33% |
| 4. Gun rights..... | 13% |
| 5. Common Core..... | 12% |
| 6. Individual privacy..... | 10% |
| 7. Tax policies and financial reform.. | 9% |
| 8. Immigration policy..... | 8% |

Overall, less than one out of every ten pastors (6%) indicated that they had addressed six or more of the eight topics studied. At the other end of the continuum, one-quarter of conservative pastors (25%) did not address any of the eight issues tested. About one-quarter of the pastors (28%) taught on three, four, or five of those subjects. A plurality (41%) spoke from the pulpit about one or two of those issues – most commonly, same-sex marriage and abortion.

Interestingly, another national survey we recently conducted among conservative Christians found that among those who typically attend church every week, far fewer of the congregants recalled their pastors addressing these issues:

	Church topics preached/taught about according to:	
	<u>Pastors</u>	<u>Congregants</u>
Same-sex marriage.....	67%	46%
Abortion.....	59%	50%
US-Israel relations.....	33%	24%
Tax policies and financial reform..	9%	7%
Immigration policy.....	8%	10%

There are, of course, a variety of reasons why these numbers might be so different: pastors overstating the number of topics they had preached on, congregants having been absent when those topics were addressed, the sermons not being memorable to congregants, pastors briefly touching upon a topic in the midst of a teaching that was primarily about another topic, etc. But the data are what they are: the reality is probably somewhere in between the answers derived from pastors and those from congregants. The discrepancy certainly does not change the overall conclusion: most theologically-conservative Protestant pastors do not address more than one or two sociopolitical topics from the pulpit during an election season, much less during the times in-between – and the topics they address are often “safe” and predictable.

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Priority Issues to Conservative Pastors

When we asked pastors to prioritize their sense of the importance of 20 current issues, we found that the issues deemed “critical” to the largest proportions were religious freedom/persecution (79%), national debt (67%), abortion policy (62%), and national security/terrorism (62%).

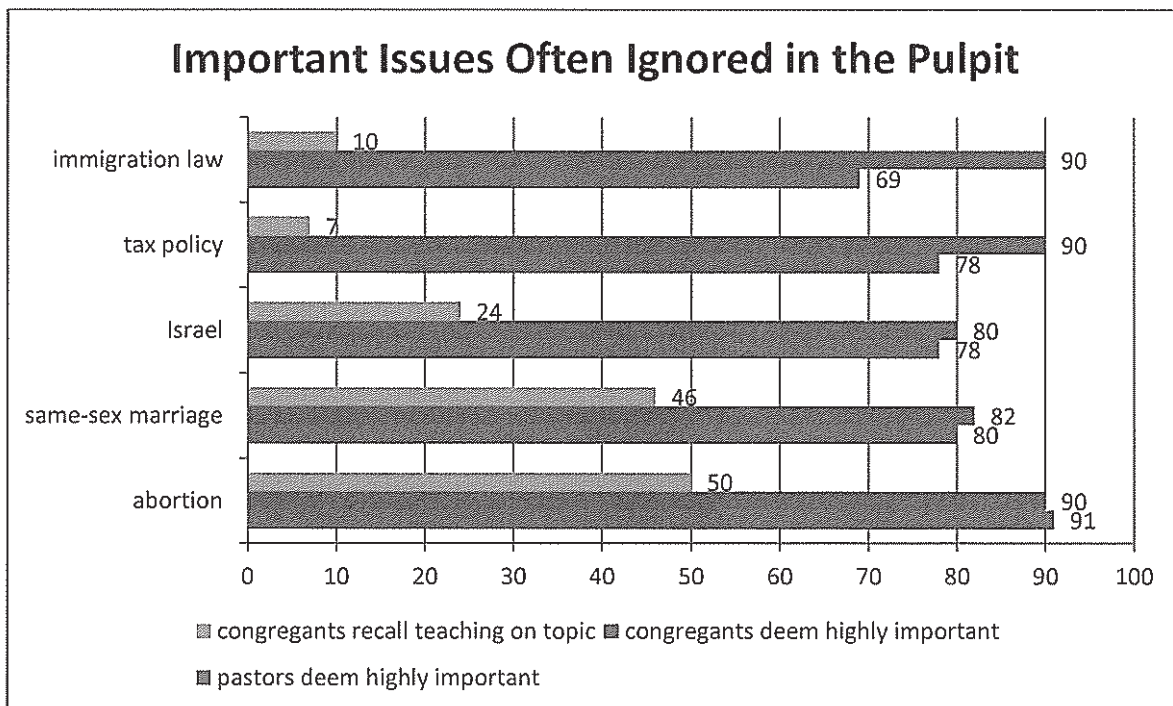
In total, 18 of the 20 issues were deemed to be either critically important or very important to conservative pastors. And yet, there was no issue for which the percentage of pastors who preached or taught about that issue was anywhere close to the percentage that deemed the issue to be vitally important.

Notice that when we compare the importance attached to issues by conservative pastors and conservative congregants, the views of the two groups are very similar on most issues. The issues on which there are significant differences of opinion show that congregants consider the issues to be more important. Those subjects include immigration reform (a 21 percentage point gap), healthcare (16-point gap), and tax policy (12-point gap). While neither group deems environmental policy to be a high importance, congregants were 17 points more likely to do so than were pastors.

How important this issue is according to:

Issues of importance	Theol. Conserv. Pastors		Congregants		Gap
	Critical	Critical plus Very Important	Extremely plus very important		
1. Religious freedom/persecution.....	79%	93%	86%		7 points
2. National debt.....	67%	93%	94%		1
3. Abortion policy.....	62%	91%	91%		0
4. National security/terrorism.....	62%	90%	94%		4
5. Same-sex marriage.....	56%	80%	82%		2
6. Relationship with Israel.....	49%	78%	80%		2
7. Healthcare policy.....	44%	77%	93%		16
8. Foreign policy.....	39%	83%	n/a		
9. Jobs/unemployment.....	38%	81%	82%		1
10. Immigration reform.....	34%	69%	90%		21
11. Tax policy.....	33%	78%	90%		12
12. Privacy rights.....	32%	75%	n/a		
13. Economic growth.....	30%	77%	n/a		
14. Gun rights.....	29%	66%	n/a		
15. Military spending.....	28%	75%	n/a		
16. School choice.....	25%	65%	n/a		
17. Common Core.....	23%	58%	n/a		
18. Keystone pipeline.....	22%	61%	n/a		
19. Campaign finance reform.....	13%	42%	n/a		
20. Environmental policy.....	8%	25%	42%		

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It might be noted that this happened during a period in which only 12% of conservative pastors believed that the relationship between the Church, families, and the government is very or somewhat healthy. Nine out of ten pastors described that relationship as either not too or not at all healthy.

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Implications for Spiritually Active Christian Conservatives

- Pastors are often reluctant to address social or political issues. The best ways to encourage them to do so include letting them know that you are interested in these topics and would consider them appropriate; that you are not interested in his/her personal opinions as much as you are in learning what the Bible teaches on those topics; and that you have appreciated the times when he/she taught on other current issues from a biblical perspective, and hope to experience more of that kind of teaching in relation to a broader range of issues.
- If you are able to identify other congregants who share your interest in experiencing such teaching – and the data indicate it should not be difficult to find many such people, if you are in a church led by a theologically-conservative pastor – then develop a way for all of you to communicate your shared interest to the pastor.
- You might provide your pastor with publically available information – such as published articles, links to television broadcasts or websites – that convey the research showing the enormous numbers of committed churchgoers who are conservative that want their church to be more politically active. Preaching about what the Bible says in relation to current issues of importance – beyond abortion and same-sex marriage – would be a significant contribution to the body of Christ being relevant to American culture.
- Discuss with your pastor your desire to influence our culture in all ways possible – including through politics and government. In order to be as intelligent, articulate, and effective as possible in that process, however, you would be grateful for gleaning wisdom from the pastor’s teaching regarding what the Bible says on such issues.
- You could offer to do a survey of people attending your church’s small groups or some other regular gathering of congregants, or perhaps even use a free survey service like Survey Monkey to conduct a survey among the church’s attenders. Using the same survey as developed by the American Culture & Faith Institute, as reported on in this report, you could then get a direct measure of what proportion of the people in your church are interested in receiving biblical perspectives from the pulpit on today’s issues, and identify which issues are of greatest interest to your congregation.

- One of the most compelling insights from past election research is that Christian conservatives generally do not engage other people in conversation about public issues because they feel ill-versed in those subjects. Inform your pastor that for the Church to be salt and light in a dark and hurting world, you and others in the body need to be biblically-informed about cultural issues of importance.

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Implications for Theologically-Conservative Pastors

- There is no need to be apologetic when preaching about what the Bible teaches in relation to current issues. As the survey data highlight, most conservative Christians who are spiritually active crave this information. For them to be good citizens and wise voters – that is, able to think and vote “Christianly” on these topics and about the candidates who will impact laws on these matters – pastors can provide great assistance by guiding their thinking on such subjects.
- Historically, the Christian Church has been one of the most politically active and influential institutions in the country. Not only does the Constitution anticipate and encourage such engagement, but the nation has been demonstrably worse off ever since pastors chose to disconnect faith from politics and governance. America urgently needs cultural direction from those whom God has placed in positions of spiritual leadership. One way of providing such leadership is by shaping the thinking of the nation’s Christians by teaching them foundational biblical principles related to the pressing social and political issues of the day. That teaching is likely to pay major dividends for America by influencing their behavior, as well, since research has proven that “we do what we believe.” If people’s worldview is on target – which such teaching is likely to impact – then their actions will follow.
- A majority of Christians believe it is “extremely important” for their pastor to teach them how God’s Word relates to contemporary issues. Of the 22 issues studied in this research, a majority of active, conservative Christians expressed the belief that it is extremely or very important to teach them how to think biblically about these issues. To refuse to do so would be to undermine the strength of the body of Christ and would invite the forces of darkness to continue to mislead or distract God’s people. Pastors have more than an opportunity to teach on these matters; they have a responsibility and calling to do so.
- Research shows that most pastors and preachers enjoy studying the Word of God in preparation for time in the pulpit. However, it is likely that teaching on many of these issues will demand additional study time by pastors, since these are topics on which most pastors have never been trained. This may represent a new challenge for conservative teachers, but will also provide an opportunity for pastors to grow alongside their congregation in regard to these important but often neglected topics.

- Studies by Barna Group and others have shown that one of the primary reasons that people are dropping out of churches in record numbers is because they believe it to be irrelevant to life these days. By addressing the topics that people care and wonder about, from a biblical vantage point, will not only make the church more relevant to people's lives, but also enable congregants to perceive the Bible in a new light. Regular attenders who are exposed to church teaching on these subjects will also be better able to converse with their unchurched friends in a more confident and intelligent manner, and to reflect on the information they receive from the media with greater insight and wisdom.
- Because these topics are most likely to be deemed controversial by people who uncomfortable discussing these issues, it is likely that pastors who teach about these matters will experience some pushback from congregants. However, the data clearly indicate that such pushback is most likely to come from people who are politically – and probably theologically – moderate in their views. In other words, these are individuals who are less likely than conservatives to take the scriptures at face value and less likely to possess a biblical worldview. As a result, addressing these issues may serve as an impetus to developing a more biblically-centered worldview among many people in the congregation. At the very least, pastors have an opportunity to recognize that criticism for addressing such topics may come from people who are theologically incompatible with what the church stands for, thus providing an entirely different interpretation to their criticism.

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About United in Purpose

United in Purpose

United in Purpose (a 501[c]4 organization) and United in Purpose – Education (a 501[c]3 entity) share a critical mission: to provide information and resources intended to help people understand and embrace a biblical worldview, and to encourage them to live accordingly. UiP endeavors to accomplish that end by working with, uniting and equipping like-minded conservative organizations to bring biblical values to the forefront in homes, schools, churches, businesses, the media, and the public arena. What UiP brings to the table in that effort is the provision of technology, research, and marketing strategies geared to facilitating cultural change in America based upon Judeo-Christian principles. UiP believes that when Americans live in concert with God’s principles, as described in the Bible, American culture and individual lives will be transformed for the better. On the political continuum, UiP supports conservative principles but is non-partisan.

American Culture & Faith Institute

ACFI is the public opinion research arm of United in Purpose – Education. Under the guidance of researcher George Barna, ACFI conducts surveys throughout the year, interviewing theologically conservative church leaders and politically conservative adults. The research is used to assist UiP’s partner organizations in understanding cultural trends and developing strategies for cultural influence. ACFI surveys are conducted by telephone and online.

Principal Researcher: George Barna

George Barna is the founder of Barna Group, the nation’s best-known research firm focused on faith-based research. Barna was previously a political campaign manager and conducted public opinion research for political campaigns and for government agencies. Since selling the Barna Group he has served as Executive Director of American Culture & Faith Institute, the research division of United in Purpose – Education, focusing on public policy issues, voting behavior, worldview, and cultural influence. He is the author of more than 50 books and speaks about his research findings regularly at events around the world.

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