

Many beliefs, many paths to heaven?

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY

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 means 52% of Christians do not agree with the doctrines many religions teach, particularly conservative denominations.

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."

This survey on salvation is a follow-up to a highly controversial finding in Pew's Religious Landscape survey, released earlier this year. It detailed the religious demographics, beliefs and behavior of 35,000 U.S. adults surveyed in 2007.

Pastors, theologians and Christian commentators complained that the Landscape Survey question on access to eternal life — which 70% said was open to many faiths — was too vague. "Did people mean only other religions that are similar to their own, like Baptists grudgingly admitting Lutherans might go to heaven?" said Pew research fellow Greg Smith.

So Pew revisited the topic in a new survey of 2,905 adults, conducted July 31-Aug. 10, with more specific questions. Smith says the new findings reinforce the original finding that "Americans really are thinking quite broadly."

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.

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.

The number of those who said actions determine who attains heaven, was lowest (11%) for white evangelicals, highest for white Catholics (47%).

The number of people saying theirs is the only faith that can lead to eternal life increased slightly, from 24% to 29%, between 2007 and 2008. The biggest increase was among white evangelical Protestants — up from 37% to 49%.

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.