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## Bad News about the Good News

### The Construction of the Christian-Failure Narrative

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#### Abstract

Many American Christians perceive that their faith is derided in public discourse. This negative portrayal is usually attributed to the secular media, which is assumed by many Christians to be liberal and biased against Christianity. This article develops an alternative mechanism for the production and distribution of bad news about Christianity – from the leaders of Christianity themselves. Church leaders may deploy negative portrayals of the church, as “failing,” in “crisis,” or otherwise not living up to Christian standards, in order to motivate their followers. We term this strategic negative portray the “Christian-failure narrative.” We develop this concept by examining in-depth one particular Christian failure narrative – the belief that Christians have inordinately high divorce rates. We compare popular perceptions of Christians’ divorce rates versus actual rates found in sociological data.

#### Introduction

[1] In this article, we explore how Christians – especially Evangelical Christians – present themselves publically. We find that contrary to expectation, many of public pronouncements that Christians make about themselves are negative, frequently describing the Christian church as failing and in need of reform. We explain this negative talk in terms the culture-of-fear hypothesis (Glassner; Best) which argues that stories which create fear and unrest among an audience are more likely to become popular in the media and are often strategically deployed in order to create some change in the audience; fear is a primary motivator. Applied to Christianity, Christian leaders and commentators find it useful to cast

the church in a negative light. The emphasis on bad news about Christianity, regardless of its accuracy, is a powerful way of attracting listeners, readers, and financial support. We term this rhetorical strategy as the “Christian-failure narrative.”

[2] This narrative explains a paradox. Christians often perceive the media as biased against them, but actual studies of media coverage find mixed results. Sometimes researchers find evidence of a bias, but other times not. We reconcile these two generalizations by pointing to Christian leaders’ selective use of the media to portray Christianity negatively. As a result, regardless of the media’s actual coverage of religion, Christians are overwhelmingly exposed, from their leaders and the media, to negative portrayals of their faith.

### **Religion and the Media**

[3] Many Americans, especially Christians, assume that the media is biased against their religious faith (Hoover: 99; Hill, Hickman and McLendon). This assumed bias has been railed against by sectarian commentators. For example, Cal Thomas, a conservative Christian commentator, wrote that the press views conservative religions as a threat to its liberal agenda, and so it treats them negatively (Hoover: 62). The Reverend Jerry Falwell lamented that columnists and newspaper reporters frequently disparage those trying to call America back to her moral and spiritual roots (Silk: 37). Yale law professor Stephen Carter argued that society as a whole, as exemplified by the news media, discounts religion as a “hobby” – acceptable as part of one’s private experience but inappropriate to discuss in the public arena. In fact, some websites and organizations exist solely to identify and highlight the media’s bias against Christianity. For example, GetReligion.org, a prominent website that monitors the media’s coverage of religion, has as its motto “The press . . . just doesn’t get religion.”

[4] Christian Americans’ concerns about the media are documented in survey data. A survey by the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center asked clergy members if they thought that “most religion coverage today is biased against ministers and organized religion.” This statement was agreed with, either somewhat or strongly, by 58% of mainline Protestant clergy, 70% of Catholic priests, and a full 91% of conservative Protestant ministers (Dart: 147). Likewise, a survey of newsreaders found that readers were less satisfied with the news’ coverage of religion than any other main area of news (reported by Hoover: 121). More recently, a 2009 study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life asked Americans if they thought the news media was friendly, unfriendly or neutral toward religion. Nationwide, 35% of Americans viewed the media as unfriendly to religion (with 42% reporting neutral and 14% friendly). Among white Evangelicals, however, the percentage reporting “unfriendly” leapt to 52% and among respondents who attended church regularly, regardless of religious tradition, it was 46%. Generally speaking, conservative Christians, such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals, are the most likely to view the media as negatively targeting their faith (Hoover: 99).

[5] While many American Christians view the media as biased against them, research has come to a less definitive conclusion. Judith Buddenbaum criticized the media’s coverage of religion as insufficient, shallow, and sometimes biased. In contrast, Hill and colleagues found that the media described mainstream religious groups in neutral or favorable terms, but they did use consistently pejorative language in describing new religious movements. A 2007

study by the group Media Matters suggested that the media might actually favor conservative religions – at least in terms of attention given. Media Matters found that newspapers and television news quote conservative religious leaders 2.8 times more often than they do progressive religious leaders. Vinson and Giebert compared coverage of Evangelical Christians in two local newspapers, both in regions with a high Evangelical population, and a national newspaper. They found that while the national newspaper promoted negative stereotypes about Evangelicals, the local papers' coverage had a significant portion of positive stories.

[6] Scholars have identified two possible sources of media bias against religion. The first regards journalists themselves – what they believe and what they value. Generally speaking, members of the media are less religious than the population as a whole (Hoover). As a result, they may treat the subject differently because they do not understand it well and are worried about misinterpreting it (Dart: 150), or because they lack empathy (Wright 1997: 102). It may also be the case that journalists with strong religious beliefs may be cautious about portraying religious views sympathetically (Schmalzbauer: 166).

[7] The second reason regards the nature of the media itself – namely, that the media creates news rather than objectively or neutrally reporting it (Hart, Turner, and Knupp). As such, the media is drawn toward presenting certain types of stories. Whether covering sports, show business, politics, or religion, the media emphasizes what is exciting or unexpected, and this often entails stories of conflict or bad news (Dart: 146). As such, religious controversy makes “good copy” (Hoover: 19), and common themes of religious stories include hypocrisy, false prophesy, and a decline in religiosity (Dart: 145). This emphasis on bad news about religion is not just a supply-side phenomenon, for media consumers demand a steady supply of bad news. Dart writes that “good news may be interpreted as uneventful,” and so people vote for negative, sensational news with their remote controls and subscriptions. In short, bad news about religion sells (Hoover: 111).

### **The Narrative of Christian Failure**

[8] Many leaders of American Christianity – whether pastors, authors, commentators, or others – have a particular, negative way of talking about their religion. We term it the “Christian-failure narrative.” It is a rhetorical device used to capture the attention of the listener, reader, or viewer by emphasizing the difficulties and troubles faced by the faith.

[9] The Christian failure narrative is structured in three parts: statements of failure, crisis, and then solution. The first part is a claim that in some way Christians have fallen short. The specific failure varies by the interests and values of the person presenting it. Commonly alleged failures include Christians acting immorally, not evangelizing, not loving their neighbors, not fighting for justice, not praying, not giving, or simply not living out their beliefs.

[10] Next, generalizing from these problems, the claim is made that the Christian Church is in crisis. The exact nature of this crisis, again, varies by presenter, but common themes include the Church losing its influence in the world, not carrying out its mission, diminishing in size, and – especially – losing its young people. For example, well-known Christian apologist Josh McDowell, in light of statistics about young people leaving the church, has

asked if this will be the “last Christian generation” in America (McDowell and Bellis). Likewise, journalist Christine Wicker summarizes the work of Christian pollster George Barna as indicating that “the Evangelical Church as we know it is beginning to die” (Wicker: xiii).” Also, the Christian magazine *Outreach* asserts that the “the picture is bleak” because “94% of our churches are losing ground in the communities they serve” (Barnes).

[11] Finally, the narrative usually concludes with a proposed solution. This solution offers a way for the Church to right its ways. It instructs Christians in what to do, think or believe in order to reverse their failure. This solution, it is claimed, will avert the potential crisis, and the first two parts of the Christian-failure narrative are meant to focus interest and appreciation on the solution.

[12] While the message of Christian-failure can be used throughout Christianity, we speculate that it operates most frequently and effectively among Evangelicals and other conservative Christians. The salvation message of this religious tradition is based, in part, on fear, i.e., the possibility of going to hell motivates the need for a faithful life. As such, Evangelicals might naturally gravitate toward fear-messages about other aspects of the church as well.

### Constructing the Christian-Failure Narrative

[13] The Christian-failure narrative is constructed by two types of actors – those who create information about American Christianity and those who select and disseminate it. We find that methodologically rigorous studies conducted by social scientists are typically not utilized by Christian leaders themselves or the media. This may be due to how the information is disseminated, access to academic journals, or because such studies do not provide data that supports Christian failure narratives.

[14] Instead, Christian commentators appear most often to draw upon data collected by Christian survey organizations. The best known of these is the Barna Group (barna.org), which, since 1984, has been “conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors” of Christians. The Barna Group regularly conducts nationwide telephone surveys on issues ranging from how Christians respond to the Harry Potter books to broad religious trends. The Barna Group supports itself from the sale of its reports and other services, and often emphasizes negative or otherwise sobering aspects of Christianity. For example, reports from recent years include: “Americans stay spiritually active, but biblical views wane,” “The concept of holiness baffles most Americans,” “Fewer than 1 in 10 teenagers believe that music piracy is wrong,” “Only half of Protestant pastors have a biblical worldview,” “Tithing down 62% last year,” and “Surprisingly few adults outside of Christianity have positive views of Christians.”

[15] In addition to reports about American Christianity, the Barna Group also produces books based on their findings, and these books sometimes follow the pattern of the Christian-failure narrative. For example, David Kinnaman, current head of the Barna Group, and Gabriel Lyons – two emerging Evangelical leaders – took up the theme of Christian failure in the book *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*. They offer a wide-ranging critique of Evangelicals, claiming that non-Christians view Evangelicals as too evangelistic, sheltered, anti-gay, judgmental, and most of

all, hypocritical. Kinnaman and Lyon suggest that not only do non-Christians have a negative perception of Evangelicals, but this perception is worsening over time, and it is most negative among young people. These negative perceptions of Evangelicals threaten both the mission and, ultimately, the very existence of Evangelical Christianity in America. In keeping with the Christian-failure narrative, Kinnaman and Lyons offer a solution to dispel the “unChristian perception of our faith.” They call for Christians to act more like Jesus, connecting with people, serving people, being creative, and acting with compassion. Despite the inaccuracy of some of the empirical assertions of this book (Wright 2011), it has sold well over 100,000 copies.

[16] Information about American Christianity is also collected by Christian ministry organizations. For example, Willow Creek Church, based in Barrington, Illinois – one of the largest, most influential evangelical Protestant churches in the country – surveyed itself and six other churches. They found that up to a quarter of mature Christians were dissatisfied with the church and “stale” in their Christian faith (Hawkins, Parkinson, and Arnson).

[17] Finally, information about American Christianity also comes from the informal observations by Christian leaders and commentators themselves. Though not drawn from systematic data collection, these observations are sometimes expressed as statistics. For example, the Christian apologist Josh McDowell is quoted as saying that in his observation, evangelical youth are only about 10% less likely to engage in premarital sex than nonevangelicals (Sider: 23).

[18] From these various sources, there is a plethora of information about American Christianity. At this point a second group of actors comes into play – Christians leaders, writers, speakers and organizations who select, interpret, and sometimes alter the information to present to their constituents. Their goal is not necessarily to represent American Christianity accurately; rather they use the information to strengthen efforts of recruitment, commitment, and differentiation from secular Americans. Often, this takes the form of creating a moral panic. That is, to help the Christian Church be more Christian, they convince the church that it is not very Christian. To help the Church grow, they portray it as dying. Their selective and usually negative portrayal of the state of American Christianity can be found in sermons and everyday conversations, books and articles, and Christian television shows and websites.

[19] In one example, Battle Cry Ministries recruits American churches into a campaign to bring young people into the church. This campaign includes various summits and rallies, with some being stadium-sized events. Why should Christians support Battle Cry Ministries? According to Battle Cry Ministries’ literature, Christianity may not survive another generation in the United States without programs like itself. In alarming terms, Battle Cry Ministries claims that “this generation of teens is the largest in history – and current trends show that only 4 percent will be evangelical believers by the time they become adults. Compare this with 34 percent of adults today who are evangelicals. We are on the verge of a catastrophe” (cited in Smith). The sociologist Christian Smith investigated this claim and found that it was based on an informal, nonrandom survey of 211 young people conducted by a seminary professor in the mid-1990s. Despite the dubious validity of this statistic, it has received widespread attention and acceptance among Christian commentators.

[20] In another example, Ron Sider, a well-known speaker and writer, and president of Evangelicals for Social Action, wrote *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* in which he offers a biblically-based vision of how Christians should live out the whole gospel and not conform to modern culture. Why should Christians buy and read his book? Sider presents a series of statistics that he claims demonstrate that Evangelical Christians are in “blatant disobedience of clear biblical moral demands” in both their behavior and worldview. These statistics regard Christian behavior with sex, money, racism, and, as we will discuss in depth below, divorce. He summarizes his conclusion in the subtitle of the book: “Christians are living just like the rest of the world.” This moral hypocrisy not only “undercuts our message to the larger society” but also “over a period of time it certainly will mean major decline” in the Evangelical movement (Guthrie).

[21] Certainly Christian thought-shapers are not the only ones who use data about Christianity to portray it negatively; some critics of Christianity do so as well. Perhaps the most prominent critics of Christianity (and of all religions for that matter) are the “New Atheists.” Their critiques of religion usually emphasize theological arguments, but sometimes they use statistics about Christians’ morality. For example, Dawkins cites various statistics that politically-conservative states (i.e., “red” states) have higher crime levels than politically-liberal states (i.e., “blue” states). Presumably conservative states have greater numbers of conservative Christians, so this statistic indirectly raises questions about the morality of Christians. Likewise, Harris draws the same conclusion in observing that the highest rates of violent crime and theft occur in politically-conservative states; e.g., three of the five most dangerous cities in the United States are in Texas.

[22] Sometimes critics of Christianity use Christians’ own self-condemnations as evidence against Christianity. For example, on a website entitled *Religious Freak: One Man’s Question against Religious Idiocy*, the anonymous author portrays Christians as hypocrites for condemning homosexual behavior while at the same time engaging in high rates of their own sexual misconduct. His evidence: A 2001 Barna Group study that found that 30% of Christians practice cohabitation and a statement by Phil Magnan, director of the Christian Group Biblical Family Advocates. Magnan wrote: “How can we as Christians have any moral credibility before God and man when we are practicing the very thing we condemn in the form of immoral marital practices?” The website concludes that religious people have a “vehement hatred for human sexuality” (Religious Freak).

[23] Ironically, the negative portrayal of Christianity may be the one thing that both advocates and critics of the faith can agree upon. There is, of course, a difference in motivation. When critics of Christianity portray Christians as amoral and hypocritical, they often seek to discredit the Christian faith and those who practice it. When Christian leaders portray Christians as amoral and hypocritical, it is to rally congregants to change their behavior.

### **The Culture of Fear**

[24] Our statement of the Christian-failure hypothesis extends the culture of fear hypothesis developed by Glassner and Best. In *The Culture of Fear*, Glassner investigates why Americans fear things that are statistically unlikely to harm them. He argues that various groups have an incentive to make people afraid, as this creation of fear gains them resources such as money,

prestige, and votes. As Glassner summarizes, “immense power and money await those who tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes” (xxviii).

[25] Various groups in society constitute what Glassner terms “fear vendors.” They scare people for profit. Journalists sensationalize dangers to attract more readers and viewers. Politicians amplify fear to garner donations, votes, and high approval ratings. Advocacy groups increase consciousness and mobilize support for their efforts to alleviate problems. Manufacturers convince the general public of the need for their safety-related products. Many social phenomena are presented to the public as fearful. Among those analyzed by Glassner include road rage, criminal victimization, physical illness, violent crime, drug abuse, accidents, cyber-predators, teenagers as victims, black men as a social danger, Ebola epidemics, plane crashes, and razor blades in Halloween apples.

[26] We apply the culture of fear hypothesis to religion, and our application of it departs from previous work in a significant way. Previous studies have emphasized the use of statistics in negatively characterizing other groups, especially minorities. For example, television coverage routinely portrays African-American men as those who “rob, rape, loot, and pillage” (Glassner). In this article, however, we examine the opposite – how in-group members present themselves negatively. The members of American Christianity portray themselves – not others – in a negative light with the use of statistics. Christian commentators have an incentive to make people afraid, but their messages are directed toward, and are about, members of their own group.

#### **Case Study: Statistics about Christian Divorce Rates**

[27] At this point, we illustrate the ideas discussed above with an examination of Christian divorce rates. Long-standing marriages are defined as a bellwether of Christian morality, and Christian divorce rates frequently appear in sermons and writings as proof of Christianity’s short-comings. Here we explore how information about this issue is created, interpreted, and disseminated.

##### *Academic Research on Religion and Divorce*

[28] Previous studies have found that Christians and members of other religions have lower divorce rates than people with no religious affiliation. Heaton and Goodman analyzed four waves of the General Social Survey (GSS), and they found that among married individuals, 21% of Catholics and 29% of Protestants had been divorced compared to 42% of non-affiliated individuals. Also analyzing the GSS, Wilcox examined data from 1992 to 2002 and found lower divorce rates among Catholics (35%), Jews (36%), Mainline Protestants (39%), Evangelicals (42%) and higher rates among black Protestants (53%) and individuals reporting no religious affiliation (53%). Religious differences were amplified when attendance of religious services was taken into consideration. Only 27% of the Catholics who attended church on a weekly basis had divorced, similar to 32% of Mainline Protestants and 35% of Evangelicals. Active Jews, at 37%, and Black Protestants, at 49%, did not show much difference by attendance.

[29] In analyzing data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), Call and Heaton found low annual probabilities of divorce among Jews (1.3%), Liberal and Moderate Protestants (1.85%), Catholics (1.85%), members of other religions (2.0%), and

Conservative Protestants (2.2%). They found higher annual divorce rates (3.4%) among those not affiliated with a religion. In a second study of NSFH, Wilcox and Williamson found that members of “other” religions were 45% less likely to divorce than non-affiliated individuals. Mainline Protestants were 39% less likely and Catholics were 35% less likely. The differences with Jews and Conservative Protestants were not significant. Furthermore, Wilcox and Williamson found that active Christians and active members of other religions – those who attended religious services on a weekly basis – had even lower divorce rates – 44% to 54% lower than those with no religious affiliation. In a third study using NSFH data, Lehrer and Chiswick examine couples of similar religious orientation compared to couples in which neither partner had a religious affiliation. The five-year dissolution probability for Mormons and members of other religions was .13, for Catholics and Protestants .20, for Jews .27, and for couples with no religious affiliation it was .36.

*Findings from Six Data Sets*

[30] Building upon previous work, we examine the relationship between religious affiliation and having had a divorce, among those who had ever been married, using data from six different data sets.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we examine variation in divorce rates by religious activity (Wilcox and Williamson). Our analysis provides a baseline understanding with which to compare popular discussion of Christian divorce rates. We start with data from the General Social Survey (GSS) collected from 1980 to 2009, and we follow the classification of Steensland et al. of seven religious traditions: Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Black Protestants, Catholics, Jews, members of other religions, and the religiously unaffiliated. If we simply compare Christians (Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, Black Protestants, and Catholics) versus non-Christians (Jews, other religions, and the religiously unaffiliated), we find that Christian respondents have a significantly lower divorce rate (37%) than non-Christians (44%). This simple comparison, however, obscures meaningful differences among the traditions. As shown in Table 1, several traditions have relatively low rates of divorce, i.e., Jews (30%), Catholics (32%), and Mainline Protestants (35%). Others have moderate rates, i.e., members of other religions (39%) and Evangelicals (40%). Others have high rates, i.e., the religiously unaffiliated (50%) and Black Protestants (51%).

[31] In all religious traditions, however, people who frequently attend services have much lower divorce rates. For example, Evangelical Protestants who attend church at least several times a month have divorce rates of 31%, compared to 49% of those who attend less often. A similar pattern was found among Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Black Protestants, and members of other religions. (There were too few frequent attendees among the Jewish respondents for a meaningful comparison.)

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<sup>1</sup> Measuring *current* divorce status could confound the rates of divorce and marriage. A group having relatively few currently divorced members might simply reflect low rates of marriage or high rates of remarriage.

Table 1. Divorce Rates by Religious Affiliation, General Social Survey.

	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2009	1980-2009
Evangelical	34%	41%	46%	40%
Non-Active	42%	50%	55%	49%
Active	25%	30%	37%	31%
Mainline Protestant	28%	38%	41%	35%
Non-Active	31%	43%	44%	39%
Active	19%	25%	34%	26%
Black Protestant	47%	51%	54%	51%
Non-Active	51%	57%	58%	55%
Active	42%	42%	49%	45%
Catholic	27%	33%	35%	32%
Non-Active	36%	40%	42%	39%
Active	17%	24%	22%	21%
Jewish	24%	31%	36%	30%
Other Religion	33%	41%	42%	39%
Non-Active	42%	46%	47%	45%
Active	25%	33%	34%	30%
No Religion	46%	52%	50%	50%
Total Sample	32%	40%	43%	38%
Sample Size, N=	10,700	9,975	10,559	31,234

Source: General Social Survey, 1980-2008. "Active" is defined as attending religious services on a weekly basis.

[32] In recent decades, divorce rates have climbed incrementally.<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, the average divorce rate for all GSS respondents was 32% and by the 2000s it was 43%. Nonetheless, the rank ordering of religious traditions remained stable. In each decade, Jews, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics had low divorce rates, members of other religions and Evangelicals had moderate rates, and the religiously unaffiliated and Black Protestants had high rates.

<sup>2</sup> There are various ways of measuring divorce rates. In this paper we measure it as the percentage of ever-married people who have had a divorce or are currently separated. Using this measure, the divorce rate has steadily climbed over the past several decades. Another measurement is the percentage of divorces per 1,000 married women. Using this second measure, the divorce rate has dropped slowly, but steadily, since 1980. Combining these two measures, a married couple today is less likely to get divorced than one in recent decades, however there are an increasing number of divorced people in society as older, less-often-divorced people are replaced by the younger, more-often-divorced.

[33] To test the robustness of the GSS findings, we replicate them using data from five other national studies: the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), the International Social Survey Program – U.S. respondents only (ISSP), the CBS/New York Times Monthly Poll, October 1990 (CBS-NYT), the National Survey of Family Growth – Cycle V (NSFG), and the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS). These surveys were collected from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s by various survey organizations. Despite variation in sampling procedures and question wording across these five data sets, they produce a consistent pattern of findings. As shown in Table 2, Catholics (27% to 33%) and members of other religions (27% to 37%) have the lowest divorce rates. Protestants have moderate rates (31% to 36%). Black Protestants (43% to 49%) and those with no religious affiliation (45% to 52%) have high divorce rates.<sup>3</sup> (These data sets do not allow for distinguishing Evangelicals from Mainline Protestants, so we combine them into one group.)

Table 2. Divorce Rates by Religious Affiliation, Various Surveys.

Religious Affiliation	NSFH** (1987-88)	ISSP* (1988)	CBS-NYT* (1990)	NSFG** (1995)	MIDUS** (1995-96)
Protestant	36%	31%	32%	36%	37%
Non-Active	42%	40%	–	41%	45%
Active	26%	16%	–	28%	25%
Black Protestant	49%	43%	45%	44%	45%
Non-Active	52%	47%	–	50%	47%
Active	46%	36%	–	39%	44%
Catholic	33%	29%	27%	29%	30%
Non-Active	40%	38%	–	33%	35%
Active	24%	16%	–	23%	24%
Other Religion	33%	32%	27%	33%	37%
Non-Active	34%	–	–	36%	39%
Active	31%	–	–	29%	32%
No Religion	49%	52%	53%	45%	52%
All Responds	38%	33%	33%	36%	38%
Sample Size	10,439	1,106	753	6,844	3,622

\* Cells report % of respondents who reported ever having been divorced; \*\* cells report % of respondents who reported ever having been divorced or are currently separated; blank cells indicate insufficient sample size. “Active” is defined as attending religious services on a weekly basis.

<sup>3</sup> The Steensland et al. classification identifies Black Protestants as those who affiliate with historically Black denominations. For these five datasets, absent necessary denomination information, we coded Black Protestants as Protestants who were Black.

[34] In each of these data sets, respondents who frequently attend religious services have lower divorce rates. Active Protestants have divorce rates ranging from 16% to 28%, active Catholics from 16% to 24%, active members of other religions 29% to 32%, and active Black Protestants from 36% to 46%.<sup>4</sup>

[35] Based on the analyses presented above, we can summarize the empirical relationship between Christianity and divorce as follows:

1. Christians have lower divorce rates than non-Christians (due to the high divorce rates of religiously unaffiliated people).
2. Christian traditions vary in their divorce rates, with Catholics and Mainline Protestants having relatively low rates, Evangelicals moderate, and Black Protestants high.
3. Christians who attend church regularly have lower divorce rates than those who do not.

*Data from the Barna Group*

[36] Despite the existence of academic studies on the issue, the most frequently cited statistics by Christian leaders and commentators regarding Christian divorce rates come from the Barna Research Group. Since the mid-1990s, the Barna Group has published studies concluding that born again Christians have divorce rates equal to that of non-Christians. For example, in its 2004 survey, the Barna Group reported that 35% of ever-married, born again Christians had been divorced, which was the same rate as non-Christian married adults. The report concluded:

Although many Christian churches attempt to dissuade congregants from getting a divorce, the research confirmed a finding identified by Barna a decade ago (and further confirmed through tracking studies conducted each year since): born again Christians have the same likelihood of divorce as do non-Christians.

[37] To arrive at this conclusion, however, the Barna Group make a series of methodological decisions that, whether intentional or not, produce findings in line with a Christian-failure narrative. In their analysis of other issues, the Barna Group usually distinguishes between two types of Christians, those who fit their criteria for being born-again and those who do not. Barna's "born again Christians" approximate sociologists' "evangelical Protestants" and non-born again Christians are mostly Catholics and Mainline Protestants. However, when analyzing divorce rates, the Barna Group departs from its standard practice and defines Catholics and Mainline Protestants as non-Christians, combining them with members of other religions and the religiously unaffiliated.

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<sup>4</sup> The data in Tables 1 and 2 describe the linkage between religion and divorce rates. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the causality underlying this correlation, but we note that it is open to multiple causal interpretations: 1) Religion might lower peoples' risk of getting divorced; 2) Religion might attract people already at low risk of divorce; 3) Church-goers who get divorced might be more likely to leave the church; 4) The correlation between religion and divorce may be spurious; and, 5) Religious people may be less likely to report divorces on surveys.

[38] This revised coding scheme changes the association between Christianity and divorce rates. If Barna had stayed with its standard three-part division of religion, it probably would have concluded that born again Christians have higher divorce rates than non-born again Christians, but lower divorce rates than non-Christians.<sup>5</sup> This would perhaps be cause for concern for Evangelicals, but it probably would not be fear-provoking. However, by using a two-part classification, the Barna Group can equate the divorce rates of born-again Christians to that of non-Christians because Catholics and Mainline Protestants have low divorce rates. Thus, redefining them as non-Christian substantially lowers the divorce rate of the non-Christian comparison group (see the appendix for an in-depth analysis of this comparison). It is not that the Barna Group is factually in error, per se, rather the structure of its analysis produces a fearful message.

*Selection and Use of Divorce Statistics*

[39] Barna's statements about Christian divorce rates have carried the day in public discourse by both supporters and critics of Christianity. Among Christian commentators, Sider uses Barna's statistics to show that born-again Christians have "slightly higher" divorce rates than those of non-Christians. Sider concludes that "these divorce rates are a scalding indictment of what isn't being said behind the pulpit" (20).

[40] Likewise, Marriage Savers, a Christian organization that offers advice and various resources to Christian married couples, offers a training seminar to turn congregations into "marriage savers." In justifying the need and expense of such seminars, Marriage Savers reviews Barna's divorce statistics and explains the high rate of Christian divorces as follows: "Too many churches are wedding factories. Ask this question about your own church: who is in charge of marriage? Don't tell me the pastor. He oversees everything. Who is responsible for marriage preparation, the enriching of existing marriages, or saving those in trouble? No one, in the typical Protestant church" (Marriage Savers).

[41] Similar to Christian leaders, critics of Christianity use Barna's divorce statistics, but they do so for a different reason: to portray the Christian faith as invalid and its followers as hypocrites. For example, Ron Barrier, a spokesman for American Atheists, uses Barna's findings as evidence of the moral inferiority of religion and, correspondingly, the moral superiority of atheism. He writes:

These findings [of Barna] confirm what I have been saying these last five years. Since Atheist ethics are of a higher caliber than religious morals, it stands to reason that our families would be dedicated more to each other than to some invisible monitor in the sky. With Atheism, women and men are equally responsible for a healthy marriage. There is no room in Atheist ethics for the type of "submissive" nonsense preached by Baptists and other Christian and/or Jewish groups. Atheists reject, and rightly so, the primitive patriarchal attitudes so prevalent in many religions with respect to marriage.

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the Barna Group does not make its data publically available, so their analyses can not be replicated.

[42] Austin Cline, a commentator on religious matters for About.com, uses Barna's findings to identify the moral failings of Christians. Cline opines that "If marriage is in any danger in America, perhaps the threat comes from the unstable marriages of conservative Christians, not the relationships of gays or the marriages of godless atheists."

#### *Varying Receptivity to Divorce Statistics*

[43] While writing this article, we conducted a natural experiment that demonstrates the high interest garnered by negative portrayals of Christianity. The experiment was conducted on Digg.com, a popular user-driven news website in which readers nominate news stories and then vote for those that interest them the most. The more votes, or "diggs," received by a story, the more prominently featured it is on the website, and the more people read it.

[44] In May 2007, the first author was reading Digg.com and came across a story posted several hours earlier entitled: "Atheist divorce rate is lower than Christian." It presented Barna's findings, as summarized above. The first author then submitted a second story, based on the findings presented in Table 1, and gave it the parallel title, "Christian divorce rates are lower than atheist." This created two different stories on Digg.com about Christians and divorce rates. They were posted on the same day, had similar titles, and presented data in a similar manner, but they received very different responses from readers.

[45] The story portraying *higher* divorce rates among Christians received over 3,500 votes of interest, making it one of the top stories of the week (of over a thousand submitted). The story portraying *lower* Christian divorce rates received less than a dozen votes. This difference in votes reflects substantially greater interest in and receptivity towards statistics that paint Christianity in a negative light. Furthermore, by virtue of receiving so many votes, the first story was prominently featured on the website thereby exposing more people to it and further establishing Barna's statistics as the conventional wisdom about Christian divorce rates.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Discussion**

[46] In this article, we develop the concept of a Christian failure narrative, in which Christian leaders, teachers, pastors, and other commentators selectively emphasize negative information about the Christian faith as a way of motivating Christians to follow their teachings. This negative message is reinforced by critics of the faith using similar information as evidence against the validity of the Christian faith and its practice. We examined in depth a popular instance of the Christian-failure narrative – views about Christians' divorce rates, especially those of Evangelical Christians. We found that supporters, critics, and the general populace embraced statistics portraying Christians as having high divorce rates. Even though more-scientific sources present statistics suggesting otherwise, the high Christian divorce rate described by Barna has become widely accepted. As a result, this particular construction of moral fear helps stigmatize Christians as immoral and hypocritical.

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<sup>6</sup> Though the readership of Digg.com does not constitute a representative sample of the general populace, it attracts many thousands of readers a day – presumably representing a variety of religious perspectives.

[47] There are various implications of our findings. For one, they suggest an interpretation to the finding that Christian leaders and active church-goers are the most likely to view the media as hostile to their faith. Active Christians are the people who encounter most often the Christian-failure narrative in sermons and Christian writings. As a result, their view of the media is most influenced by the representations they hear in church, which, as we argue, emphasize negative accounts of Christianity.

[48] The construction of moral fear, as outlined here, also elaborates the culture of fear hypothesis. In the works of Glassner, Best, and others, the construction of a culture of fear is usually used by a group in power, such as whites, to create fear about minority groups, such as African-Americans. In the analyses we have presented, however, a majority group, Christians, is stigmatized both by itself and others. In both cases, the works of Glassner and Best as well as our own, the group that does the stigmatizing does so to advance its own perceived interests, but in the case of Christian commentators, this takes the form of self-stigmatization.

[49] The use of moral fear within Christian groups may well affect Christians' view of their own religion, promoting a sense of ambivalence if not futility. As Christian teachers emphasize negative statistics to spur Christians into better Christian practices, this emphasis may have the unintended effect of demoralizing their audience. It could create ambivalent feelings toward the church itself – viewing it as ineffective in the lives of its members. This is particularly likely among young adults and adolescents raised in Christian homes who have witnessed their parents divorce. If they think their own experience is emblematic of the failure of Christian churches to prevent divorce, they may be more likely to leave the faith or to avoid regular church attendance (Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, and Marquardt). This suggests a form of institutional alienation, in which the adherents of Christianity are exposed to an image of a failed church that fosters ambivalence toward Christianity among Christians.

[50] Accordingly, future research should expand upon the analyses of this paper. Such research could use explore these processes among Christians and members of other religious traditions in other countries. Are there general cultural elements at play that promote this form of institutional alienation? Also, to what extent does a similar dynamic occur in other religions, and, if so, how it might take a different form. This type of research promotes a better understanding of religious peoples' understanding of themselves, including the origins and consequences of this self-understanding.

#### **Appendix 1. Recreating Barna's Divorce Analysis.**

[51] In examining Barna's influential analysis of Christian divorce rates, there are four relevant religious groupings: 1) Self-identified Christians who fit Barna's criteria (primarily Evangelicals), 2) Self-identified Christians who do not meet Barna's criteria (primarily Catholics and mainline Protestants), 3) Members of other religions, and 4) Individuals of no religious affiliation.

[52] Barna's research compares group 1 versus groups 2, 3, and 4. As shown in Table 2, Catholics and Mainline Protestants have lower divorce rates than Evangelical Christians, and so if they are defined as non-Christians, this lowers the divorce rates of "non-Christians" to be equal to that of evangelicals. Sociologists, in contrast, tend to analyze these four groups

separately, and they conclude that Christians, as well as members of other religions, have lower divorce rates than those with no religious affiliation.

[53] We demonstrate the impact of these competing operationalizations of Christianity by replicating Barna's analysis using data from the Midlife in the United States Study (MIDUS). This data set not only measured religious affiliation and divorce, it also asked respondents: "Have you ever been 'born again,' that is, had a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Jesus Christ?" While not identical to Barna's theologically-based criteria for being a Christian, it is reasonably close.

[54] In the MIDUS data, 45% of the Christian-affiliated respondents also identified themselves as born-again, and, using the groups described above, we found the following divorce rates:

Group 1: Self-identified Christians who also had a born-again experience had divorce rates of 36%.

Group 2: Self-identified Christians who did not have a born-again experience had divorce rates of 34%.

Group 3: Members of other religions had divorce rates of 37%.

Group 4: Individuals with no religious affiliation had divorce rates of 52%.

[55] In a sociological study, these four groups would be presented separately, and one would conclude that respondents with any religious affiliation have substantially lower divorce rates than those with no affiliation. In contrast, Barna's analysis would combine groups 2, 3, and 4 into a "non-Christian" category. It would then conclude that born-again Christians have divorce rates (36%) basically indistinguishable from non-Christians (38% – the average of groups 2, 3, and 4).

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