

Rock Of Salvation Or Of Offense?

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Last April, just before Passover, the Barna Group published the results of one of their many surveys that outline the cultural trends of religion in America. This particular one was entitled, "What Do Americans Believe About Jesus? Five Popular Beliefs."

For any of you who may not be familiar with the Barna Group, they are, as stated in their own website, "a research and resource company" that is "considered to be a leading research organization focused on the intersection of faith and culture." The statistical information that they gather has been used and quoted in the major print and electronic media as a snapshot of modern religion within the United States, and their mission statement even proclaims that they are there to provide people "with credible knowledge and clear thinking, enabling them to navigate a complex and changing culture."

They do provide helpful insights which we can use as another tool to help us navigate through this sea of chaos, but we must always be wary, knowing that the real credible knowledge and clear thinking that enable us to navigate *must* ultimately come from the unchanging Word of God.

I only stress this here because this is the critical point of the sermon today. Our navigation needs to be directly within the truth of the Rock of our salvation, or else we will find ourselves *crushed* by the self-same Rock, which we will see more clearly in a couple of minutes. But first we are going to look at Barna's report, and the five popular beliefs that Americans hold today about Jesus. Barna prefaced their report with this statement:

Jesus Christ remains a central figure and perennial person of interest in the American religious landscape—especially in the days leading up to Easter. And 2015 is no exception. On Sunday, March 29, National Geographic Channel premiered its adaptation of Bill O'Reilly's book *Killing Jesus* to 3.7 million viewers—the channel's

biggest audience in history. CNN's *Finding Jesus* miniseries has also sustained impressive viewership. Google searches of Jesus Christ climbed by 53 percent in the week leading up to Easter—a likely result of both seasonal television programming and the approaching holiday. But what do Americans believe about Jesus? Who do they say He is? Here are five popular American perceptions of Jesus based on recent research.

I am going to condense these for lack of time, but you will see just from this small segment that mankind's relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is really affected by a distinctly jaded worldview. A view not founded on the credible knowledge and clear thinking that comes only from learning and living the revealed Word of God, but from words that have been twisted around through the minds of men. We cannot allow ourselves to get caught in this rapidly changing culture of unbelief.

1. The vast majority of Americans believe Jesus was a real person. Jesus Christ has made a cameo in hundreds of pop culture places, from *The Davinci Code* to *South Park*. But, although the character of Jesus has certainly been fictionalized, satirized, and mythologized over the centuries, the vast majority of Americans still maintain that He was a historical figure. More than nine out of ten adults say Jesus Christ was a real person who actually lived (92%).

However, as these statistics will show in a minute, there was a marked difference from one generation to the next. Barna separated the report into four distinct adult generations. There were the Elders (those 70 and older), the Boomers (who were born between 1946 and 1964), the GenXers (who were born between 1965 and 1984), and the Millennials (young adults born after 1984). Here in this first question, 96% of the Elders believed Jesus was a real person, 95% of the Boomers, 91% of the GenXers, and only 87% of the Millennials.

2. Younger generations are increasingly less likely to believe Jesus was God. The historicity of Jesus may not be in question for most Americans, but people are much less confident in the divinity

of Jesus. Most adults—not quite six in ten—believe Jesus was God (56%), while about one-quarter say He was only a religious or spiritual leader like Mohammad or Buddha (26%). The remaining one in six say they aren't sure whether Jesus was divine (18%).

Elders in this particular point [belief in the divinity of Jesus] (62%), Boomers (58%), GenXers (55%), and Millennials less than half (48%). [Of the millennials] a third say that Jesus was merely a religious leader, while 17 percent are not sure who He was.

I hope you can see that this world is headed not *towards* but *away from* credible knowledge and clear thinking, based on words, but not the words of God. In this morass, are we clinging to the *precious* "Invitation Only" relationship with God built on belief in the bedrock foundation of His revealed Word, which is the only credible source of clear thinking?

3. Americans are divided on whether Jesus was sinless. Perhaps reflective of other questions about Jesus' divinity, Americans are conflicted on whether Jesus committed sins during His earthly life. About half of Americans agree, either strongly or somewhat, that while He lived on earth, Jesus Christ was human and committed sins like other people (52%). Just less than half disagree, either strongly or somewhat, that Jesus committed sins while on earth (46%), and 2 percent aren't sure.

Brethren, this just gets deeper into the confusion as it goes along. This is huge because in light of the numbers we saw in question 2, we can see that some of the very people who believe in the divinity of Jesus must also be numbered among those who think He probably sinned as a man. If this is the case, they believe in salvation through One who could only pay for the penalty of His own sins! How much real belief and clear thinking is *that*? While Millennials were more likely to believe Jesus sinned, all three of the other generations were evenly split 50/50.

The answer to point 4 in light of the answers to two and three is also very interesting.

4. Most Americans say they have made a commitment to Jesus Christ. On the whole, America is still committed to Jesus. The act of making a personal commitment to Jesus—often seen as the “first step” in becoming a Christian—is a step that more than six in ten Americans say they have taken and, moreover, the commitment is still important in their lives today.

While the majority of Americans report such a commitment, some groups are significantly more likely to have done it than others. Women, for example, are more likely than men to have made a personal commitment to Jesus (68% compared to 56%). White Americans are the least likely ethnic group to have committed to Jesus: only six in ten white Americans report having done so compared with eight in ten black Americans and nearly two-thirds of all non-white Americans.

The more money people have, also, the less likely they are to have committed to Jesus (this is from the Barna Report). In light of the other two answers, we can see a massive amount of confusion as to what they have committed themselves to, and it seems that many have committed themselves to nothing more than a Gandhi-like teacher.

Finally, the responses attached to question 5, as well as the Barna Group's own conclusion, further show that *unbelief* is rampant even within the ranks of those who compiled this survey because they do not really know what the Bible says. They do not know the words about the Kingdom of God and its King.

5. People are conflicted between “Jesus” and “Good Deeds” as the way to heaven. Among adults who have made a personal commitment to Jesus, most also believe that Jesus is the way to heaven. When given several beliefs about the afterlife to choose from, nearly two-thirds of those who have made a personal commitment to Jesus say they believe that after they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior (63%). Only 2 percent of the adults who

report a personal commitment to Jesus say they will not go to heaven. About one in seven admit they don't know what will happen after they die (15%).

Overall, roughly two out of five Americans have confessed their sinfulness and professed faith in Christ [a group Barna classifies as the "born again Christians"].

Barna continues: "Millennials are less likely to believe that Jesus is the path to heaven than are other generations."

What the research means, according to David Kinnaman (who is president of the Barna Group and directed the national study) is that:

There isn't much argument about whether Jesus Christ actually was a historical person, but nearly everything else about his life generates enormous, and sometimes rancorous, debate.

These findings, however, "demonstrate the strong degree to which Jesus remains embedded in the minds of Americans. It is not surprising that Easter brings a range of Jesus-centered entertainment and media programming: Jesus has a built-in audience. This study shows the extent of Christian commitment in the nation—more than 150 million Americans say they have professed faith in Christ."

Brethren, because of the distorted unbelief in the revealed Word of God, the Rock of salvation actually becomes a rock of stumbling and ruin. This is what the Word of God tells us, and that is what we are going to take a look at right now.

Will Jesus find those given the truth of God's Word sheltered within himself in faith, or will the Rock be a wall in our path to the Kingdom as determined by our own faithlessness in exercising the truth in fear of God? Will the King find His subjects faithfully living the truth upon His return or will we be living lives scattered by unbelief?

Please turn with me to Isaiah 8, and we will be reading the prophecy that God gave to Isaiah to deliver to Israel. Israel was more fearful of men and

seeking the ways of men than trusting in God, and here we find a very important principle in a prophecy that also looks forward to Jesus Christ. This is an absolute fact of life for all men, and especially for the Israel of God, the church.

Isaiah 8:11-16 For the Lord spoke thus to me with a strong hand, and instructed me that I should not walk in the way of this people, saying: "Do not say 'A conspiracy,' concerning all that this people call a conspiracy, nor be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. The Lord of hosts, Him shall you hallow; let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread.

He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall down and be broken, be snared and taken." Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples.

Isaiah 8:19-22 And when they say to you, "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter," should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

They will pass through it hard-pressed and hungry; and it shall happen, when they are hungry, that they will be enraged and curse their king and their God, and look upward. Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish; and they will be driven into darkness.

We will be focusing the remainder of this sermon on the principle involved in verses 14 and 15, but first I want to read what we have just read in Isaiah from *The Message*, a Bible in contemporary language, because I really want you to get a good handle on the importance of what God is telling all those who are called to His holiness today.

Isaiah 8:11-15 (MSG) God spoke strongly to me, grabbed me with both hands and warned me not to go along with this people. He said: "Don't be like these people, always afraid somebody is plotting against them. Don't fear what they fear. Don't take on their worries. If you're going to worry, worry about The Holy. Fear God-of-the-Angels-Armies.

The Holy can be either a Hiding Place or a Boulder blocking your way, The Rock standing in the willful way of both houses of Israel, a barbed-wire fence preventing trespass to the citizens of Jerusalem. Many of them are going to run into that Rock and get their bones broken, get tangled up in that barbed wire and not get free of it."

Isaiah 8:16-22 (MSG) Gather up the testimony, preserve the teaching for my followers, while I wait for God as long as he remains in hiding, while I wait and hope for him. I stand my ground and hope, I and the children God gave me as signs to Israel, warning signs and hope signs from God-of-the-Angels-Armies, who makes his home in Mount Zion.

When people tell you, "Try out the fortune tellers. Consult the spiritualists. Why not tap into the spirit-world, get in touch with the dead?" Tell them, "No, we're going to study the Scriptures." People who try the other ways get nowhere—a dead end! Frustrated and famished, they try one thing after another. When nothing works out they get angry, cursing first this god and then that one, looking this way and that, up, down, and sideways—and seeing nothing, a blank wall, an empty hole.

Brethren, this is the challenge we are facing, each and every one of us that are called to be a holy witness within the body of Christ. The Rock of salvation will become a rock of offense to any who are not living the true Word of God. This is an absolute truth right from the mouth of God. Therefore, the same rancorous debate that divides this world *will* and *does* also divide those who are to be of one mind with Him, just as it did when Jesus Christ Himself walked the earth (as recorded in Mark 6:3) and they could only see a carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James.

Today, we are going to examine this conundrum a bit and see perhaps the most important thing that we within the body of Christ need to do about it. Please turn with me now to Romans 9. Here in this chapter, Paul is explaining physical Israel's rejection of Jesus Christ and how it all fits into God's plan and purpose, which is being worked out to extend His mercy and grace upon His people. We also see at the beginning of chapter 10 the example of their tripping point. What caused them to trip and what must be done by those now called by the grace of God?

Here then, in chapter 9, Paul quotes Isaiah 8:14 and goes on to explain how the Rock of salvation will become a rock of ruin, and what God expects from us. So we will begin reading in Romans 9:30 and we will be reading through chapter 10:4, and then 14-17:

Romans 9:30-33 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and a rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

Romans 10:1-4 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Romans 10:14-17 How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace,

who bring glad tidings of good things!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

To those called now into the body of Christ, God has given the opportunity and responsibility to hear and obey the gospel of the King, as preached by a duly appointed ministry which was sent by Him to walk in the beauty of His Word. As the noble Bereans of Acts 17, these are those who eagerly hear and prove the Word. These are they who are unified by learning and living the truth of Christ, through the grace of God, together. These are those who must be trusting that God is doing His work so that the faith and belief that is produced truly makes Jesus Christ the Rock of salvation rather than the rock of offense. They studied and checked things out, as we need to, because there are ministers who will come in sheep's clothing, but the true ministers need to be followed.

Unfortunately, because we live in this world—and are more prone to be part of it rather than separate from it, as God expects—we still tend to look more like those mentioned at the beginning of the sermon than like those who trust in God, believing and applying His gospel of peace which is being delivered to us by duly appointed men who are, in fact, bringing us glad tidings of good things, if we will only look to God who stands behind them. (I am not talking about Joe Tkach because he has proven himself *not* to be a true minister, but I am talking about those ministers who have given you the *true* tidings of glad joy.) Brethren, the question here, is, are we living our lives believing and trusting God, or not? If not, the very Rock of salvation becomes a rock of ruin.

John Ritenbaugh said of these verses in Romans 10:14-17 during a sermon about Passover, that the Word of Christ is what brought us out of the world, and that to which we were converted. When we drift away from it, we become confused and we begin dividing, bickering, and fighting among ourselves. The solution is given elsewhere in the Bible: *Get back to what brought us together in the first place*—the combination of the Word of Christ and devotion to Him, to the love that we had at the beginning. Along with obedience, practical application of God's Word is a *must* if we want to have saving faith. We must check ourselves before Passover and see whether

we have passed up or neglected opportunities to make practical use of our faith. This means so much to our attitude, the way we approach life on a daily basis.

And brethren, Jesus Christ gave us the most important place where we express the belief and saving faith that makes Jesus Christ a Rock of salvation rather than a rock of offense. We are going to take a look at what is perhaps the most familiar and direct command from Jesus Christ given to those to be faithfully led by the Rock of salvation, and yet it is obviously the least faithfully pursued direction from Jesus Christ.

Please turn with me to John 13.

John 13:31-35 So, when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and glorify Him immediately. Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come,' so now I say to you. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

As absolutely sure and obvious a sign to all as the sharing of God's holy Sabbath time with Him is, so too must an absolutely obvious sharing of sacrificial love with Him among those who are truly members of the Body of Christ be. How do we do this as the weakest of men, battling human nature and carrying different world views? We do it by trusting the power of God, through His Holy Spirit, to apply His every Word to our own lives personally, each and every day, in every way. We most certainly cannot count on our own righteousness, but if we believe God, then we will be applying His Word to please Him, not for our own righteousness sake.

In Volume 1 of Edward Young's commentary on the book of Isaiah, he writes about the verses we started in, in Isaiah 8:14.

God's command continues . . . Sanctify yourselves, He commands, for He will be a sanctuary. If you sanctify Him, He will in His turn

be a sanctuary to you also. The Lord is the Holy One to His people. If, in the fullest sense, they regard Him as Holy and so sanctify Him, He will be to them an object of Holiness, and in Him, there will be true protection. About them, He will be a wall of Holiness and a place of refuge.

Young continues:

As Delitzsch puts it: 'All who sanctified the Lord of Lords He surrounded like temple walls; hid them in Himself, whilst death and tribulation reigned without, and comforted, fed, and blessed them in His own gracious fellowship'.

On the other hand, a stone of striking and rock of stumbling which will cause those who bump against it to fall . . .

. . . to some a sanctuary, but to others a stone of stumbling . . .

. . . Not only a stone of stumbling but also a bird trap which snares and a spring trap will God be to the people. In the first part of the verse we see the results of godly fear; in the second, those of ungodly fear.

Young continues in his commentary on verse 15.

The wicked in Israel will actually stumble over the stone, the gin, and the snare. Because of the stone many will stumble and fall and be broken . . . The Lord Himself will be the occasion for the destruction of those who fear Him not. Peter reflects upon this verse when he says, 'Unto you therefore which BELIEVE, He is PRECIOUS; but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble AT THE WORD, BEING DISOBEDIENT.'

Brethren, how precious is the word of the truth of God that He has graciously given to us, that we can dwell together within the Rock of our salvation, united with Him and one another in love. Are we actively applying God's

Word in feeding, comforting, and blessing one another within the temple walls for the glory of God, or are we on the outside stumbling around and striking the rock?

I would like us to consider how precious we think God's words of truth are; take a look and see, are we doing these things or not? Turn with me to James 3.

James 3:1-2 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive the stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

Looking back at what Paul wrote from Isaiah, and the duly appointed ministers given to serve you, if anyone does not stumble, he is a perfect man. How many of us are bringing judgment down on ourselves by nit-picking at God's duly appointed ministry that we have proved—through His Word—are teaching the truth? I am not saying you should not do as the noble Berean's did and check things out, as Mr. Armstrong always told us. Have we ever considered that we may be turning the Rock of our salvation into a source of stumbling and stricter judgment on ourselves because we refuse to trust and believe in those God has carefully appointed—as He said, He stands behind—so we nit-pick? Has the Rock of our salvation in this matter become a rock of offense for failure to trust God and His way of doing things? So we all are to be teachers?

Quickly now, let us go down to a couple more verses in James. I know we are running short on time but this is really important.

James 4:1-6 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a

friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"? But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

James 4:11-12 Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge one another?

James 5:7-8 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and the latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

These are the things that will either make Jesus Christ the Rock of our salvation or the stumbling block of unbelief. And why? Jesus Christ gives us the principle in Matthew 25—we will not turn there but I will just read it, verse 40:

Matthew 25:40 “And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’”

Matthew 25:45 “Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’”

He *is* the Rock of salvation to one, and the rock of offense to the other. Today we live in a society that has no idea who Jesus Christ really is because they refuse to fear God and submit to the truth of His Word, and that is the way God has it for this time. We must not be that way. But as Barna rightly concluded, nearly everything about His life (as the world sees it) generates enormous, and sometimes rancorous, debate.

This is the world driven by Satan and all the demons with him, but within the body of Christ, rancorous debate must not exist. We either sanctify the Lord by humbly believing Him and applying His Word in all our relationships so we can dwell together within the temple walls, or the precious Stone becomes a stone of rejection.

For a final scripture, please turn with me back to the book of Numbers.

Numbers 20:6-12 So Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and they fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give to the congregation and their animals."

So Moses took the rod from before the Lord as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

We too, brethren, find ourselves in a very similar, high-profile situation by the way we openly are living our love for one another, and we very easily could dishonor the Rock of our salvation before men and God. Because we have not believed God and hallowed Him by the outward sign of our love for one another, are we making the Rock of our salvation into a rock of offense?

We must not be among those who trust in their own righteousness and despise others. We must be among those faithfully living the Word of God,

together, so the Son of Man will find a faithful, united, and holy people ready to serve with Him in His glory at His return so that others may truly know of the Rock of their salvation.