

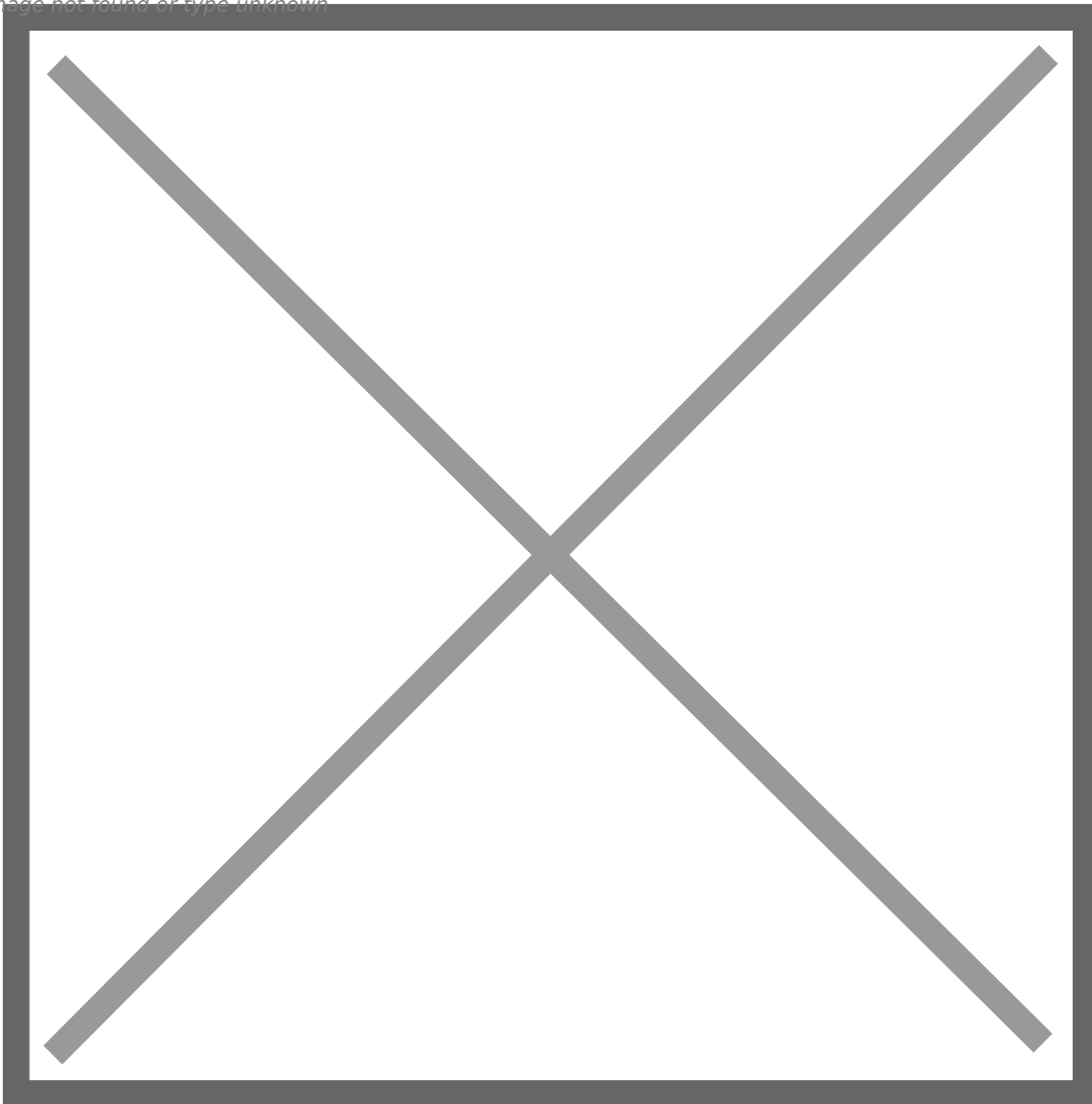
The Barna Group thinks I'm a "notional Christian"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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The Barna Group's recent religious freedom poll is pretty interesting:

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Note that evangelicals overwhelmingly support religious freedom and are concerned about its possible demise—yet a majority of them also believe that "traditional

Judeo-Christian values should be given preference."

Fred Clark [calls this "quantifiable proof"](#) that "a great many white evangelicals have a delusional persecution complex." I'd put it differently: "religious freedom" has apparently come to mean not only different things to different people but different things to the same people answering different questions in the same poll. I don't know about "delusional," but there's certainly some cognitive dissonance there.

Here's what Barna's David Kinnaman says, as quoted indirectly in the group's own write up:

Evangelicals have to be careful of embracing a double standard: to call for religious freedoms, but then desire the dominant religious influence to be Judeo-Christian. They cannot have it both ways. This does not mean putting Judeo-Christian values aside, but it will require a renegotiation of those values in the public square, as America increasingly becomes a multi-faith nation.

That's right, and I appreciate Kinnaman's clarity on this. Still, as a mainliner it can be hard to read the evangelical-oriented Barna's stuff. Did you notice the three categories of Christians in the chart above? Here's the group's explanation:

"Evangelicals" meet the born again criteria (described below) plus seven other conditions. Those include saying their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church attended. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as "evangelical."

"Non-evangelical born again Christians" are defined as people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. These adults are born again, but do not meet the additional evangelical criteria.

"Notional" Christians are individuals who identify themselves as Christian yet do not meet the criteria for being "born again."

That's right: you've got your evangelicals, your Christians who share some evangelical traits but not all of them, and your Christians in name only.

How do mainline Protestants, Catholics or Orthodox feel about religious freedom? Well, unless you're willing to define them in strictly negative terms—how evangelical aren't they? do they have the nerve to call themselves Christians even though they don't see faith as an individualistic or afterlife-focused undertaking?—you're not going to find out from Barna.

(In the past Barna [has described "notional Christians" somewhat differently](#), though still as a negatively defined catch-all for those who aren't good enough for Barna to grant them the label "Christian" without dismissively qualifying it. I'm a little tired of it.)