



# FocusFamilyINSIGHT

Ministry Strategy – Family Research

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**To:** Interested Students of the Family  
**Re:** **Divorce Rate in the Church - As High as the World?**

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## “Christians divorce at roughly the same rate as the world!”

It's one of the most quoted stats by Christian leaders today. And it's perhaps one of the most inaccurate.

Based on the best data available, the divorce rate among Christians is significantly lower than the general population.

*Here's the truth...*

Many people who seriously practice a traditional religious faith – be it Christian or other - have a divorce rate markedly lower than the general population.

*The factor making the most difference is religious commitment and practice.*

The intuitive is true! Couples who regularly practice any combination of serious religious behaviors and attitudes – attend church nearly every week, read their bibles and spiritual materials regularly; pray privately and together; generally take their faith seriously, living not as *perfect* disciples, but *serious* disciples – enjoy significantly lower divorce rates than mere church members, the general public and unbelievers.

Professor Bradley Wright, a sociologist at the University of Connecticut, explains from his analysis of people who identify as Christians but rarely attend church, that 60 percent of these have been divorced. Of those who attend church regularly, 38 percent have been divorced.<sup>1</sup>

Other data from additional sociologists of family and religion suggest a significant marital stability divide between those who take their faith seriously and those who do not.

W. Bradford Wilcox, a leading sociologist at the University of Virginia and director of the National Marriage Project, finds from his own analysis that “active conservative Protestants” who regularly attend church have are 35 percent *less likely to divorce* compared to those who have no affiliation. Nominally attending conservative Protestants are 20 percent *more likely to divorce*, compared to secular Americans.<sup>2</sup>

The following chart shows the relative risk of divorce by religious affiliation among Protestant, Catholic and Jewish adherents. (Wilcox controlled for other socio-economic factors that impact marital health, thus providing a clearer, cleaner measure of the actual religious dynamic on marriage.)

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley R.E. Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites ...and Other Lies You've Been Told*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2010), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Williamson, “The Cultural Contradictions of Mainline Family Ideology and Practice,” in *American Religions and the Family*, edited by Don S. Browning and David A. Clairmont (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) p. 50.



<b>Faith Affiliation</b>	<b>% Divorce Likelihood Reduction</b>
<i>Protestant - Nominal</i>	20
<i>Protestant –Conservative</i>	-10
<i>Protestant - Active Conservative</i>	-35
<i>Catholic</i>	-18
<i>Catholic (nominal)</i>	-5
<i>Catholic - Active</i>	-31
<i>Jewish</i>	39
<i>Jewish (nominal)</i>	53
<i>Jewish - Active</i>	-97

Professor Scott Stanley from the University of Denver, working with an absolute all-star team of leading sociologists on the Oklahoma Marriage Study, explains that couples with a vibrant religious faith had more and higher levels of the qualities couples need to avoid divorce.

“Whether young or old, male or female, low-income or not, those who said that they were more religious reported higher average levels of commitment to their partners, higher levels of marital satisfaction, less thinking and talking about divorce and lower levels of negative interaction. These patterns held true when controlling for such important variables as income, education, and age at first marriage.”

These positive factors translated into actual lowered risk of divorce among active believers.

“Those who say they are more religious are less likely, not more, to have already experienced divorce. Likewise, those who report more frequent attendance at religious services were significantly less likely to have been divorced.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Take-Away**

The divorce rates of Christian believers are not identical to the general population - not even close. Being a committed, faithful believer makes a measurable difference in marriage.

Saying you believe something or merely belonging to a church, unsurprisingly, does little for marriage. But the more you are involved in the actual practice of your faith in real ways – through submitting yourself to a serious body of believers, learning regularly from scripture, being in communion with God through prayer individually and with your spouse and children, and having friends and family around us who challenge us to take our marriage’s seriously – the greater difference this makes in strengthening both the quality and longevity of our marriages. Faith does matter and the leading sociologists of family and religion tell us so.

<sup>3</sup> C.A. Johnson, S. M. Stanley, N.D. Glenn, P.A. Amato, S.L. Nock, H.J. Markman and M .R. Dion *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce* (Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Department of Human Services 2002) p. 25, 26.