

Actually, there are **two** problems with counting Christians: what exactly is a “Christian” and how does one count them?

Defining a Christian is a pricklier problem than you would assume. I recall a meeting that I attended about a year ago where this subject came up. The dozen of us in attendance all had similar backgrounds- we were all Westerners (Europeans and North Americans) working with evangelical churches in Europe. After ninety minutes of discussion, our group was still very far from a commonly agreeable definition. Every time we approached consensus, a member of our group would point out that the proposed definition would include a particular group that generally had a theology that they found disagreeable. The focus of deliberation was clear. Who had the “right” beliefs to make it into heaven? After all, this is an important question for a group dedicated to seeing that people would become convinced of a certain set of beliefs in order to be *saved*.

Nearly all of the current research generated by the missions community actually sidesteps the issue by measuring something different: church attendance and church membership. Though most of the more serious research that I have read is careful to state that attendance or membership is being measured, the missions practitioner often walks away equating these numbers with the number of born-again Christians in a given area. In other words, affiliation is equivalent to salvation. Is this good? Wasn’t this Martin Luther’s contention with the existing church five hundred years ago?

Affiliation is really just one of many ways of defining “Christian”. In North America, the Barna Group chooses to define born-again Christians as someone who would agree with the following two statements:

- I have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today.
- When I die, I will go to Heaven because I have confessed my sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

This reflects about 40% of the U.S. population.¹ Do 40% of the people in America actually follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Could it be so high while there is so much crime, poverty, and violence in America today?

I had to face this difficult issue head-on in my own recent research study, the European Spiritual Estimate, ESE. In this study, I chose to measure intentionality instead of belief or affiliation. The ESE considers Christians at two levels: culturally affiliated Christians and Gospel-oriented Christians. This first category is usually a large number in Western society as it simply includes anyone who would call themselves “Christian”. In my own study, it is no surprise that 72.7% of Europeans would label themselves as “Christians”. The second category includes all who would indicate that they follow Jesus Christ and are *actively* concerned about the people in their community and their relationship with Jesus Christ. These are people that are concerned about the spiritual destiny of others. Perhaps this value is closer to what we ought to measure. But is this definition even enough? After all, isn’t the “road to Hell paved with good intentions²”?

Maybe an even better measure would be right activities instead of right beliefs or intentions. How many people have shared their faith? How many have discipled someone else? But this approach raises a whole new set of questions. Which activities are the right ones to measure?

Even if we are able to define “Christian” with some degree of satisfaction, we are still faced with that second issue: how do you count them?

In most current missions research, the method of counting is a product of what the researcher is measuring. Counting church attendance or membership simply requires consulting a denomination’s internal data. Because this is usually a very time consuming process, the researcher also needs to make the additional assumption that the information will remain the same over a long period of time- at least the lifetime of the study as well as the time until a new study is done. From my experience, this is usually a five year period. Is it likely that this type of information will be true for five years? Will it even be true after one year?

¹<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=8>

² A popular North American axiom.

In the ESE, the intentions of a population are measured to estimate the number of Gospel-oriented Christians. Current research outside of the missions community supports a common practice that has been employed by business for years- that the average of estimates of a group of people will almost always be more accurate than the estimate of any single expert.³ What is important to this approach is that this group of people needs to have an interest in giving an accurate estimate, have a diverse and independent opinion, and be able to draw on personal local knowledge. To accomplish this, the ESE respondents must have at least four continuous months of ministry in a specific European location during the last five years. The result is that the average of 515 responses estimates that 4.12% of Europeans follow Jesus Christ and are *actively* concerned about the people in their community and their relationship with Jesus Christ.

While I do not endorse or disapprove of any of the current practices in missions research, it is important to highlight this core issue of our research approach. In conclusion, there are three key points:

- 1) The missions community must be more honest and transparent with information that is presented. Most researchers have been careful in defining what is being measured. We should not make assumptions that the researchers themselves are usually not making: church membership does not make a person spiritually reborn.
- 2) We need to honestly ask ourselves about what we really need to measure. The ESE measures Gospel-oriented Christians as a starting point- not the ending point- for future measurement. Perhaps future measurements should be something slightly different: the number of Christians involved in evangelism, discipling others, or planting churches.
- 3) The missions research community needs to work at determining what measurements actually help ministry impact and then developing novel and accurate approaches for measuring these factors.

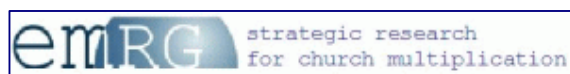
*S. Scott Friderich
24 February 2006*

³ *The Wisdom of Crowds* by [James Surowiecki](#), Anchor (August 16, 2005).

THE EUROPEAN MISSIONS RESEARCH GROUP: emRG

The European Missions Research Group (emRG), is an open-door network focusing on research for church multiplication in Europe. Our next meeting will be in Barcelona, Spain from April 3rd to 5th. In addition to gathering key research minds from across Europe, we will be discussing how to integrate various forms of research into a common and useful platform. A key part of this discussion is to understand which measurements have utility and impact for church multiplication in Europe.

Please contact Andreas Wolf (andreas@dawneurope.net) for details about emRG and this spring meeting in Spain.



THE EUROPEAN SPIRITUAL ESTIMATE

The European Spiritual Estimate (ESE) is a survey that I administered for the European Missions Research Group (emRG) from August 1 to December 12, 2005. The general purpose of the survey is to provide a reasonable estimate of the "Christianess" of Europe.



It is my hope that the ESE is the beginning of intelligent discussion of this issue based on objective and timely data. Furthermore, I hope that this information will better inform intentional prayer and the allocation of resources for the weighty gospel challenge that Europe presents to followers of Jesus in today's world.

Details about the study can be found at <http://emrg.friderich.net>. A full report will be issued March 2006.