

# SPOTLIGHT: I Love You—I Just Don't Trust You

“Do not trust a neighbor,” says Micah 7:5. Theological conservatives seem not to have trouble heeding this Bible verse, according to a recent study in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Three sociologists, led by Colorado State University’s Lynn Hempel, looked at data from the reputable General Social Survey and found that theological conservatism (including among Catholics and mainline Protestants) correlates to distrust of other people.



## THE STUDY'S FINDINGS

1 **The more religiously involved you are, the more you trust others.**

2 **The more theologically conservative you are, the less you trust others.**

BUT:

3 **For the theologically conservative, more religious involvement doesn't mean more trust.**

4 **For the religiously active, conservative theology still means less trust.**

“Theological conservatives believe in the fundamental depravity (sinfulness) of human beings and the social world and find evidence for this viewpoint in the Bible. . . [Their] worldview suggests that trust in people, social institutions, and the like is not only naïve but reflects a dangerous misplacement of trust, which . . . should be granted only to God.”

## IS CONSERVATIVE DISTRUST A PROBLEM? EXPERTS RESPOND:

**RAM CNAAN**  
University of Pennsylvania

The study found that theological conservatives trust people in their immediate circles and distrust ‘others.’ When you label that as lacking generalized trust, it sounds negative. When you realize that they live in a social arrangement that is the envy of most community scholars, it does not sound so bad.”

I’m not sure that a robust view of human sinfulness is irrational or naïve in a society in which deception, ruthlessness, and betrayal are found in every sphere. But it must be held in tension with deep recognition that everyone is made in God’s image. Loving my neighbor does not require that I trust him or her, but partnering with him or her on projects for the common good probably does.”

**CHRISTINE POHL**  
Asbury Theological Seminary

It’s unclear how important responses to these questions really are in day-to-day behavior. Theological conservatism may lead to lower levels of social trust (that’s still under debate), but it may also still lead, for example, to increased levels of civic volunteerism or increased levels of civic morality.”

CORWIN SMIDT

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## TEST YOURSELF

Condensed versions of the questions used to measure theological conservatism and trust.

- Do you believe in hell?
- Do you believe the Bible should be taken literally?
- Have you had a “born again” experience?
- Have you tried to encourage someone to accept Jesus as Savior?
- Can people be trusted?
- Would most people try to be fair to you rather than try to take advantage of you?
- Do people try to be helpful rather than just look out for themselves most of the time?