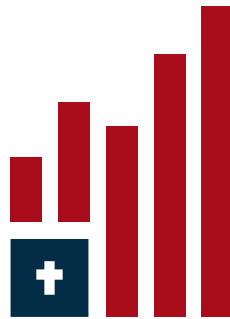


State of the Bible

USA 2021

RESEARCH FROM AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY



State of the Bible

USA 2021

RESEARCH FROM AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY

Prepared by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	i
<hr/>	
INTRODUCTION	v
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 1: THE BIBLE IN AMERICA	1
<hr/>	
SUPPLEMENT: MEASURING SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT	30
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 2: FINDING THE NEW NORMAL	35
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 3: HOPE FOR THE HURTING	61
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 4: THE GOOD LIFE	83

CHAPTER 5: GENERATION Z	103
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 6: GOOD NEIGHBORS	123
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 7: THE BIBLE IN THE AMERICAN CHURCH	151
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 8: GENEROSITY AND THE BIBLE	179
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 9: HELP WANTED: THE YEAR IN REVIEW	193
<hr/>	
APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY	221
<hr/>	
APPENDIX 2: DEFINITIONS	225
<hr/>	
APPENDIX 3: PATHWAY OF SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT	231
<hr/>	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	237



PREFACE

BY DAVID KINNAMAN

Barna Group

I've had the privilege of presiding over more than 25 years of social research focused on the intersection of faith and culture in the U.S. Much of that work has explored Americans' relationship with Christianity's sacred scriptures.

Since 2011, our team at Barna has worked alongside our friends at American Bible Society to track the State of the Bible. Over ten years, this body of work represents one of the largest data sets on how the population perceives and engages the Bible. Now, in 2021, the *State of the Bible* project enters its second decade. After helping American Bible Society to pioneer the tracking study, Barna's role is changing. From now on, American Bible Society will collect and analyze the data. Barna will collaborate with the team at ABS (in print and through online webinars) to report on the data in service of the church, using our data journalism skills to highlight

the connections between the Bible and the broader story of faith in America.

We've learned so much through the years. First, most Americans love and revere the Bible, though there is a sizable—and growing—

“The Christian community is woefully unprepared to address the questions, mindsets, and worldviews of Gen Z.”

segment of adults who are skeptical of the Bible and its influence in society. As in so much of American life, it is the extremes who are defining what's next when it comes to the Bible in America. However, the tussle between those who esteem the Bible and those who do not is contrasted by the massive group of Americans in the middle, who are mostly indifferent to the

Bible. At best, they could be described as people who lightly like the Bible; at worst, they are impervious to the claims of Scripture, believing it to be irrelevant to their lives.

Another key theme of our research is the massive gap between younger and older generations when it comes to the Bible. On balance, Millennials and Gen Z perceive and engage with the Bible vastly differently than do the oldest Gen Xers, Boomers, and Elders. My firm conviction, based on our research over the past 26 years, is that the Christian community is woefully unprepared to address the questions, mindsets, and worldviews of Gen Z. No, it's not just a stage-of-life thing that the younger set will simply “out-grow.” The sacred canopy under which they live—the plausibility of the Bible's claims, the informational world they inhabit, the

way screens shape their perceptions of reality—is quite disconnected from the structures of discipleship that most congregations employ. I believe the church is going to need new models of discipleship (or new wineskins, as Jesus described) to address the actual questions younger generations are asking of the Bible and of belief in general.

Still, whether for or against, young or old, the Bible continues to cast a long shadow over the U.S. population. And that’s a good thing—an opportunity to be leveraged! Coming out of COVID-19, as Americans rethink their relationship to all matters of faith, there will be inevitable twists and turns in the story of the Bible in America. And alongside the good people of American Bible Society, we look forward to guiding Christian leaders along that road.



DAVID KINNAMAN

David Kinnaman is the author of the bestselling books *Faith For Exiles*, *Good Faith*, *You Lost Me*, and *unChristian*. He is president of Barna Group, a leading research and communications company that works with churches, nonprofits, and businesses ranging from film studios to financial services. Since 1995, David has directed interviews with more than two million individuals and overseen thousands of U.S. and global research studies. He lives in California with his three children.



INTRODUCTION

BY JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

American Bible Society

The original *State of the Bible* research project began in 1812. That's right—1812. You might even say American Bible Society was founded to answer the needs of that first American Bible research project.

It all started when missionaries Samuel Mills and John Schermerhorn left New England to tour the United States and bring a report of its spiritual condition, especially along the western frontier. The men traveled through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and on down the Mississippi river to New Orleans. They toured the South and returned up the Eastern Seaboard, visiting the Carolinas and Virginia along the way. Two years later, during 1814–15, Mills again visited the American West. This time he was joined by fellow missionary Daniel Smith. Once again, Mills found the nation in a difficult state:

Everywhere they went they found a dearth of Bibles, ministers, and churches; a lack of respect for the Sabbath; and a general disregard among the inhabitants of the West for the condition of their souls. What existed in abundance was profanity, gambling, drinking, and fighting.... Most of the citizens of the West still did not have access to ministers, churches, or Bibles.¹

Of course, that original Bible research project wasn't known by the *State of the Bible* name, but it had many of the same goals. First, Mills set out to understand the young American nation's condition with regard to the Bible, faith, and the church. Though he didn't

“The state of the nation and the state of the *Bible in the nation* are inextricably linked.”

use modern polling, he traveled widely, observing and listening carefully to the people he met. Second, he reported his findings to leaders of the American church, helping them see the best path forward and calling them to take unified action.

In 1816, Mills's second report sparked the formation of American Bible Society, under the leadership of some of the same visionaries who founded our country, including John Quincy Adams (sixth U.S. President), John Jay (first Chief Justice), and Elias Boudinot (Director of the U.S. Mint). These leaders understood that the state of the nation and the state of the *Bible in the nation* are inextricably linked. These nineteenth-century visionaries asked approximately

¹ Raymond, D. B. (2014). The Legacy of Samuel J. Mills Jr. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 38(4), 207–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693931403800413>

100 local Bible societies to unite under a singular mission. They called for a national Bible society that would serve alongside the churches to make the Bible available to every person in a language and format each could understand and afford, so all people would have the opportunity to experience its life-changing message. On May 21, 1816, these visionary leaders, spurred on by Mills's report, gathered on the steps of City Hall in New York City to announce the formation of American Bible Society.

205 YEARS OF BIBLE MINISTRY

In 2021, as we launch the second decade of modern *State of the Bible* research, we also celebrate 205 years of uninterrupted service. Since its founding in 1816, American Bible Society has been helping people experience God through the Bible. Today, American Bible Society translates the Bible, distributes the Bible, engages people with the Bible, helps hurting people find restoration through the Bible, and advocates for the Bible's message of hope in the United States and around the world. Through the church and a worldwide network of Bible Societies operating in over 240 countries and territories, we carry the gospel message where it is needed most.

So, you might be asking yourself, “Where *is* the Bible needed most?” It's a good question, but it's not a *new* question. Based on the historical work of American Bible Society—and even more substantially on the work of the church—let me suggest three responses:

1. **The Bible is needed where it is not available.** Access to the Bible is a human right. Currently, though, a billion

people in the world do not have access to the Bible because it has not been translated into their language. Nobody should be forced to read the Bible; neither should they be denied the opportunity to read it and believe it.

2. **The Bible is needed where people are hurting.** The sad truth about our world is that people everywhere endure pain. Often we even inflict pain on others. In the midst of real trauma, grief, and affliction, the Bible brings comfort to those who seek it. In the pages of the Bible we find a God who sees us and a God who desires to be with us.
3. **The Bible is needed where wisdom is in short supply.** In every domain of life and society, human beings are faced with our own limitations. As parents, children, neighbors, citizens, employees, and employers ... in a multitude of roles we face responsibilities that call for wisdom. Nobody can see the future, but we dream of a better future for ourselves, our children, our fellow Americans, and our fellow humans around the world. In the Bible, we find wisdom that has stood the test of time. We discover perspective on our questions that transcends our own limited field of view. For people who lack wisdom and seek understanding, the Bible is an open invitation to a life deeply rooted in relationship with God and in transformative Christian community.

Certainly there are other ways to answer the question, “Where is the Bible needed most?” In the pages of this *State of the Bible* ebook, you will find data suggesting the Bible faces challenges in America.

You will also find data suggesting the Bible can help Americans face our challenges with hope and resilience.

A SECOND DECADE OF BIBLE RESEARCH

In 2011, American Bible Society commissioned the Barna Group to conduct the first modern *State of the Bible* research project. The Barna team helped ABS bring our tradition of Bible research into the twenty-first century by using the tools of public opinion polling to “listen at scale” to the experiences and perspectives of all American adults. In the decade that followed, we were inspired by the team at Barna and by our ministry partners to develop our own in-house research capabilities. Our relationship with Barna has changed over the years from commissioning the *State of the Bible* research to collaborating with Barna researchers and finally to conducting the research and coordinating the publishing work.

BIBLE FOCUSED. RESEARCH INFORMED.

Our *State of the Bible* research team is deeply committed to the Bible, and our work is informed by rigorous inquiry into the Bible’s role in transforming people and societies. Our research and experience tell us the Bible makes us more generous, more compassionate, more loving toward our neighbors, and more hopeful about our future in Christ. These are encouraging findings, but we’re not done asking questions and uncovering insights.

In January 2021, we reached out to a representative sample of American adults to learn about their experiences with the Bible in

their daily lives. We conducted 3,354 online interviews with American adults in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In addition to adults, we invited a small number of Gen Z youth to participate in the survey, yielding an additional 91 responses that provide directional insights into the developing perspectives of America's youngest generation.²

This ebook is our team's effort to tell the story of the Bible in America through the words and experiences of our respondents. As we've analyzed the data, three key research themes have emerged that are guiding our thinking throughout this ebook: (1) the Movable Middle, (2) human flourishing, and (3) trauma and pain.

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVABLE MIDDLE

Since 2018, we have described Scripture engagement in five measurable segments, ranging from Bible Disengaged at the low end to Bible Centered at the upper end.³ Researchers find the Scripture Engagement Scale and these segments powerful and useful tools, but non-researchers may find them overly complex and even confusing. For simplicity, we often referred to the middle two segments (Bible Neutral and Bible Friendly) as the "Movable Middle."

This year, we have chosen to simplify the way we report on Scripture engagement by reducing our segmentation from five parts to three. We are adopting the Movable Middle moniker to refer to

² See Appendix 1: Methodology, page 221.

³ For more on measuring Scripture engagement, see the article on page 30.

those who are “test-driving the Bible.” This segment of American adults has grown over the past three years, and we will focus more attention there for now.

Our three Scripture engagement segments will be reported using the following categories (see “Measuring Scripture Engagement” on page 30 for more details):

1. **Scripture Engaged** refers to anyone who would have been classified in prior reports as either Bible Engaged or Bible Centered.
2. **Movable Middle** refers to those who are in the Bible Neutral or Bible Friendly categories
3. **Bible Disengaged** is the same as before and carries the same name.

FLOURISHING AND THE BIBLE

In 2020, we introduced readers to the measurement of Human Flourishing as defined by Dr. Tyler Vanderweele’s team at Harvard University’s T. H. Chan School of Public Health. Based on our 2020 *State of the Bible* research, we jointly published a brief peer-reviewed paper in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, focusing on normal levels of flourishing in the American population and how COVID-19 impacted each of the six domains of flourishing.⁴

4 VanderWeele, T.J., Fulks, J., Plake, J.F. et al. National Well-Being Measures Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Online Samples. *J GEN INTERN MED* 36, 248–250 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-020-06274-3>

This year we will share more about the relationship between the Bible and human flourishing. After investigating Scripture engagement and flourishing together in three consecutive studies, we have deeper insights into how the Bible is associated with overall well-being.

TRAUMA AND PAIN

Finally, evidence is mounting that the Bible provides resources for people enduring trauma, pain, and grief. For many Americans, 2020 highlighted our vulnerability to disease, disaster, mistreatment, and misunderstanding. Engaging with Scripture seems to have little connection to the incidence of trouble in a person's life. Even Jesus said, "While you are in the world, you will have to suffer" (John 16:33). Still, for those who are hurting, the Bible offers comfort.

A recent study conducted among jail inmates in Richmond, Virginia, showed that American Bible Society's Bible-based, volunteer-led Trauma Healing ministry was extraordinarily effective in helping incarcerated people recover from their trauma. You can read more about that research at abs.bible/healingforinmates.

UNDERSTANDING THE STATE OF THE BIBLE

In 2020, we experimented with releasing our annual *State of the Bible* report in a serialized format, beginning with an initial release in the summer and following that with monthly updates. That

approach turned out to be a tremendous success. It allowed readers time to digest this large study in more manageable chunks.

This year, we will continue that serialized approach. Rather than issuing a single report, we are beginning by releasing two major chapters in May. Additional chapters will be released throughout the year.

The initial release of this ebook contains the following chapters:

1. **The Bible in America** examines Scripture engagement and key trends around the Bible since our last study in 2020.
2. **The New Normal** looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's relationship with the Bible and examines the role of the church in helping people progress down the Pathway of Scripture Engagement (see page 231 for more on the *Pathway of Scripture Engagement*).

Each chapter contains related data and analysis based on responses to the *State of the Bible 2021* survey. At the end of each chapter we offer **next steps** for readers who want to grow in their relationship with God through Scripture.

FUTURE INSTALLMENTS

Between June and December, we will release new chapters in the *State of the Bible 2021* story. Here is what you can expect in the coming months:

1. **Hope for the Hurting** will examine how people turn to the Bible in times of stress and how Scripture can help hurting people understand and cope with their heart wounds.
2. **The Good Life** will explore the connection between the Bible and holistic health, using research-validated measures of human flourishing, hope, and well-being.
3. **Generation Z** will focus on America's youngest adult generation, examining the Bible's role in faith formation among emerging adults.
4. **Good Neighbors** will describe the relationship between Scripture engagement and the kinds of prosocial behaviors that make for healthy communities.
5. **The Bible and the American Church** will profile the relationship that different branches of the American church have with Scripture.
6. This double feature will include a look at **The Bible and the Military** and an examination of **The Bible, Money, and Generosity**.
7. **The Year in Review** will recap the major stories from 2021 and offer an updated *State of the Bible* ebook with all the chapters included.

Our research tells us clearly that an individual's relationship with the Bible is the single greatest influence on her or his overall spiritual health, period. Nothing else comes close.

The 2021 *State of the Bible*, contains scientific research about America, the church, the Bible. We will discuss how gender, race, faith

tradition, relationships, and access to technology influence Americans' experience with God. The data will paint a picture of how COVID-19 has shattered families, emptied bank accounts, taken jobs, and distanced relationships. That picture is vivid and sometimes challenging, but it is not hopeless. Millions of Americans face these challenges with hope that they find in the Bible.

Whether you are a member of the media, a church leader, a fellow Christian, an adherent of another faith, or someone who claims no faith at all, this research is an invitation for you to consider the Bible's influence on your own life.

If you wish you used the Bible more frequently, you're not alone. We will give you suggestions about how your dream can be realized.

If you have tried the Bible and just don't understand it, let this research point you to the tools being used by others to explore and understand the Bible better.

We invite you to consider the state of the Bible in your life and start or continue your journey with God's Word today.



JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

Dr. John Plake is a researcher with a pastor's heart. He bridges the worlds of social science, business intelligence, and spiritual formation, helping Christian leaders understand how people grow in Christ.

Dr. Plake serves as director of Ministry Intelligence at American Bible Society and is the editor-in-chief of the *State of the Bible 2021* ebook. Over 31 years of full-time ministry, John has served as a pastor, missionary, professor, and researcher.

He is an ordained minister with a Ph.D. in intercultural studies. He lives with his family in Wilmington, Delaware.

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THE BIBLE IN AMERICA

*The miracle of the Bible is not
that it records the rage of the oppressed.
The miracle is that it has more to say.*

Rev. Esau McCaulley, Ph.D.

Esau McCaulley’s *New York Times* op-ed was published in response to the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, as demonstrations for racial justice broke out across America during the pandemic. Writing as a biblical scholar, he notes that the context of the Bible includes injustice, oppression, lament, and even rage. McCaulley explains that what he calls the Bible’s “trauma literature” (like Psalm 137) gives a place for rage and lament, but the biblical story doesn’t stop there. Eventually rage

gives way to hope and justice, he writes, “and we find the spiritual resources to make this transition at the cross.”

Over the past year, America has faced pandemic and injustice, grief and rage. As the nation looks toward a new year, many are questioning what’s next. Is there a place for lament and grief? Can the founders’ aspiration to “liberty and justice for all” be realized in our day? Does a 2,000-year-old book have anything to say that will help us navigate our twenty-first-century world?

McCaulley reminds us that the biblical narrative points to hope. In spite of brokenness, God is at work to bring about healing.

In 2021, as we report on our annual *State of the Bible* research, these truths are a helpful paradigm. Our aim is to contextualize the United States’ complicated relationship with the Bible following a season of significant global and national distress.

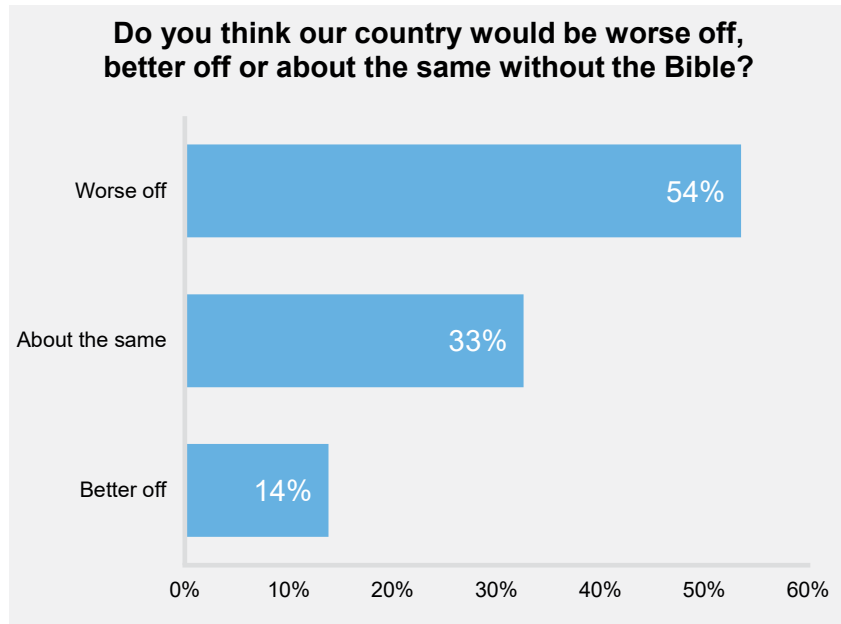
We’ll also examine signs of hope that the Bible remains a strong foundation for America and leads to transformation for both individuals and communities. Further, there is great opportunity for many to move from openness to the Bible to deeper engagement with God’s Word.

WHAT DO AMERICANS THINK ABOUT THE BIBLE?

THE BIBLE'S INFLUENCE IN THE U.S.

First, let's look at how Americans see both the Bible, and the Bible's impact on the nation.

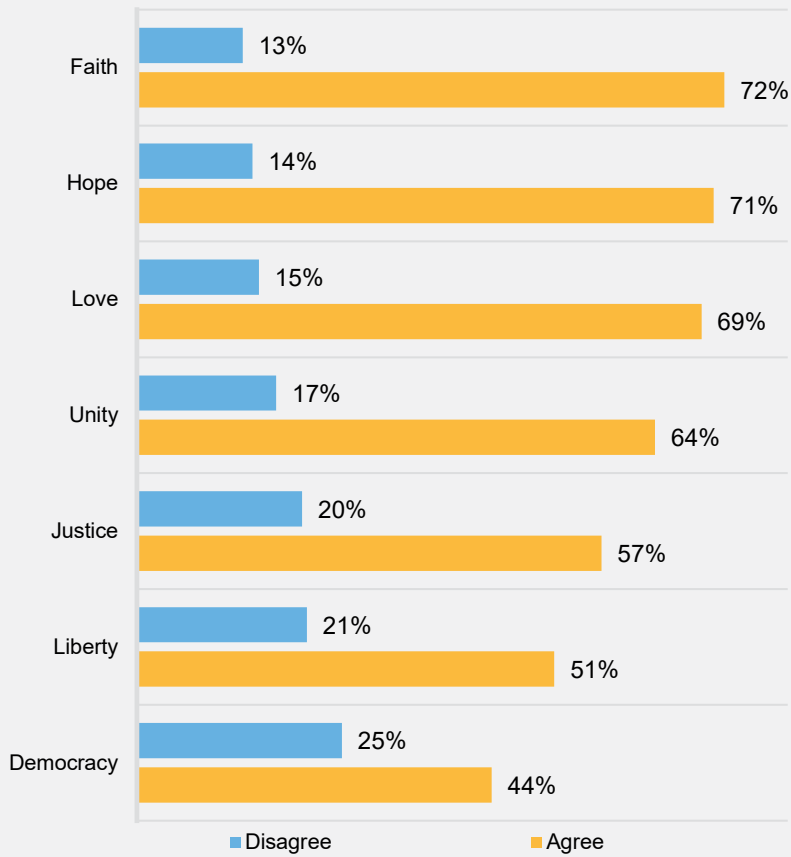
Over half of U.S. adults (54%) believe that America would be worse off without the Bible, which is actually a 5-percent increase since last year (49% in 2020). One in seven Americans (14%) believes the nation would be better without the Bible, essentially the same as last year's 13 percent. While the proportion with a more negative view remained about the same, there has been a shift from last year for those in the middle. One in three American adults (33%) believe America would be the same with or without the Bible. Five percent of those who were ambivalent last year have moved to a more Bible-affirming view in 2021.



This belief in the Bible’s value to the United States aligns with a sense that the Bible upholds American values. Faith (72%), hope (71%), and love (69%) (among other qualities) are widely agreed upon as values the Bible is essential for sustaining.

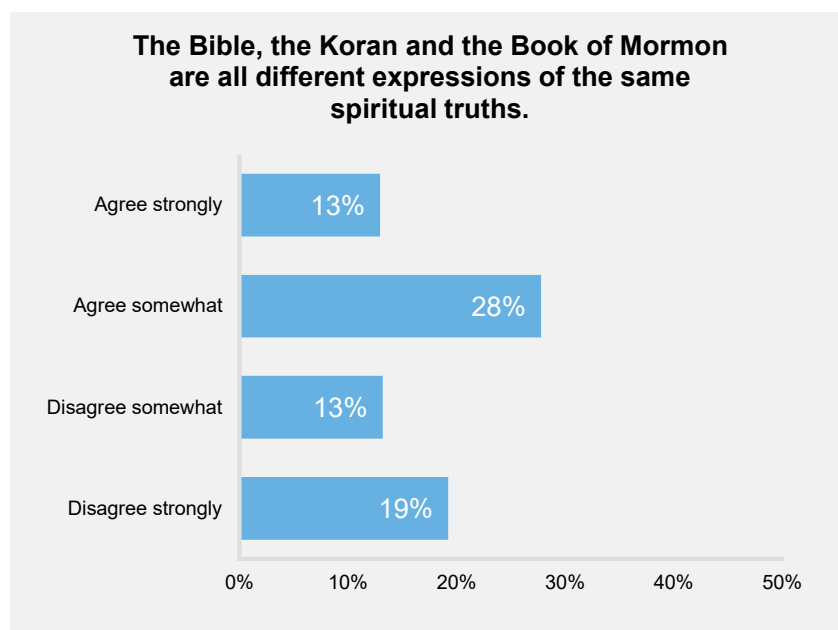
Of the listed American values, only democracy failed to garner agreement from a majority of respondents when asked if the Bible’s teachings are “essential to sustaining the following American ideals.” While only 44 percent agree that the Bible’s teachings underpin American democracy, just one in four disagrees, leaving nearly one third (31%) unsure about the connection between the Bible and democracy.

The Bible's teachings are essential to sustaining the following American ideals:



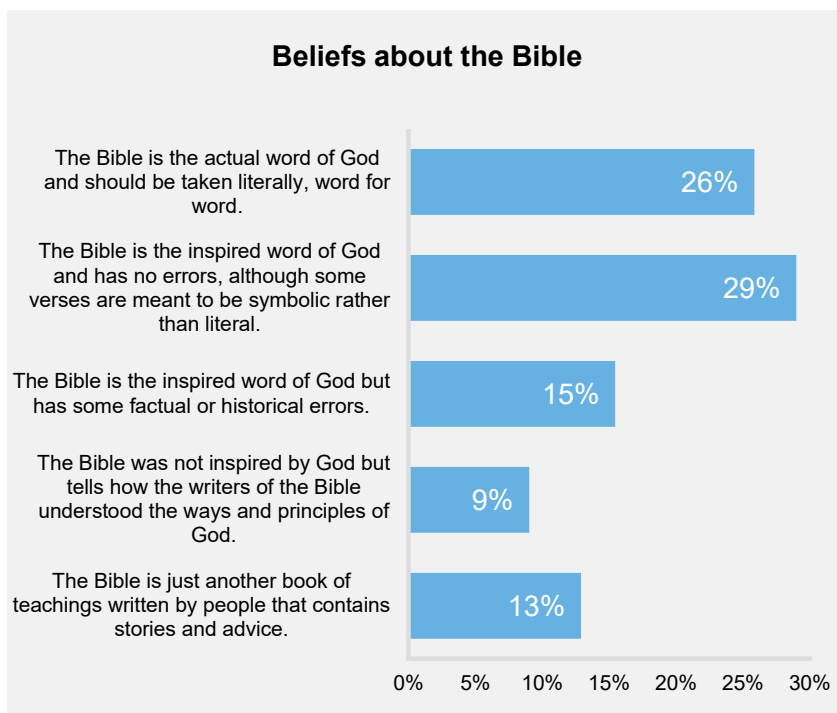
THE BIBLE AS A UNIQUE, TRUE, AND MEANINGFUL WORK

The Bible presents a singular vision of the world's history, purpose, and future. For many Americans, though, the uniqueness of the Bible is not well understood. Presently, four in ten Americans (41%) either somewhat or strongly agree the Bible, the Koran, and the Book of Mormon are all different expressions of the same spiritual truths. Only one third (32%) see the Bible as unique or distinct from other spiritual books.



Interestingly, most descriptions of what the Bible actually is still fall within the realm of Christian orthodoxy. One-quarter of respondents (26%) believes the Bible is the actual word of God and should

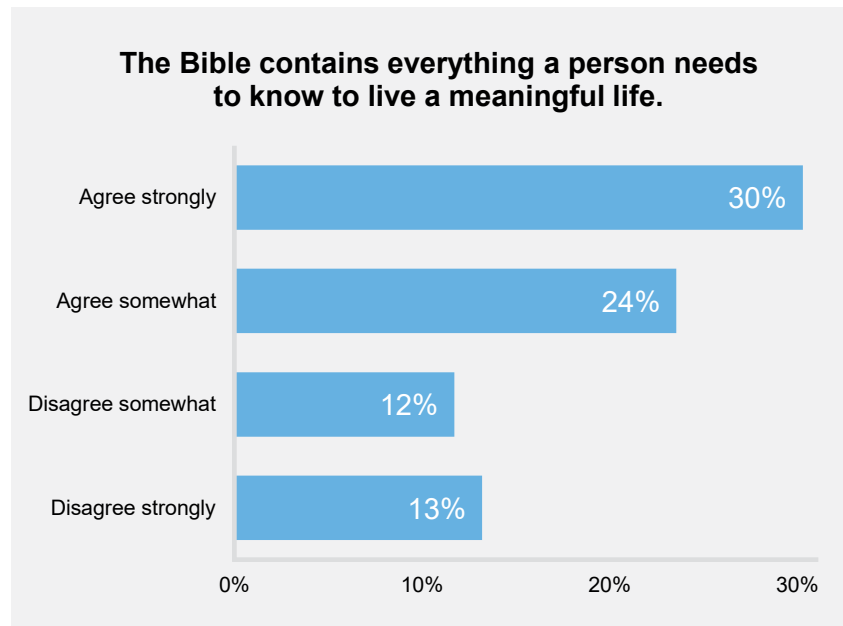
be taken literally. Three in ten (29%) hold the view that the Bible is the word of God and, though it does not have errors, parts of it can be interpreted both literally and symbolically. Sixteen percent say the Bible has some historical or factual errors but is still the word of God. Taken together, seven in ten Americans claim a view that regards Scripture as the word of God (71%). **Over half of American adults (55%) hold what is known to be a “high” view of Scripture, which deems the Bible without error.**



A much smaller proportion of Americans holds lower views of the Bible. One in eight (13%) indicates that the Bible is just another book that contains stories and advice. One in ten (9%) holds the

view that the Bible is not inspired by God, but rather reveals the writers' understanding of the principles of God. Some Americans (10%) take a Bible Hostile stance, believing the Bible was written to control or manipulate people.

A slight majority of Americans agrees that Scripture's message is particularly helpful; **54 percent say the Bible contains everything a person needs to live a meaningful life.** This view has fallen significantly since last year when over two thirds of adults (68%) affirmed the Bible as an important source of wisdom.

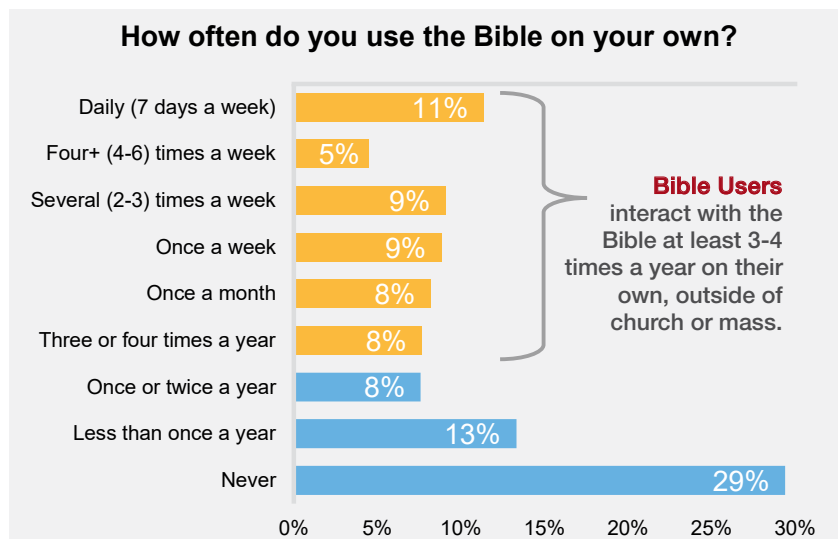


HOW DO AMERICANS ENGAGE WITH THE BIBLE?

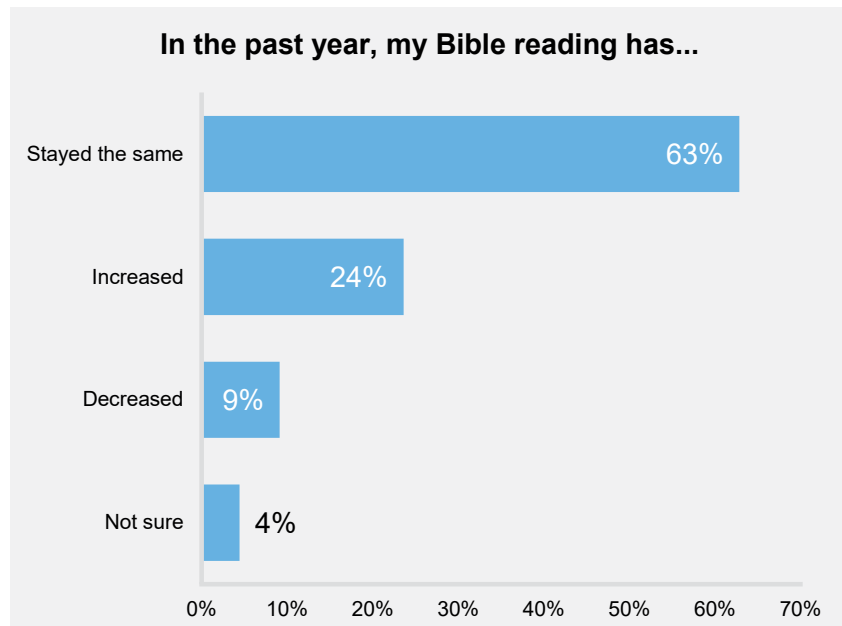
FREQUENCY OF BIBLE USE

Our data reveal that over 181 million Americans opened a Bible in the past year. This number is up significantly (7.1%) from 2020, when 169 million adults used the Bible at least occasionally. In 2021, we estimate that 128 million American adults reach for the Bible with regularity.

Just over one-third of U.S. adults (34%) read the Bible once a week or more, while half (50%) read the Bible less than twice a year (including “never”). In between these two extremes, we find those who read the Bible more than twice a year, but not on a weekly basis (16%). **Overall, one in six U.S. adults (16%) reads the Bible most days during the week, up from 12 percent in 2020.**



Nearly two in three Americans (63%) report their Bible usage is the same as last year, while one in ten (9%) says it has decreased. One in four U.S. adults (24%), however, reports a more frequent Bible-reading habit.



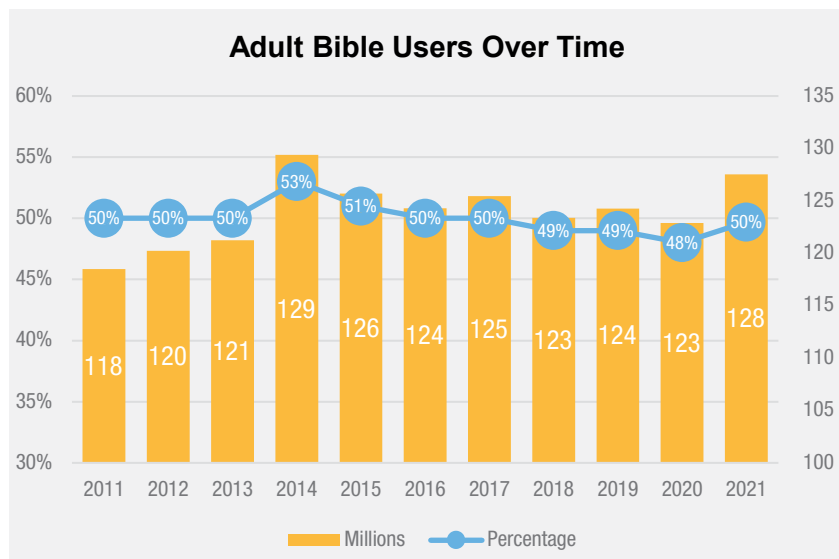
PROFILING BIBLE USERS

From here, we'll look more closely at **Bible Users**, defined as individuals who read, listen to, or pray with the Bible on their own at least three or four times a year outside of a church service or church event.

The proportion of Bible Users in the United States has remained fairly constant for the past decade. In typical years, approximately

half of American adults reach for the Bible at least occasionally. In 2014, our team estimated that an all-time high of 53 percent of American adults were Bible Users, and the low point of 48 percent was reached in 2019. As the adult population of the United States has grown from 237 million in 2011 to nearly 257 million today, the number of adult Bible Users in the nation has grown by 10 million to its current level of 128 million.

In January 2020, we estimated that Bible Users had reached a ten-year nadir, registering only 48 percent of Americans. In June, as COVID-19 took hold, we recorded a drop in the proportion of Americans who **never** use the Bible. That figure fell from 35 percent in 2019 to 31 percent in the summer of 2020. As of January 2021, **the proportion of American adults who never use the Bible has fallen to 29 percent, its lowest point since 2016.** Along with the drop in *nevers*, we observed a modest rise in Bible Users.



Who are these one in two Americans (50%) who are Bible Users today? Here's a quick profile:



Bible Users are not just Christians. In fact, 37 percent of those who self-identify with other religions also read the Bible at least three to four times a year. This suggests that many people of other religions are interested enough to interact with the Bible, at least occasionally.



Bible Users tend to be older. Three in ten Boomers and Elders (31%) interact with the Bible multiple times a week. Fewer than half as many members of Gen Z (14%) do the same. Less than half of Gen Z are Bible Users (43%), significantly lower than both Boomers and Elders.



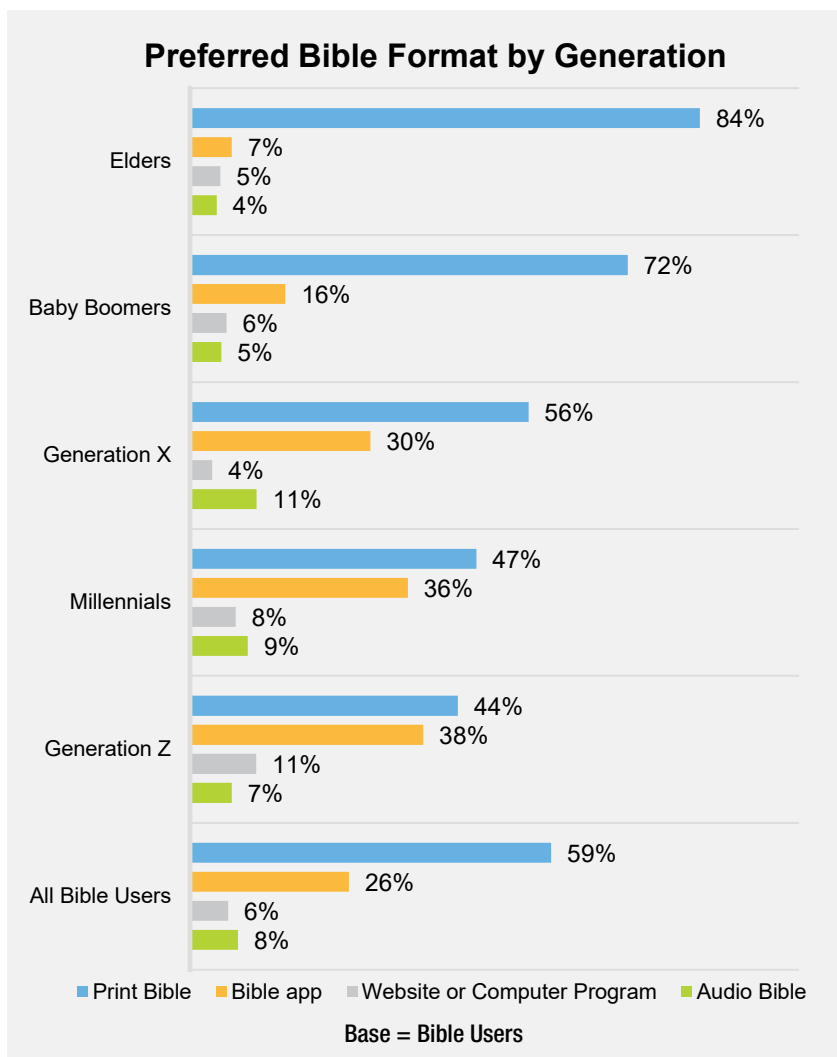
Bible Users are ethnically diverse. Seven in ten Black Americans (69%) and over half of Hispanic Americans (52%) are Bible Users. White Americans (46%) and Asian Americans (44%), by comparison, are less likely to be Bible Users.



Bible Users are more likely to live in the American South than in other regions of the country. Nearly three in five adults in the South are Bible Users (57%), compared to less than half of adults in the Northeast (46%), Midwest (45%), or West (44%) regions.

ON-SCREEN OR ON THE PAGE

On the other side of 2020—a year that, due to social distancing, increased device-dependency in nearly every aspect of life—six in ten Americans (59%) still indicate they prefer print or paper Bibles.



Those who are Scripture Engaged are about twice as likely to prefer reading the Bible on their smartphones or tablets (27%) as the Bible Disengaged (14%). Audio formats and computer programs trail behind (at 8% and 6%, respectively).

Over one quarter of American adults prefers to use the Bible on a smartphone or tablet.

Smartphone or tablet use of the Bible among younger generations is increasingly popular, preferred by 38 percent of Gen Z (primarily made up of “Screenagers” at the moment) and 36 percent of Millennials. Only a slightly higher percent prefer a print Bible (44% Gen Z, 47% Millennials). Fewer than half of

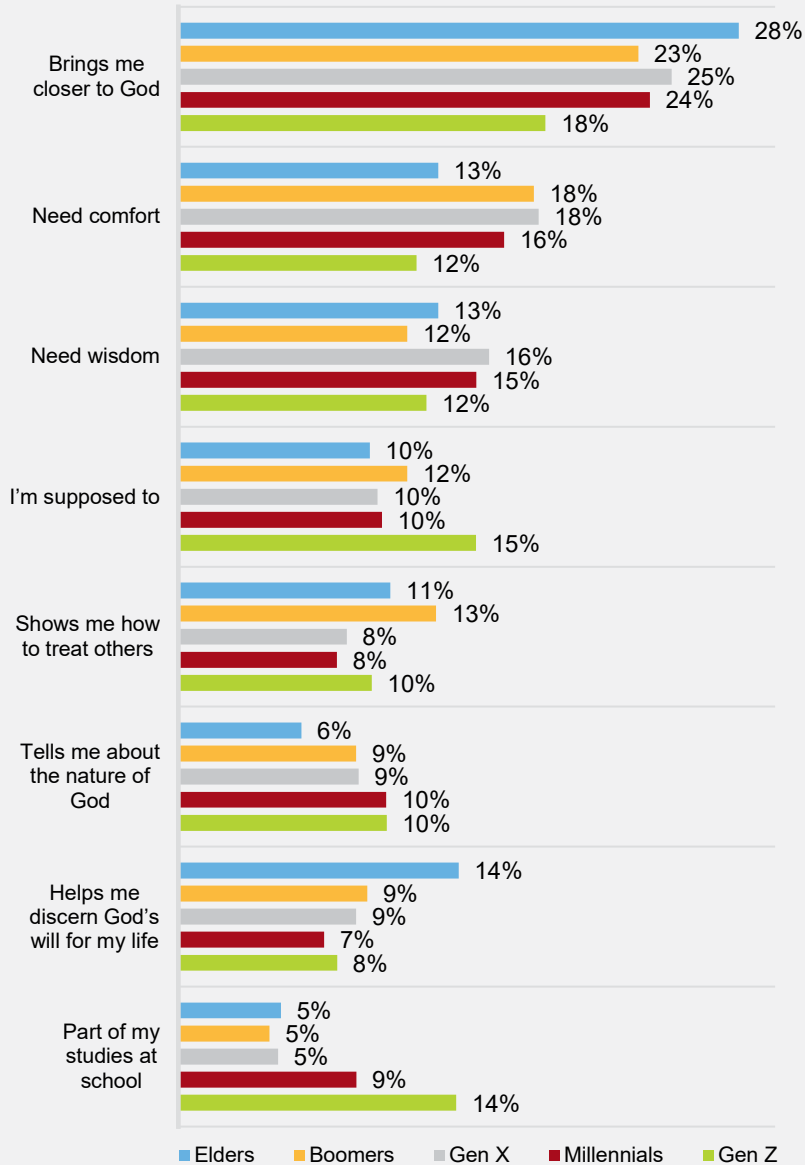
Gen Z and Millennials prefer print Bibles, compared to digital and audio formats. Meanwhile, as few as 7 percent of Elders opt to read their Bibles from a screen, and 84 percent prefer print.

MOTIVATIONS, EMOTIONS, AND FRUSTRATIONS SURROUNDING BIBLE USAGE

What motivates people to read the Bible? Mostly, Americans believe it brings them closer to God (24%) or offers comfort (16%).

These experiences drive Bible-reading across generations, with some notable exceptions. Gen Z respondents are more likely to say they read Scripture because “I know I’m supposed to” (15%) and “It’s part of my studies at school” (14%), suggesting that, at least in this season, **Bible-reading may still seem an obligation to emerging adults.** Responses from Boomers and Elders lean toward relationship and the impact they experience when they sense God’s

Reasons for Bible Use by Generation



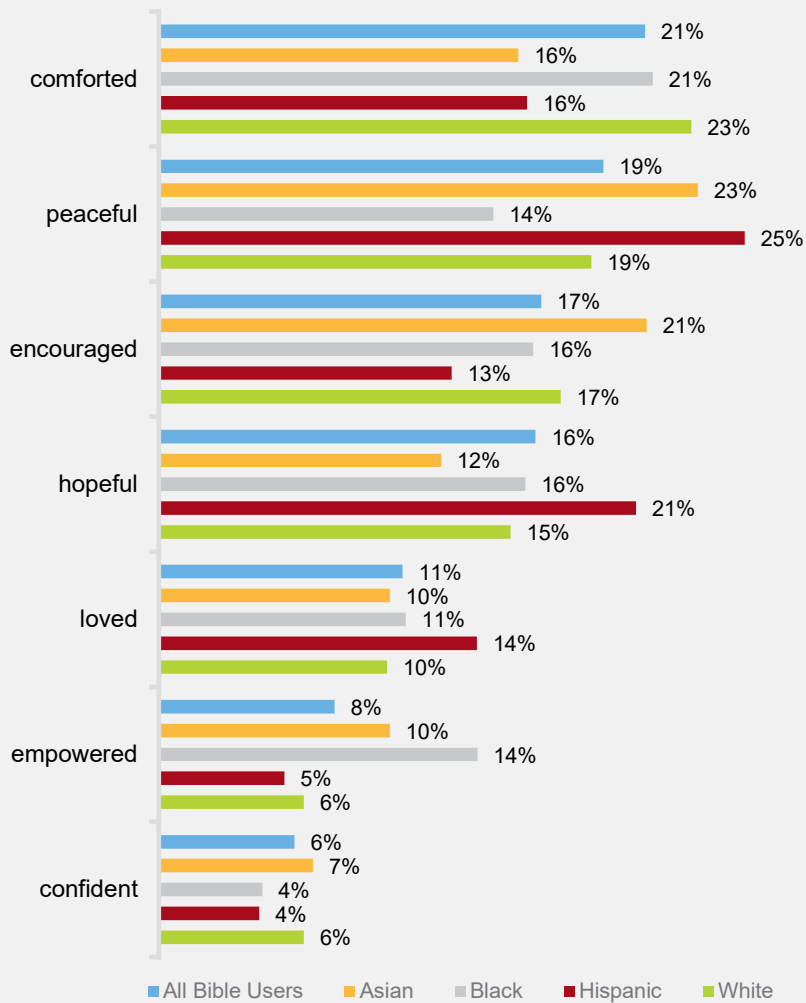
presence, wisdom, and comfort. Elders are more likely to read the Bible to make decisions (14%). When combined with a need for wisdom (13%), these responses suggest God is a source of wisdom. In summary, the Bible is often found to be what people need at critical times in their lives. What they need may vary by life stages.

With these positive motivations to engage, people are also quick to describe the Bible as a feel-good read. One in five feels comforted (21%) or peaceful (19%), with encouraged (17%) and hopeful (16%) also among the top favorable words associated with Bible use. Gen Z less often feel comforted (14%), and Boomers less often feel peaceful (18%).

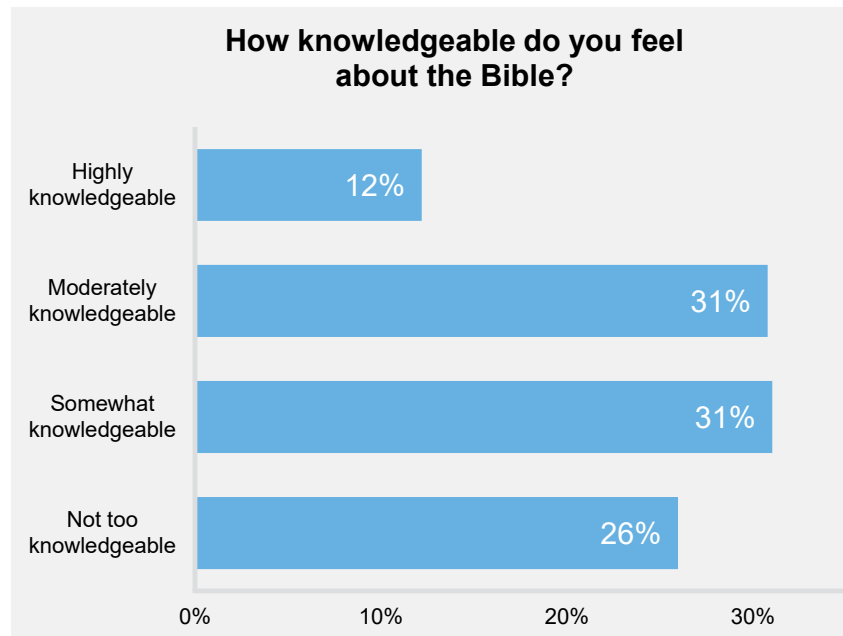
By race and ethnicity, Black (16%) and Hispanic (21%) Americans are somewhat more likely to say Bible use makes them feel hopeful than other ethnicities. Accordingly, it's worth noting that Black adults also report the biggest change in their annual Bible reading. Nearly two in five Black respondents (38%) say they have turned to Scripture more often this year than last.

Given all these positive Scripture encounters, when pressed to identify frustrations in their Bible use, U.S. adults' plurality response (25%) is that they have no frustrations. Being unsure where to start (16%) or not having time for Bible engagement (15%) are the chief complaints. Only 11 percent say they struggle to feel excited about Bible use. Sometimes the language (12%) and layout (11%) or a reader's lack of understanding of stories (10%) or biblical history (8%) create barriers.

Favorable Emotions from Bible Use

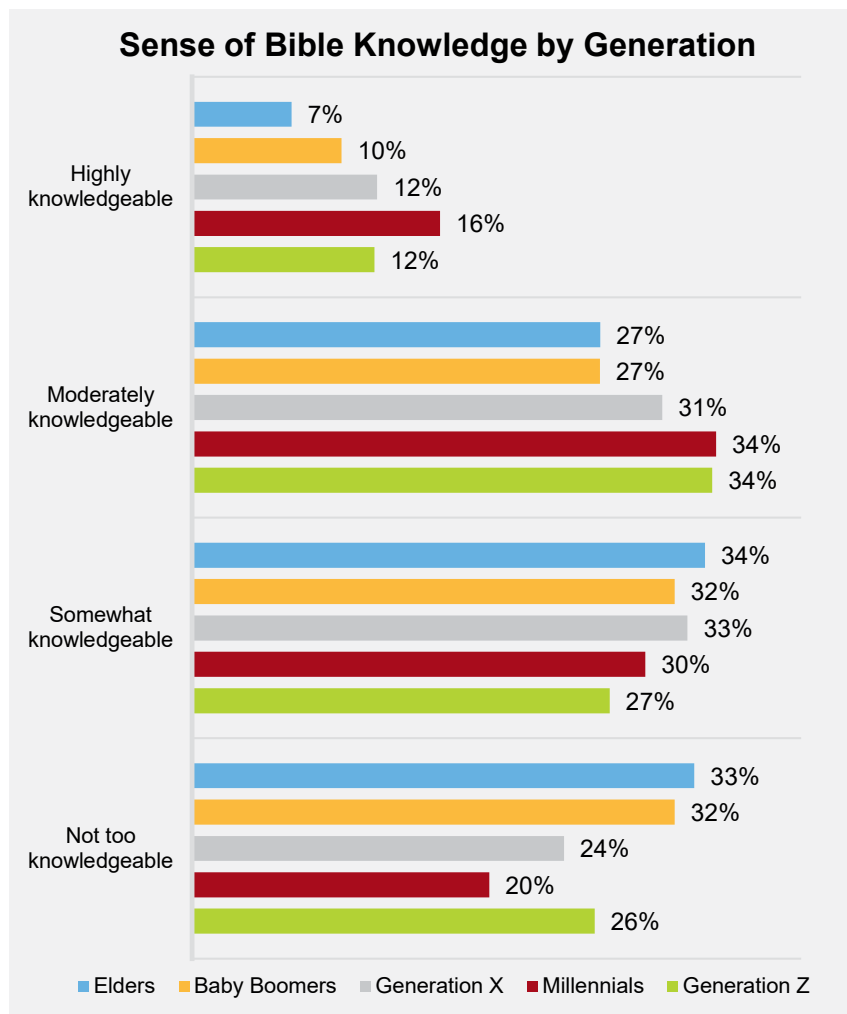


For the most part, U.S. adults don't want to assume too much of their knowledge of Scripture. Three out of five respondents place themselves in at a mid-point on Bible knowledge (31% somewhat or 31% moderately knowledgeable). In general, the more people are engaged with the Bible, the more knowledgeable they feel. At the extremes, we find a minority (12%) who call themselves highly knowledgeable, while more than double that feel they are not too knowledgeable about the Bible (26%).



Millennials claim the highest knowledge of Scripture, with 16 percent saying that they are “highly knowledgeable,” compared to both Gen X and Gen Z (12%). Gen Z and Millennials, though significantly less engaged with Scripture and less frequent users of the

Bible than Boomers and Elders, claim the highest knowledge of its contents. Meanwhile, Elders and Baby Boomers have higher rates of engaging with Scripture, yet they self-assess as “highly knowledgeable” much less frequently than younger generations (10% Boomers, 7% Elders).



SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT PROFILES AND TRENDS

Having looked at how U.S. adults at large relate to the Bible, we'll now examine some of the nuances of these perceptions and habits through American Bible Society's Scripture engagement categories. **See “Measuring Scripture Engagement” on page 30 for more details on the grouping and history of these categories.**

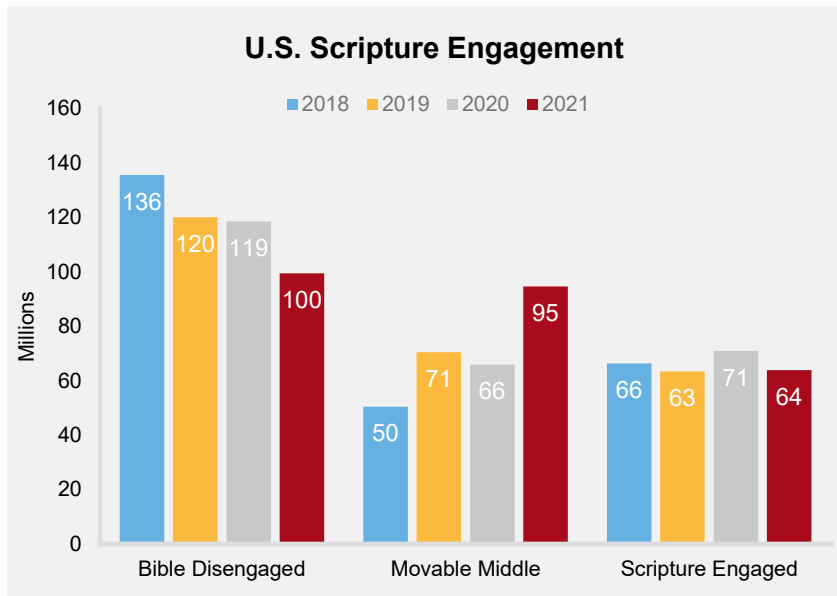
State of the Bible researchers determine levels of Scripture engagement using three important factors:

1. Frequency of interaction with the Bible
2. Spiritual impact of the Bible on the user
3. Moral centrality of the Bible in the user's life

Since 2018, the percentage of the population that scores Scripture Engaged has largely remained the same. The major shift, meanwhile, is happening in the form of an exodus from the Bible Disengaged to the Movable Middle. In 2018, over half of the population was considered disengaged (54%). For the next two years, the population of the Disengaged remained similar: 47 percent in 2019, and 46 percent in 2020. This year, however, the number of Bible Disengaged people has dropped sharply to 39 percent. **Those who once were disengaged have moved to what we are now calling the “Movable Middle.”** This middle group has jumped up since 2020, from one-quarter of the population (26%) to over one-third (37%).

It's clear that hearts are being softened to the Bible. But will this willingness to open Scripture—even if infrequently—evolve into a

deeper engagement with the message? Or will middling Bible usage satisfy a need for “just enough?” Let’s zoom in on each of these three groups to learn more about their demographic profiles, as well as telling patterns in their beliefs and behaviors related to Scripture.

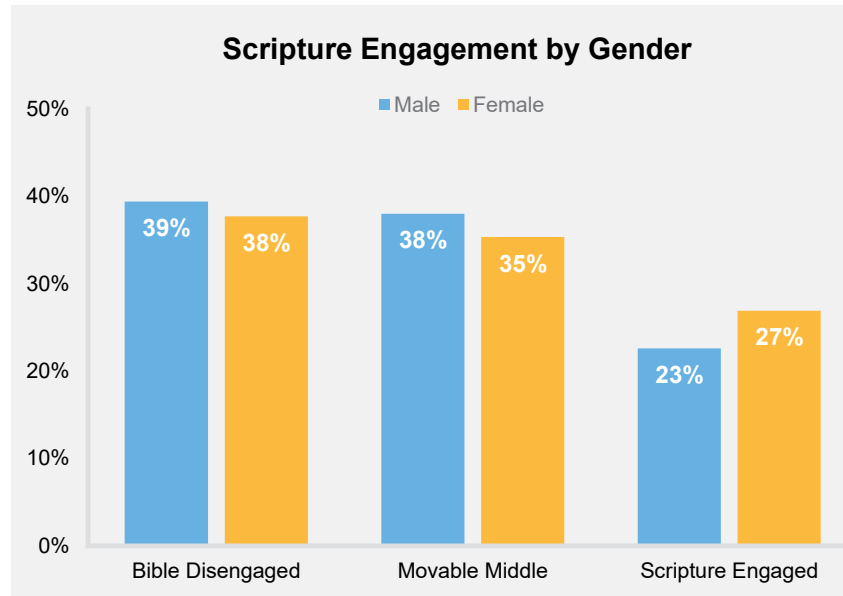


SCRIPTURE ENGAGED

Last year, we noted significant negative shifts in women’s Bible engagement, most likely due to life disruptions that occurred and the emotional turmoil that came with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since mid-2020, however, **women have returned to being more Scripture Engaged than men (27% vs. 23%).**

Consistent with previous studies, **Black Americans score higher than other groups in being Scripture Engaged (38%).** Second to

Black Americans, over one in four Hispanic Americans (26%) is in this category.

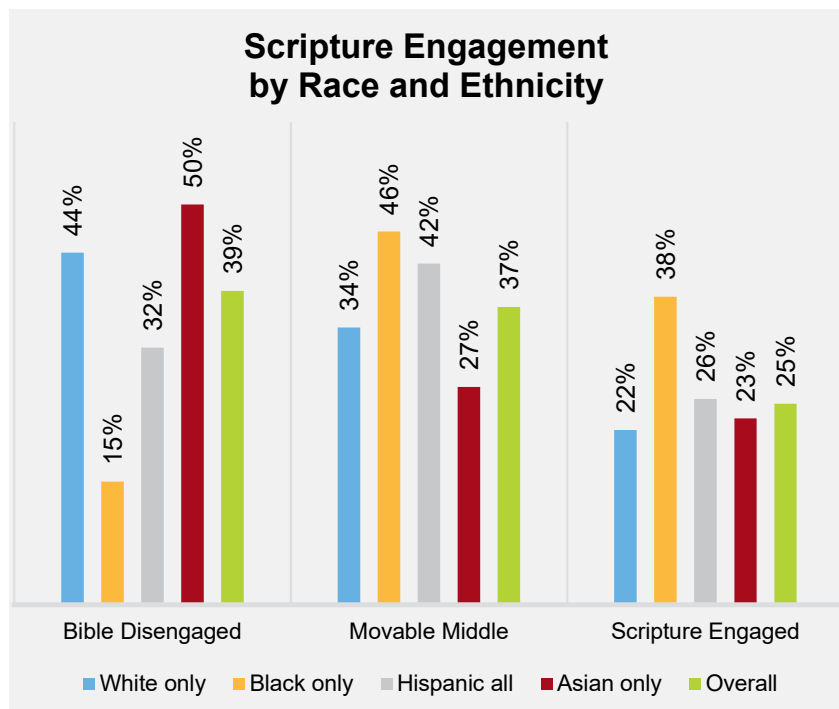


Evangelicals lead the way with Scripture engagement scores. Almost half of evangelical Protestants (46%) are Scripture Engaged (with 16% of those scoring high enough to be considered Bible Centered). Just behind evangelicals, historically Black Protestants rate the highest in Scripture Engagement with almost two in five (38%) fitting the criteria for Scripture Engaged.

The more people are engaged with Scripture, the more likely they are to rate their Scriptural knowledge higher—but not too high. Even those who are Scripture Engaged tend to choose “moderately knowledgeable” (45%) over “highly knowledgeable” (28%). In

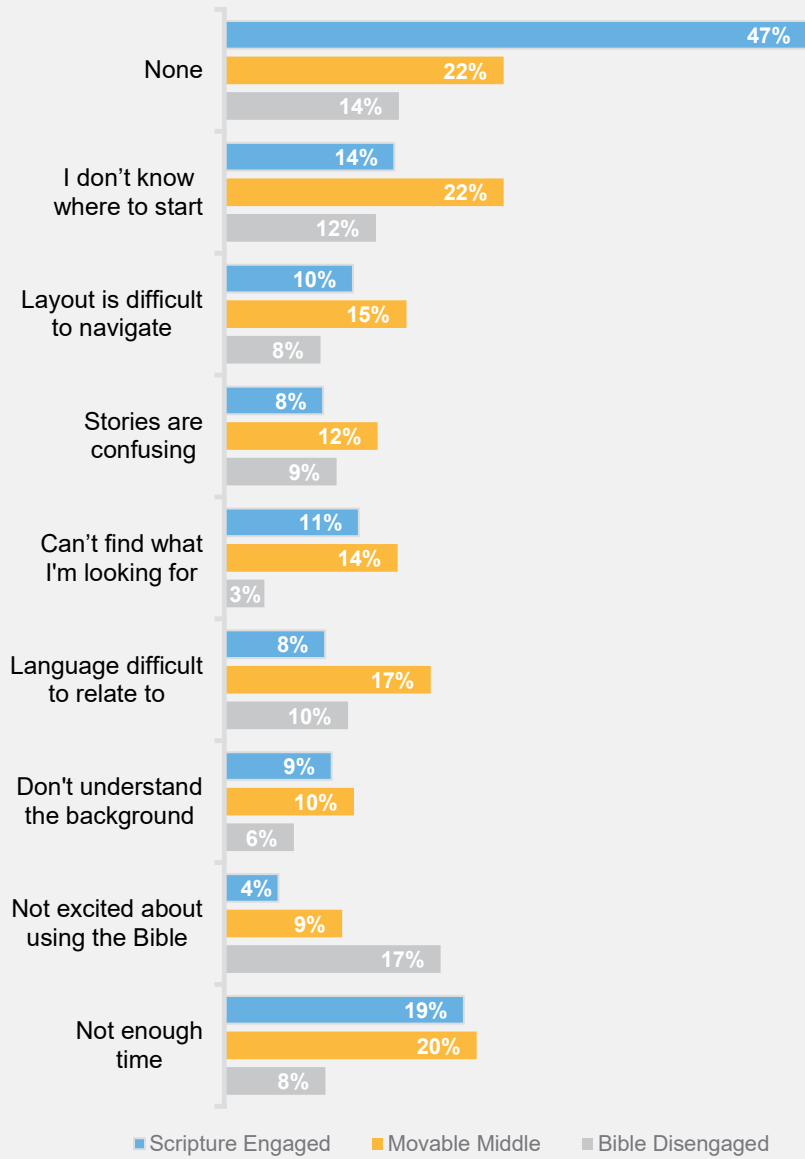
other words, they believe they have more to learn, and, in their case, they appear committed to study.

Four in ten Scripture Engaged individuals approach the Bible with a desire to be closer to God. The strong majority (88%) also finds meaning in the Bible, something much more pervasively felt among this engaged group.



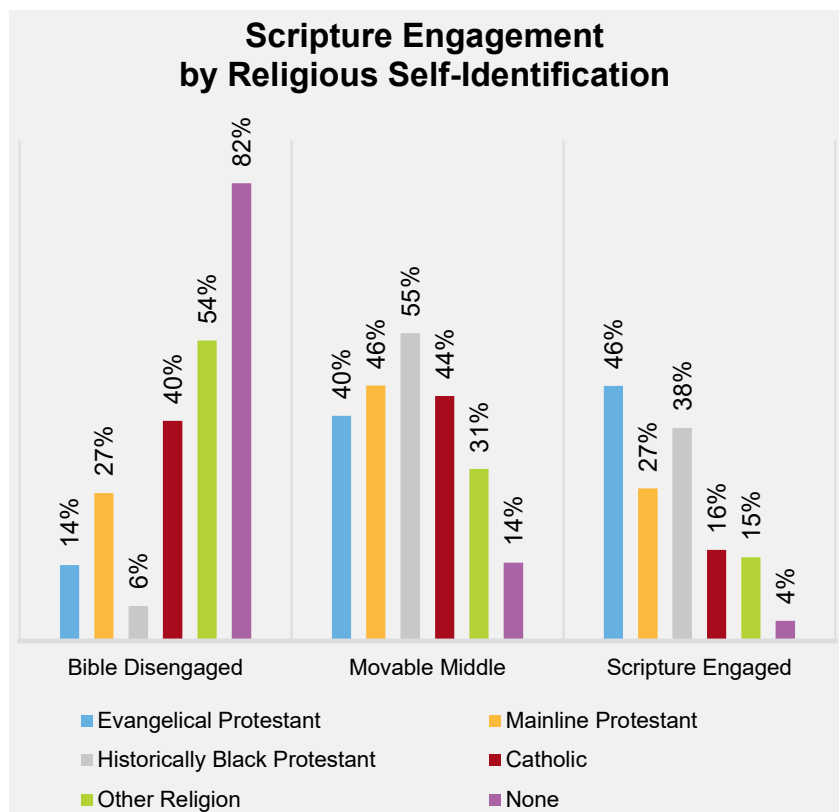
Few Scripture Engaged respondents have frustrations with the Bible. Almost half have none at all (47%). If anything, they just want more time in Scripture: One-fifth (19%) say they “never seem to have enough time” to use their Bible.

Most Significant Frustrations When Using the Bible on My Own



THE MOVABLE MIDDLE

Historically Black churches (55%), mainline Protestants (47%), and Roman Catholics (44%) all have high percentages represented in the Movable Middle.



Individuals who self-identify as followers of other religions are more Bible Disengaged (54%) than Christian denominations; however, they also have quite a robust Movable Middle representation. Three in ten (31%) are neutral or friendly toward Scripture, which

indicates a significant number of respondents other religions have begun a journey with the Bible.

People in the Movable Middle read the Bible less frequently than the Scripture Engaged, and they are less likely to experience the life-changing message of the Bible. They also are more likely to experience frustrations than those who are Scripture Engaged. Their most frequent frustration is in not knowing where to start when reading the Bible (23%).

When they do engage with Scripture, they find benefit. Two in three (66%) find meaning for their lives in the Bible. And, when people in the Movable Middle come to the Bible, they find comfort (22%) and feel closer to God (25%). When attempting to help those in the Movable Middle become more engaged, the challenge is often to point them to resources that will reduce their frustrations.

BIBLE DISENGAGED

As noted, over the past year, women have made a shift toward being Scripture Engaged and men toward the Movable Middle ground. As a result, there are significant declines for both men and women in Bible Disengaged numbers (now only 39% of men and 37% of women).

Black Americans have the smallest percentage of people in the Bible Disengaged (15%) category, while Asian Americans (50%) and white Americans (44%) have the highest rates of Disengagement by ethnic group.

Those who are Bible Disengaged indicate a much higher preference for print Bibles (68%) rather than smartphones (14%), yet are also more likely than more engaged users to prefer a computer program (15%). By comparison, those who are Scripture Engaged or in the Movable Middle look similar in their Scripture format preferences, with 59 percent of each opting for print.

Those who are least engaged with Scripture often feel the weight of obligation when they do read the Bible. One in five Bible Disengaged adults (20%) says they open the Bible because they are supposed to. Bible Disengaged adults are disproportionately single (40%) and members of Gen Z (43%). This group of emerging adults is more likely to feel social pressure to interact with the Bible, compared to older groups that may reach for Scripture out of their own desire for spiritual support and guidance.

Bible Disengaged Americans who occasionally use the Bible tend to be ambivalent about it. Some say they simply don't feel excited about using the Bible (17%) or don't know where to start (12%). Still, 14 percent of Bible Disengaged Americans report having no frustrations with the Bible. Together, these responses show their disengagement may have more to do with a lack of exposure to Scripture than with any aversion to Scripture—indeed, half of those who are disengaged from the Bible acknowledge that they are also “not too knowledgeable” about the Bible (50%).

Black Americans are less likely to be Bible Disengaged than other ethnic groups.

CONCLUSION

State of the Bible 2021 respondents point us to several significant shifts. First, in the midst of a tumultuous period in America, people who once were Bible Disengaged are reaching for the Bible. Consequently, the Movable Middle has swollen to include 95 million American adults who are exploring Scripture, many for the first time. Second, these new Bible explorers often find the Bible difficult to navigate and understand. As they look for a connection with God, comfort for their hurts, and answers to their questions, they will also need relational guides to help them and digital tools to improve their access to Scripture. Third, America's youngest generations are reaching for electronic devices when they want to explore the Bible. Smartphones and computers are extremely portable and allow users to search for content they couldn't easily find in a printed Bible.

From the online church revolution to socially distanced small groups, the landscape of Christian faith and worship in America has been deeply disrupted in the past year. In the following chapter, we will focus our attention once more on the impact that COVID-19 has had on America's relationship with the Bible, faith, and the church. We will also set the stage for a deeper investigation of the Bible's impact on people who are struggling emotionally and looking for hope.

NEXT STEPS

For Pastors. A lot has changed in Scripture engagement across the United States in the past several years. How has Scripture engagement changed in your congregation? If you'd like to know how your church's relationship to the Bible is affecting the spiritual vitality of your church, check out the [Look Inside Church Assessment](#).

For Church Leaders. Digital interaction with the Bible is especially popular among younger generations and among those who are relatively new to the Bible. Have you considered using a [YouVersion](#) reading plan with your small group or class, so you can grow together? Try using the *with friends* feature.

For Families. Talk about your frustrations with reading the Bible and how you feel when it goes well. Consider watching some of [The Bible Project's](#) amazing videos to add variety to your family Bible engagement.

For Individuals. Talk to a friend about your experiences with the Bible and ask them to begin reading the Bible with you. Start by searching [YouVersion](#) or [The Bible Project](#) for a topic that interests you. The Bible offers wisdom for life, even life in the 21st century.

MEASURING SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

When American Bible Society and Barna Group first set out 11 years ago to understand what the State of the Bible was in America, they prioritized creating a system to track and trace levels of engagement with Scripture among Americans. Are those who are engaged with Scripture simply those who read their Bible, or is there more to it? The question that researchers sought to answer was **what kind of interaction** with the Bible results in a transformed relationship with God and others?

Five core issues arose that *might* contribute to Scripture engagement.

- **Duration:** Does the length of time that someone spends interacting with the Bible in any single instance matter?
 - **Modality:** How do the social setting and/or physical setting of Bible interactions influence Scripture engagement?
 - **Impact:** In what ways does interaction with the Bible affect the emotions, spiritual life, and desires of Bible Users??
 - **Centrality:** How does the Bible influence a person's choices and decisions?
- When both Barna's and American Bible Society's research teams looked into answering these questions, an answer emerged:
- **Frequency:** Does it matter how frequently people interact with the Bible, whether that interaction is through reading, listening, singing, or some other medium?

Scripture engagement is measured as consistent interaction with the Bible that shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships with God and others.

THE SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT SCALE

In order to measure these factors, a 14-item questionnaire was created: **The Scripture Engagement Scale**. Three factors are used to create this scale.

- **Frequency:** Two questions about how often a respondent uses the Bible on their own and as a part of a large church service.
- **Impact:** Six questions about the Bible's influence on a user's relationships with God and others.
- **Centrality:** Six questions about the Bible's influence on a user's choices and decisions.

Among Bible Users,¹ the Scripture Engagement Scale is centered on 100, meaning that approximately one half of Bible Users in the United States score above 100, and the other half score below 100.² The Scrip-

ture Engagement Scale is also divided into segments, based on its standard deviation, which is set at 15 points. The five **Scripture Engagement Segments** are:

- **Bible Centered:** Score = 115 or higher. Bible Centered people interact with the Bible frequently. The values and principles of Scripture are central to their life choices and relationships. More than eight in ten (83%) use the Bible on their own at least four times a week.
- **Bible Engaged:** Score = 100–114. Bible Engaged people interact with the Bible regularly. The values and principles of Scripture mostly influence their relationships with God and others. To a lesser degree, the Bible also influences their life choices. Bible Engaged people normally interact with the Bible somewhat less frequently than the Bible Centered. Nearly half (46%) read the Bible once a week or several times a week on their own, whereas four in ten (38%) read the Bible at least most days of the week.
- **Bible Friendly:** Score = 85–99. Bible Friendly people interact with the Bible periodically and are open to the Bible as

1 See the Definitions on page 225.

2 In January 2021, Bible Users averaged a Scripture Engagement Scale score of $M = 99.54$, $SD = 14.3$.

a source of spiritual insight and wisdom. They are almost evenly split between those who read the Bible once a week (22%) and those who read it only once a month (24%) on their own.

- **Bible Neutral:** Score = 70–84. Bible Neutral people interact with the Bible sporadically and report little influence from the Bible. Nine of ten read the Bible either once a month (37%), three or four times a year (23%), or once or twice a year (32%). This is the most troubled category of respondents, showing high levels of stress and low levels of hope and flourishing.
- **Bible Disengaged:** Score = Less than 70. Bible Disengaged people interact with the Bible infrequently, if at all, and it has a minimal impact on their lives. Two thirds (66%) never read the Bible on their own, and three in ten (30%) read it only once or twice a year. As a group, Bible Disengaged people rarely seek out the Bible, tending to encounter it through others, rather than by choice.

SIMPLIFIED SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT SEGMENTS

In 2021, most of our reporting is based on a simplified, three-part Scripture Engagement segmentation that uses the following categories:

- **Scripture Engaged:** Scripture Engaged people are those who have a score of 100 or higher according to their results of this survey. The Bible impacts their daily lives, helps guide their relationships with God and others, and they regularly read/listen to/engage with the Bible.
- **Movable Middle:** Formerly the Bible Friendly and Bible Neutral categories, these individuals score between 70 and 99. These people range from those who sporadically interact with the Bible on the low end, to those who periodically open the Bible as a source of spiritual insight and wisdom. This group of people can easily shift to being more Bible-engaged, or they can give up and become less Bible-engaged because the Bible's influence has not taken root in their lives.
- **Bible Disengaged:** Anyone who scores less than 70 is considered Bible Disengaged. Those that fit this category interact infrequently with the Bible, and it has minimal influence in their lives. Bible Disengaged people rarely seek out the Bible, and tend to encounter it through others, rather than by choice.

By finding a score on the Scripture Engagement Scale and determining Scripture Engagement Segments, researchers have

common verbiage to discuss groups and assess relationships they have with the Bible. It is a meaningful measure to find the life-transforming power of the Bible over against other demographic segments. For example, when studying flourishing levels, hope levels, or stress levels of groups from different Scripture Engagement Segments, researchers can find how being more or less engaged with Scripture affects those particular things.

Both the original five-part segmentation and the simplified three-part segmentation are based on the same underlying measurement system. *State of the Bible* researchers conduct regular analyses at the highest levels of precision available and report their results using the Scripture Engagement Segments that most clearly communicate the relationship between Scripture engagement and other variables of interest.



FINDING THE NEW NORMAL

America is tired. The world is tired. Most of us long to move on from COVID-19, from social unrest, and from political upheaval. We want to grieve our losses, heal our wounds, and finally process the pain of a year none of us could have foreseen. We long to visit our extended families again, book that long-awaited vacation, and finally look to a future beyond 2020.

Last July, we released the special COVID Edition of *State of the Bible 2020*. At that time, COVID-19 was raging across America. Churches were closed and hospital beds were filled. Toilet paper was hard to find and N95 respirators were *impossible* to obtain. The average daily count of new COVID-19 cases in the U.S. was near 65,000.

Then things went crazy. Weariness with social distancing led to Labor Day parties, Thanksgiving gatherings, and Christmas dinners that fueled the fire of the pandemic. Politics and social unrest

drove many people to gather for rallies and protests. By January, the daily average of new cases in the U.S. had risen to over 250,000.

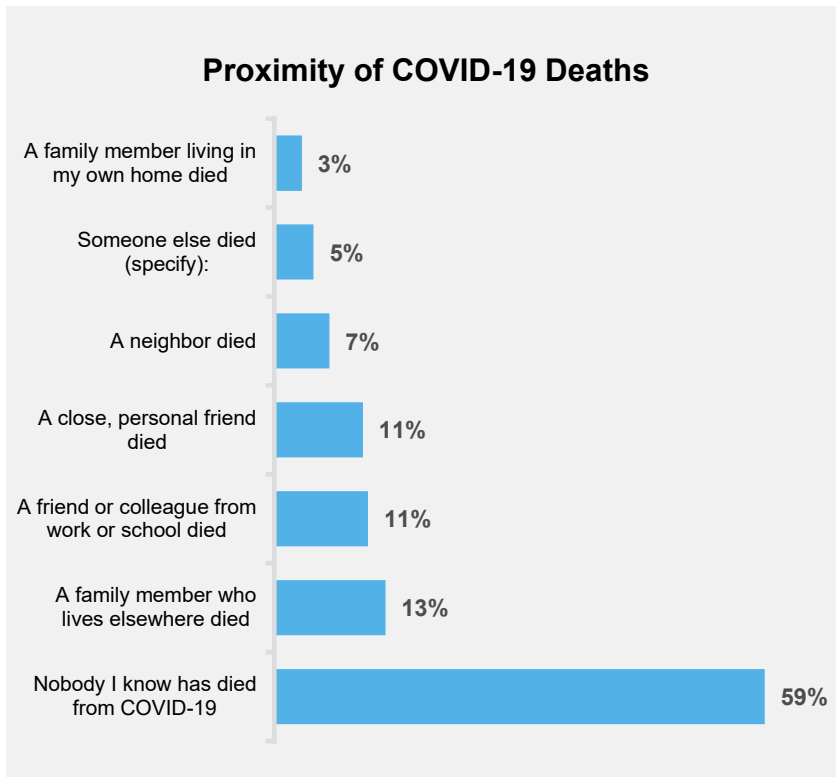
As of May, we're better at coping with the virus, but its long-term effects are still draining us. Average daily cases are still stubbornly high, about the same as last July, but there are signs of hope, too.

Americans are moving forward with muted optimism after a year of stress, frustration, and loss. As they inch into a “new normal,” will they continue reaching for their Bibles for comfort and strength? Will they seek the Lord in prayer in times of stress? Will they find connection in church services, whether online or in person? As we explore Scripture Engagement trends, church participation, stresses, and comforts over the past year, it is clear that, though things have recovered somewhat from last year, they may never be exactly as they were pre-COVID.

THE PERSONAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

Some Americans have made it through COVID-19 largely unscathed, but many others have either faced the illness themselves or watched someone they know battle the deadly virus.

As of April 2021, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that over 550,000 people have died as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Two in five respondents (41%) in our study indicate they personally know someone who has died from the virus. Through their experiences, we see a glimpse of how COVID-19 has impacted families, friends, churches, and schools.



Americans who live in cities have a higher death exposure rate, with 54 percent telling us that someone they know passed away. With death rates like these, mortality is at the forefront of Americans' minds.

In our sample, younger generations show a much higher probability of infection, with one-quarter of Gen Z (25%) and Millennials (23%) and one in five Gen X (20%) being exposed. These infection rates correspond with [CDC data](#) that indicate the highest rate of infection is among 18-to-24-year-olds, followed by those 25-44

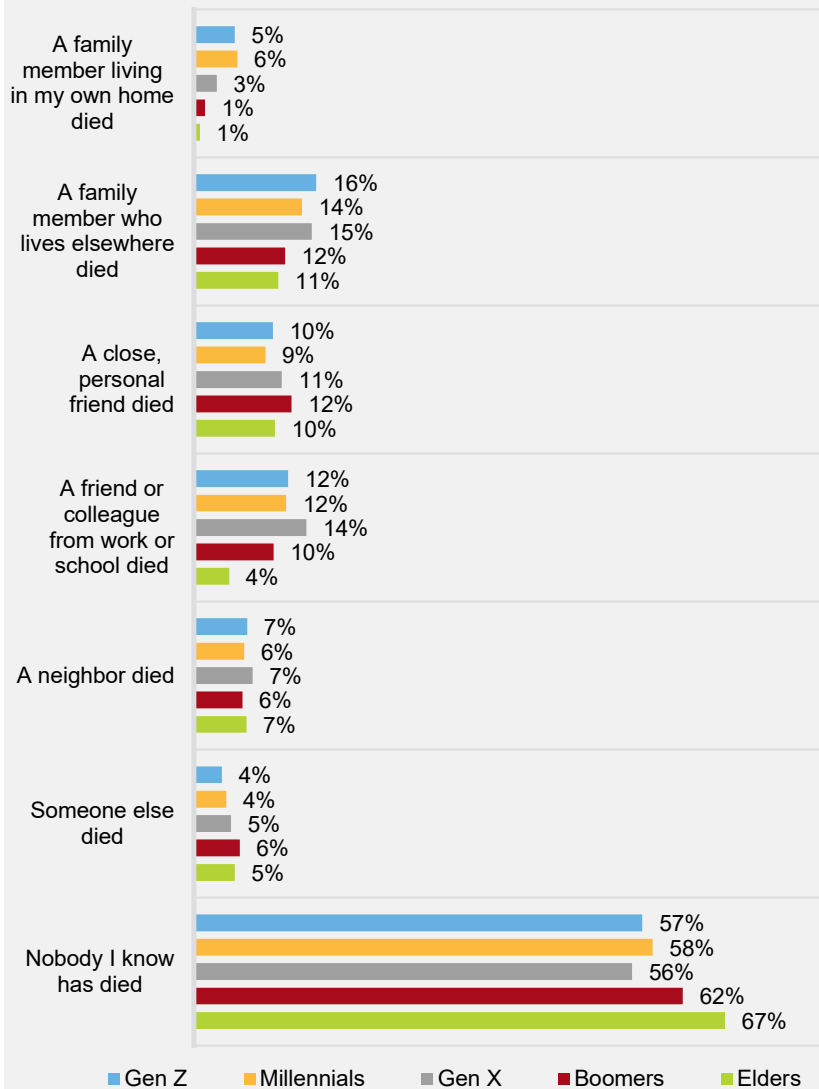
years old. Accordingly, Millennials in our study had the highest hospitalization rate, with almost one-quarter of respondents indicating that they had received urgent medical care in the hospital (24%). Second to Millennials, Gen Z was also hospitalized more than older generations with 17 percent having been admitted due to COVID-19 symptoms. Those who live in cities and small towns were equally likely to be exposed to the virus (19%) compared with those who live in suburbs or rural locations (17%).

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT AND COVID-19 INFECTIONS

Across the country, COVID-19 infection was somewhat more likely among the Scripture engaged than among the disengaged. Sixteen percent of Bible Disengaged Americans, 19 percent of the Movable Middle, and 20 percent of those who are Scripture Engaged were possibly or positively infected. Hospitalization rates were also lower among the Bible Disengaged, with only 11 percent seeking in-patient care, compared with 19 percent of the Movable Middle, and 22 percent of Scripture Engaged adults.

Scripture Engaged people are also more likely to know someone who has died from COVID-19 (49%), over the Movable Middle (44%) and the Bible Disengaged (33%). There is no indication in the data to explain why Scripture Engaged people have been affected more than other groups by COVID-19. Lifestyle issues, including inability or unwillingness to maintain social distance and being a member of a large family or social network may play a role.

Proximity of COVID-19 Deaths by Generation



Gen Z is experiencing the highest stress levels of any generation, due to COVID-19.

HIGH STRESS ACCOMPANIED COVID

These data points reveal American people who have endured significant changes in the COVID-19 era through illness, loss, or lifestyle shifts due to social distancing and economic disruption, culminating in higher rates of stress in the past year.¹

Though older generations are particularly vulnerable to the physical impacts of COVID-19, Gen Z has the highest stress scores ($M = 18$).² Adult members of Gen Z have faced significant lifestyle disruptions. Additionally, many have family members who were physically threatened by COVID-19. All of these challenges appear to have resulted in uncommonly high stress scores for Gen Z adults. Older generations in the non-infected category have lower stress scores (Millennials, $M = 15$; Gen X, $M = 13$; Boomers, $M = 10$; Elders, $M = 7$).

Across all generations, however, stress levels increase with suspected or diagnosed infections. Tied for the highest levels of stress among those infected with COVID-19, Millennials and Gen X both have a mean score of 20. Gen Z is right behind with a mean score of 19. The oldest generations experience less stress than other generations, with infected Boomers scoring 17, and infected Elders scoring 12 on average.

¹ To gauge the mental and emotional health of Americans in 2021, we asked respondents to answer questions exploring a combination of factors, including anxiety, loneliness, intense emotions, lack of emotion, and hypervigilance.

² The italicized letter *M* refers to the arithmetic mean (average) of a range of values.

Again, here we see young adults perhaps expressing greater stress related to the uncertainty and disruption resulting from such a diagnosis, despite having a higher chance of survival. Younger generations also tend to be more inclined than older adults to recognize or report a toll on their mental and emotional health.

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT TRENDS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

WOMEN BOUNCE BACK FROM 2020

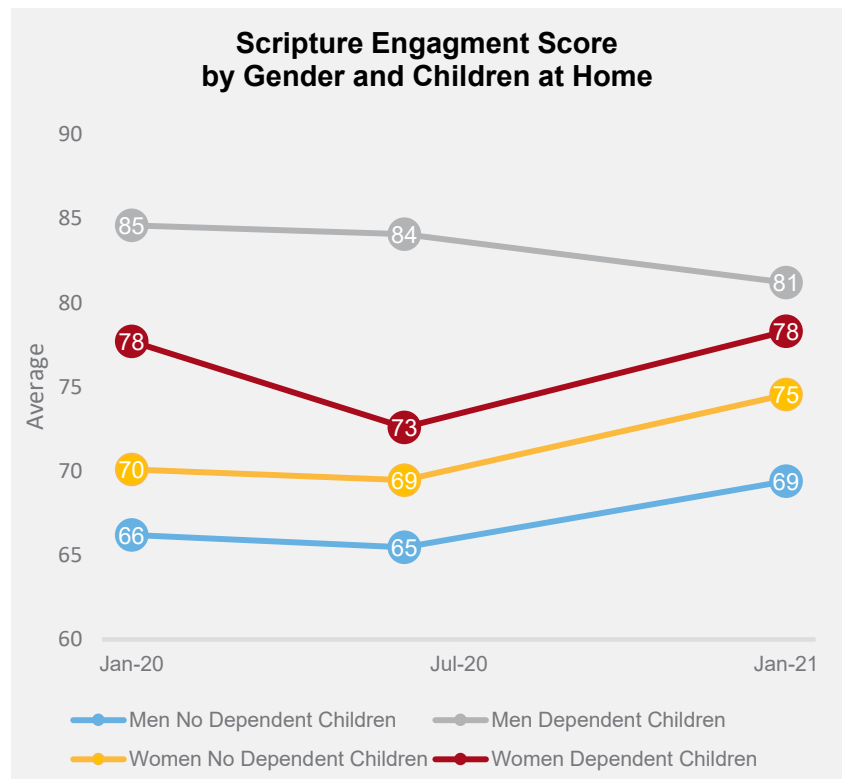
Through the COVID-19 pandemic, women have borne the brunt of childcare duties, with many mothers leaving jobs to stay home with children full time, and others attempting to balance home life with remote work.³ Simultaneously, women's Scripture Engagement Scores fell behind men's for the first time during the pandemic.

In 2021, to better examine the impact of COVID-19 on adults in various stages of life, we looked at Scripture engagement trends and highlighted the responses of those who have dependent children compared to those who do not. In 2020, both men and women *without dependent children at home* saw non-significant decreases in average Scripture Engagement Scores. Between June 2020 and January 2021, both groups have seen a significant increase in average Scripture Engagement (Men +4, Women +6).

Among *parents with dependent children at home*, the story has been more mixed. During the first months of the pandemic

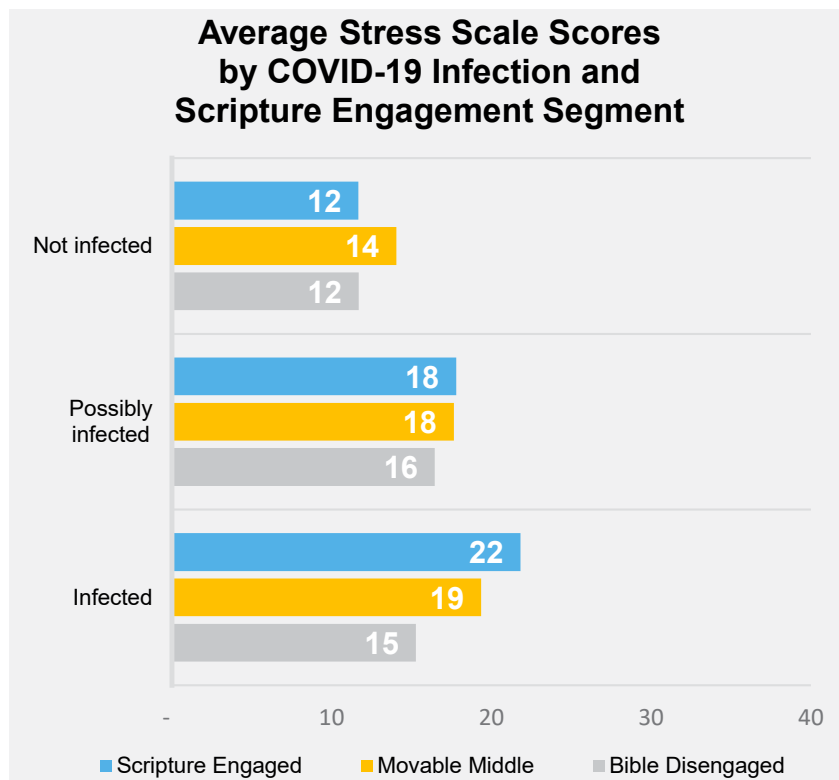
3 See [brookings.edu/essay/why-has-covid-19-been-especially-harmful-for-working-women](https://www.brookings.edu/essay/why-has-covid-19-been-especially-harmful-for-working-women)

(January–June 2020), fathers experienced little impact on their average scores. Mothers, though, saw a sharp decline in their Scripture engagement, falling from 78 to 73 on average. **Since June, mothers with children at home have recovered their summer losses and now average 78 on the Scripture Engagement Scale.** Fathers with children at home are the only segment of respondents whose Scripture Engagement Scores have fallen since June (–3 points on average). As of January, across all parenting categories, women average 77 on the Scripture Engagement Scale, compared to 75 for men.



STRESS AND SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

When examining stress through the lenses of both COVID-19 infection and Scripture engagement, it appears that Scripture engagement is associated with higher levels of stress for infected respondents. Among all those who were *not infected* with COVID-19, stress scale scores average 13 out of a possible 40 points. Uninfected Bible Disengaged participants match the stress levels of uninfected Scripture Engaged respondents (both $M = 12$). Uninfected Movable Middle participants match the stress levels of uninfected Scripture Engaged respondents (both $M = 12$). Uninfected Movable Middle respondents, however, have a higher stress score ($M = 14$).



Among those who *possibly* contracted COVID-19—meaning they had symptoms of the disease but were never medically diagnosed—stress scores average 17. Within the group of possibly infected respondents, Bible Disengaged people average 16 points, while both the Movable Middle and Scripture Engaged segments scored $M = 18$ out of a possible 40 points for stress.

With a *medical diagnosis of COVID-19*, stress scores jumped again to an average of 19. Both the Movable Middle ($M = 19$) and the Scripture Engaged ($M = 22$) segments score significantly higher than the Bible Disengaged ($M = 15$) in this group. Stress scores increase again for who were *hospitalized*. Within the hospitalized group, the Bible Disengaged ($M = 19$) and Movable Middle ($M = 21$) reported statistically equivalent stress scores. Hospitalized Scripture Engaged respondents averaged 30 points on the stress scale.

These results indicate that many Scripture Engaged Americans are experiencing uncommonly high levels of stress at present. This observation runs counter to other patterns we see in the data. For instance, people with higher levels of Scripture engagement have better well-being scores compared to those who are less engaged with the Bible. As pastors and church leaders serve their congregations in 2021, they should keep in mind that those with a deep commitment to the Bible and their faith may have also been deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. These congregants have likely suffered both physical and emotional stresses and will need skillful, biblical care to fully recover.

CHURCH ENGAGEMENT

POSITIVE HYBRID CHURCH EXPERIENCES

Church engagement during COVID-19 has included both in-person and online gatherings. Barna Group polling in late March 2020 showed just 3 percent of churches remained open for normal use, while 73 percent were completely shuttered at that time. Enforced social distancing prompted the introduction or embrace of online church. By the fall of 2020, three-quarters of churched adults reported having watched a sermon online. Most adults who were attending churches that provided online services through the pandemic (60%) told Barna this was the only digital activity available through their church, suggesting a need for a more holistic approach to online or hybrid ministry. New data from our 2021 *State of the Bible* survey suggest adding online services is a valuable starting point associated with positive experiences.

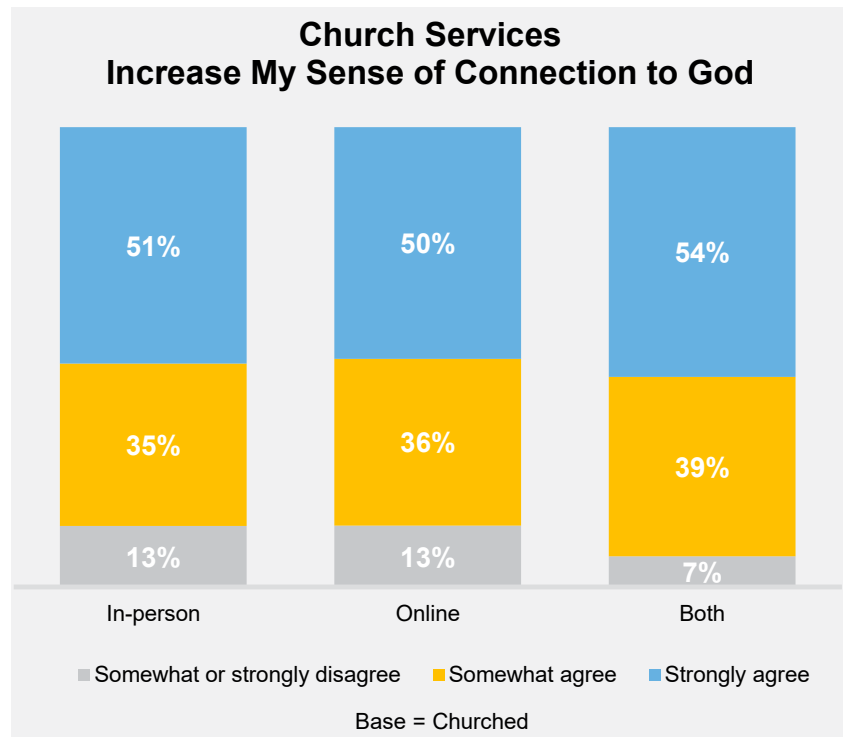
Congregants who attend churches with both in-person and online service options expressed more positive opinions of their church experience than congregants at churches with only one service option. Those who attended both in person and online are most likely to strongly agree (44%) that their church services increased their desire to read the Bible, whereas only 33 percent of those who attended digitally and 40 percent of those who attended only in person strongly agree.

The same trend is seen when respondents were asked about whether church services increased their understanding of Scripture. Half of

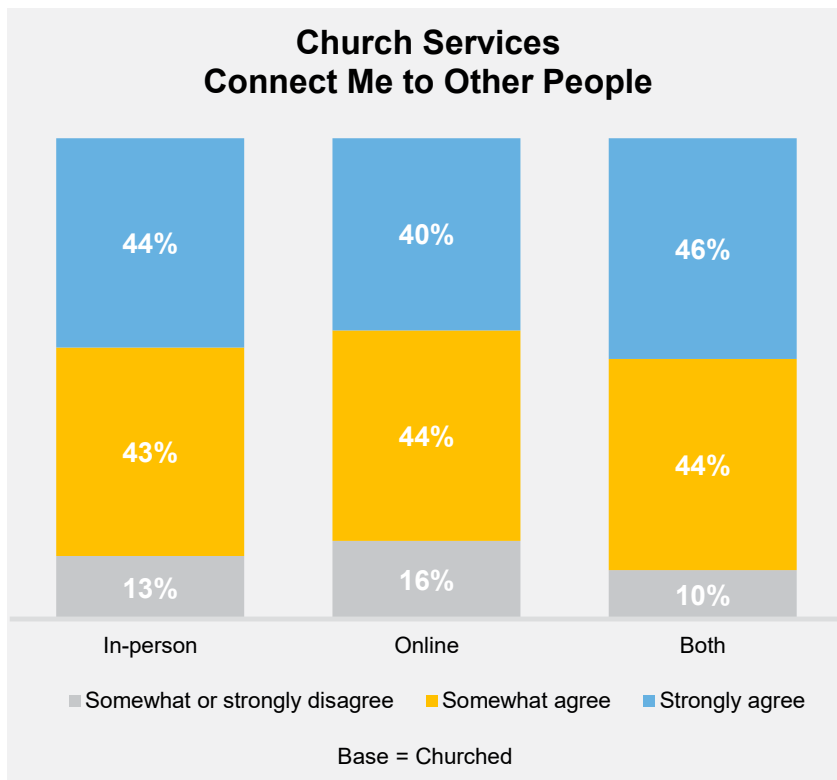
those who attended both online and in person say they strongly agree (50%), and those who met only online (43%) or in person (46%) are less inclined to strongly agree.

CONNECTION MATTERS

Especially over the past year, as people have grappled with disconnection brought about by the pandemic, connection to God and to other people is one of the main benefits that a church community can offer—however it gathers.

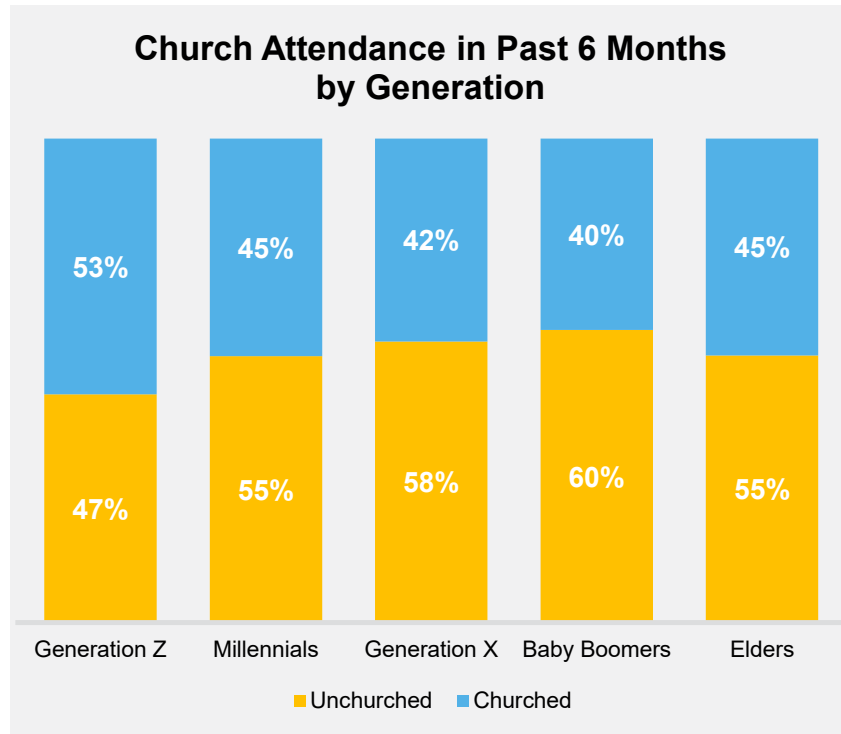


When churched respondents were asked if church services increased their sense of connection to God, roughly half of respondents strongly agree, regardless of whether they attended in person (51%), online (50%), or both (54%). Similar proportions of respondents indicated that church participation connects them to other people. Slightly less than half strongly agree for every type of service: in-person (44%), online (40%), or both (46%). Though the necessary COVID-era pivot to online or hybrid ministry caught many churches unprepared, it seems to have paid off by providing multiple avenues of connection for many attendees.



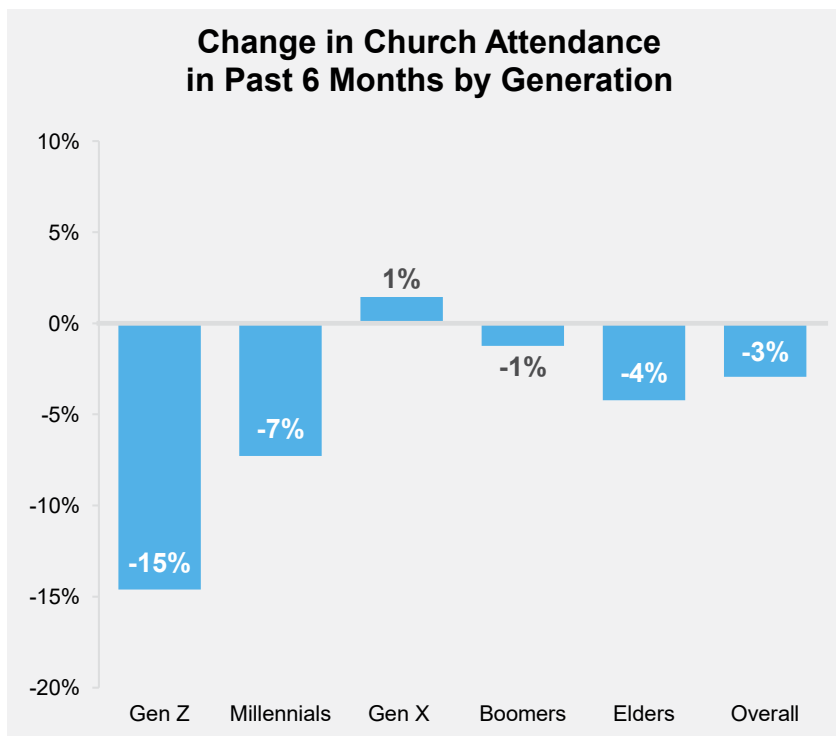
COVID-19 CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY GENERATION

Compared to June 2020, church attendance—both in-person and online—has fallen across America (−3%). Overall, 44 percent of adults have attended a church service in the past six months. Gen Z is the most likely age group to report recent church attendance; however, their participation has fallen sharply since June (−15%). Only Gen X and Boomers report church participation that is statistically unchanged in the past six months. All other adults report declines in church attendance ranging from 15 percent for Gen Z to four percent for Elders. The relative volatility of data on Gen Z church participation may be partially attributable to the fact that



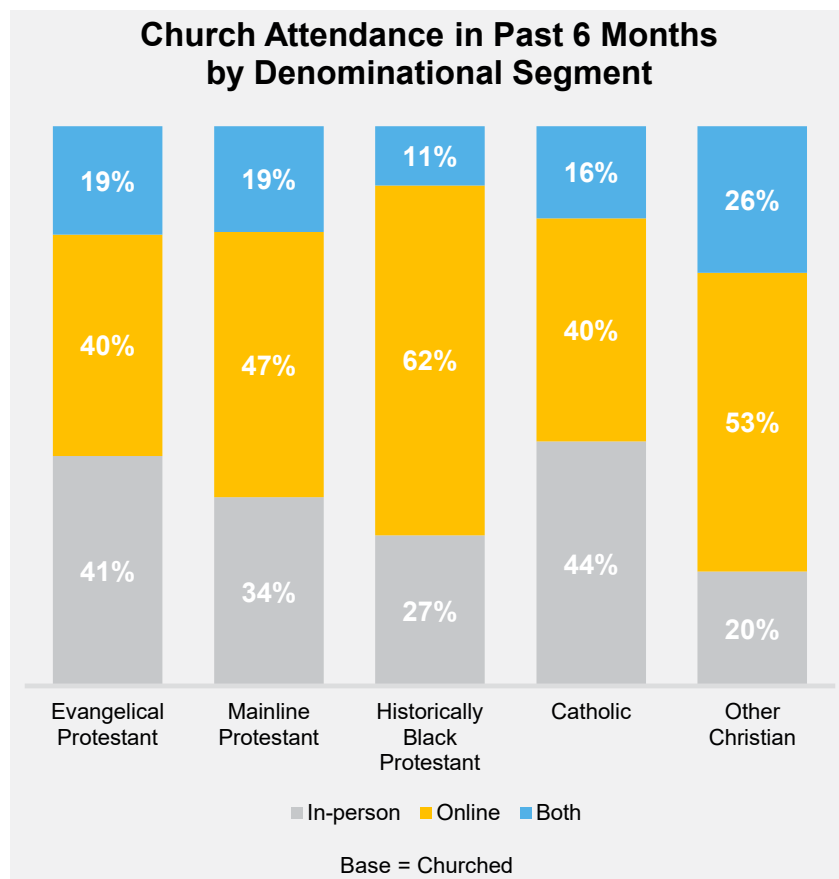
it is an “incomplete” adult generation, containing less than half as many (43%) adult members as the Millennial generation.

COVID-19 has disrupted church engagement across America. While many churches have begun offering online worship services and small groups, America’s youngest and most tech-savvy adults have shown significant decreases in church participation since June. As the pandemic recedes in the coming months, it will be important for church leaders to carefully consider strategies to re-engage Gen Z and Millennials in the corporate practice of their faith.



COVID-19 CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY DENOMINATION

Across the spectrum of Christian denominations, many churched Americans adapted their worship service attendance around difficulties caused by closures or changes in regular routine. At present, most churched adults favor online options or a mix of both online and in-person worship gatherings. A plurality of Roman Catholic churchgoers (44%) chooses to attend services in person.



Two-thirds of congregants at historically Black churches (63%) report attending only online during the last six months. Though both evangelical and mainline Protestants are more likely than other denominations to report hybrid attendance (both 19%), their preference is still to worship in person (41% evangelicals, 48% mainline Protestants).

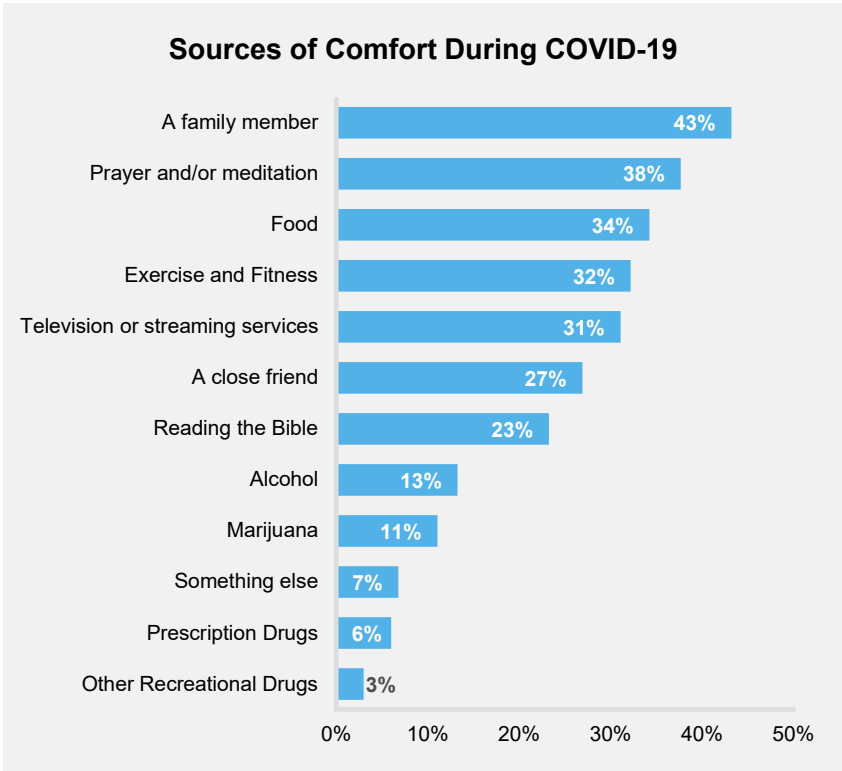
COVID-19 COMFORTS

With increased levels of stress, especially during a global pandemic, there is a deep human need for comfort. How do Americans find comfort in the midst of COVID? Are their sources of comfort healthy and helpful?

Overall, we'll examine comforts in four main categories: relationship comforts, activity comforts, substance comforts, and spiritual comforts. When gathered in these sections, American comforts in 2021 fall in this order: relationship (53%), activity (52%), substance (46%), and spiritual (44%). Women are more likely to engage with certain sources of comfort, particularly relational and spiritual sources.

The most popular comfort choice from all respondents is seeking out a family member (43%), followed by prayer and/or meditation (38%). Food is the third most popular option for the general American population, chosen by one in three (34%). Reading the Bible ranks seventh, overall (23%).

America's top COVID comforts are family, prayer, and food. The Bible ranks seventh, overall.



COVID-19 COMFORTS BY GENERATION

Gen Z and Millennials stand out from older adults in that they do not choose prayer or meditation as one of their top three comforts. In the absence of this spiritual comfort, younger generations find consolation in food, family members, friends, and exercise. Older generations, however, hold prayer in the highest regard, with both Boomers and Elders choosing prayer, family members, and exercise as their top three comforts.

Generation	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice
Generation Z	Food 48%	Close Friend 41%	Family member 40%
Millennials	Family Member 44%	Food 43%	Exercise and Fitness 37%
Generation X	Family member 44%	Prayer and/or Meditation 38%	Food 32%
Baby Boomers	Prayer and/or Meditation 44%	Family member 42%	Exercise and Fitness 31%
Elders	Prayer and/or Meditation 48%	Family member 46%	Exercise and Fitness 27%

COVID-19 COMFORTS BY ETHNICITY

Black Americans select “reading the Bible” as one of their top three comforts, unlike any other group. This reflects Black Americans’ reputation as being deeply rooted in Scripture.⁴ Both Black and Hispanic Americans place prayer and/or meditation as their greatest comfort, overall. Regardless of age, they are much more likely than Asian Americans to make this choice. White Americans fall between, with prayer as one of their top three comforts.

⁴ See [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/24/three-quarters-of-black-americans-believe-in-god-of-the-bible-or-other-holy-scripture/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/24/three-quarters-of-black-americans-believe-in-god-of-the-bible-or-other-holy-scripture/)

Ethnicity	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice
White only	Family member 44%	Prayer and/or Meditation 34%	Food 33%
Black only	Prayer and/or Meditation 48%	Family member 36%	Reading the Bible 36%
Hispanic all	Prayer and/or Meditation 46%	Family member 44%	Food 37%
Asian only	Family member 48%	Exercise and Fitness 40%	Food 38%

COVID-19 COMFORTS BY SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The top three choices for comfort vary widely across Scripture Engagement segments. Bible Disengaged adults cite watching television or streaming services (39%), talking to a family member (39%), and food (35%) as their main choices—a fairly insular and distinctly unspiritual picture of comfort. The Movable Middle select common-ground comforts like family members (44%), prayer and/or meditation (43%), and exercise (33%) as their top

Segment	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice
Scripture Engaged	Prayer and/or Meditation 70%	Reading the Bible 67%	Family member 49%
Movable Middle	Family member 44%	Prayer and/or Meditation 43%	Food 34%
Bible Disengaged	TV or Streaming services 39%	Family Member 39%	Food 35%

three. Scripture Engaged respondents rely on spiritual comforts first, prioritizing prayer (70%), reading the Bible (67%), and talking to a close family member (49%).

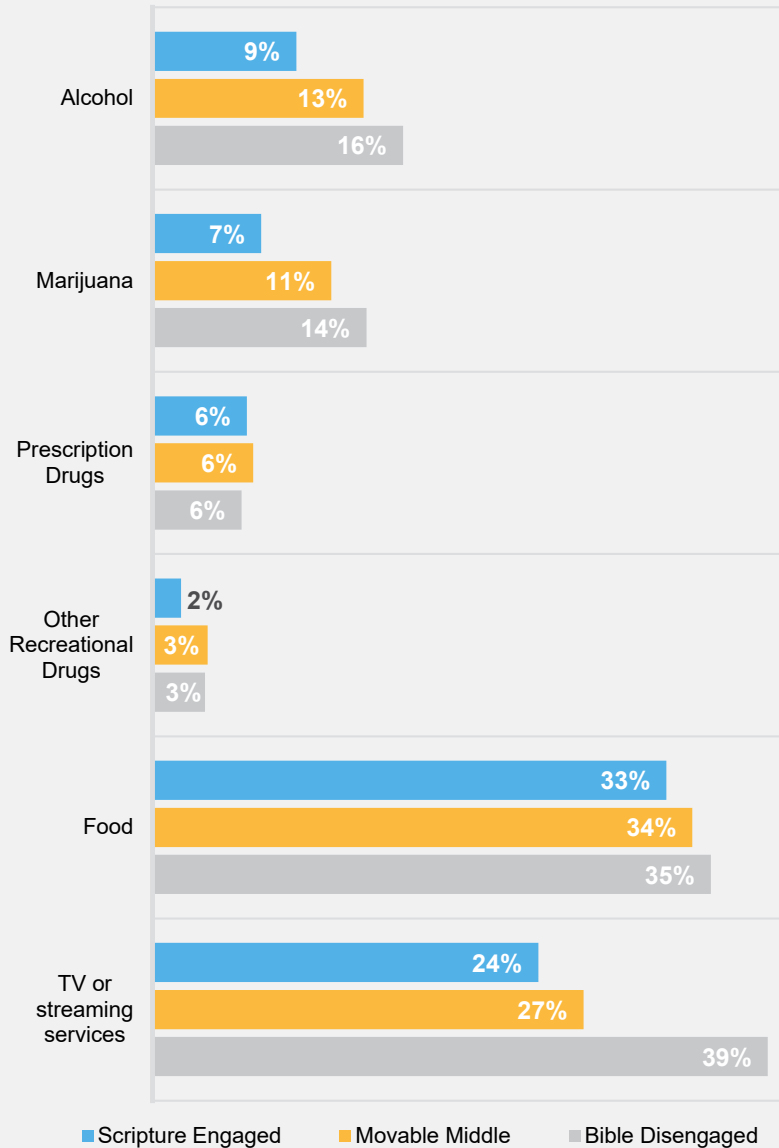
COVID-19 COMFORTS BY DENOMINATIONAL SEGMENTS

When looking at specific denominational segments, historically Black and Protestant evangelical churches lead the way in selecting spiritual comforts, as both prioritize prayer, family members, and reading the Bible as their top three comfort sources. Mainline Protestants and Catholics still look to prayer for comfort, but second to family members. The emphasis on prayer across all denominations indicates that a large contingent of Americans still seek God in uncertainty and stress. Americans with no religious affiliation—known as the “nones”—place television, food, and family atop their comfort lists.

DYSFUNCTIONAL COMFORTS

Damaging comforts, those that could lead to physical or social problems if used in excess, are less popular than other selections, but are still options for many Americans attempting to deal with stress.

Dysfunctional Comforts During COVID-19 by Scripture Engagement Segment



Women choose food as a comfort more frequently than men (37% vs. 32%). Men, however, tend to choose alcohol, marijuana, and other non-prescribed drugs as a source of comfort more readily than women (16% vs. 11% alcohol; 12% vs. 10% marijuana, 4% vs. 3% other drugs). An equal minority of men and women use prescription drugs (both 6%).

Although Scripture Engaged people have higher stress scores than other Scripture engagement designations, they seem to handle stress in different, and potentially healthier, ways and show less interest in potentially harmful comforts. Meanwhile, the Movable Middle selects prescription drugs and other non-prescribed drugs slightly more often than their peers. Bible Disengaged adults are more likely than people in other Scripture engagement segments to select food, alcohol, and marijuana as sources of comfort.

THERE IS HOPE

Although we can't see from the data what comes first—their stress, their COVID-19 encounters, or their comfort routines—what we do know is that a group of adults, predominantly the Scripture Engaged, have been challenged in many ways the past year, yet have remained engaged in their faith and in the Bible. They still turn to prayer, Bible reading, and church community for strength, hope, and support. As the nation and the world move cautiously toward a “new normal,” many Americans are looking to God for help.

NEXT STEPS

For Everyone. A wide variety of organizations—including the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and several medical journals—have noted the mental and emotional health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. People are facing stresses not only due to illness and grief but also due to economic turmoil, relocation, and disruption of support services, including childcare, public education, and behavioral health services. Allison Gilbert’s April 2021 op-ed in the *New York Times* predicts “The Grief Crisis Is Coming.”

American Bible Society recently launched a website with **resources for individuals and organizations** seeking biblical help for emotional struggles, what we call “heart wounds.” If you are looking for help, or if you want to be a help to someone else, visit hope.americanbible.org. There you’ll find resources to fit your situation.

If you’d like to join an **online healing group**, visit ministry.americanbible.org/mission-trauma-healing/events for more information.



HOPE FOR THE HURTING

America is facing a mental health crisis. For over a year, we have witnessed the physical impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Daily news stories have brought us images of overflowing hospitals, long lines for COVID testing and vaccination, closed schools, and masked people. These physical effects of the pandemic are obvious, and the psychological impacts are becoming clearer every day. People are hurting emotionally, too.

Public health experts including Dr. Anthony Fauci have begun raising the alarm about mental health. His comments were sparked by worrisome results from the American Psychological Association's February 2021 *Stress in America* survey. Similarly, while we "can finally imagine a world without COVID-19," writes Erin Petersen for *Business Insider*, the "mental health consequences of this pandemic ... will be with us for years to come."

“70 percent of U.S. adults have experienced some type of traumatic event at least once in their lives.”

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that young American adults (Gen Z and Millennials) are experiencing elevated levels of anxiety and depression, particularly when they live alone and face economic hardships. Furthermore, high levels of anxiety and depression are correlated with overall poor health. Parents with children at home

face similar challenges, according to a Census Bureau survey of 58,729 households.

them today. The National Council for Mental Wellbeing asserts that “70 percent of adults in the U.S. have experienced some type of traumatic event at least once in their lives.” According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “more than two thirds of children reported at least one traumatic event by age sixteen.”

Beyond these stresses, some Americans have been victims of or witnesses to significant trauma that still affects

In the midst of this pain, there is hope. Americans are turning to the Bible for relief and healing. The Bible brings comfort and healing to those suffering with stress and trauma, and is a significant source of hope for those who turn to it.¹ Psychologist and global mental health expert Dr. Diane Langberg has called trauma “the mission field of the twenty-first century,” urging the church to serve traumatized people with competent, Bible-centered ministry.

¹ See christianitytoday.com/news/2021/may/bible-reading-study-trauma-ptsd-covid19-mental-health.html.

In chapter four, we will look more closely at the encouraging relationship between Scripture engagement and holistic well-being. Meanwhile, we turn our attention to Americans' experiences of stress and trauma, and we begin an examination of how the Bible brings hope to hurting people.

STRESSED OUT AMERICANS

To determine stress levels, *State of the Bible* respondents were asked to rate themselves on ten items related to their mental and emotional health. These items gauge anxiety, loneliness, intense emotions, lack of emotion, hypervigilance, and other symptoms associated with stress. The scores are divided into three categories: low, moderate, and high stress. The stress scale items are scored on a scale from 0–4; thus the top score is 40. Stress items include:

- Having difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Feeling tense or watchful or on guard
- Feeling lonely or cut off from other people
- Having strong negative feelings such as fear or anger
- Feeling hopeless about the future
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Feeling nervous or shaky inside
- Feeling no interest in things you used to enjoy
- Feeling restless, jumpy, or easily startled
- Feeling numb or detached

Half of Americans scored 12 or more, meaning they mostly say that they experience these stress symptoms “a little bit.” Meanwhile,

one-quarter of Americans scored 21 or more, indicating that they mostly experience moderate levels of stress. Ten percent of Americans fall into the highest stress category—those who score 29 or more. These respondents say they experience most of these ten stress symptoms “quite a lot” or “extremely.”

MOST COMMON SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Stress is a key indicator of mental health, and the most common stress symptom for Americans is sleep disturbance. Half of American adults (48%) experience moderate or severe difficulty either

“67 percent of Americans said they are not sleeping like they want to since the pandemic started.”

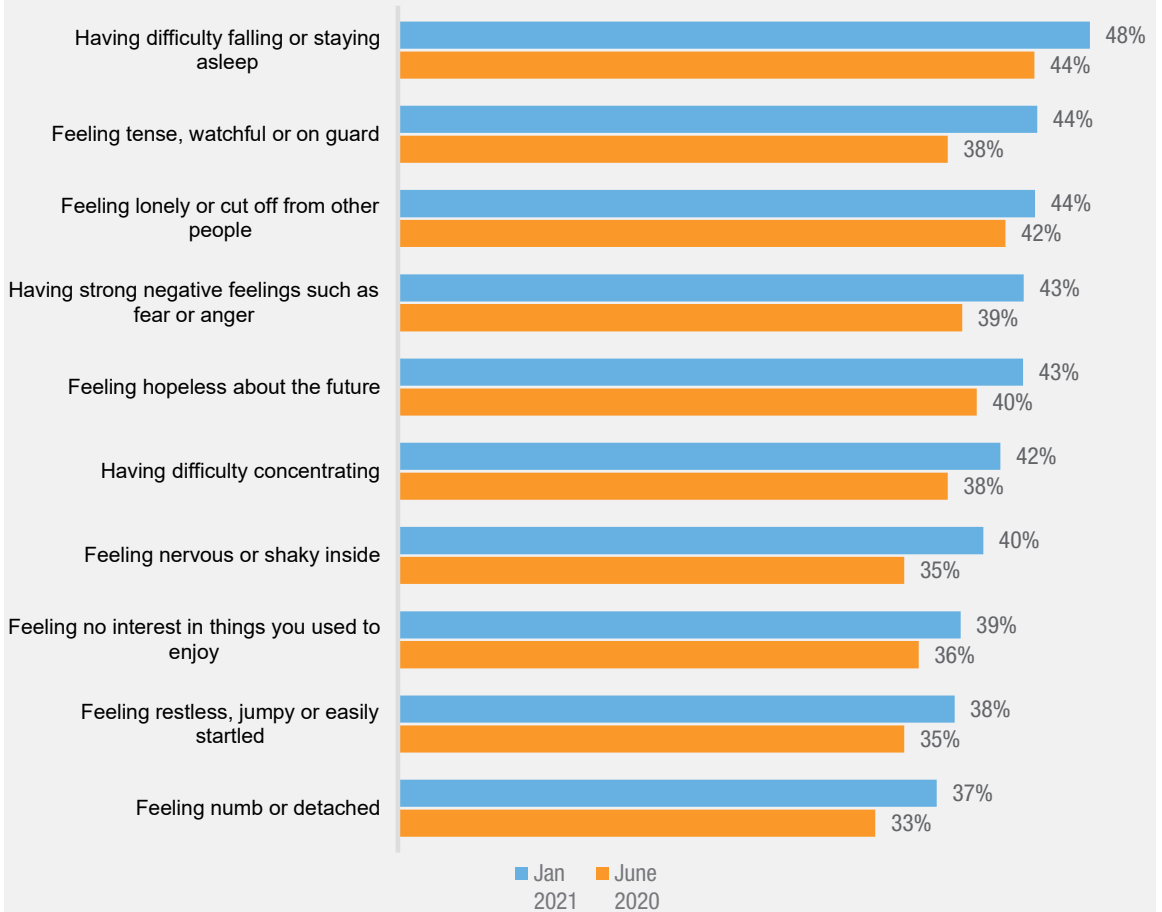
falling or staying asleep. Sleep trouble was also the top stress symptom reported in the 2020 *State of the Bible* report. Reports of this experience are up 4 percentage points in 2021, compared to last year. Similar evidence of sleep disturbances was published

recently by the American Psychological Association. Their February 2021 survey found “Two in three Americans (67%) said they are sleeping more or less than they wanted to since the pandemic started. Similar proportions reported less (35%) and more (31%) sleep than desired.”

Following sleep problems, watchfulness and loneliness are the two next most prevalent stress symptoms. Both impact 44 percent of Americans moderately or more, up 6 points since last year.

Every stress symptom, in fact, has increased since June 2020.

Common Stress Symptoms for Moderate & High Stress Groups



STRESS BY DEMOGRAPHICS

The increased experience of stress symptoms has led to an overall increase in stress *scores* across the nation. In June 2020, the average respondent scored a 12 on the stress scale. Today, U.S. adults have a mean score of 14, an increase of 17 percent since June. High stress scores are more likely among young, female, and Black or Hispanic respondents.

As noted in chapter two, young people are more likely than older adults to report experiencing profound stress—in fact, age is inversely proportional to stress scores. Gen Z adults report an average stress score of 18 and Millennials average 16. In the middle is Gen X with a mean score of 14. Older generations, in contrast, experience the lowest levels of stress: Baby Boomers have a mean score of 10, and Elders average 8 on the stress scale.

Gen Z has been disrupted in many ways, and they might lack the experience or maturity to effectively deal with extreme stress. As a group, however, younger generations may be more comfortable and transparent in discussing mental health and emotional experiences than older generations.

Despite this comfort, confusion and comparison abound in emerging adulthood. For instance, Barna data from the summer of 2020 revealed that three in ten people in Gen Z were experiencing internal pressure to be successful and perfect, and one in four was facing external pressure from parents and older generations. Further, the uncertainty surrounding the generation-defining events

of 2020–21 has clashed with Gen Z’s efforts to navigate college and plan for the future. In times of anxiety, Barna reports, Gen Z’s number-one coping mechanism is listening to music.

Alongside these generational differences, stress is also experienced differently by gender. Women experience stress at a higher rate than their male counterparts (women, $M = 14$; men, $M = 13$). Likewise, stress symptoms are not evenly distributed by ethnicity in America.² The lowest stress levels are seen among Asian Americans, scoring a 12 on average. While white respondents score 13 on average, Black and Hispanic Americans score significantly higher than average (both $M = 15$).

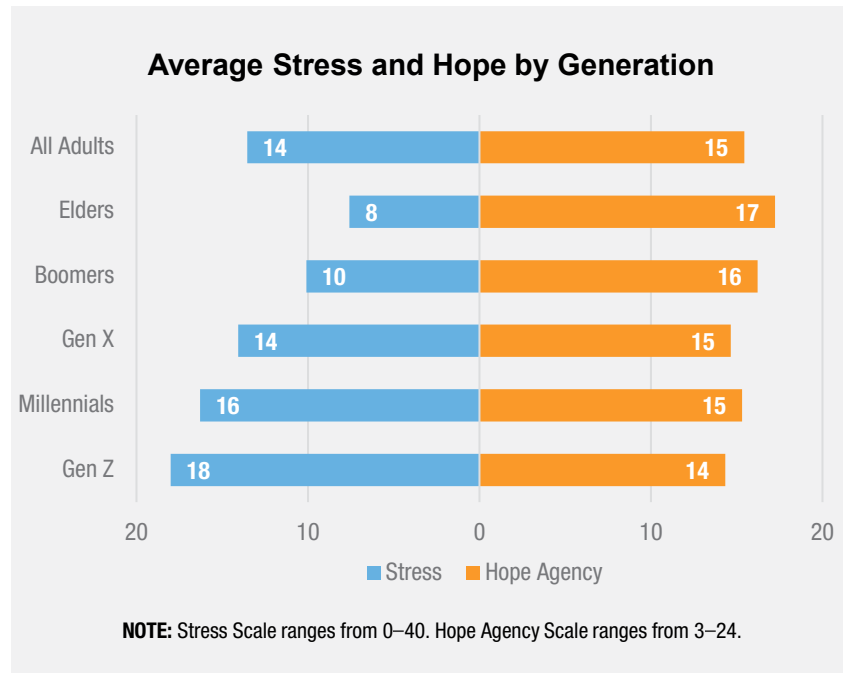
SIGNS OF HOPE

Acknowledging the difficulties facing Americans today is an important first step, but it is only a beginning. If stress and trauma are the full story (more on trauma in a few pages), there can be no future, no healing. But Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 NIV). Facing his impending crucifixion and predicting the coming persecution of the church, Jesus pointed his disciples to a hope-filled future. Similarly, *State of the Bible* researchers are interested in both our respondents’ struggles and their sense of hope for a better tomorrow.

² The italicized letter *M* refers to the arithmetic mean (average) of a range of values.

HOW DO WE MEASURE HOPE?

Hope can be measured in a variety of ways, and social scientists are continually refining their measures. In this chapter, we report on the Hope scale, which measures a person's confidence that they are able to move themselves forward toward their goals, imagining a preferred future and acting to realize that vision. Hope scores can range from 3–24.³ Chapter 4 will delve deeper into hope, flourishing, and well-being.

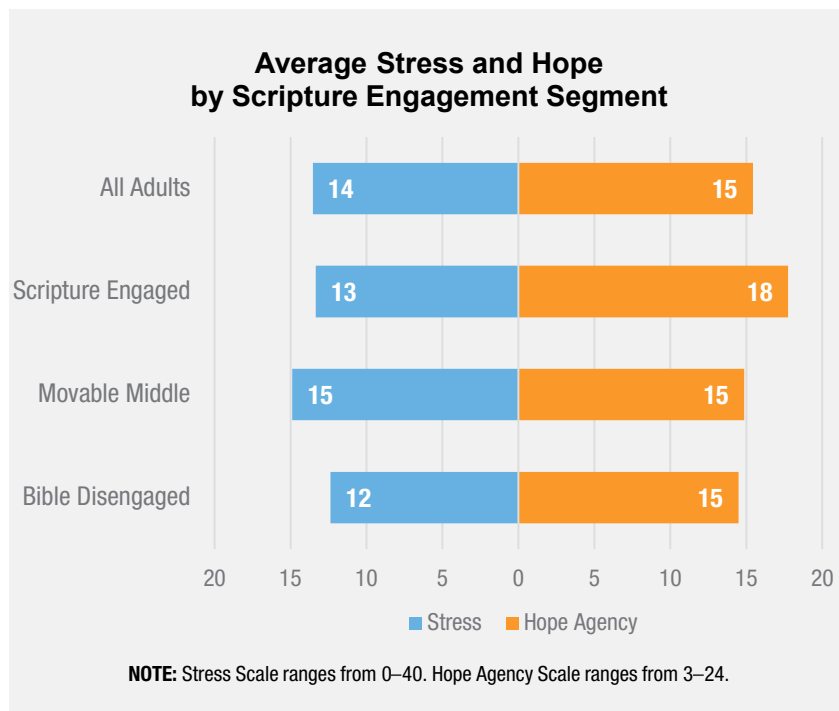


3 For additional information on measuring hope, see Snyder, C. R., Sympson, S. C., Ybasco, F. C., Borders, T. F., Babyak, M. A., & Higgins, R. L. (1996). Development and validation of the State Hope Scale. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(2), 321–335. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.2.321>

STRESS & HOPE FOR THE SCRIPTURE ENGAGED

Even though increased stress levels are apparent across various demographics and groupings, there are signs of hope, especially for the Scripture engaged. As people consistently interact with the Bible, their sense of hope tends to increase. Likewise, people who are less engaged with Scripture tend to express lower levels of hope.

Stress scores have risen slightly for every Scripture Engagement category, growing most pronounced in the Movable Middle (overall, $M = 15$; Bible Friendly, $M = 16$; Bible Neutral, $M = 14$). Bible Disengaged respondents have the lowest stress score ($M = 12$). The Scripture Engaged fall in between, with an average stress score of 13.



While Bible Disengaged respondents aren't as stressed, they also share the lowest Hope score with the Movable Middle ($M = 15$).

Though Scripture Engaged people experience stress at approximately average levels, they score above average for hope. With an average hope score of 18, Scripture Engaged respondents exhibit significantly higher levels of hope than either the Movable Middle or the Bible Disengaged. These higher levels of hope give clues to how the Bible may help them engage with stress and look toward the future with expectancy.

TRAUMA EXPOSURE

While symptoms of stress are felt among most Americans to varying degrees, trauma exposure refers to a narrower category of people. Nearly half of respondents (48%) indicate trauma exposure in at least one of these three categories:

1. They have personally experienced a trauma (30% of cases)
2. They have witnessed a trauma involving an immediate family member (21% of cases)
3. They have witnessed a trauma involving someone other than a family member (12% of cases)

Trauma severity correlates to effects of trauma experienced in the present. People who experience the lasting effects of trauma are significantly less hopeful ($r = -.224$), experience more stress ($r = .439$), are less likely to flourish ($r = -.219$), have decreased

sense of happiness and life satisfaction ($r = -.220$), and have lower mental and physical health ($r = -.260$).⁴

The effects of severe trauma tend to persist. The higher the severity of trauma, the more likely people experience its effects today ($r = .556$). Overall, trauma—especially severe and complex trauma—produces consistent negative effects on well-being.

Younger generations have reportedly experienced more trauma than older generations, with six in ten Gen Z (63%), over half of Millennials (56%), and half of Gen X (50%) indicating some form of trauma exposure. The oldest generations report significantly less trauma exposure (Boomers 37%, Elders 29%). Of those who have experienced trauma, Millennials have the highest incidence of personal trauma exposure (36%), followed by Gen X (34%) and Gen Z (32%). Witnessing a trauma involving a family member, however, was most commonly experienced by Gen Z (32%), with Millennials (24%), and Gen X (22%) following behind.

Trauma incidence is higher for women as well. Over half of women have experienced some form of trauma (51%) compared to 44 percent of men. Over one-third of trauma cases experienced by women (36%) are personal, exceeding exposure to a family member's trauma (23%) or other trauma (11%).

4 The italicized letter *r* in statistics refers generally to the correlation between two variables. See “Correlation” on page 225 for additional details and interpretation guidelines.

In 2019, Barna and American Bible Society delved deeper into this gender gap in the *Trauma in America* report, revealing that women are more acquainted with widespread trauma such as the death of a loved one, betrayal, domestic violence, physical abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse, or destitution. Meanwhile, trauma that is more unique to men is also rarer, such as near-death experiences, incarceration, job loss, and conflicts such as wars, bombings, and other attacks.

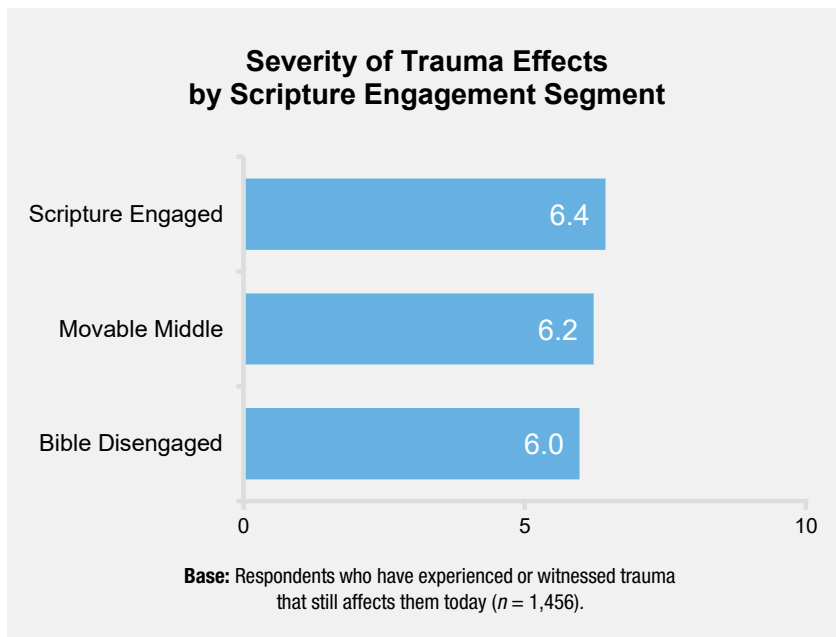
SEVERITY OF TRAUMA VARIES BY DEMOGRAPHIC

Though descriptions of traumatic experiences are similar in severity (men, $M = 6.0$; women, $M = 6.4$), the effects of trauma are nuanced by gender. Women are significantly more likely than men to say the trauma they have experienced still impacts them today. Women are also twice as likely to develop post-traumatic symptoms due to trauma and “display more sensitivity to stimuli that remind them of the trauma.”

Similarly, generational segments reveal different trauma severities.⁵ Even though Gen Z respondents rate themselves as experiencing more trauma than other generations of those who have experienced trauma, the severity is slightly below average (overall, $M = 6.2$; Gen Z, $M = 6.1$). Millennials and Gen X rate the severity of their trauma slightly higher than average (both $M = 6.4$), while Elders score significantly lower than average ($M = 5.2$).

5 Trauma severity is a measure of the *subjective impact* of a traumatic event. Two people involved in a similar traumatic event may experience its impact quite differently.

Severity of trauma is also experienced differently across Scripture Engagement segments. Those who are Scripture Engaged ($M = 6.4$) have felt more severe trauma effects than the Movable Middle ($M = 6.2$) and Bible Disengaged ($M = 6.0$).



This phenomenon may be caused by people turning to the Bible for comfort when they are hurting. It is also possible that there is a different underlying cause. For instance, women are both more likely to be trauma victims, and more likely to be Scripture Engaged than men. Similarly, Black and Hispanic respondents are both statistically more likely to be Scripture Engaged over white or Asian peers, and more likely to have endured trauma. Whether due to the demographic breakdown of Scripture Engaged people

or some other cause, the data indicate that people who have suffered trauma also seek help and comfort in the pages of the Bible.

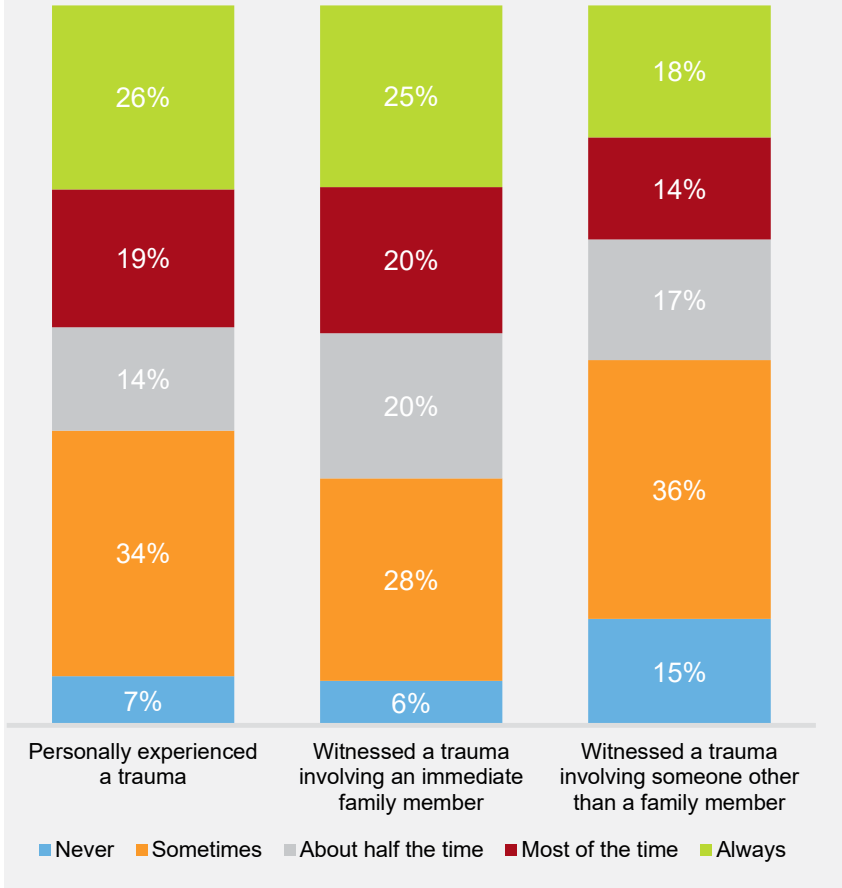
TRAUMA EFFECTS

The closer one's proximity to a traumatic experience, the more likely that trauma will have persistent and disruptive effects. When asked "Does the trauma you experienced or witnessed still affect you today?" one-quarter of those who have personally experienced a trauma say "always" (26%), and 19 percent say "most of the time." Only 7 percent of those personally affected by trauma say it "never" affects them now in their daily lives. These percentages track closely to those of individuals who witnessed the trauma of a family member (25% "always," 20% "most of the time," 6% "never").

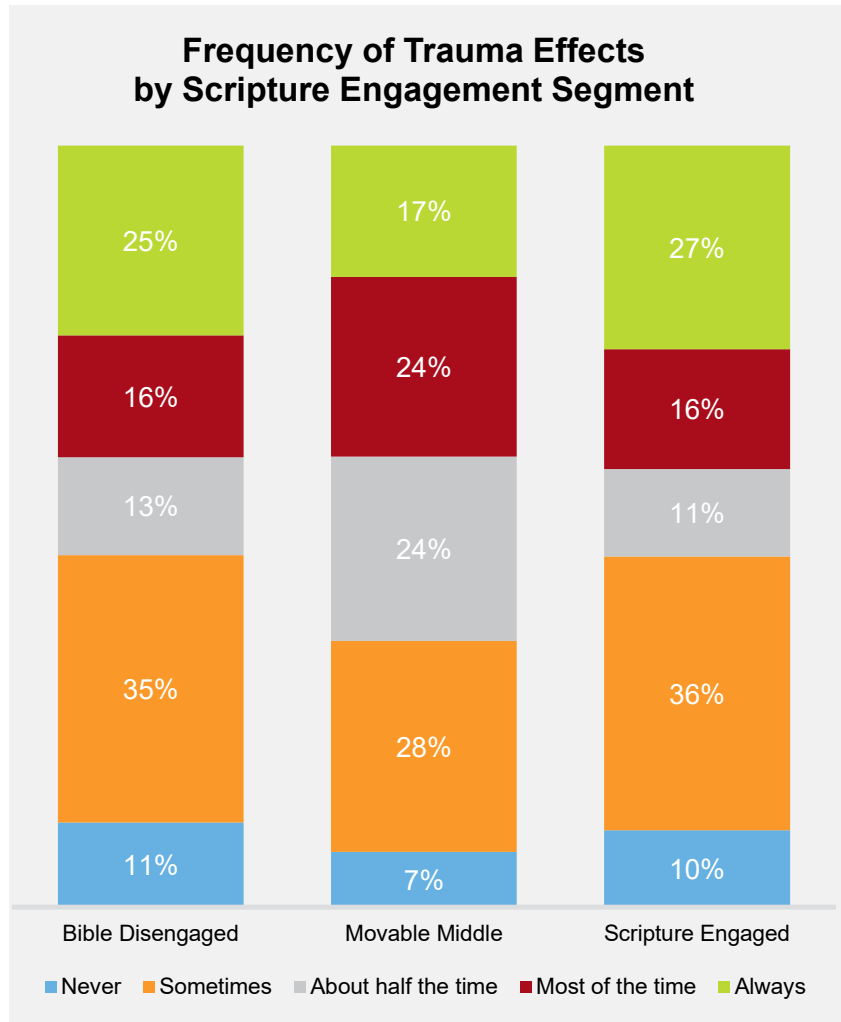
When further removed from a trauma, however—for instance, if it involved a non-family member—Americans less often sense its effects in the present (18% "always," 14% "most of the time," 15% "never").

When looking at trauma effects and Scripture Engagement segments, an interesting pattern emerges. Those who are Scripture Engaged are more likely than other groups to experience effects of their trauma "always" (27%) or "sometimes" (36%). Only 10 percent of Scripture Engaged Americans indicate they "never" feel the lasting impact of their trauma (10%).

Frequency of Trauma Effects by Type of Trauma



This continues an important theme in the data: **A strong relationship to the Bible often coexists with—and could even be compelled by—the hardships of life. Being rooted in the Bible does not preclude tough circumstances, but may provide respite and hope in spite of them.**



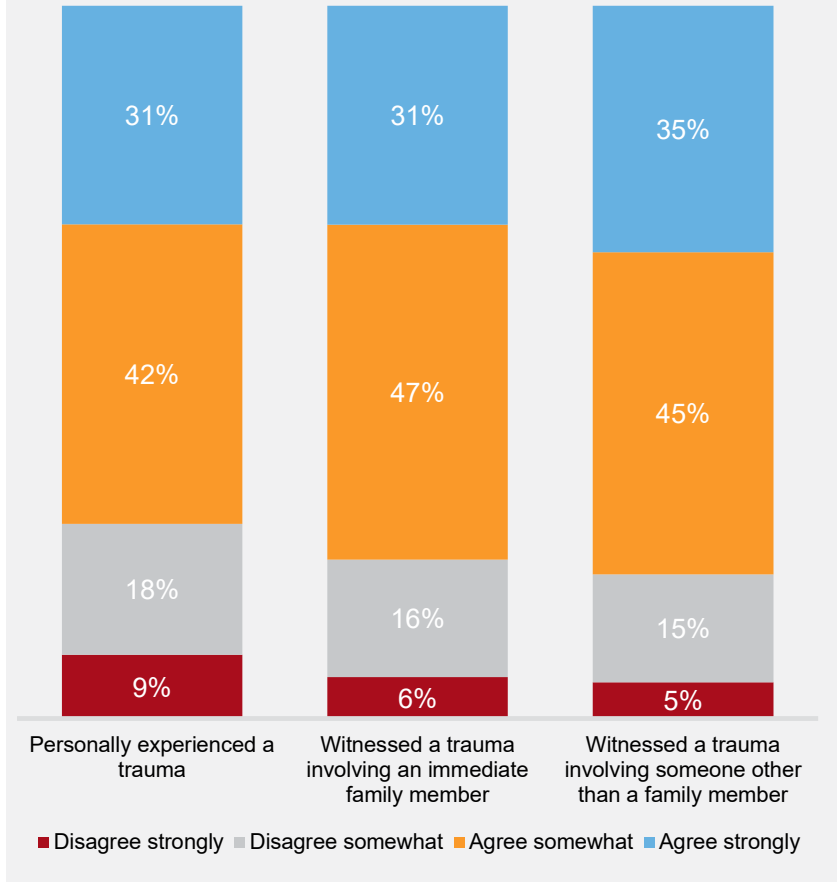
TRAUMA AND FORGIVENESS

When asked if they were able to “sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not,” people who had never experienced trauma were least likely to agree strongly (24%). In contrast, those who have experienced personal trauma or witnessed a trauma involving a family member agree at equal rates (31% “strongly”). The segment most willing to forgive others are those who witnessed a trauma involving someone other than a family member (35% “strongly agree”).

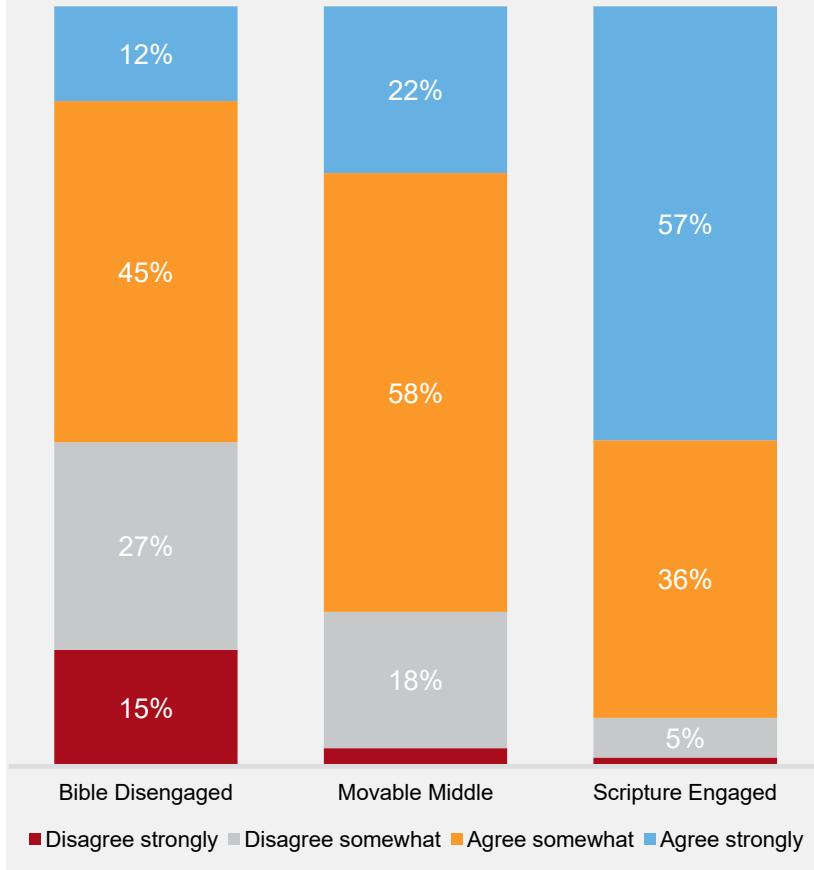
Experiences of trauma appear—generally—to urge people to exercise the muscles of forgiveness, but being distanced from the personal experience helps foster that attitude.

Severity of trauma has no statistical relationship to ability to forgive. That is, even those who have experienced the worst, most long-lasting trauma are about as likely to forgive as those who have experienced less trauma. If it hurts, it hurts, and that is difficult to move past. However, Scripture Engagement is significantly related ($r = .433$) to evidence of forgiveness. The more Scripture Engaged someone is, the more likely they are able to forgive others.

Ability to Forgive by Type of Trauma



Ability to Forgive by Scripture Engagement Segment



CONCLUSION

Stress and trauma are all too common in America. Regardless of relationship with the Bible or the church, people experience hurt. In the midst of these difficulties, though, the Bible and the church make a critical difference. First, when people hurt, many of them turn to the Bible for help and comfort. Second, when they turn to the Bible, they are better able to cope, and they experience higher levels of hope and flourishing (more on this in chapter four). Finally, when they are rooted in Scripture, they are better able to forgive.

There is an ongoing need for the church to provide skilled, Bible-based care to those who are trying to cope with stress and heal from trauma. When the church steps into that space, it fills an important void.

NEXT STEPS

Learn More. In 2019, American Bible Society commissioned Barna Group to study trauma in the United States. The result of that in-depth study was ***Trauma in America: Understanding how people face hardships and how the Church offers hope.*** You can download the free ebook or order a print version from TraumaInAmerica.Bible.

Hope for Prisoners. In March 2021, American Bible Society and the Baylor University Center for Studies in Religion released a major study of a Bible-based trauma healing program for incarcerated people. For more information on correctional trauma healing and how you can implement this transformational program in your community's jail or prison, visit BaylorPrisonStudy.Research.Bible.

Stress in the Military community is widespread, affecting active duty service members, veterans, military families, and children. American Bible Society's Armed Services Ministry has been supporting these critical communities since 1817. Visit ArmedServicesMinistry.org to find out how you can support ministries to America's military community, including:

- **God Understands:** Scripture for Warriors in Need
- **Never Alone:** Military Trauma Healing
- **Hero Squad:** God's Truth for Military Children



THE GOOD LIFE

What does it mean to live *the good life*? In common parlance, someone is living the good life when they are financially secure, achieving success, and enjoying a relatively worry-free existence. Is that sufficient? In pop culture, many celebrities are thought to be living the good life, and the public is all too frequently shocked when famous, successful people experience heartache and display self-destructive behaviors.

Many Americans find hope for a better future through engagement with the Bible and the church, but the good life is about more than the future. The good life is about holistic well-being across many domains of life. It is about a better life both today and in the future.

In the Bible, Jesus says, “I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullest” (John 10:10b). In other words, it seems to be Christ’s intent that we live a life that is deeply satisfying. The question is how is that possible? What are keys to living the good life today?

THE PROBLEM OF TRAUMA AND PAIN

In Chapter 3, we looked at the stress levels and trauma exposure of Americans before beginning to dive into hope for the future. Stress can be found in every demographic; no one is immune. But those with the highest stress scores tend to be those who are young, female, Black, or Hispanic.

On the other hand, trauma—the emotional response to a terrible event—is not as pervasive as stress, though it still impacts nearly half of Americans (48%).¹ Respondents who have either experienced personal trauma or witnessed a trauma are significantly more likely to be members of the following **demographic groups**:

- Female (51%)
- Young (Gen Z 63% or Millennial 56%)
- Less educated² (61%)
- Lower income (54%)
- Black (56%) or Hispanic (52%)
- Single (55%) or separated (67%)
- Urban (56%)

Scripture engagement and church engagement also correlate to trauma exposure. As we explored in Chapter 3, hardships in life affect all people. Those who fall into these key **faith groups** are more likely than average to have experienced trauma:

¹ See “Trauma Incidence” in **Appendix 2: Definitions** on page 225 for more information on how trauma is defined in this study.

² Indicates respondents with less than a high school diploma.

- Historically Black Protestant (61%)
- Active church attenders (59% of those who have attended church in the past month; 65% of those who have attended in the past six months)
- Bible Users (53%)
- Movable Middle (51%)
- Bible Centered (54%)

Far too many Americans have experienced a traumatic event, and many of them continue to feel the impact of that trauma in their daily lives. Respondents who had experienced or witnessed a traumatic event (48%) were also asked, “Does the trauma you experienced or witnessed still affect you today?” Response options were assigned numerical values as follows:

- Never (0)
- Sometimes (1)
- About half the time (2)
- Most of the time (3)
- Always (4)

Using this impact scale, the average American trauma survivor has an impact score of 2.1, meaning that they experience the effects of their trauma approximately half the time. Americans who feel the effects of their trauma most often are:

- Female ($M = 2.3$)
- Gen Z ($M = 2.3$) or Millennial ($M = 2.3$)
- Have less than a high school education ($M = 3.0$)

- Have a high school education ($M = 2.3$)
- Lower income ($M = 2.2$)
- Single ($M = 2.3$)
- Have children in the household ($M = 2.3$)
- Scripture Engaged ($M = 2.4$)

Sadly, trauma is pervasive and it impacts daily life, even among people of faith.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

With this painful reality as our backdrop, the *State of the Bible* research team began to examine how people who have been traumatized might find hope beyond their pain. In other words, “can people who have suffered still experience the good life?”

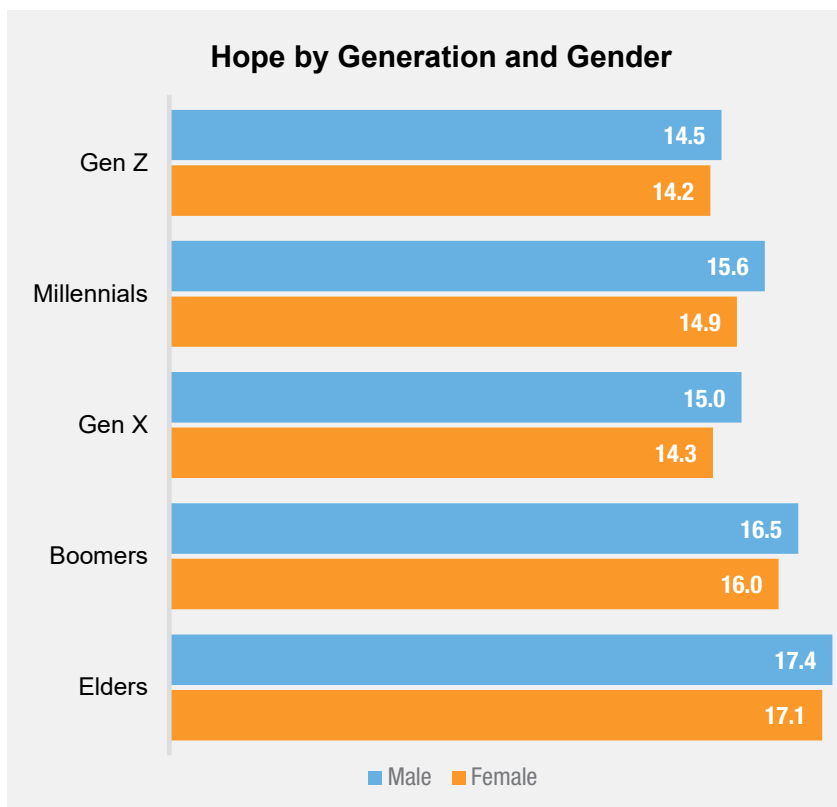
HOPE BY GENDER AND GENERATION

While the average Hope score³ of American adults is 15.4, different life situations and experiences impact people’s ability to see a path toward their goals and a better future. For instance, men score higher than women for Hope ($M = 15.7$ men vs. $M = 15.2$ women). This small but statistically significant difference indicates that men find it easier to imagine a better future and take steps to impact that future. Although men and women are not strikingly different

³ In this study, hope refers to **someone’s ability to imagine a better future that they can influence**. This construct is often called “Hope Agency.” The *State of the Bible* research team relied on published academic research to evaluate respondents’ levels of hope. See the works of Dr. Chan Hellman (University of Oklahoma) and the late Dr. C. R. Snyder (University of Kansas) for more information.

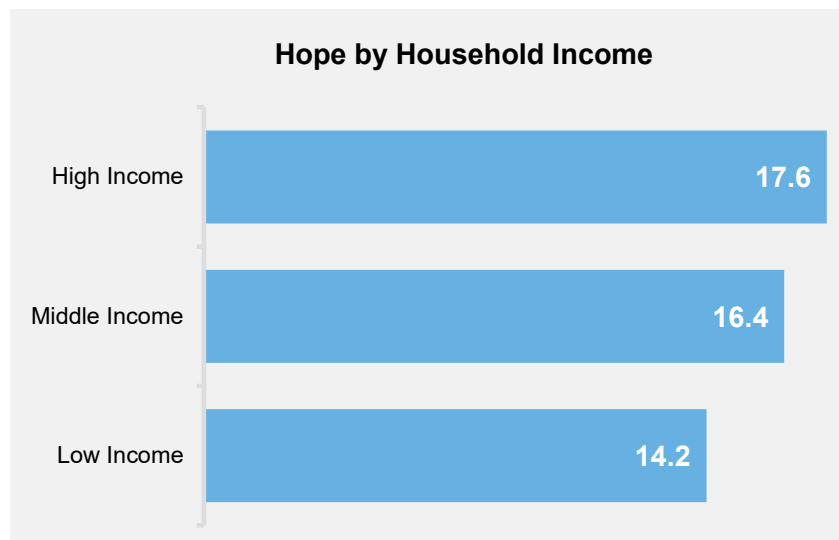
in terms of Hope scores, generational differences provide a wider range of responses.

Hope appears to increase with age. Boomers and Elders score higher than average for hope ($M = 16.2$ and $M = 17.2$, respectively), while younger generations struggle with hope. Gen Z has a mean score of 14.3, followed by Gen X with 14.7, and Millennials fall closer to the average with 15.3.



HOPE BY OTHER DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographics such as education level, income, marital status, and political affiliation also impact Hope scores. Americans who have not completed high school have drastically lower Hope scores ($M = 13.3$) than those with more education ($M = 16.8$ for college graduates). Income is also a factor when looking at Hope Agency; the lower a person's income, the lower their ability to see themselves as influencing their own future.⁴



Relationships and close social connections are also a factor in Hope scores. **Married Americans have the highest average Hope scores ($M = 16.7$) of all relationship statuses.** Trailing behind married individuals, those who are divorced or single are less likely to see

⁴ Annual household income is categorized as follows—Low: <\$50k; Medium: \$50–\$99K; High: \$100+.

a future with hope, with a mean score of 14.3. Those who are separated have the lowest hope scores—not only of all marital status categories, but of all demographic categories in general ($M = 13.1$).

Involvement in the political life of America, as demonstrated by party affiliation, also correlates with feelings of hope when looking toward the future. While Democrats and Independents have average Hope scores ($M = 15.3$ and $M = 15.1$, respectively), Republicans over-index for hope ($M = 16.2$). Interestingly, Hope scores are lowest among those who indicate *no* political affiliation ($M = 13.7$). These Americans who don't indicate a sense of belonging in the political system may feel that they have no ability to effect change.

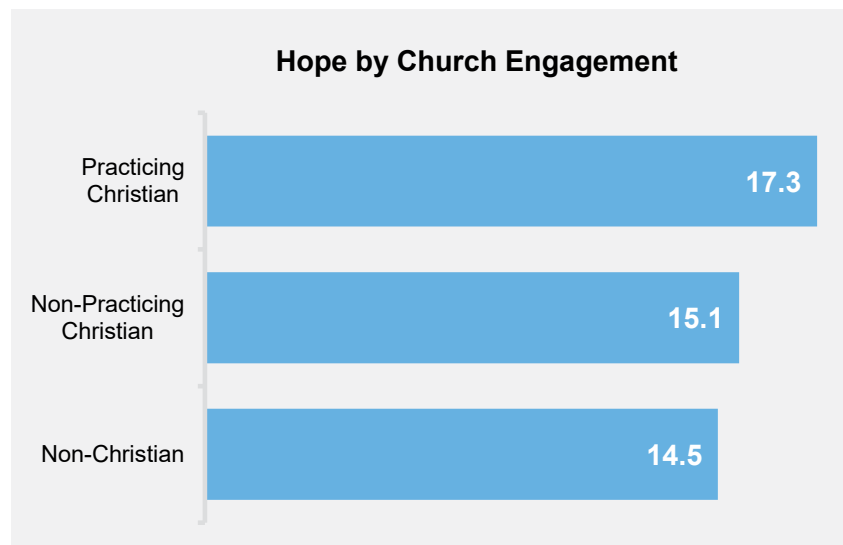
“Self-identified Christians have much higher Hope scores than those who do not identify as Christian.”

HOPE AND CHURCH ENGAGEMENT

In addition, higher Hope scores correlate to active involvement in a church community and a consistent faith life. Self-identified Christians have much higher Hope scores ($M = 15.8$) than those who do not identify as Christian ($M = 14.5$), especially those with no faith ($M = 14.3$). Other faith traditions score closer to average on Hope ($M = 15.6$).

A pattern also emerges when looking at church attendance. Weekly churchgoers ($M = 16.9$) have more hope for their future than those who are unchurched ($M = 14.9$) or who have only been to

church in the past six months ($M = 14.7$). Accordingly, Practicing Christians have the highest average Hope scores ($M = 17.3$). This stands in contrast to Non-Practicing Christians ($M = 15.1$) and Non-Christians ($M = 14.5$). In summary, **the more actively people practice their Christian faith, the more hopeful they are about their future.**



BIBLE USE IS ACCOMPANIED BY HOPE

In addition to other demographic and religious characteristics, Bible usage also influences Hope scores. Bible Users score higher than average for hope ($M = 16.3$), while those who do not use the Bible have much lower Hope scores ($M = 14.6$). Additionally, those who are curious about the Bible and/or Jesus have higher hope scores ($M = 15.7$) than those who are not curious ($M = 14.6$).

As noted in Chapter 3, Scripture engagement is a driving factor in higher Hope scores, even though Scripture Engaged people have similar levels of stress as other Scripture Engagement categories. Across all other demographics, if someone is engaged with Scripture on a regular basis, they have more hope and are more ready and willing to forgive others.⁵ These data suggest a powerful insight: **Connection to the Bible and Christian community provides hurting people with a bridge to hope and healing.**

HUMAN FLOURISHING AND THE GOOD LIFE

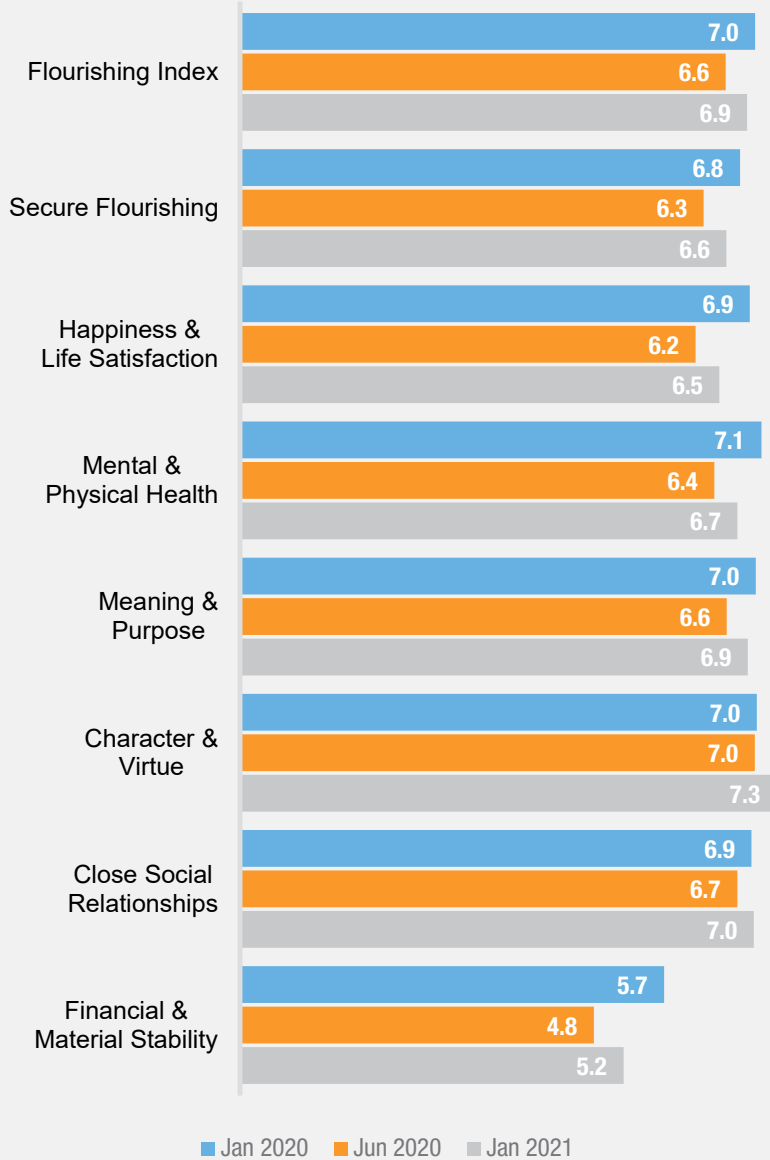
Researchers at Harvard University's T. H. Chan School of Public Health have developed a 12-item measure of Human Flourishing across six essential domains:

1. Happiness and Life Satisfaction
2. Mental and Physical Health
3. Meaning and Purpose
4. Character and Virtue
5. Close Social Relationships
6. Financial and Material Stability

The first five dimensions are averaged to form the **Flourishing Index**. Average American adults score 6.9 out of 10 on the Flourishing Index ($SD = 1.8$). All six dimensions—including Financial and Material Stability—are averaged to form the **Secure Flourishing** scale, which adds *lack of worry about finances and material*

5 See "Stress & Hope for the Scripture Engaged" on page 69 for more on this issue.

Flourishing Among U.S. Adults 2020 – 2021



needs to the original Flourishing domains. American adults average 6.6 on the Secure Flourishing scale ($SD = 1.7$).

Though the Harvard Human Flourishing inventory does not include any direct measure of faith, it is a solidly researched assessment of well-being and can help faith-based researchers understand the impact of religious engagement, including Scripture engagement. Since 2020, the *State of the Bible* research team has used Human Flourishing as our index for holistic well-being.⁶

FLOURISHING REBOUNDED FROM JUNE 2020

Last year, between January and June 2020, Human Flourishing scores in America dropped across every domain. The most dramatic drops occurred in Happiness and Life Satisfaction ($M = 6.90$ in January 2020 to $M = 6.17$ in June 2020) and Financial and Material Stability ($M = 5.74$ in January 2020 to $M = 4.97$ in June 2020). With the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the financial fallout of job loss due to prolonged closures, these declines make sense. However, these two flourishing items also saw the highest rate of rebound by January of 2021, with Happiness and Life Satisfaction scores increasing by 0.32 ($M = 6.49$) and Financial and Material Security scores increasing 0.40 ($M = 5.19$).

Although the other domains of Flourishing did recover, only two categories actually *increased* compared to January 2020: **Close Social Relationships** and **Character and Virtue** (see chart at left).

6 For additional information on measuring Human Flourishing, visit <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>.

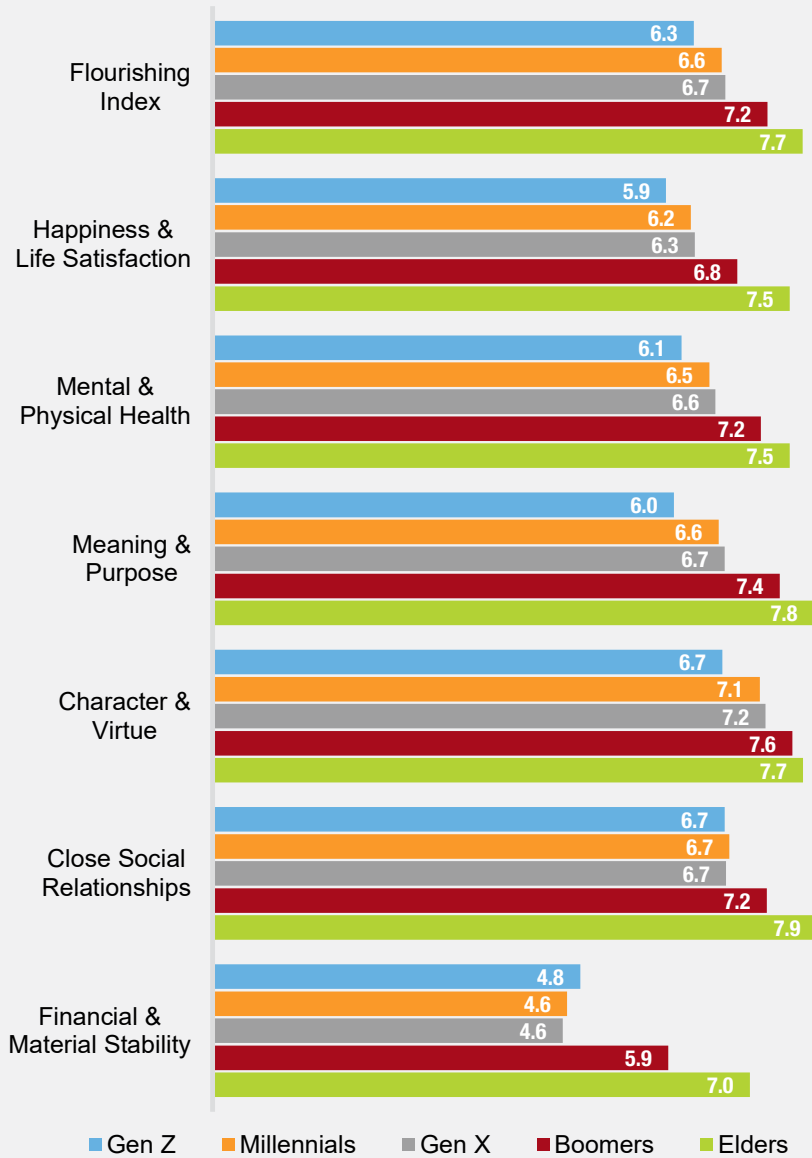
The Flourishing Index experienced a drop of 0.40 points in the average score in 2020 but has since rebounded 0.29 points. The Secure Flourishing Index saw an even greater drop (0.49) with a similar rebound of 0.30.

FLOURISHING BY GENDER AND GENERATION

Men and women do not differ significantly on Human Flourishing as a whole, yet there are slight differences within the specific categories. Women report having better Close Social Relationships compared with men (women, $M = 7.1$ vs. men, $M = 6.9$), while men score higher for Mental and Physical Health (men, $M = 6.8$ vs. women, $M = 6.6$) and Financial and Material Stability (men, $M = 5.4$ vs. women, $M = 4.9$).

Older adults are flourishing at higher levels than younger adults. Much like the correlation between generation and hope, well-being levels are related to age in each Flourishing category. The lower the age, the lower the score, and the higher the age, the higher the score. The only exception is in the case of Financial and Material Stability. In this section, Gen Z did not report the lowest numbers; rather, Millennials and Gen X—the generations most likely to be occupied with both career and family—tie for the lowest mean score of 4.6. It may be that Gen Z feels less anxious about their financial and material stability because many are just entering adulthood and still enjoy some family support for money, shelter, and insurance. Some Gen Z college students may not yet bear the full responsibility of earning a living. The highest

Flourishing by Generation



scores for Financial and Material Stability occur in the two oldest generations: Boomers (5.9) and Elders (7.0).

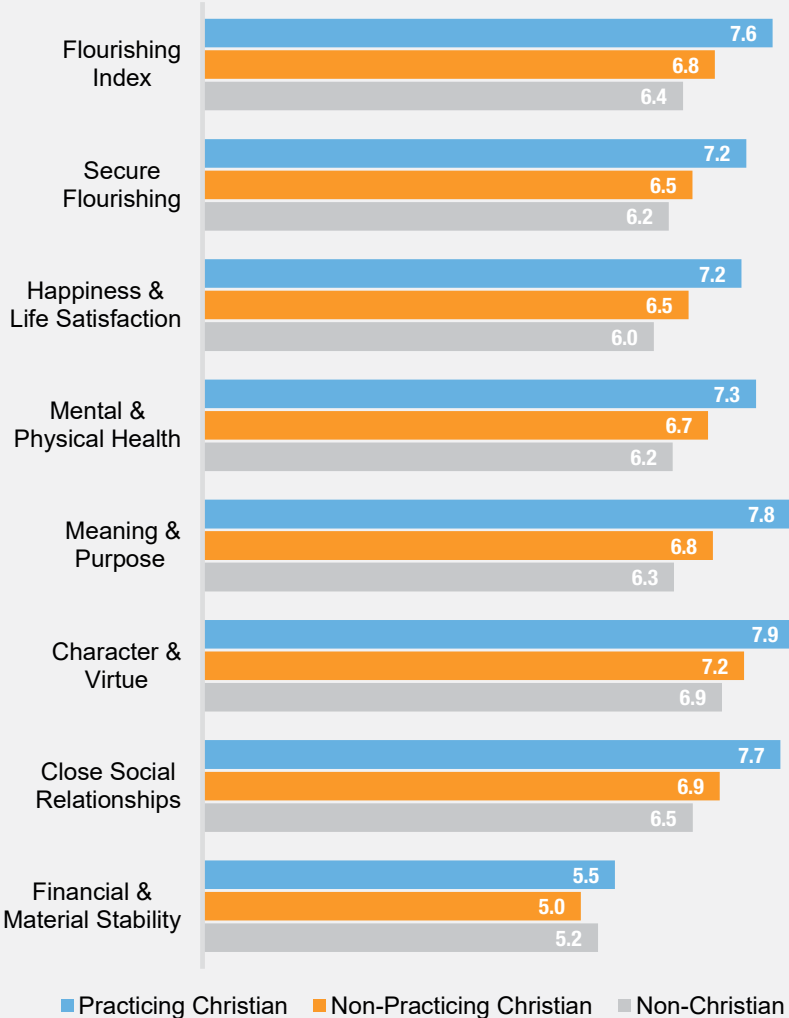
“Practicing Christians experience higher levels of Flourishing in every measured domain.”

On closer analysis, it appears that the wide range of responses in Flourishing domains hints at varied levels of maturity and experience across generations. Gen Z averages significantly lower scores than Elders in the domain of Happiness and Life Satisfaction (Gen Z, $M = 5.9$; Elders, $M = 7.5$). All other generations fall within that range: Millennials (6.2), Gen X (6.3), and Boomers (6.8). Likewise, Meaning and Purpose reveals a range of 1.8, with Gen Z reporting a 6.0 mean score and Elders reporting 7.8. Of course, Gen Z is at a stage of life where it is common to re-evaluate their life trajectory, search for a vocational calling, and make more frequent career changes.

FLOURISHING AND CHURCH ENGAGEMENT

As described earlier in the chapter, church engagement is associated with higher Hope scores. Similarly, church engagement is also correlated with increased *well-being*. Practicing Christians experience higher levels of Flourishing in every measured domain. The top three categories for practicing Christians include: Character and Virtue ($M = 7.9$), Meaning and Purpose ($M = 7.8$), and Close Social Relationships ($M = 7.7$). Non-Practicing Christians, though they fall behind practicing Christians in every category of well-being, still score higher than their non-Christian peers, underscoring the spectrum of Flourishing experiences tied to church engagement.

Flourishing by Church Engagement



FLOURISHING AND SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Scripture Engagement has a positive correlation with all Flourishing domains as well. In every case, consistent, meaningful interaction with the Bible increases Flourishing and corresponds to well-being. The top three Flourishing items for Scripture Engaged respondents are the following:

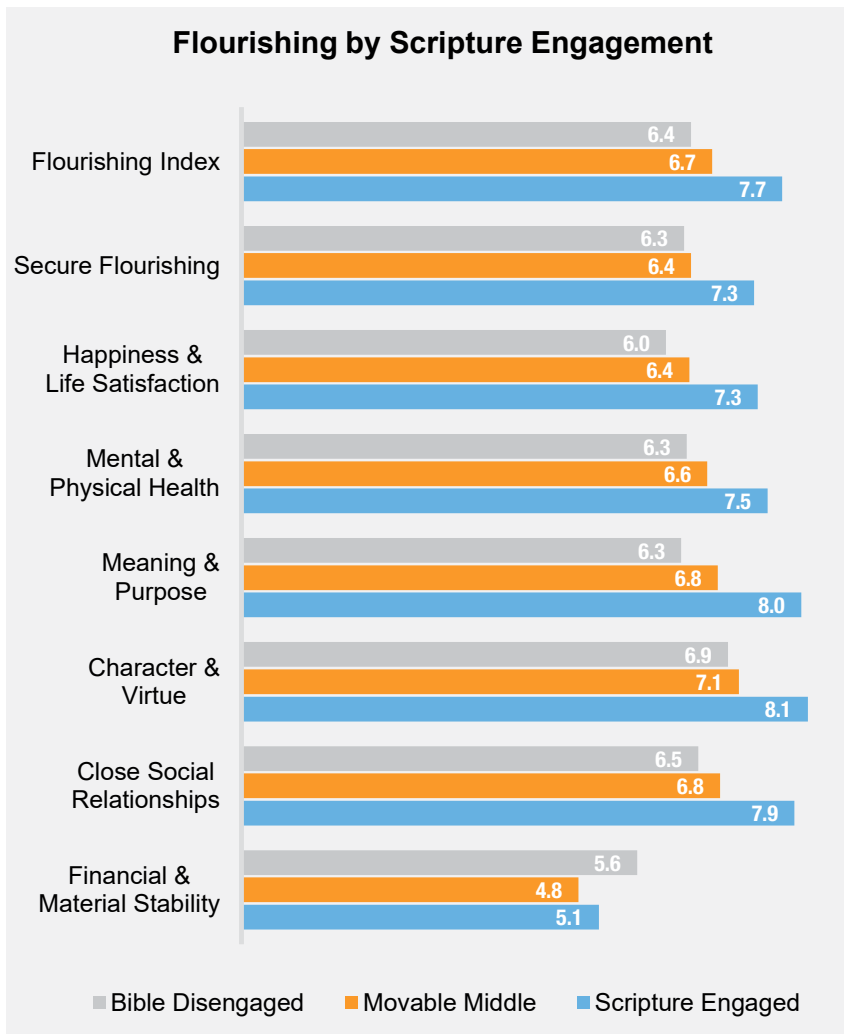
- Character and Virtue ($M = 8.1$)
- Meaning and Purpose ($M = 8.0$)
- Close Social Relationships ($M = 7.9$)

Consistent Bible engagement may anchor a virtuous life and give ethical stability and feelings of purpose. High scores in the domain of Close Social Relationships may indicate that Scripture Engaged individuals experience meaningful relationships through their church community and may also find their interactions with the Bible enriched when experienced in relationally close community.

Scripture Engaged Americans score higher in every category of human flourishing except Financial and Material Stability. Bible Disengaged Americans report a mean score of 5.6 for Financial and Material Stability, while Scripture Engaged respondents average 5.1. The Movable Middle, however, has the lowest average score for Financial and Material Stability ($M = 4.8$).

When we take a more holistic approach and examine overall Flourishing compared to Secure Flourishing, Scripture Engaged respondents lead all others, averaging 7.7 for Flourishing and 7.3 for Secure Flourishing. By comparison, respondents in the Movable Middle

average significantly lower (Flourishing, $M = 6.7$; Secure Flourishing, $M = 6.4$). Bible Disengaged respondents score significantly lower than the Movable Middle on Flourishing ($M = 6.4$) and are in a statistical tie with the Movable Middle on Secure Flourishing ($M = 6.3$).



These data suggest an important takeaway: **Holistic well-being is not determined by one's financial status.** Except among America's lowest-income households, there is no relationship between flourishing and income. Conversely, Scripture engagement and church engagement are significant predictors of holistic well-being.

CONCLUSION

Hope and human flourishing vary across demographics, but it is consistently true that involvement in church community and engagement with the Bible are central components of the good life for many Americans. Likewise, those who practice the Christian faith on a regular basis move into the future with an overall better outlook on life. Their future is bright and hopeful.

For many Americans, hope and even flourishing are hard-won and have occurred alongside trauma or a lack of stability. There is a sense that their lived experience—not naivete or a desire for a “feel-good” gospel—anchors them in Scripture, faith, and church, and vice versa.

NEXT STEPS

Learn More. In May, Adam Grant wrote in *The New York Times* about flourishing and its opposite, languishing. To learn more about flourishing in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, [check out Grant's article](#). You can also take an online [human flourishing quiz](#) to learn more about your own levels of well-being.

Dig Deeper. The creative team at The Bible Project has developed a brief Bible study and an engaging video on the subject of Peace (*Shalom* in Hebrew). Shalom, or peace, is not only the absence of conflict but also the presence of connection and completion. In other words, it's the Bible's word for flourishing or well-being. You can dig deeper into the biblical concept of well-being, flourishing, or peace by clicking on this link:

- **Peace:** <https://bibleproject.com/church-at-home/week19-peace>

Find Healing. American Bible Society's Trauma Healing ministry provides resources that point people to hope and bring increased well-being, even in times of stress. Find resources for yourself, your family, or your church at <https://hope.americanbible.org>.



GENERATION Z

Until recently, “Millennial” has been the common parlance to refer to young people. Now, as elder Millennials approach middle age, discussions about “the next generation” turn to Generation Z—or, as the pandemic era coined them, “Zoomers.” In previous chapters, we reported on Gen Z where age has been a significant influence, but here we’ll tighten the lens on the experiences of this cohort, including their interest in and study of Scripture.

Gen Z now spans people aged nine through 24. Traditionally, *State of the Bible* addresses the perspectives of American adults (ages 18+); however, this year we were interested in learning more about younger members of America’s youngest complete generation. To do that, we allowed students as young as age 15 to participate in our survey for *State of the Bible*. Ninety-one individuals in that age group agreed to share their responses with us. Though this group of students is small and should be analyzed cautiously, their

perspectives are intriguing and instructive in the ways they presently differ from adults, even within Gen Z. We'll report on this group of 15–17-year-olds as “Gen Z youth,” distinguishing them from the 18–24-year-olds in their generation when appropriate. We will also look ahead to Gen Z's generational neighbors, the Millennials, who can provide clues as to how young people today may mature.

GEN Z AND WELL-BEING

Gen Z is entering the period of life social scientists name “emerging adulthood,” which is characterized by transition. Emerging adults often feel “stuck in between” adolescence and adulthood. They are in a period of self-discovery and meaning making. People in this stage of life seek to understand the world around them by turning inward, attempting to understand and assert their own personal identity.

This group of young adults is unique for pursuing college and graduate education, delaying marriage and childbearing, and entering into long-term employment at older ages. Gen Z is also more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations. The first generation to grow up in an era marked by the wide availability of smart phones, Gen Z is coming of age against the backdrop of the internet and with heightened awareness of global and societal issues.

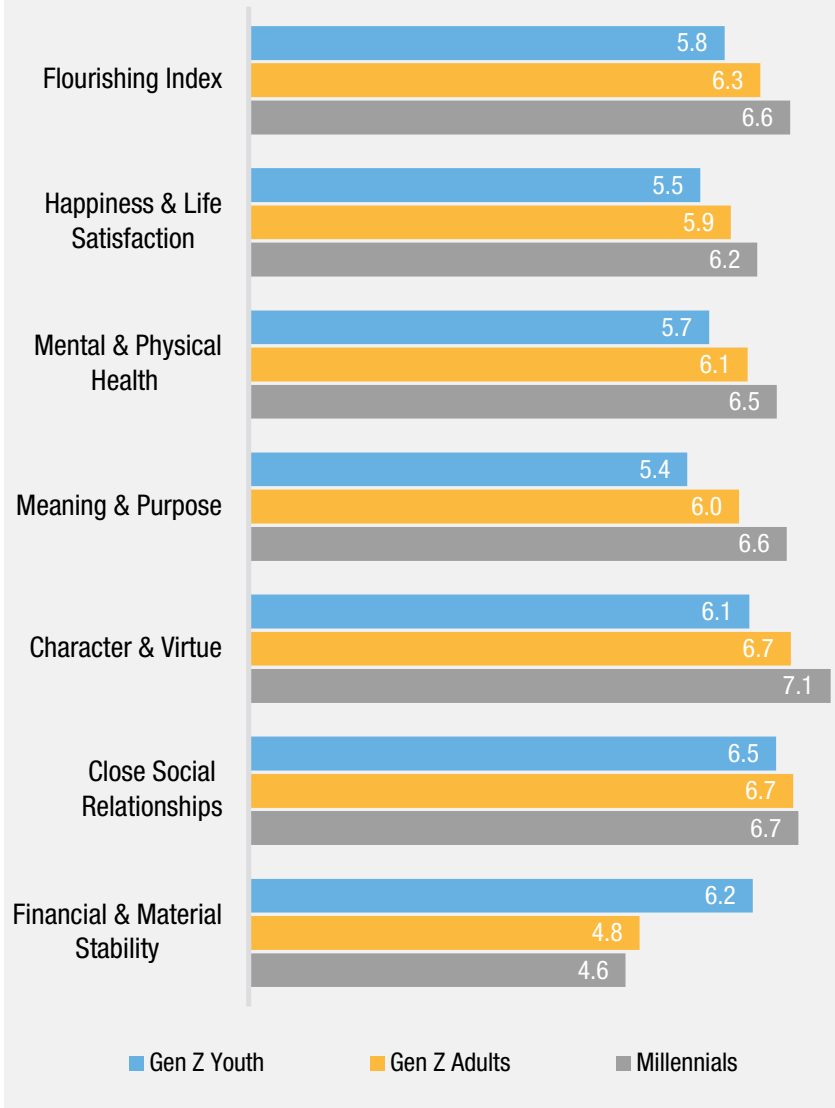
Throughout the *State of the Bible* report so far, Gen Z has been more likely than older generations to report certain personal struggles.

They have the highest levels of stress (page 66), they are more likely than average to report trauma exposure (page 71), and they have the lowest Hope Agency scores (page 68), among other things. This holds across Gen Z teens and adults in this study. When it comes to metrics of Flourishing, however, experiences among Gen Z are more nuanced.

Overall Flourishing scores of Gen Z youth are significantly lower than adults in the same generation (*see data visualization on following page*). While Gen Z youth score an average of 5.8 on the Flourishing scale, Gen Z adults score 6.3. This disparity is evident across all Human Flourishing dimensions, indicating that Gen Z youth are generally less satisfied with life than their slightly older peers. The biggest disparities between Gen Z youth and adults are shown in the dimensions of Meaning and Purpose (Gen Z Youth, $M = 5.4$; Gen Z Adults, $M = 6.0$) and Character and Virtue (Gen Z Youth, $M = 6.1$; Gen Z Adults, $M = 6.7$), which both show a difference of 0.6.

Financial and Material Stability is the only exception. Gen Z youth score higher in this domain of human flourishing compared with both Gen Z adults and Millennials. This phenomenon is likely due to the fact that most Gen Z youth (90%) live at home and are not yet directly responsible for their financial affairs. In contrast, half of Gen Z adults (47%) live on their own and report lower Financial and Material Stability overall.

Flourishing Dimensions by Generation



GEN Z AND BIBLE USE

The Psalms give a beautiful picture of what the Word of God provides for those who heed its words:

Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people, who do not follow the example of sinners or join those who have no use for God. Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the LORD, and they study it day and night. They are like trees that grow beside a stream, that bear fruit at the right time, and whose leaves do not dry up. They succeed in everything they do. (Psalm 1:1–3 GNT)

“Gen Z—especially Gen Z youth—has a precarious relationship with the Bible.”

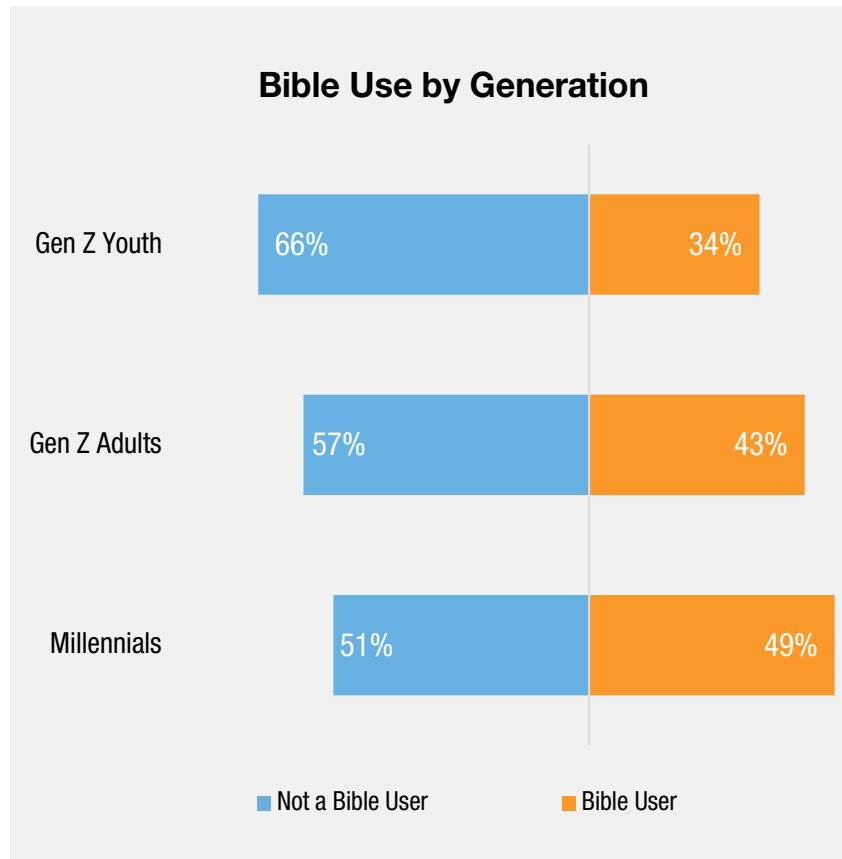
As Gen Z wrestles with the tumult of emerging adulthood, the Bible can provide them with guidance to navigate challenges and opportunities with wisdom and grace. **However, Gen Z—especially Gen Z youth—has a precarious relationship with the Bible.**

GEN Z BIBLE USERS

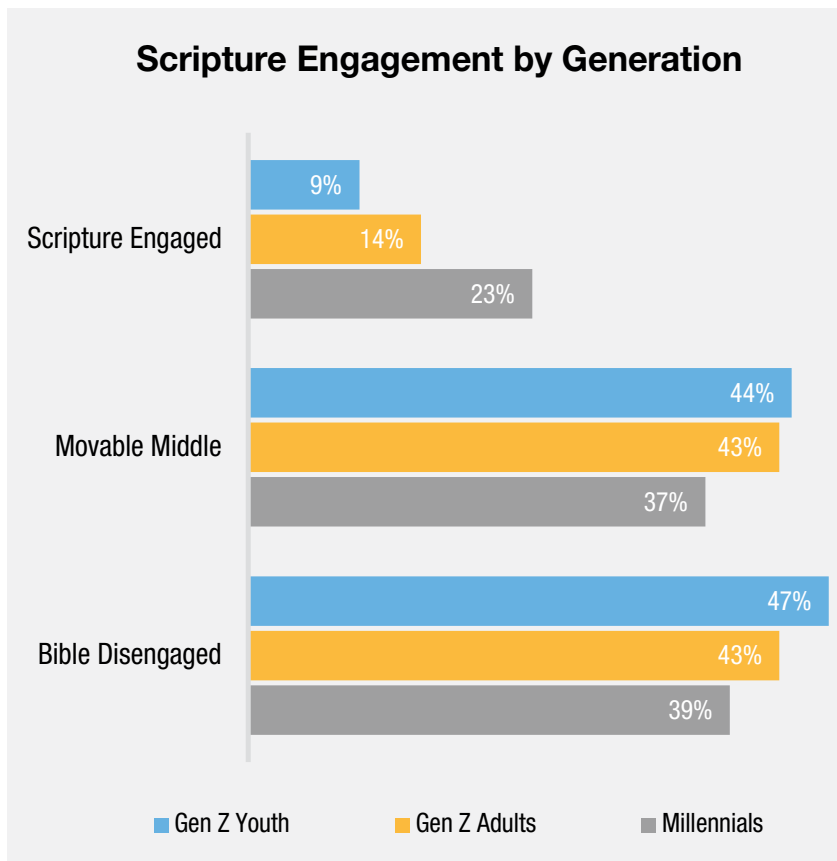
Half of all American adults qualify as a Bible User today—those who use the Bible at least three to four times per year (page 12). However, only one-third of Gen Z youth (34%) are Bible Users, while 43 percent of Gen Z adults qualify. Compared with Gen Z, Millennials have a much higher percentage of Bible Users, approaching the national average (49%).

GEN Z SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Gen Z youth are more often Bible Disengaged (47%) or in the Movable Middle (44%) and are less likely than either Gen Z adults or Millennials to be Scripture Engaged. In fact, only 9 percent of Gen Z youth qualify as Scripture Engaged, compared with 14 percent of Gen Z adults and 23 percent of Millennials. Gen Z adults are equally likely to be Bible Disengaged and in the Movable Middle (both 43%).

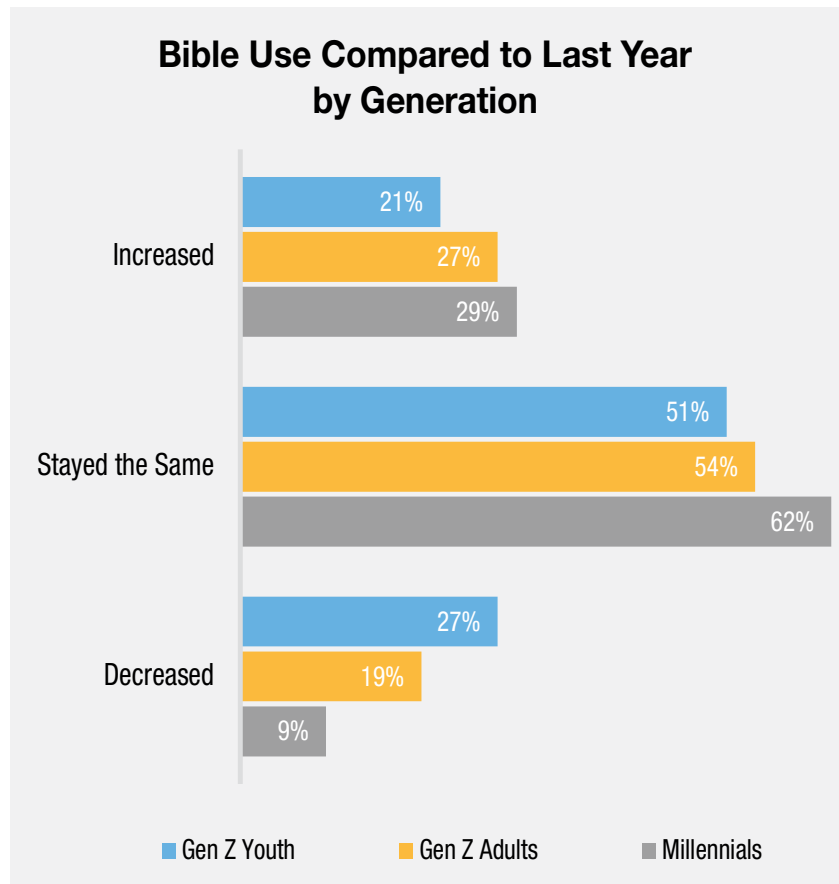


When we look at the average Scripture Engagement score for each group (see “Measuring Scripture Engagement” on page 30), Gen Z youth score significantly lower than Millennials, while Gen Z adults are statistically tied with Millennials. The difference between Gen Z youth ($M = 68$) and Millennials ($M = 75$) is approximately one half of a standard deviation, or half of a category. So, the average Gen Z youth is Bible Disengaged, while the average Millennial is in the Movable Middle.



BIBLE USE IN 2020

The turmoil of 2020 did not spark greater Bible use among teenagers. Gen Z youth (27%) are more likely than Gen Z adults (19%) or Millennials (9%) to say they decreased their Bible use in the past year. Millennials, on the other hand, are more likely to say their Bible use has increased in the past year (29%) compared with Gen Z adults (27%) and Gen Z youth (21%).



GEN Z AND BIBLE PERSPECTIVES

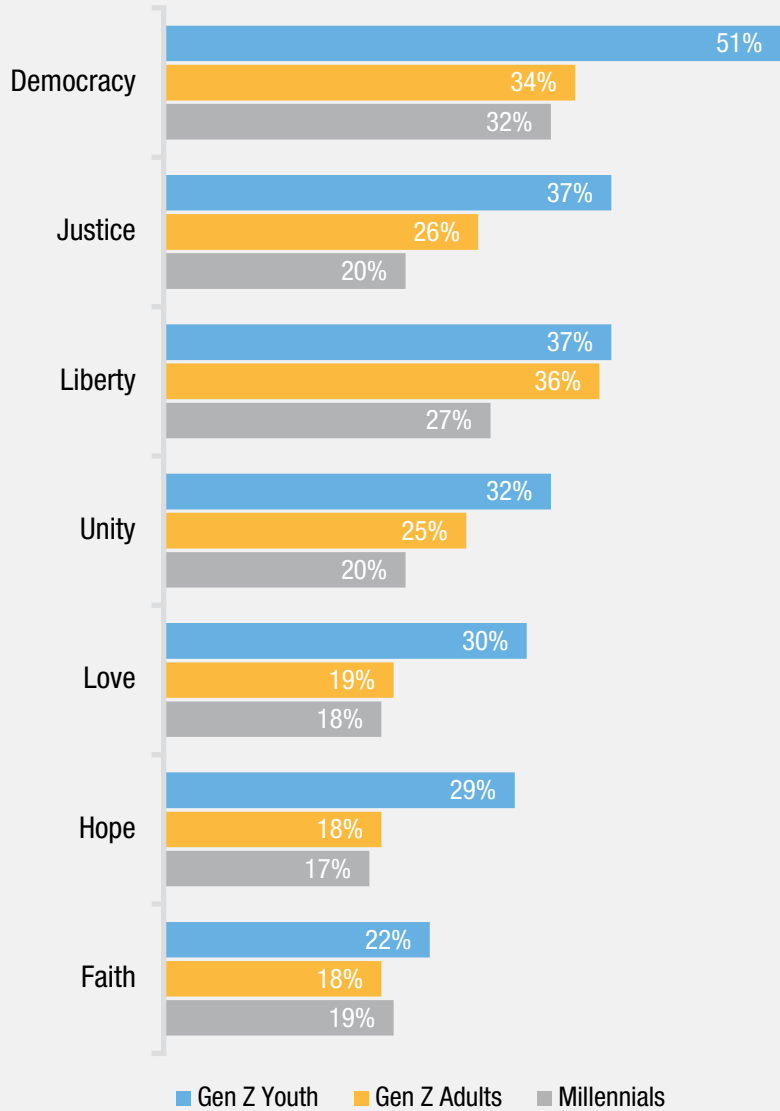
Alongside Gen Z's lower-than-average Bible engagement, there is significant uncertainty about Scripture's value.

When asked about the Bible's importance to sustaining key American ideals, youth in Gen Z (ages 15–17) were more likely than adult members of their generation, and far more likely than older adults, to be undecided. We see this

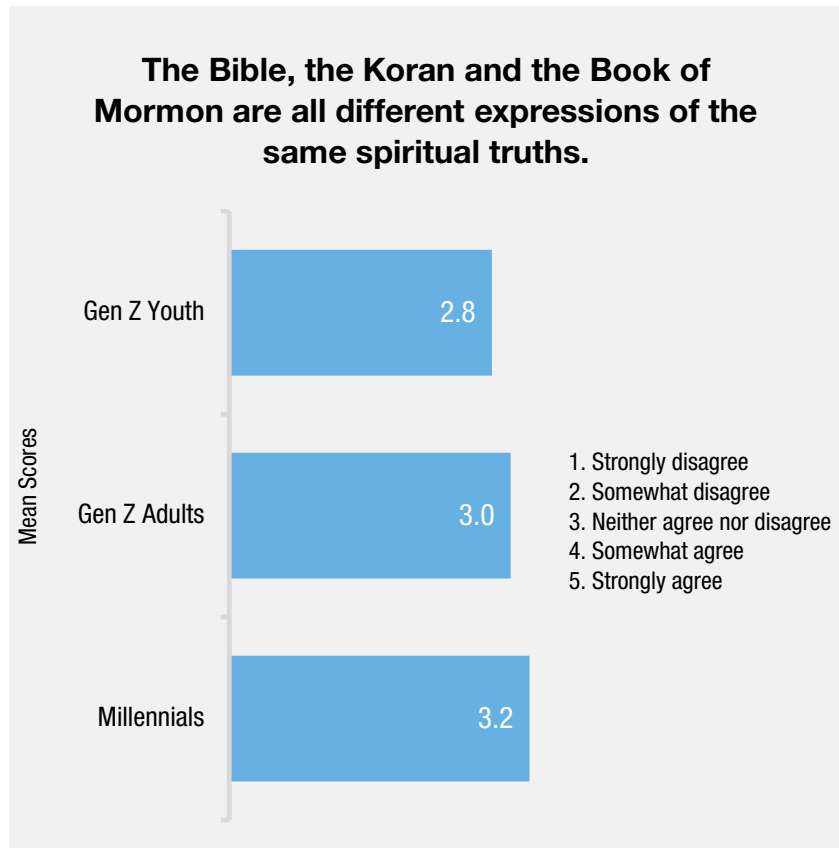
in the percentage who “neither agree nor disagree” that the Bible's teachings are essential to upholding Democracy (51% of Gen Z youth vs. 34% of Gen Z adults) Justice (37% vs. 26%), Love (30% vs. 19%), and Hope (29% vs. 18%). Gen Z youth may continue to form their opinions as they age into adulthood, but Gen Z as a whole are still more likely than Millennials to questions the Bible's relevance to issues like Liberty (37% vs. 27%) and Unity (29% vs. 20%).

“Gen Z youth are more likely to be *undecided* about the Bible's connection to key American ideals.”

Uncertain if the Bible's teachings are essential to sustaining the following American ideals:

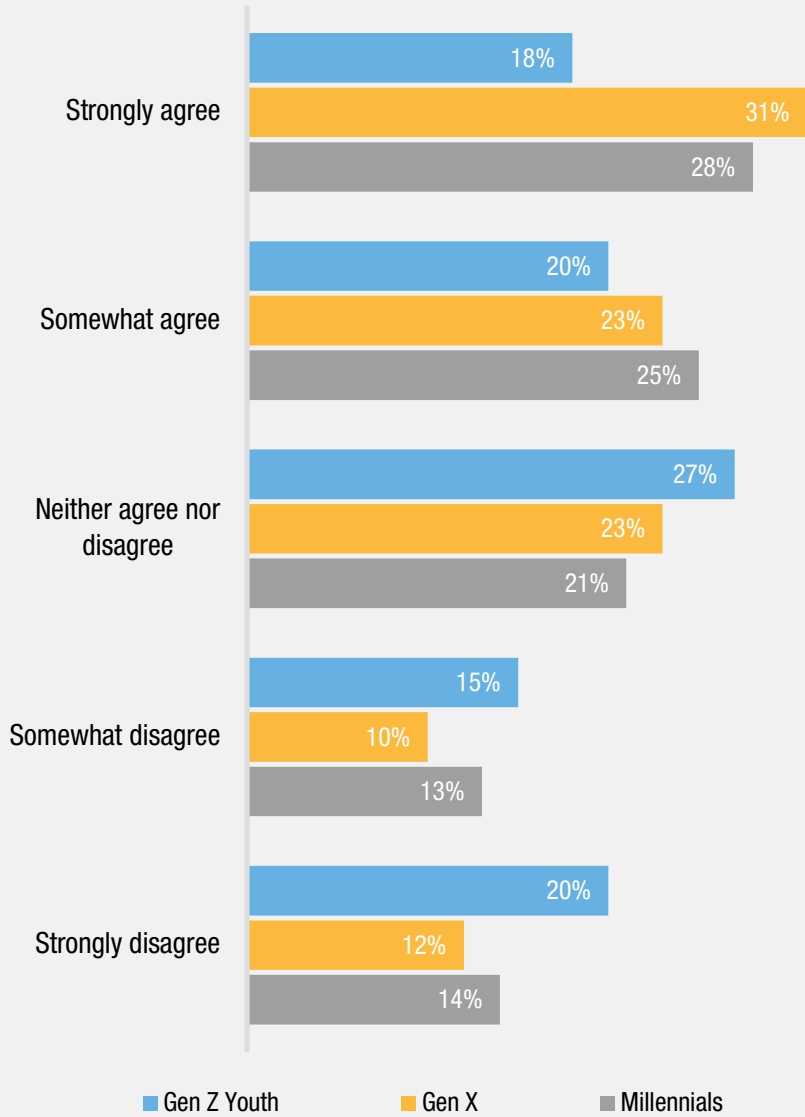


One-third of Gen Z indicates they “neither agree nor disagree” that the Bible, the Koran, and the Book of Mormon are all different expressions of the same spiritual truths (33%).



They also have a significantly lower view of the Bible than other generations, with 20 percent strongly disagreeing, and 15 percent somewhat disagreeing with the statement that “The Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life.” Even their ambivalence toward that question is telling; 27 percent neither agree nor disagree.

The Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life.



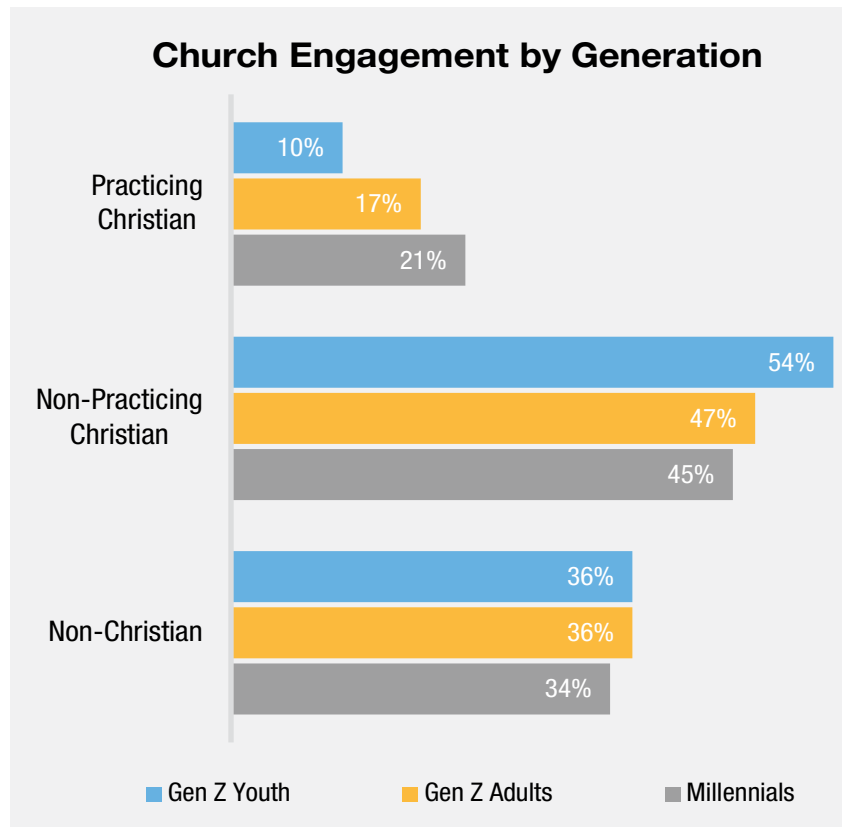
It remains to be seen whether these responses are more indicative of indecision or relativism. Barna Group research among Gen Z (ages 13–21) reveals high agreement with opinions such as “what is morally right and wrong changes over time based on society” (31% agree strongly, 43% agree somewhat) and “many religions can lead to eternal life; there is no one true religion” (27% agree strongly, 28% agree somewhat).

If Gen Z follow the same path as Millennials—and research suggests they will—they may continue to grow into rather than age out of these ideas. Millennials are the most likely to say the Bible is the same as other holy books (17% strongly agree, 27% somewhat agree). While the average Gen Z youth somewhat disagrees that the Bible is the same as other holy books ($M = 2.8$), Gen Z adults are closer to Millennials, with an average score of 3.0, placing them firmly in the “neither agree nor disagree” group alongside the slightly older generation ($M = 3.2$).

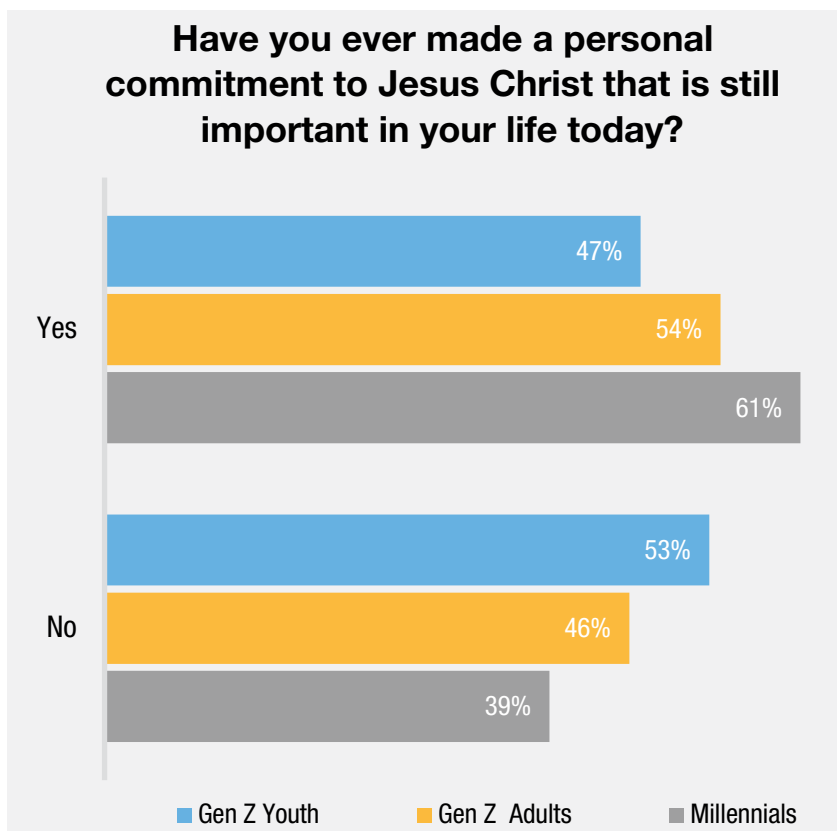
Whether or not they see the Bible as sacred and authoritative, Gen Z show significant openness to the book. Eighty-one percent of Gen Z youth and 74 percent of Gen Z adults say they’re curious about Scripture. Further, two-thirds of Gen Z youth (64%) wish they read the Bible more. As stated in the previous chapter, Bible Use corresponds to higher Hope scores, but even those who are curious about the Bible have higher hope scores than those who are not curious (page 90). Time will tell if the Gen Z curiosity about the Bible may lead to exposure, engagement, and, eventually, to positive impact.

GEN Z AND FAITH

Zooming out, Gen Z's halting steps toward Scripture are placed in the context of a meandering faith journey, occurring in both their generation and the nation. It remains to be seen how much of this effect will be cultural or generational—a matter of fact or a matter of time. In this study, at least, both segments of Gen Z (36% of Gen Z youth and adults) as well as Millennials (34%) are equally likely to be non-Christians, and recent data suggest the so-called “rise of the Nones” (religiously unaffiliated people) may be stalling.



Today, over half of Gen Z youth indicate they have not yet made a commitment to Jesus Christ that is important in their life (53%). The percentage of those who are committed, meanwhile, ticks up with age (47% of Gen Z youth, 54% of Gen Z adults, 61% of Millennials), pointing to future opportunities for teens to make meaningful faith decisions.



CONCLUSION

Though our sample of Gen Z youth is small, compared to the larger sample of adults, a clear and consistent picture of this younger generation is emerging from the available data. It is a picture of a period of exploring, questioning beliefs, and seeking a way in the world. It's possible those teens and young adults may continue to loosen ties to religious traditions and seek to deconstruct or reconstruct a faith of their own. Some may populate the ranks of the “Nones” and the “Dones.” Still others may find their way to a stable, faithful place, urged on by life's milestones and challenges. **For all the handwringing about Millennials, Gen Z's immediate elders suggest the picture can change significantly even in one's late twenties and thirties, where adults show higher levels of Bible engagement, confidence in their own beliefs, and engagement with their faith.**

The church can support faith formation for emerging adults by welcoming their questions and helping them engage with the Bible for themselves. In addition, Bible engagement, prayer, and spiritual relationships have been shown to be keys to strengthening the spiritual formation of emerging adults, including those in Gen Z.

WHAT IS GEN Z LIKE?

Barna Group's Gen Z: Volume 2 report, based on a 2020 study of 13–21-year-olds, sheds more light on who Gen Z are and are becoming.

- Mentors of Gen Z may encounter mixed reactions. Though the majority of Gen Z feels valued by older adults in their lives (32% agree strongly, 45% agree somewhat), a similar percentage expresses that other generations don't understand the pressures they face (31% agree strongly, 39% agree somewhat).
- Success is a high priority for Gen Z. Three-quarters (77%) say they have been successful so far in life and nearly all (91%) agree they hope to achieve a lot in the next decade.
- Among Gen Z churchgoers, the importance of learning about Scripture increases for practicing Christians compared to Non-Practicing Christians. The former is more likely to identify “wisdom for how scriptures apply to my life” (38% of practicing Christian Gen Z vs. 18% of Non-Practicing Christian Gen Z) as a reason to be involved in a church.
- Digital natives are self-aware when it comes to their tech usage. Sixty percent of Gen Z says their generation spends too much time on screens.
- As noted, trauma and stress are ubiquitous for Gen Z. How do they cope? Teens and young adults tell Barna they turn to friends, family, and various digital media (music, games, memes, and so on) when they are anxious or lonely.
- “Resilient discipleship”—a Barna measure based on church attendance and engagement, trust in the Bible's authority, commitment to Jesus, and a desire to see their faith impact others—is a counter to negative trends among Gen Z. Teens and young adults who qualify as resilient disciples are marked by greater digital discernment, positive mental health, and intergenerational community.

NEXT STEPS

Learn More. Barna Group has done extensive research into Generation Z and their relationship with faith. You can check out the [Gen Z Collection at Barna.com](#).

- *Gen Z: Volume 1* unpacks the culture, beliefs and motivations shaping today's teenagers and young adults.
- *Gen Z: Volume 2* takes a deeper look at Gen Z's emotional lives, their relationship with technology and how they feel about faith and practice it.

Dig Deeper. Growing Leaders is a ministry that focuses on the next generation, including Gen Z. Dr. Tim Elmore and Andrew McPeak's newest book—*Generation Z Unfiltered*—identifies nine challenges that today's teens and young adults are dealing with and how to help them address those realities. You can find resources for serving the next generation at [GrowingLeaders.com](#).

Faith and Liberty. Generation Z youth are uncertain about the Bible's importance for sustaining key American values, like liberty, democracy, and unity. You can equip the next generation with the stories of the Bible's influence on American history and culture through the ***Faith and Liberty Bible***. Order online at [Amazon.com](#) or [Bibles.com](#).



GOOD NEIGHBORS

The age-old question “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) has been at the forefront of many Americans’ minds during the events of the last year. Relationships to neighbors can bring out the best and the worst aspects of human behavior, a reality made even more apparent during heightened political and social tensions and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a long history of Christians caring for their neighbors in times not so different from these. In the year 165, when an epidemic devastated the Roman Empire, Christians stepped in and provided for victims of the deadly disease.¹ During a sixteenth-century epidemic, Martin Luther wrote to implore the Christian faithful to serve their neighbors by remaining—even amid sickness and death—to care for those in need.²

1 <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2020/how-did-early-christians-respond-to-plagues>

2 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/martin-luther-plague-pandemic-coronavirus-covid-flee-letter.html>

Scripture itself provides blueprints for being a good neighbor. After telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asks the teacher of the Law, “In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a neighbor toward the man attacked by the robbers?” The teacher of the Law answered, “The one who was kind to him.” Jesus replied, “You go, then, and do the same” (Luke 10:36–37 GNT).

The State of the Bible investigates the Bible’s influence on neighboring by examining Americans’ propensity to volunteer, help a stranger, give to charity, and respect and honor those in different occupations. By also examining Americans’ understandings of biblical perspectives on civic engagement, including Bible Users’ prosocial behaviors, a picture emerges of what it means to be *good neighbors*.

The findings suggest that people who are rooted in the Bible tend to epitomize neighborliness better than others. Scripture engagement and connection to a vibrant Christian community have key benefits for society as a whole. Biblically motivated people make better neighbors because they tend toward attitudes and behaviors that have a positive influence, including volunteering, helping strangers, and donating money to churches and other charities. Even when accounting for all other variables, the more deeply people engage with the Bible, the more respectful they are of others.

THE NEIGHBORING INDEX

The first measure of neighborly behaviors is what we have called the Neighboring Index. Three questions comprise the Neighboring Index. Respondents were asked, “Which activities have you done in the last seven days?”

1. Volunteered in my community (not including church)
2. Helped a stranger
3. Donated money to a charity

The most popular neighboring behavior in America is helping a stranger (51%), followed by donating to charity (38%), and volunteering in their community (20% outside of church). The Neighboring Index intentionally leaves out volunteerism that happens inside the church; it is intended to measure community involvement and serving neighbors in a public or civic capacity only.

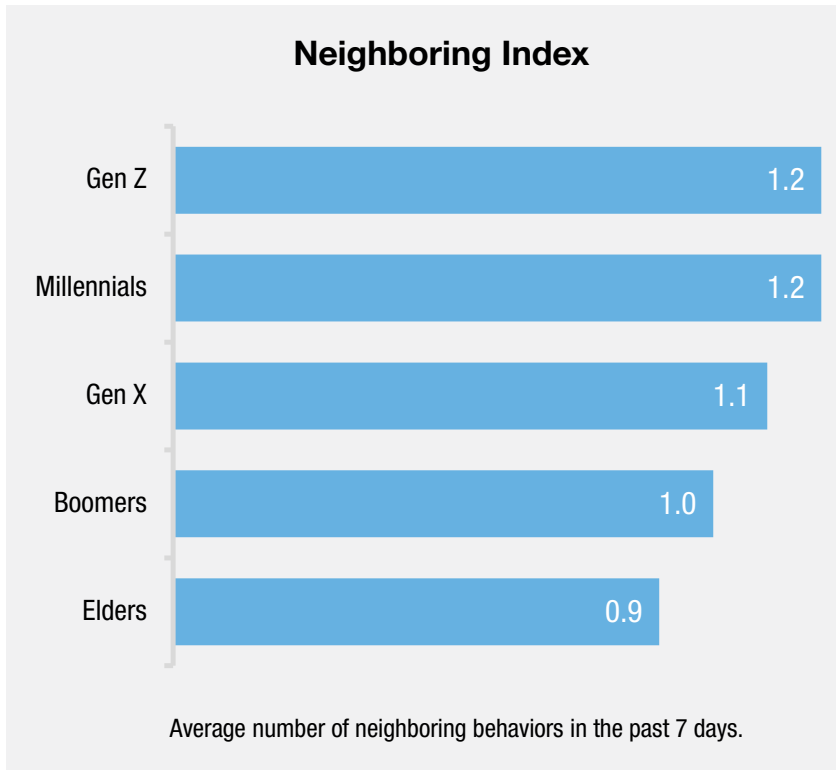
The highest score on the scale is 3, meaning the respondent participated in all three activities, and the lowest score is 0, indicating they had done none of these things in the last seven days. The average Neighboring Index score of American adults is 1.1, meaning that the average American has done one of these three things in the past week.

NEIGHBORING BY GENERATION

There is an inverse relationship between a respondent's age and their propensity to engage in loving behaviors toward people in their community. While Gen Z and Millennials score the highest with a mean score of 1.2, older generations score the lowest (Elders, $M = 0.9$; Boomers, $M = 1.0$), and Gen X is consistent with the American average of 1.1.

Not all neighboring behaviors are equally popular across generational lines. Younger adults are more likely to engage in community volunteerism and helping strangers, while older generations are more likely to donate money to a charity. One-third of Gen Z adults (32%) indicate that they volunteer in their community, while one-quarter of Millennials (25%) say the same. Over half of the three younger generations indicate that they helped a stranger in the past seven days (56% of Gen Z; 59% of Millennials; 55% of Gen X). Boomers are more likely to help a stranger (44%) or donate money to a charity (39%) than to volunteer (14%). Donating money to charity is especially a priority for Elders (51%).

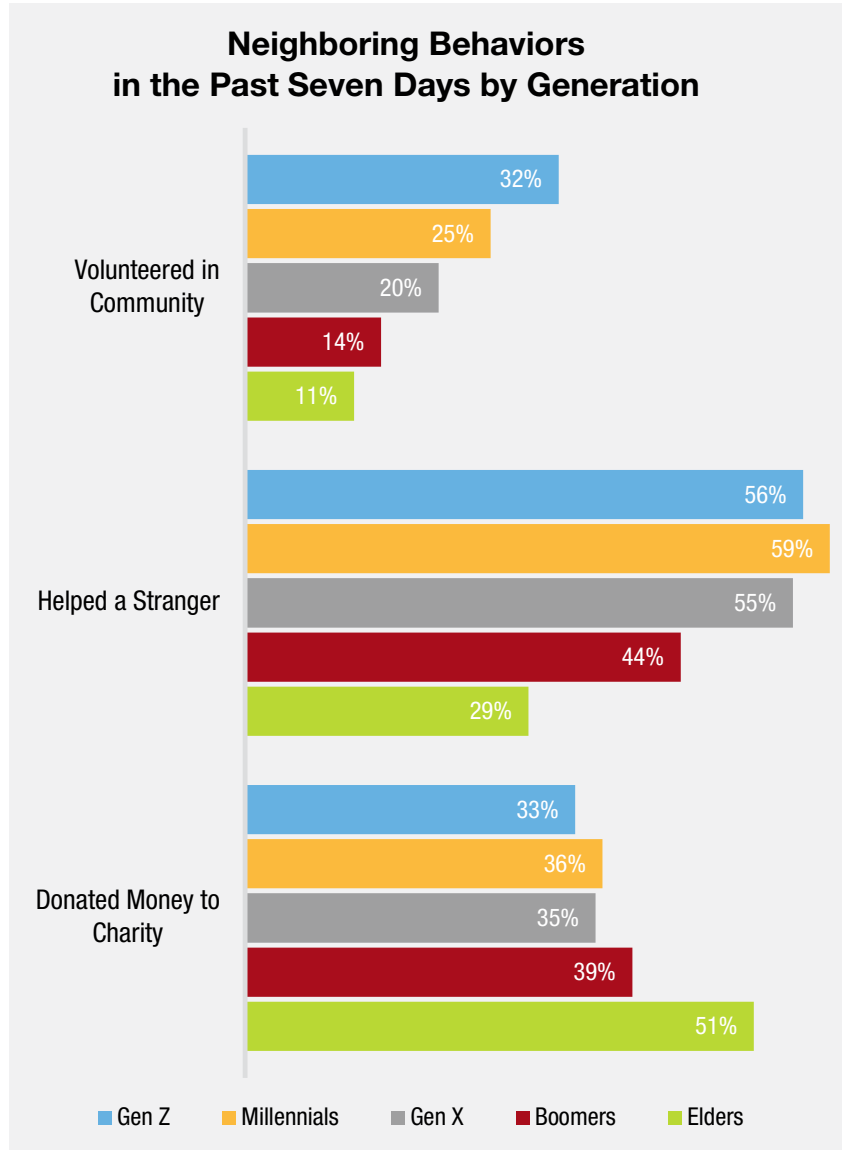
These tendencies may reflect both means and motivations across ages and stages of life. Older adults are likely to be in a season of life with more financial resources, while younger adults, perhaps with less expendable income, are drawn to give of their time and abilities.



These neighboring behaviors also align with differences in what adults consider to be altruistic.³ Barna research from 2016 revealed gaps in the ways generations think about and extend generosity toward others. Millennials are far more likely than Boomers and Elders to feel that generosity should be “spur-of-the-moment”—say, practicing hospitality or helping a stranger, rather than setting aside a recurring donation. Meanwhile, “Elders appear to have more cerebral, less circumstantial ideals related to generosity,

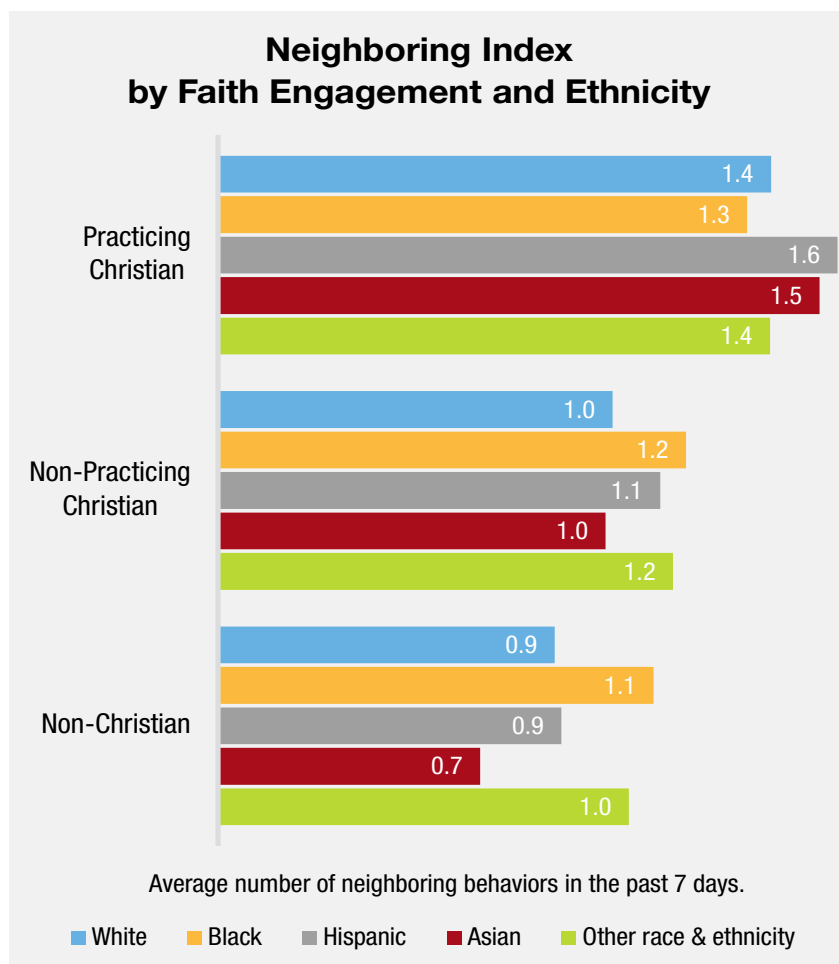
³ See *The Generosity Gap*. Barna Group (2016). p. 19.

especially compared to Millennials.” These older adults are more likely to see generosity as a discipline or something that is planned.



NEIGHBORING BY RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

Those who practice their Christian faith are more likely to exhibit key neighboring behaviors. In fact, Practicing Christians score an average of 1.4. Meanwhile, Non-Christians score below the national average ($M = 0.9$), and Non-Practicing Christians fall in line with the national average ($M = 1.1$).



These distinctions are not, however, consistent along racial and ethnic lines. Black Non-Christians, for example, still score higher than Non-Christians of other ethnicities ($M = 1.1$). Among Practicing Christians, Hispanic Americans have a mean score of 1.6, followed by Asian Americans ($M = 1.5$), both of which are significantly higher than other faith segments of the same ethnicity.

NEIGHBORING AND SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Higher Scripture Engagement scores also correlate with higher Neighboring Index scores. Bible Disengaged Americans ($M = 0.8$)

are the least likely to volunteer in their community (9%), donate money to charity (24%), or help a stranger (43%). Those in the Movable Middle ($M = 1.2$) are more likely to do these things, with 23 percent volunteering in their community, 40 percent donating money to a charity, and 55 percent helping a stranger, revealing that they prioritize these neighborly behaviors more than their Bible Disengaged peers.

The highest scores across Neighboring Index categories, however, are among the Scripture Engaged ($M = 1.5$). One-third of Scripture Engaged Americans volunteer in their community on a weekly basis (33%), and the majority donates money to a charity (56%) or helps a stranger (60%) with this regularity.

“The highest scores across Neighboring Index categories are among the Scripture Engaged.”

OCCUPATIONAL RESPECT

One measure of civility among Americans is Occupational Respect—that is, how much someone respects others who work in various vocations. Respondents were asked to rate their level of respect (“I have deep respect for ...”) on a scale from 1–5, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement.



Overall, firefighters ($M = 4.4$), healthcare professionals ($M = 4.4$), schoolteachers ($M = 4.3$), and members of the military ($M = 4.2$) garner the highest levels of respect from respondents. With mean scores around 4, respondents “somewhat agree” that they have deep

respect for people working in these professions. At the bottom end of the list are more institutional roles such as government leaders ($M = 3.0$), religious leaders ($M = 3.7$), and police officers ($M = 4.0$) which shows that overall, respondents “neither agree nor disagree” that they have deep respect for those working in these vocations.

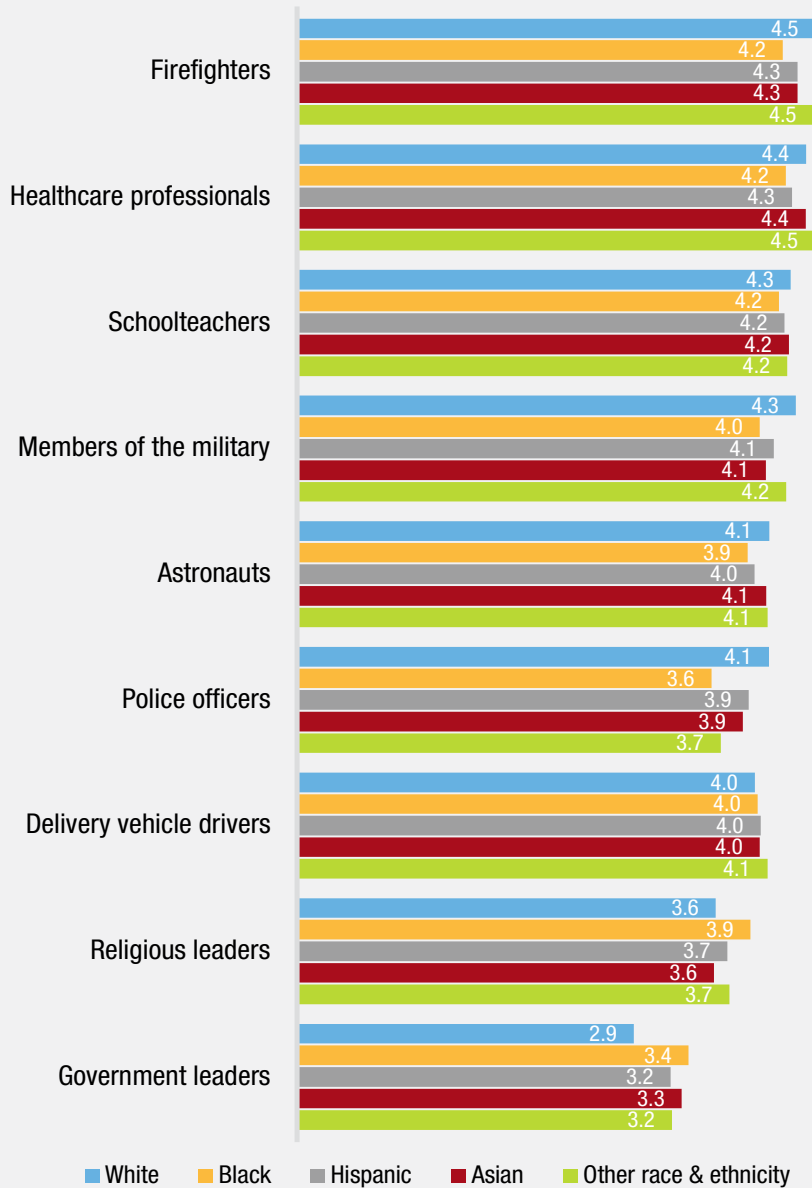
Analysis revealed two underlying factors related to Occupational Respect. The first factor is related to service, and the second is related to authority. Occupations perceived to be high service and low authority (like firefighters or healthcare workers) score highest overall, while those perceived as having high authority and low service score lowest (like government and religious leaders).

OCCUPATIONAL RESPECT BY DEMOGRAPHICS

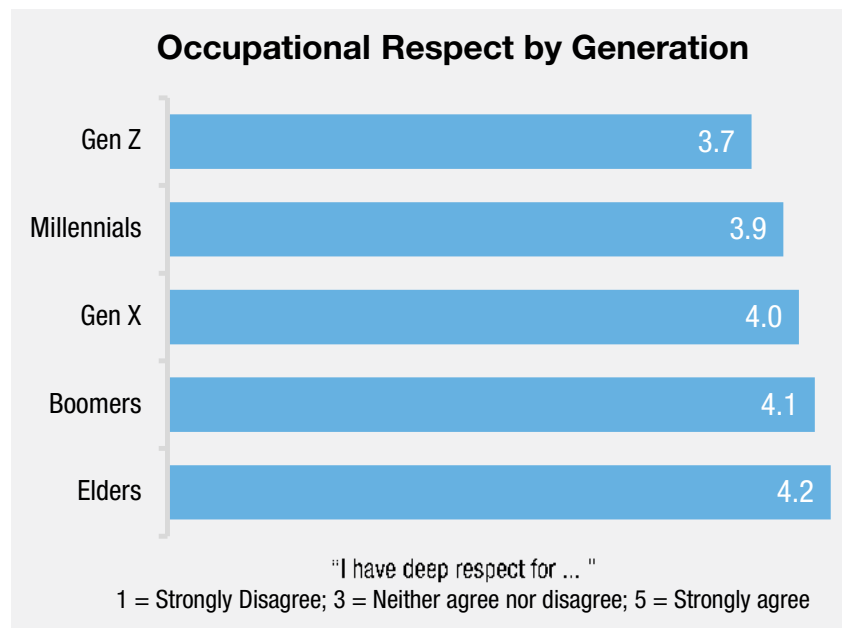
There are nuances to Occupational Respect that allude to varying experiences and trust levels of authority systems in America. For instance, media reporting and the national conversation surrounding police brutality likely surfaces in relatively low reported respect for police officers. On this point, Black Americans score 0.4 points lower than the average, at 3.6, which is 0.3 points below their average Occupational Respect score of 3.9.

White Americans, meanwhile, lag in their respect of government officials, providing the lowest mean score of 2.9. Hispanic Americans follow with the second-lowest score of 3.2.

Occupational Respect by Ethnicity



Occupational Respect increases with age, indicating lower levels of civility among young adults. Younger generations have lower overall Occupational Respect; Gen Z has a mean score of 3.7 and Millennials 3.9, indicating some ambivalence toward people regardless of service or authority. Older generations, however, typically “somewhat agree” that they have respect for different occupations.



Likewise, with more education, the scores for Occupational Respect climb. Respondents who have completed less than a high school education score lowest, saying they “somewhat disagree” that they have respect for various occupations ($M = 3.8$). Adults with some higher level of education, from a high school diploma on through a graduate or professional degree, all have a mean score of 4.0. Those who hold doctoral degrees score highest with an average of 4.1.

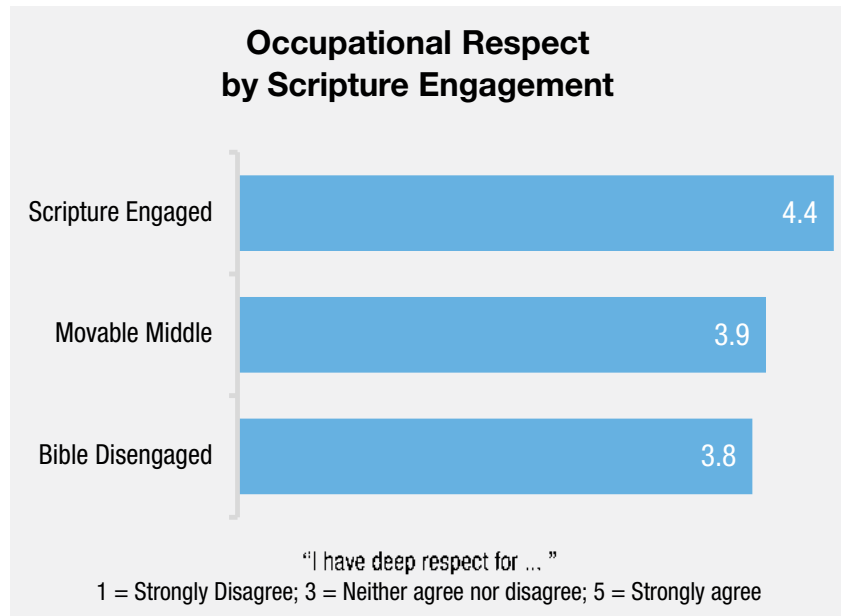
OCCUPATIONAL RESPECT BY CHURCH AND SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Notably, Occupational Respect increases with church attendance. Those who have attended a service in the past week have the highest score of 4.2, and those who attend less frequently express lower levels of respect for various occupations (past month: 4.0; past six months and unchurched: 3.9).

The same pattern is evident when looking at Scripture Engagement. The Bible Disengaged score an average of 3.8, whereas respondents in the Movable Middle score 3.9. Those who are Scripture Engaged score the highest, with an average of 4.4, well above the national average.

This pattern coincides with 2018 Barna research, which shows that working Christians readily see a range of occupations as “callings,” whether explicitly ministerial roles (like pastors, missionaries, or worship leaders) or community roles (like firefighters, pediatricians, or military officers).⁴ Even technical roles in accounting or finance are seen as potential callings. People of faith, especially those more rooted in church and in Scripture, are keenly aware of the spiritual nature and vocational value of work, which may translate to their increased respect for the occupations of others.

⁴ See *Christians at Work*. Barna Group (2018). p. 30.



Overall, Occupational Respect is predicted by three components:⁵

1. Flourishing: Character and Virtue (see “Human Flourishing and the Good Life” on page 91)
2. Scripture Engagement
3. Age

In other words, people who see themselves as moral and self-controlled, who consistently and deeply interact with the Bible, and who are older, tend to have greater respect for the listed occupations than those who do not share these characteristics.

⁵ A multiple regression predicting Occupational Respect produced three significant independent variables: Flourishing: Character and Virtue ($\beta = 0.237$), Scripture Engagement Scale ($\beta = 0.209$), and Age ($\beta = 0.132$). All predictors were significant at the $p < .001$ level. The model explained 15.3% of the variance in Occupational Respect.

BIBLE PERSPECTIVES ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONAL CARE

In addition to investigating Neighboring and Occupational Respect, the *State of the Bible* team wanted to understand what American adults believe the Bible teaches regarding Civic Engagement and Personal Care. Respondents were asked, “Does the Bible encourage or discourage the following?”

1. Being aware of civic and government issues
2. Personal participation in civic and government issues
3. Submitting to government leaders
4. Living a healthy lifestyle
5. Caring for my mental and emotional health
6. Wise money management

Items 1–3 relate to Civic Engagement, while items 4–6 related to Personal Care. Responses range from “Strongly discourages” (–2), “Is Silent” (0), to “Strongly Encourages” (+2).



Overall, Americans lean toward believing the Bible encourages all the above to some extent. They are most likely to believe the Bible encourages them to live a healthy lifestyle and care for their own mental and emotional health, both averaging a 1.0 (Encourages) on the above scale. Wise money management is next in line, with an average score of 0.8, followed by being aware of civic and governmental issues ($M = 0.6$). Being personally involved in government issues ($M = 0.5$) and submitting to government leaders ($M = 0.4$) score lower as actions perceived to be encouraged by Scripture.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONAL CARE BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

Education, generation, and gender somewhat influenced people's perspectives on these issues. For each of the six questions, college graduates were more likely to say the Bible encourages Civic Engagement ($M = 0.67$) and Personal Care ($M = 1.03$). Meanwhile, those with a high school diploma or less were significantly less likely to agree.

Generation Z was more likely than all other age groups to say that the Bible strongly discourages, discourages, or is neutral about both Civic Engagement ($M = 0.23$) and Personal Care ($M = 0.57$). Women were more likely than men to say the Bible encourages Personal Care ($M = 0.97$), but both genders responded similarly to questions of the Bible's encouragement of Civic Engagement ($M = 0.50$).

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONAL CARE BY SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

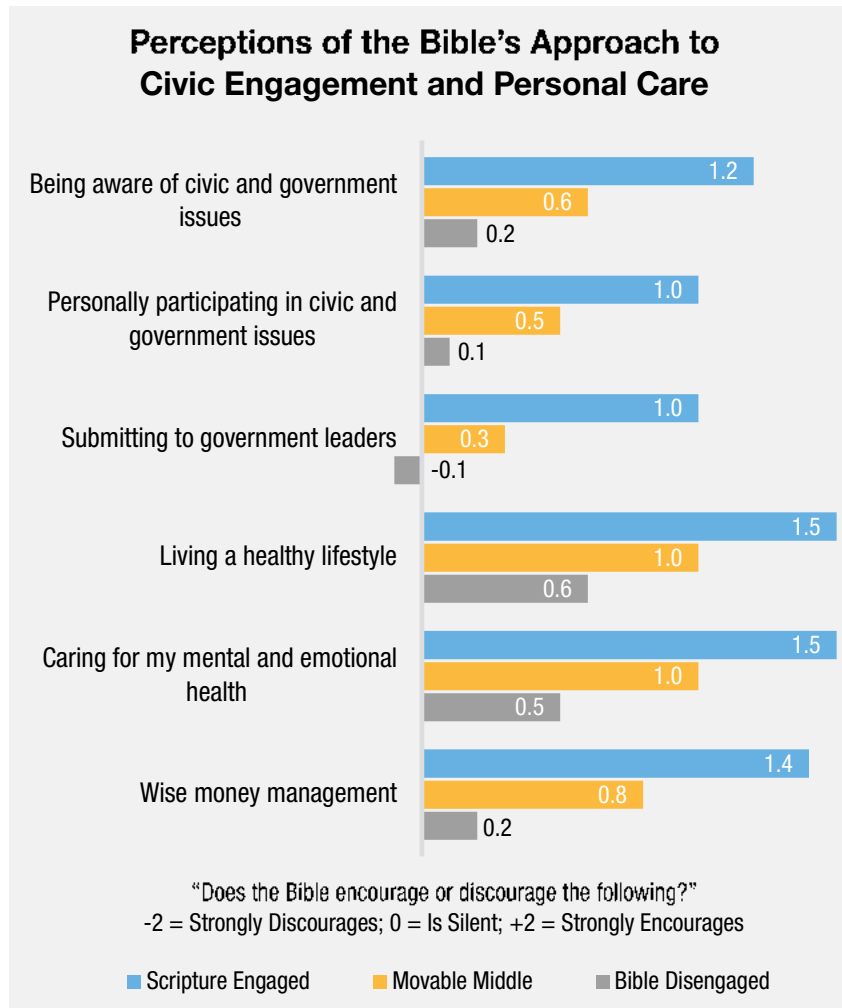
Like U.S. adults overall, all Scripture Engagement segments tend to see Personal Care as being encouraged by the Bible. Personal Care includes living a healthy lifestyle, caring for mental and emotional health, and managing money wisely.

The Movable Middle believes the Bible encourages all three things (physical health, $M = 1.0$; mental and emotional health, $M = 1.0$; money management, $M = 0.8$). The Scripture Engaged are even more convinced on these points of Personal Care, with an average score of 1.5 for both physical and mental health, and 1.4 for wise money management.

But even among Bible Users, there is less agreement about the Bible's support for Civic Engagement. Scripture Engaged people are more likely to believe the Bible encourages good citizenship and involvement in government (being aware of civic and government issues, $M = 1.2$; personal participation in government, $M = 1.0$; submitting to government leaders, $M = 1.0$), whereas the Movable Middle believes the Bible may have less to say about these matters ($M = 0.6$; 0.5; 0.3, respectively).

Bible Disengaged people have more divergent views on how Scripture relates to life and community. Though adults in this group express moderate belief that the Bible encourages caring for mental and physical health (mental, $M = 0.5$; physical, $M = 0.6$), they are more uncertain about the Bible's perspective on money

management ($M = 0.2$). Further, they believe the Bible is silent about or discouraging of behaviors related to Civic Engagement, including involvement in civic and government issues ($M = 0.2$), government participation ($M = 0.1$) or submission to government leaders ($M = -0.1$).



NEIGHBORING AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Finally, the *State of the Bible* research team looked at neighboring through the lens of prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior is behavior that is done voluntarily for the benefit of others without the expectation of reciprocation or personal benefit. Research consistently demonstrates that prosocial behaviors have (perhaps paradoxically) significant benefits for people who engage in them, and they also impact the world in a positive way.⁶ *State of the Bible* research indicates that prosocial behaviors are linked to an increased sense of meaning and purpose in life (see page 91).

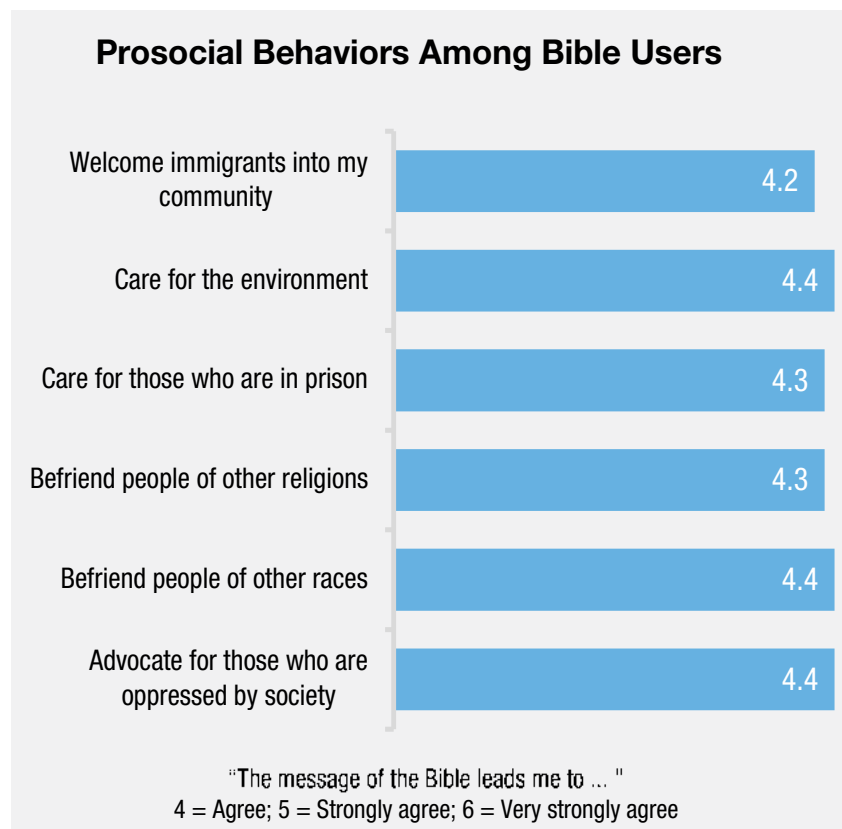
To gain insight into Bible Users' attitudes and beliefs about what the Bible teaches regarding neighboring attitudes and behaviors, we posed the question, "The message of the Bible leads me to:"

1. Welcome immigrants into my community
2. Befriend people of other races
3. Befriend people of other religions
4. Care for those who are in prison
5. Care for the environment
6. Advocate for those who are oppressed by society

Scores on these items range from "disagree" (1) to "very strongly agree" (6).

6 For more on prosocial behavior, see Eisenberg, N., & Miller, P. A. (1987). The relation of empathy to prosocial and related behaviors. *Psychological Bulletin*, 101(1), 91–119. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.101.1.91> or Penner, L. A., Dovidio, J. F., Piliavin, J. A., & Schroeder, D. A. (2005). Prosocial Behaviour: Multilevel Perspectives. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56(1), 365–392. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070141>.

Overall, Bible Users agree that the Bible leads them to do all six of these things, with an average score of 4 or more. “Befriend people of other races,” “Care for the environment,” and “Advocate for those who are oppressed by society” have the highest scores ($M = 4.4$). In the next group, “Befriend people of other religions” and “Care for those in prison” both have an average score of 4.3. “Welcome immigrants into my community” is the behavior reportedly least compelled by the Bible, though it still follows closely behind, with an average score of 4.2.



PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR BY DEMOGRAPHICS

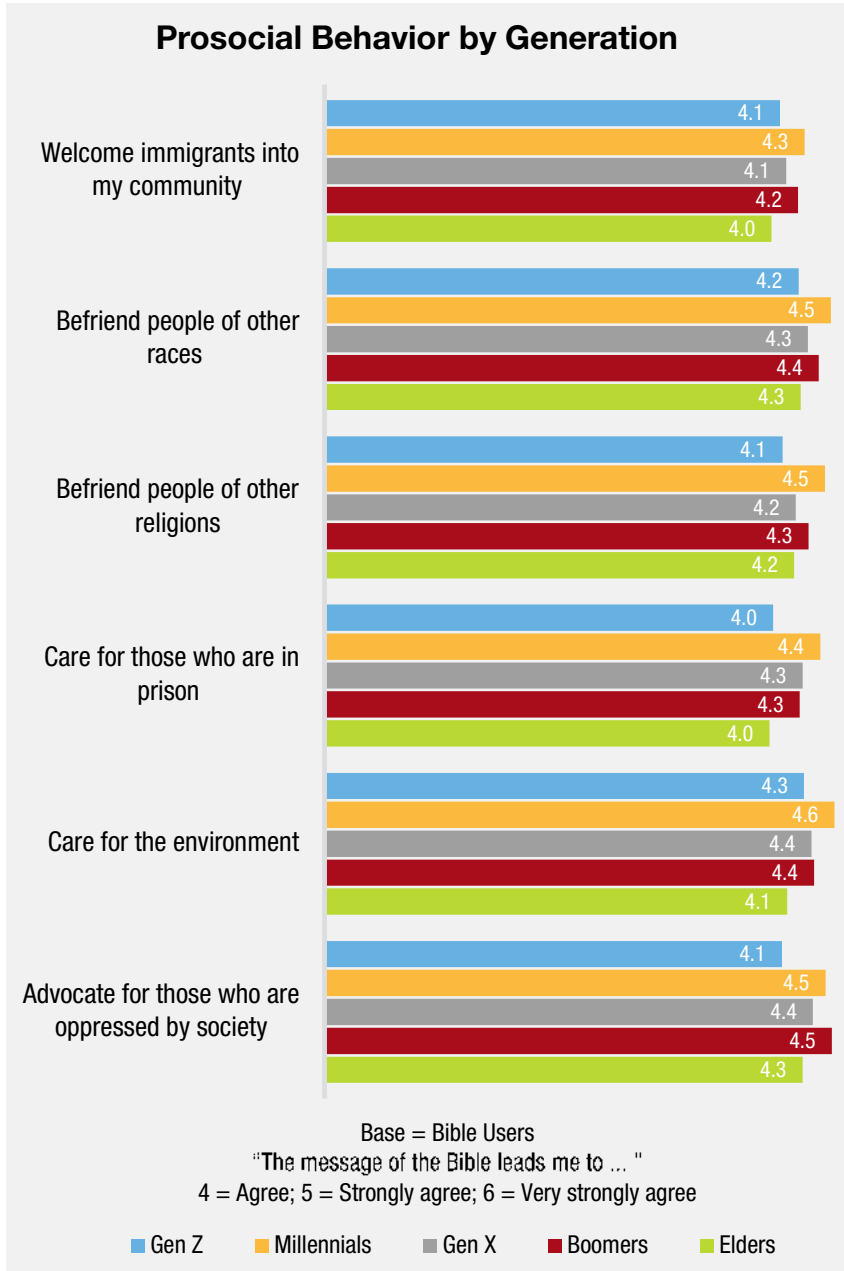
Across generational lines, there are significant differences in Bible Users' reports of being led by Scripture toward neighboring behaviors that address justice issues. Millennials and Boomers express the strongest agreement, while Gen Z and Elders express lower levels of agreement in each category.

Hispanic Bible Users score higher than people in other racial and ethnic groups in the belief that the Bible leads them to befriend people of other races and religions and care for the environment (all, $M = 4.5$). They are joined by Black Bible Users in their relatively strong agreement that the Bible leads them to welcome immigrants into their community, both with an average score of 4.4. Meanwhile, Black Bible Users most strongly believe that the Bible leads them to advocate for those who are oppressed by society ($M = 4.6$) and care for those in prison ($M = 4.4$).

These beliefs among Hispanic and Black Bible Users likely stem not only from scriptural conviction but also from a sensitivity to the ways these issues and injustices have had a disproportional impact on their own communities. Indeed, in Barna research from 2019, 88 percent of Black Practicing Christians say Black people are treated less fairly than white people by the courts and justice systems; just 8 percent felt the groups are treated equally. Additionally, 79 percent of Hispanic Practicing Christians agreed that laws should protect immigrants from being treated unfairly.⁷

⁷ See *Beyond Diversity*, Barna (2019), pp. 94–97, 131.

Prosocial Behavior by Generation

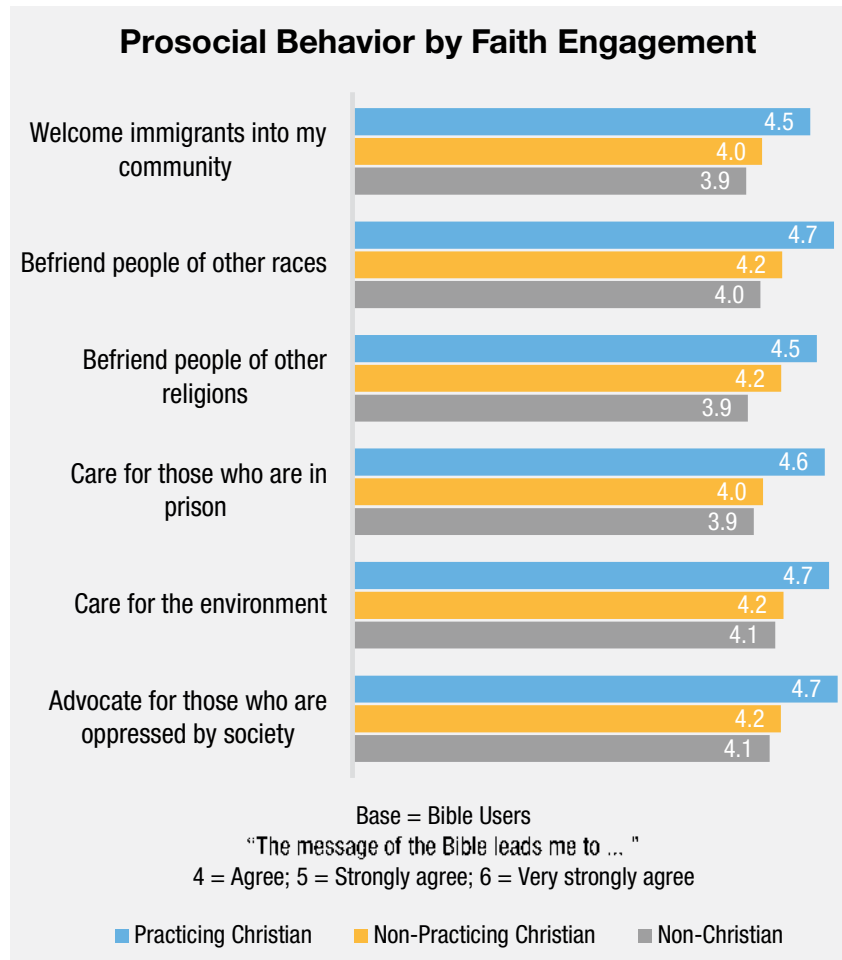


Underscoring the importance of applying Scripture's teaching to these subjects, Barna found that Practicing Christians became more likely to express support of immigrants when presented with a relevant Bible reference, such as the instruction in Deuteronomy 24:14 to treat foreigners justly.

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR BY CHURCH AND SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

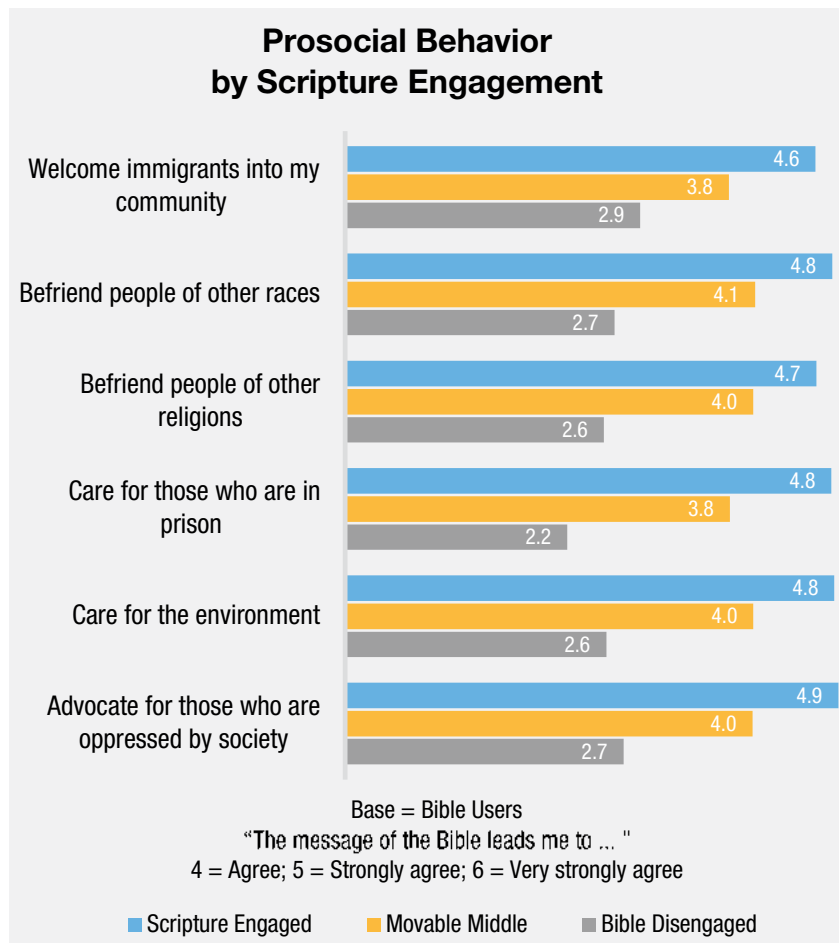
Christians who practice their faith are more likely to strongly agree that the Bible leads them to engage in neighboring actions. There is a range of difference between Non-Practicing Christians' and Practicing Christians' responses to the Bible's message. The greatest divide surfaces when it comes to a belief that Scripture leads one to care for those in prison (Practicing Christians, $M = 4.6$, Non-Practicing Christians, $M = 4.0$). The smallest difference occurs when it comes to befriending people of other religions (Practicing Christians, $M = 4.5$, Non-Practicing Christians, $M = 4.2$).

Responses toward all other prosocial activities show a difference of 0.5 or more, with Practicing Christians consistently being more likely than Non-Practicing Christians to say the Bible leads them toward the welcoming and care of others.



While age and ethnicity relate to attitudes toward neighbors and society, the strongest factor in neighboring behaviors seems to be practicing a Bible-based faith. Of those Bible Users who are also classified as Bible Disengaged (see page 225), the perception of these neighboring actions is actually negative. They disagree that the Bible leads them toward any of the six behaviors, with scores

ranging from 2.2 at the lowest (caring for people in prison), and 2.9 at the highest (welcoming immigrants). Bible Users in the Movable Middle are more likely to say that the Bible encourages them toward these behaviors, yet they are less sure when it comes to welcoming immigrants ($M = 3.8$) and caring for those in prison ($M = 3.8$), perhaps due to varying perceptions of justice and grace.⁸



8 The survey did not distinguish between legal/documentated and illegal/undocumented immigrants.

Finally, Scripture Engaged Bible Users are the most likely to attest that Scripture compels them to embrace neighboring attitudes and behaviors, showing significantly higher scores across all six categories.

CONCLUSION

The biblical calling to care for one's neighbor and community is challenging for many people in an age known for polarization, disconnection, and numerous social challenges. Yet, Jesus's words stand in sharp relief: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Through examining the Neighboring Index, Occupational Respect, beliefs about the Bible's perspectives on Civic Engagement and Personal Care, as well as prosocial Neighboring attitudes and behaviors of Bible Users, it is apparent that those rooted deeply in the Scriptures also express and exhibit neighborly behavior. In every case, there is variance due to age, generation, or ethnicity. However, those differences are largely overcome when people are connected to God's Word and God's people in vibrant Christian community.

NEXT STEPS

Learn. This chapter referred to three excellent resources from Barna Group. Visit Barna.com to learn more about these studies:

- ***Beyond Diversity:*** *What the future of racial justice will require of U.S. churches*
- ***Christians at Work:*** *Examining the intersection of calling and career*
- ***The Generosity Gap:*** *How Christians' perceptions and practices of giving are changing—and what it means for the church*

Act. Page 131 includes a list of several occupations that experience varying levels of respect in America. Select at least one category and make a plan to encourage someone from that group who serves in your community. Can't decide? **Clergy Appreciation Day** is coming up on Sunday, October 10, 2021.

Share. Invite a friend or neighbor to join you in volunteering through a local community organization or a local church. When you put Scripture into practice by serving others, you'll see how it changes your relationships and your community.



THE BIBLE IN THE AMERICAN CHURCH

Over the centuries, multiple longstanding traditions have formed around the message of the Bible as the text has encountered new cultures and innovations. For example, movable type printing and growing literacy rates made the Bible available to large numbers of people, sparking more widespread biblical scholarship by non-clergy. Americans today have unprecedented and seemingly unbridled access to the Bible and related tools, biblical research, and information about different belief systems and religious groups. Alongside this, their opinions and options concerning faith expression have also multiplied.

The Christian church in America varies widely, but at its core we find the gospel: the message of complete forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The largest Christian traditions in the U.S. are Protestant

and Roman Catholic.¹ *State of the Bible* researchers have further grouped Protestants into *mainline* (such as Episcopalian, Lutheran, Congregationalist, Reformed like the Presbyterian Church USA), *evangelical* (such as Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, and the Presbyterian Church in America), and *historically Black Protestant* (including Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal denominations) groups.

Many people focus on the differences between these groups, but the *State of the Bible* research team has focused on **three key similarities** when looking deeply into the church traditions of the U.S.:

1. For nearly 2,000 years, the message of the Bible has been the central message of the church of Jesus Christ. That message is the story of Jesus Christ and his work to save all humankind from the brokenness of sin. Christians call that message the gospel because it is good news—the best news, in fact—for all the world.
2. Today, across every Christian denomination and tradition, Bible engagement helps people grow in their faith, connect with God, forgive others, and navigate modern challenges with timeless wisdom and perspective.
3. The Bible offers hope and flourishing to all who turn to it, especially to those who engage the Bible in the context of a vibrant Christian community of faith.

¹ See <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/#religions> for a full breakdown of religious traditions in the United States.

Though each Christian tradition brings distinct ways of understanding and connecting with God’s Word, all Christian traditions invite worshippers to read, hear, and reflect on the message of the Bible. As the apostle Paul wrote, “I am proud of the good news! It is God’s powerful way of saving all people who have faith” (Romans 1:16a).

PRACTICING THE FAITH

Many surveys report on *self-identified* faith, rather than *practicing* faith. When respondents are asked, “Do you consider yourself any of the following religious faiths?” their response is their self-identified religious affiliation, regardless of their current involvement with or devotion to that religious faith.

Practicing Christians, however, meet specific behavioral criteria (according to a definition from Barna Group), including:

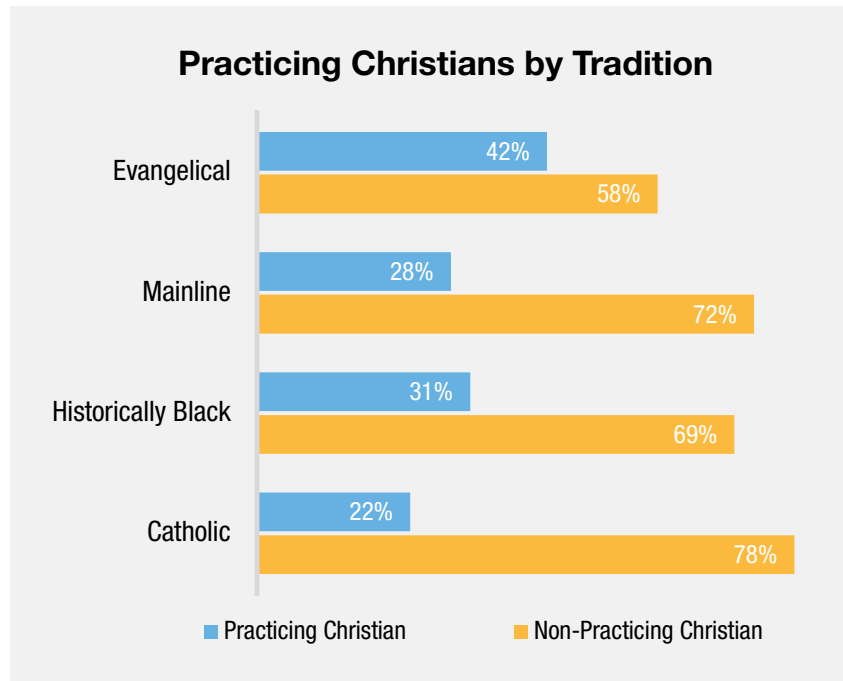
- Identifies as a Christian
- Attends a religious service at least once a month
- Strongly agrees their faith is very important in their lives

All Christian traditions in the U.S. contain people who practice their faith and those who do not. For example, two in five (42%) evangelicals meet the criteria for Practicing Christians, while three in ten (31%) historically Black Protestants, and more than one in four (28%) mainline Protestants qualify. Likewise, one in five (22%) Catholics are Practicing Christians. Overall, more than half of self-identified Christians in every church tradition are considered

Non-Practicing Christians (ranging from 58% of evangelicals at the low end and 78% of Catholics at the high end). For a closer look at the the major trends around practicing faith in America over the past 20 years, see Barna’s March 2020 article, “Signs of Decline & Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith.”

“More than half of self-identified Christians in the U.S. are not actively practicing their faith.”

The distinction drawn between self-identified faith and practicing faith surfaces other major differences between those who simply say they believe and those who have incorporated the faith into their life and routine in a transformative way.

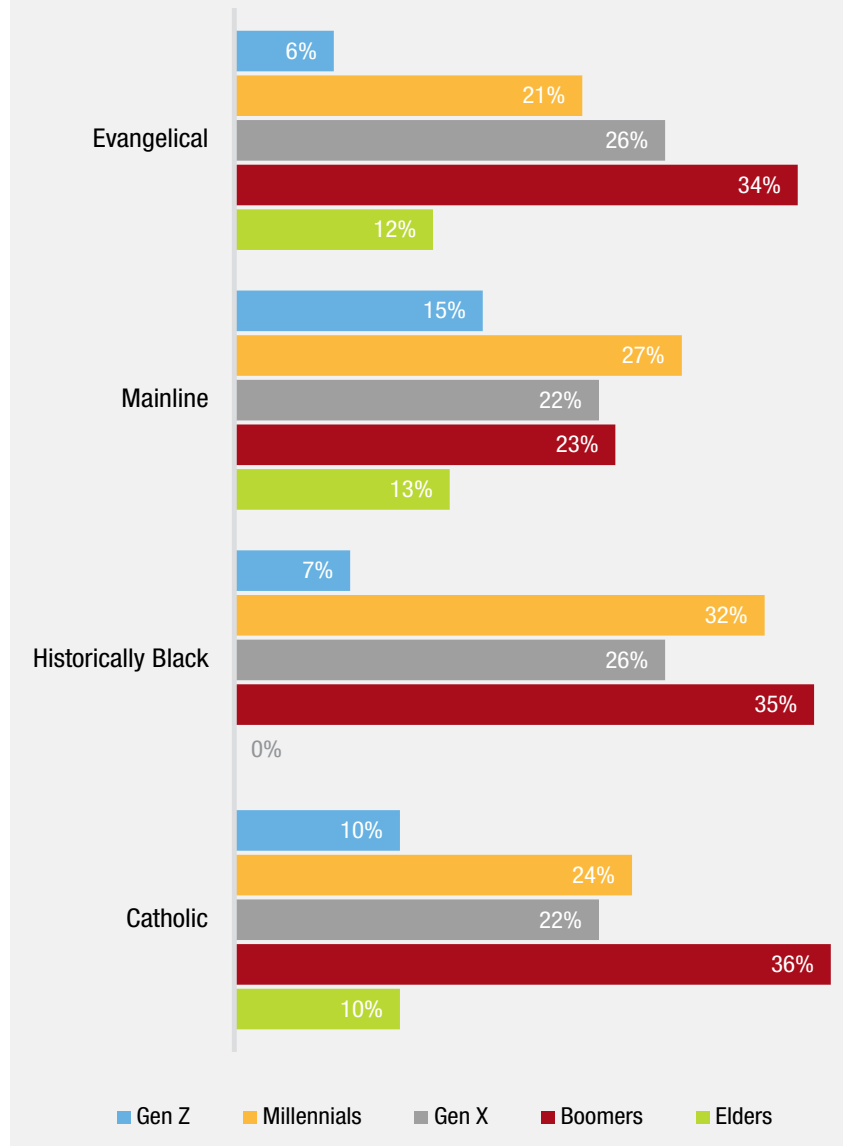


PRACTICING CHRISTIANS BY TRADITION AND GENERATION

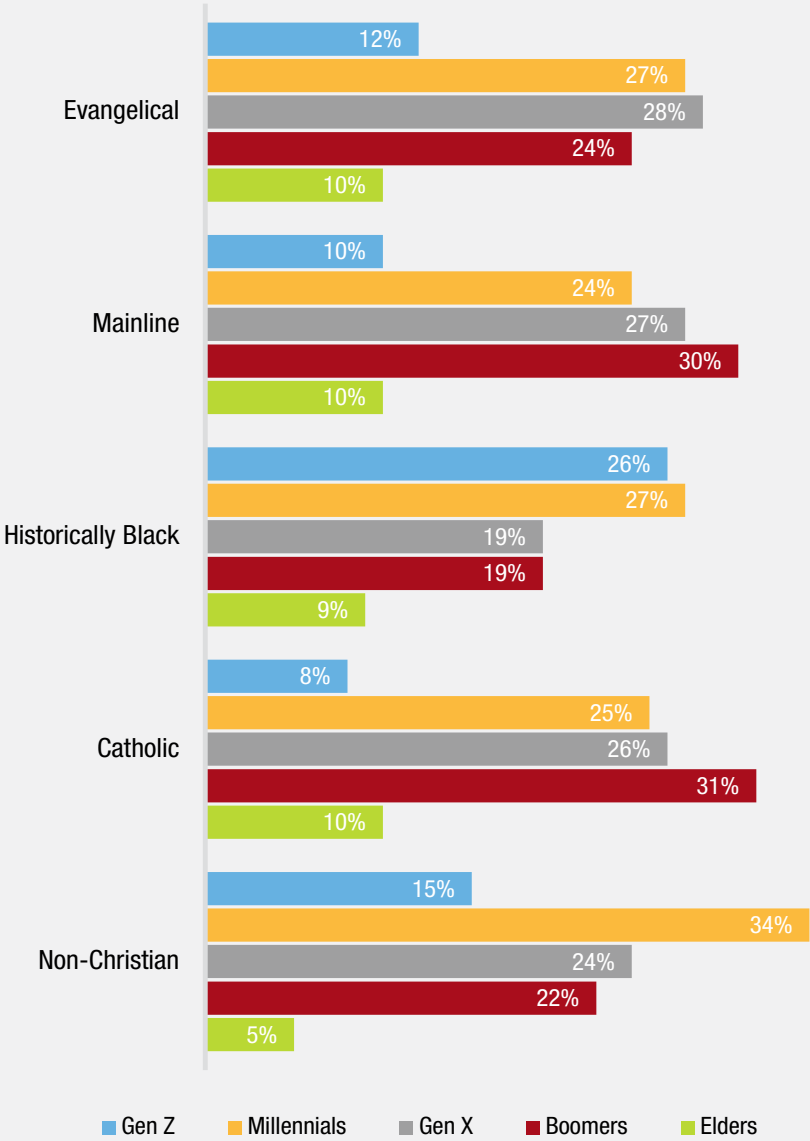
Who, exactly, are Practicing Christians? They vary not only by tradition, but also by generation (see visualizations on pages 156–157).

Baby Boomers, already more likely than younger adults to self-identify with Christianity, are in turn a dominant presence across Practicing Christian segments. They make up more than one-third of historically Black Protestants (35%), evangelicals (34%), and Catholics (36%). On the other end of the age spectrum, Gen Z—already less likely than all older generations to be religious—see less representation among Practicing Christians, especially the evangelicals; just 6 percent of this group falls in the youngest adult category. Millennials and Gen X comprise about one-quarter each of Practicing Christians and hold steady percentages across the denominations. Millennials do emerge as the largest subset among mainline Practicing Christians (27%). Additionally, 15 percent of this tradition falls in Gen Z, making this the group that most represents younger Practicing Christians.

Practicing Christians by Tradition and Generation



Non-Practicing Christians by Tradition and Generation

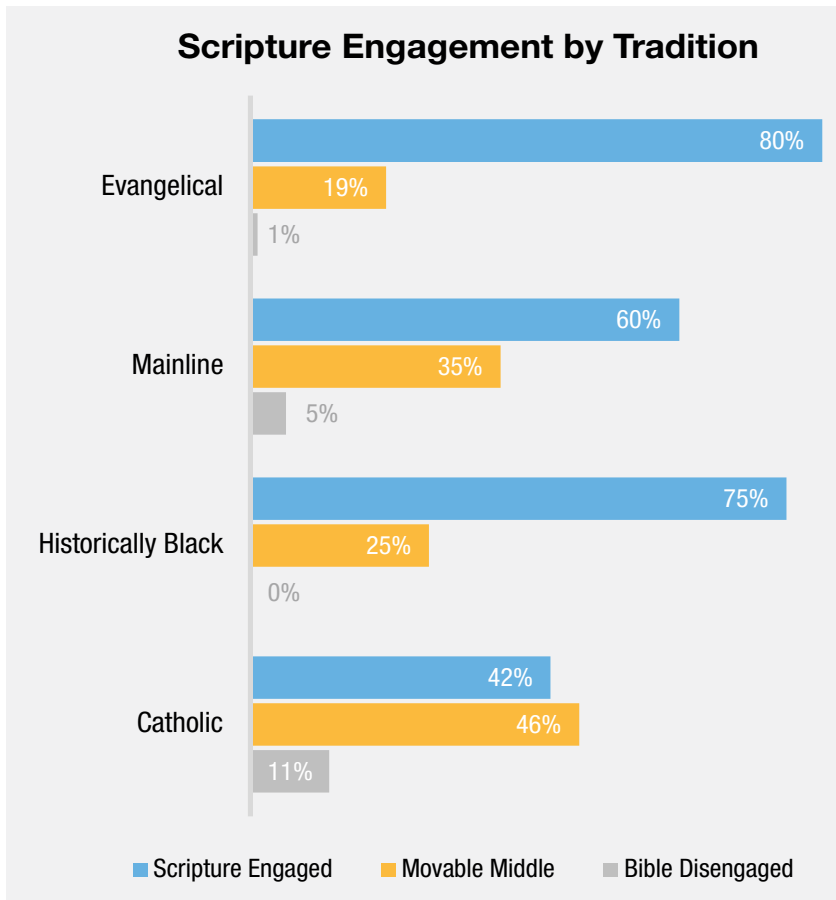


PRACTICING CHRISTIANS' CONSISTENT AND GROWING SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

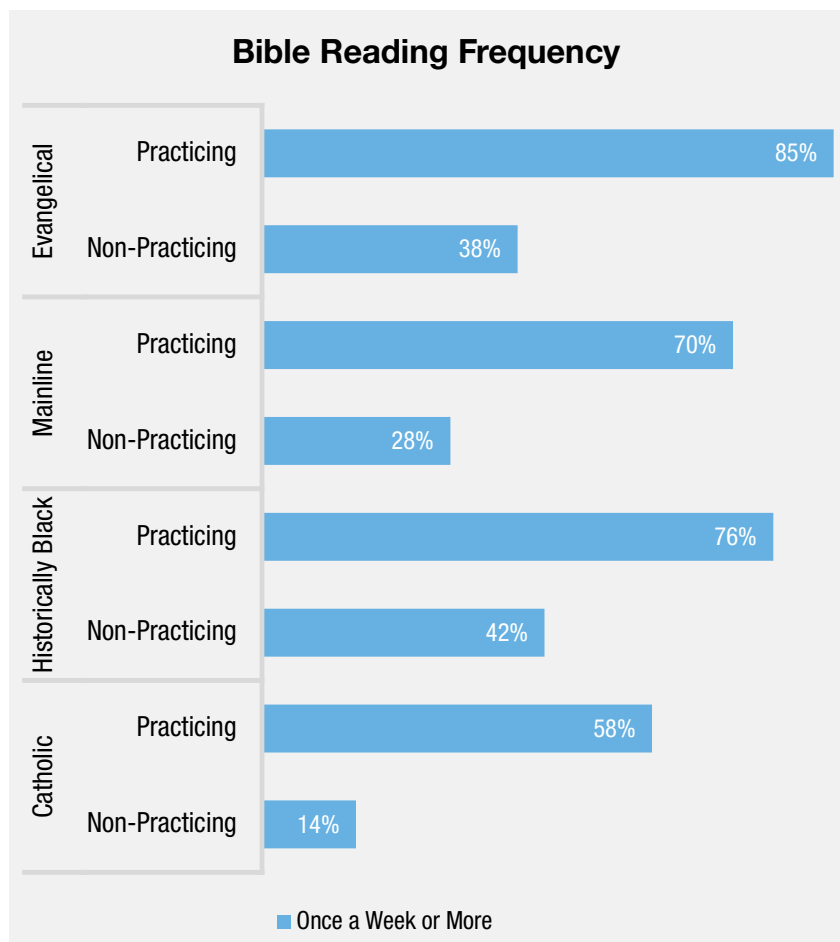
The Christian faith naturally involves and encourages proximity to the Bible.

Practicing Christians lead the way in consistent interaction with the Bible and openness to its message. Over two-thirds are Scripture Engaged (67%), 29 percent are in the Movable Middle, and only 4 percent are Bible Disengaged. Meanwhile, Non-Practicing Christians fall mostly into the Movable Middle (52%), with only 16 percent qualifying as Scripture Engaged and 33 percent as Bible Disengaged.

Zooming in on denominations, eight in 10 Practicing Christian evangelicals are Scripture Engaged (80%), 19 percent are in the Movable Middle, and a mere 1 percent are Bible Disengaged. Historically Black Protestants have a similar profile, with three-quarters of respondents being Scripture Engaged (75%), one-quarter being in the Movable Middle (25%), and none qualifying as Bible Disengaged. Mainline Protestant and Catholic Practicing Christians, however, have a wider range of Scripture Engagement. While 60 percent of mainline Protestants are Scripture Engaged, 35 percent are in the Movable Middle, and 5 percent are Bible Disengaged. Forty-two percent of Catholics are Scripture Engaged, 46 percent are in the Movable Middle, and 11 percent are Bible Disengaged.

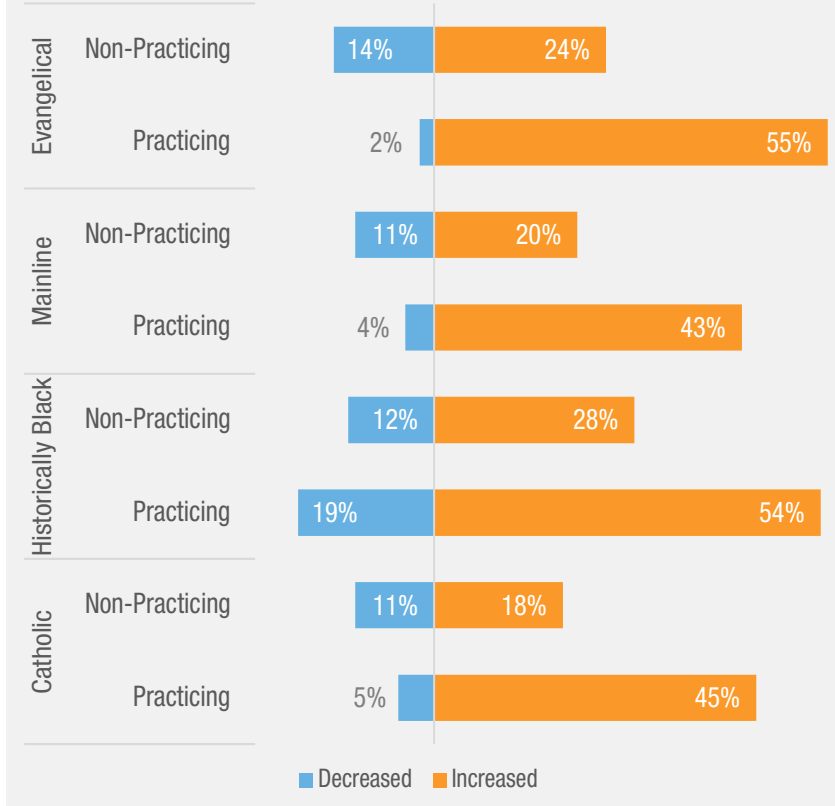


Overall, three-quarters of Practicing Christians (75%) read their Bible at least weekly, and 84 percent read their Bible at least monthly. Only 28 percent of Non-Practicing Christians, on the other hand, read their Bible weekly, with 39 percent opening Scripture monthly. Weekly Bible reading is most common among Practicing Christians who are evangelicals (93%), historically Black Protestants (87%), and mainliners (80%).



Not only that, by most Practicing Christians' accounts, Bible reading is on the rise. Overall, half (50%) say they have increased their use of the Bible in the past year, something only 21 percent of Non-Practicing Christians attest to. Growth in Bible engagement is especially evident among evangelical (55%) and historically Black Protestant (54%) Practicing Christians.

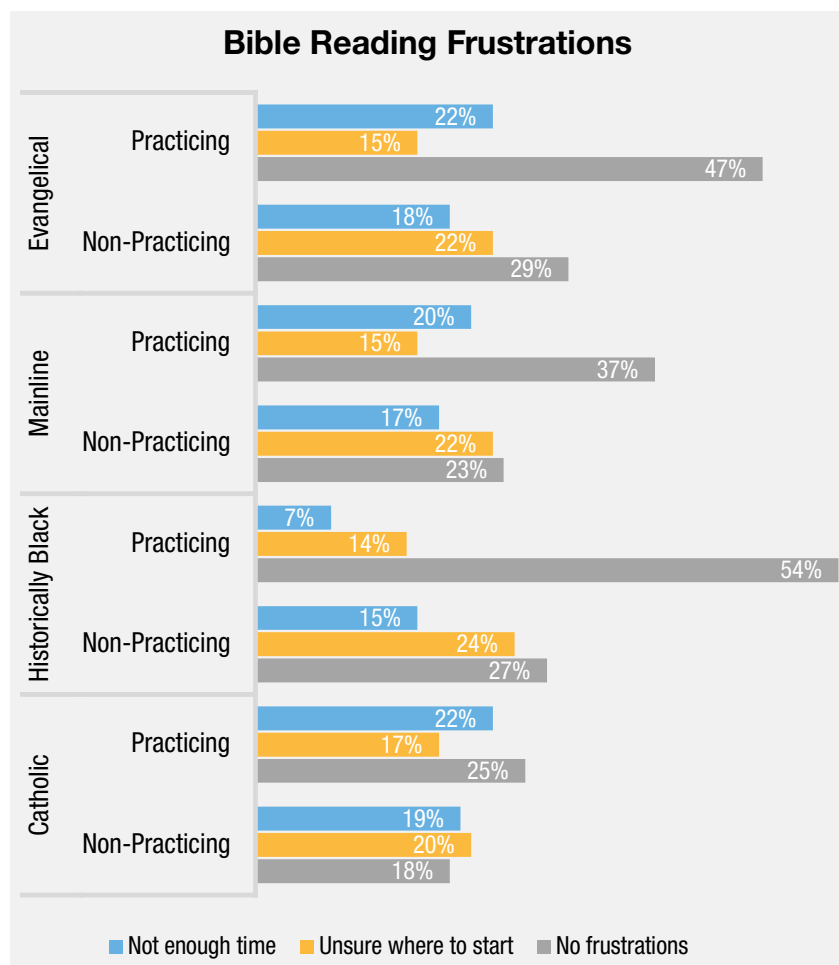
Change in Bible Use by Tradition and Practicing Faith



Virtually all Practicing Christians in every tradition want to read the Bible more. In total, nine in 10 Practicing Christians say they wish they read their Bibles more (91%). Again, Non-Practicing Christians trail behind on this point, though a notable majority (72%) does long for more frequent Bible reading.

PRACTICING CHRISTIANS' BIBLE FRUSTRATIONS (OR LACK THEREOF)

A plurality of Practicing Christians reports no frustrations with reading the Bible. Over half of historically Black Protestant (54%), 47 percent of evangelical, 37 percent of mainline, and 25 percent of Catholic have no qualms about picking up their Bibles and reading.



Even so, about one in five among evangelical, mainline, and Catholic Practicing Christians doesn't seem to have enough time to use the Bible (22% evangelical; 20% mainline; 22% Catholic). Practicing Catholic Christians also express greater difficulty when it comes to navigating and relating to verses.

The primary frustration for Non-Practicing Christians is simply not knowing where to start (22% evangelical and mainline; 23% historically Black Protestant; 20% Catholic), perhaps suggesting a need for encouragement or discipleship.

PRACTICING CHRISTIANS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE BIBLE

Most biblical scholars acknowledge that parts of Scripture function as figures of speech or are intended to be interpreted figuratively. For example, the various dreams of Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar, or the illustrations Jesus draws after he poses the question, "What is God's kingdom like? What can I compare it with?" (Luke 13:18). Many Old Testament books employ poetic devices as well.

Though a range of factual and figurative interpretations of Scripture are embraced across traditions, a common thread among Practicing Christians is esteeming the Bible as God's message to humankind.

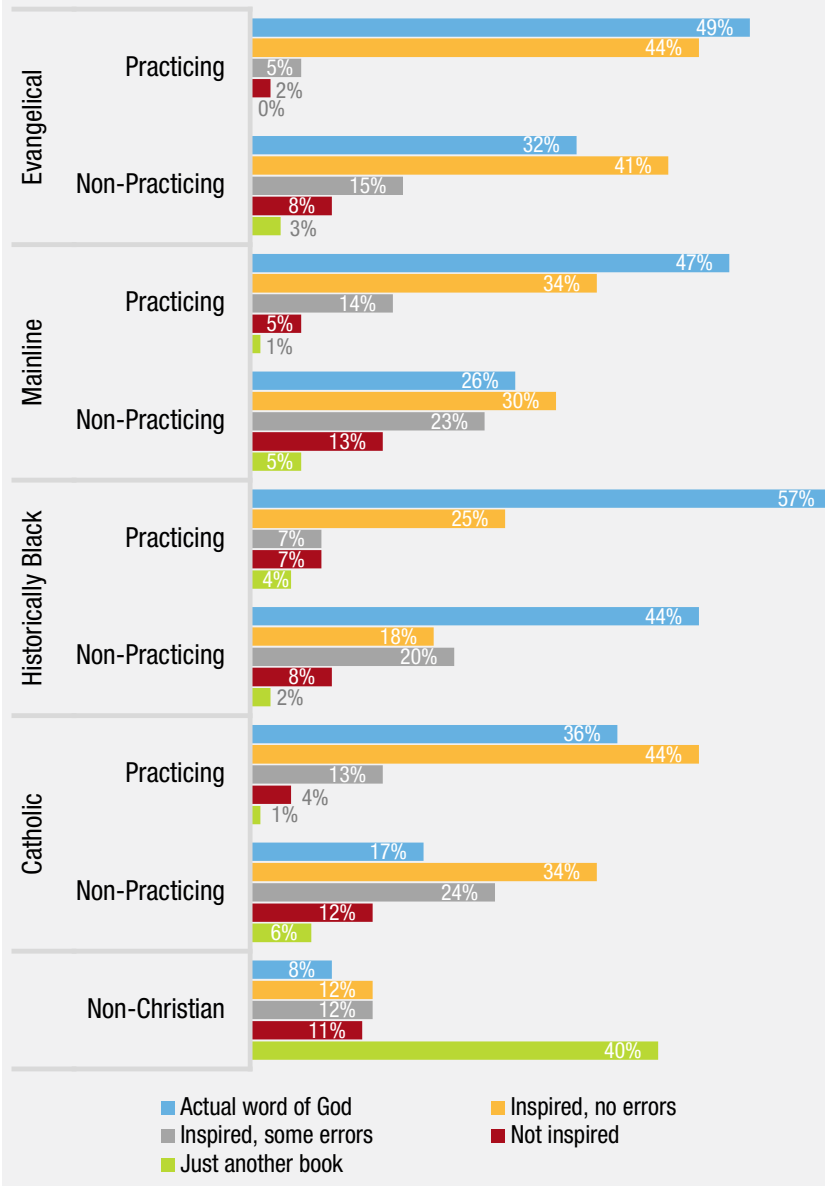
When asked a question adapted from the General Social Survey, "Which of the following statements comes closest to describing what you believe about the Bible?" respondents were provided with six options:

1. The Bible is the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word.
2. The Bible is the inspired word of God and has no errors although some verses are meant to be symbolic rather than literal.
3. The Bible is the inspired word of God but has some factual or historical errors.
4. The Bible was not inspired by God but tells how the writers of the Bible understood the ways and principles of God.
5. The Bible is just another book of teachings written by people that contains stories and advice.
6. None of these.

Practicing Christians tend to select one of the first two options, or “high views,” of the Bible. Overall, Practicing Christians lean toward understanding Scripture as literal and God’s word (46%), followed by 40 percent of Practicing Christians who see the Bible as God-inspired but somewhat symbolic. Meanwhile, the latter is the most frequently affirmed view of Scripture among Non-Practicing Christians (34%).

Looking closer at segments of Practicing Christians, 57 percent of historically Black Protestants, 49 percent of evangelicals, and 47 percent of mainline Protestants hold to the first high view. They are joined by 36 percent of practicing Catholics. Option two resonates with 44 percent of both Catholics and evangelicals, 39 percent of mainline, and 25 percent of historically Black Protestants. Marginal percentages of Practicing Christians hold any other view, though

Beliefs about the Bible



some mainline (14%) and Catholic (13%) Practicing Christians allow that the Bible, though God-inspired, may hold historical or factual errors.

HOW THE BIBLE IMPACTS PRACTICING CHRISTIANS

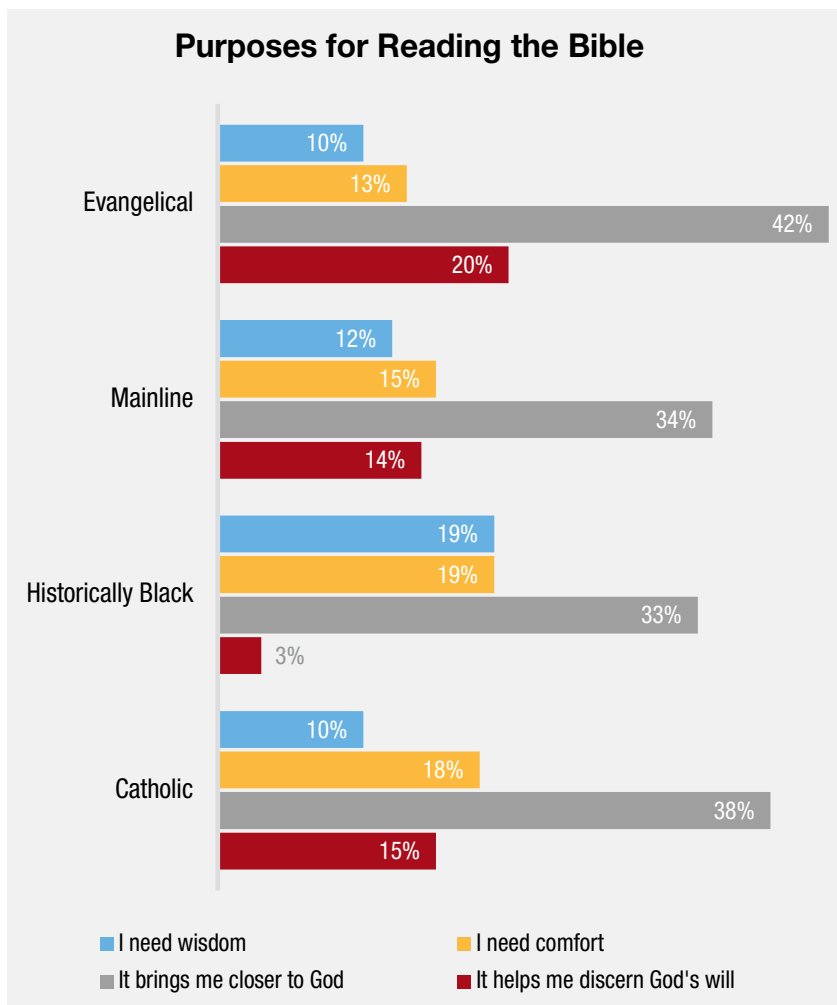
IT BRINGS THEM CLOSER TO GOD

Practicing Christians reach for the Bible for a variety of reasons. First, they say “it brings me closer to God.” Across Practicing Christians of all denominations, in fact, this is listed as the primary reason to read the Bible (42% evangelicals; 34% mainline; 33% historically Black Protestant; 38% Catholics). Second choices vary, but all fall far behind this top motivation (see visual).

Underscoring this as a driver, 85 percent of Practicing Christians say they sense a connection to God at least most of the time when reading the Bible. Further, the Bible makes them curious to know God better. Across all segments, Practicing Christians experience curiosity to know God more when they spend time in Scripture (89% “most of the time” or “always”).

Practicing Christians overwhelmingly believe that God is the “all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.” This is the majority view for evangelical (91%), mainline (83%), historically Black Protestant (74%), and Catholic (76%) Practicing Christians.

A deeper understanding of God is both a desire and an outcome for Scripture engagement and suggests the layers of meaning to be found within the pages of the Bible.

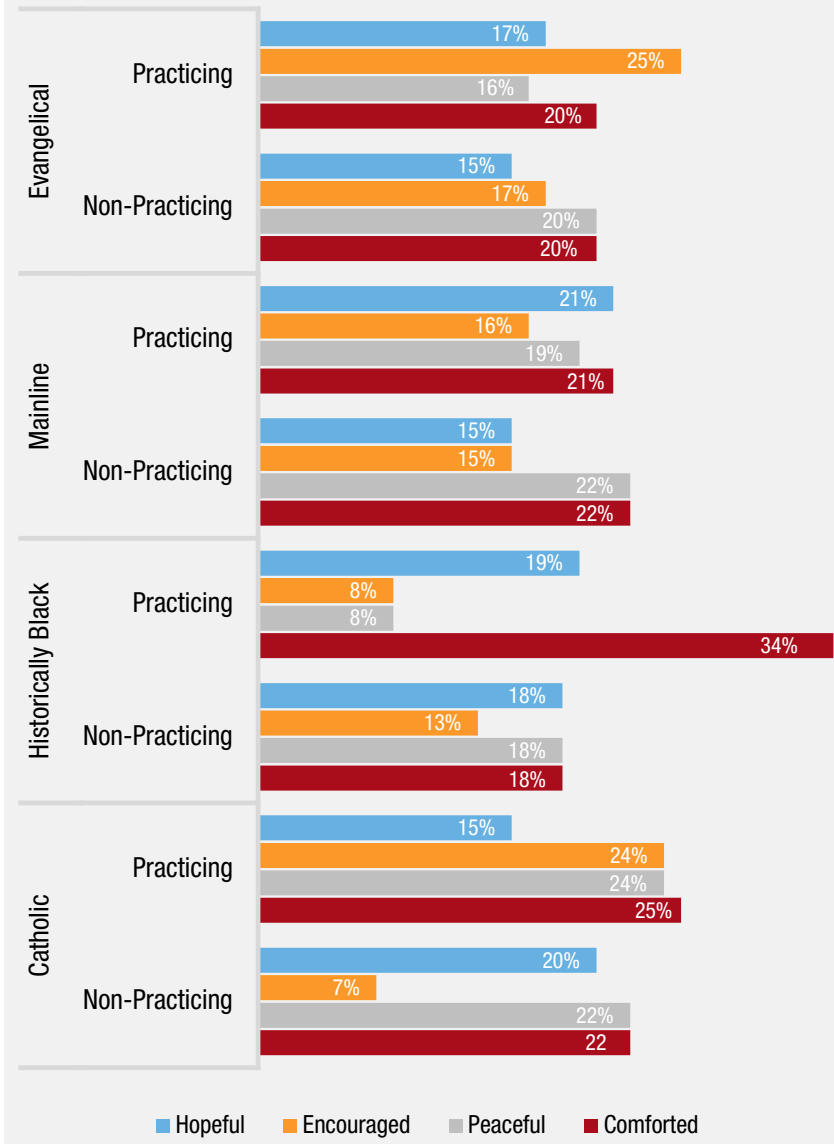


IT BRINGS ABOUT POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Practicing Christians' shared willingness to be shaped by the message of the Bible still manifests in a variety of emotions, differing somewhat by tradition. One in three historically Black Protestants, along with one in four practicing Catholics (25%), feel comforted (34%). Mainline Protestants feel hopeful (21%), and evangelicals feel encouraged (25%).

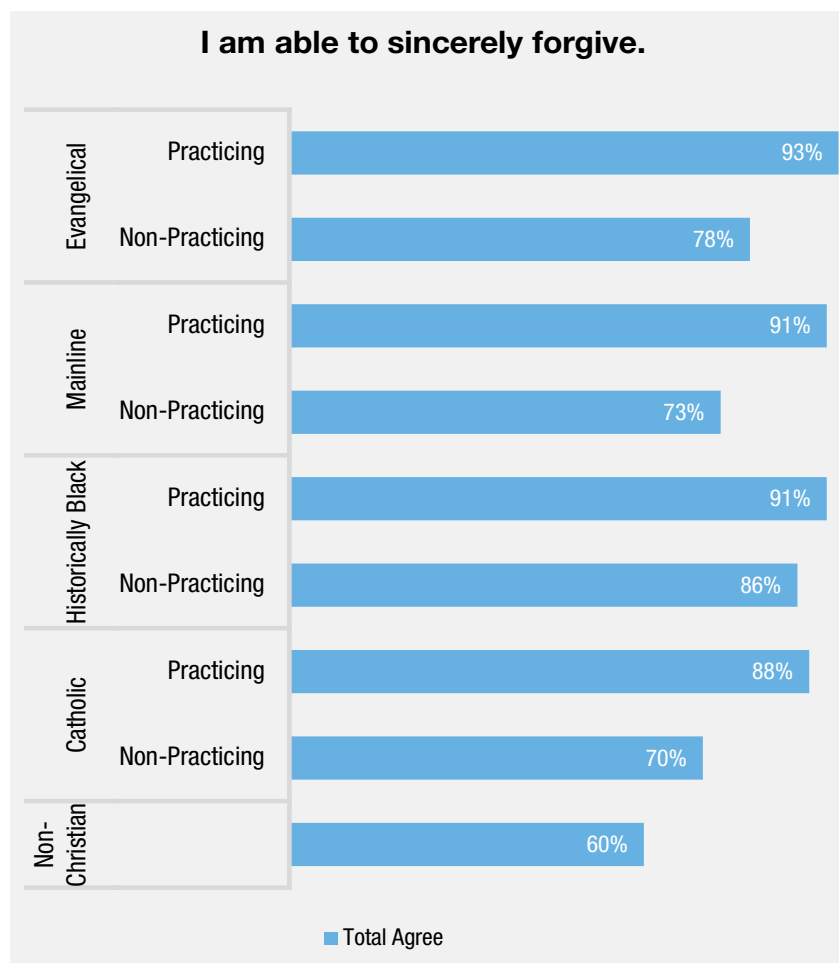
Along with this, Practicing Christians agree that the Bible is a great source of comfort when they are struggling (98%) and a great source of wisdom for decisions they make in life (98%).

Primary Favorable Emotions When Reading the Bible



IT HELPS THEM FORGIVE

When respondents were asked to agree or disagree on a four-point scale with the question, “I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not,” 91 percent of Practicing Christians agree



somewhat or strongly agree, compared to 75 percent of Non-Practicing Christians and only 60 percent of Non-Christians.

IT INFLUENCES POSITIVE ACTION

The Bible helps to shape how people engage with the world and with others, though there are different actions and emphases favored across Christian traditions. We discussed the Bible's influence on neighboring and prosocial behaviors in chapter 6 (see page 123). Here we focus on the particular prosocial behaviors that are emphasized by the various traditions in the U.S. Church.

Practicing Christians in historically Black Protestant churches are the most likely to say the Bible leads them to welcome immigrants into their community (71%). Their evangelical and mainline Protestant peers feel compelled to prioritize befriending people of other races (63%, 60%). Practicing Catholics emphasize care for the environment (59%).

These top priorities are not to the exclusion of other goals and cares. Together, they speak to the varied ways churches serve and choose to exemplify the character of the Christ that Practicing Christians follow.

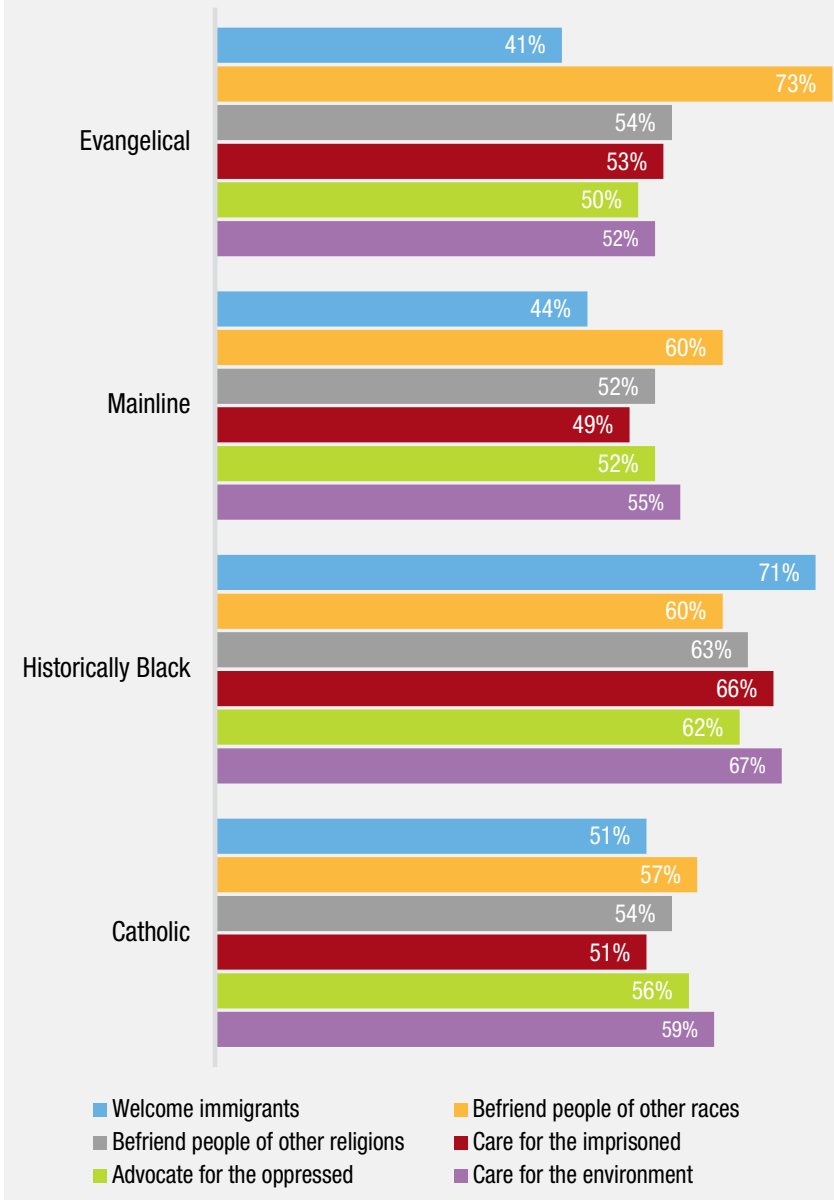
In summary, as Practicing Christians engage with the Bible—a text they highly revere and enjoy—they experience positive emotions, sense connection to God, feel comfort, and find wisdom. As a result of that study of Scripture, they are better able to forgive and engage generously with others. Overwhelmingly, and across

denominations, Practicing Christians reveal that the Bible has transformative power in their lives. In fact, compared to 78 percent of Non-Practicing Christians, nearly all Practicing Christians (97% on average) agree that the Bible has transformed their life.

THE BIBLE AND THE BLACK CHURCH

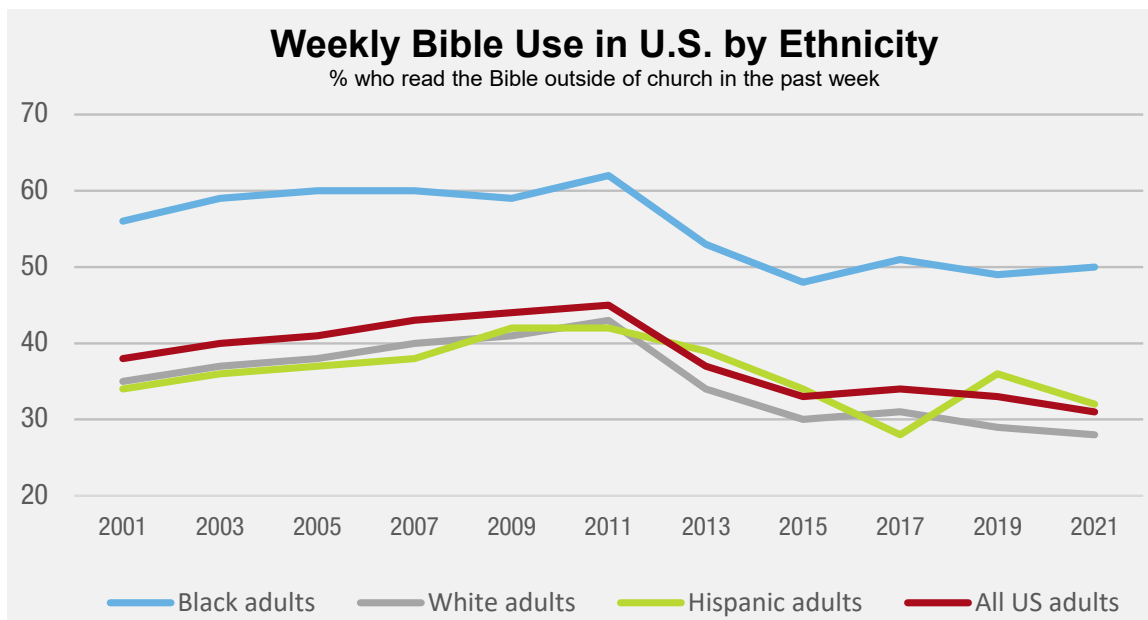
State of the Bible is focused on Scripture engagement in America. By cross-referencing our data with other studies that have run over the years—like those by our friends at Barna Group—we identify trends across demographics. One such trend bears mention here as it provides background for the high view of Scripture reported among those who self-identified as being from a Historically Black Church tradition. Over decades of research conducted by Barna Group, Black adults remain—by far—the racial demographic most rooted in Scripture. This is true when looking at both the general population and at Christians. Barna’s 2020 *Trends in the Black Church* study, for which American Bible Study was a research partner, included 822 members of the Black Church, both historic denominations and other majority-Black or Black-led churches today. This large sample allows for a more detailed portrait of Black Church adherents. Time and again, the research revealed the Bible as an anchor in lives, homes, and pulpits. In fact 78 percent of attendees and 82 percent of pastors in Black churches say sermons are primarily expository, focused on explanations of Scripture passages, which relates to environments of deeper trust in and appreciation of the Bible.

The Bible's message leads me to...



Though two in three Black Church churchgoers (67%) engage Scripture on their own each week, a hallmark of the Black Church’s deep relationship with the Bible is that it is shared. Bible reading with others, either family or non-family (49%), is reportedly part of churchgoers’ routines at least once or twice a week, if not more frequently.

One-third of churchgoers in the Black Church (32%) say they often read or study the Bible together as a family. This is an area in which Millennials are more likely to be engaged than their elders (42% vs. 32% Gen X and 29% Boomers in the Black Church say “often”), perhaps as they are more likely to be parenting young children in this stage of life.



Accordingly, we see Bible study groups being popular among Millennials in the Black Church, one-quarter of whom (23%) says they attend a Bible study at a church multiple times a week, under normal circumstances (vs. 11% Gen X, 8% Boomers). Still, overall, more than half of Boomers in the Black Church (55%) engage in a weekly or biweekly Bible study (compared with 45% Gen X, 54% Millennials, 41% Gen Z), and Boomers are more likely than their younger peers to say teaching the Bible is one of the most important issues the Black Church should be involved in. Rev. Dr. Nicole Martin of American Bible Society summarized in a Q&A for the Barna study, “Theologically, Black Christian movements have been built upon the promises of Scripture that provide the reality of flourishing in this world and in the world to come.”

CONCLUSION

Across Christian traditions, the message of the Bible is good news and an invitation to be a part of “good works” (Ephesians 2:10). The Bible offers hope and flourishing to all Americans who turn to it, pick it up, read it, and learn from it—especially when it is engaged in the context of a vibrant and active Christian faith.

NEXT STEPS

Individuals. Reach out to a friend, neighbor, or colleague from a different Christian tradition than your own. Ask them to tell you about their journey with the Bible, their favorite Scriptures, and how the Bible influences their life day-to-day. When you discuss your faith with neighbors, it can open the door to opportunities for prayer, witness, and encouragement.

Families. Talk with members of your immediate family about how the Bible influences each of your lives. Think about how Scripture makes you feel, even if it's challenging. Then select and do a YouVersion Bible reading plan together. You can find great plans at www.bible.com/reading-plans or by downloading the Bible app to your mobile device.

Pastors. Connect with another local pastor from a different Christian tradition than your own. Talk about the place of the Bible in your life and in the life of your congregation or parish. Then consider inviting your neighboring pastor to speak at your church, introducing your congregation to a Bible engagement practice they might find new, interesting, or refreshing.



GENEROSITY AND THE BIBLE

One day at the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus issued a brilliant bit of statistical analysis. He saw rich folks dropping “a lot of money” into the collection box, but then a poor widow came along and gave two little copper coins—worth about a penny. “I tell you that this poor widow put more in the offering box than all the others,” Jesus said. “For the others put in what they had to spare of their riches; but she, poor as she is, put in all she had—she gave all she had to live on” (Mark 12:41–44 GNT).

In this way, Jesus gave us a new way to look at charitable giving. There’s more to consider than the total amount given. Jesus called attention to a new metric—giving as a proportion of total funds available. Jesus suggests that this is a better way to gauge the condition of the giver’s heart.

Leaders of churches and Christian charities still look for big donors to make the big contributions that pay the bills and advance crucial ministries, but many of these leaders also care deeply about the hearts of all givers. Are people learning and practicing the biblical virtue of generosity? Whatever their income level, are they growing in faith as they open their hearts to give?

Generosity has been defined as “the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly.” —Christian Smith

In this chapter we present findings around financial giving. Who gives, and how much? Are certain factors associated with greater giving? To what extent does Bible reading or church attendance affect someone’s donations?

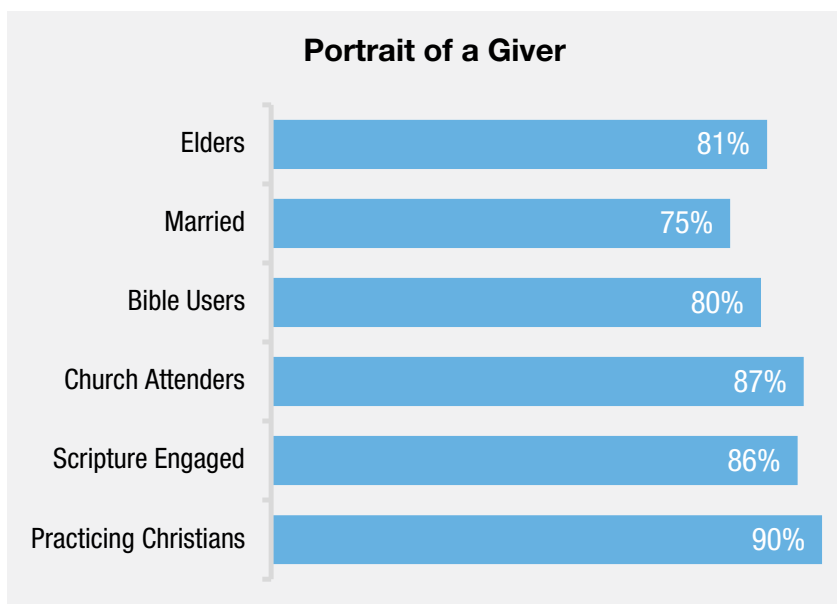
While we are primarily looking at financial gifts here, we recognize that generosity takes many other forms as well. People contribute time and talents, prayers and encouragement, at levels it would be hard to count. In a previous chapter of this report, we examined “neighboring” and found that donating money to a charity was a key factor, along with volunteering and helping others. Good neighbors show generosity in many ways, including financial support.

And we also keep in mind the Jesus Metric, if you will. We’re not just looking for big numbers, but for evidence of generous hearts.

PORTRAIT OF A GENEROUS GIVER

What can we say about those who show financial generosity?

Certain demographic factors emerge, creating a kind of portrait. We also see a handful of interconnected religious factors in play. We'll deal with these factors in more depth in the following pages, but here is the snapshot.



Generous givers tend to be:

- **Elders**, that is, those in our oldest age bracket. This group is 40 percent more likely to donate than Generation Z.

- **Married.** Wedded folks are 40 percent more likely to donate than those who are single.
- **Not wealthy.** Those making \$30,000 annually or less give a higher percentage of their income than those making \$60,000 or more.
- **Educated.** The higher one's education level, the more they tend to give.
- **Happy.** Those who score high in Happiness and Life Satisfaction are more likely to give than those who score low, and they give far more.

As for religious factors, generous givers tend to be:

- **Bible Users.** Those who read the Bible at least 3–4 times a year (outside of a church service) are 55 percent more likely to donate than those who don't.
- **Church Attenders.** Those who attend church regularly are 75 percent more likely to donate than those who do not.
- **Scripture Engaged.** Those who demonstrate Bible engagement through frequency of Bible reading, impact on their lives, and centrality to their decision-making are 86 percent more likely to donate than the Bible Disengaged.
- **Practicing Christians.** Those who identify with a Christian tradition, attend church at least monthly, and consider it important in their lives are 40 percent more likely to donate than Non-Christians.

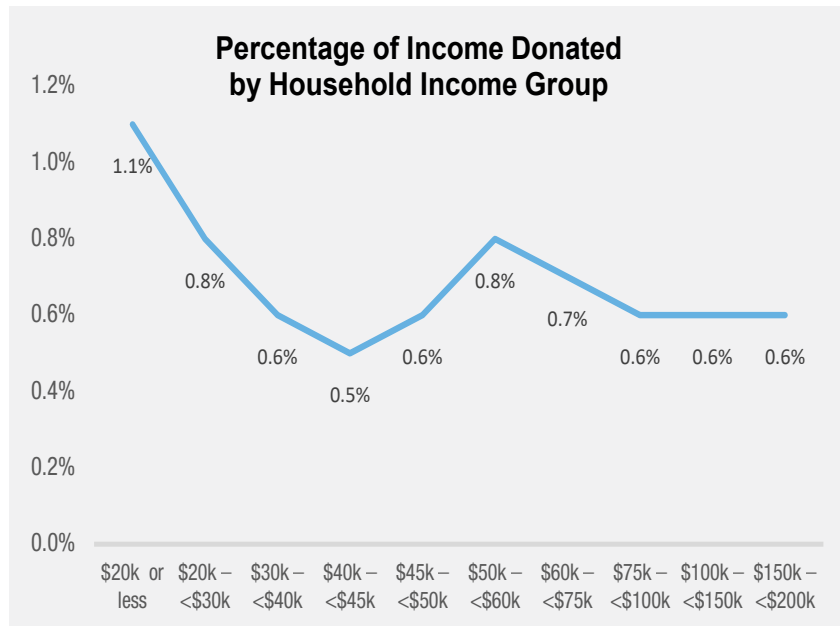
FINANCIAL GIVING ACROSS KEY DEMOGRAPHICS

FINANCIAL STATUS

It stands to reason that those with more money give more money to charities. While this is true in terms of monetary value—higher earners do give significantly larger donations—it is also true that lower earners tend to give greater proportions of their earned income to charities. Those who make \$20,000 or less give 1.2 percent of their income. Those who make \$20,000–\$30,000 give 0.85 percent. The highest earners, in contrast, give about 0.6 percent of their annual income.

FINDING THE MIDDLE

With charitable giving, we find that the median (middle) figure gives a more accurate picture than the mean (average). If five people give your ministry 10, 20, 30, 40, and 10,000 dollars, the mean would be \$2,020, but it would be a mistake to assume most of your donors are giving thousands when only one is. The median figure of \$30 better reflects the character of your donor base. So, as we report on the giving tendencies of various groups, we'll generally rely on the median figures to get a clear picture.

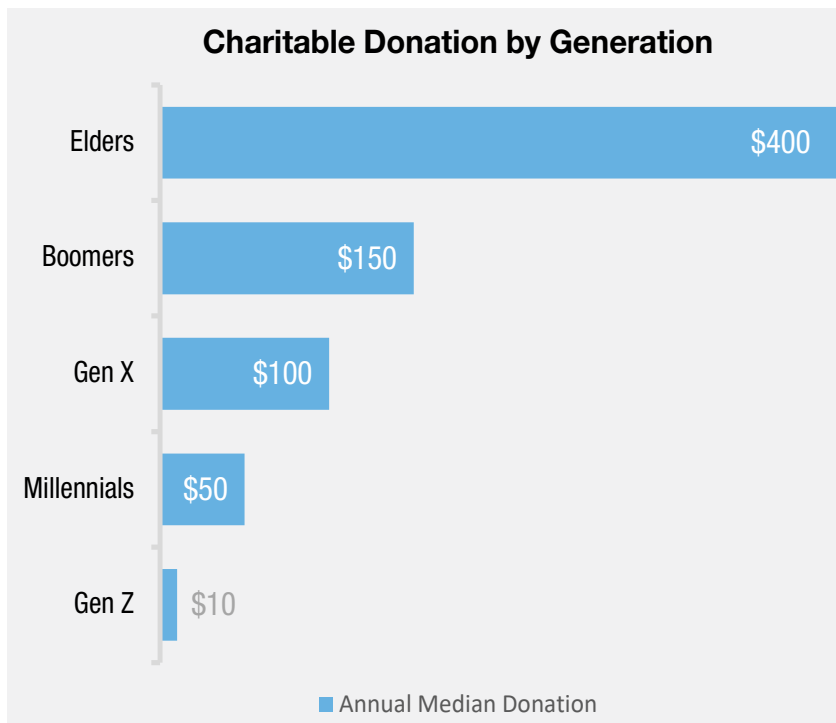


AGE AND STAGE OF LIFE

Older generations exhibit more financial generosity than younger generations. Eighty-one percent of Elders report donating money to charities, and those who give tend to give more. (Median dollars donated rises from \$10 among Gen Z to \$400 among Elders.)

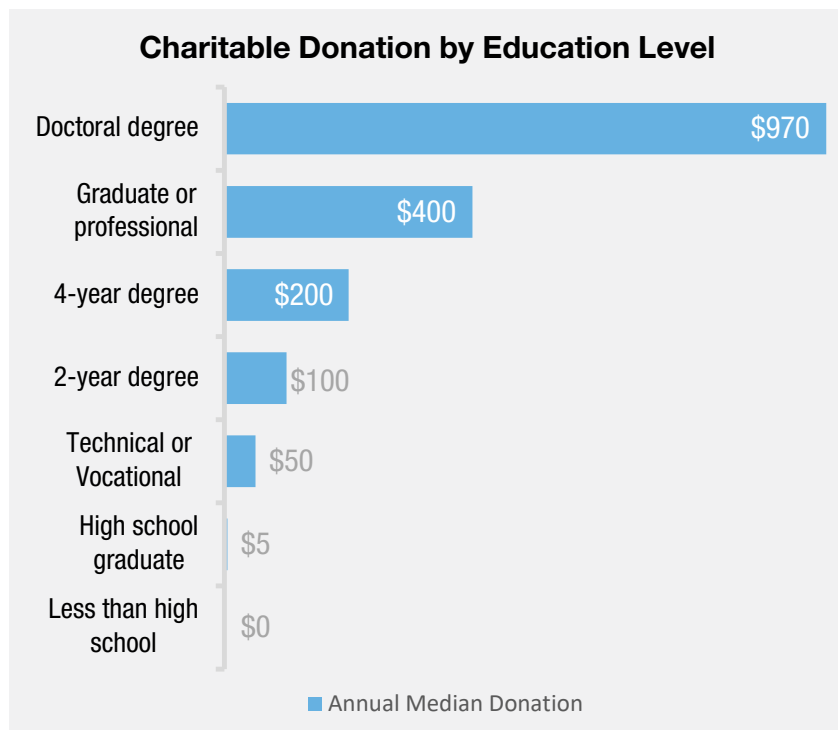
Older adults may have more money to give, and younger adults may find it easier to donate ten bucks on an app, but Barna Group research also finds basic differences in the *definition* of generosity across generations. For instance, Elders tend to identify donations or volunteerism as the peak of generosity, where Millennials value hospitality more.

Overall, men tend to be more generous with their donations, with a median donation of \$108, compared to women's \$88. Taking relationship status into account is important, however, as women have great influence in how couples decide to donate. Altogether, married adults give significantly more than adults of other relationship statuses (median of \$248 compared with \$146 for widowed, \$52 for divorced, \$30 for separated, and \$6 for single).



EDUCATION

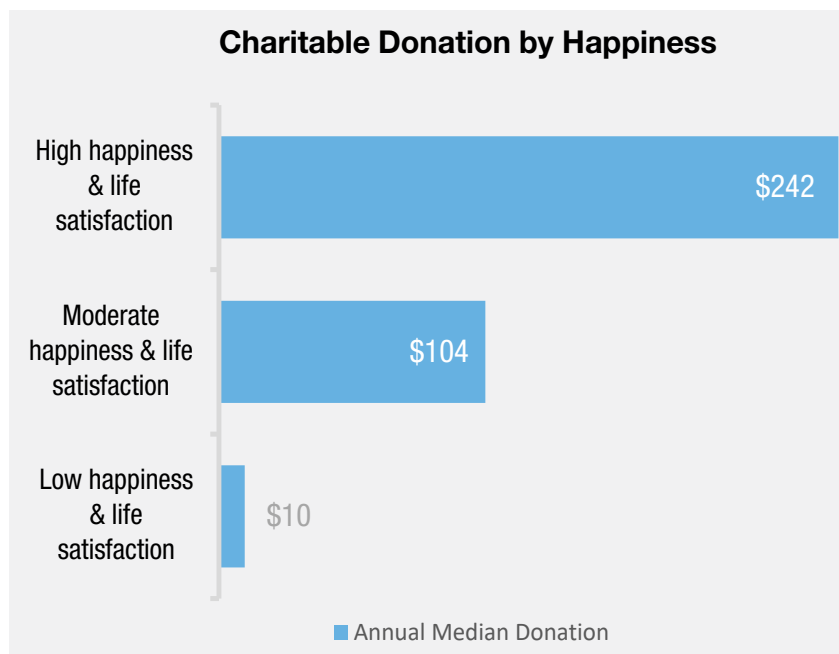
Education also affects giving, perhaps because earning potential grows. Those who have less than a high school education donate a median amount of \$0, but that increases with high school graduation (\$5). Each education level increases in dollars donated. For example, the difference between median donations for an individual with a two-year degree (\$100) versus a four-year degree (\$200) is \$100, and that difference doubles again with a Graduate or Professional degree (\$400). The highest median donation amount by education level (\$970) is given by those who have earned a Doctoral degree.



THE CHEERFUL GIVER

“God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7 NIV). Research shows that cheerful people also love to give. Those who score high on self-reported Happiness and Life Satisfaction also show greater generosity. And this is independent of financial stability.

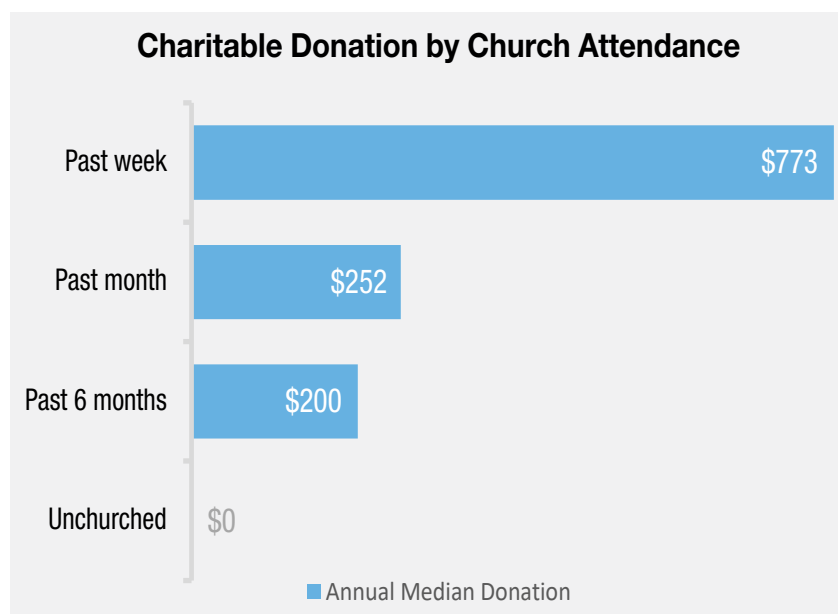
We grouped respondents into three groups based on Happiness and Life Satisfaction: high, medium, and low. Those who self-report high happiness and life satisfaction give a median amount of \$242, whereas those who are moderately happy give \$104, and those who identify as having low happiness give \$10. Overall, 77 percent of those at the highest levels of Happiness and Life Satisfaction donated, compared to 54 percent at the lowest levels.



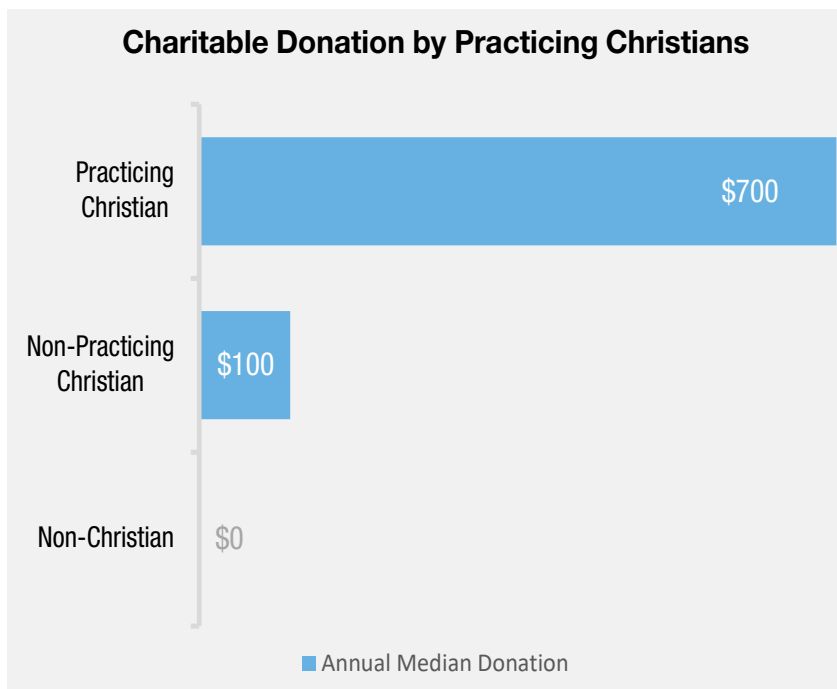
GENEROSITY, FAITH, AND SCRIPTURE

A pattern emerges among those who give financially: the more involved a person is in their church, the more they read their Bible, the more engaged with Scripture they are, and the more they practice their faith, the more likely it is that they will give financially, and give generously.

Let's begin with church attendance. The more frequently people say they attend church, the more money they are likely to donate to charity. While this may be related to the experience of regularly passing the offering plate or being asked to give online, it seems to also indicate a pattern of behavior that church attendance enhances. Median contributions range from \$0 for the unchurched to \$773 for those who attended in the past week.



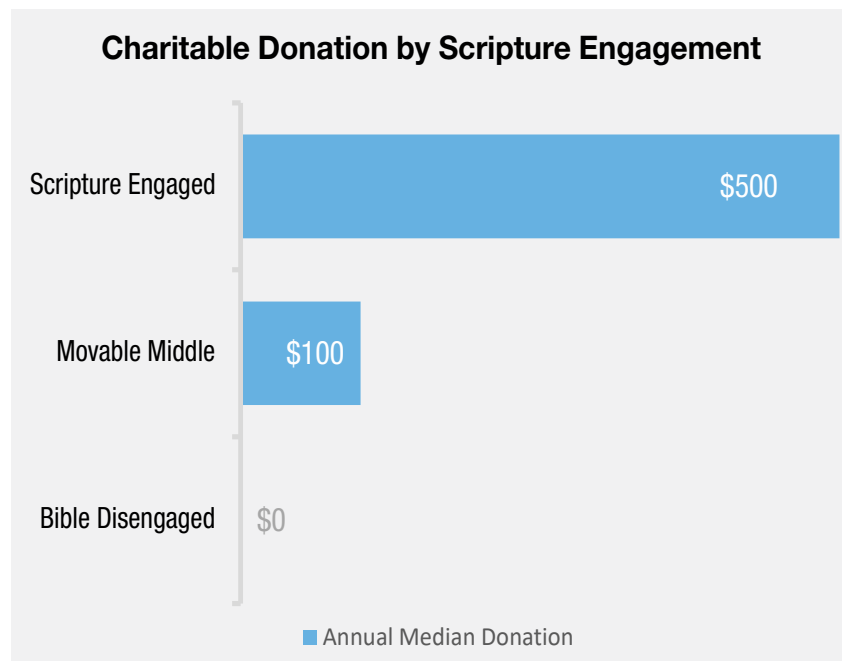
Research suggests that people tend to be more generous toward organizations with which they identify. We see this with regular churchgoers who give to their church. They see themselves as part of it, so they give. Overall, 87 percent of church attenders made donations to some type of church or charity, compared to only 50 percent of those who do not attend church.



This effect is compounded when combining attendance with faith affiliation and devotion. Practicing Christians (see previous chapter for more on this committed group) contribute a median amount of \$700, much higher than the median amount of \$100 given by Non-Practicing Christians. Meanwhile, those who are

Non-Christian give a median amount of \$0 to charity. Overall, nine in ten Practicing Christians (90%) donated money to charity, whereas only 65 percent of Non-Practicing Christians and 47 percent of Non-Christians say they did the same.

A deep engagement with Scripture also correlates to charitable giving. At a broad level, Bible Users are much more likely than Non-Bible Users to donate to charity. In fact, 80 percent of those who meet the qualifications of a Bible User (reading 3–4 times a year, outside of church) give to charity, compared to 52 percent of Non-Bible Users. Those who do not use the Bible regularly give a median amount of \$5 to charity, compared to Bible Users, who give a median amount of \$258.



Looking closer at levels of Scripture Engagement within these groups, Bible Disengaged individuals give a median charitable donation of \$0; only 47 percent of Bible Disengaged people give to charity at all. Compare this with those at higher Scripture Engagement levels. In the Movable Middle, 72 percent are givers, with a median amount of \$100. Among the Scripture Engaged, the figures soar to 86 percent, giving a median of \$500.

GENEROUS WITH TIME, TALENTS AND LOVE

Generosity overflows.

It doesn't stop when you send a gift to a church or charity. It takes up residence in your heart, in your life. Givers give, whether that's volunteering in the community, helping a stranger, or clicking an app for disaster relief.

In case you need numbers on that, try these: Volunteers donated eight times more money to charity than those who did not volunteer (\$40 versus \$5). People willing to help a stranger donated 140 percent more than those who were not (\$120 versus \$50).

For many Christians, the connection is clear. Freely we have received the grace of God, lavished on us in many ways. And in all the ways we can, we freely give.



HELP WANTED: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

The year began on a note of hope. Surely 2021 would be better than its predecessor. We said goodbye and good riddance to 2020, after enduring its pandemic, its election, its social turmoil, its natural disasters—and many of us looked forward to a rebuilding, or at least a return to something more normal.

We had a feeling that things would change for the better in 2021. How could they get any worse?

But the new year brought new challenges. New storms, new fights, and a tougher strain of the virus. Maybe 2021 wasn't any worse than 2020, but it was certainly a partner in crime.

In the midst of these struggles, however, our data reveal some good news. It's a principle that goes back to Bible times: When times get tough, people turn to God for help. And it proved true this year.

Despite the horrible events of 2021—perhaps in response to those events—Bible reading in America increased.

2021 marks the fourth straight year in a trend of Americans reading the Bible more frequently.

FAITH AMID FRENZY

Of course COVID-19 remained a major concern throughout 2021. Just when it seemed we might be getting the upper hand on the virus, with vaccines available and social restrictions lifting, the Delta variant arrived in the United States. It reignited the pandemic, circumventing vaccine protection, and spreading through whole communities. This highly contagious strain of the virus overwhelmed smaller hospitals and left many more dead in its wake. For a second straight year, COVID-19 is among the leading causes of death in the U.S. After almost two full years of fighting COVID-19, healthcare workers are facing higher burnout rates than ever, and they are leaving their positions in record numbers.¹

¹ <https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20210920/survey-critical-care-nurses-consider-quitting-due-covid>

The economic impact of the virus is still being tabulated. But one temporary change may have some staying power: More people are working from home. This was a necessity in times of shutdown, and it remained prudent for many workers as the virus raged. Now it looks like the wave of the future. Many Americans are re-examining their long commutes and asking the question, “Why not work from the safety and convenience of home?” Some have taken this opportunity to renegotiate their employment protocols, leveraging their options for more pay, less travel, or an easier schedule. Others are choosing to leave jobs entirely, resulting in what has been dubbed the “Great Resignation” and leaving many businesses struggling, with “Help Wanted” signs hanging in their windows.

Help has been sorely wanted in many corners of society. Churches and community organizations that distribute food to the hungry have been pressed by the growing need—but also encouraged by the generous increase in contributions.

Natural disasters have done great damage in the U.S. this year, with wildfires raging in the West and hurricanes pummeling the South. Here again it’s “Help Wanted,” as people seek to rebuild their lives after losing everything to flames or floods.

And nearly all Americans are feeling the effects of supply-chain disruptions stemming from the pandemic and shifts in hiring, leading to shortages and inflation. We are all beginning to realize that, despite our best efforts to manage our own lives and fortunes, we are not ultimately in control. We need help.

In times like these, we might turn to a promise like Psalm 46:1, “God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble” (GNT). And we might look for more guidance elsewhere in the Good Book. This, in fact, is happening.

As you’ll see here, for all its trials, **2021 has seen an increase in Bible reading**. We pray that all Americans will find in its pages a foundation for faith that helps them weather their storms and help others through times of disruption and need.

Nearly one in four U.S. adults (24%) has increased their Bible reading from last year.

In this final installment of *State of the Bible 2021*, let’s dig deeper into the data. We’ll also take a sneak peek at *State of the Bible 2022*, which hits the field to gather new data in January.

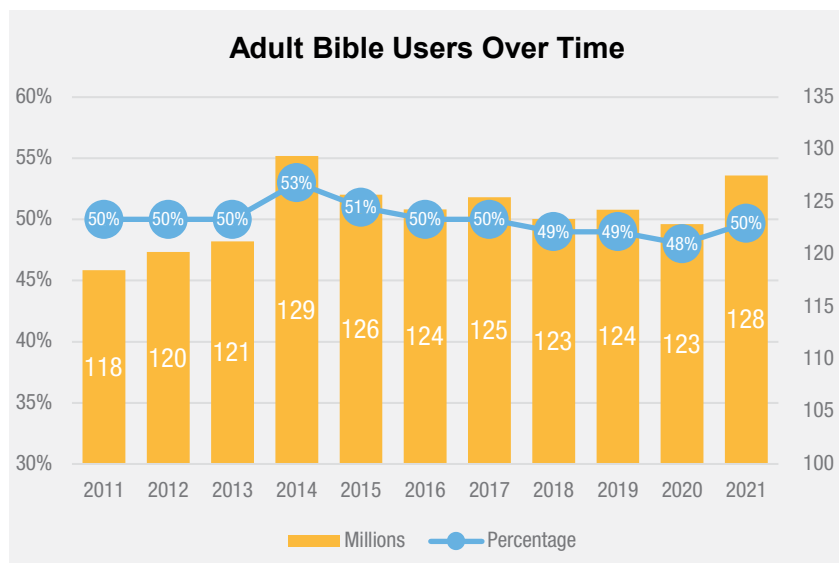
THE TOP 10 STORIES OF 2021

Here we’ve summarized the top findings from this year to help you process and present helpful information to those you serve.

#1 — BIBLE READING IS UP

2021 marks the fourth straight year in a trend of Americans reading the Bible more frequently. Nearly one in four U.S. adults (24%) has increased their Bible reading from last year.

Twelve million more Americans turned to the Bible this year, a 7 percent increase over 2020. Those who “used the Bible at least occasionally” totaled 169 million last year, but in 2021 that figure shot up to 181 million. Of those, 128 million American adults reported using the Bible with regularity.



While it’s true that about half of American adults read the Bible “less than twice a year” or “never,” **more than a third (34%) read it once a week or more.** And this figure does not include Bible reading that is part of a worship service.

But how many of those people read the Bible “most days of the week”? In the shutdown year of 2020, that figure was at 12 percent, **but in this tumultuous 2021 it has risen to 16 percent.** Get that: About one in six Americans reads the Bible “most days,” and that number is moving upward.

We noted in previous years that Bible Users tend to be older, ethnically diverse, and from the American South, and that profile still stands. Recently, we’ve seen the landscape of Bible Users in America changing and spreading to all areas and varied demographics.

Strikingly, *State of the Bible* research reveals that Bible Users are not just Christians. Of those who self-identify with other religions, 37 percent also read the Bible at least three to four times a year.

Read more about how Bible reading has gone up this year [beginning on page 9.](#)

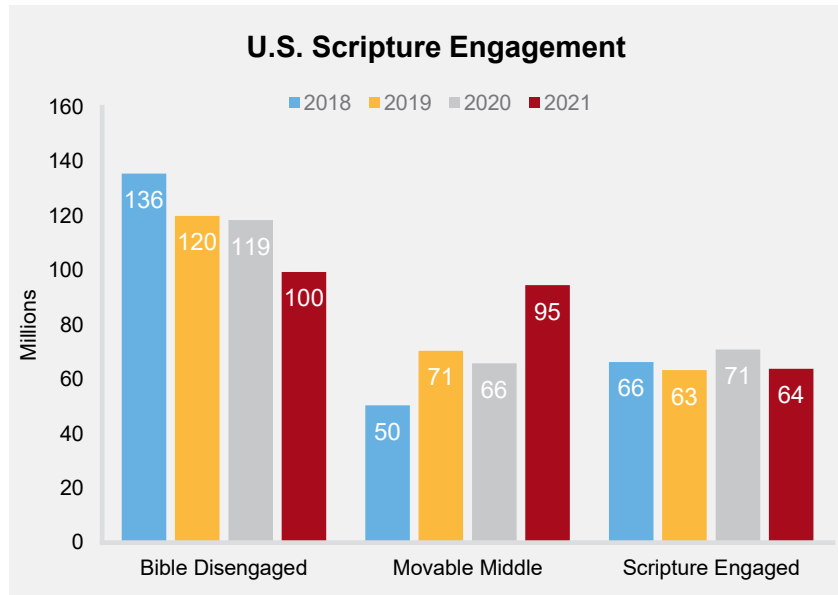
#2 — THE RISE OF THE MOVABLE MIDDLE

Contrary to popular belief, Americans remain quite open to the Bible. In fact, this year’s data shows an increase in that openness.

Through questions related to (a) Bible-reading frequency, (b) spiritual impact, and (c) the centrality of Scripture in moral decision-making, we categorize people as *Scripture Engaged* on one side and *Bible Disengaged* on the other. That leaves a substantial group in the middle, open to the Bible, reading it occasionally, perhaps for encouragement or guidance, but not fully engaged. We used to

divide this group into *Bible Friendly* and *Bible Neutral*. Now we call them all the *Movable Middle*.

And we have seen substantial movement in the past year.



The Movable Middle group ballooned from **66 million** (26%) in 2020 to **95 million** (37%) in 2021. While some of this comes from a mild (but concerning) drop on the Scripture Engaged side, the bulk of the increase comes from a 19-million-adult drop among the Disengaged.

Tracking four years of data (2018 through 2021), we see the trend even more starkly. The Disengaged group is moving steadily down, while the Movable Middle has nearly doubled in that time (up 90%).

This shift shows a growing group of Americans open to the Bible, exploring it, and looking for answers in its pages. Can we move this crowd out of the “friend zone” and into a more serious relationship with the Bible?

You can read more about the Movable Middle [beginning on page 20 of *State of the Bible*](#).

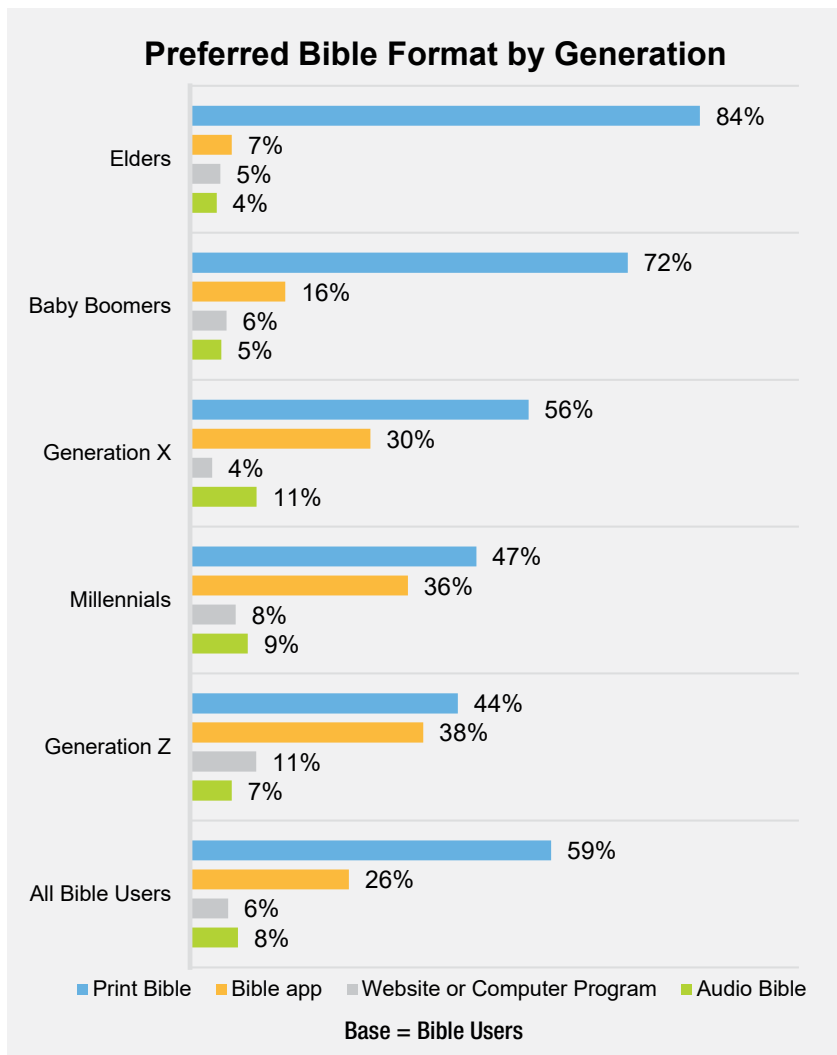
#3 — DIGITAL BIBLES DEEPEN ENGAGEMENT

When Americans read the Bible, they’re most likely to pick up a printed copy. Even after 2020, a year in which our routines shifted dramatically toward electronic platforms, Americans still prefer print for Bible-reading experiences. Nearly six in 10 American adults (59%) choose a paper Bible over other options including digital, audio, and computer programs.

As you might expect, there’s a clear age-related trend here. Only 7 percent of Elders and 16 percent of Baby Boomers prefer to use Bible apps on a smartphone or tablet, while that’s the favored format for 36 percent of Millennials and 38 percent of Generation Z.

But it’s surprising how many of those younger folks still prefer reading printed Bibles—47 percent of Millennials and 44 percent of Gen Z. In the coming years, we can expect electronic formats to overtake printed Bibles, but that change is happening very slowly. It may be that, for many, the Bible is connected to a traditional way of life, and so they prefer the traditional way of accessing it. Perhaps, as the Bible becomes more integrated into people’s daily

lives, they'll access it in the formats they're constantly using for other communication.



This is suggested by additional data showing that Scripture Engaged people are about twice as likely to prefer reading the Bible on their smartphones or tablets (27%) as the Bible Disengaged (14%). If it's an essential part of your life, you'll access the Bible in any way available.

To read more about the Bible and technology, [begin on page 13](#).

#4 — WE ALL FEEL STRESS; THE BIBLE CAN HELP

Scripture Engaged Americans feel just as much stress as others, sometimes more, but they are more likely to turn to prayer, meditation, or (no surprise) Bible reading for stress relief. They're less likely to rely on alcohol or drugs—or even watching TV.

Knowing that COVID-19 created great stress throughout our society, we asked specifically about ways in which Americans choose to comfort themselves. Overall, in these tumultuous times, Americans most frequently sought out family members (43%) and prayer and/or meditation (38%) to deal with their stress. One in three (34%) turned to food for comfort.

When we broke down stress-relief methods according to Bible engagement, we saw some things we expected and some we didn't. Of course Scripture Engaged people would rely on prayer/meditation (70%) and Bible reading (67%), but prayer/meditation was also the second response (39%) for those in the Movable Middle, just one point behind the first, talking with a family member

(40%). (Once again, we see that this vast middle group is open to spiritual things, even though the Bible isn't always central.) The "family member" response was high at all levels of Bible engagement. About a third of each group also said "food."

Segment	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice
Scripture Engaged	Prayer and/or Meditation 70%	Reading the Bible 67%	Family member 49%
Movable Middle	Family member 44%	Prayer and/or Meditation 43%	Food 34%
Bible Disengaged	TV or streaming services 39%	Family member 39%	Food 35%

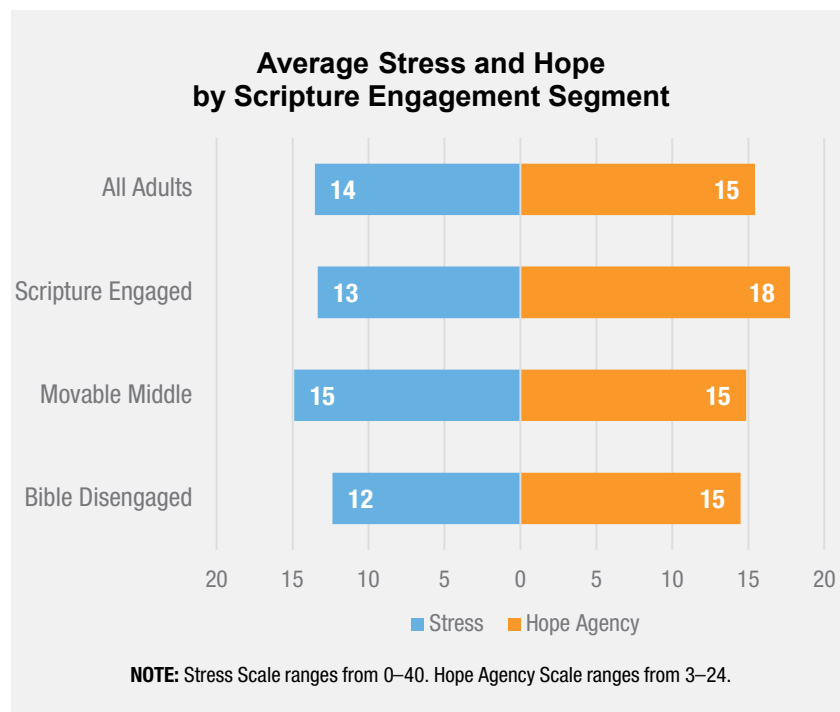
In sum, we can say that, though higher Scripture Engagement does not keep us from experiencing stress, it seems to correlate with healthier choices about how to cope.

Read more about stress and Scripture Engagement [beginning on page 54](#).

#5 — THE BIBLE BRINGS HOPE

As we just saw, the Bible helps us cope. It also brings us hope.

Like everyone else in these trying times, Scripture Engaged people have experienced challenges with sickness, employment, financial strain, and the stress of educating their children at home. Their stress levels are about average, but they score significantly above average in hope.



To explore this, we used the Hope Agency Scale, developed by several scholars to measure a person's confidence that they are able

to move themselves forward toward their goals, imagining a preferred future, and acting to realize that vision. Hope scores range from 3 to 24, with 15 as the average score for adults in general. Scripture Engaged people scored 18.

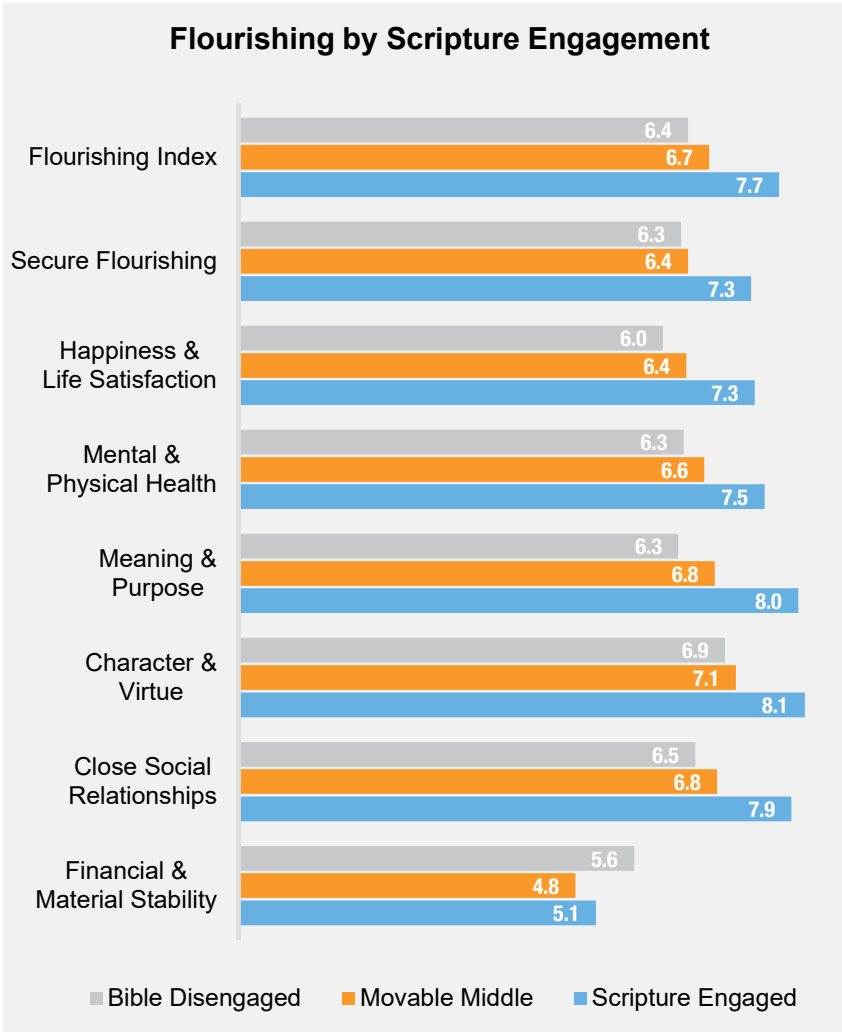
The Bible is full of stressful situations, and yet it consistently offers a vision of a “preferred future.” It invites faithful people to trust in God and participate in the redemption God is bringing about. When Jeremiah writes of God’s “plans to bring about the future you hope for” (Jeremiah 29:11 GNT), he was in a situation bleaker than 2020–21. Those who engage with biblical promises like these recognize that God is still at work today, inviting them into a hope-filled future.

To read more about the Bible and its relationship to hope, you can do so [beginning on page 69](#).

#6 — PEOPLE FLOURISH WITH THE BIBLE

In terms of satisfaction, purpose, and relationships, Scripture engagement helps people flourish.

As we did with the Hope Scale, we borrowed another psychological survey to measure the effects of Bible engagement—Harvard University’s Human Flourishing inventory. “Flourishing” is defined as a composite of Happiness and Life Satisfaction; Mental and Physical Health; Meaning and Purpose; Character and Virtue; and Close Social Relationships. **Scripture Engaged Americans score higher in every category of human flourishing.**



We had found a significant dip in the Flourishing scores among all Americans between January and June of 2020. You may recall that COVID began spreading across the country that March, and

things began shutting down. But the scores began bouncing back by January 2021.

The Human Flourishing inventory does not test for specifically spiritual factors, but its categories do include a number of things we might consider part of the “abundant” life Jesus promised (John 10:10). Is it any wonder that those who connect regularly with God in Scripture flourish so abundantly?

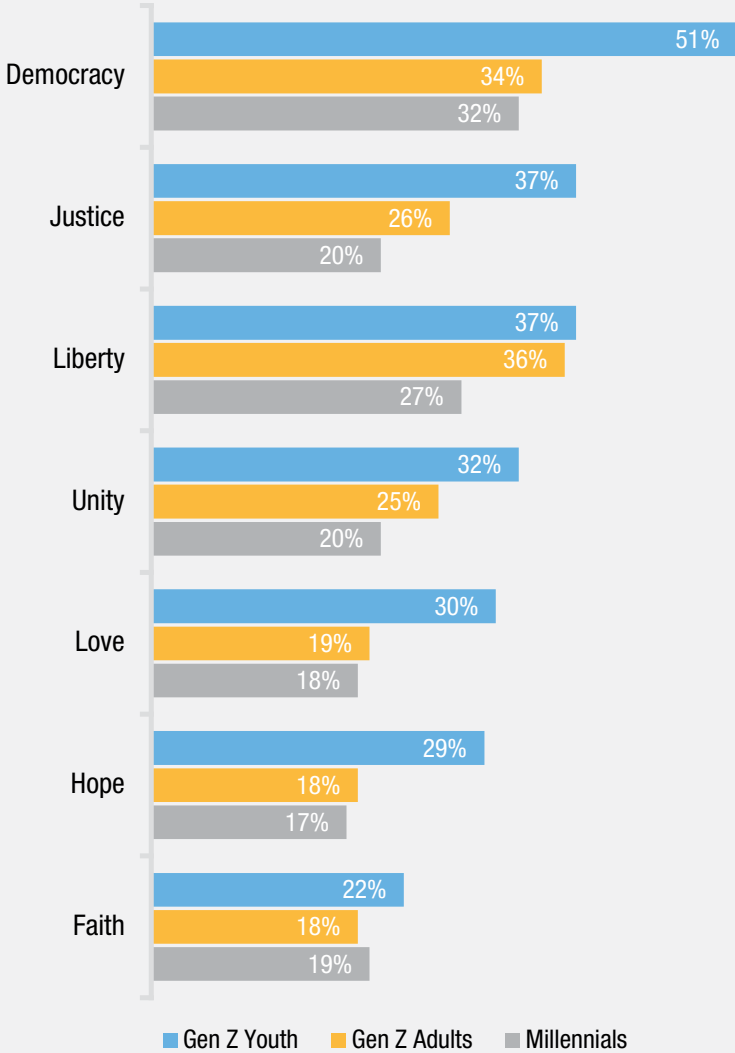
To read more about human flourishing for the Scripture Engaged, [begin on page 96](#).

#7 — GEN Z IS CURIOUS BUT UNDECIDED

Generation Z, which in our survey includes ages 15–24, is a work in progress. They are less Scripture Engaged than all other age groups and more undecided about the Bible’s impact and importance, yet they say they’re highly curious about the Bible.

According to *State of the Bible* data, Gen Z is also struggling with the stress and strain of the pandemic. There always tends to be unrest in emerging adulthood, but navigating the events of the past year seems to have heaped more stress on a young, digitally native generation that is still learning how to navigate life events with a limited support system. Remember that this group lost a year or more of in-person classes, sports seasons, graduations, proms, and college visits.

Uncertain if the Bible's teachings are essential to sustaining the following American ideals:



Our data show this generation is disproportionately stressed, with an average stress score of 18. Three in five Gen Z (63%) have reported experiencing trauma, a much higher percentage than other generations. They have the lowest Hope scores. Flourishing scores are low, and significantly lower among Gen Z youth than Gen Z adults.

Only 9 percent of Gen Z youth and 14 percent of Gen Z adults are considered Scripture Engaged. They all show uncertainty about the value of reading the Bible and indecision about the Bible's connection to traditional American values. Their church engagement is much lower than other generations, which might help explain their general unfamiliarity with the Bible.

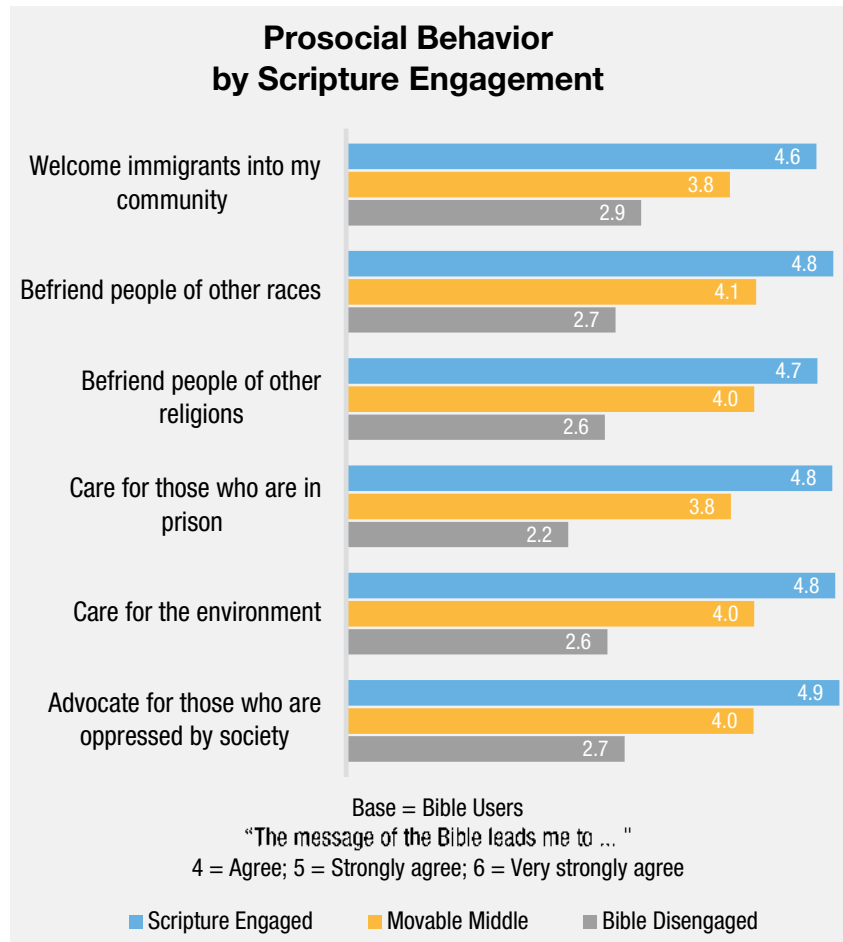
But consider this: **Significant percentages of Gen Z youth (81%) and Gen Z adults (74%) say they are curious about Scripture.** Nearly two-thirds of Gen Z youth (64%) say they wish they read the Bible more.

In the past, younger generations have sometimes rebelled against a Bible-rich tradition imposed by their elders. This seems more like an absence of that tradition. Perhaps the church can support teens and young adults to grow into their faith by welcoming their questions and helping them engage with the Bible for themselves.

To read more about Gen Z, [begin reading on page 103](#).

#8 — BIBLE PEOPLE ARE GOOD NEIGHBORS

People who are rooted in the Bible report engaging in neighboring behaviors more than others. Volunteering, helping strangers, donating money, and respecting others are some of the ways that Scripture Engaged people tend to show their faith in their daily interactions with people.



One-third of Scripture Engaged Americans (33%) volunteer in their community on a regular basis, and the majority donates money to a charity (56%) or helps a stranger (60%) with regularity. These numbers are all higher than those of the Movable Middle or Bible Disengaged.

Scripture Engaged Bible Users are most likely to say the Bible compels them to embrace neighboring attitudes and behaviors.

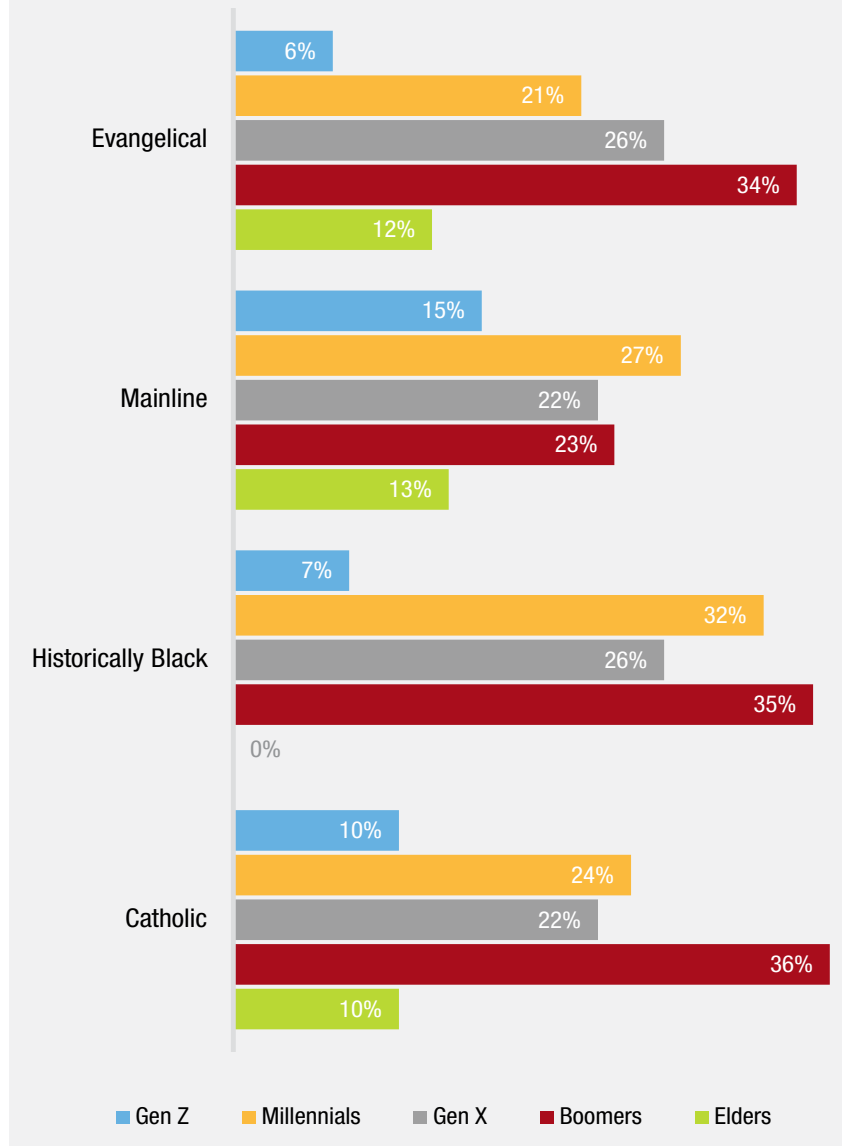
All of this demonstrates that Scripture Engagement and connection to a vibrant Christian community have key benefits for a community and society.

Begin reading on page 123 for more information about how the Bible shows up in the lives of good neighbors.

#9 — THE UNCOMMON STRENGTH OF PRACTICING CHRISTIANS

Many people call themselves Christians but don't practice their faith. That is, they don't participate in the basic disciplines of their church. They may not go to church at all. They may seldom read the Bible, if at all. Many Non-Practicing Christians seem to see Christianity merely as a cultural identity often resulting from their family of origin. Overall, more than half of self-identified Christians in every Church tradition are considered Non-Practicing Christians.

Practicing Christians by Tradition and Generation



As you might expect, there is a big overlap between the Practicing Christian group and the Scripture Engaged group. Over two-thirds of Practicing Christians are Scripture Engaged (67%), 29 percent are in the Movable Middle, and only 4 percent are Bible Disengaged. At the same time, Non-Practicing Christians fall mostly into the Movable Middle (52%), with only 16 percent qualifying as Scripture Engaged. Virtually all Practicing Christians in every tradition want to read the Bible more (91%) and also tend to have “high views” of the Bible.

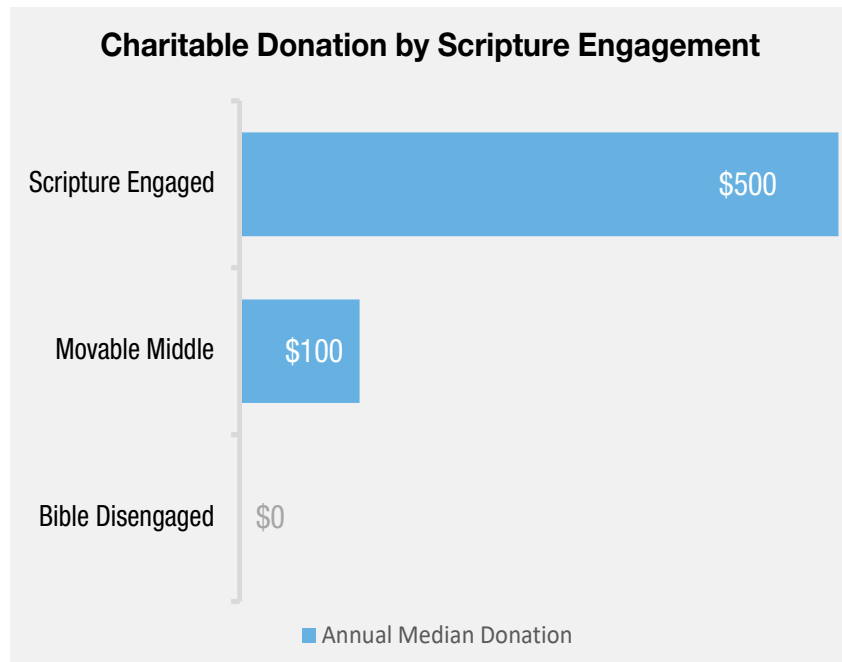
The collection of Practicing Christians who are also Scripture Engaged is spread across the different generations and varied faith traditions (see visualization on page 212). Churches of different types share a love of the Bible.

To read more, begin on page 151.

#10 — THE BIBLE ENGAGED ARE GENEROUS

Generosity can be measured in many ways, but one key indicator is charitable giving. Bible Users are 55 percent more likely than non-Bible Users to donate any amount to churches or charities. The Scripture Engaged are 96 percent more likely than the Bible Disengaged.

Scripture Engaged people also give greater amounts—reporting a median of \$500 in donations, compared to \$100 for those in the Movable Middle and a statistical \$0 median for the Bible Disengaged.



In addition, our research shows that those at lower income levels tend to donate a greater proportion of their income than those who earn more.

Biblical values of sacrifice and service, along with connections to local church community, create a culture for generous financial giving, regardless of income level.

To read more, begin on page 179.

PREVIEW — STATE OF THE BIBLE 2022

As 2021 comes to a close, the *State of the Bible* research team is preparing to collect data for *State of the Bible 2022*. Here are some exciting things to expect from next year's report.

#1 — Most robust study ever. For the first time in 2022, we will be partnering with the National Opinion Research Center to field *State of the Bible* as a probability-based study, using their AmeriSpeak panel. In particular, the AmeriSpeak panel will give us access to groups of respondents who might be missed with fully online survey methods. Our partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago will enable the *State of the Bible* research team to validate our historical research methodology and will inform our efforts to publish best-in-class research into the Bible, faith, and the church in America.

#2 — Learning about how—and how often—people share the message of the Bible with others. We want to learn about what people do with the life-changing message of the Bible in their interactions with others. Do people who read the Bible share its message? In what circumstances or settings? Do they have the knowledge, training, and resources they need? What other variables can we identify?

#3 — Closer look at prosocial behaviors and beliefs. Over the past few years, we have been interested in what people believe the Bible says about being a good neighbor. But do those beliefs become actions? In 2022, we plan to explore the impact of the Bible not only

on beliefs but on behaviors. For instance, it is easy to believe that the Bible encourages us to befriend someone of a different religion or race, but have our respondents actually done this?

#4 — Looking at intellectual humility and civility. This year we looked at occupational respect as a measure of civility. Next year we want to explore this more directly by measuring intellectual humility. We're interested in how the Bible influences our interactions with others, especially those with whom we may not agree. One hypothesis is that Scripture Engaged people have higher levels of intellectual humility. We will be reporting our findings in 2022—whether or not our initial hypotheses are supported by the data.

#5 — Learning more about how people engage with the Bible. How do they work their way through Bible? What systems, resources, or activities do they use? Do they use a daily devotional, read the Bible sequentially from beginning to end, or read based on the feeling or need of the day?

#6 — Preparing for a global *State of the Bible* study. We are planning now to conduct the largest study of Bible engagement, faith, and the church. By interviewing people in more than 100 nations, we hope to see where the Bible is needed most and how it is changing people and communities around the world. Although the date of the study is to be determined, we are already preparing. A big part of this preparation is in testing translation. We'll make sure each question is framed in a way that has relevance outside the United States, so people around the world can tell us about their interactions with the Bible—and its impact on their lives.

CONCLUSION: HELP WANTED

You've seen the signs in shop windows. Signs of the times, you might say. Each job opening indicates upheaval, a business trying to get back on track, or perhaps a worker who decided to do something different.

Upheaval is a good word for 2021. COVID drove a bulldozer through our lives, followed by a parade of chaotic events, and what do we do now? Is there a “normal” to get back to, or do we just forge ahead into the unknown?

We need help. To pick up the pieces or to try something new. We're at the end of ourselves.

Many Americans are picking up the Bible, seeking divine assistance—more people than last year or the year before. That's great news. In a time when help is desperately wanted, people are going to the right place. The God they meet in the Bible is ready to help, ready to heal, ready to help them start over, ready to transform their lives.

Chapter by chapter, we have shown you data on how the Bible makes life better. Bible people are happier, more hopeful, more helpful, and better able to cope with stress. We hope that you can take this knowledge and run with it.

People all around you want help. You can open this Book for them, the Book where they can meet the God who helps in times of trouble.

NEXT STEPS

Pray. Currently, 95 million American adults are in the Movable Middle, test-driving the Bible. Many are seeking God's love, guidance, and help with significant challenges, new opportunities, and unexpected circumstances. Please join us in prayer for the Movable Middle, asking God to do two things: 1) open their eyes to the life-changing message of the Bible and 2) provide them with a loving friend to guide them in their exploration of Scripture.

Give. If *State of the Bible: USA 2021* has helped you, please consider helping others by investing in our work. You can give by visiting stateofthebible.org and clicking on the **Give Now** button. Your gift of any amount will help fund our global research. A gift of \$7,500 can fund *Global State of the Bible* research for an entire nation.

Share. Do you know someone who is curious about the Bible but doesn't know where to start? American Bible Society has created a free guide that you can share with the Bible beginners in your life and help them discover the truths of God's Word! **Start Here** is a quick, comprehensive introduction to the Bible. Use the link to download this resource from our LinkedIn page.



METHODOLOGY

In 2021, the *State of the Bible* research team at American Bible Society conducted a survey of American adults on topics related to the Bible, faith, and the church. The study was conducted online, using a 15-minute questionnaire. The study produced 3,354 complete responses from a representative sample of adults 18 and older within all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Supplemental data were collected from 91 youth, ages 15–17. Data were collected from January 4–29, 2021. The sampling error for a sample of this size is ± 1.692 percent at the 95 percent confidence level, considering a U.S. population of 330,036,210 adults, as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau on January 1, 2021.

Participants were recruited and surveyed through national consumer panels, sourced from [Qualtrics](#). Based on U.S. Census data, quotas were designed to ensure that the final group of respondents reflected the distribution of adults nationwide and adequately represented the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States. Quotas

limited responses by gender, geographic division, generation, ethnicity, and generation within ethnic group. No other screening criteria were applied. Post hoc weighting ensured that the sample was representative of U.S. adults in each quota area plus religious self-identification. The religious self-identification of Americans is described in detail by the [Pew Religious Landscape Study](#) and subsequent [religious composition studies](#) by the Pew Research Center.

INTERPRETING SURVEY DATA

The range of sampling error indicates the accuracy of the results, and it is dependent on two factors: 1) the sample size and 2) the degree to which the result under examination is close to 50 percent or to the extremes, 0 percent and 100 percent.

Readers can estimate the accuracy of survey results using the table below. First, find the column heading that is closest to the study's sample size. Next, find the row whose label is closest to the response percentages for a particular question from the survey. The intersection of the row and column displays the number of percentage points that need to be added to, and subtracted from, the result to obtain the range of error. There is a 95 percent chance that the true percentage of the group being sampled is in that range.

Note that these statistics only relate to the sampling accuracy of survey results. When comparing the results of two subgroups (e.g., men versus women), a different procedure is followed and usually requires a greater sample size. Further, a range of other errors could influence survey results (e.g., biased question wording,

inaccurate data tabulation)—errors whose influence cannot be statistically estimated.

Result	500	600	800	1,000	1,200	1,500	2,000	2,500	3,000	3,500
05% or 95%	2.0	1.8	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.7	0.6
10% or 90%	2.7	2.5	2.1	2.0	1.7	1.6	1.3	1.2	0.9	0.8
15% or 85%	3.2	2.9	2.5	2.3	2.1	1.9	1.6	1.4	1.1	1.0
20% or 80%	3.6	3.3	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.1	1.8	1.6	1.2	1.1
25% or 75%	3.9	3.6	3.0	2.8	2.5	2.3	1.9	1.7	1.3	1.2
30% or 70%	4.1	3.8	3.2	2.8	2.7	2.4	2.0	1.8	1.4	1.2
35% or 65%	4.3	3.9	3.3	3.1	2.8	2.5	2.1	1.9	1.4	1.3
40% or 60%	4.4	4.0	3.4	3.1	2.8	2.5	2.2	2.0	1.5	1.3
45% or 55%	4.5	4.1	3.5	3.2	2.9	2.6	2.2	2.0	1.5	1.3



DEFINITIONS

The following definitions are used in this and other *State of the Bible* reports to group respondents by demographics, beliefs, and practices.

Bible Skeptic: Individuals who believe the Bible is just another book written by people that contains stories and advice.

Bible User: Individuals who read, listen to, or pray with the Bible on their own at least 3–4 times a year, outside of a church service or church event.

Correlation: In statistics, the strength of a linear relationship between two variables is often expressed in terms of a numerical value preceded by the italicized letter *r*. In this volume, correlations are only reported when they are statistically significant ($p < .05$) and when the correlation coefficient (r) is 0.2 or greater. Following are general rules of thumb for interpreting the qualitative magnitude of a correlation:

- Very Weak: ($r = 0.00 - 0.19$)
- Weak: ($r = 0.20 - 0.39$)
- Moderate: ($r = 0.40 - 0.59$)
- Strong: ($r = 0.60 - 0.79$)
- Very Strong: ($r = 0.80 - 1.00$)

Churched: Individuals who have attended a Christian church service in the past six months for any reason other than a special occasion, such as a wedding or funeral.

Division: The U.S. Census Bureau divides the United States into nine geographic divisions, which are groupings of multiple states. These divisions and their population characteristics are used to ensure that survey responses are demographically representative of the United States as a whole.

Generations:

- **Generation Z (1997–2012):** Ages 9 to 24 in 2021. This study includes adults (18–24) in Generation Z. Data on Gen Z youth (15–17) are only shown in comparison to Gen Z adults and are not included in reporting unless specifically noted.
- **Millennials (1981–1996):** Ages 25 to 40 in 2021.
- **Generation X (1965–1980):** Ages 41 to 56 in 2021.
- **Baby Boomers (1946–1964):** Ages 57 to 75 in 2021.
- **Elders (1928–1945):** Ages 76 to 93 in 2021. This study considers any respondent 76 years old or older to be in the Elders generation.

No faith/Other faith: Individuals who do not consider themselves Christian (including atheists, agnostics, and other faiths); Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are also included, even if they describe themselves as Christian.

Practicing Christian: Individuals who meet all three of the following criteria:

- identify as either Protestant or Catholic
- attend a religious service at least once a month
- say their faith is very important in their lives

Non-Christian: Individuals who consider themselves to be anything other than Christians.

Non-Practicing Christian: Self-identified Christians who are not Practicing Christians as defined above.

Pathway of Scripture Engagement: is American Bible Society’s theory of change: a ten-step logic model describing how individuals with access to the Bible receive it, interact with it, and ultimately are changed by it. See *Pathway of Scripture Engagement* on page 231 for further detail.

Region: The U.S. Census Bureau divides the United States into four geographic regions, which are groupings of multiple divisions. These regions and their population characteristics are used to ensure that survey responses are demographically representative of the United States as a whole.

Scripture engaged: Anyone who scores 100 or higher on the Scripture Engagement Scale. See *Measuring Scripture Engagement* on page 30 for a more thorough explanation.

Scripture unengaged: Anyone who scores below 100 on the Scripture Engagement Scale. See *Measuring Scripture Engagement* on page 30 for a more thorough explanation.

Scripture Engagement Scale: Based on responses to 14 survey items about the frequency of Bible use and the impact and centrality its message, this scale provides a high-fidelity, numerical measure of holistic Scripture engagement among U.S. Bible Users. The Scripture Engagement Scale is centered on 100, meaning that approximately one half of U.S. Bible Users score above 100, and the other half score below 100. The scale's standard deviation is 15.

Scripture Engagement Segments, Full: The Scripture engagement of individuals and groups can be described using the following five segments based on Scripture Engagement Scale scores. See *Measuring Scripture Engagement* on page 30 for a more thorough explanation.

1. **Bible Centered:** Score = 115 or higher.
2. **Bible Engaged:** Score = 100—114.
3. **Bible Friendly:** Score = 85—99.
4. **Bible Neutral:** Score = 70—84.
5. **Bible Disengaged:** Score = Less than 70.

Scripture Engagement Segments, Simplified: The Scripture engagement of individuals and groups can be described, using the following three segments based on Scripture Engagement Scale scores. See *Measuring Scripture Engagement* on page 30 for a more thorough explanation.

6. **Scripture Engaged:** Score = 100 or higher. Includes both the Bible Centered and the Bible Engaged.
7. **Movable Middle:** Score = 70—99. Includes both the Bible Friendly and Bible Neutral categories.
8. **Bible Disengaged:** Score = Less than 70. Same as Bible Disengaged in the Full Scripture Engagement segmentation.

Self-Identified Religion: Respondents are asked, “do you consider yourself any of the following religious faiths?” Their response is their self-identified religion, regardless of their current involvement with any religious organization.

Trauma Impact: Respondents who have experienced at least one traumatic event are asked, “Does the trauma you experienced or witnessed still affect you today? *Select one.*” Response options are:

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Never

Trauma Incidence: Respondents are asked, “Have you ever experienced physical, psychological or emotional trauma? That is, extreme violence, abuse, or a near-death experience that produces a response of intense fear, helplessness, or horror? *Check all that apply.*” Response options are:

- you personally experienced a trauma
- you witnessed a trauma involving an immediate family member
- you witnessed a trauma involving someone other than a family member
- none of these apply to me

Respondents who select *any option except* “none of these apply to me” are counted as having experienced trauma.

Trauma Severity: Respondents who experience the impact of trauma at least “sometimes” are asked, “Please rate the **severity** of the trauma effects you are experiencing on the scale below.” The numerical response scale has a range of 1–10 with the following qualitative anchors:

- 0 = None
- 5 = Moderate
- 10 = Overwhelming

Unchurched: Individuals who have not attended a Christian church service in the past six months for any reason other than a special occasion, such as a wedding or funeral.



PATHWAY OF SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement (PSE) is American Bible Society's theory of change: a ten-step logic model describing how individuals with access to the Bible receive it, interact with it, and ultimately are changed by it. The PSE is the foundation of our empirical research, which shows that consistent interaction with the Bible shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships with God, self, and others.

PURPOSE OF THE PATHWAY

The PSE marks out a set of waypoints along a journey of spiritual formation. When the Bible is made available through translation

and distribution, pilgrims may enter the Pathway and begin their journey toward reconciliation with God and others.

The journey along the Pathway brings its own benefits, including wisdom for daily living, increased awareness of God's presence and voice, and generosity of spirit and action. However, what makes the Pathway uniquely valuable is its destination: spiritual health and vitality marked by deeply rooted love for God and healthy relationships with others, particularly those in the community of faith.

The PSE is like a ladder with ten rungs. Users might climb one rung at a time or even skip a rung. They may climb slowly or quickly. It's even possible to climb part of the way up the ladder and then retreat a few steps. As users climb the ladder, their perspective changes with altitude and as distant objects draw nearer. Still, the most important thing about a ladder is that it's leaning against the right building. Similarly, the most important thing about Scripture Engagement is that it is leaning against the building of holistic spiritual vitality marked by love for God and others. According to Jesus, loving God and others are the two great commandments for all his followers (Matthew 22:37–39).

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement



What is Scripture Engagement?

Scripture engagement is consistent interaction with the Bible that shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships with God, self, and others.

- **External Milestone**
- **Internal Milestone**

PROGRESS ALONG THE PATHWAY

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement is also like an old-school map that marks out a journey from beginning to end. The PSE is for anyone who has access to the Bible in their own language because the Bible is the primary vehicle that carries people toward spiritual health. The PSE shows the landscape and key waypoints, but it doesn't do two important things. First, it doesn't have a YOU ARE HERE marker. Second, it doesn't measure progress toward spiritual vitality. For those tasks, we use the Scripture Engagement Survey to locate an individual on the Scripture Engagement Scale.

The SES is designed to plot an individual's current location on the Pathway and their—with repeated measurement—progress (growth) toward spiritual health. Using a brief survey, individuals and groups can be located on the Pathway¹ and matched to transformative, Bible-based ministry interventions that catalyze movement toward spiritual health. By translating the Pathway's basic map into an accurate GPS, the Scripture Engagement Scale can guide individuals to the next step in their spiritual journey. It can also help ministry leaders design and deploy discipleship tools that are appropriate to people at every stage of the spiritual formation journey.

¹ Based on our research, a score of 100 on the Scripture Engagement Scale corresponds approximately to step 6 on the Pathway of Scripture Engagement.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

S *tate of the Bible 2021* is the effort of a small army of gifted individuals who combine their skills and perspectives to produce what you hold in your hand or view on your screen. As we launch the second decade of the modern *State of the Bible*, our research is conducted and coordinated by the Ministry Intelligence team at American Bible Society. The Barna Group has provided data journalism for this edition, meaning their capable editorial team has handled most of the writing.

We continue to be grateful for our partnership with Barna Group and their president, David Kinnaman, who has shown deep curiosity about how the Bible influences America. David has selflessly helped the American Bible Society team to grow, while remaining engaged in this important work with us. On October 28, 2020, while the rest of us struggled with COVID-19, David and his family were forced to say goodbye to his beloved wife, Jill, who lost her battle with brain cancer. All of us on the *State of the Bible* team pray

that the God Who Sees will give comfort to David and his children as they endure grief and find their way forward.

In addition to David's leadership, we are grateful for the work of Alyce Youngblood, Barna's vice president of editorial, who served as the report's lead editor. Thanks also to Lisa Cooper for her work as the report's lead author. Other members of the Barna team also helped coordinate our work and ensure that this report helps all of us "see the whole" picture of the Bible in America.

Robert Briggs, president and CEO of American Bible Society, has been a consistent champion of *State of the Bible* and of data-informed ministry, overall. He understands that the future of America is connected to our nation's access to and engagement with the Bible, and he regularly urges all of us at American Bible Society to serve the church with the highest quality data and insights we can mine.

American Bible Society's Ministry Intelligence Team is led by Dr. John Plake, who joined the *State of the Bible* research team for the 2018 study. Since that time, Dr. Plake has helped to expand American Bible Society's research capabilities, making it possible for us to lead the *State of the Bible* research and produce this report. Dr. Plake serves as the editor-in-chief of this report and oversees the ongoing *State of the Bible* series.

Dr. Jeff Fulks serves as research manager on the Ministry Intelligence Team, where he brings deep insight into the world of behavioral science research and serves as the lead analyst for the *State of*

the Bible research. He skillfully incorporates research-proven measures into our work, and he performs countless statistical tests to uncover the story behind the numbers.

James McGowan managed our data warehouse and worked skillfully with Tableau to ensure that our research quotas matched U.S. Census Bureau data on the demographic characteristics of American adults. Project management assistance came from Carolyn Wildermuth and Heidi Rosenblatt.

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Jefferson Lee's web design work brought this ebook into your hands. Finally, our gifted partners at Pinkston, led by D. J. Jordan, helped us connect this research with the broader stories in America and the interests of key media outlets.

STATE OF THE BIBLE USA 2021

As America struggled to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and a troubling season of social unrest, American Bible Society launched its second decade of research into our nation's relationship with the Bible, faith, and the church. Despite real challenges, research shows that *consistent interaction with the Bible shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships*.

As the nation looks to the future, the Bible brings hope. Here are just a few highlights:

1. 128 million American adults are Bible Users.
2. Women's Scripture engagement rebounded after a difficult summer of 2020.
3. 95 million American adults are "test driving" the Bible.
4. Disengagement from the Bible falls below 100 million, down over 26 percent since 2018.

This is the story of millions of Americans and their journey through life with God's word.



Insights