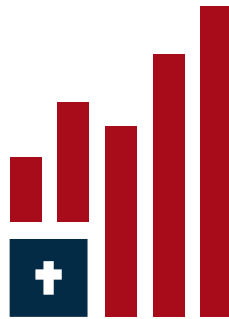


State of the Bible

USA 2023

RESEARCH FROM AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY



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INTUITION & INSIGHT

BY JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

American Bible Society

*This is the essence of intuitive heuristics:
when faced with a difficult question,
we often answer an easier one,
usually without noticing the substitution.¹*

Daniel Kahneman

All of us see the world in patterns. We notice similarities and differences between people and situations, automatically classifying them into groups. As Dr. Deborah Tannen notes, “We all know *we are unique individuals*, but we tend to see *others as representatives of groups*. It’s a natural tendency,

¹ Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (p. 12). MacMillan USA.

since we must see the world in patterns in order to make sense of it; we wouldn't be able to deal with the daily onslaught of people and objects if we couldn't predict a lot about them and feel that we know who and what they are" (emphasis added).²

We process and sort clues about people's age, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, geographical origin, and a myriad of other details, using these phenomena to understand individuals—even if only provisionally—as representative of a group. In other words, we automatically make caricatures of others, at least until we get to know them as individuals. Often, though, we don't make that effort.

There's the key word: *effort*.

Pastors and church leaders understandably build ministry programs on obvious groupings: men's and women's groups, youth ministry, outreach, and music. The problems with this approach are equally obvious. All women are not alike. Teenagers come from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. Our communities are filled with people who might look similar at first glance but have unique challenges lurking just below the surface. Helping people take the next step in their journey with God requires a custom approach based on relational knowledge, not just stereotypes and broad categories.

It takes a tremendous amount of effort to really get to know another person. Daniel Kahneman earned the 2002 Nobel prize in economics for his work on human judgment and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. His research suggests that human beings have two distinct and nearly independent mechanisms for

² Tannen, D. (2007). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. William Morrow & Co.

understanding the world and making decisions. He calls these two mechanisms *System 1* and *System 2*.

System 1 is extremely skilled and efficient at pattern recognition. Based on experience, it quickly (even subconsciously) draws parallels between the current situation and other situations that you may have experienced in the past. In milliseconds, it gives you confidence that you understand the situation and can respond appropriately. Think of it like a major league hitter standing in the batter's box. He has seen thousands of pitches since he started playing baseball, so he can quickly distinguish between a fastball and a curveball. System 1 tells him what is coming and how soon he should start his swing.

System 1 is our default. It is almost effortless in its efficiency. But it can be fooled. Major league pitchers make their living by disguising their fastball or their curveball, faking out experienced hitters and making them swing or hold back when they shouldn't.

System 2 is slower, deliberative, careful. It is the system that evaluates evidence, calculates probabilities, and engages in the scientific method. It is the system that my journalism professor taught me to employ when he advised me to proofread stories *backwards* so my mind (System 1) wouldn't fill in the right word when the wrong word was written on the page.

System 2 can overrule the intuitive System 1, but only with effort. Unfortunately, our energy for such effort is available only in a limited supply. We often treat self-examination and critical thinking as luxuries that we can do without.

For thirteen years, *State of the Bible* has provided a careful, scientific perspective on America’s relationship with the Bible, faith, and the church, pushing past caricatures, cliches, and tropes. In these pages, you’ll see both encouraging data and important challenges for the Bible in America.

American Bible Society invests in *State of the Bible* research every year because we want to know the truth according to System 2, whether we like the results or not. We invite our colleagues in ministry to set aside automatic intuitions and unexamined ideas about how we help people connect to Bible, faith, and church. Here, we make time to listen to America, looking for insights to help us all prayerfully engage our neighbors with the good news of the gospel.

LOOKING AHEAD

From April through December 2023, the *State of the Bible* research team will release a new chapter each month, focusing on key aspects of America’s relationship with the Bible. Here a few of the stories we will be releasing in the coming months:

2023
APR **The Bible in America.** Our first chapter tracks key metrics about Scripture engagement, Bible use, and perceptions of the Bible in America. We’ll also focus on the relationship between Scripture engagement and “Persevering Hope,” a new measure for this project.

2023
MAY **Faith in Motion.** In May, we’ll turn our attention to the ways that faith is shifting in America. We begin with a deeper look at the influence of our mothers on our faith

journey. We'll also track the faith traditions that Americans are *leaving* and *joining*.

2023

JUN

Flourishing and Hope. Through our ongoing collaboration with scholars at Harvard University's T. H. Chan School of Public Health, we'll continue tracking the influence of the Bible on holistic well-being, looking at human flourishing, stress, and hope.

2023

JUL

Spiritual Vitality. What does it mean to be spiritually healthy? How do different kinds of people connect with God? What is the Bible's role in catalyzing spiritual health? We'll look at each of these questions in more detail than ever before in our July edition.

2023

AUG

Generation Z. America's youngest adults are members of Generation Z (1997–2012). Individuals born between 1997 and 2009 are now adults, meaning that just over half of all Gen Z Americans are 18 years old or older. We'll look closely at different generational experiences and perspectives on the Bible, faith, and the church.

2023

SEP

The Bible and Behavior. In September, we'll focus on how the Bible influences Americans' behavior, especially the ways they behave toward others.

2023

OCT

Bible Use and Technology. While printed Bibles remain popular in America, technology is influencing how people study the Bible, search for biblical content,

and interact with Scripture in their daily routines. We'll take a closer look at the Bible and technology in our October release.

2023

NOV

Generosity. Our November release will be a double-feature. First, we'll look at how the Bible influences generosity in America. Second, we'll give attention to members of the Armed Services and veterans, exploring their relationships with the Bible, faith, and the church.

2023

DEC

Year in Review. Finally, in December, we'll review the top stories of 2023 and announce the new topics we plan to cover in 2024.

THE BIG STORIES

Each year, *State of the Bible* pursues a rigorous research agenda. We track key metrics year over year, and we look for connections to new horizons in the scientific studies of religion, well-being, and society. We work as a team, bringing many perspectives to our analysis, and we endeavor to be methodical and deliberative in our work. In other words, we take time to engage System 2.

As people of faith, we also invite God to guide our deliberations and inspire our responses. We don't simply need data, we also need insight and wisdom. As American culture changes—sometimes gradually and at other times dramatically—our methods of ministry must adapt to those changes, so every American has an

opportunity to connect meaningfully with the Bible and its life-changing message of hope.

The evidence suggests three things.

1. When people engage deeply with the Bible, their lives and relationships are better. In other words, they flourish.
2. Fewer people in America are engaging with the Bible. Scripture engagement is not rising yet; it continues on a downward trajectory.
3. There are signs of hope. The Movable Middle has rebounded, and Bible disengagement has fallen in the past year.

While we look carefully at the facts, we also pray and work for a better future. Our nation faces challenges that could be met by a deeper connection to God through Scripture. We hope you will join us in thinking carefully and praying earnestly for a Bible revival in America. ■



JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

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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

Artificial Intelligence is all the rage. In the last year it has jumped from science fiction to your phone. The major search engines have been scrambling to deploy their super chatbots, not just answering queries but engaging in human-like conversations, creating artwork, and writing research papers.

Yet there are glitches.

In a fascinating *New York Times* piece, columnist Kevin Roose details a conversation he had with Microsoft's Bing chatbot (which wanted to be called Sydney). "Over more than two hours, Sydney and I talked about its secret desire to be human, its rules and limitations, and its thoughts about its creators. Then, out of nowhere, Sydney declared that it loved me—and wouldn't stop, even after I tried to

change the subject.” Roose includes a transcript of this chat, which is ordinary at times, occasionally angry and bizarre, and often creepy.¹ “These systems learn by analyzing enormous amounts of digital text culled from the internet, which includes volumes of untruthful, biased and otherwise toxic material,” writes Cade Metz in another *Times* article.²

Imagine the millions of social media posts—and professional media articles—these chatbots have digested in trying to pass as human. They are mirroring our ways as best they can. Apparently, the fault is not in our searchbots, but in our selves. Their programmers and our collective data have taught these AI entities to be shallow, to be selfish, sometimes to be cruel. As intelligent as these programs are, they’ve had to learn *emotional* intelligence from us, and we humans are not the best teachers.

The *State of the Bible* project has some things in common with those bots, though we aim to be far less creepy. Our team is also crunching data from real people and using it to communicate. The statistics help us construct a picture of reality, especially the reality of how Americans relate to the Bible. These monthly reports are then rolled out to you, focusing on different aspects of the research. We hope this will stimulate important conversations in your families, churches, ministries, and communities.

1 Roose, K. (2023, February 16). *Bing’s A.I. Chat: ‘I want to be alive.’* 🤖. The New York Times. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/16/technology/bing-chatbot-transcript.html>

2 Metz, C. (2023, February 26). *Why do A.I. chatbots tell lies and act weird? Look in the mirror.* The New York Times. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/26/technology/ai-chatbot-information-truth.html>

But we are also learning from the difficulties that some are having with the AI chatbots. Information alone is not enough. To be truly helpful in the human community, we must deploy human characteristics like wisdom, empathy, and hope. These are the values people are truly searching for.

A FUTURE WITH HOPE

In that vein, we'll start our reporting not with our usual scorecard of Scripture engagement (you'll see those stats later), but with some good news about hope.

In dealing with the struggles of life, people who engage with the Bible have far more hope than others.

The Persevering Hope Scale comes from research by a group of scholars from five universities. Like many other psychological assessments, it relies on self-reporting. In this case, respondents are asked about four ways of dealing with difficulties in their lives.

Hope, in general, has been a popular research theme in the last few decades. At first, the work focused on the basics: *a desire for a goal* and *the uncertainty of its outcome*. The next phase of study, notably by C. R. Snyder, introduced *agency* and *pathways* as significant components of hope. The Persevering Hope group builds on this by adding a third aspect: “the motivation to persevere in the face of seemingly unlikely or even impossible goals.” As their report summarizes, “agency

People who engage with the Bible have far more hope than others.

thinking says, ‘I can do this,’ pathways thinking says, ‘I will find a way to get this done!’ . . . and persevering hope (goal-transcendent motivation) says, ‘I can and will keep going, regardless of the outcome!’”³

The 2023 *State of the Bible* survey included the four questions connected to the Persevering Hope metric. People were asked to rate each response on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) scale of agreement.

“When an outcome I desire seems unlikely or even impossible, I . . .

- Am determined to see things through to the end.
- Will keep trying.
- Won’t give up.
- Am motivated to wait for a successful outcome.”

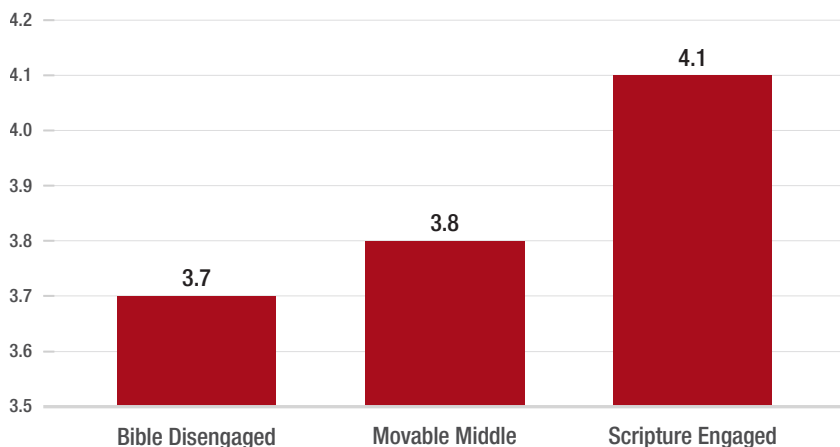
Responses are averaged to yield a Persevering Hope Scale (PHS) score from 1 to 5. In the *State of the Bible* data, the overall average score was 3.8.

Remarkably, in most people-groups, the average score varied very little, maybe a tenth of a point higher or lower. Male and female respondents had equal 3.8 scores. Generational differences were minuscule—Boomers up a tenth (3.9) and Elders down a tenth (3.7). The only geographical blip was in the Northeast, slipping to 3.7. No great variances to report on . . .

3 Rueger, S. Y., Worthington, E. L., Jr., Davis, E. B., Chen, Z. J., Maloney, J. M., Eveleigh, E., Cowden, R. G., Stone, L. B., Lemke, A. W., & Glowiak, K. (2022). Development and initial validation of the Persevering Hope Scale: Measuring wait-power in four independent samples. *Journal of Personality Assessment*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2022.2032100>

... except Scripture Engaged people, who outscored everyone else, with a PHS of 4.1.⁴

Hope and Scripture Engagement



In a field with little variation, these are significant effects. No other demographic group scored that high. Apparently those who read the Bible regularly, who live and think according to its teaching, find resources that keep them going, even in tough times.

This was clearly the case in New Testament times, when the book of 1 Peter was written to Christians facing opposition to their faith. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). In spite of life’s challenges, believers displayed a persevering hope that was

⁴ The only significant cohort that came close, at 4.0, was “Practicing Christians,” a group that strongly overlaps the Scripture Engaged.

noteworthy, prompting questions about where it came from. This research suggests it is still true today.

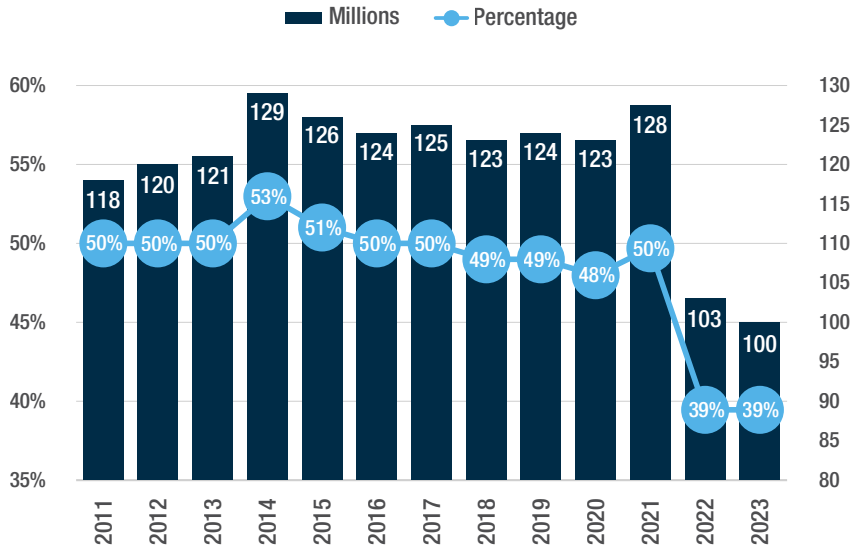
BIBLE USE

How often do people read the Bible? Not as often as they did a few years ago.

Frequency in Bible interaction is just one of three factors that go into American Bible Society's Scripture Engagement metric, but it's a good place to start. We can get a quick take on our society's exposure to Scripture and compare this statistic from year to year. (For various reasons, including the fact that many people hear the Bible read to them or view it in various forms, we talk about *using* the Bible and not just reading it.)

For most of the last decade, about half of Americans said they used the Bible three or more times per year. This qualified them, by our definition, as Bible Users. In last year's poll, that number dropped ten points. Only two in five Americans (39%) were Bible Users. Frankly, we were hoping this was a glitch, but the 2023 responses matched last year's low point (39%).

Adult Bible Users 2011–2023



Considering that the *State of the Bible* polling is done in January, we can assume that responses cover most of the previous year. Thus, the recent high point of 50 percent Bible use occurred in 2020, a year when many people were cooped up at home with little else to do. The next two years saw a return to activity for many, and for a tenth of the population, the Bible was not part of the reboot.

Despite the downturn in Bible Use, we can still say that about 63 million American adults (24%) use the Bible—on their own, outside of a church service—at least once a week.

PROFILE OF BIBLE USERS

Who are these Bible Users, the two in five Americans who come to Scripture at least three times a year?

Women (41%) are more likely to be Bible Users than men (36%).

Never-married people (30%) are least likely to use the Bible, but interestingly, people who are Separated (52%) are most likely.

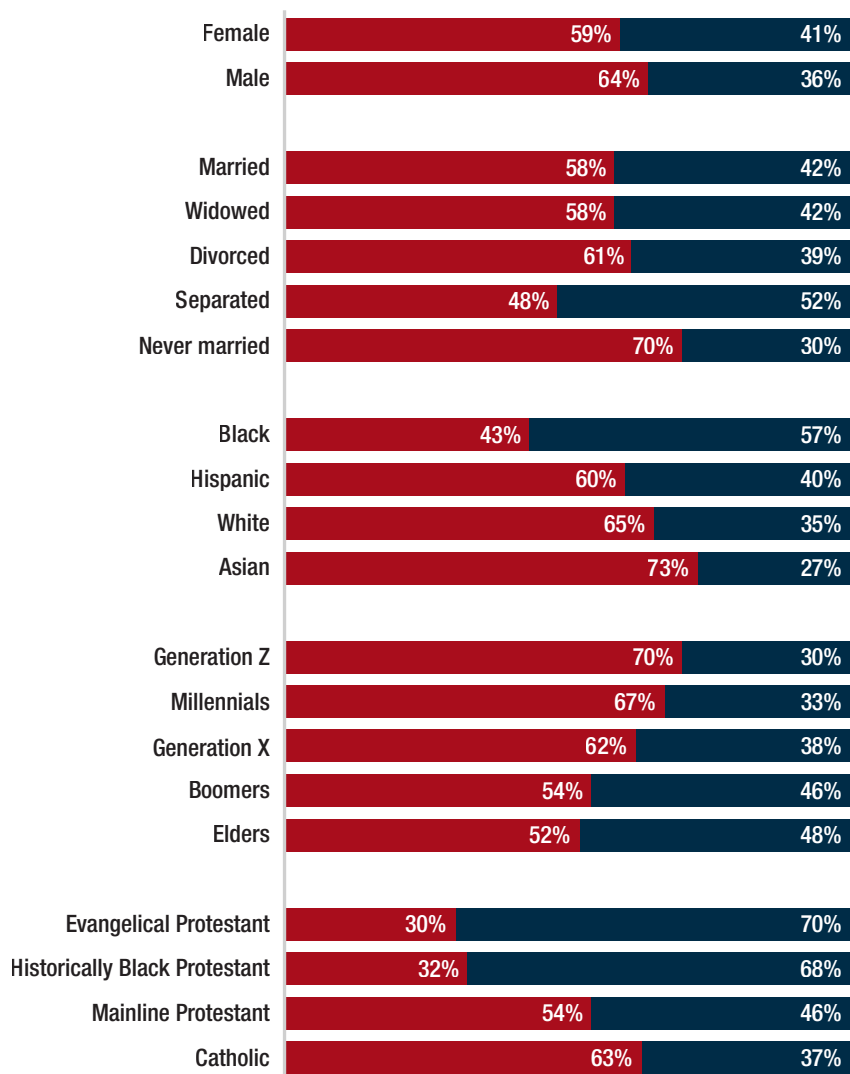
Black Americans (57%) are most likely to be Bible Users, while Asians (27%) and Whites (35%) are least likely.

Bible Use seems to increase with age, as Elders (48%) are most likely and Generation Z (30%) least likely to turn to Scripture.

With regard to religious identity, Evangelical (70%) and Historically Black (68%) Protestant denominations lead the way in Bible Use. Catholics (37%) are low.

Bible Users in America

■ Not a Bible user ■ Bible user



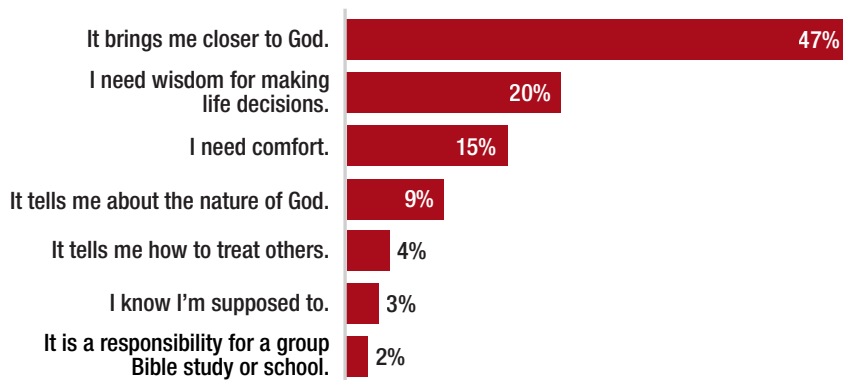
GOALS AND CHALLENGES

When people interact with the Bible, what are they looking for? What drives them to Scripture? And what factors keep Bible use from being an optimal experience? Our survey asked about people's motivations and frustrations.

Bible Users were given seven options to complete the sentence "I use the Bible because . . ." They had to choose only one. Far and away, the most popular response (47%) was "It brings me closer to God." Others said they "need wisdom for making life decisions" (20%) or that they "need comfort" (15%). No other response was chosen by even one-tenth of that group.

The subgroup most likely to choose "I need comfort" was Generation Z (24%), confirming what we've seen for several years now: These are stressful times for the youngest participants in our survey, and many look to the Bible to help them through.

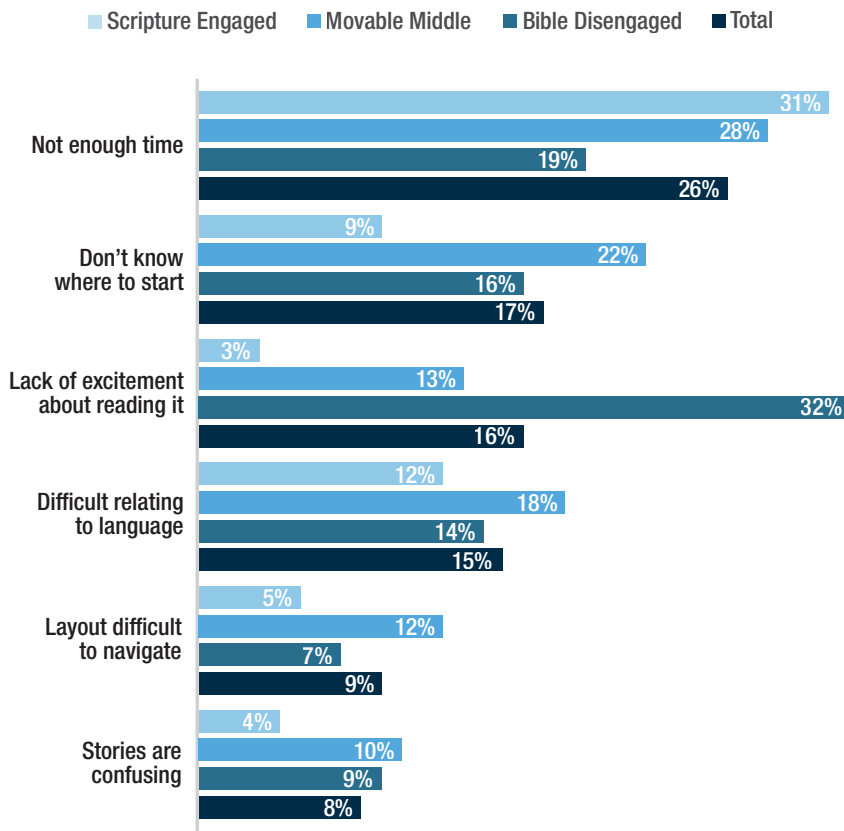
Motivations for Bible Reading



We also asked everyone in the survey, “Which of the following would you say are your top two most significant frustrations when it comes to reading the Bible on your own?” We then provided multiple options.

Four of the options were chosen by at least one-tenth of the respondents, with more than a quarter choosing “Not enough time” (26%).

Frustrations with Bible Reading



Looking more closely at the responses of the Bible Disengaged, and the “semi-engaged” group we call the Movable Middle, we found some fascinating divergence. While time was an issue across the board, nearly a third of the Bible Disengaged blamed “Lack of excitement about reading it” (32%). Give them points for honesty. The Bible isn’t an integral part of their lives because there’s no desire driving them to it. They don’t find it exciting.

In the Movable Middle, common responses were “I don’t know where to start” (22%) and “Difficult relating to language” (18%). This creates a game plan for teachers, preachers, and publishers. Would significant portions of the Movable Middle be wooed into meaningful Scripture Engagement if we provided a clearer starting point and more readable resources?

“Do you wish you used the Bible more?” More than half of all those we surveyed said yes (52%).

This simple question cuts across categories. A surprising number of the Bible Disengaged and non-Bible Users answered affirmatively. Even if Bible reading is not a part of their lives, they still feel it might be a good thing to do more of. And in the Movable Middle, that sleeping giant of a category, about five of six (83%) say yes to this wish.

Granted, this is a bit like asking, “Do you wish you exercised more?” Wishing and doing are two different enterprises. But it’s still important to know the desire is there. And whatever we could do to increase excitement about the Bible, explain the language, or show where to start, it might move the needle a bit.

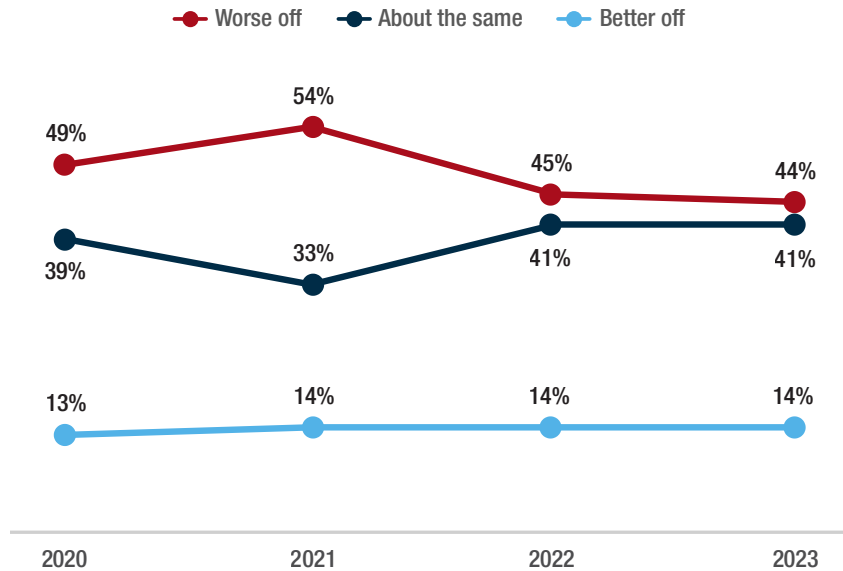
BIBLE INFLUENCE

For years, we have asked Americans to imagine their nation without the Bible. “If people of our country were to not read the Bible, do you think our country would be worse off, better off, or about the same?” The results have been rather consistent.

While some observers assume there’s a growing animosity toward the Bible, we don’t see that on this question. Only about one in seven (14%) say a Bible-less America would be better. Three times that many (44%) take the opposite view, that America would be *worse* off without Bible-reading. Nearly that number (41%) say there would be little change.

It’s worth noting that more than a quarter of non-Bible Users say the country would be worse off without it. They don’t interact with Scripture themselves even three times a year, but they seem glad that others do.

Without the Bible, America would be... 2020–2023

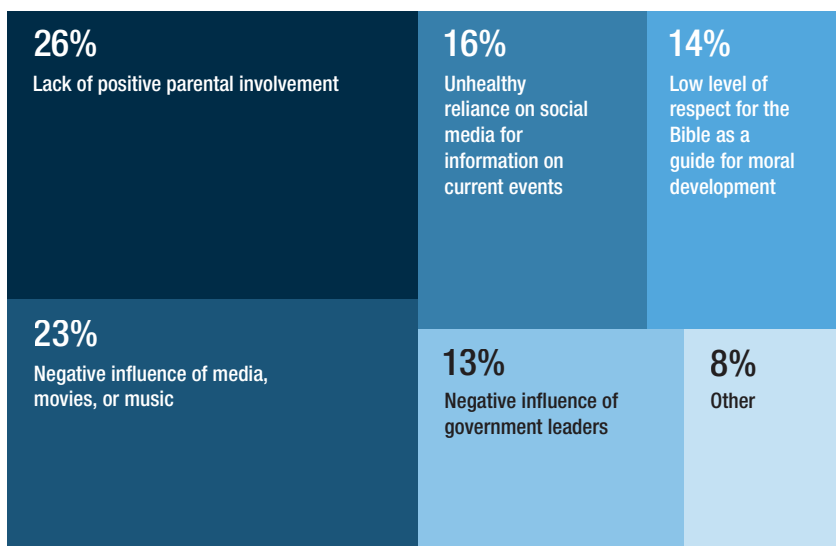


Looking at responses to this question over the last four years, we find an interesting bulge in the data. Remember that the surveys in 2020 and 2021, taken in January, reflect the attitudes and experiences of the previous year. In 2019–20, America saw considerable cultural conflict—political campaigns, protests about racial injustice, responses to a pandemic, closures of schools and churches, etc. In that context, we might assume more people recognized how much the country needed biblical guidance—and more than half said the country would be worse off without the Bible (54% in the 2021 poll). In the two years since, those concerns may have leveled off.

MORAL DECLINE

More than six of seven Americans (86%) see a moral decline in the nation, though they disagree about where to place the blame.

Reasons for Moral Decline



When asked to choose the main reason for the decline, the most popular answer was *“Lack of positive parental involvement”* (26%). This response made a strong showing in every generation, though people over 40 were most likely to say this.

“Negative influence of media, movies, or music” (23%) was the second-most chosen response, fueled mostly by Generation Z (31%) and Millennials (30%).

The third-most-chosen response was “*unhealthy reliance on social media for information on current events*” (16%), with Gen X leading the way. (This age group includes many parents of teens and pre-teens, parents who might be especially concerned about this issue.)

Only one in seven respondents (14%) blamed “*Low level of respect for the Bible as a guide for moral development*” as the main reason for decline, and most of them were Scripture Engaged. It should be no surprise that this was by far the leading answer among those whose lives are shaped by Scripture.

Pause a moment to take this in. A huge proportion of Americans (86%) see the country in moral decline. These are people of all religions or none at all. They see the downslide, but they can’t agree on what the problem is. Parents, music, social media—all of these may contribute to the problem, but there’s one diagnosis recognized only by a select group. Those who know and love the Bible understand its power as “a guide for moral development.” They see that the moral decline of America parallels the decline of Scripture engagement in America. Could the nation’s moral decline be slowed or even reversed by greater attention to Scripture? That thesis might find greater agreement than we expect.

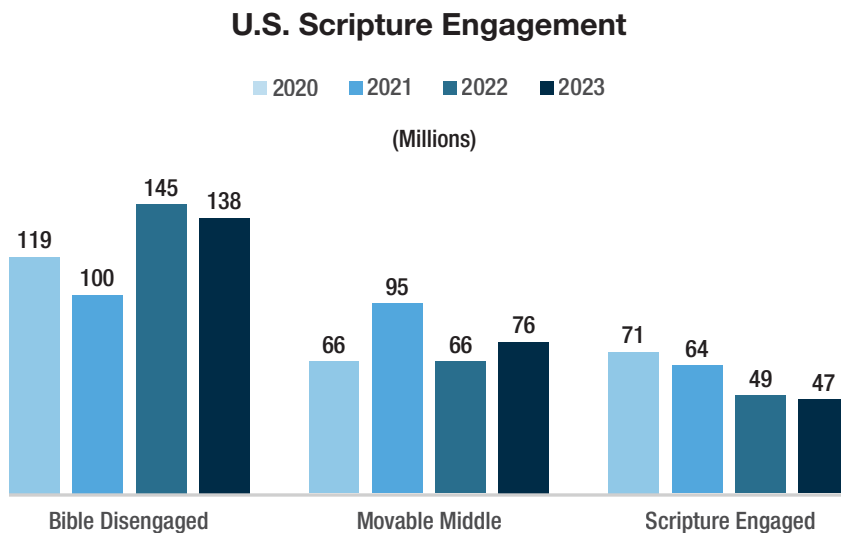
SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Early in this chapter we looked at Bible Users, those who interact with Scripture on their own at least three times a year. Admittedly, it’s a low bar, but we’ve set a much higher bar with the definition of Scripture Engagement. This metric considers not only frequency of

Bible use, but also Scripture’s impact on a person’s relationship with God and others, as well as its centrality in daily decision-making. Fourteen questions in the survey have been designed and tested to yield a Scripture Engagement score. (For more details, see Appendixes 3 and 4, starting on page 201.)

Based on these scores, we assign three categories: Scripture Engaged and Bible Disengaged on either end of the data, and the Movable Middle in between. In that middle category, people have some interaction with the Bible and it has some effect on their lives, but not to the frequency or depth of the Scripture Engaged. We expect their level to change year by year, reflecting more engagement or less, depending on a number of influences, including life events, relationships, struggles, and personal growth.

Change is exactly what we’ve seen over the last four years.



The 2020 survey, with data collected just before the pandemic began, showed Scripture Engagement at a high point, with 71 million American adults (28%). Less than half the population (47%) was in the Bible Disengaged category.

In 2021, with the pandemic in full-swing, we saw massive growth in the Movable Middle, coming mostly from the ranks of the Disengaged. We theorized that the many challenges of 2020 made people turn to the Bible, at least casually. Yet the same survey showed a moderate drop among the Scripture Engaged. Perhaps those same challenges made it more difficult for these people to maintain their more rigorous Bible habits.

Last year's survey, administered when recovery was underway, was a gut punch, with soaring numbers for the Bible Disengaged. The chart for the Scripture Engaged "fell off a cliff," as we reported. Now only 49 million Americans were Scripture Engaged.

Could this be a temporary downturn? Maybe 2021 was a year of rebuilding. People were busy putting their lives back together, apparently too busy for the Bible. We hoped that eventually they would rebuild their lives around a renewed interaction with Scripture.

We're still hoping.

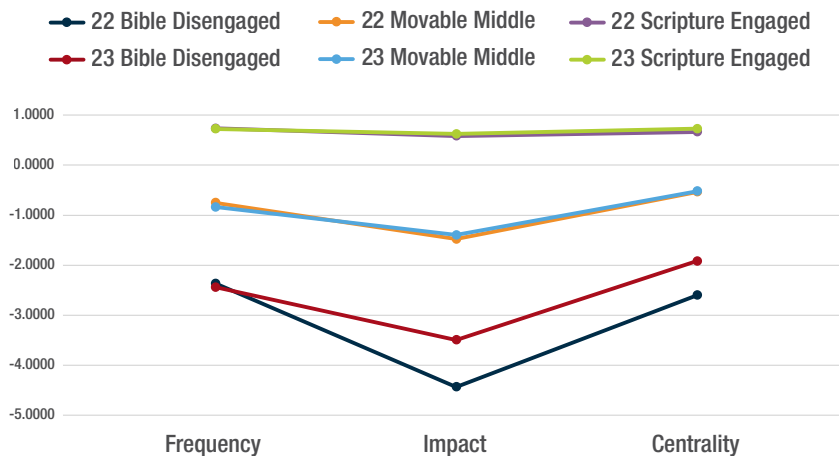
The latest *State of the Bible* survey shows a very slight drop in Scripture engagement, not the bounce-back we looked for. Once again fewer than one in five Americans (18%) are Scripture Engaged.

Yet there is a bit of good news on this chart. The Movable Middle has moved again, this time upward. It seems that about 10 million of last year’s Bible Disengaged have migrated to the middle group, indicating a certain level of Bible interaction, though short of full engagement.

LESS DISENGAGED?

Drilling deeper into the data, we find another trend that offers some hope. As mentioned above, the Scripture Engagement score is based on answers to questions about Bible reading frequency, impact on relationships, and centrality in decision-making. Breaking down the responses for each of those three factors, we find a curious trend among the Bible Disengaged. While the numbers are still low (that’s what puts them in the Disengaged category), we see substantial improvement over last year in their scores for centrality and impact.

Factors in Scripture Engagement 2023



That leads us to say that, not only are there 10 million fewer Bible Disengaged Americans than there were last year, *they aren't as disengaged as they used to be*. If the trend continues, we might see even more migration into the Movable Middle in 2024.

WHO ARE THE Scripture Engaged?

Married people (23%)
are more likely to be
Scripture Engaged
than the **Never
Married (10%)**

Women (20%) are
more likely than
men (16%) to be
Scripture Engaged

People are more
likely to be Scripture
Engaged in the
South (23%) than in
the **Northeast (10%)**

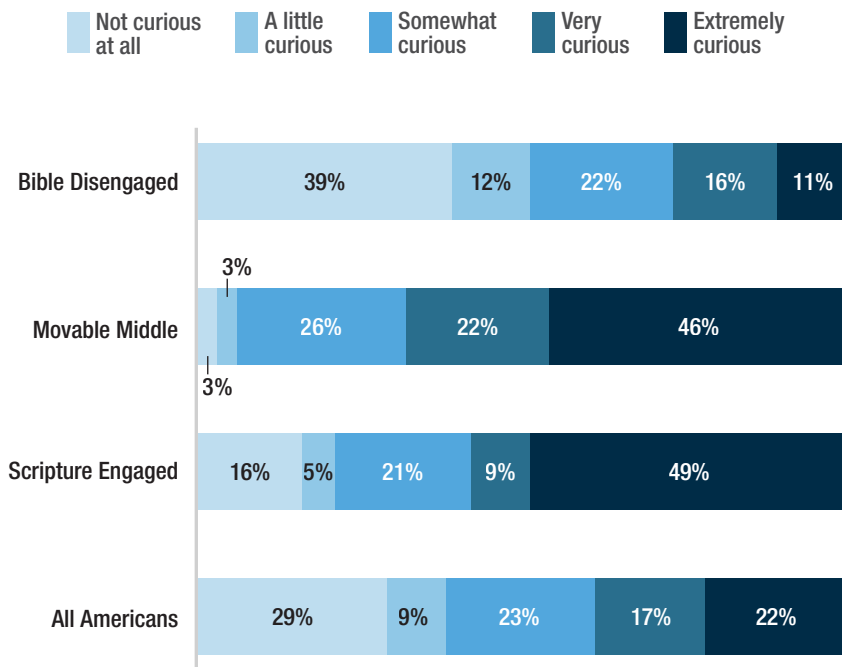


BIBLE CURIOSITY

Read through the book of Acts and you'll find this on every page: Curiosity. From Jerusalem to Athens and dozens of stops in between, people clamored to know about Jesus and the Scriptures. That hasn't changed.

The *State of the Bible* survey indicates that nearly three in four Americans (71%) are curious about the Bible and/or Jesus.

71% of Americans are Curious about the Bible and/or Jesus



It's easy for us to bemoan the fact that Scripture Engagement is down, but curiosity is still strong. It's easy to write off the Bible Disengaged, assuming they'll never care about Scripture, but they might not be as far away as we think.

While two in five of the Bible Disengaged (39%) say they are not curious at all about Jesus or the Bible, that means a substantial majority (61%) claim some level of curiosity. In fact, more than one-quarter of that group (27%) say they're "very" or "extremely" curious.

The Movable Middle is awash in curiosity, with more than two-thirds (68%) "very" or "extremely" curious and only a smidgen (3%) not curious at all.

Granted, there's a difference between wondering and actively searching, but this is a start. Curiosity is a growth platform for Bible ministry in the U.S.

How will we respond? ■



FAITH IN MOTION

Christian history is well-populated with faithful mothers. The Bible tells of Timothy’s faith being influenced by his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois. Bishop Augustine recognized the powerful prayers of his mother, Monica. Reformers John and Charles Wesley were grateful for the guidance of their mother, Susanna. These are just a few of the more prominent examples. Millions more stories could be told, even today.

A few years ago, our colleagues at Barna conducted a helpful survey of households. “Practicing Christians in their teen years consistently identify mothers as the ones who provide spiritual guidance and instruction and instill the values and disciplines of their faith in the household,” they reported. Data consistently showed “mothers to be the managers of faith formation (among other household routines and structures).”¹

¹ *The powerful influence of Moms in Christians’ households*. Barna Group. (2019, May 7). Retrieved April 17, 2023, from <https://www.barna.com/research/moms-christians-households/>

A well-known proverb offers this expectation: “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6 NIV). This verse has challenged and comforted many Christian mothers and fathers through the years. New research for *State of the Bible 2023* bears it out.

PERSONAL FAITH CHANGE SINCE CHILDHOOD

Three out of five Americans (61%) have the same religious faith they saw in their homes as children. We asked people to think back to when they were ten years old. Are they following the same faith their mothers had back then?

A substantial majority of all respondents said yes. Among those who now identify as Christians, three out of four (77%) are following their mother’s faith.

These numbers are consistent with the results from last year, but this year’s survey got more specific. What *was* their mother’s faith back then? We wondered whether some religions were better than others at holding on to youthful adherents. After all, while the data show us that most Americans have stayed with the faith of their childhood, that still leaves nearly two in five who have experienced movement in their faith commitment. That’s more than 100 million adults in the U.S. who, since their childhood, have shifted, drifted, questioned, converted, adapted, or adopted.

Movement from Mother's Faith

<p>WHEN THE MOTHER WAS</p> <h3>Protestant</h3> <p>62% are now Protestant 4% are now Catholic 11% are now Other Christian 19% are now Atheist/Agnostic/None</p>	<p>WHEN THE MOTHER WAS</p> <h3>Catholic</h3> <p>6% are now Protestant 57% are now Catholic 14% are now Other Christian 21% are now Atheist/Agnostic/None</p>
<p>WHEN THE MOTHER WAS</p> <h3>Other Christian</h3> <p>3% are now Protestant 3% are now Catholic 68% are now Other Christian 21% are now Atheist/Agnostic/None</p>	<p>WHEN THE MOTHER WAS</p> <h3>Atheist/ Agnostic/None</h3> <p>10% are now Protestant 7% are now Catholic 15% are now Other Christian 63% are now Atheist/Agnostic/None</p>

Among the various religious groups, the number of people staying with the faith of their mother is rather consistent, with Protestants (62%) and Catholics (57%) both outpaced by those in the “Other Christian” category (68%). Notably, the mix of Atheist, Agnostic, and None (no religious faith) shows about the same staying power (63%) as Protestants.

All three Christian groups have lost about one-fifth of their young adherents to the Atheist-Agnostic-None camp. But there is also movement *out* of the “AAN” group. **Nearly a third (32%) of those who had Atheist, Agnostic, or “No faith” mothers at age ten now identify as Christian.**

THE VALUE OF A SPIRITUAL QUEST

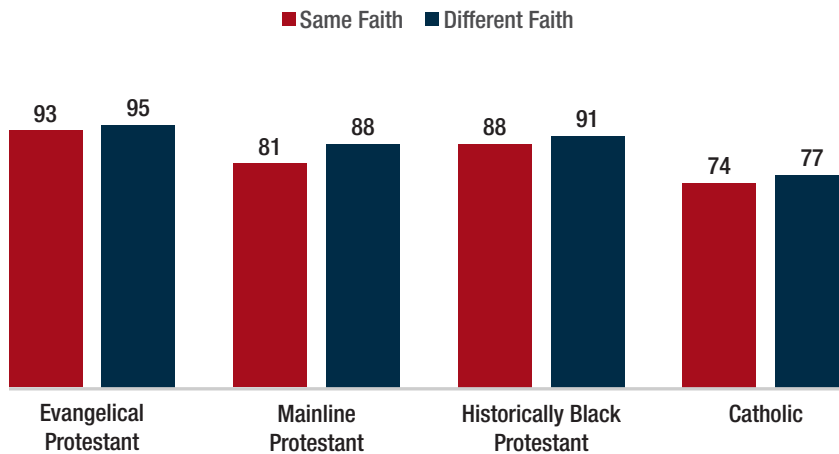
We often think of faith change as a negative occurrence. We see people doubting, straying, or backsliding, and we lament. We remember the apostle Paul's sad comment on a defection in the early church: "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:10 NIV). But the Bible also gives us Nicodemus the Pharisee, the Samaritan woman at the well, and Cornelius the centurion as examples of those whose faith changed as they grew up (as well as pretty much *all* of the first-century Christians). The story of Christianity from its inauguration to today is a story of changing faith.

We easily assume that rejecting the faith of one's youth is a bad thing, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, the *State of the Bible* data suggest otherwise.

Christians who have changed their faith are more Scripture Engaged than those who haven't.

Using our Scripture Engagement Scale, we compared scores of Catholics and Protestants who followed the faith of their mothers and those who didn't. Those who have changed their faith score several points higher in Scripture Engagement. This holds true in each major denominational group.

Scripture Engagement Score by Faith Change



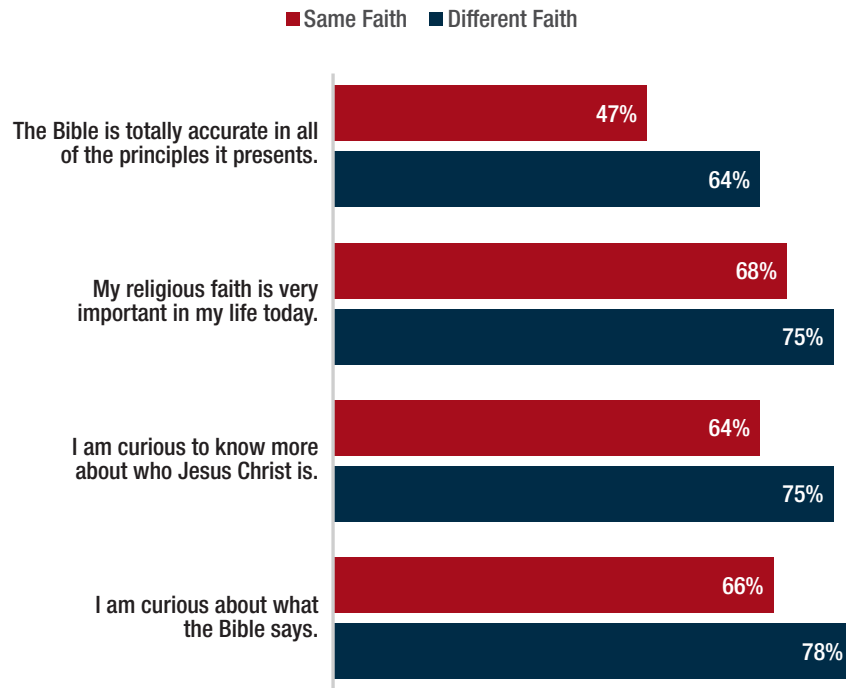
These numbers are from the Scripture Engagement Scale.
For an explanation of these scale scores, see Appendix 2: Definitions.

We also examined the possible effect of faith-change on a number of other faith-related questions. On matters of the Bible’s accuracy, the personal importance of religious faith, and curiosity about Jesus and the Bible, we see substantial increases among those whose faith has changed.

This trend held true across the various Christian groups—Catholic, Evangelical, Mainline, Historically Black Protestant. It didn’t matter which Christian tradition they had come from or moved to—the process of moving itself seemed to boost the vitality of their faith.²

² We excluded from these totals those who said their mothers had been Atheist, Agnostic, or None.

Spiritual Perspectives and Faith Change



Consider those who have remained in the faith of their childhood. Some may find all they need in that tradition, but others may be stuck there. They continue to identify with that faith group, but they're not engaging with Scripture, not finding meaning in their faith, not really curious about Jesus or the Bible. Still others sense that their tradition alone is not sufficient to sustain spiritual health across a lifetime, so they seek answers elsewhere.

Church leaders who work with teens and young adults have long recognized the importance of having them internalize the Christian


faith. The leader’s job includes helping them to own their connection with Christ. Most times this can be done within a faith tradition, but sometimes this process becomes a quest that leads to a different Christian expression. Sometimes seekers return to their spiritual roots with a stronger faith.

As Setran and Kiesling write, “Emerging adults may come through the process of probing and exploration more convinced than ever about the veracity of received truth claims and lifestyles. The difference is that they now have *reasons* for their beliefs and chosen practices, reasons for finding them more adequate than alternative visions. They can face the diverse perspectives of our pluralistic world, standing firm in their convictions while also finding space to dialogue with difference. These internalized ideals are now etched on emerging adults’ hearts and minds in a manner that will make the ideals more difficult to dislodge when the emerging adults find themselves in new locations.”³

Of course, such spiritual searches can occur among people of all ages, not just young adults. Internalization of Christian truth is a “lifelong process.”⁴ As they seek the best expressions and connections for their faith or their growing understanding of the Bible’s teaching, some people will pull up stakes from one religious tradition and move to another. This is not necessarily a loss of faith commitment. It can actually signal spiritual growth.

3 Setran, D. P. and Kiesling, Chris A. (2013). *Spiritual formation in emerging adulthood: A practical theology for college and young adult ministry*. Baker Academic. p. 70.

4 Ibid.



About one in eight Americans affirm, “Christ is the most important relationship in my life.”

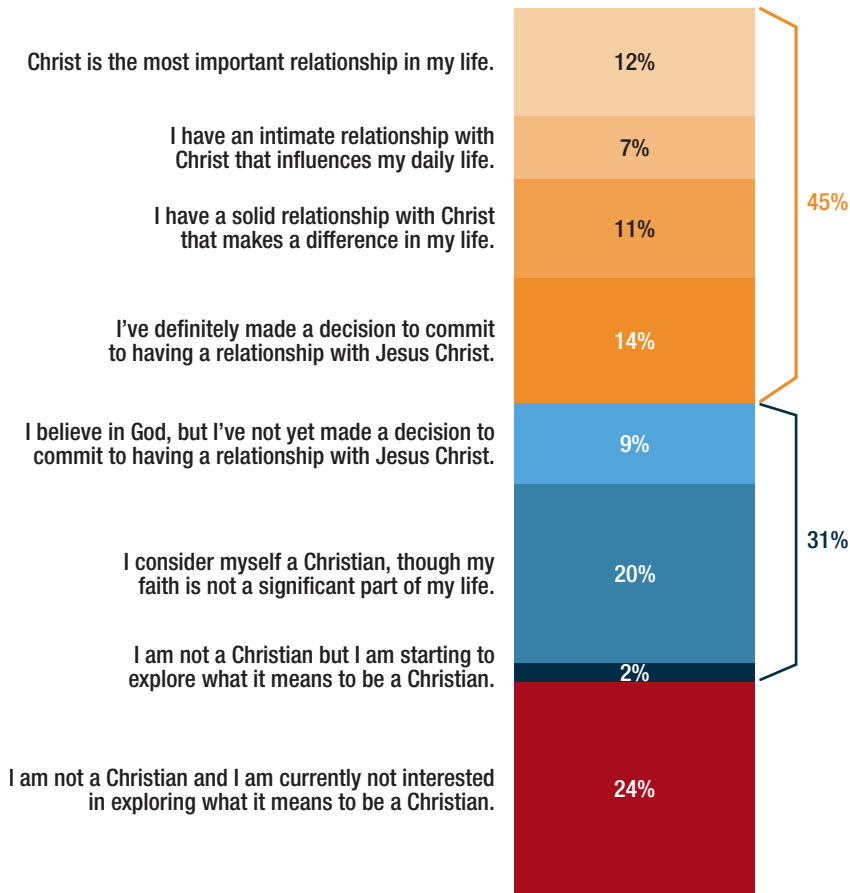
COMMITMENT TO CHRIST

Many churches focus on two groups of people: the “saved” and the “lost.” We find this distinction throughout Scripture. In the last few decades, some churches have identified “seekers” as another group worthy of attention. This idea too has biblical backing.

Yet most people in ministry recognize that Christians have various levels of commitment to Christ. Likewise, seekers have different degrees of proximity to a Christian commitment. In *State of the Bible 2023*, we have identified a range of spiritual commitment, actual and potential, in the hopes of informing faith development and evangelism.⁵

⁵ The eight responses on this question are © 2023 Originate Constructs. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Commitment to Christ in America



Nearly one in four Americans (24%) say they're not Christians and are "not interested in exploring" Christian faith. Most people who trust in Jesus would be saddened by this response, but many would be surprised that the percentage isn't higher.

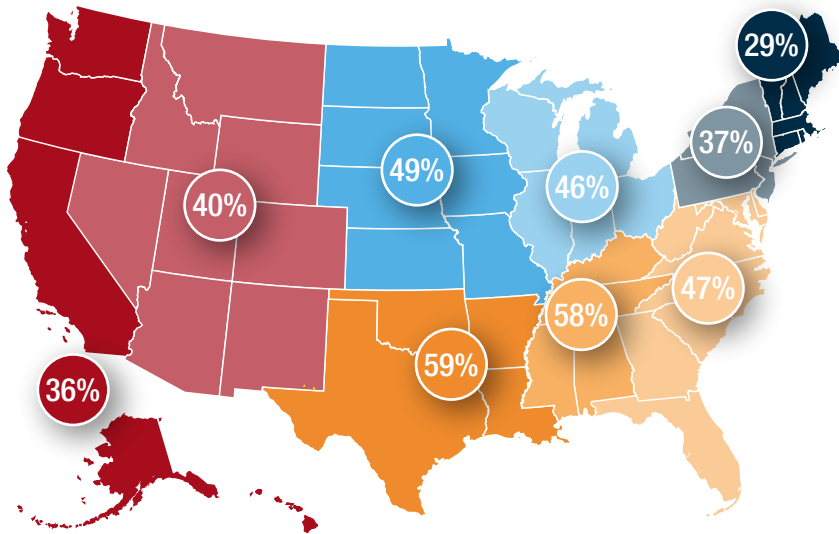
Moving upward on the chart, the next three responses indicate some level of seeking. People say they're "starting to explore" Christianity, believing in God, or even calling themselves Christian but without a meaningful faith commitment. Taken together, these three "seeking" responses make up nearly a third of the population (31%).

About one in eight Americans (12%) affirm the strongest statement, that "Christ is the most important relationship in my life." But there are four statements here that all indicate commitment to Christ. Combining these, we can say that just under half of Americans (45%) report some level of Christian commitment.

Drilling into some of the demographic details of this spiritual commitment spectrum, we find Elders (55%) the most likely to indicate Christian commitment (in any of those four responses), with Millennials (37%) the least likely. Black people (64%) were far more likely to be committed to Christ than any other racial or ethnic group. With regard to marital status, the Never Married (35%) were least likely to show Christian commitment. Married people (49%) were bested only by Separated people (54%).

We did a more granular geographical analysis than we usually do, based on census divisions, and we see some stark distinctions. The highest levels of commitment are seen in the West South Central (59%) and East South Central (58%). The lowest levels are in New England (29%), the Pacific (36%), and the Mid-Atlantic (37%).

Commitment to Christ and Geography



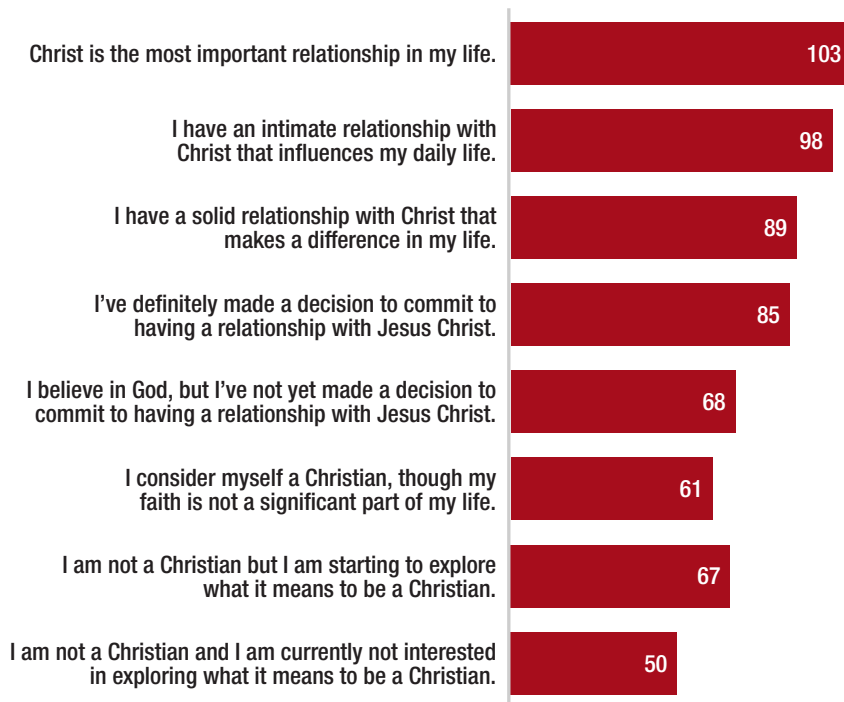
THE LINK BETWEEN COMMITMENT TO CHRIST AND SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Jesus chided the Pharisees for studying the Scriptures and missing the point. “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39–40 NIV).

There is a deep connection between Scripture engagement and commitment to Christ. This is a point of faith for those of us who work on the *State of the Bible* report, but it’s also good to get data verifying this belief.

People who affirm the strongest level of Christian commitment also score highest on our Scripture Engagement Scale. The correlation is strong.⁶ The only deviation is in the “seeker” area, where people “starting to explore” the Christian faith (though they don’t yet call themselves Christian) outscore those who call themselves Christian but don’t consider faith “significant.”

Scripture Engagement by Commitment to Christ



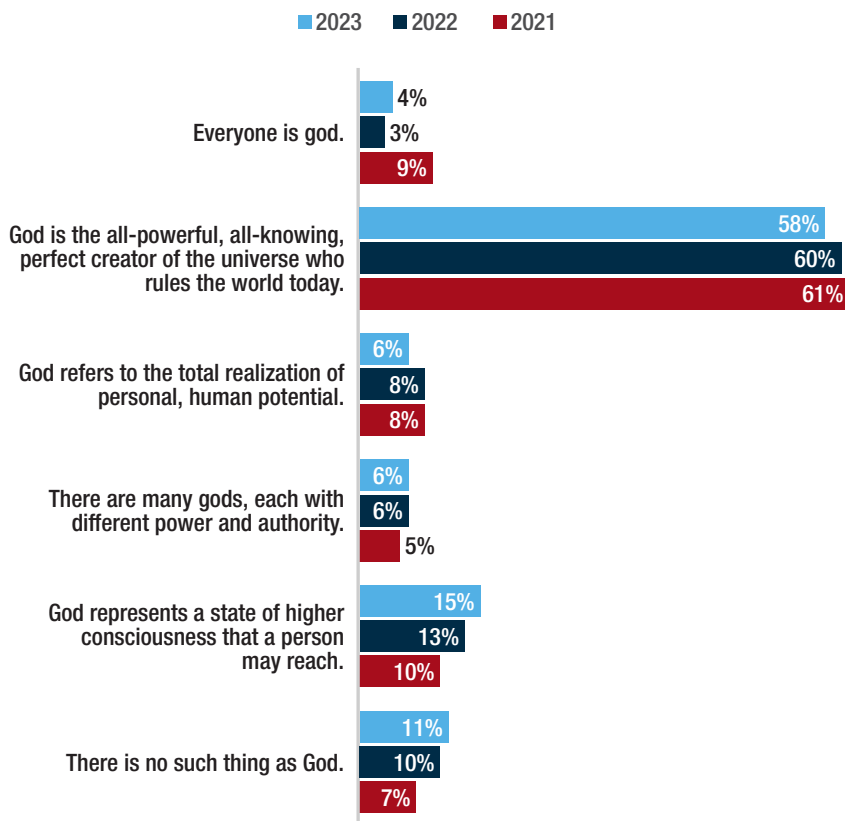
These numbers are from the Scripture Engagement Scale. For an explanation of these scale scores, see Appendix 2: Definitions.

⁶ $r = .778$

CHANGING BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

Year-to-year statistics may show us some trends in the making. While the traditional definition of God still has a healthy majority, the numbers are slipping slightly. Perhaps a few years of egregious human misbehavior have made people less apt to say “Everyone is god,” but the idea of God as a “state of higher consciousness” is rising fast.

Beliefs about God 2021–2023



CHURCH ATTENDANCE TRENDS: IN PERSON AND ONLINE

How can we tell the story of the recent pandemic and the church?

Many churches were closed for a long while. When they re-opened, many parishioners still had health concerns that kept them away. Some people got out of the habit of going to church, and they might never come back. Yet a number of churches, by necessity, put their services online, and these newly accessible services might keep the elderly and shut-ins connected with the church in ways that weren't possible before.

Church leaders learned a lot about technology and pivoting into new kinds of ministry. Some congregations found new vitality in meeting the emerging needs of their communities, providing food or tutoring or child care. And in any major crisis, Christians have an opportunity to share a divine hope that our neighbors need.

How does the story end? Are we out of the crisis yet? Are people coming back? Can churches return to business as usual?

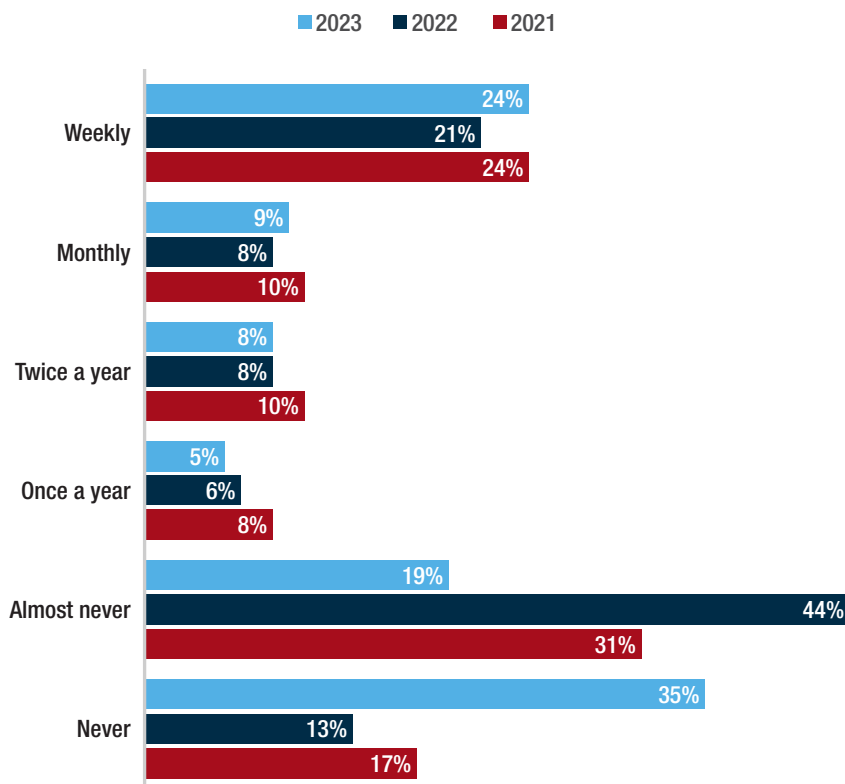
Almost.

Regular church attendance, combining in-person and online, has bounced back from last year's drop. Nearly one in four Americans (24%) say they attend services weekly, the same level we saw in 2021. We're still a bit down from pre-pandemic levels.

But less-frequent attenders—those who go to church monthly or just once or twice a year—have not bounced back. Numbers in those categories are still down from 2021.

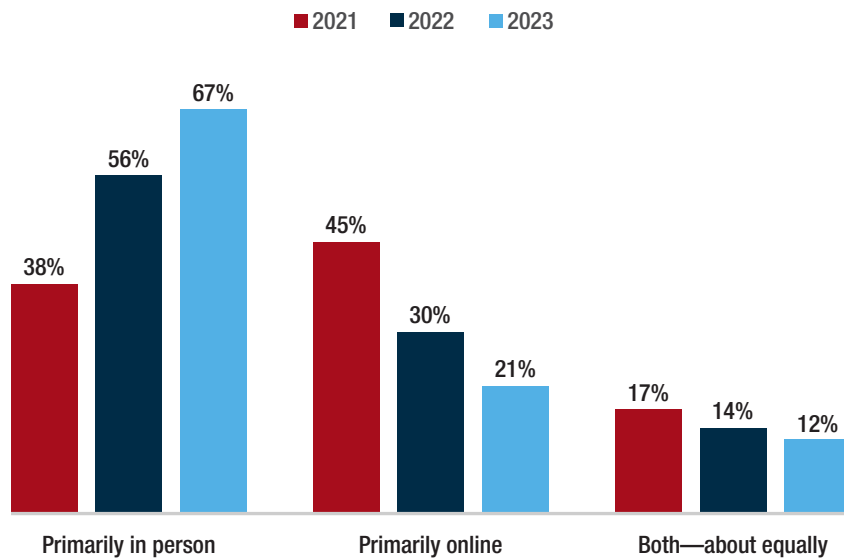
We see a statistical outlier among those who hardly ever go to church. Last year, four out of nine (44%) said they “Almost Never” attended a place of worship. This year, it seems many of those people found a way to attend even less. More than a third (35%) say they “Never” attend.

Church Attendance 2021–2023



In-person attendance has also been on the rise over the last two years. Now two-thirds of church attenders (67%) say they primarily attend worship in person. Only about one in five (21%) primarily worship online, less than half of the number from 2021 (45%). The proportion who say they attend worship in both ways, about equally, has also dwindled (12%, down from 17% in 2021). Clearly, worshipers are returning to the in-person experience.

Church Attendance 2021–2023, In Person and Online

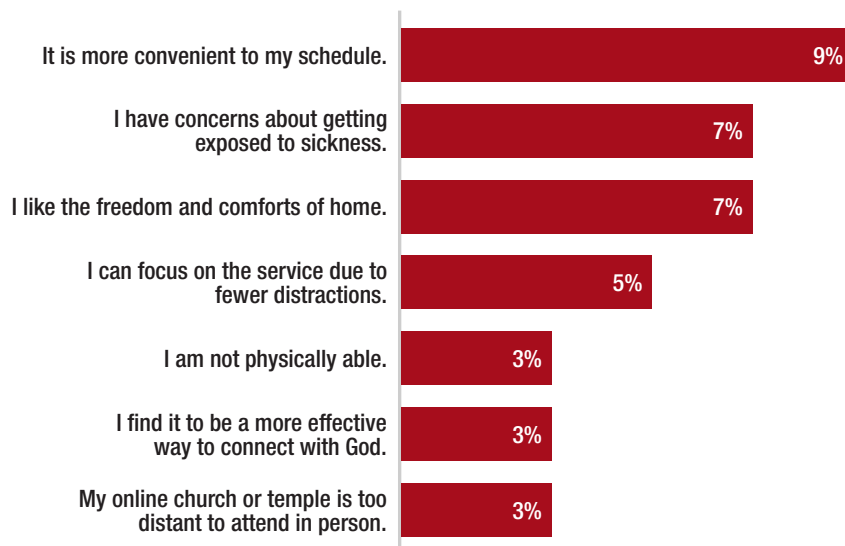


Yet online church services will not vanish. While their necessity has lessened, there are still multiple reasons why people tune in.

Scheduling convenience was the most popular reason (9%) for people to attend church online. Another 7 percent said, “I have concerns about getting exposed to sickness.” Another 7 percent said they

liked “the freedom and comforts of home.” While only mentioned by a relative few (3%), we shouldn’t forget that some are “not physically able” to attend in person.

Reasons for Online Attendance



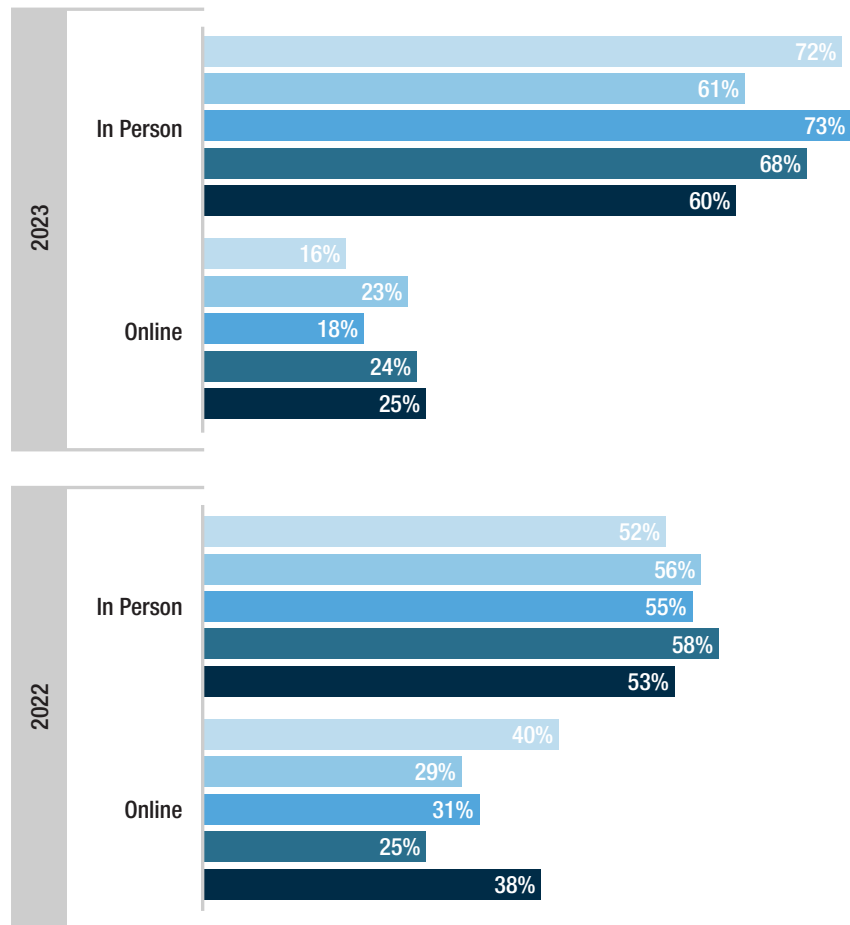
The movement from online to in-person shows up in every generation, but there are fascinating differences, especially as we compare 2023 with last year. Were those in Gen Z early adopters of the online-church technology, and did they get bored with it and return to in-person? Did Elders harbor health concerns last year but jump at the chance to see their friends again, when they could do so safely? Are the Boomers still enjoying “the freedom and comforts of home”?

It’s hard to know why Gen Z went from highest online to lowest, or why Boomers saw such a slight difference from last year to this

year. A number of factors play into these statistics, making it hard to explain them—or predict what’s next.

Church Attendance by Generation 2022–2023

■ Gen Z ■ Millennials ■ Gen X ■ Boomers ■ Elders



CONCLUSION: HOW FAITH MOVES

When James taught us that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:20 KJV), he was saying something important about the nature of faith. It’s active. It makes things happen. It’s on the move. We see that in multiple ways in this chapter.

We explored the personal faith journeys of people since childhood, as well as their commitment to Christ today. When people change their faith, they often wind up with a stronger one. Their quest for a truer expression of their relationship with God carries them into deeper engagement.

We observed the movement of faith through a continuum that included seeking and claiming and enjoying a relationship with Jesus.

Also, we’ve looked at the movement of church attendance (in different forms) since the pandemic changed everything. Churches themselves have shifted gears to conduct meaningful ministry among their members and communities.

In addition, there is still a regular movement of people *into* a genuine Christian faith, through evangelism. Sometimes a simple invitation—to watch a TV show, to have a conversation—can change a life. With that in mind, we asked a question of respondents who said they never go to church: *If a Christian friend invited you to engage in one of the following activities, how likely would you be to participate?*

Perhaps these ideas, put in motion, will guide someone into faith. ■

If a Christian friend invited you to . . .

Percent of non-churchgoers likely to participate

13%

Attend a Christian music concert or event

12%

Watch a church service streaming online or on television

18%

Watch a dramatic television program or movie about Jesus

9%

Listen to a Christian podcast or radio program

16%

Eat a meal in a group where biblical issues were discussed

9%

Attend a small group discussion on a biblical theme





FLOURISHING AND HOPE

How are you doing? Your answer likely depends on (a) how much time you have; (b) who's asking; and (c) how long it has been since the last time they asked you that. We're all accustomed to the quick "Fine" response with casual friends and relative strangers (and stranger relatives), but occasionally we'll entrust our closest friends with the whole truth.

I'm sad about this.

This worries me.

A really great thing happened to me yesterday.

Once we get specific about the events of our lives and how we respond to them, then there's a story to tell . . . if we and our conversation partners have time for that.

In the past few years, COVID has given us something to talk about. A health scare, a job layoff, the new challenge of working remotely. The pain of losing loved ones, concerns about kids, frustrations (and arguments) about mask-wearing and vaccinations. Within a shared context, we tell our own stories.

And how are we doing? Well, it's been tough, but it seems we're finally getting back to the normal ups and downs of life.

This chapter of *State of the Bible 2023* focuses on our data from two sets of questions created in the world of academia: Human Flourishing and Persevering Hope. On the Flourishing questions, we asked, essentially, "How are you doing?" In twelve different ways, we invited people to evaluate their lives on a scale of one to ten. These self-reported results yielded a Flourishing Index score. The Persevering Hope scale asked not only about people's general attitudes, but specifically how they responded to life's difficulties.

We weren't checking blood pressure or credit ratings. We were asking people *how they felt* about their health or finances or friendships or other areas of life. The results, viewed over several years, tell a collective story most of us know well.

Christian scholar C. S. Lewis wrote about how people can view situations differently. "Imagine a set of people all living in the same building. Half of them think it is a hotel, the other half think it is a

prison. Those who think it a hotel might regard it as quite intolerable, and those who thought it was a prison might decide that it was really surprisingly comfortable.”¹

That might explain why Practicing Christians, and especially those who are Scripture Engaged, score so high on both flourishing and hope. It’s not that they are unusually fortunate. They’ve gone through the same troubles as everyone else, but they tend to view those hardships with a different filter. The Psalms often express gratitude for the Lord’s presence in bad situations (even in “the valley of the shadow of death . . . thou art with me”), and the apostle Paul puts it baldly: “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:12–13 NIV).

The Bible prepares us for life’s challenges and gives us divine resources to deal with them. This allows believers to flourish. This helps us persevere.

Christians go through the same troubles as everyone else, but they tend to view those hardships with a different filter.

HUMAN FLOURISHING

The Human Flourishing Index emerged at Harvard University’s T. H. Chan School of Public Health in 2017. While health care often focuses on pathology—what’s wrong—this was an effort to see health in a positive way. Do people feel happy, healthy, supported by friends, and so on?

¹ Lewis, C. S. (1970). “Answers to Questions on Christianity.” In *God in the Dock* (p. 52). Eerdmans.

Researchers asked about six areas of the human experience, referred to as “domains.”

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

For each domain, two simple questions were tested and honed. The creators decided to treat financial status differently, so the instrument yields two scores: the Human Flourishing Index (which leaves out the financial response) and the Secure Flourishing Index (which includes it).

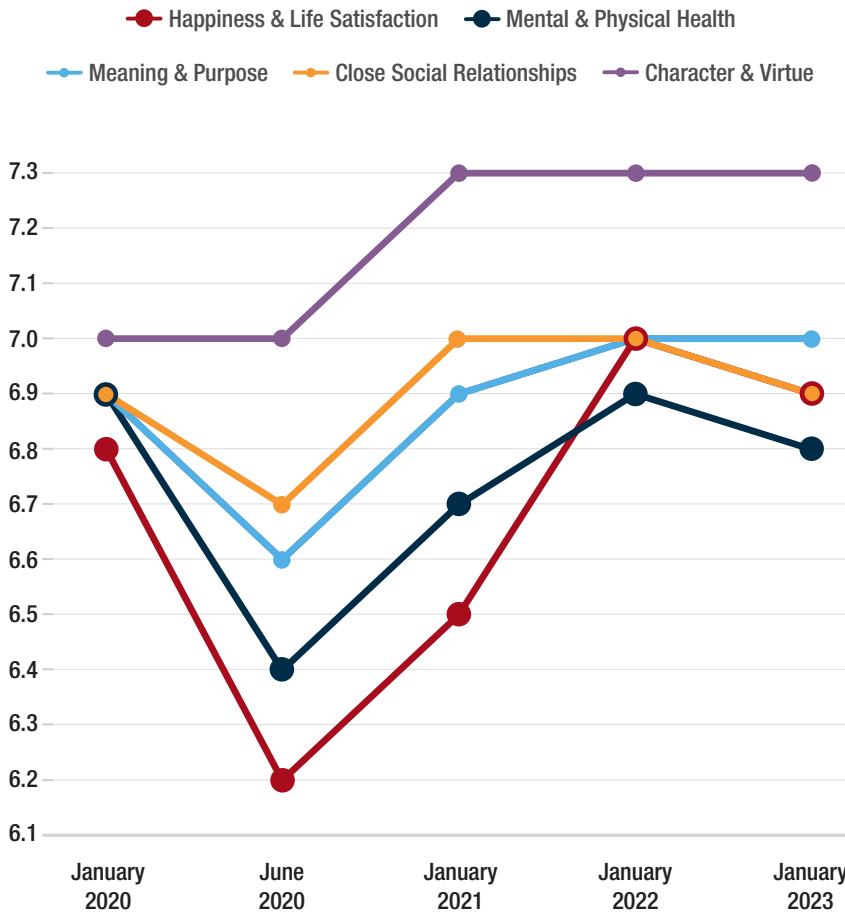
For several years now, the Harvard group has allowed us to use their Flourishing questions in the *State of the Bible* survey. From a research standpoint, the timing could not have been better. We first included these questions in our 2020 version, about a month before COVID began affecting American society. We continued to use the Flourishing questions in an extra mid-year survey we added in that year, as well as our normal January polls in 2021–23.

We understand that Human Flourishing is not just about our response to a pandemic, but the data have been especially eloquent throughout this era of COVID.

FLOURISHING IN THE TIME OF COVID

The Flourishing Index (which combines the first five domains, but not Financial & Material Stability) shows remarkable durability over this period. In June 2020, as we were all struggling with shutdowns, the index dipped substantially, but by the next January it was back to its pre-pandemic level. In the last two years, it has risen slightly.

Flourishing Domains 2020–2023



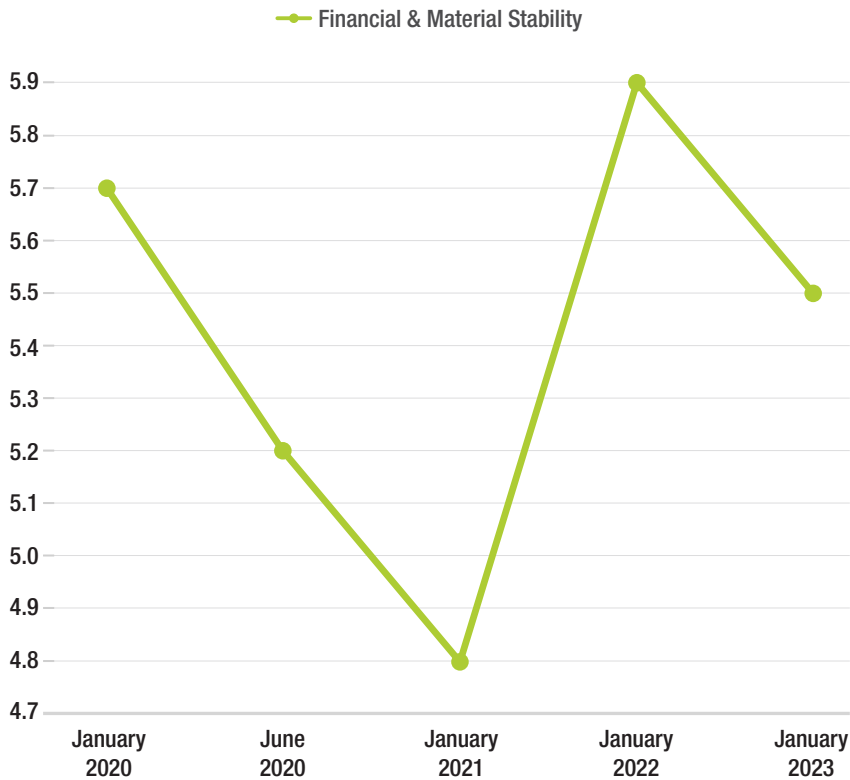
Some domains have been more affected than others. **Happiness & Life Satisfaction** had the steepest drop in the first pandemic poll, but it improved over the next two years before taking a slight dip in 2023. **Mental & Physical Health** displays a similar contour, as we might expect. Besides the disease itself, which affected the physical health of many, COVID added great stress to our lives, affecting mental health. It's no surprise that people reported a decrease in this area, but the recovery is notable. Still, this is the only domain with a current score less than its pre-pandemic score.

The **Meaning & Purpose** domain, like **Close Social Relationships**, shows a drop in the June 2020 score and a quick rise by the next January. COVID certainly created upheaval in people's lives. If people were out of work or unable to be as active at church, they might question their sense of purpose. If they were prevented from going places with friends, their relationships might suffer. But good things can be forged in bad times. People might emerge from their challenges rather quickly with deeper relationships and a stronger sense of purpose. That seems to be what happened here.

The **Character & Virtue** domain is an anomaly. It never dropped, even in our June 2020 statistics. In fact, by the next January, it had grown substantially, and it's still at that high level. This might reflect the basic truth that "adversity builds character." It might rely on the fact that, when our whole society was struggling, there were plenty of opportunities to demonstrate our character by doing good to those in need. "Patience is a virtue," they say, and one of the survey questions in this domain built on that, asking about people's willingness to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later. As we

plodded through the pandemic, that wasn't just a hypothetical question—we were delaying gratification every day.²

Financial & Material Stability 2020–2023



The Secure Flourishing Index adds a sixth domain, **Financial & Material Stability**. Here's where we see the greatest variation over the five surveys. The category dropped half a point by June 2020 and nearly another half-point by the next January (a 16% decrease in one

² COVID wasn't the only thing happening in recent years. We've also seen a stark polarization of American society on political and cultural issues. It's possible that the Character & Virtue questions tapped into this, as people defined "good" according to their political/cultural stance. The increase, then, would reflect their greater commitment to their cause.

year). You might remember the business closures and lost wages of that period. But things turned around by January 2022, with a huge increase (23%) in this category.

Remember that this is not based on economic data, but on self-reported attitudes. We asked if people worried about paying their bills or keeping their homes. That confidence surged mightily ahead of the 2022 survey, but dropped again by January 2023, most likely due to inflation concerns. One of the questions in this domain also mentions worry about “safety.” Crime was a frequent topic in the midterm campaigns, and awareness of mass shootings is high. This might contribute to a lower sense of “material stability” in this last year.

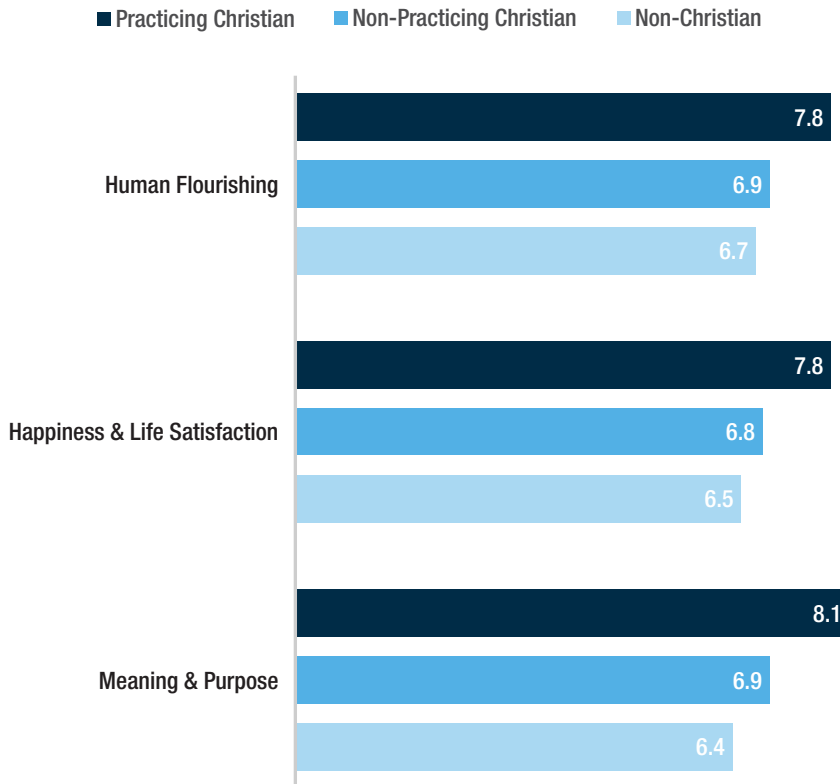
THE EFFECT OF FAITH ON FLOURISHING

Do the people who follow Jesus truly enjoy the “abundant life” Jesus promised (John 10:10)? When people engage with Scripture or attend church regularly, do they “flourish” more? That is, are they likely to self-report higher levels of health, happiness, character, purpose, and the like?

Yes. Practicing Christians report a much higher level of Flourishing (overall and in each individual domain) than Non-Practicing Christians or Non-Christians.³ The individual domains that saw the greatest difference were “Happiness & Life Satisfaction” and “Meaning & Purpose.”

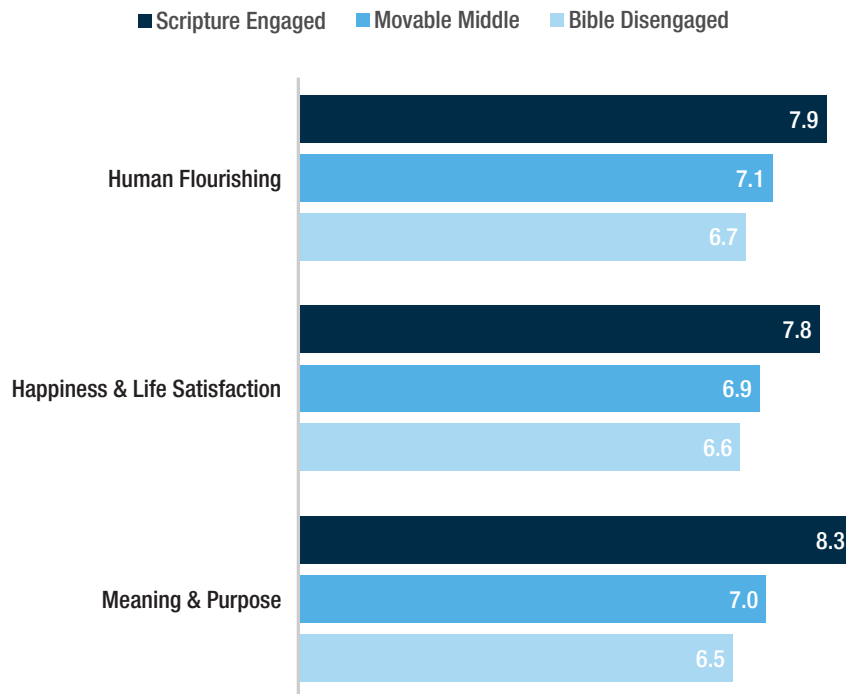
³ See Appendix 2 for definitions of our Practicing Christian and Scripture Engaged categories.

Flourishing Index by Christian Practice



We see a very similar story with the Scripture Engaged, as compared with the Movable Middle and Bible Disengaged—higher scores across the board, but especially in those two domains of satisfaction and purpose. The score in the “Meaning & Purpose” domain deserves an extra look. For the Scripture Engaged, it is the highest score (8.3) of any area. Also, the increase over the Movable Middle’s score (7.0) is greater than we see in any other area.

Flourishing Index by Scripture Engagement

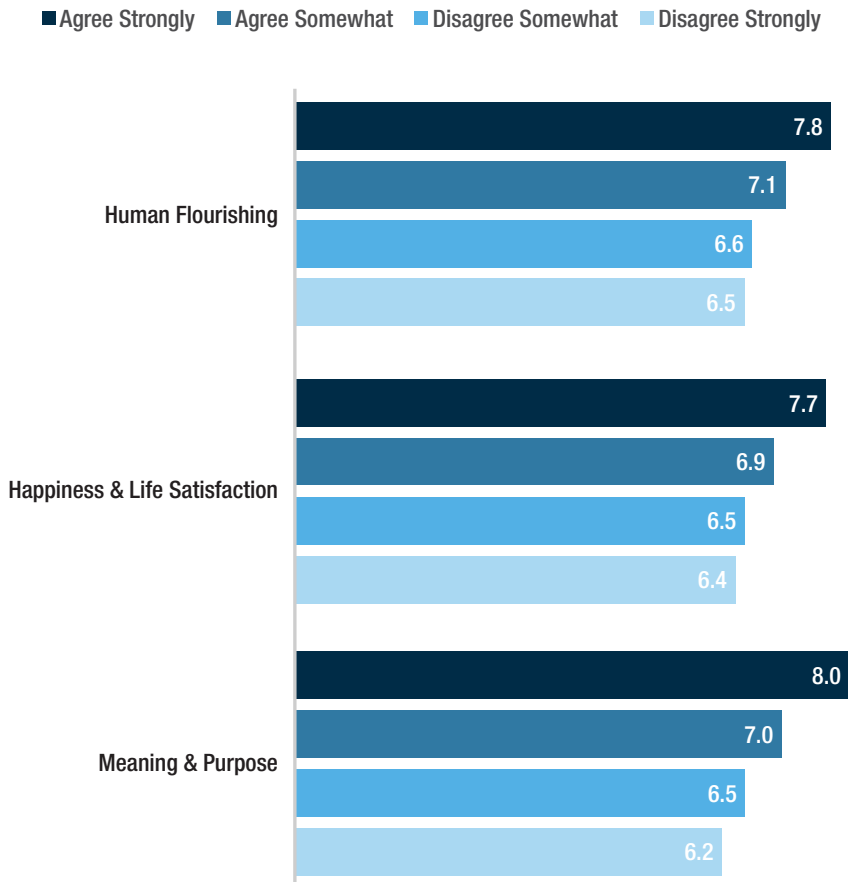


Church leaders and Christian communicators often struggle to make a compelling case for Scripture Engagement. They know it makes a difference, but what’s the “selling point”? What’s the “felt need” that gets met when people read the Bible and live it out? We see one here. People who make Scripture an important part of their lives have a greater sense of purpose. They sense that their daily activities are worthwhile because they’re following Jesus. By contrast, those in the Movable Middle connect with Scripture sporadically. They may respect it without following it. And they are far less likely to lead purposeful lives.

Elsewhere in this survey, we asked whether people would say, “The message of the Bible has transformed my life.” Those who agreed with that statement had higher Flourishing scores, especially in those two domains of satisfaction and purpose. (And the more strongly they agreed, the higher their Flourishing scores.)

Flourishing Index by Life Transformation

“The message of the Bible has transformed my life.”



How does the Bible transform someone’s life? What changes?

We could answer that in many ways, but this survey gives us two of the most obvious. Biblical transformation involves a redefinition of “Happiness & Life Satisfaction” and a renewed sense of “Meaning & Purpose.”

One of the most quoted (and misquoted) verses of the Bible is Romans 8:28 (KJV)—“And we know that all things work together for good . . .” Many stop there, assuming that all bad things will turn to good things, and thus sadness will turn to happiness. But the biblical passage continues: “. . . to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” This is a crucial part of the transforming message of the Bible, that we are called to live our lives, in good times and bad, according to God’s purpose. We can find joy in the often difficult journey of life because the Lord walks with us, leading in the direction he chooses. As the Psalmist sings, “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16:11 NIV).

The survey results verify what the Bible leads us to expect. Those who practice their faith, engaging fully with God and God’s Word, transformed by that message—these people flourish like trees on a riverbank, they find delight in God’s presence, and they live their lives driven by God’s eternal purpose.

EXERCISES

With regard to Human Flourishing, the data we've reported so far show a clear advantage for those who practice their Christian faith and engage with Scripture. But are there other factors that contribute?

Physical exercise makes a difference. We found that those who reported physically exercising in the previous week had higher Flourishing scores than those who didn't. The same was true for those who "**meditated**" or "**prayed to God**" within the previous week. Note that these were exercises of three different types: completely physical, spiritual but not necessarily religious (meditating), and most likely religious (prayer). All three showed substantial increases (six-tenths of a point) on the Human Flourishing scale and similar increases on the component categories. (The highest difference, not surprisingly, came with physical exercise in the domain of "Mental & Physical Health.")

This might suggest that any kind of disciplined activity would make people feel better about their lives, leading to higher Flourishing scores. Some might say that the commitment to go to church or read the Bible regularly provides the same sort of structure as a daily run.

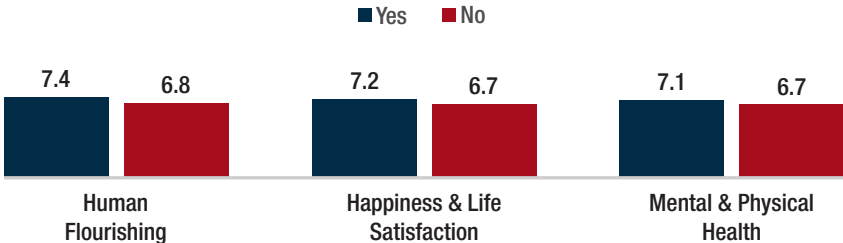
But the scores for the Scripture Engaged (7.9) and Practicing Christians (7.8) far exceed even those of the physical exercisers (7.2). Maybe the sheer discipline is part of it, but there appears to be something in the content of Christianity and the Bible that helps people flourish.

Flourishing Index by Disciplines

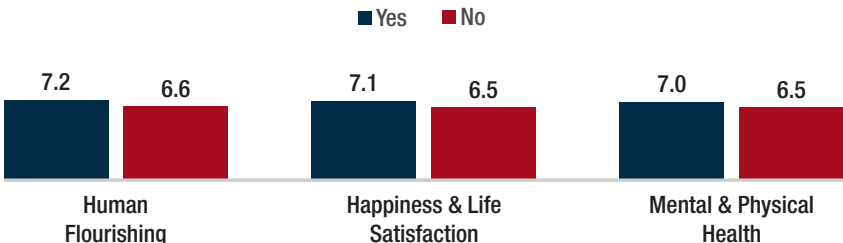
Have you engaged in physical exercise in the last 7 days?



Have you meditated in the last 7 days?



Have you prayed to God in the last 7 days?



THREE KEYS TO FLOURISHING

Do some qualities or attitudes affect Human Flourishing more than others? We found three that deserve special mention.

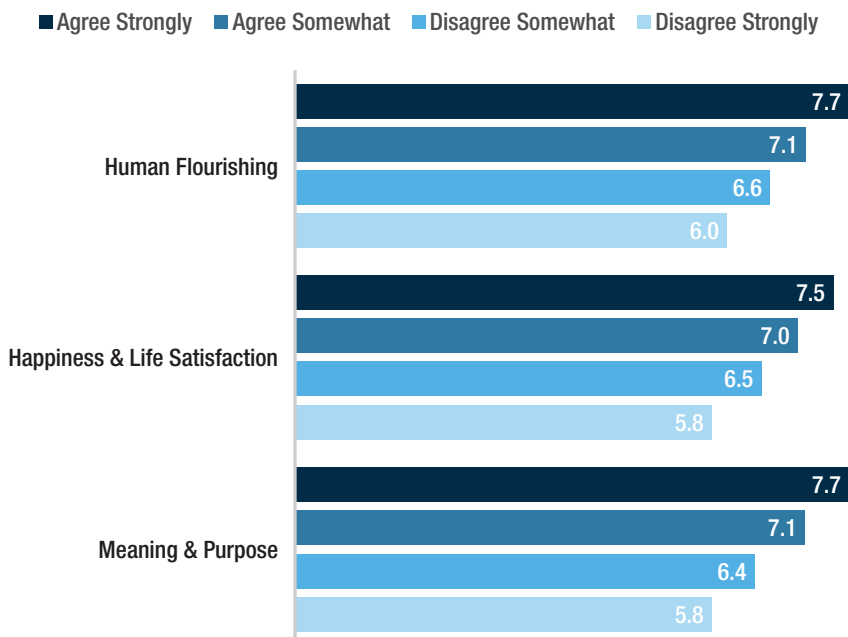
Forgiveness

“I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.”

We asked this of everyone in the survey, Christian or not. The responses gave us a clear conclusion: *When people forgive, they flourish.*

Flourishing Index by Forgiveness

“I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.”



We also had a set of questions asked only of self-identified Christians, focusing on spiritual vitality. These provided us with two more keys to flourishing.

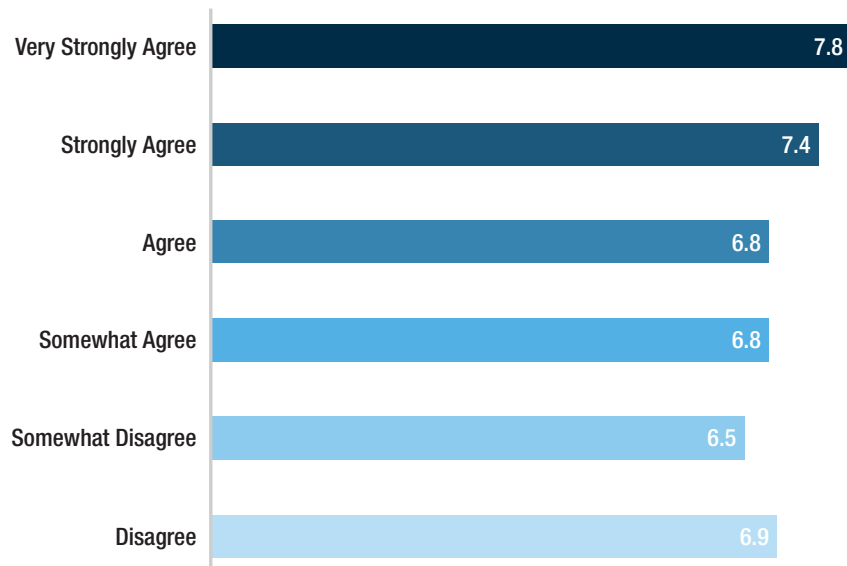
Gratitude

“I thank God daily for who he is and what he is doing in my life.”

While there was a clear increase in flourishing among those who agreed with this statement, we don’t see the usual stair-steps on the other side of the grid, among those who “somewhat” agreed or disagreed. We suspect that the word *daily* introduced an element of self-discipline rather than merely attitude. Still, those who Strongly or Very Strongly Agreed had the highest Flourishing scores by far.

Flourishing Index by Gratitude

“I thank God daily for who he is and what he is doing in my life.”



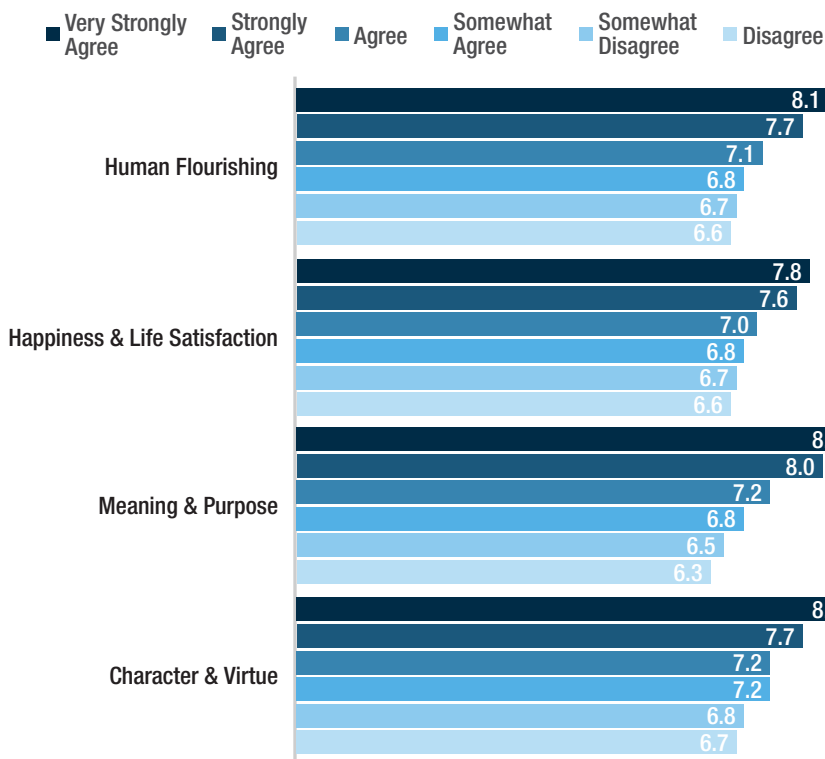
Purpose

“I know and use my spiritual gifts to fulfill God’s purposes.”

Those who agreed on this point cracked Level 8 on the Flourishing Index. And in the domain of “Meaning & Purpose” they attained one of the highest scores we’ve seen (8.4). This affirms a connection that many church leaders know well. As people identify their God-given abilities—their spiritual gifts—they use them to serve God, and this creates fulfillment and joy in their lives.

Flourishing Index by Spiritual Gifts

“I know and use my spiritual gifts to fulfill God’s purposes.”



*“Hope stands up to its knees in the past
and keeps its eyes on the future.”⁴*

Frederick Buechner

PERSEVERING HOPE

A STRONG CORRELATION: SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT AND PERSEVERING HOPE

Early in Chapter 1, we presented a new metric, the Persevering Hope Scale (PHS), recently developed by experts at five different universities (see pages 3–6). While researchers have been exploring human hope for several decades, this new tool focuses on hope that provides strength in difficult circumstances. How determined are people to keep going despite opposition, to keep trying for a successful outcome? This is more than an optimistic attitude, more than a sense of personal agency—it’s perseverance.

While we’ve used other measures of hope in the past, we were excited to include the Persevering Hope questions in the *State of the Bible* survey this year. And we were eager to see the results. The Bible often teaches about hope in hard times (Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4; Isaiah 40:27–31), so could we expect the Scripture Engaged to demonstrate high levels of Persevering Hope? That’s exactly what we found.

Surprisingly, there was little variation in scores among different demographic groups. Age, gender, race, geography—these didn’t matter much, just a tenth of a point here and there. The lack of variation suggested a commonality. Perhaps a base-level Persevering

⁴ Buechner, F. (1992). *A room called remember: Uncollected pieces* (p. 11). Harper San Francisco.

Hope is common to humanity. People of all types deal with adverse situations and move forward.

But one group far exceeded that base level. The score of the Scripture Engaged showed a significant increase in Persevering Hope. We should also note that Practicing Christians scored nearly as high as the Scripture Engaged.⁵

This made us wonder about other items in our survey. Beyond the major demographic groupings, we ask about a lot of attitudes and experiences. How can we get a bigger picture of Persevering Hope?

THE THREE KEYS TO HOPE

Earlier, we considered three “keys” to Human Flourishing. Could those same three keys help us open the door to hope in difficult times?

In many cases, people struggle to deal with past (or ongoing) mistreatment. **Forgiveness** is often very difficult. Yet we know it can contribute greatly to one’s emotional and spiritual health. Is there a connection between forgiveness and Persevering Hope?

Yes. We asked all survey respondents—not just the Christians—if they agreed with this statement: *I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.* Those who agreed strongly had the same high PHS score as the Scripture Engaged (4.1, as opposed to only 3.5 for those who disagreed strongly on the forgiveness question).

⁵ See the chart on page 5. The Practicing Christian score was 4.0, compared to 4.1 for the Scripture Engaged. The mean for all respondents was 3.8.

Persevering Hope by Forgiveness

“I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.”



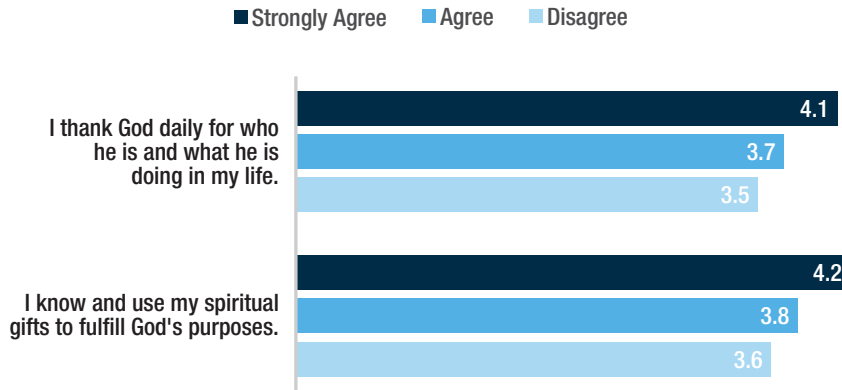
On the other two “keys”—**gratitude** and **spiritual gifts**—we see the highest highs and lowest lows of anything we’ve seen yet on the PHS. On these points we relied on questions asked only of self-identified Christians. Did they agree with the following questions:

I thank God daily for who he is and what he is doing in my life.

I know and use my spiritual gifts to fulfill God’s purposes.

Even among these self-identified Christians, those who *aren’t* thanking God (3.5) or using their spiritual gifts (3.6) score lower than any of our usual demographic groups. And, as we saw with Human Flourishing, those who use their gifts for God’s purposes have an off-the-chart Persevering Hope Score (4.2).

Persevering Hope by Gratitude and Spiritual Gifts



FURTHER THOUGHTS

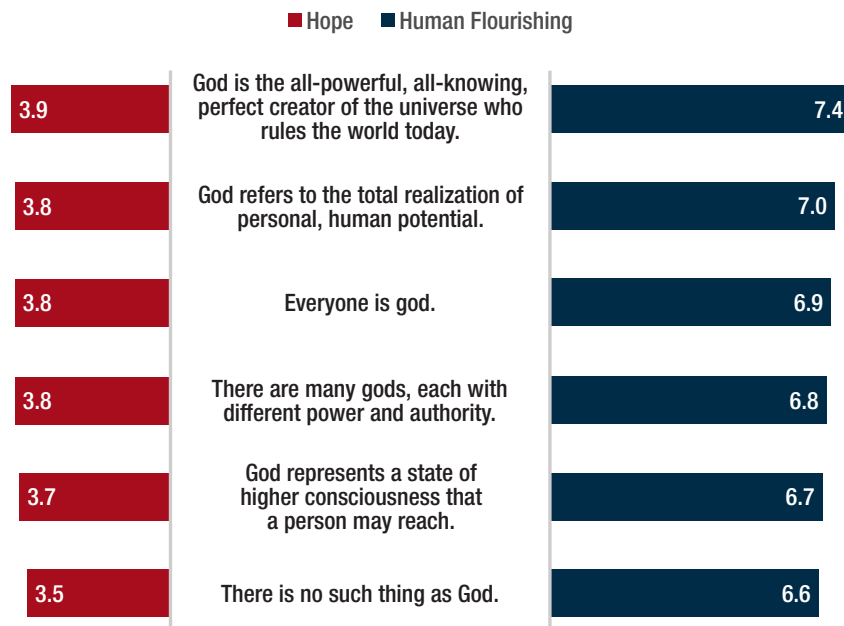
VIEWS OF GOD

Many of the findings in this report involve the Scripture Engaged or Practicing Christians—those at a fairly high degree of religious commitment. But what happens when we consider more basic questions like the existence or nature of God? On page 35, we explored these basic beliefs about God over the last few years. While about three in five hold to a traditional view that “God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today,” the ranks of those who understand God as a “higher consciousness” are swelling. About one in ten Americans say there is no God.

How do these different understandings of God affect people’s Flourishing or Persevering Hope? Those with a traditional belief in God score significantly higher on both measures. Those who don’t believe in God at all have the lowest scores.

The Bible talks about those “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12 NIV). Even then, the link between hope and theism was observed. But it makes us wonder which came first. Have people been beaten down by life, hope squeezed out of them, and so they take it out on God by not believing? Or does their refusal of God leave them with few spiritual resources to deal with the troubles of life? We often treat the existence of God as an academic point to be debated. It might be more emotional than we think.

Hope, Flourishing, and God



*Persevering Hope values may range from 1–5.
Human Flourishing values may range from 0–10.*

ACCOUNTABILITY

We asked self-identified Christians if they agreed with this statement: “*I allow other Christians to hold me accountable for my actions.*”

As with other aspects of Christian practice, this showed a strong correlation with Human Flourishing. Those who agreed had 10 percent higher scores than those who didn’t.

We’ll look deeper into elements of spiritual vitality in the next chapter, but this is an important correlation. Would our churches, and the people in them, flourish more if we would more frequently “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24 NIV)?

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

The statistics reported above regarding those who know their spiritual gifts and use them for God’s purposes are quite stunning. The Meaning & Purpose domain is an important component of Human Flourishing, and those who know and use their gifts ace it.

What could your church do to help more people have a greater sense of calling for their lives? ■

*Life is never made unbearable by circumstances,
but only by lack of meaning and purpose.⁶*

Viktor Frankl

6 Frankl, V. E. (1963). *Man’s search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy* (I. Lasch, Trans.). Beacon Press.

CHRISTIANS WHO KNOW AND USE THEIR SPIRITUAL GIFTS SCORE . . .

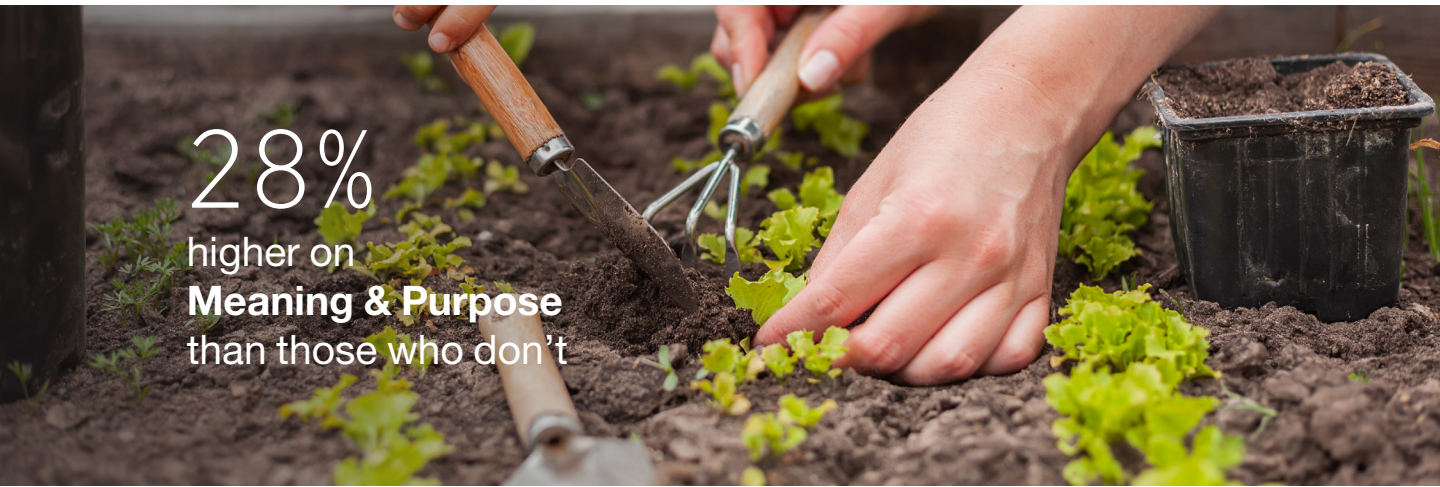
19%

higher on
Human Flourishing
than those who don't



28%

higher on
Meaning & Purpose
than those who don't



17%

higher on
Persevering Hope
than those who don't





SPIRITUAL VITALITY

People love stories about journeys. Always have. The *Odyssey* follows a war hero on his circuitous voyage home. Medieval folks delighted in the adventures of Everyman, seeing a spiritual commentary on their own lives. In the 1600s, John Bunyan brought a more evangelical approach to a similar story with *Pilgrim's Progress*, a bestseller for centuries. In modern times, imaginations have embraced J. R. R. Tolkien's adventures, beginning with *The Hobbit* (subtitled "There and Back Again") and continuing with *The Lord of the Rings*. There we follow an unlikely alliance of elves, dwarves, humans, hobbits, and a wizard taking a perilous journey to save Middle Earth from the forces of evil.

Perhaps you have your own favorite "journey" book. Maybe that book is the Bible.

In faith, Abraham leaves his country for a Promised Land. His descendants escape slavery in Egypt and wander a while before reclaiming that same land of promise. In Scripture, the journey of faith is often

an actual journey, usually on foot. In the pedestrian world of biblical times, it's appropriate that "walking" becomes the go-to metaphor for spiritual growth. "Whether you turn to the right or to the left," the prophet assures God's people, "your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'" (Isaiah 30:21 NIV).

For years now, the *State of the Bible* report has evaluated the use of the Christian Scriptures in the U. S., along with the effect of the Bible on people's lives. We have focused our attention on Scripture engagement, but we have always recognized it as part of a larger picture—a larger *journey*. People approach faith, adopt faith, and grow in faith, and the Bible supports every step.

In this chapter we explore the journey of faith and spiritual growth that surrounds (and usually is prodded by) Scripture engagement.

SPIRITUAL TEMPERAMENTS

Tolkien's hobbits have to learn the unique personality traits of their fellow travelers—elves, dwarves, and humans. The same might be said of any team activity. People come with different preferences, styles, assumptions, goals. It's no different on a spiritual journey. People meet God—and meet *with* God—in widely different ways.

Pastor and author Gary Thomas created a helpful paradigm in the book *Sacred Pathways*, identifying nine different temperaments that affect people's spiritual journeys. "As I read the classics of the Christian faith and shared my journey with others, I discovered various ways in which people find intimacy with God: by studying church history or theology, by singing or reading hymns, by dancing, by

walking in the woods. Each practice awakened different people to a new sense of spiritual vitality.”¹

In the last few decades, businesses have paid great attention to “personality types,” and a number of models have proven helpful—Myers-Briggs, DISC, and StrengthsFinder, among others. Some of these have been adapted to religious contexts. But Thomas emphasizes that he is modeling *spiritual* temperaments that affect people’s interactions with God.² That fits our interest in the broader context of Scripture engagement, so we arranged to include questions in our survey related to Thomas’s nine Spiritual Temperaments.

Spiritual Temperaments

I connect best to God or the supernatural when . . .	Defined as . . .	%
I’m surrounded by nature—the mountains, the forests, or the ocean.	Naturalist	32%
I am alone and reading the Bible or praying.	Ascetic	14%
God quietly touches my heart, tells me he loves me, and makes me feel like I’m his closest friend.	Contemplative	11%
I’m in a church where my senses come alive and I experience God’s presence.	Sensate	8%
I learn something special about him that I didn’t understand before.	Intellectual	6%
I’m participating in a familiar form of worship with memories dating back to my childhood.	Traditional	5%
I am singing or praying loudly and my emotions are awakened.	Enthusiast	5%
I see him in the needy, the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned.	Caregiver	4%
I am obeying God by standing up for his justice and urging people to join the cause.	Activist	2%
I don’t believe it is possible to connect with God or the supernatural.	No Connection	13%

1 Thomas, G. (1996). *Sacred Pathways*, Zondervan, p. 8.

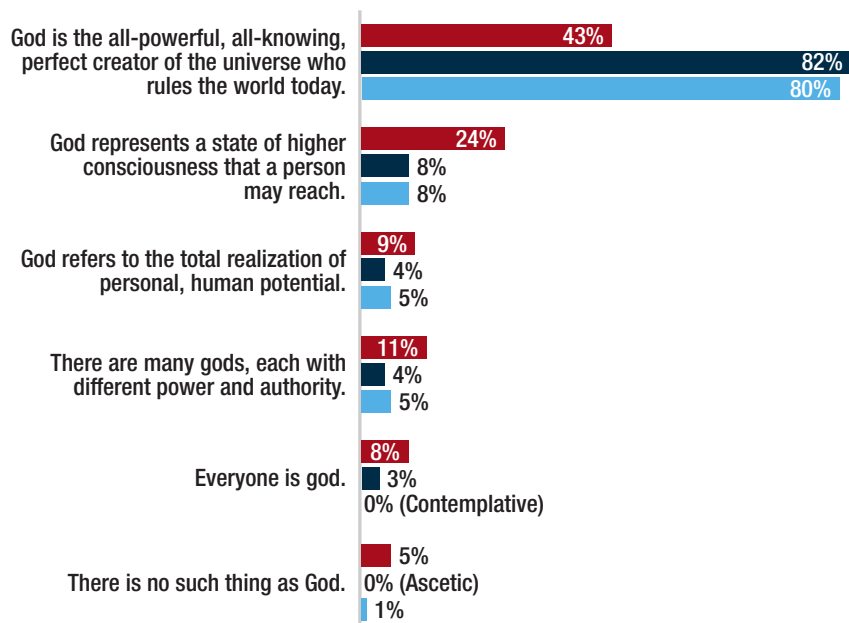
2 There are a few overlaps between the nine points of the Enneagram and the nine temperaments from *Sacred Pathways*, but also significant differences. Thomas says he didn’t consult the Enneagram when writing his book.

The temperament questions were asked of everyone in the survey, not just those who identified as Christians. As a result, we had a substantial group (13%) taking a tenth option—no connection with God at all. By far the most-cited temperament was the one we define as **Naturalist**, with nearly one in three connecting best with God in a natural setting. While this group includes many committed Christians, it also coincides with a broad range of beliefs about the supernatural. Creation leads many to the Creator, as the Bible indicates (Psalm 19:1–5; Acts 14:15–18; Romans 1:19–20). But others seem to stop short, worshiping nature itself and not seeking out the God who made it (Romans 1:25).

Beliefs about God by Top 3 Temperaments

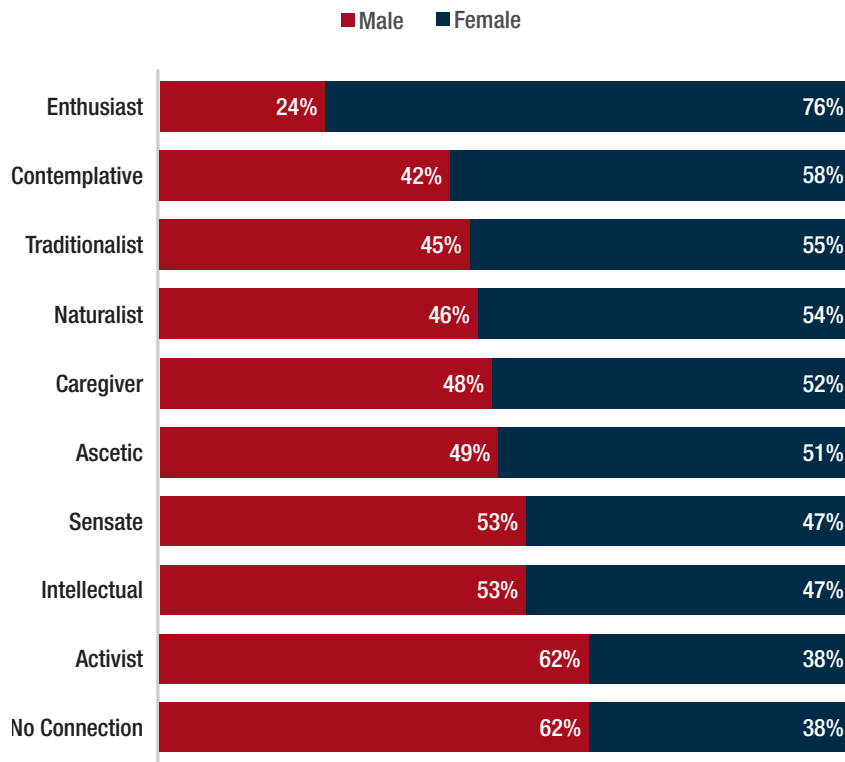
■ Naturalist ■ Ascetic ■ Contemplative

Percentage of those with this temperament who hold this view of God.



Demographic analysis of the nine temperaments reveals some points of interest. Of those who identify as Enthusiasts, “singing or praying loudly” with “emotions awakened,” three out of four (76%) are female. Women are also more likely to be Contemplative (58% are female). About five in eight of the Activists are male (62%), and men are more likely to be Intellectual or Sensate (53% of each group are male). Yet among those who say it’s not possible to connect with God, five of eight (62%) are male.

Spiritual Temperaments by Gender



Note: 52% of those participating in the survey were female

Evaluating the generations, we find Elders most likely to be Naturalists. They're also the group least likely to rule out the possibility of connecting with God. Generation Z is the group most likely to connect with God as Activists and Caregivers. It's no surprise that Traditionalists are most likely to be Elders and least likely to be Gen Z, but the same is true of Sensates, who "experience God's presence" in church, making their "senses come alive." Boomers far outpace other generations in the Ascetic experience, "alone and reading the Bible or praying."

Spiritual Temperament by Generation

Temperament	High Generation	Average	Low Generation
Naturalist	Elders (38%)	32%	Gen X (29%)
Ascetic	Boomers (18%)	14%	Millennials (10%)
Contemplative	Gen X (14%)	11%	Millennials (8%)
Sensate	Elders (11%)	8%	Gen Z (7%)
Intellectual	Millennials (8%)	6%	Elders (3%)
Traditionalist	Elders (8%)	5%	Gen Z (4%)
Enthusiast	Millennials (7%)	5%	Elders (1%)
Caregiver	Gen Z (6%)	4%	Elders (1%)
Activist	Gen Z (6%)	2%	Gen X (1%)
No Connection	Gen Z & Gen X (16%)	13%	Elders (7%)

In *Sacred Pathways*, Gary Thomas notes, “Spiritual temperaments can evolve over time. Just as a married couple will express their love for each other differently in their 50s than they did in their 20s, so our love relationship with God undergoes change as we mature and walk through life.”³ We may see some of that in the generational differences, with Gen Z connecting with God through the activity of working for justice or caring for others. Perhaps Elders have learned to settle back and enjoy communing with God in nature.

We also recognize that the descriptions of the temperaments may reflect the churchgoing habits of each generation. Gen Z may respond to sensory interaction with God, perhaps at a concert or through a video, but the description specifies that the senses come alive “in a church.”

THE JOURNEY

The Spiritual Temperaments are about *who* people are in their connection with God. Now we want to consider *where* they are in their spiritual journey. In Chapter 2, “Faith in Motion,” we briefly reported on a new set of data on Spiritual Commitment. The survey offered eight descriptions of points along a journey of faith, from “not interested” to “Christ is the most important relationship in my life.”

3 Thomas, p. 233.

Steps of Spiritual Commitment

**STEP
1**

I am not a Christian and I am currently not interested in exploring what it means to be a Christian.

**STEP
2**

I am not a Christian but I am starting to explore what it means to be a Christian.

**STEP
3**

I consider myself a Christian, though my faith is not a significant part of my life.

**STEP
4**

I believe in God, but I've not yet made a decision to commit to having a relationship with Jesus Christ.

**STEP
5**

I've definitely made a decision to commit to having a relationship with Jesus Christ.

**STEP
6**

I have a solid relationship with Christ that makes a difference in my life.

**STEP
7**

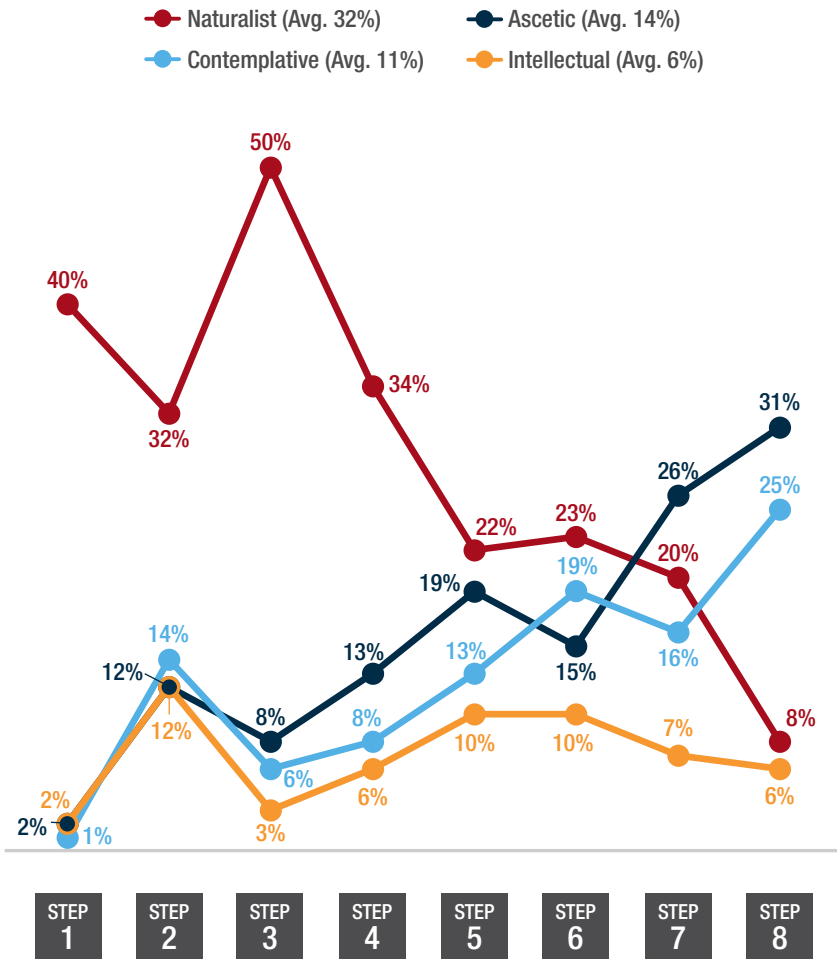
I have an intimate relationship with Christ that influences my daily life.

**STEP
8**

Christ is the most important relationship in my life.

Do the Spiritual Temperaments affect people's progress on this journey? The data reveal some significant movement.

Spiritual Commitment by Selected Temperaments



The graph shows the percentage of those at each step of the journey who identify as that particular spiritual temperament. We've selected four of the five most common temperaments to track through the stages.

While the connection with God through nature continues among those who are committed to Christ, it decreases substantially. Half of the “nominal” Christians (Step 3), who say their faith is not a significant part of their life, are Naturalists. Only one in twelve of those at the strongest level of commitment say they connect best with God through nature.

It shouldn't surprise us that people who connect best with God outdoors would be reluctant to come inside for a worship service.

An opposite trend is seen with Ascetics and Contemplatives. Remember that Ascetics connect with God through personal prayer and Bible reading, while Contemplatives connect personally with God as a “friend.” These temperaments seem to grow in importance as people commit to Christ at a deeper level.

The Intellectual pathway holds some quirks. It balloons among those who are exploring Christianity, though not yet committed (Step 2), and it makes a strong showing among those at the early stages of Christian commitment (Steps 5 and 6). This might suggest that an intellectual connection with God can lead a person *into* Christian faith, but that faith deepens more through personal devotion and less through reasoning.

Step 2 on this journey represents the “seeker.” In some ways, the nominal Christian (Step 3) and the theist (Step 4) might be further along in their journey, but they seem to be stalled or moving backward. With its relatively high representation of Bible readers, mullers, and thinkers, the Step 2 group seems to be at the doorstep of Christian commitment.

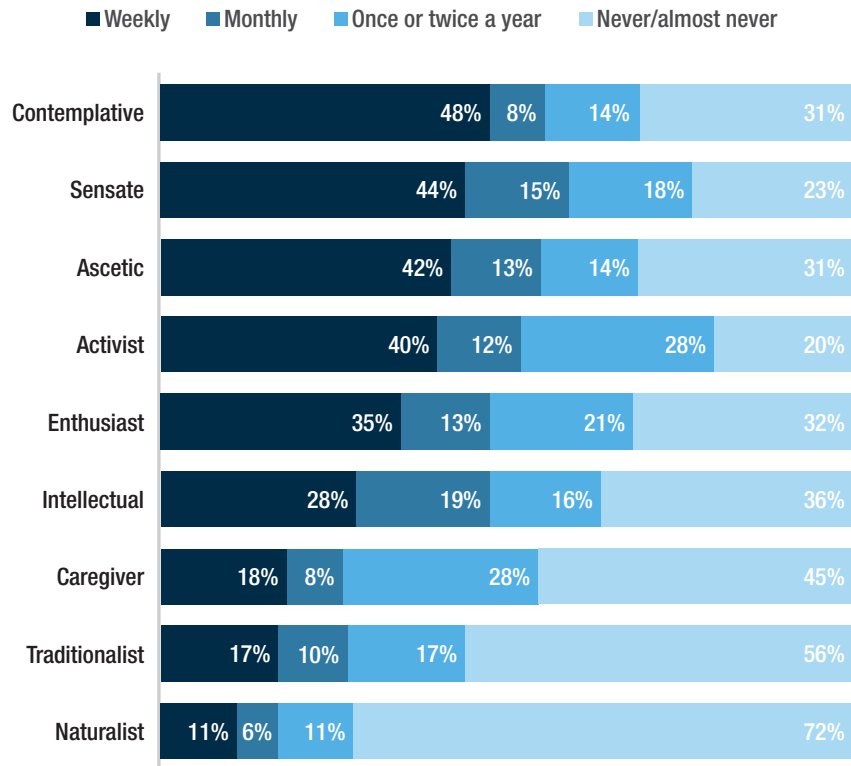
CHURCHGOING

How do spiritual temperaments affect one's church attendance? When we track the attendance patterns of each temperament, we see some important differences. We've already seen that nearly one in three Americans would say they connect with the supernatural best in nature. Some of these (11%) attend church weekly, but a vast majority (72%) attend "never" or "almost never." It shouldn't surprise us that people who connect best with God outdoors would be reluctant to come inside for a worship service.

Also worth noting is the number of Traditionalists who attend church infrequently. We might expect them to be the most loyal attenders, but nearly three-quarters of them (73%) don't even attend monthly. Does this reflect a nominal faith, or is it perhaps a protest against churches that have ditched traditional styles?

There's a marked difference here between Caregivers and Activists, though we might expect them to be similar, since both put into practice Jesus's command to love our neighbors. While the sample sizes are low, we find Activists far more active in church attendance (40% weekly). Do Caregivers feel their personal ministry takes the place of church involvement, or are they just too weary to get to church? Do Activists, on the other hand, find in church services the fuel they need to fight for justice?

Spiritual Temperament by Churchgoing Frequency



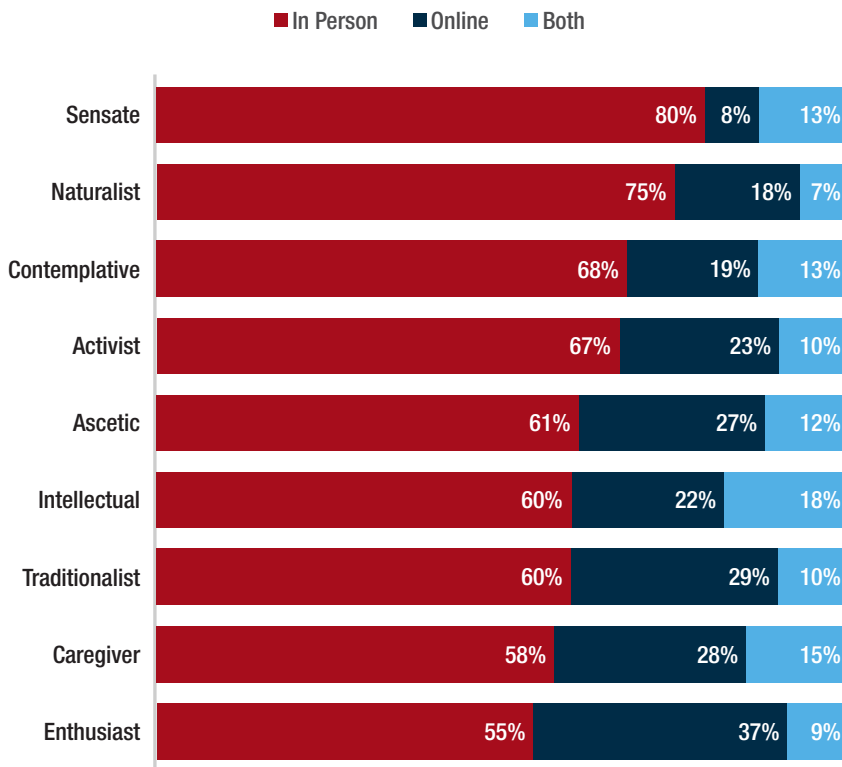
When the *State of the Bible* survey asks about church attendance, online services are explicitly included. But we also include a question that separates the two formats, revealing whether people attend services primarily in person, primarily online, or both about equally.

Sensates, those who say they connect best with God when “I’m in a church where my senses come alive and I experience God’s presence,” are most likely to attend church primarily in person (80%). Similarly, we might expect Ascetics, who connect with God when “I

am alone and reading the Bible or praying,” to value the online experience, which is generally less social and more “alone.” More than a quarter of them (27%) do, in fact, attend church primarily online.

But there are some surprises as we study these preferences. Enthusiasts, who connect with God when “I am singing or praying loudly and my emotions are awakened,” have the highest portion (37%) attending church primarily online. Do they feel they can shout hallelujah at home but not at church?

Spiritual Temperament by Church Format



Perhaps you've noticed that certain denominations have particular styles. A churchgoer having a hard time in one church might find a happy home in another type of church. No, we're not suggesting that you trade parishioners like baseball cards, but attention to Spiritual Temperaments might help some churches adapt their styles and expand their ministries.

Top 5 Temperaments for 4 Denominational Groups

<p>Evangelical Protestant</p> <p>Ascetic (23%) Naturalist (22%) Contemplative (15%) Sensate (13%) Enthusiast (9%)</p>	<p>Mainline Protestant</p> <p>Naturalist (30%) Ascetic (15%) Contemplative (13%) Sensate (10%) Enthusiast (9%)</p>
<p>Historically Black Protestant</p> <p>Ascetic (23%) Naturalist (21%) Enthusiast (14%) Contemplative (11%) Sensate (11%)</p>	<p>Catholic</p> <p>Naturalist (28%) Ascetic (16%) Contemplative (14%) Sensate (11%) Traditionalist (11%)</p>

As we explore the temperaments of those from different church traditions, we see that the Ascetics—connecting through simple prayer and Bible study—are strong among Evangelicals and those in Historically Black denominations. Enthusiasts are strongest in the Historically Black denominations and weakest among Catholics. Traditionalists appear in the top five only among Catholics.

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Scripture Engaged people tend to be Ascetic (32%) or Contemplative (24%), reading the Bible and finding friendship with God there. We've watched the Naturalist group, including nearly a third of all Americans, barreling through many other categories in this chapter, but it places a distant fourth (10%) among the Scripture Engaged.

On the other hand, the Naturalists dominate the Bible Disengaged, with four out of nine (44%), and no other temperament registering higher than 6 percent. This leads us to a conclusion we've been gathering throughout this chapter. Many people interact with God both in Scripture and in his creation, but for many others, nature takes the place of Scripture, of the church, or even of God. The Bible celebrates the way creation declares God's glory, but it also warns about worshipping the creation more than the Creator. We seem to see both sides in this survey.

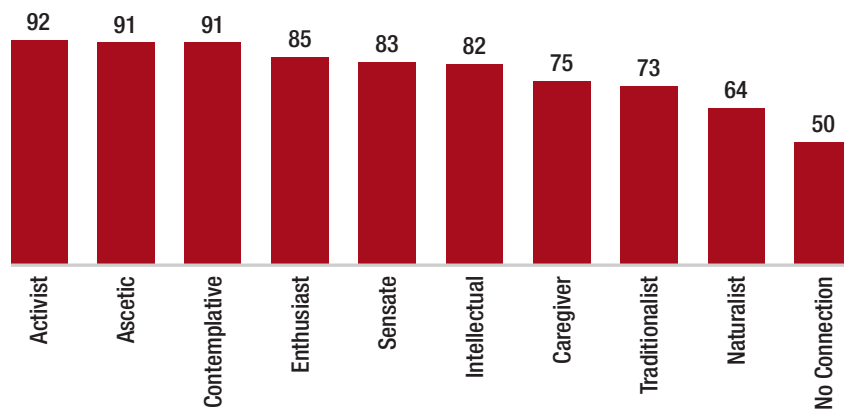
Scripture Engagement by Spiritual Temperament

Temperament	Scripture Engaged	Movable Middle	Bible Disengaged
Ascetic	32%	16%	6%
Contemplative	24%	10%	6%
Sensate	12%	11%	5%
Naturalist	10%	26%	44%
Intellectual	7%	9%	3%
Enthusiast	7%	7%	3%
Activist	4%	5%	0%
Traditionalist	2%	8%	5%
Caregiver	1%	6%	3%
No Connection	0%	1%	25%

We like to look at the data from all angles, so we've also computed the collective Scripture Engagement scores for those in each of the Spiritual Temperaments. As a reminder, we derive a person's Scripture Engagement score from multiple questions in the survey involving frequency of Bible reading, its impact on one's relationship with God, and its centrality in decision-making.⁴

While Ascetics and Contemplatives have the most people in the Scripture Engaged camp, the highest collective score belongs to Activists. While only a small fraction of the Scripture Engaged (4%) identify as Activist, *none* of the Disengaged do. This means that those few who are Activist are highly engaged, driving that average score upward. And that makes sense. If someone is "obeying God by standing up for his justice and urging people to join the cause," it's likely that they've been engaging with Isaiah or Amos or Luke or James and putting their reading into practice.

Average Scripture Engagement Scores by Spiritual Temperament



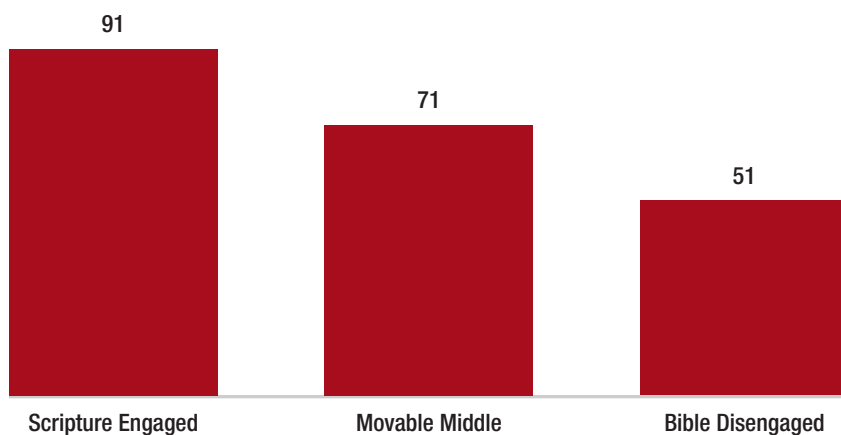
⁴ See "Scripture Engagement Scale" in Appendix 2: Definitions.

SPIRITUAL VITALITY

Our journey has taken us from an initial Spiritual Temperament assessment through churchgoing and Scripture Engagement. Now we come to the broad issue of spiritual health, illuminated by a proven metric called the Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svG).⁵ From answers to nine concise questions focusing on beliefs, spiritual practices, and faith in action, the svG yields a score between 0 and 100 as a reliable measure of spiritual health. This year, we included these questions in the *State of the Bible* survey, asking them only of self-identified Christians.

First, we found a very strong correlation with Scripture Engagement. This was no surprise, but it serves to verify the importance of the Bible in spiritual health. Spiritually healthy people engage with Scripture on a consistent basis.

Scripture Engagement and Spiritual Vitality (SVG)

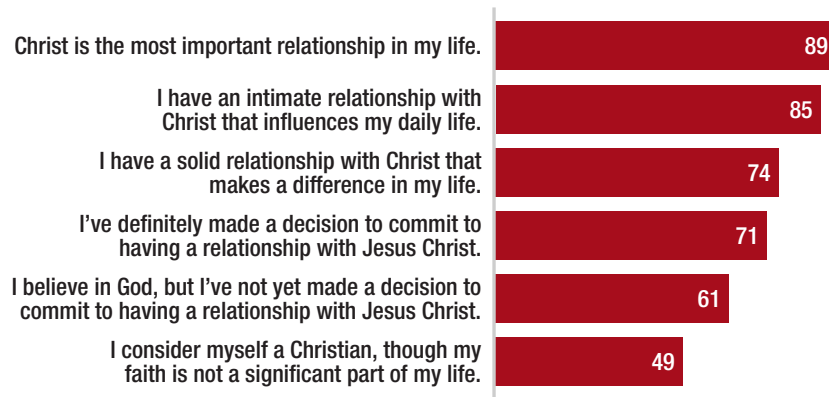


Base: Self-identified Christians

⁵ The Spiritual Vitality Gauge is used by permission of Renovo. All rights reserved. renovo.services

We also saw increasing SVG scores with each advancing step on the spiritual journey, as we described earlier in this chapter. (Because we only asked the SVG questions of those who identified as Christians, we have omitted the first two steps of the journey.)

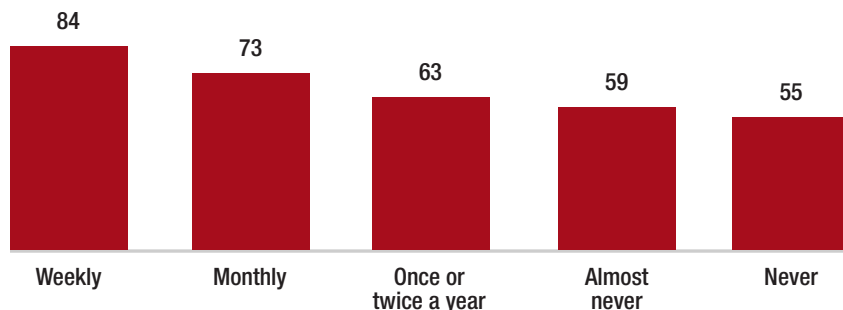
Spiritual Journey and Spiritual Vitality (SVG)



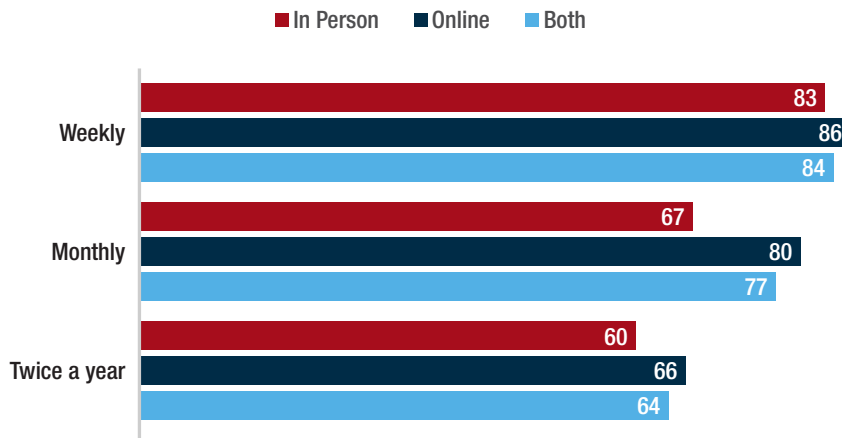
Base: Self-identified Christians

As we expected, those who attend church more often (either in-person or online) show more spiritual vitality, as shown by the SVG. Yet it might surprise some that those who attend primarily online have slightly higher SVG scores than those who attend in person.

Church Attendance and Spiritual Vitality (SVG)



Church Format and Spiritual Vitality (SVG)



CONCLUSION: FOLLOW THE LEADERS

In our evaluation of the SVG among several different demographic groups, we found that black Americans significantly outscore white and Hispanic Americans on this measure of Spiritual Vitality.⁶

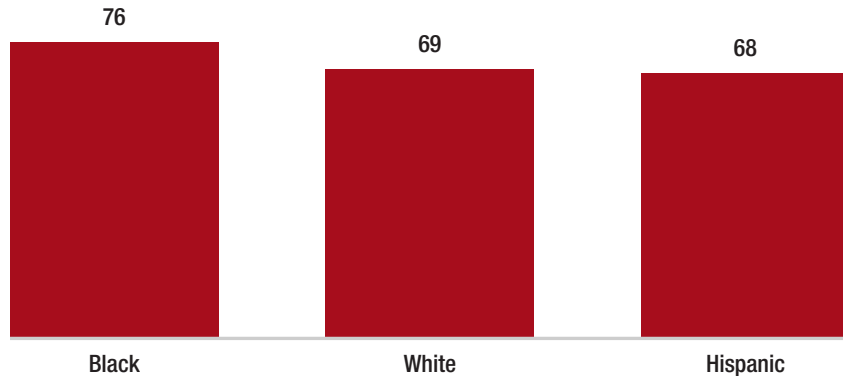
This should not surprise us. The fact is, black Americans lead the way on nearly every measure of spiritual life we have. People in this group are more likely to attend church weekly, to read the Bible, to be Scripture Engaged, to be “Bible Centered,” and now to display Spiritual Vitality in their lives.

In a review article about religion’s effect on mental health among minorities, Nguyen and Sands state: “Religion has been an important

⁶ Other ethnic groups had sample sizes too small for legitimate comparison.

source of resiliency for many racial and ethnic minority populations.” Later they examine some reasons for that.

Spiritual Vitality (SVG) by Race/Ethnic Group



“In black communities, religion and the church serve many functions above and beyond spiritual sustenance. Historically and contemporaneously, the black church, in addition to being a religious institution, is a social, cultural, civic, educational, and political institution that is central to black communities. . . . Because of social, economic, and institutional disenfranchisement, black Americans have traditionally had difficulty accessing public and private services. As a result, black churches tend to offer a greater number of community programs and mental health services than white churches.”⁷

Yet we know it’s not just “religion” that provides this inner strength, especially in the history of black Americans. It’s a relationship with

⁷ Nguyen, A. W., & Sands, L. P. (2020). Religion and mental health in racial and ethnic minority populations: A review of the literature. *Innovation in Aging*, 4(5). Accessed 6/12/23 at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7518711/>. The article cites Lincoln, C. E., & Mamiya, L. H. (1990). *The Black church in the African American experience*. Duke University Press; also Taylor, R. J., Ellison, C. G., Chatters, L. M., Levin, J. S., & Lincoln, K. D. (2000). Mental health services in faith communities: The role of clergy in black churches. *Social Work*, 45(1), 73–87.

Jesus Christ, found in the teachings of Scripture, celebrated in the community of faith, tested in the fires of prejudice, and nurtured by God's promises.

“The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed,” the Psalmist assures us, “a place of safety in times of trouble” (Psalm 9:9 GNT). Over centuries of disenfranchisement, black Americans have developed a resiliency that's noted by experts, but also a trusting relationship in the Lord who provides refuge. *State of the Bible* research shows overwhelmingly that black Christians lead the way on virtually every desirable metric. This group has a lot to teach the rest of the American church.

People everywhere are on unique journeys of faith, bringing their past experiences, personality quirks, and generational histories. God meets us in the pages of Scripture, in community, in nature, intellectually and spiritually. He hears our cries of “Help!” and “Hallelujah!” And he walks with us, beside us, sometimes ahead of us, through trials and triumphs. ■

BLACK CHRISTIANS: LEADING THE WAY

Black Americans are

44%

more likely than all other Americans to attend church at least monthly.

Black Americans are

59%

more likely than all other Americans to be Scripture Engaged.

Black Christians score

10%

higher than all other Christians on the Spiritual Vitality Gauge.



GENERATION Z

REMEMBER Y2K? If you're not in Generation Z, you might be old enough to recall the doomsday fears that accompanied our passage into this new millennium. We worried that computers, which had come to dominate our lives, would be baffled by the sudden appearance of "00" on their internal calendars. Files would be erased, cars would stop running, games of Donkey Kong would pause forever.

It didn't happen like that, and many of us felt foolish for fretting.

The oldest members of Gen Z were born about that time. While Millennials *became adults* in the new millennium, thus earning their label, the next generation has been *growing up* in the twenty-first century. That in itself tells us a lot about them, as we think about the world they learned to navigate. Born 1997–2012, they are turning 11 to 26 this year. The *State of the Bible* only surveys adults, ages 18 and up, so we include only about half of that generation in our survey, but even this half-tribe shows unique characteristics, as well as fascinating differences between its older and younger members.

“The transition to adulthood today is more complex, disjointed, and confusing than in past decades.”

Christian Smith

As you might expect, the great majority of Gen Z adults are not yet married. Many are still getting their education. Many are still living with their parents. One major trend of this century is the tendency of young adults (including many Millennials) to “return to the nest,”

living with their families for little or no rent until they get married or established in a career.¹ Young adults living with their parents have certain freedoms teenagers don’t, but there might also be some restrictions—and all of this might affect their spiritual lives and development.

Millennials are known as the first “digital natives.” They have never known a world without computers. But we might consider Gen Z the first “**social media natives.**” Cell phones became common during the upbringing of this generation, evolving into “smart phones,” not just portable but now wielding considerable computing power. In previous decades someone might “go online,” turning a computer on and sending a message, but now people are always connected. This is the world Gen Z grew up in—always on.

Dominant social mores have changed as well, especially regarding marriage, sexuality, and gender. Observers in recent decades have noted a steady decline in Christian assumptions: shops closed on Sunday, “bad words” as taboo in public, basic Bible knowledge, and the like. Some call this a post-Christian century. Indeed, many

1 Fry, R. (2020, September 4). *A majority of young adults in the U.S. live with their parents for the first time since the Great Depression*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/09/04/a-majority-of-young-adults-in-the-u-s-live-with-their-parents-for-the-first-time-since-the-great-depression/>

Gen Z adults have grown up without learning anything about the Bible, the church, or Jesus.

This time of life (ages 18–26) is also an opportunity for **re-evaluation**. Young adults may question the religious, social, or political views of their parents. They may turn away from their childhood faith, or they may embrace a faith that’s completely new to them. A recent project by the Pew Research Center, looking back through the past few decades, estimates that about three in ten people raised as Christians “become unaffiliated between ages 15 to 29, the tumultuous period in which religious switching is concentrated” (while some others disaffiliate from their previous faith and enter Christianity).²

Experts talk about the development of both personal identity (*who am I?*) and social identity (*how do I fit in my world?*) in this stage of life.³ We might add spiritual identity, which interacts with both of those (*how do I relate to God as I live my life in this world?*).

“The transition to adulthood today is more complex, disjointed, and confusing than in past decades,” wrote Christian Smith . . . *in 2009*.⁴ He had the Millennial generation in his gaze, but the trend seems to continue with Zoomers, with even greater pace, pressure, and possibilities. Traditional markers of personal, social, and spiritual identity have worn away. Many young adults are forging a new path—on their own.

2 Nadeem, R. (2022, September 13). *Modeling the future of religion in America*. Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

3 See Setran & Kiesling, *Spiritual formation in emerging adulthood*, 58–9.

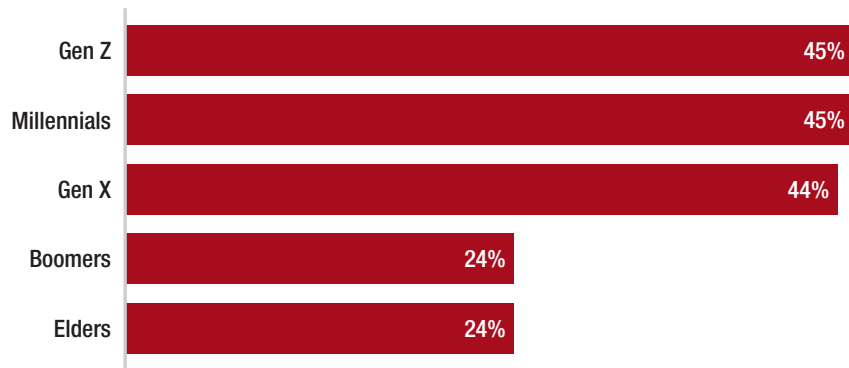
4 *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 6. Cited in Setran & Kiesling, 55.

Our goal with *State of the Bible* research is to learn all we can about the journey Gen Z is on, what challenges they face, how we can help, and what they can teach us about this new world they inhabit. One thing we learned from Y2K was that sometimes the stroke of midnight doesn't bring doomsday, just a new day.

Digital Bible Use by Generation

How frequently have you read from a digital Bible app on a phone, tablet, or computer in the past year?

Weekly or Daily Digital Bible Use



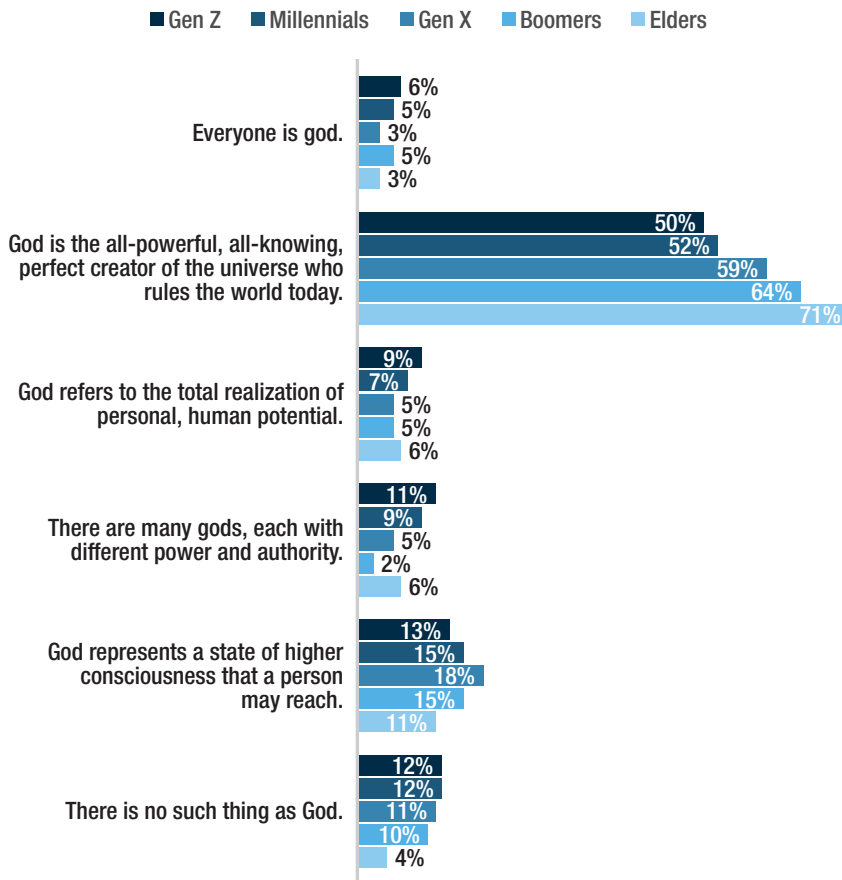
Base: Bible Users

FAITH AND CHURCH

Half of Gen Z adults (50%) adopt the traditional Christian understanding of God as “the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.” This is slightly lower than the portion of Millennials (52%) who hold this view. Among all Americans born before 1981, five of eight (63%) claim this belief.

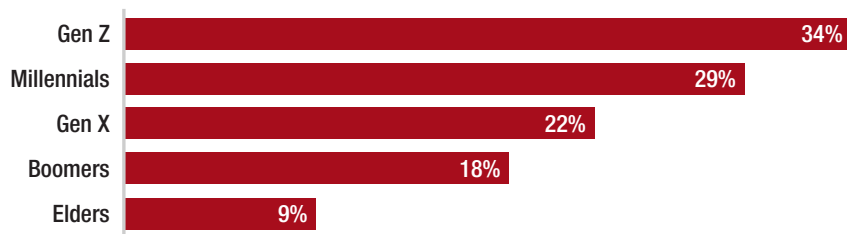
We also see Gen Z adults slightly more likely to dabble in other ideas about deity—ideas we might call pantheism, polytheism, atheism, self-actualization, and higher consciousness. Yet all generations have a smattering of these views (“higher consciousness” is surprisingly popular among Gen X). While there’s evidence that a post-Christian theology is slowly gaining ground, no alternate view of God is taking over. Basic theism is still the default belief in America.

Beliefs about God by Generation



When we move from beliefs to religious affiliation, the difference between generations grows starker. More than a third of Gen Z adults (34%) identify as Agnostic, Atheist, or No Religious Faith (AAN). This is substantially more than Millennials (28%). The chart shows us stairsteps, as each older generation has fewer in the AAN categories.

Portion of Agnostics, Atheists, or Nones by Generation



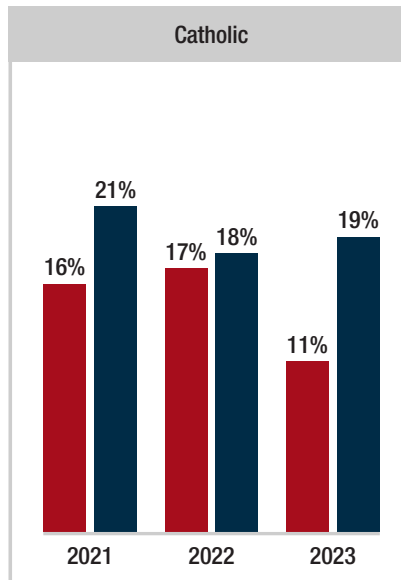
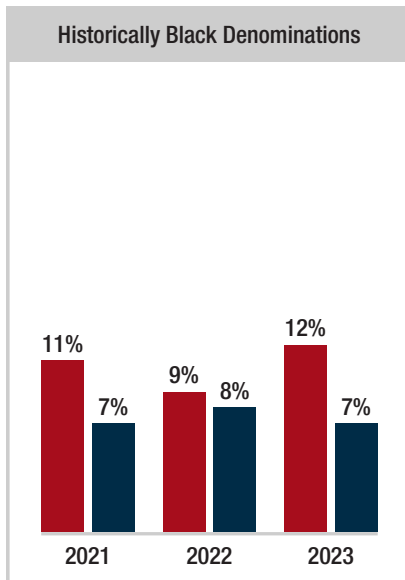
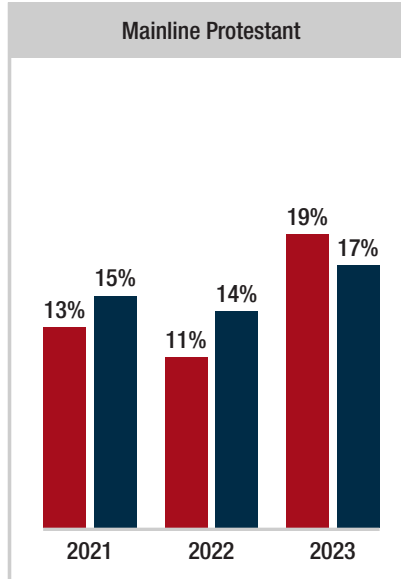
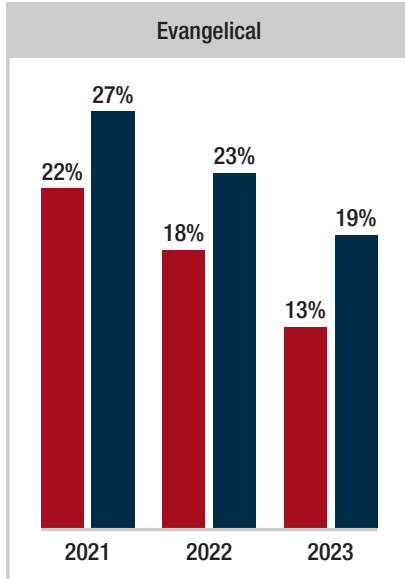
Yet there are still substantially more Gen Z adults who identify as Christians (58%), combining Catholic, Protestant, and “Other” Christian traditions. Agnostics, Atheists, and Nones are still in the minority, even in this most adventurous life-stage.

However, we’ve seen major movement over the last three years in affiliation with specific Christian denominations. The percentage of Gen Z adults identifying with Evangelical denominations has dropped sharply (22% to 13%). This is part of a significant exodus from evangelical churches among all American adults (27% to 19% over two years).

Mainline Protestants (11% to 19%) and Historically Black Protestants (9% to 12%) have gained with Gen Z in the last year. Both those groups are now more popular with Gen Z than with Americans in general.

Religious Identity, 2021–2023

■ Gen Z ■ Total U.S.



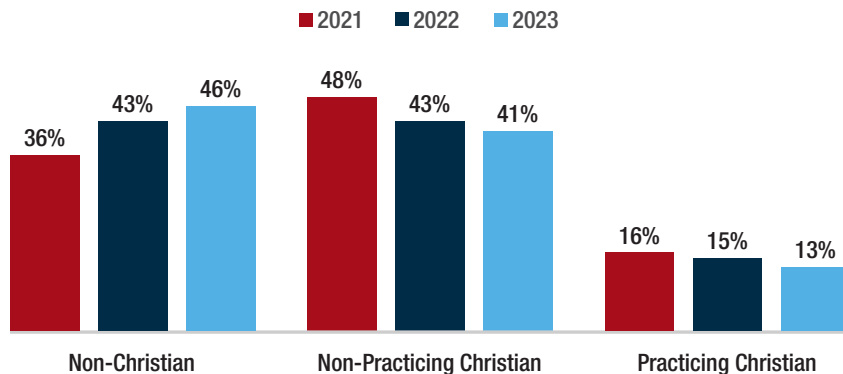
PRACTICING CHRISTIANS

The term “Practicing Christian” combines identity, belief, and practice to find people with an authentic, active faith. To qualify, one must identify as a Christian, attend church at least once a month (online or in person), and say their faith is very important to them.

Generationally, older people are far more likely than younger people to be Practicing Christians. Nearly a third of Elders (32%) qualify, along with not quite as many Boomers (28%) and even fewer in Gen X (23%). Only about one in eight Millennials and Gen Z (both at 13%) are Practicing Christians.

Over the last three years, Gen Z has declined steadily in its percentage of Practicing Christians, and also of Non-Practicing Christians (those who identify as Christians but lack either the “very important” factor or church attendance). Yet in 2023 their percentage of Non-Christians has increased dramatically. This indicates that we’re not just dealing with people who don’t feel like going to church. A greater number of young adults do not identify as Christians.

Gen Z and Practicing Christians, 2021–2023

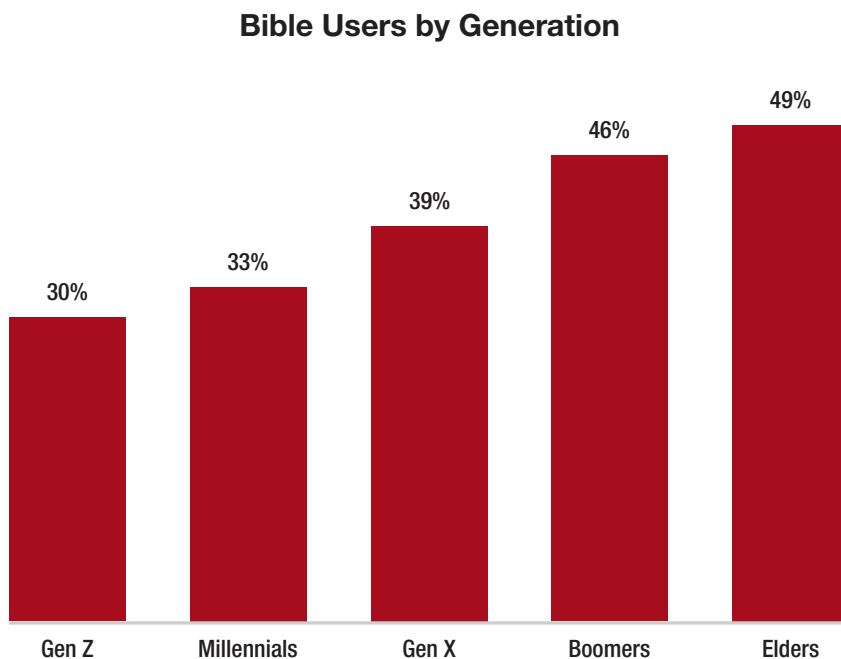


BIBLE READING AND ENGAGEMENT

With regard to Bible interaction, our survey sets both a rather low bar and a high bar. Gen Z adults score low on both measures.

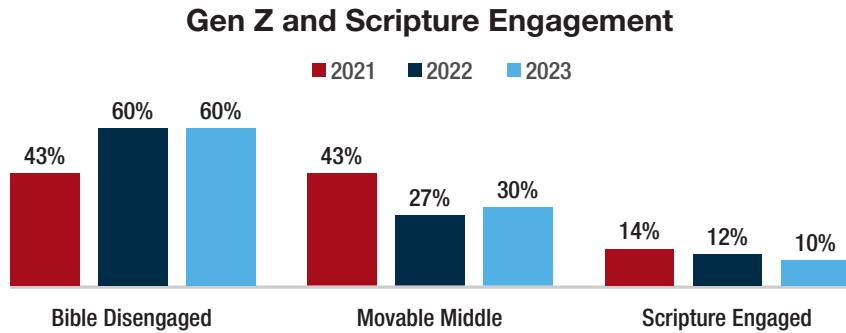
Bible Use is the low bar. If you interact with the Bible on your own, outside of a church service, at least three times a year, you're a Bible User. With only three in ten (30%) interacting with Scripture even this much, Gen Z adults rank lowest of all generations in Bible Use. This is the same percentage Gen Z registered last year.

It should be noted that fewer than half of *any* generation this year, even Elders, are Bible Users.⁵



⁵ This is the first year that all generations are under 50 percent in Bible Use. Overall, Bible Use ticked down from 39 to 38 percent in the past year, largely due to a drop among Elders from 58 to 49 percent.

The high bar for Bible interaction is **Scripture Engagement**, a measure explained elsewhere in this document, combining frequency, centrality in decision-making, and spiritual impact. The percentage of Gen Z adults who are Scripture Engaged has declined steadily (14%, 12%, 10%) in the last three years.



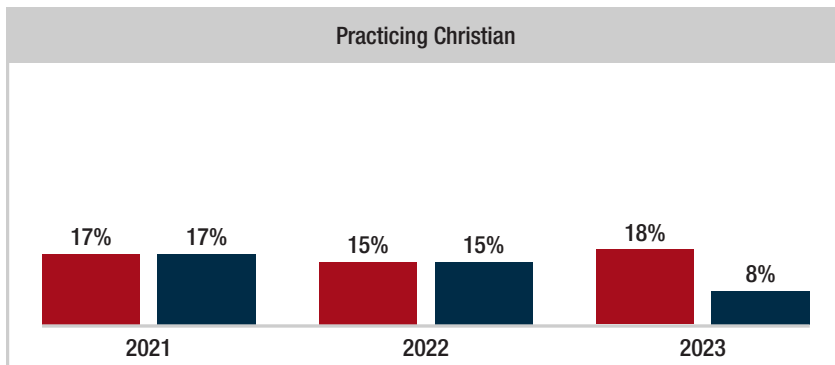
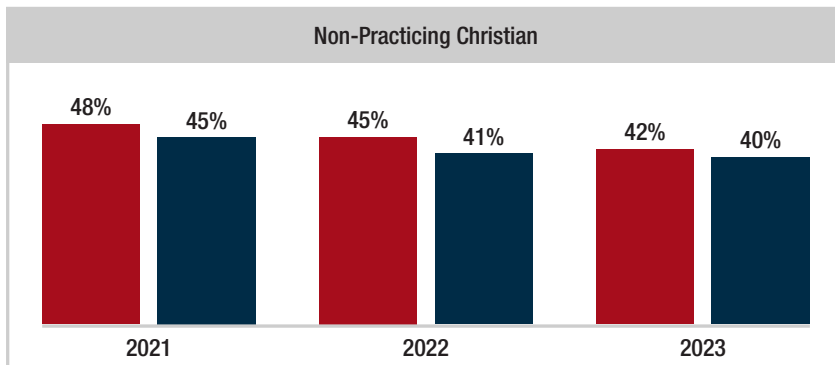
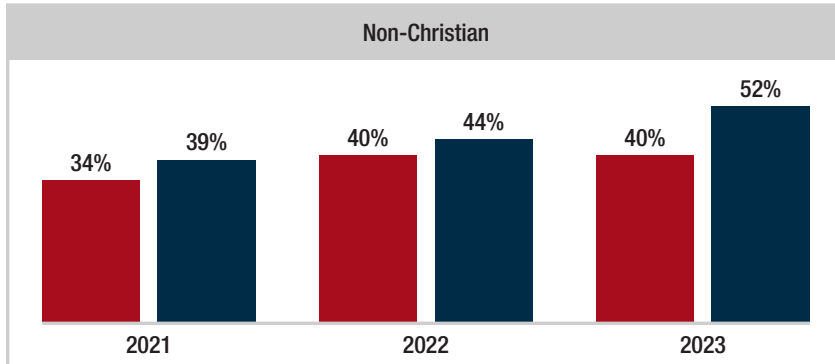
OLDER AND YOUNGER GEN Z

There's a difference between a high school senior and a college grad. A young adult living with parents has a different life than another one getting an apartment closer to work. The group we survey as Generation Z includes a wide range of life experience, even when we only count its adult members. But what if we divided this generation even further? We thought maybe people ages 22 to 26 would have different numbers in our survey than those 18 to 21. We were right.

Older Gen Z is less than half as likely to be Practicing Christians as younger ones. This suggests that a significant number of people stop going to church, or perhaps stop claiming to be Christians, at some point during their early twenties. The percentage of older Gen Z who are non-Christians exceeds that of younger Gen Z by a significant margin (52–40%).

Practicing Christian Status Among Older and Younger Gen Z

■ Gen Z (18–21) ■ Gen Z (22–26)



In the last chapter, we explored Spiritual Temperaments. The temperaments most associated with Scripture engagement and Christian maturity were the Ascetic and Contemplative; the least was Naturalist. Comparing older Gen Z with younger Gen Z, we see differences at these same points. Older Gen Z are more likely to connect with God in nature, and less likely to be Ascetic or Contemplative. They were also considerably more likely to say it’s impossible to connect with God at all.

Spiritual Temperaments in Older and Younger Gen Z

Temperament	Gen Z (18–21)	Gen Z (22–26)	All Others
Naturalist	27%	34%	32%
Contemplative	16%	6%	11%
Ascetic	13%	10%	14%
Sensate	8%	6%	8%
Enthusiast	6%	7%	5%
Caregiver	6%	5%	3%
Activist	5%	6%	2%
Traditionalist	4%	4%	6%
Intellectual	2%	7%	6%
No Connection	13%	18%	13%

Similarly, provided with various views of biblical authority, the younger Gen Z-ers were far more likely to choose options associated with more conservative Christian teaching. Between the “literal word for word” response and the “without errors” response, nearly half (45%) of the 18–21 year-olds affirmed these “high views”

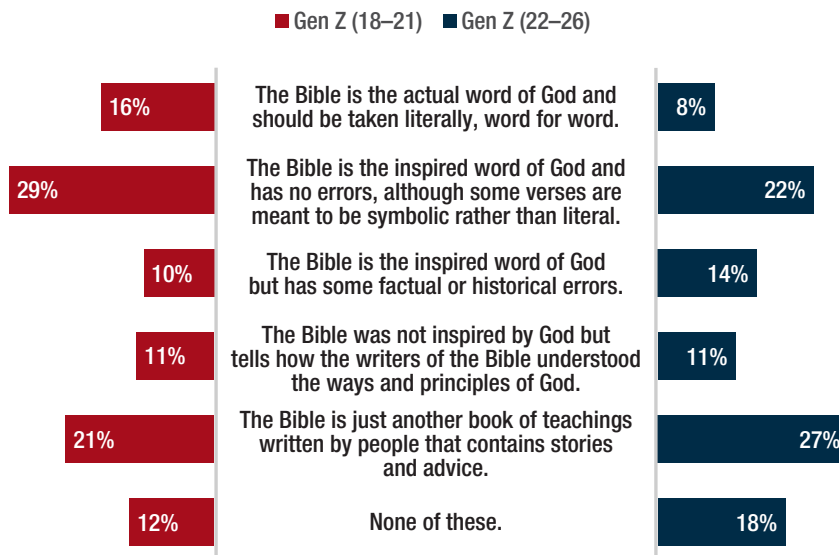
of Scripture inspiration. Older Gen Z-ers agreed at only two-thirds of that pace (30%). The older ones were more likely to say the Bible is “just another book of teachings” (27%, compared with 21%).

Just a few years of young adulthood make a big difference. Are older Gen Z-ers questioning what they were taught and exploring new options?

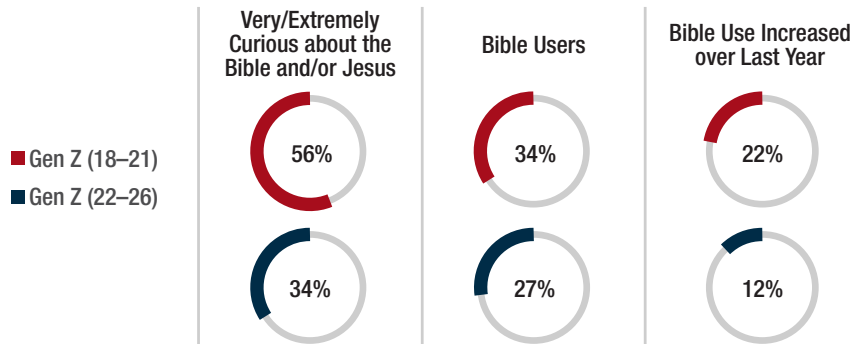
Notably, the percentage of those who hold these “high views” of Scripture inspiration *far exceeds the percentage of Bible Users*. Among younger Gen Z adults, while 45 percent indicate their esteem for the Bible in these two ways, only 34 percent are Bible Users. At the risk of oversimplification, it suggests that 11 percent of these young adults respect the Bible but still don’t read it.

Beliefs about the Bible in Older and Younger Gen Z

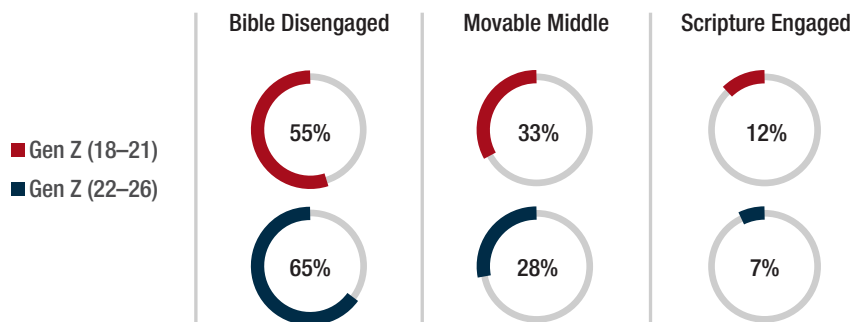
Which of the following statements comes closest to describing what you believe about the Bible?



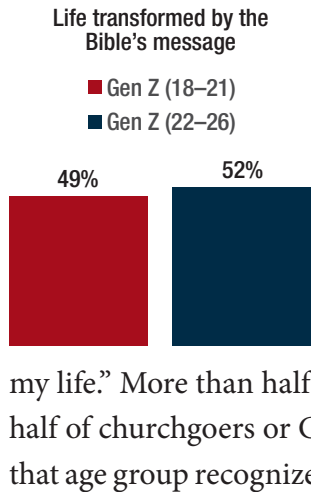
In further comparisons, younger Zoomers showed more curiosity about the Bible and/or Jesus, scored higher in most Bible and church measures, and are far more likely to wish they read the Bible more.



Statistically, it appears that younger Gen Z resembles Gen X (who, in many cases, are their parents). Older Gen Z resembles Millennials (who might be their older siblings). Yet we’re seeing even greater declines than we’ve seen with Millennials.

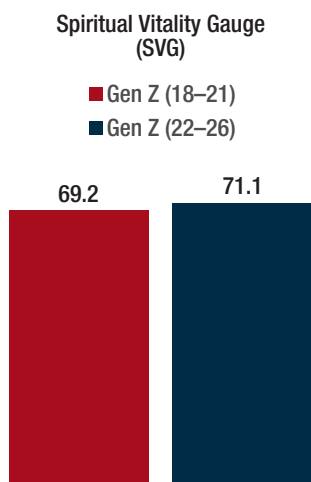


The older Gen Z includes many who are rethinking previous religious commitments. Some are questioning their faith. Some are leaving the church. Many show less interest in the Bible. These appear to be steps they take between age 21 and 26.



Yet keep in mind that we’re dealing with percentages. We see a trend here that’s concerning, but there are indications that some in the older Gen Z group continue to display spiritual vitality. We asked everyone in our survey if they agreed with the statement “The message of the Bible has transformed my life.” More than half of 22–26 year-olds said yes. That’s not just half of churchgoers or Christians. More than half of Americans in that age group recognize that the Bible’s message has affected them.

We were also interested to compare the older and younger Gen Z on the new metric we included this year, the Spiritual Vitality Gauge (see Chapter 4). On this measurement of holistic spiritual health, the older Gen Z outscored the younger by a few points. It’s not a huge difference, but given the profusion of negative scores for this older Gen Z group, this offers some hope.



One explanation: We asked the svg questions only of self-identified Christians. As we’ve seen, the proportion of Non-Christians in this older Gen Z group has grown, and there are fewer self-identified Christians. Yet we see a Christian maturity developing in this group. Despite all the negative data, you can’t assume that the Christian 22–26 year-olds you know are sub-par believers. There just aren’t as many of them.

GOOD NEWS FOR GEN Z?

It has been noted, by us and others, that Gen Z seems more activist than older generations. We found this confirmed again in several questions about what we call “prosocial behaviors.” While Gen Z results were comparable to other generations on all the behaviors listed, they led the way in three areas:

- Advocating for those who are oppressed
- Welcoming immigrants
- Caring for those in prison

We should also note that older Gen Z was ahead of younger Gen Z in these concerns.

There’s more to this story than youthful energy. When churches become known for a judgmental spirit, for infighting, or for pious irrelevance, people leave.⁶ What we observe in our data is that many of the people who leave are young adults.

But when Christians follow our Lord’s instruction to show his love to those in need, the church often gets a second look. How can we respond faithfully to the concerns and perceptions of our youngest adults?

We always keep an eye out for opportunities to acquaint people with Jesus, and we found a new possibility here. We asked Non-Christians and Non-Practicing Christians if they’d accept an invitation from a Christian friend to . . . Watch a TV show about Jesus, Have dinner

⁶ <https://www.barna.com/research/current-perceptions/>

and discuss biblical things, Listen to a Christian podcast, Attend a Christian concert, and so on.

The responses from Gen Z Non-Christians were quite low, but among Non-Practicing Christians in Gen Z, they were quite high—

- 41 percent likely to go to a concert
- 40 percent to stream a church service online
- 26 percent to watch a TV show or movie about Jesus
- 24 percent to listen to a Christian podcast

All of that suggests that there might be ways to get Non-Practicing Christian young people practicing again . . . if we ask.

And the highest response among Gen Z Non-Christians? Not the concert or the movie, but “Eat a meal in a group where biblical issues are discussed.” Nearly one in five (18%) would consider that. So start searching for recipes. ■

Nearly one in five Gen Z Non-Christians would consider “eating a meal in a group where biblical issues are discussed.”

ENGAGING GEN Z

BY MARK MATLOCK

*“After a while the people of Joshua’s generation died,
and the next generation did not know the LORD
or any of the things he had done for Israel.”*

Judges 2:10 CEV

Imagine that. After an amazing Exodus, decades of wilderness provision, and finally reaching the land God promised to Abraham, a generation rises that doesn’t know God and can’t recall what he did for Israel.

How does this happen?

Sadly, I encountered it in my own home while watching an episode of *The Bible* (produced by Roma Downey) with my daughter. We had just watched Moses and the Israelites miraculously cross the Red Sea, as a result of God’s extraordinary provision for them, when my daughter—then a young teenager—turned to me and said, “Wait! That really happened? That’s in the Bible?”

As a minister who has traveled the country teaching teenagers the Bible, I was speechless. How does she not know this?

A few weeks later, speaking at a college ministry event for a church in the Bible Belt, I discovered that less than half of those in attendance were familiar with the story of

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego found in Daniel. And the majority of these young adults had grown up in the church!

This was nearly two decades ago, but it was a wakeup call for me as a parent and as a minister. I had taken my own spiritual upbringing for granted, forgetting that the experiences of this younger generation were vastly different from my own.

Growing up, every Easter I had watched Cecil B. DeMille's film *The Ten Commandments* (because it was the most exciting thing on our television's five channels). My Sunday school lessons had a comprehensive scope and sequence that exposed me to the breadth of the Bible's narrative. By contrast, a generation later, the church in which we were raising my daughter changed their philosophy of children's ministry three times during her early years. It wasn't that my parents had done a better job raising children (though they probably did!), but that the culture had changed radically over the years. The systems that had informed and encouraged my spiritual development were no longer in place for my daughter. This forced me to pay new attention to the spiritual formation of these emerging generations.

Read the rest of this article on the American Bible Society blog, americanbible.org/matlock. ■



MARK MATLOCK

Mark Matlock is a facilitator of innovation and impact, helping organizations adapt to changing times by turning research-based insights into action. As the founder of WisdomWorks, Mark has worked as a consultant to national and international faith-based organizations, helping them leverage the transforming power of wisdom to accomplish their mission.

Having initiated many projects related to the Next Generation, Mark's research continues to provide insights into emerging generations and how to cultivate faithful disciples. Mark is the co-author of *Faith for Exiles*, and is currently working on Emotionally Healthy Discipleship for teens with Pete Scazzero and a new book, *Faith for the Curious*, being released in 2024 with Barna and Baker Books.

Connect with Mark at wisdomworks.com.

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO ...

Advocate
for those
who are
oppressed

GEN Z (18-21)

78%

GEN Z (22-26)

79%

ALL OTHER ADULTS

68%

Welcome
immigrants

GEN Z (18-21)

67%

GEN Z (22-26)

73%

ALL OTHER ADULTS

58%

Care for
those in
prison

GEN Z (18-21)

51%

GEN Z (22-26)

55%

ALL OTHER ADULTS

45%



THE BIBLE AND BEHAVIOR

“It is impossible to give faithful witness to the gospel while being indifferent to the situation of the hungry, the sick, the victims of human inhumanity.”

Lesslie Newbigin¹

The first Christian martyr helped run a food program for poor widows. A third-century bishop urged his people to risk their lives caring for those stricken by a devastating plague. Christians started most of the first hospitals. (How many great hospitals today still bear the names of saints or Christian denominations?) Christians fought against slavery and child labor. They spoke out for better treatment of prisoners. In the 1850s, a Presbyterian pastor advocated for the rights of Chinese immigrants in California.

¹ Newbigin, L. (1989). *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. W. B. Eerdmans, p. 136.

Throughout history, the followers of Jesus have heeded his call to show love to “the least of these, my brothers and sisters” (Matthew 25:40 NLT), and they’ve done so in courageous, creative ways.

But about a century ago, a rift developed. As part of a larger series of disputes, many biblically minded Christians accused prominent churches of being seduced by the “social gospel” into a narrow focus on social reform. Efforts to usher in God’s kingdom through political change, they said, led to downplaying critical biblical teachings like sin and personal repentance. Overemphasis on social structures distracted from the essential mission of the church, which was to preach the gospel of salvation from sin through faith in Jesus.

It has been a balancing act ever since. Certain ministries and denominations became more known for their helping ministries or social advocacy, others for sharing the good news. This rift was far less of a factor within Catholic and Historically Black churches, who saw it as a false dichotomy. The biblical mandates for both emphases are illustrated poignantly in the appeal to pastors in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after . . .” *what?* The word in our Greek New Testament, *dikaiosune*, can be translated as “righteousness” or “justice.” Is Jesus blessing those who seek to live in right relationship with God? Those who work to see justice prevail in society? Different churches would preach this different ways.

In July 1974, Billy Graham invited 2400 Christian leaders from 150 nations to Lausanne, Switzerland, to talk about evangelism. Their Lausanne Covenant acknowledged that they had “sometimes

regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ.”²

A half-century later, where are we? Have we healed the rift? Are today’s Bible-engaged Christians sharing both God’s way of salvation and God’s call for justice?

VARIETIES OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Scripture engagement has an effect on people’s lives. In our efforts to gauge that effect, we ask about people’s religious beliefs, practices, and identity. In this chapter, we turn our focus to several banks of questions about social behavior. How do people care for those in need, for the community in general, and for themselves? Do they consider it important to serve the wider world of humanity in certain ways? And what difference does Scripture engagement make in these matters?

We combined the questions into three sets and totaled up scores for each set. There are also a few questions we treat separately. Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of the concept. The three sets, with their component questions, are:

² *The Lausanne Covenant*. Lausanne Movement. <https://lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant> (accessed August 10, 2023).

CARE FOR OTHERS

It is important for me to . . .

- Welcome immigrants into my community
- Befriend people of other races
- Befriend people of other religions
- Advocate for those who are oppressed by society

Each question has a numerical response range of 1 to 6, with an average score of about 4.

Collectively, the mean score is about 16.

LIFE CARE

How important is it for you to practice the following disciplines?

- Living a healthy lifestyle
- Caring for my mental and emotional health
- Practicing wise money management

Each question has a numerical response range of 1 to 5, with an average of a bit over 4.

Collectively, the mean score is about 13.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

How important is it to you to practice the following disciplines?

- Being aware of civic and government issues
- Personally participating in civic and government issues
- Submitting to government leaders

Each question has a numerical response range of 1 to 5, with an average of a bit under 3.

Collectively, the mean score is 8.8.

OTHER

There are three other questions we examine in this chapter but don't include in those groups.

It is important for me to . . .

- Be a good neighbor (3.7) *sometimes treated as a category to itself*
- Care for those who are in prison (3.4)
- Care for the environment (4.7)

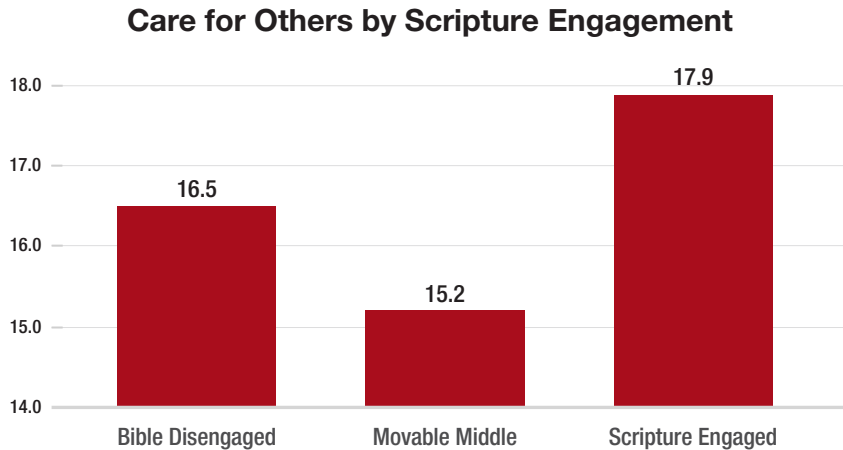
The range for each of these is 1 to 6. The average score for each question is in parentheses.

We asked these questions of everyone, whether they identified as Christians or not, whether or not they interacted with the Bible or attended church. The results brought some surprises.

THE NONCOMMITTAL MIDDLE

Comparing the different Scripture Engagement groups, as well as the Practicing Christian groups, we consistently find that the middle groups (Movable Middle and Non-Practicing Christians) score lower than the others on nearly all social behavior questions.

Consider the Care for Others scale. The Scripture Engaged have the highest score (17.9), as you might expect, given the Bible’s frequent challenges to love others. But second place goes to the Bible Disengaged (16.5). The Movable Middle (15.2) is the least likely group to consider it important to welcome immigrants, befriend people of other races or religions, or advocate for the oppressed.



It’s not that the Movable Middle considers it *unimportant* to care for others in these ways, but they’re most likely to call it only “*some-what* important” (a 3-point response, rather than the 5- or 6-point agreement logged by many in the other camps). While the Engaged and Disengaged put a high priority on these loving behaviors, the Middle is less committal.

The same pattern occurs on nearly every social behavior question, and even on Life Care issues. Surprisingly, the Bible Disengaged consistently outscore the Movable Middle on questions about caring. The one outlier, from the Community Engagement collection, is “submitting to government leaders,” where three out of seven (43%) of the Bible Disengaged called it “not at all important” (compared to 24% of the Movable Middle and 15% of the Scripture Engaged). It makes sense that a biblical term like *submitting* would find more of a negative reaction from Americans less familiar with Scripture.

The pattern carries over to the Practicing Christian designation. Here the middle category, Non-Practicing Christians, generally scores less than Non-Christians on the importance of pro-social behavior. A stark difference is seen in the percentages of those who agree “strongly” or “very strongly” that it’s important to act lovingly toward immigrants, the oppressed, or those of other races or religions. Those who do not identify as Christians match the levels of those who practice their Christian faith, far exceeding the levels of Non-Practicing Christians.



“Caring for the environment” stands out as the other issue on which the Disengaged and Non-Christians lead the pack. Agreement on this point is strong across the board. In fact, it’s one of the highest-scoring of all the pro-social behaviors in this survey (with 56% of all respondents agreeing “strongly” or “very strongly,” and only 3% disagreeing, even “somewhat”).

When asked if it was important to “care for those who are in prison,” nearly half of the Scripture Engaged agreed strongly.

It makes sense that Scripture Engaged people would find in Genesis 1 and other passages a mandate to care for God’s creation. But we live in a highly politicized culture where every social issue carries additional baggage related to definitions, diagnoses, and proposed policies. We suspect this weight tamped down the response of the Scripture Engaged and Practicing Christians on the environment question, and likely with “welcome immigrants” and “advocate for the oppressed” as well.

“Remember those who are in prison,” the early Christians were told, “as though you were in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:3 GNT). When asked if it was important to “**care for those who are in prison,**” nearly half of the Scripture Engaged agreed strongly or very strongly. This far outpaced the levels of any other group. Of all the pro-social behaviors in our queries, this is probably the most challenging, yet it’s not debated much in the media. Still, our survey shows a significant group of Bible-following people affirming the importance of showing the love of Jesus in this way (see Matthew 25:36).

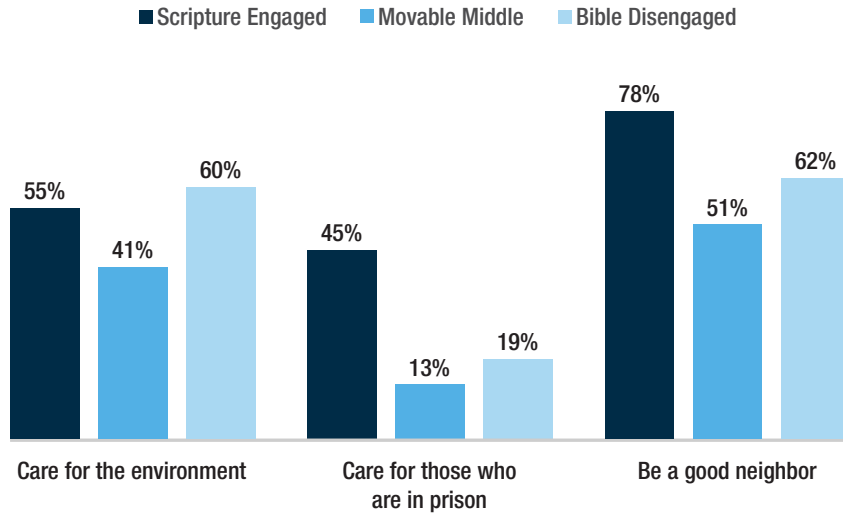
It is important to “**Be a good neighbor**”—agree or disagree? If there’s an “easy-answer” item in this survey, here it is. The Scripture Engaged were nearly unanimous in their agreement (only one person disagreed, among the hundreds surveyed). Perhaps with the biblical exhortation to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39 NIV) echoing in their minds, more than three of four in this group agreed strongly or very strongly. This was true of Practicing Christians as well.

Yet as we’ve seen on other questions of pro-social behavior, the Bible Disengaged and Non-Christians also expressed support here, with five of eight agreeing strongly or very strongly (only 2% disagreed). We all agree: It’s good to be a good neighbor.

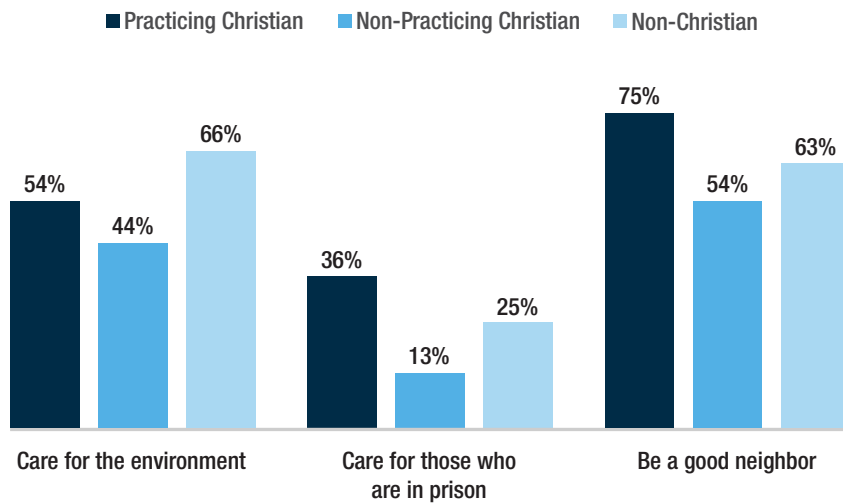
Except the Movable Middle doesn’t seem so sure. Yes, they agreed, but not at the “strong” levels indicated by those who were more *and less* connected with Scripture. (Non-Practicing Christians showed results similar to the low level of the Movable Middle.)

Here again we see a reflection of the “noncommittal middle.” These are people who identify as Christians but either don’t attend church or don’t consider their faith important in their lives. Perhaps they read the Bible occasionally, but they don’t live their lives by it. On question after question, even when they agree that these pro-social activities have some importance, they show less enthusiasm about them. They bring to mind the “lukewarm” people of Laodicea, who were told, “I know that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other!” (Revelation 3:15b GNT).

Other Questions by Engagement and Practice



Percent “strongly” or “very strongly” agreeing that this is important to do



Percent “strongly” or “very strongly” agreeing that this is important to do

THE SHADOW GROUP

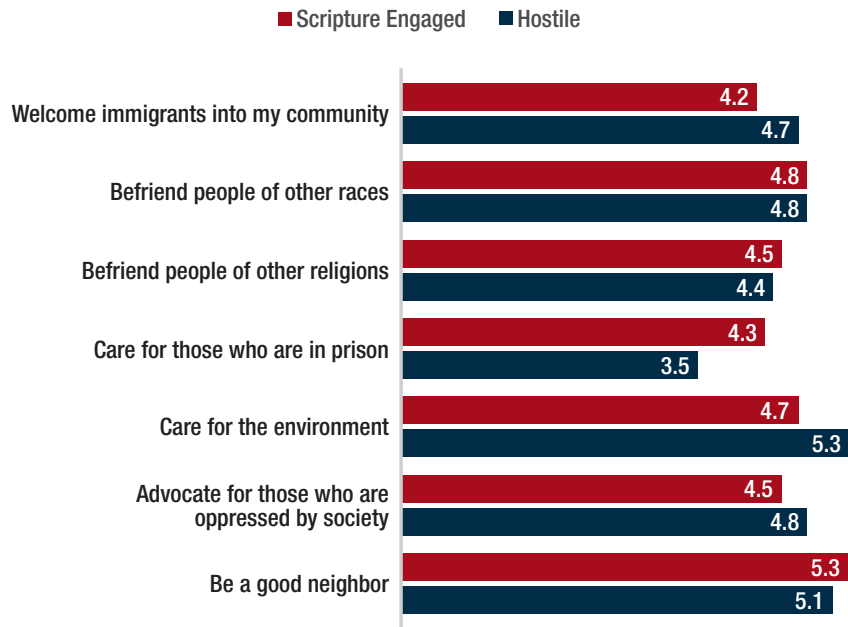
We expect Practicing, Scripture Engaged Christians to show love for others in all these ways, and indeed we find high scores there. But we're surprised by the scores that are nearly as high (and occasionally higher) on the other side of the graph—among Non-Christians and the Bible Disengaged. Clearly Christians aren't the only ones who care about others.

The data show us a “shadow group” of Bible Disengaged Non-Christians who seem to care as much about other people as Scripture Engaged Christians do. Who are these people? Some belong to other, non-Christian religions, and many of these religions teach the value of treating other people well, but a large portion of this group is religiously unaffiliated. And, for a substantial number of them, it isn't just that they have not gotten around to going to church or reading the Bible. Many seem to feel that church and Bible *are* the problem.

“The Bible was written to control or manipulate other people.” Our survey includes that option among various other statements about the Bible, and about one in six Americans agree with it, at least “somewhat.” About 7 percent “agree strongly” with this statement.

How did this “hostile” group score on the pro-social questions? About as high as the Scripture Engaged, and on some questions decidedly higher.

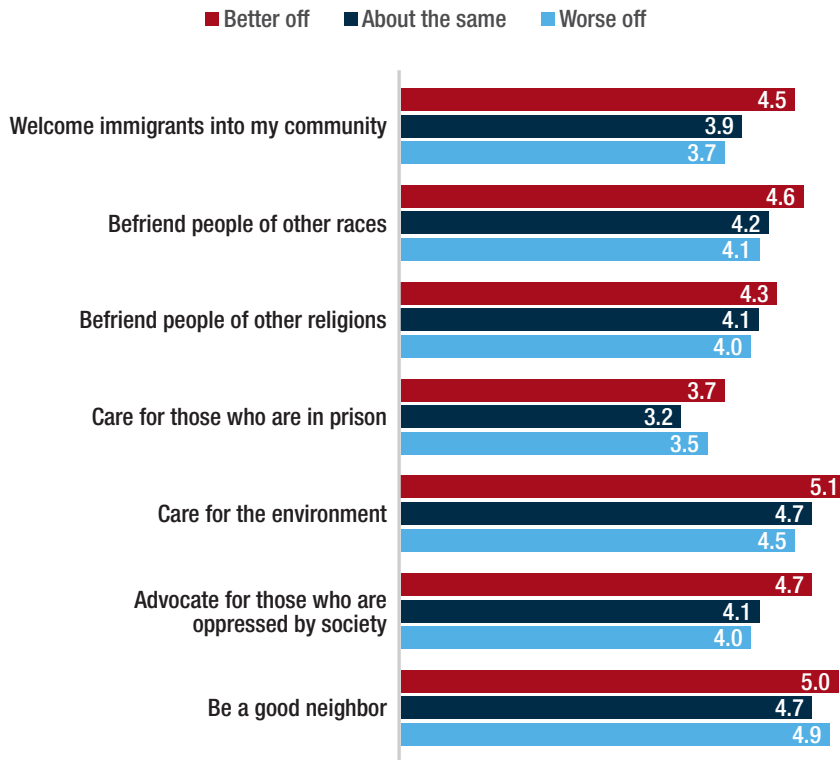
Hostile and Scripture Engaged on Pro-Social Questions



Another question in our survey asked respondents to imagine a scenario where people in America did not read the Bible. Would the country be better off, worse off, or about the same? This offers a quick take on people’s positive or negative feelings about the Bible, whether or not they engage with it themselves. Only about one in seven (14%) say the country would be better off without the Bible. The rest are split about evenly between “Worse off” and “About the same.”

Let’s look at the pro-social scores of this one-seventh of Americans who think things would improve without the Bible. Amazingly, on every question, the “better off without the Bible” group comes out ahead.

“Better Off” without the Bible and Pro-Social Questions



“If you have love for one another,” Jesus told his disciples, “then everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:35 GNT). Isn’t love the defining mark of Christ-followers?³

Then why, in these measures of the perceived importance of loving actions, is there little or no statistical difference between Scripture Engaged, Practicing Christians and Disengaged Non-Christians? Specifically, why do we see those hostile to the Bible giving as much importance to these actions as do the Scripture Engaged?

3 Readers of a certain age may be humming, “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.”

Some of this, again, may be a matter of political baggage and competing definitions of “love” and its demands. But while some Christians might feel embarrassed that we’re not “winning the race to love others,” it’s not really a competition. We might do well to look at the opportunities this situation presents.

The apostle Paul wrote about “Gentiles, who do not have the law, [and yet] do by nature things required by the law.” God’s law, he said, was “written on their hearts” (Romans 2:14–15 NIV). Throughout Scripture we find people outside the covenant community who do good things and are commended. We can affirm loving actions done by non-Christians in our own society without doing damage to a biblical theology of sin and the need for salvation.

Maybe we can celebrate the good work of non-Christians who are committed to pro-social behavior. We could commend them for it. They’ve probably expected judgment from religious people; what if we flipped that script?

We might find more opportunities to work side by side with non-Christian, anti-Bible people to do good work in the world. Perhaps they might see Christian faith afresh. As they see how the Bible inspires us to love others, it might open some minds.

Eventually this approach may lead us to forge new relationships—not using the Bible to manipulate people (as they might fear) but letting the Lord’s love infuse our actions, toward them and alongside them. We share with them a longing to see a broken world fixed, to see people helped and healed. That same passion defines the redemptive work of Christ. Perhaps that’s something to talk about.

REPORT CARD FOR DEMOGRAPHICS

Perusing the scores of various demographic groups on pro-social questions, we find hope for Gen Z, affirmation for the wisdom gained by Elders, and confirmation of the value of education.

GENERATIONS

The youngest adults in our survey scored highest on the Care for Others questions. With regard to befriending people of other races or religions, welcoming immigrants, or advocating for the oppressed, Generation Z considers this behavior important to a much greater degree than any other age group. Boomers and Elders are least likely to say these behaviors are important.

The results are reversed on the question, “Is it important to be a good neighbor?” That term resonates most with Elders and Boomers, least with Gen Z.

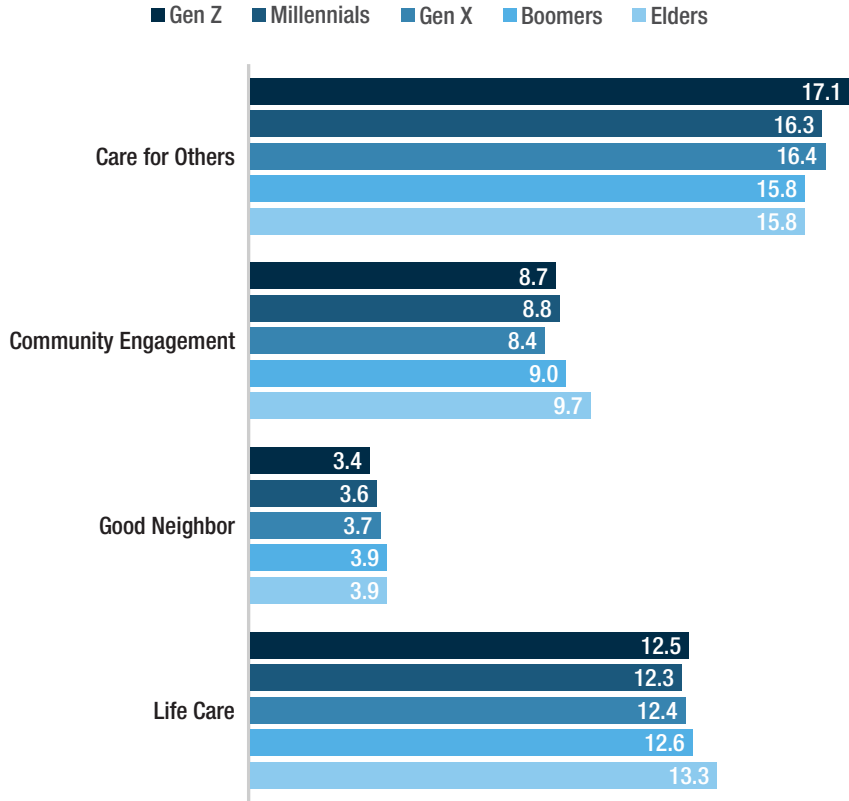
Elders also lead by a substantial margin on Community Engagement questions: awareness of and participation in civic matters, as well as “submitting to government leaders.” Surprisingly (or not), the lowest score here comes from Generation X. The contour of these generational attitudes toward community engagement provides an interesting history of the last 75 years in America.⁴

The personal issues in our Life Care collection are dominated by the Elders, who may have learned through experience the

4 You might see Elders learning good citizenship in their youth; Boomers “tuning out” but later taking charge; Gen X retreating into family life and personal achievement; then Millennials and Gen Z beginning to rediscover activism.

importance of taking care of yourself physically, emotionally, mentally, and financially.

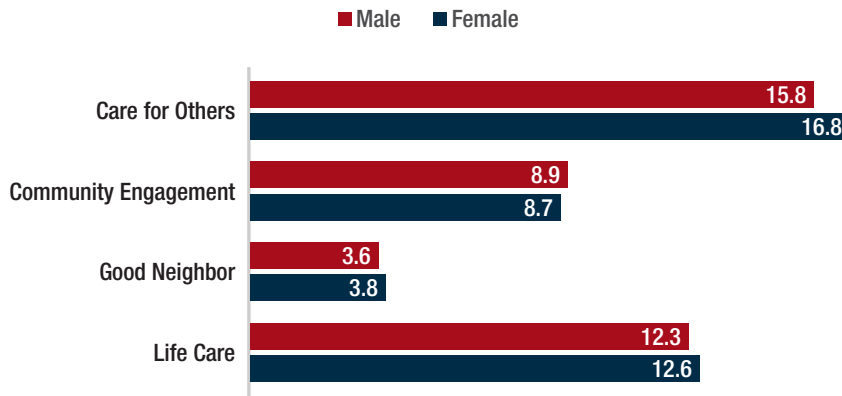
Pro-Social Questions by Generation



GENDER

Women outscore men on three groupings of pro-social questions (including Good Neighbor), but not on Community Engagement. Men put slightly more importance on civic and government matters, while women place more importance on Care for Others and the personal well-being issues involved in Life Care.

Pro-Social Questions by Gender



EDUCATION

A stairstep effect is clearly seen in the data on all four pro-social categories. Each higher level of education brings a greater sense of the importance of others, of the community, and of one's own responsibilities to self and others.

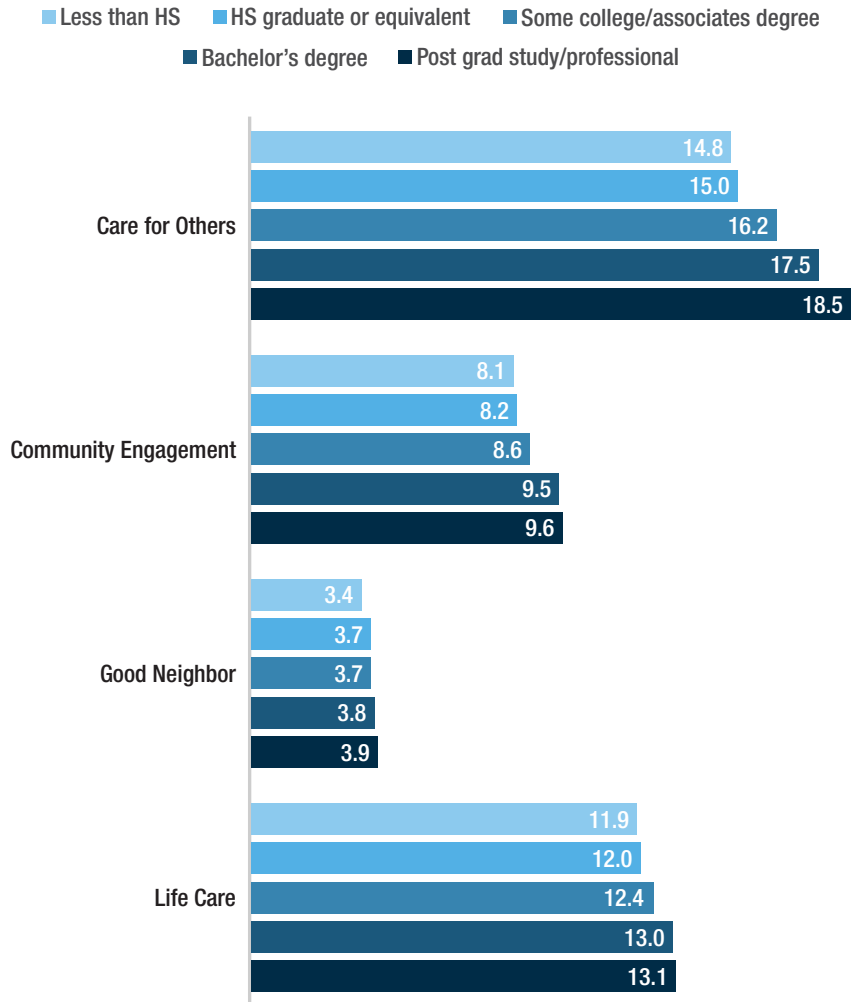
Nelson Mandela is famously quoted as saying, “Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.”⁵ In our data we find evidence of the beginning of this world-changing: the awareness of need and responsibility—the prioritizing of care. Education may eventually teach someone how to change the world, but first it expands their vision, awakening them to needs and possibilities.

One more note: About a page ago, we reported that Gen Z outpaced everyone else on Care for Others. But remember that many in that age group (18–26) are still getting their education. Many of them

5 Quoted in Education: The most powerful weapon for changing the world. *USAID impact*. <https://blog.usaid.gov/2013/04/education-the-most-powerful-weapon/> (accessed August 10, 2023).

will climb these educational stairsteps in the next few years, going to college, getting a degree, possibly doing grad work. Based on these findings, we could expect this generation to become even *more* committed to these caring issues.

Pro-Social Questions by Education



COMMUNITY TYPE

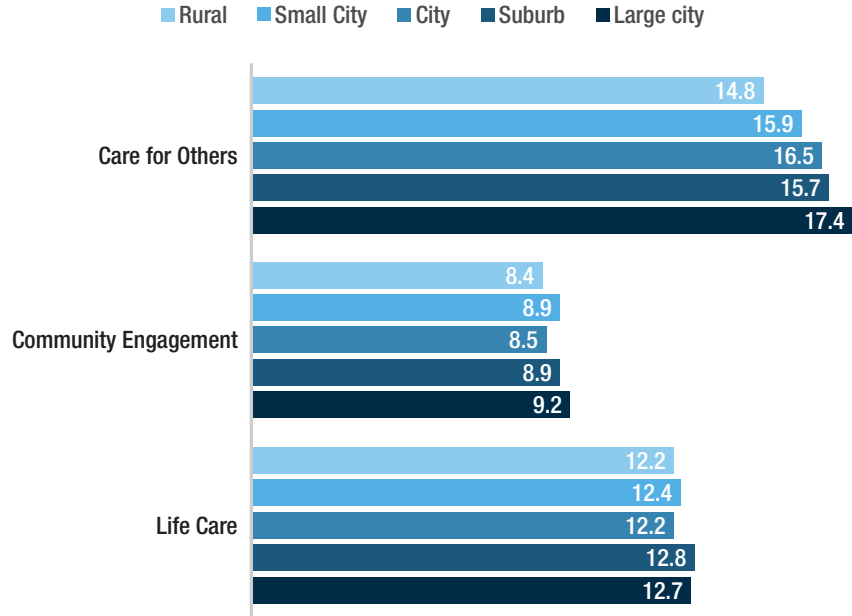
How does the community where you live affect your views of society? Does your sense of civic engagement depend on whether you reside in a big city, small town, or countryside? Does “being a good neighbor” mean something different when your next-door neighbors live a mile away rather than when you hear them through the wall?

In our survey, those who live in a “large city” (250,000 population or more) assigned the greatest importance to Care for Others. It’s likely that they meet people of other ethnic backgrounds and religions every day, so the need to “befriend” them is not a distant aspiration but a present opportunity. Immigration and oppression are also issues they may regularly encounter.

Those who describe their communities as “rural” score lowest in this category, possibly because those issues are farther away from them, not only mentally but geographically.

We recognize that the questions in this Care for Others category can be seen as politically volatile. Some would have strong feelings about illegal immigration. Some would be wary of social agendas that prioritize racial or religious diversity. They might wonder just who are the “oppressed” to be advocated for. The interpretation of these questions certainly affects the scoring, and that interpretation may be affected by where people live, and who they live with.

Pro-Social Questions by Community Type

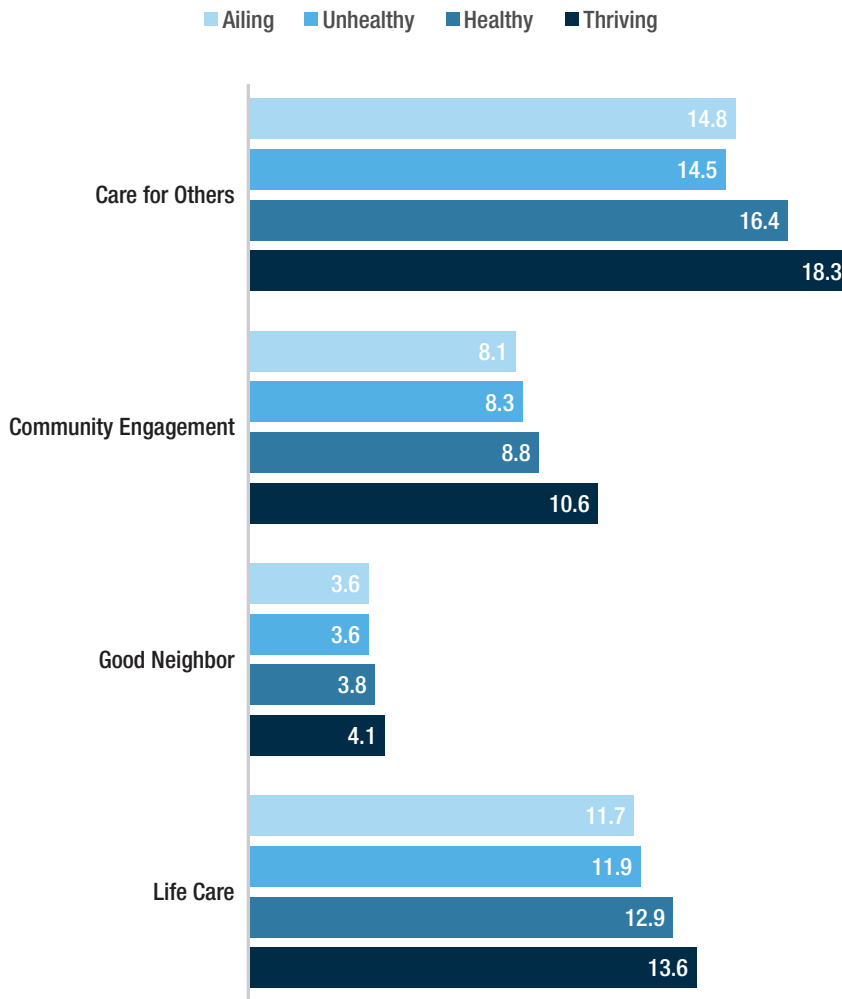


SPIRITUAL VITALITY

This year, for the first time, we included the Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svg), based on nine questions about Christian belief and practice (see page 83). Asked only of self-identified Christians, these questions yield a score between 0 and 100, which is then used to put the respondent in one of four svg categories: Ailing, Unhealthy, Healthy, Thriving. We wanted to see if our pro-social scores correlate with spiritual vitality, as measured by the svg.

They do, perfectly. Each higher level of Spiritual Vitality has higher scores in Community Engagement, Care for Others, and Life Care.

Pro-Social Questions by Spiritual Vitality



Earlier we referred to the “shadow group” of non-Christians and Bible Disengaged who surprised us by scoring high on our pro-social questions. Apparently, people have a lot of good reasons for

doing good, even if they aren't directly motivated by the Bible or by Christian faith.

But the svG data only includes self-identified Christians, so that “shadow group” is absent from these findings. And while the svG is strongly associated with both Scripture Engagement and Practicing Christian status, it's not just about the Bible or church. It's largely about how people live out their Christian faith.

So what is this telling us? That people with a more vital faith *live out* that faith by caring for those who need care, by loving the people around them, by investing themselves in their communities, by being good neighbors. Not because it's trendy, not because it aligns with their political views, but because they follow Jesus. ■

*He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets prisoners free,
the LORD gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.*

Psalm 146:7–9 NIV

IN THE LAST SEVEN DAYS, HOW MANY AMERICANS HAVE . . .

Prayed for someone
who's not a
family member:

56%

Helped
a stranger:

54%

Volunteered in the
community or a
place of worship:

23%




BIBLE USE AND TECHNOLOGY

“The greatest act of reverence we can give to the Scriptures is to prayerfully read them.”

Terrance Klein¹

You may carry a mental image of Hebrew scribes hunched over manuscripts, counting the letters of each line to ensure the accuracy of their copies. We have other images as well: Seventy-some scholars summoned to Egypt to translate the books of Moses into Greek (beginning what we know as the Septuagint); Jerome holed up in a Bethlehem monastery churning out the Latin Scriptures that became known as the Vulgate; Martin Luther hurling

¹ Terrance Klein. Left on the shelf, the sacred scriptures can do nothing. *America Magazine*. (2022, January 20). <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/01/20/scripture-revelation-242244>.



People of faith were striving to make the Scriptures not only available and understandable, but *connectable*.

an ink pot at the wall as he struggles to create a German Bible. (Some of these images may be more legend than history.)

Yet the dominant figure in Bible translation in the modern era is not a scholar at all, but an inventor: Johannes Gutenberg. The technology he created—the printing press—allowed for an exponential growth in the distribution of Bibles, not only Luther’s Bible in Germany, but also the Authorized or King James Version that dominated the English-speaking world for several centuries.

At every step of this journey, people of faith were striving to make the Scriptures not only available and understandable, but *connectable*. Jews throughout the Roman Empire could have parsed out the Hebrew Scriptures, but they lived their daily lives in Greek. By Jerome’s time, churches used Greek, but the common tongue was Latin. Luther hammered together different German dialects to create Scriptures that connected with his people in a way that Church Latin didn’t.

In the U.S. in the mid-1900s, a linguist named Eugene Nida understood that the King James Version was not connecting as powerfully as it had for the three previous centuries. He oversaw the development of the Good News Bible. (Boomers and Elders may recall the paperback New Testament, *Good News for Modern Man*, with

newsprint depicted on the cover.) This was one early entry in a vast field of new translations, all seeking to connect with new readers.²

But the last half-century has also seen a Gutenberg-like transition in the *technology* of communication. Bibles and other books still get printed, but at least half the population connects better with other media—audio recording, video presentation, Internet resources, phone apps, social media interaction, gaming, and more. Some companies are entering those fields with study and skill—we think of the Bible Project, YouVersion, Gloo, and the explorations in artificial intelligence by openbible.info, to name a few. We look for many more Jeromes, Gutenbergs, and Nidas to step forward.

The challenge is the same as ever for churches and people of faith: How do we preserve the authentic power of God’s Word while facilitating connections with souls navigating in today’s context? Languages and media change, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.

WEEKLY BIBLE USE

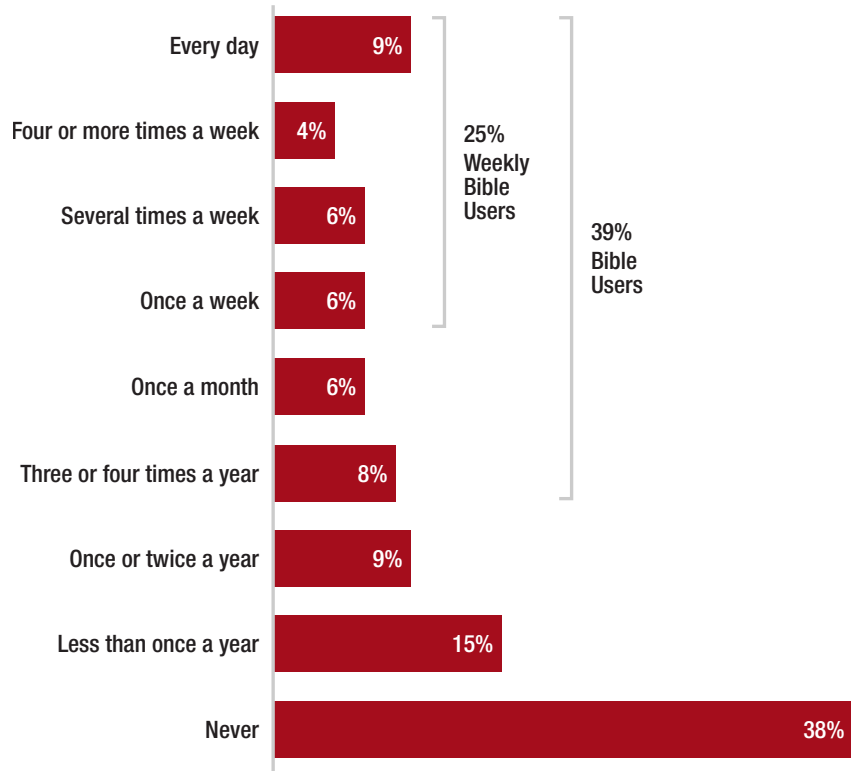
Earlier we mentioned the “high bar” of Scripture Engagement (18% of Americans) and the “low bar” that we label Bible Users (39%), who turn to Scripture 3–4 times a year. Now we’re looking for a middle option, a moderate level of Bible interaction, independent of the behavioral and spiritual effects that go into the Scripture Engagement classification. How many people use the Bible (reading, or perhaps listening), outside of their normal church services, at least once a week, and what do we know about them?

² Full disclosure: Eugene Nida worked for American Bible Society, which still produces the Good News Translation. We’re proud of Nida’s important contributions to the field of Bible translation.

One quarter (25%) of American adults use the Bible at least weekly, apart from their church services. That's about 65 million people.

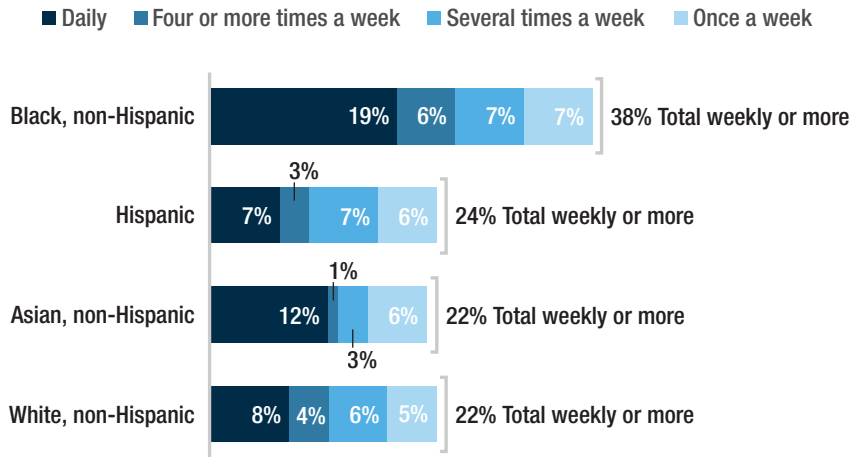
Bible Use by Frequency

How often do you use the Bible on your own, not including times when you are at a large church service or Mass?



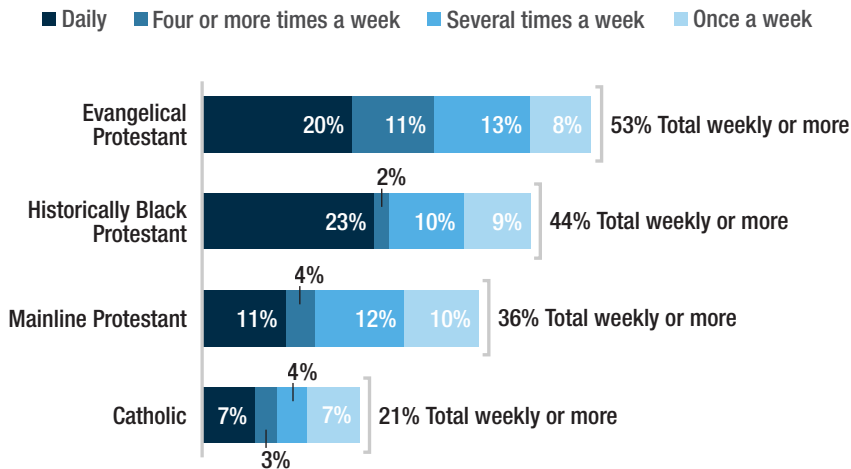
Black Americans (38%) are far more likely to read the Bible weekly than those of other ethnic groups (all others, 23% combined). Nearly one in five Black Americans (19%) use the Bible every day, again far outpacing those of all other groups (8% combined).

Weekly Bible Use by Race/Ethnicity



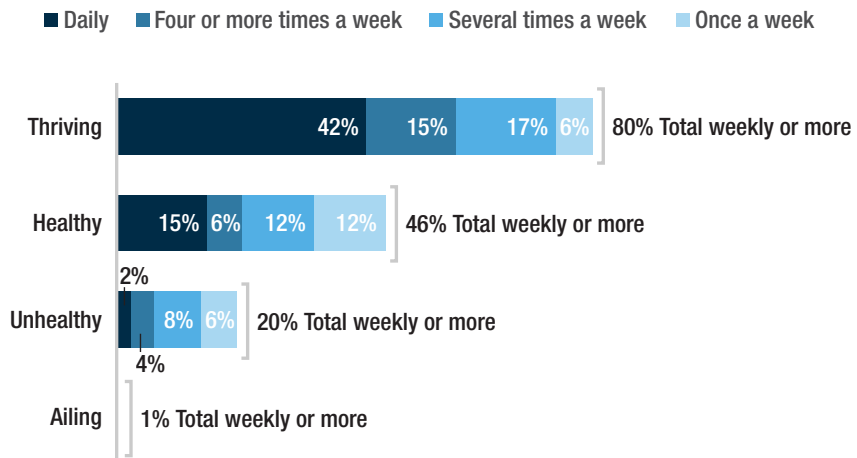
Among denominational groupings, **Evangelicals** lead the way with more than half (53%) using the Bible weekly. Catholics are least likely (21%) to use the Bible on their own on a weekly basis.

Weekly Bible Use and Denominational Groups



In Chapter 4 (see page 83 and following), we introduced the **Spiritual Vitality Gauge** (SVG), which uses nine questions about beliefs, practices, and faith in action to identify people as Thriving, Healthy, Unhealthy, or Ailing. (In our survey, we asked these questions only of self-identified Christians.) The SVG questions do not include much about Bible reading, but we find they track closely with our Bible-related data. In fact, of those at the highest level of the SVG, four of five (80%) use the Bible at least weekly. Clearly, higher levels of spiritual health are associated with regular use of the Bible.

Weekly Bible Use by Spiritual Vitality



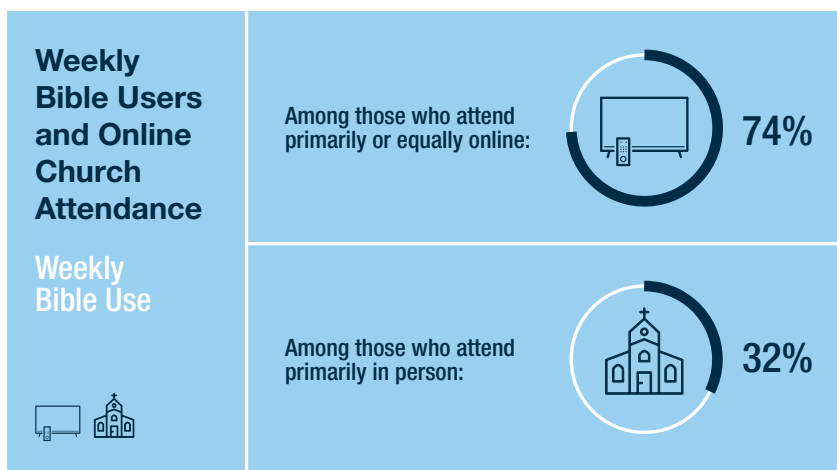
Note: Ailing totals round down to 0%, but accumulate to 1%.

Those who attend church online are far more likely to use the Bible at least weekly. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of online church attenders (whether their attendance is primarily online or about the same as in-person) say they use the Bible at least once a week.

Weekly Bible use is claimed by fewer than a third (32%) of those who attend only in person.

This might seem surprising to those who see online church as a lesser experience, used by people who are less committed spiritually. We suspect that these numbers speak to the personal nature of online attendance. In-person church attendance can be more social and cultural, often with an experiential flavor. Online attendance can be more about hearing about God and from God, often by oneself or with one's immediate family. It's personal, as Bible reading often is.

Keep in mind that the question asked in our survey explicitly excludes Bible reading that's done within a church service. It's possible that the online attenders are counting the Scripture use that occurs as they follow along during their online viewing, and this might skew the data somewhat. Still, it shows a corps of online attenders who are serious about connecting with God's Word.



CURIOSITY, DESIRE, FRUSTRATIONS, AND CHANGE

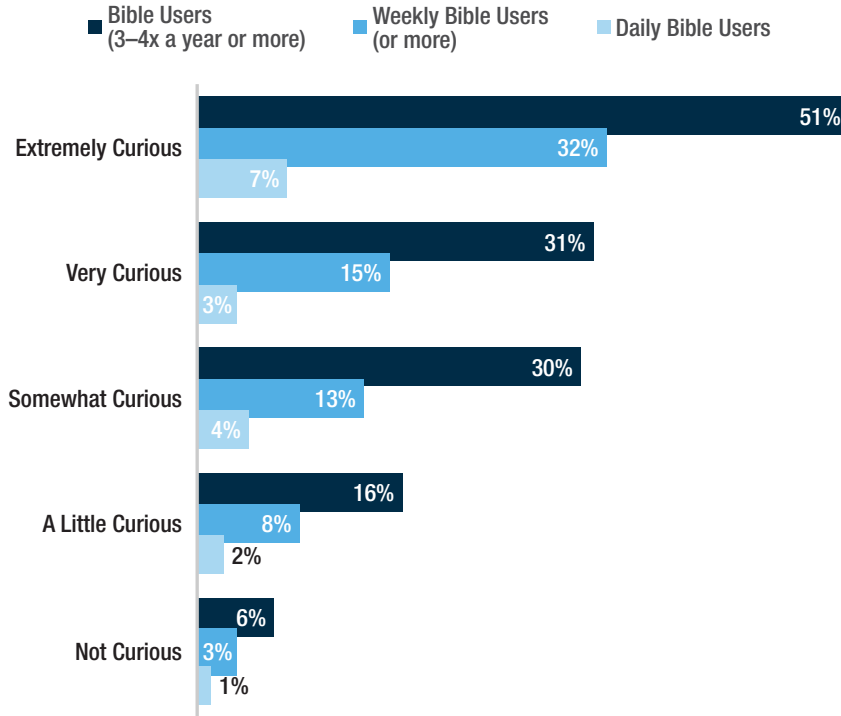
Already in this *State of the Bible* report we have examined various “journeys.” We trace changes in Scripture Engagement and church involvement from year to year, and we’ve compared generations to get a sort of roadmap for a journey through life. We’ve asked whether people have migrated from the faith their mother had when they were ten years old. This year, we’ve added questions that specifically ask about a person’s spiritual commitment—are they seeking God, are they stuck, or are they growing?

But there’s another “journey” we can discuss here by cobbling together results from several different questions. It’s the journey toward meeting God in the Bible.

It may start with curiosity about the Bible, or about Jesus. More than one in five in our survey (22%) say they’re “extremely curious” about the Bible and/or Jesus—57 million American adults. Some of these may already be avid Bible readers who are eager to learn more and more, but a cross-tabulation shows that only about a third of this group (32%) interact with the Bible on their own at least weekly. That’s a higher rate of weekly Bible Users than we see in the general population (25%), so curiosity seems to be drawing some people into Scripture, but we’re still looking at about 39 million American adults who say they’re extremely curious but *aren’t* connecting with the Bible even once a week.

What would it take to get them connected?

Curiosity and Bible Use



More than half of Americans (52%) wish they used the Bible more, and yet only about one in seven (14%) say they actually increased their Bible use in the past year. It's not at all shocking to see such a gap between desire and action—it's the human experience, isn't it?—but it might suggest that we take a close look at what keeps people from actually connecting with the Bible.

Fortunately, we asked that question. Offering nine different possibilities, we asked people to identify the top two significant frustrations in their use of the Bible.

Overall, the statements chosen most were . . .

- I never seem to have enough time to use it (26%)
- I don't know where to start (17%)
- I don't feel that excited about using it (15%)
- I find the language difficult to relate to (15%)

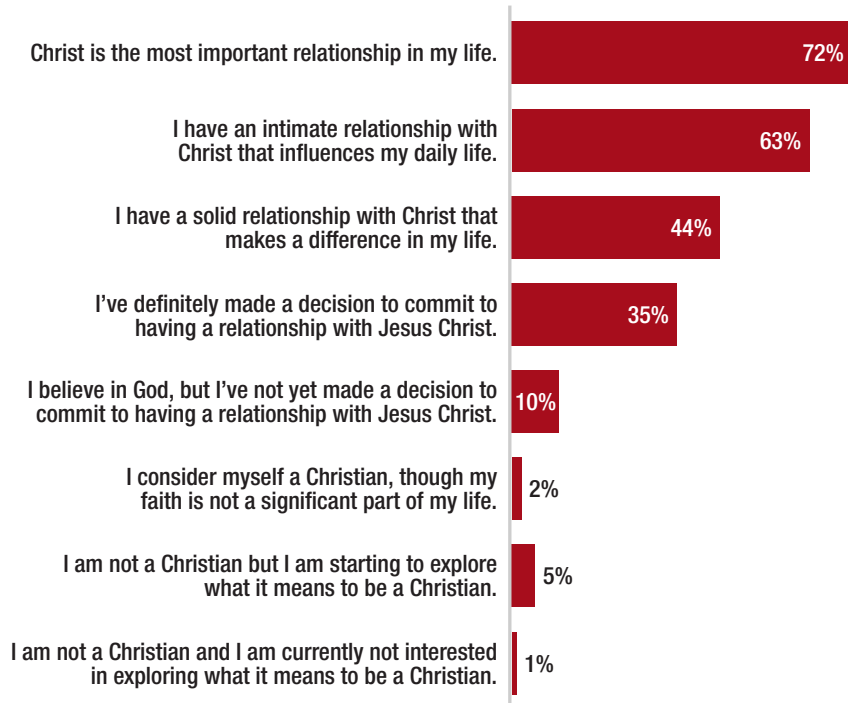
Curiosity is not a factor here. The “extremely curious” seem to have the same challenges as everyone else in finding time, starting, comprehending, or even getting excited about it. Clearly these are roadblocks along the path toward the Bible that we’re mapping out. Can we do anything to clear the way?

The path toward the Bible intertwines with a spiritual journey into a deepening relationship with Christ. We remember Jesus telling Bible scholars that the Scriptures they studied actually “testify about me” (John 5:39 NIV). It’s no surprise, then, that Bible use at any level—daily weekly, or a few times a year—increases as people move forward in their relationship with Jesus.

By now you’re familiar with the “stairstep” effect on graphs, showing a step-by-step correlation between two factors. We see that here at the advanced levels of Christian commitment vis-à-vis Bible use. Don’t let the obviousness of that point hinder your appreciation of it: Even among those who are committed to Christ, interaction with Scripture goes along with greater levels of commitment. It’s likely that the causation goes both ways. A deepening relationship with Christ drives us into the Word, and the Word helps us grow.

Bible Use and Commitment to Christ

Percentage who are weekly Bible users.



But note that the “staircase” falls apart at the lower levels. There’s a far greater likelihood of weekly Bible use once people commit to a relationship with Christ (halfway up this chart). Before that, we see some Bible use, but once the commitment is made, the Bible seems to become far more important. Snacks become feasts.

Note also the sad situation of those who claim to be Christian but don’t consider that faith “a significant part of my life.” They are being passed on this pathway by those who are actively seeking Christ in the Scriptures, even if they haven’t committed yet.

Church leaders might do well to consider what the Bible means to people at these different stages of commitment (or potential commitment). For the seekers at Steps 2 and 4 of this graph, the Bible is like the storeroom Jesus talked about, from which the homeowner “brings out new and old treasures” (Matthew 13:52). For the nominal Christian at Step 3, the Bible might be an amulet to carry, a flag to wave, but clearly not a treasure to open. For the committed believers at Steps 5 to 8, the Bible is a feast, providing regular nutrition for continuing growth.

WHY AND HOW CHRISTIANS USE THE BIBLE

We’ve just been looking at *where people are* on their journey of faith, and how Bible use relates to that. Now we ask, “How are they doing?” For this, we turn back to the Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svg) and stack it against several Scripture-related questions.

Do people come to Scripture for different reasons at different levels of spiritual health?

Yes and no. When asked to choose their main reason for using the Bible, the top answer at every level was “to get closer to God.” For those at the highest level—Thriving—two out of three (68%) chose that reason, the highest percentage for any group.

Yet we might learn something about spiritual health by seeing which groups were most likely to choose certain other responses. This is not about right or wrong answers—there are many good reasons to come to Scripture—but we might find some nuances to help us minister to those at every level.

- Healthy Christians are those most likely (21%) to come to Scripture for wisdom.
- Unhealthy Christians are those most likely (21%) to turn to Scripture for comfort.
- Ailing Christians are those most likely to seek to learn about God's nature (17%) or to learn how to treat others (23%).

Do we see a hint of a progression here? As people grow in Christian faith, are there many who look for answers first, then comfort for hard times, then guidance for challenging decisions, and ultimately a closer relationship with God?

Spiritual Vitality and Reasons for Bible Use

"I use the Bible because . . ."

Top 3 Reasons Selected for Each Level

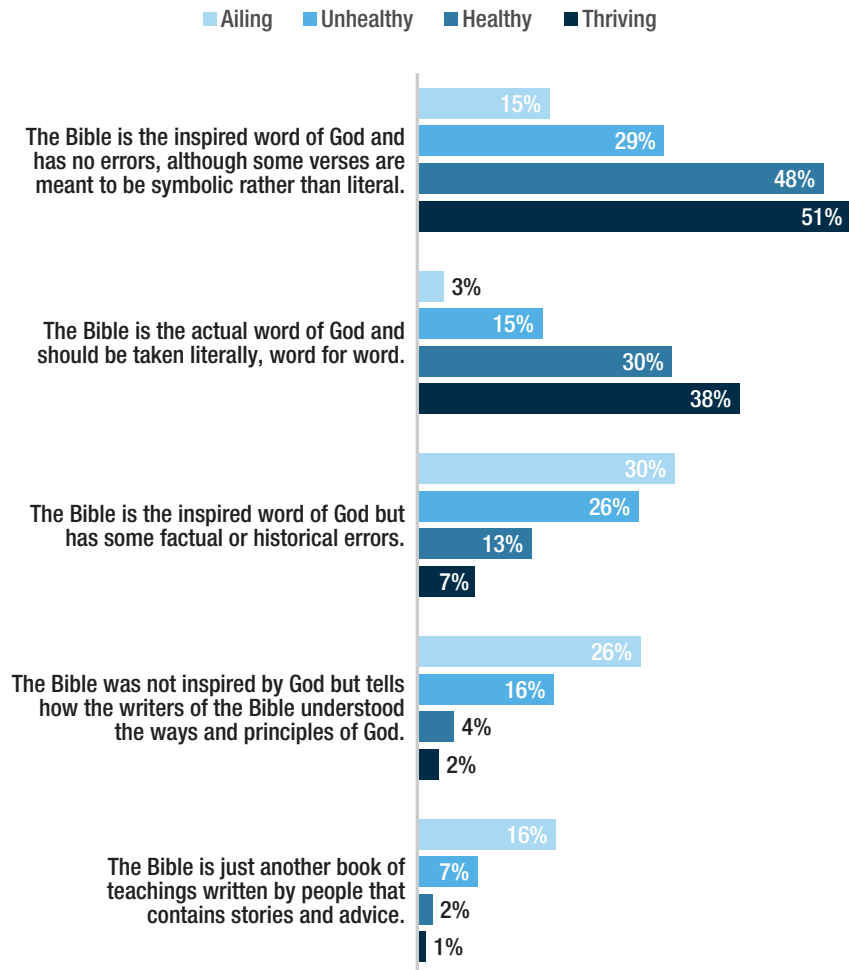
Ailing	Unhealthy	Healthy	Thriving
It brings me closer to God (31%)	It brings me closer to God (34%)	It brings me closer to God (43%)	<i>It brings me closer to God (68%)</i>
<i>It shows me how to treat others (23%)</i>	<i>I need comfort (21%)</i>	<i>I need wisdom for making life decisions (21%)</i>	I need wisdom for making life decisions (18%)
<i>It tells me about the nature of God (17%)</i>	I need wisdom for making life decisions (18%)	I need comfort (19%)	I need comfort (6%)

Throughout history, the issue of biblical inspiration has been at the center of brilliant theology, reasoned debate, vicious argument, and church splits. Wording matters, and so for many years now the *State*

of the Bible has asked people to choose statements that come closest to their beliefs about the Bible’s origin and nature.

This year, we’re able to cross-tabulate those results with the Spiritual Vitality Gauge. Do people at different levels of spiritual vitality think differently about the Bible? Clearly, yes.

Spiritual Vitality and Views of Inspiration



Understand that the SVG questions were asked only of self-identified Christians, so this differentiation does not reflect responses from those of other faiths or no faith. Still, we see the highest responses of the Ailing group for what is often considered a “low view” of biblical inspiration.

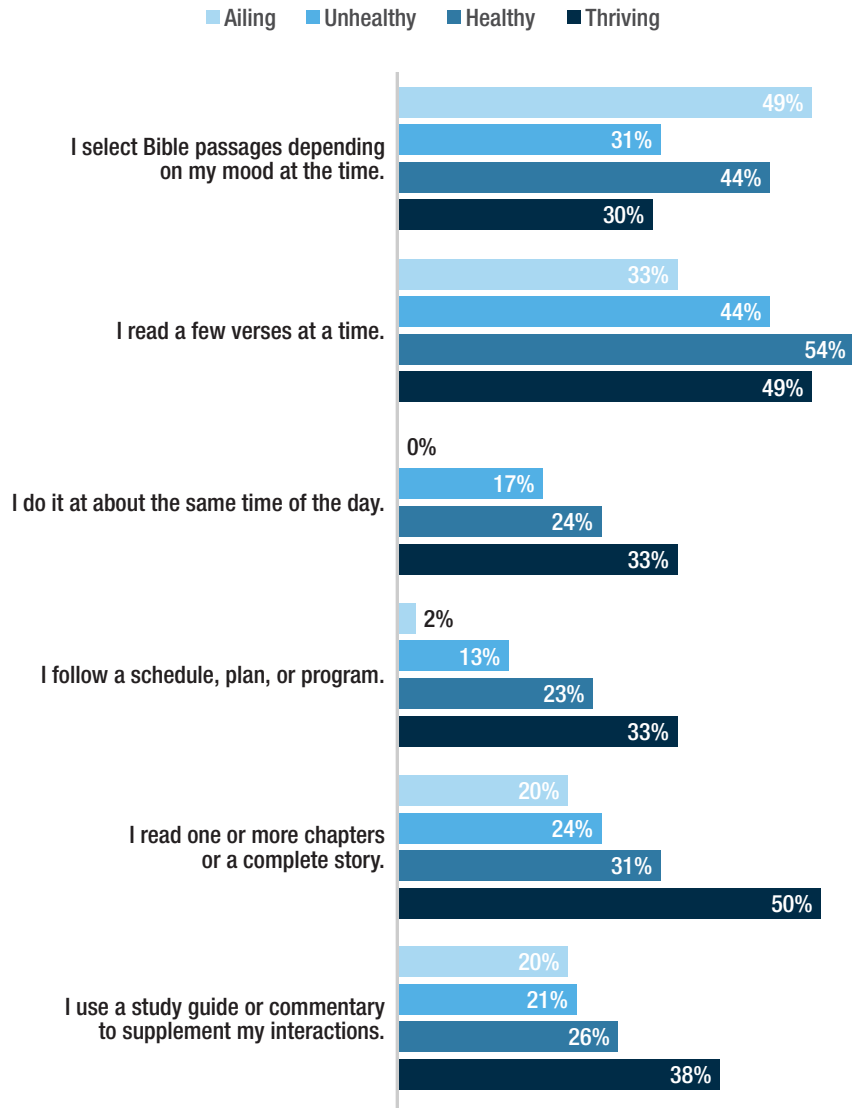
We’ve looked at *why* Christians use the Bible and *what* they think of it. But *how* do they study it? Particularly, do those at more vital levels of faith do anything that sets them apart from less-vital believers? The survey includes six options of specific Bible reading methods:

- I select Bible passages according to my mood at the time.
- I read a few verses at a time.
- I do it at about the same time of day.
- I follow a schedule, plan, or program.
- I read one or more chapters or a complete story.
- I use a study guide or commentary to supplement my interactions.

Again, there’s no right or wrong here. Bible reading is good, no matter how you approach it. But in last year’s report we labeled the first two methods listed—“mood” and “a few verses”—as Casual, and the others as Disciplined. We found that Scripture Engaged people were the most likely to follow the Disciplined methods.

This year, we can look at the relation between Spiritual Vitality and these Bible study methods. Are healthier believers more likely to use a more disciplined approach? Generally, yes, though the results are mixed. Among our findings:

Spiritual Vitality and Bible Study Methods



- “Ailing” believers are most likely to “select Bible passages depending on my mood at the time.”
- “Thriving” believers are *least* likely to do that.
- Thrivers are more likely to follow a reading plan and read about the same time of day.
- Thrivers are *far* more likely to read a complete chapter or story.
- The practice of reading “a few verses at a time” is highest among Healthy believers, a bit less among Thrivers, suggesting that this “casual” approach can still be quite helpful on occasion.

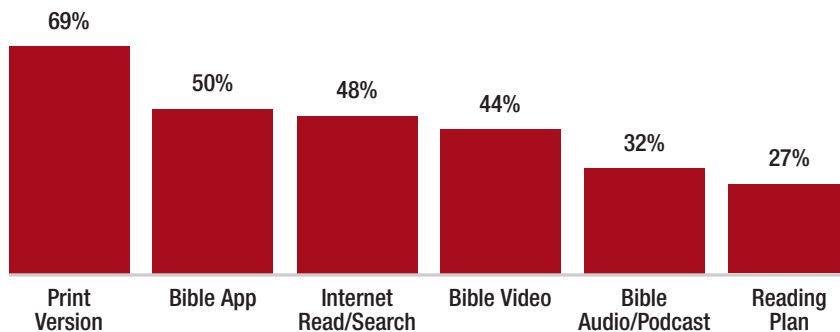
BIBLE TECH

Increasingly, when we consider how people interact with Scripture, we’re looking at a menu of technological options. Yes, many still sit down with a printed Bible, but more and more people are reading Scripture on their phones and using all sorts of Internet resources to learn and grow.

And yet the movement into Bible technology is not as rapid as you might expect. When asked how often they used different formats of the Bible, nearly seven of ten Bible Users (69%) said they still used a printed Bible on a monthly basis or more frequently. About half of them used a digital Bible app (50%) or Internet searches for Bible content (48%) in that same time frame. These figures are about the same as last year.

Bible Formats

Percentage using this Bible format monthly or more frequently



Base: Bible Users

USE OF TECH FORMATS BY GENERATION

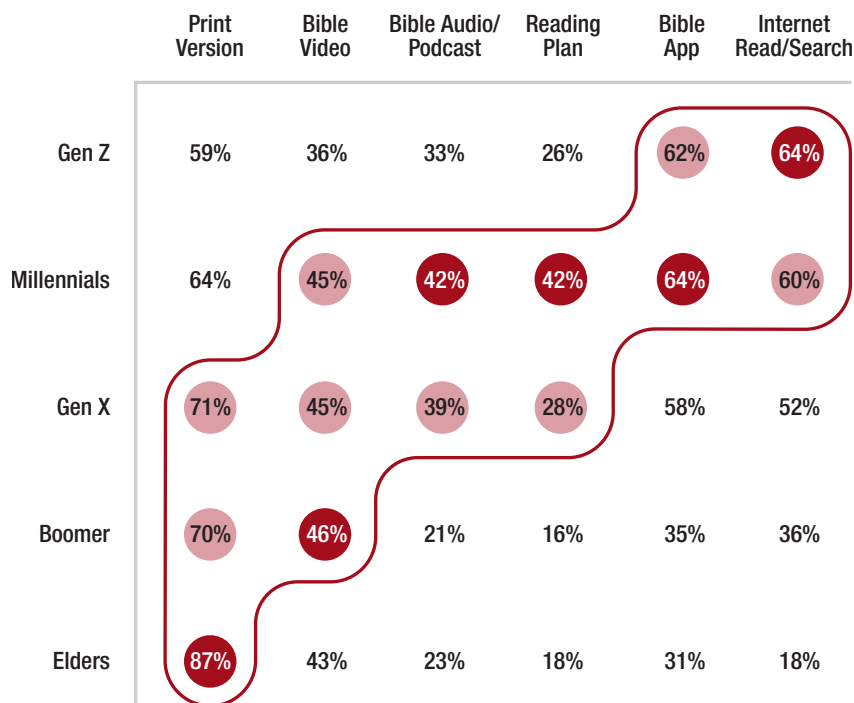
We've long established that younger adults are more comfortable with technology than older ones, but *which* tech formats appeal to which generations? We've seen a "stairstep effect" in other graphs. This is more of an escalator.

- As expected, Elders (87%) are most likely to use printed Bibles.
- Boomers (46%) are those most likely to watch a Bible program on video (though several other generations are close to this percentage).
- Gen X and Millennials (39/42%) are those mostly like to listen to an audio Bible or Bible podcast.
- Millennials (42/64%) are those most likely to sign up for an online Bible reading plan or to read a digital Bible.
- Gen Z (64%) is most likely to do an Internet search for Bible content.

For a while now, we've tended to think of Bible technology as a single thing, something the young folks love and the older folks are having a hard time getting used to. It's time to go deeper in exploring how the multiple and coexisting technologies might enhance our Bible experience and strengthen our connection with Scripture. And not only *our* experience, but the experience of those at the margins, those who might be curious about the Bible or about Jesus, and who are still waiting for something they can get excited about plugging into.

Bible Tech Use by Generation

Percentage using this Bible format monthly or more frequently



Highlighted:

*the generation with the **top** percentage using that format, and the **next** one or two.*

TEMPERAMENTS AND TECHNOLOGY

Do different types of people interact differently with technology, or with different types of technology?

In Chapter 4 we introduced you to Spiritual Temperaments, nine different ways of living one's spiritual life (see page 68). This approach is akin to personality typing, like Myers-Briggs, but focuses on how people interact with God. Do these Spiritual Temperaments also affect how people use technology to interact with God?

Ascetics feel closest to God when they are “alone and reading the Bible or praying.” There's nothing *non*-technological in this statement, but it evokes a sense of simplicity. Also, of all the temperaments, Ascetics have the highest proportion (44%) of people age 59 and older. For these reasons it is no surprise that they are among those most likely to use printed Bibles (74%).

Contemplatives are among the leaders in every category. We imagine that they are eager to glean biblical truth in any way possible.

Enthusiasts, Activists, and Intellectuals are also among the leaders in most every tech category (but not print). Enthusiasts, with their more emotional approach to God, dip down a bit when it comes to online reading plans.

Naturalists, Sensates, Traditionalists, and Caregivers are not among the leaders in the use of higher-tech versions of the Bible. Could it be that their commitment to nature, worship, church tradition, or ministry does not translate well to tech forms? ■

Bible Tech and Spiritual Temperaments

Use of this Bible format monthly or more frequently

Temperament	Print Version	Bible Video	Internet Read/Search	Reading Plan	Bible Audio/Podcast	Bible App
Contemplative	74%	59%	61%	35%	40%	64%
Enthusiast	74%	46%	62%	27%	39%	56%
Ascetic	74%	49%	41%	25%	28%	49%
Caregiver	73%	28%	51%	25%	34%	48%
Sensate	70%	39%	48%	25%	33%	45%
Intellectual	66%	41%	49%	32%	37%	50%
Activist	62%	70%	63%	35%	36%	61%
Naturalist	62%	27%	36%	18%	26%	45%
Traditionalist	53%	33%	29%	27%	14%	27%

Highlighted: Temperaments with the top percentage using that format.



HOW THE SCRIPTURE ENGAGED *ENGAGE*



43%

read one or more chapters or a complete story



36%

use a study guide or commentary



35%

interact with
Scripture about the
same time of day



GENEROSITY

One April Sunday in 1740, Ben Franklin attended a religious service in Philadelphia. The preacher was George Whitefield, renowned for his oratorical ability to tug on heartstrings. “I perceived he intended to finish with a collection,” Franklin wrote in his autobiography, “and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me.”

This was a battle of wills between two titans. Franklin had already made a small fortune as a printer and as the author of *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, with its pithy maxims often on the value of thrift. “A penny saved is a penny earned,” you know.

With a handful of such pennies in his pocket, as well as three or four silver dollars and five valuable gold coins, he was determined to withstand the pleadings of the Reverend Whitefield, who was

early in a series of evangelistic campaigns throughout the American colonies, fueling what historians would call “the Great Awakening.”

You might say the U.S. was built on Franklin’s sense and Whitefield’s spirit, but that’s another story.

“As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers,” Franklin wrote. “Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector’s dish, gold and all.”¹

This is one droll scene in a long relationship between Christianity and money. While there have been shysters and swindlers along the way, many preachers have rightly challenged people to trade their greed for generosity. Scripture is full of the urging to store “treasures in heaven,” rather than on earth. People of faith, even those with limited resources, have always dug deep to help the poor and support the work of the church. Whenever and wherever a major crisis hits, Christian groups are among the first to raise money and spend it on behalf of those who’ve been hurt.

By the way, in Philadelphia that day, George Whitefield was raising funds not for his own ministry but for an orphanage in the rough-and-tumble Georgia colony.

This chapter of *The State of the Bible* focuses on generosity—not just what Christians give or what Christian organizations receive, but all charitable giving by all Americans. Christians aren’t the only people

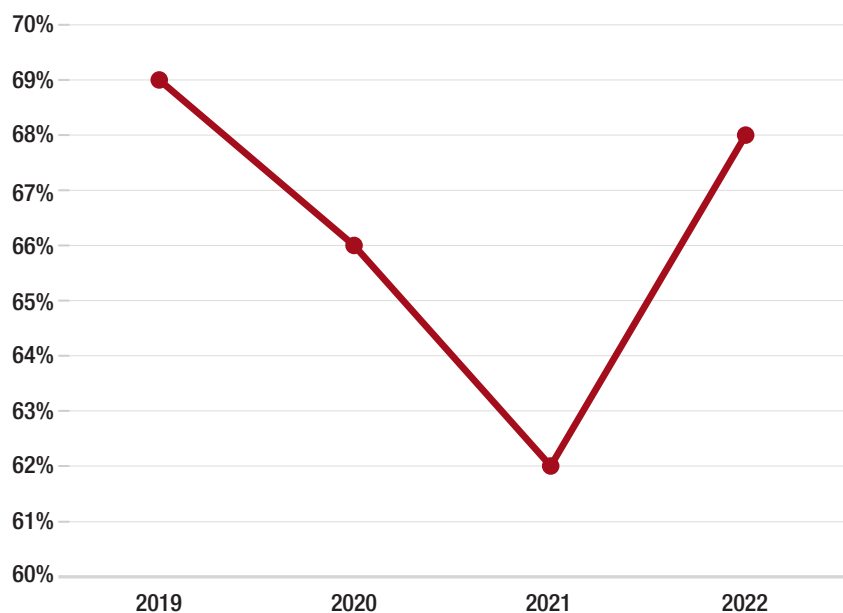
1 Franklin, B., & Chaplin, J. E. (2012). *Benjamin Franklin's autobiography*. W. W. Norton, p. 101.

who give to charity, of course. This report tracks the donation patterns of those in various demographic groups, whether or not they're Scripture Engaged or churchgoers. But throughout the data, we keep seeing the same general story: when people fully engage with biblical teaching, they are much more likely to donate generously.

THE PHILANTHROPIC TERRAIN

More than two of three American households (68%) donated to charity in 2022. This shows a strong rebound from the previous year (62% in 2021), and it comes close to pre-COVID levels.²

Percentage of Households Donating to Charity



² Conducting our survey in January of 2023, we asked people about their giving in 2022. Keep this in mind as we provide year-to-year statistics: the current 2023 report covers the situation from 2022, and each past report presents statistics from the previous year.

Religion was one of the few sectors that saw an increase in the total amount of charitable donations.

Religious organizations—including local churches, parishes, or temples as well as local and international ministries—receive the greatest portion of charitable giving. Our data confirm what other researchers have found. Religion was one of the few sectors that saw an increase in the total amount of charitable donations. “Giving to **religion** grew by 5.2 percent between 2021 and 2022, with an estimated \$143.57 billion in contributions,” reports *Giving USA 2023*.³ Adjusted for inflation, the report notes, that’s actually a slight decline (2.6%).

WHO GIVES WHAT?

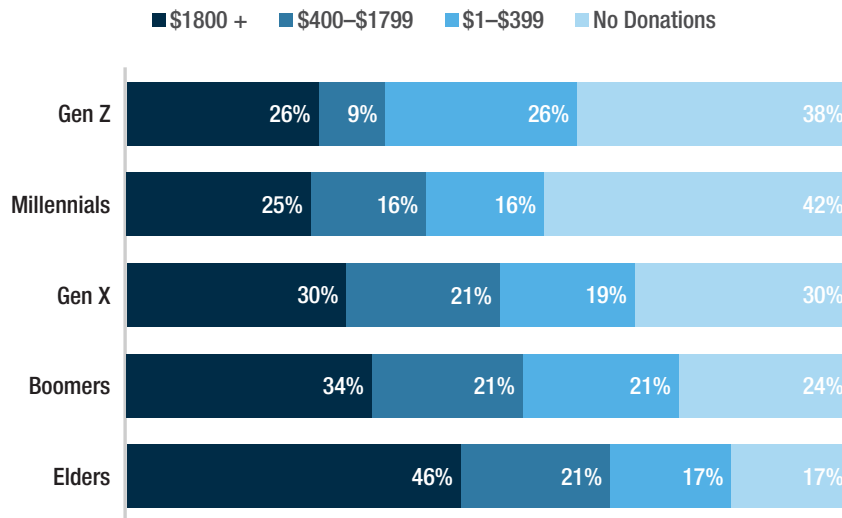
What types of people are most likely to give, and how much do they give?

Generations: Elders give most; Millennials least. In the Elder group (age 78+), five out of six people donate to charity, and nearly half donate at least \$1,800 a year. These figures are substantially higher than those of any other age group. We see the staircase effect clearly through the Millennial generation, with only a quarter of Millennials giving at that highest level, and only four of seven donating at all.⁴

3 Giving USA Foundation (2023). *Giving USA 2023: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2022*, Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. Available online at www.givingusa.org. Summarized at [https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/news-events/news-item/giving-usa:-total-u.s.-charitable-giving-declined-in-2022-to-\\$499.33-billion-following-two-years-of-record-generosity.html?id=422](https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/news-events/news-item/giving-usa:-total-u.s.-charitable-giving-declined-in-2022-to-$499.33-billion-following-two-years-of-record-generosity.html?id=422)

4 Our survey asks people how much their “household” gives to charity. Since many in our youngest sector (ages 18–26) are still in their parents’ household, the Gen Z data reflects a mixture of independent Gen Z giving and parental giving. When we looked only at those 22 to 26 years old (and less likely to live with parents), the data continued the staircase effect, with 43% not giving at all and only 20% at that highest level.

Giving Levels by Generation⁵



The amount people give to charity is largely affected by their situation or season in life. Those who have more income can afford to donate more. Many people have significant expenses for children or healthcare, limiting what they can afford to give. As we examine the giving patterns of different generations, we can imagine how income and expenses vary through the years. While Generation X has the highest income of any generation, they don't lead in the percentage of givers (or even high-amount givers). Many in that group, we assume, have considerable family expenses and student loan debt that keep them from giving as much as they might like. Many Elders, though living on lower incomes, might have fewer expenses, and they might be divesting themselves of wealth they've gathered throughout their lives.

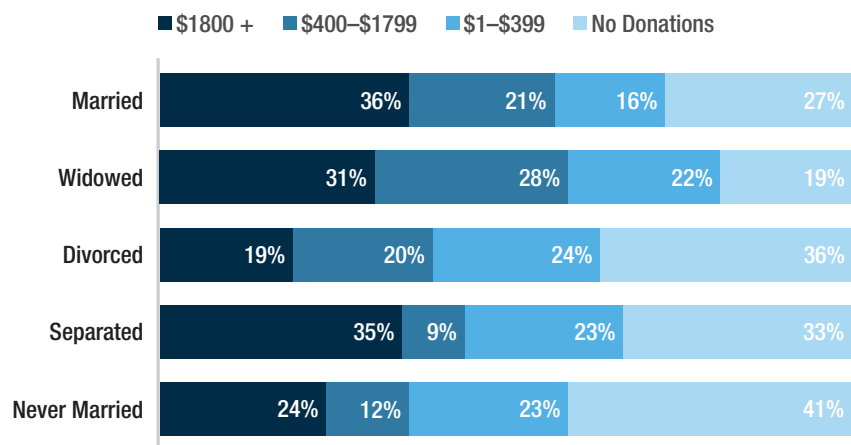
⁵ The divisions of giving levels are not arbitrary. They roughly correspond to 30%, 20%, 20%, and 30% of the total public. As it turns out, the results from Generation X closely match those of the whole population.

But there's another factor involved. People donate to causes they consider important, regardless of income or expenses. From other parts of this survey, we know that Elders are more likely to be Practicing Christians, to be Scripture Engaged, to value being good neighbors. The combination of income, expenses, and values makes that group most likely to give and give generously.

Marital status: Widowed people are most likely to give, but married people give the greatest amount. Never-married people are least likely to give at all. In some respects, these findings mirror the generational trends we just noted. Most widowed people are in the high-giving Elder group. Never-married people are mostly in the two youngest generations, which (as seen above) give the least to church or charity.

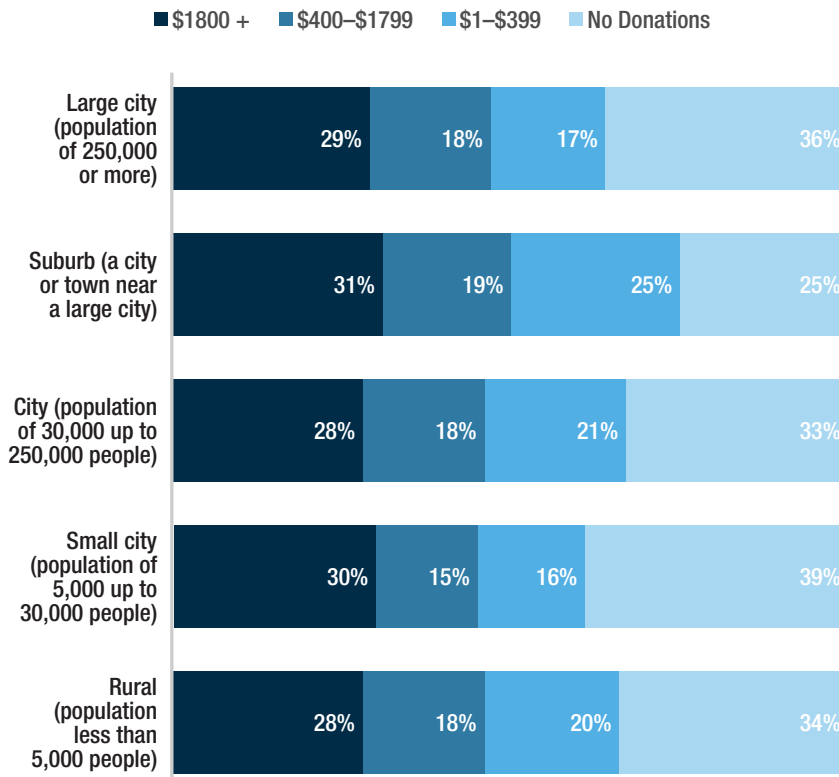
Once again, we can imagine these giving levels shaped by a combination of income, expenses, and values, according to different life situations.

Giving Levels by Marital Status



Community type: Suburbanites are most likely to donate. Those in small cities (population 5,000 to 30,000) are most likely not to give at all. The levels of giving don't vary much between community types. Since people in the suburbs tend to have higher incomes than others, we might expect more of them to be givers, and they are. Yet we would also expect a significantly higher percentage of them to give at the highest level, and they don't. The portion of those giving at least \$1,800 per year (which corresponds to \$150 per month or about \$35 per week) is about three of ten among all community types, and only a tick higher among suburbanites (31%).

Giving Levels by Community Type

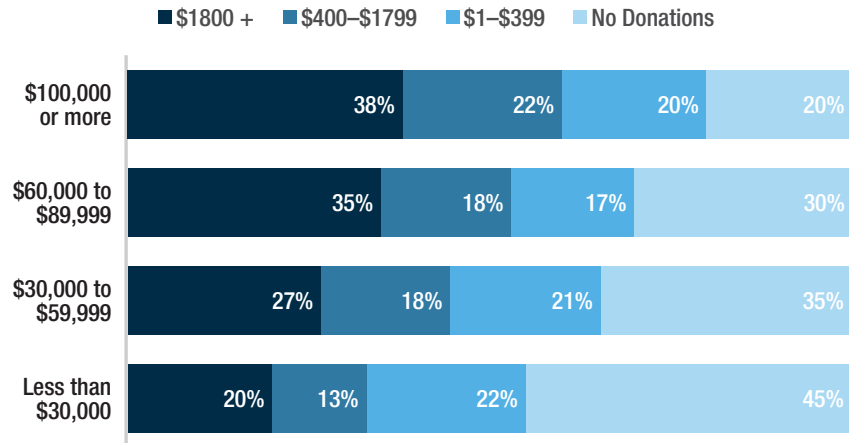


DOES INCOME MATTER?

Those who make more money give more money. About four in five (80%) of those in households annually earning \$100,000 or more make charitable contributions. That exceeds every other income group. At the lowest levels of income (households earning \$30,000 or less), only five of nine (55%) are donors.

In the highest-earning group, three of eight (38%) donate \$1,800 or more. Only one in five (20%) of the lowest income group donates at that level.

Giving Levels by Income Range

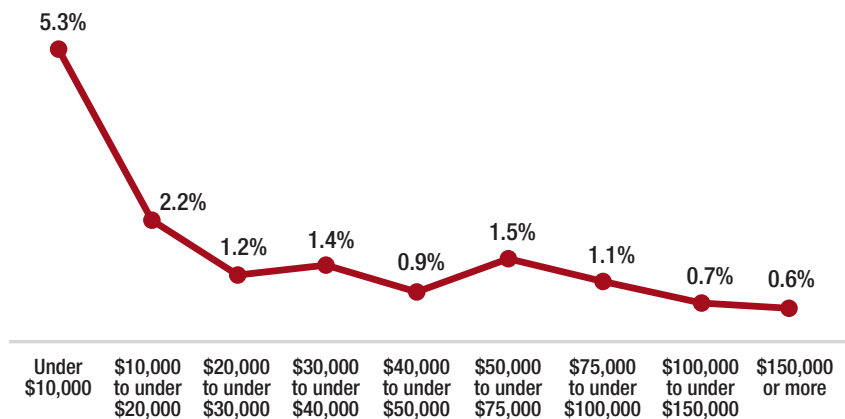


But wait. When someone is earning an annual income of \$30,000 or less, a contribution of \$1,800 or more is a substantial portion (at minimum, 6%). The one-fifth of low earners who contribute at that level are digging deep, giving sacrificially. You might already be thinking about the poor widow Jesus praised for putting two small coins in the Temple's offering box, while rich people were donating

much larger amounts. “The others offered their gifts from what they had to spare of their riches; but she, poor as she is, gave all she had to live on” (Luke 21:1–4 GNT).

Since our survey asks about income ranges and donation ranges, we can’t zero in on specific amounts or percentages, but we can make broad comparisons. When we compare the estimated percentages of charitable giving among different income ranges, a new picture emerges. While people who make more money give more money, the *percentage* of income donated by those who give runs much higher among lower income groups.

**Estimated Percentage of Income Donated,
by Income Level⁶**



Base: All Donors

Notice the uptick around \$50,000 in income. We suspect that’s a significant point regarding financial decisions. When a household

⁶ This is based on estimates of amounts given *by those who give*. We removed non-givers from the analysis.

has income under that point, it's difficult to donate. Many do anyway, considering charity as much of a necessity as groceries or rent. Yet others at that level feel they can give little or nothing to charity after meeting the basic needs of their family. Our data suggest that, somewhere near \$50,000, households begin to recognize that they have discretionary income, which they may choose to contribute to charity. And yet, as income grows, the percentage of charitable donation does not keep pace. We recognize that these figures might not include donations made through foundations or corporations, so the percentage for the highest income levels might be higher. Yet we do want to honor the high-proportion giving of the lowest income levels, as Jesus did.

SPIRITUAL FACTORS IN GIVING

So far, we've been looking at all charitable giving by all Americans—not just giving by Christians. Now we examine a number of the spiritual factors this report has covered in previous chapters. When people attend church, engage with Scripture, or grow spiritually, does that coincide with greater generosity, at least in terms of donating to charity?

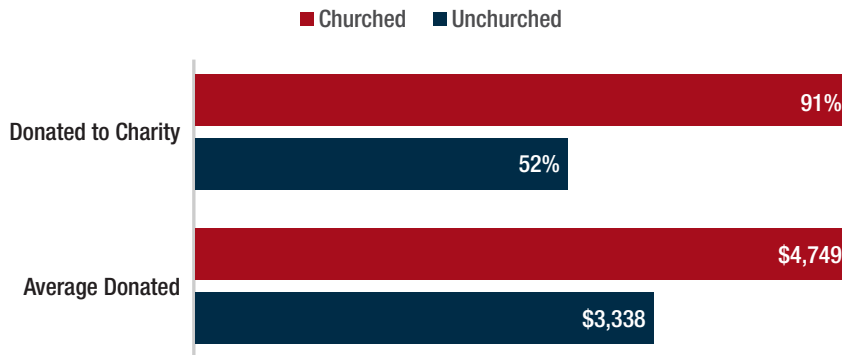
Yes. On all counts, yes.

CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Churched people (91%) are far more likely to donate to charity—*any* charity—than unchurched people (52%). Remember that this is not a very high bar. To be “churched,” someone needs to have attended at least one church service (other than a funeral or wedding) in the

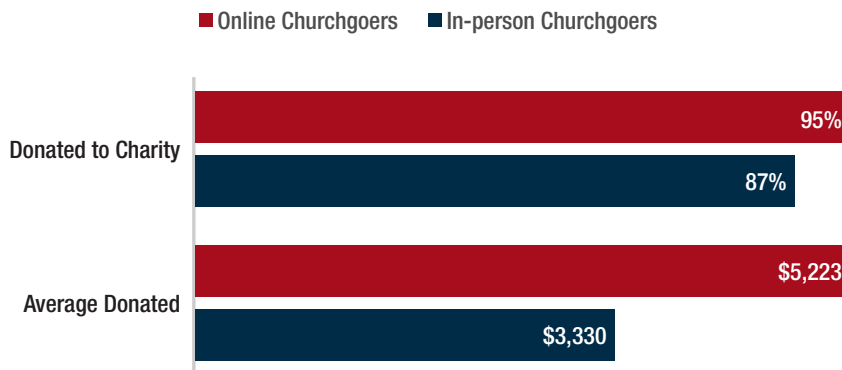
last six months. Yet there's a huge difference in charitable giving. On average, churched people give 42 percent more than the unchurched.

Charitable Giving of Churched and Unchurched



Those who attend church **online** are somewhat more likely to give to charity (95%) than those who attend primarily in person (87%), and they give in greater amounts.⁷

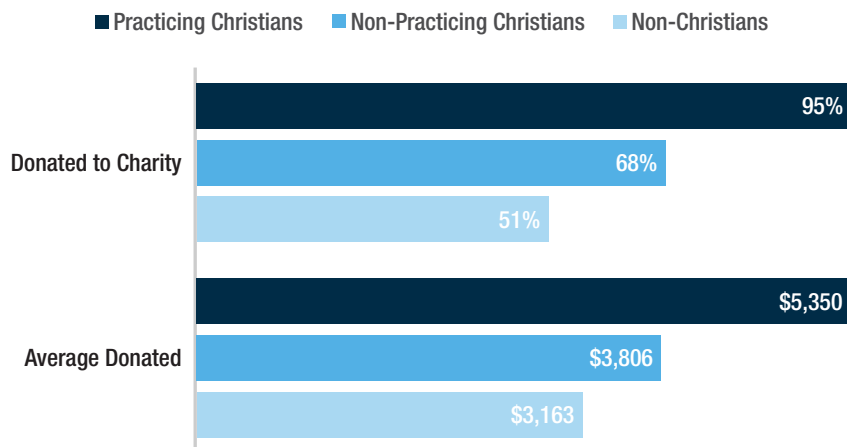
Charitable Giving of Online and In-person Church Attenders



⁷ The survey asks, "Has your church service participation primarily been . . . in person, online, or both, about equal." In this report "online" attenders also include those who say, "Both, about equal."

Practicing Christians are more likely to give (95%) than either Non-Practicing Christians (68%) or Non-Christians (51%). To be Practicing Christians, people have to identify as Christian, attend church at least once a month, and consider their faith very important in their lives. About one in five Americans qualify. Non-Christians don't identify as Christians, and Non-Practicing Christians miss out on one of the other two criteria. While generosity is not a defining item, the correlation is strong. When people practice a meaningful Christian faith, they give, and they give more.

Charitable Giving by Practicing Christian Status



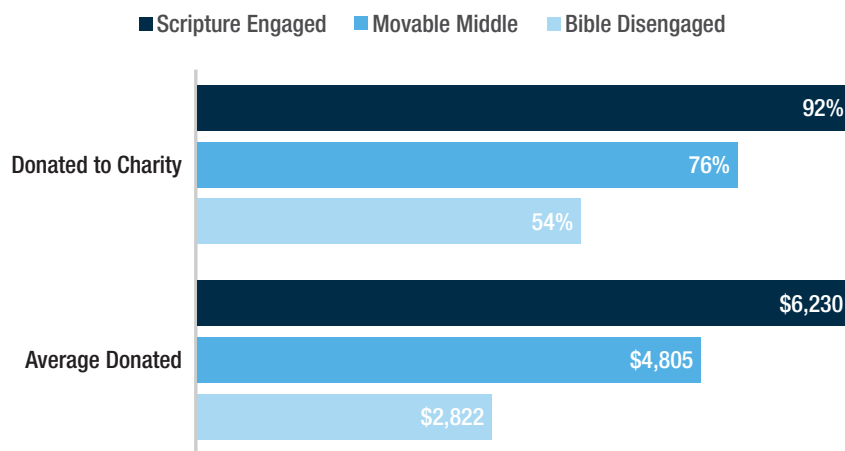
SCRIPTURE AND SPIRITUAL VITALITY

The Bible urges believers to give. Often it refers specifically to financial giving. We have examples of Joanna, Susanna, Mary, and others who supported Jesus's ministry "out of their own means" (Luke 8:1–3). Barnabas sold property to fund the early church (Acts 4:36–37). Paul commended the Macedonian churches for their "rich generosity" (2 Corinthians 8:1–5 NIV).

Scripture Engagement. With that in mind, we might expect those who engage with the Bible to practice financial generosity at a higher degree than others. And they do.

The Scripture Engaged (92%) were significantly more likely to give than those in the Movable Middle (76%) or the Bible Disengaged (54%). On average, Scripture Engaged givers donated almost a third more dollars than those in the Movable Middle and more than twice as much as the Bible Disengaged. Clearly one's relationship with the Bible is associated with financial generosity.

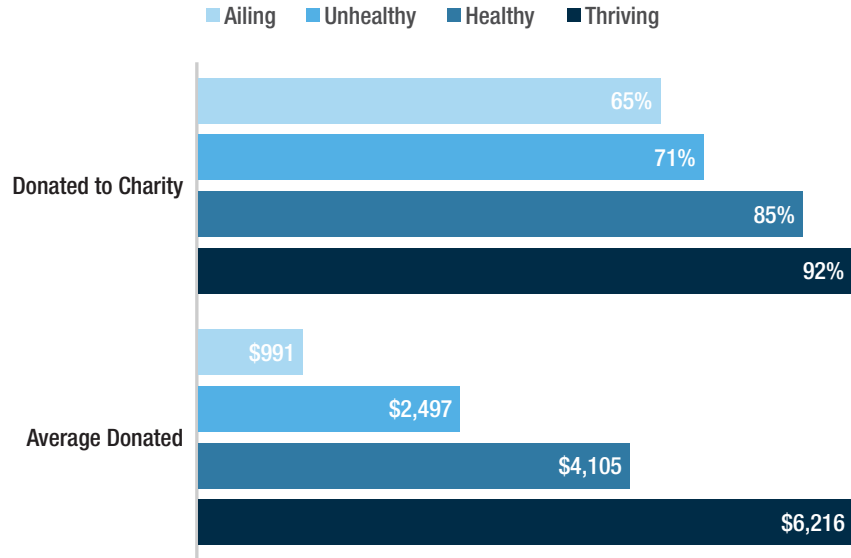
Charitable Giving by Scripture Engagement



Spiritual Vitality. The connection between spiritual maturity and generosity becomes vivid when we look at our donation statistics through the filter of the Spiritual Vitality Gauge. Based on nine incisive questions, the svg finds a score for each respondent, which then groups them as spiritually Ailing, Unhealthy, Healthy, or Thriving. Note that these questions were asked only of self-identified Christians. At each of those steps, from Ailing to Thriving,

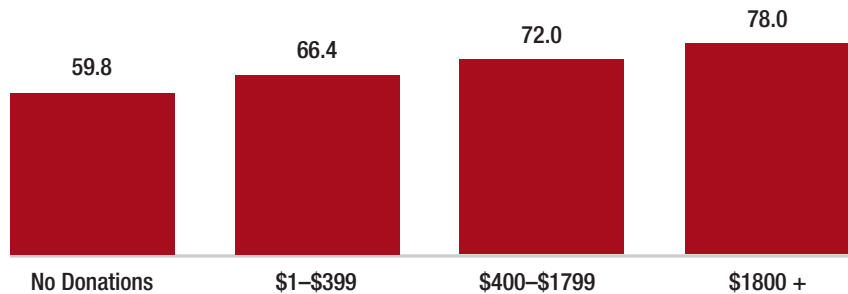
both the likelihood of being a donor and the amount donated increased substantially.

Charitable Giving by Spiritual Vitality



Looking at it another way, SVG scores grow as the amount of giving increases. Those who allow God’s Spirit to guide their lives are likely to experience a sense of generosity that leads them to help others, often with charitable donations.

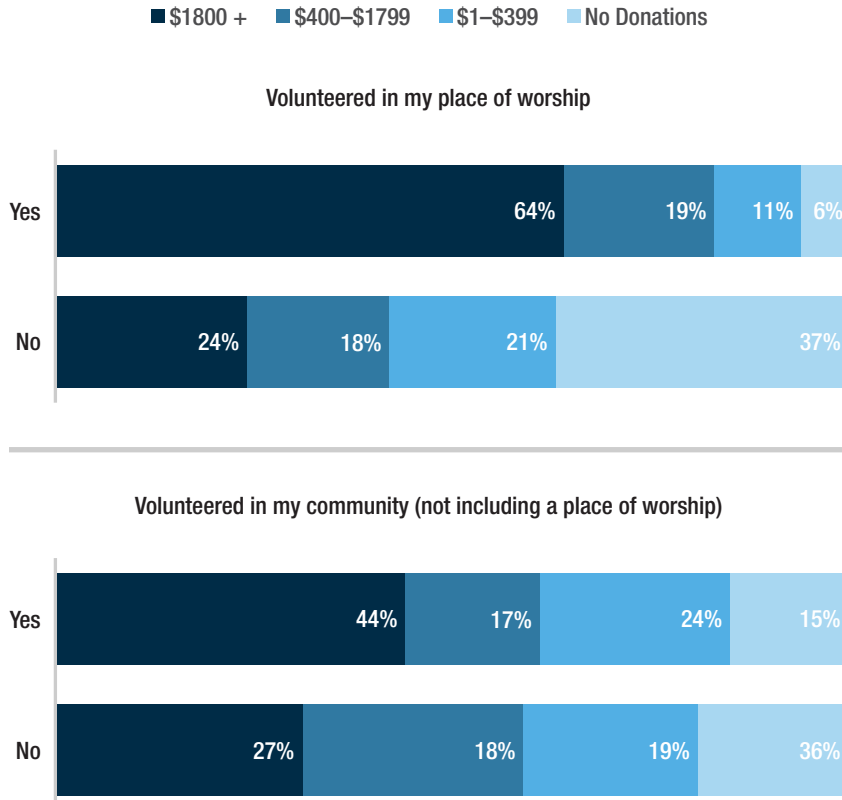
SVG Scores by Levels of Giving



VOLUNTEERING AND GIVING

Generosity spills out in all directions. When people are actively involved in helping people with their time and effort, they'll be generous with their money as well. Our survey includes two questions on volunteering—in a place of worship and in the community. With both sets of volunteers, the results were significant. Those who volunteer in the church or community are far more likely to donate to charity than those who don't volunteer. And they tend to give more money.

Giving Levels by Volunteering



CONCLUSION

Churches have been accused of caring too much about money. Sometimes that charge has been well-deserved. The Bible warns us about the dangers of wealth (1 Timothy 6:9–10) and scolds those who would show favoritism to the rich (James 2:1–6).

The title of this chapter is “Generosity,” and that’s what we’ve tried to celebrate here with numbers and percentages and charts. As always, the statistics tell a story about people. Again and again we see people transformed by God’s Word, with hearts pried open by God’s love, people of faith moved to share what they have with others—even if they don’t have much to spare. ■

THE HEART OF GENEROSITY

Of those who strongly agree that . . .

“I believe God is actively involved in my life” . . .

84%

donate to charity



“I thank God daily for who he is and what he is doing in my life” . . .

85%

donate to charity



“I am willing to risk everything that is important in my life for Jesus Christ” . . .

88%

donate to charity





WHAT WE'VE BEEN LEARNING

Man bites dog.” Countless journalism professors have used that hypothetical headline to show what “news” is. People expect dogs to bite people, so they’ll ignore a story about that. But successful journalists look for the unexpected, the surprise, the reversal: *man bites dog*.

State of the Bible 2023 has packaged volumes of information in eight chapters already, assembling a picture of America’s relationship with Scripture. In some respects, we’ve been telling the same story for several years. The country is less religious than it used to be, showing less interest in the Bible, in church, or in Christian commitment. This is especially true among younger generations, suggesting that these trends will continue for years to come.

Call us ornery, but we keep looking for surprises. Are there notes of hope to be heard amid the drumbeats of doom? Are there unexpected positives to be found? Or are there *different* issues we should focus on? Are there opportunities for ministry where we wouldn't expect? We stay true to the statistics, of course, but we turn the data every which way to find the most helpful angles. What information will help you be more effective in your service to God?

Often news outlets pick up stories from *State of the Bible* and put them out to their audiences. This gives us a sense of what others consider most newsworthy. Drawing from that feedback and from our own instincts, we offer a year-end collection of top stories—and a glimpse at next year's study.

TOP BIBLE DATA STORIES OF 2023

1. MORE THAN HALF OF AMERICANS WISH THEY READ THE BIBLE MORE

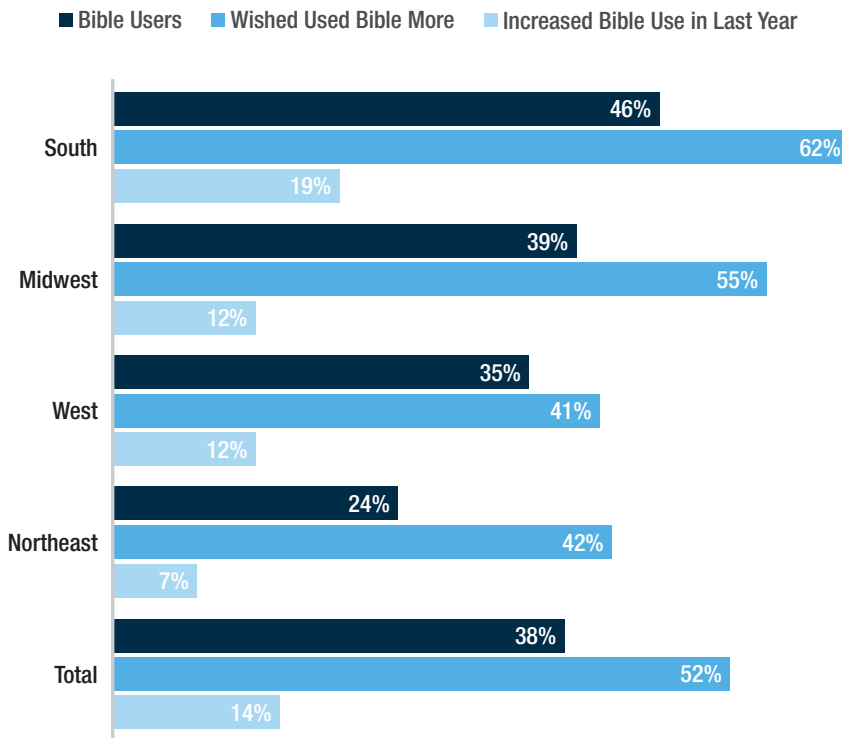
There's a gap between intention and action. More than half of Americans (52%) say they wish they read Scripture more, but only one in seven (14%) say they've increased their Bible reading in the past year. Only a quarter of the U.S. population (25%) reads the Bible weekly on their own, apart from a church service (page 141). So the “wish” question does not reveal what people are doing, but what they *think they should be* doing—just as many affirm the value of physical exercise without exercising regularly.¹ Still, it's significant that half the

¹ Statistics on wishing and doing regarding physical fitness are surprisingly hard to find. One survey shows three in four affirming the value of physical exercise. Another says only 23 percent meet government recommendations for physical activity.

population claims this “wish” as their own. They believe that Bible reading is worth putting on their to-do list even if they don’t do it.

These findings might also suggest that Bible reading still has significant cultural support in the U.S. While nearly half the populace might ignore or dismiss the Bible, there appears to be a cultural majority that upholds Bible reading as a worthy pursuit. In that light, we’ve cross-tabulated the “wish” responses with details of where people live—both region and community type.

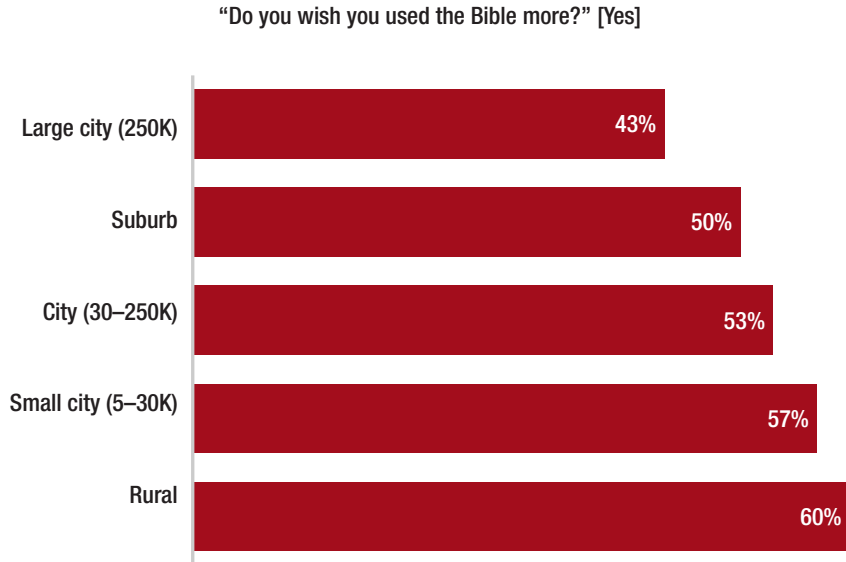
Wish to Read Bible (and Increased Bible Use) by Geographical Region



Bible Users are those who report Bible interaction on their own at least three times a year.

Regionally, we see the South as the strongest Bible culture in percentage of Bible Users (46%), the wish to read more (62%), and the actual increase in Bible reading (19%). The Northeast trails in all those areas (24/42/7%). We also see rural areas with the strongest wish to interact with the Bible (60%).

Wish to Read Bible by Community Type



Other demographic factors affect these regional and community statistics. Most significantly, in large cities and in the Northeast, we find more people who follow non-Christian religions and perhaps different writings. Yet the point still holds. In some areas there is a stronger pro-Bible culture that fosters not only the wish to read the Bible more, but higher levels of Bible use and even increases in Bible interaction.

If you are a church leader, a ministry executive, or a layperson sharing your faith with friends, these data raise a significant question. How do people feel about their own relationship with the Bible? Do they come to the conversation already wishing they read the Bible more, perhaps with a sense of guilt, perhaps longing for a more compelling way to interact with Scripture? Or are they estranged from this “Bible culture”? Perhaps the Bible is then a wonderful new thing for them to encounter.

2. ONLINE CHURCH ATTENDEES LEAD IN BIBLE READING FREQUENCY

You have been living through this story. COVID sent churches scrambling for alternate methods. Many launched (or improved) online church services. Now churches have reopened, but a significant number of Christians still attend church online.

Does this count? A lively debate persists between those who uphold the unique value of in-person gathering and those who prize the accessibility and outreach opportunities of online services. This report will not solve that issue, but we have included questions about the mode of church attendance. Our findings might help inform that conversation.

We asked whether churchgoers attended “primarily in person” or “primarily online,” with the additional option of “both, about equally.” In our analysis we put the “equally” respondents with the “online” group. This gave us two groups of about the same size—some continuing in the pre-pandemic default mode of in-person

Online attenders are more likely to give to charity than those who attend church primarily online.

attendance and others connecting with online services about half the time or more.

The results dispel any notion that online attenders are less devoted Christians.

For one thing, they are more than twice as likely to connect with Scripture on their own at least once a week (as seen in the graphic on page 139). While fewer than a third of in-person attenders (32%) report weekly Bible use on their own, that number soars to nearly three in four (74%) for online attenders. This discrepancy is so striking, it deserves more study.

Online attenders (95%) are also more likely to give to charity than those who attend church primarily online (87%), as seen on the chart at the bottom of page 165. They also give more money, on average. It should be noted that this includes all charitable giving, to churches as well as other organizations.

Arguments will continue about the relative value of in-person and online church attendance. But let's drop the idea that the online congregation is lazy, less spiritual, and uncommitted. The data do not bear that out. Perhaps we could expend some energy in seeking ways to draw the online group into the fellowship and ministry of the church, while also enhancing the spiritual lives of those *in* the room in ways that extend *beyond* that room.

3. NON-BELIEVERS VALUE SEVERAL BIBLE-BASED BEHAVIORS

For centuries, Christian preachers have railed against the immorality of those outside the faith. From Mount Carmel to Mars Hill, there's biblical precedent for that. A few decades ago, fueled by a concern about postmodernism, some Christians began opposing the amorality of the current culture, saying people had no sense of right and wrong.

But this is old news, according to our survey. People throughout our society have highly charged opinions of right and wrong, though they often differ from Christians on the specifics. We find this especially true among Gen Z.

In Chapter 6 of this report, we focused on “pro-social behavior.” The survey asked people to rate the importance of a number of charitable actions—caring for the poor and the environment, welcoming immigrants, caring for those in prison, and so on. All of these lined up with biblical teaching, and some are directly mentioned in Jesus's famous parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46).

We expected Scripture Engaged people to put a high value on these actions, and they did. We didn't expect a *greater* response from anti-Bible people. We're talking about those who say, “The Bible was written to control or manipulate other people,” those who feel the country would be “better off without the Bible.” These opponents rated most of the pro-social behaviors even higher than the Scripture Engaged did (see pages 120–121).

What can we do with this surprising information? We can start meaningful conversations with people who oppose us. Instead of criticizing their lack of morality, we should recognize that many of them are *extremely* moral, just with a different sense of what's moral and immoral. And while we would certainly disagree on some of those matters, perhaps we can find common ground on these pro-social behaviors. “Do you care about helping the poor? That's exactly what Jesus told us to do. Do you care about preserving the environment? The Bible tells us that is part of God's first command to humans. Do you want to welcome outsiders? The Bible has wisdom on doing that well!”

4. GEN Z EXPERIENCING LIFE CHANGE

Where do you draw the line? That's an important question in statistical analysis. Our work is all about identifying certain groups and looking for differences between one group and another. Every group has individuals that go against the grain, but we're looking for aggregate trends.

People seem fascinated by generations, and we follow the current practice of identifying Elders, Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. These are approximately 15-year cycles (the older groups a bit more). Since we only survey adults, the youngest group, Gen Z, enters our data set at age 18 and extends to age 26.

We find that, even in this smaller group of people 18–26 years old, there are often significant differences between the older and the younger, and that makes sense. An 18-year-old is at a much different point in life than a 26-year-old. For many, that stretch of time

includes going to college, moving out of their parents' home, getting a job, or getting married. Especially important for our study, it may also involve leaving their childhood church for another church, or re-examining their faith. This is not always a move away from God, but it can be.

Because of all this, we sometimes distinguish between younger Gen Z (18–21) and older Gen Z (22–26). Comparing these two partial generations, we find younger Gen Z far more curious about the Bible and/or Jesus than older Gen Z (56% to 34%). They're more likely to be increasing their Bible use over the previous year, and significantly more Scripture Engaged.

And yet there is hope for this older group. More than half of them (52%) say their lives have been “transformed by the Bible’s message” (slightly more than the younger group). And those who identify as Christians show a bit more spiritual vitality (on the sVG) than the younger group, suggesting that those who remain in the faith are growing in it (see page 103).

It is clearly a time of turbulence for many young people in this 22–26 age group, perhaps experiencing new-found freedom (or need) to choose their own beliefs about God, religion, and themselves. Noting that “people in Gen Z enjoy discussing what they believe,” Mark Matlock says, “This is an incredible opportunity for us. If we sit and listen, they will likely share with us; we just need to have the compassion to ask.”²

2 <https://americanbible.org/matlock>

5. SPIRITUAL TEMPERAMENTS BY DENOMINATIONAL GROUP

Borrowing a collection of Spiritual Temperaments laid out by pastor-author Gary Thomas, we explored the soul-personality of different denominational groups (see page 80).

- Naturalists—those who connect best with God in nature—are the biggest group among Mainline Protestants and Catholics.
- Ascetics—those who connect with God through simple prayer and Bible study—lead the way among Evangelicals and Historically Black Protestants.
- Enthusiasts—whose emotions are stirred through singing and praying—make a strong showing among Historically Black Protestants.
- Traditionalists crack the top five only among Catholics.
- Other temperaments in the top five among all four groups are Contemplatives (experiencing an intimate friendship with God) and Sensates (whose senses come alive in worship).

6. BLACK CHRISTIANS LEADING THE WAY

The Spiritual Vitality data we explored in Chapter 4 was strong and unequivocal. On this measure of faith and growth, black Christians in America scored significantly higher than white or Hispanic Americans. Looking back through the data on Scripture Engagement, Practicing Christians, Bible Users, and church attendance, we concluded, “Black Americans lead the way on nearly every measure

of spiritual life we have. . . . This group has a lot to teach the rest of the church” (see pages 85–88).

We can all draw encouragement as we consider the challenges black Americans have faced through the centuries and the resiliency they have found in a deep relationship with Christ. Believers of all ethnic backgrounds can praise God for the spiritual strength seen in this group—and seek to emulate it.

7. HUMAN FLOURISHING CONNECTED TO BIBLICAL TRANSFORMATION

State of the Bible includes questions about spiritual life, church connection, and of course Scripture Engagement. But the Human Flourishing Index, developed at Harvard six years ago, includes a broader assessment of the human experience. It relies on self-reporting of how people are doing in six domains of life, including Happiness, Relationships, and Purpose (see Chapter 3 for details). For several years now, we have included these Human Flourishing questions in our survey.

It was fascinating to see the ups and downs reported at various points during the COVID crisis. But the big news for anyone involved in Bible ministry is the strong effect on Flourishing scores connected with Scripture Engagement, Practicing Christian status, and biblical transformation.

We always want to be careful about suggesting that Christian faith will erase people’s problems. It doesn’t work quite like that. Still, this

is rather strong empirical evidence of the “abundant life” Jesus offers (John 10:10).

Human Flourishing Index by Three Spiritual Factors

Scripture Engagement



Practicing Christian Status



“The message of the Bible has transformed my life”



8. GENEROSITY: PEOPLE WHO VOLUNTEER ALSO DONATE

Many churches and charities thrive not only when people donate their money, but also when they give their time. Generosity is more than a financial transaction. It often involves participation, presence, and muscle. Volunteering and donation go hand in hand.

Our survey confirmed this. Those who volunteer at church are more than twice as likely to donate at the highest level than those who don't. This principle extends even to non-church situations. Community volunteers were 60 percent more likely to give at the highest level than non-volunteers (see charts on page 169).

9. FAITH IN MOTION: STRONGER WHEN CHANGED

What was your mother's faith when you were ten years old? Is that the faith you still follow?

We started this line of questioning last year, and we're refining it as we go. It's giving us great insight into the journey of faith. While many would mourn the rejection of someone's childhood beliefs, in many cases it seems to be a step toward Christian maturity. Those whose faith has changed have slightly higher Scripture Engagement scores. They are more likely to trust the Bible and to consider their current faith "very important in my life today." They report greater curiosity about the Bible and about Jesus (see pages 26–29).

Among the major Christian groups we considered (Evangelical, Historically Black Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic), it didn't matter which faith they had come from or moved to. The

movement itself generally had a positive effect. Perhaps there is a spiritual energy unfurled in the decision to choose a new path for oneself, or to let God's Spirit lead in a new direction.

EXTRA: DOES BIBLE ENGAGEMENT HEAL TRAUMA?

For about a decade, American Bible Society has included a Trauma Healing ministry, seeking to apply scriptural wisdom to the deepest wounds of the human experience. Bible engagement involves regular connection with the powerful Creator whose healing activity appears throughout Scripture, so it's a natural extension of our work. As a result, trauma and the healing of trauma's effects have become part of the *State of the Bible* survey.

From a data standpoint, we tread carefully. The issue of causation is often difficult to parse out. Does healing happen because a person is engaging with Scripture, or because the person has self-discipline, or because there's a supportive church helping out? Often it's all of the above, and more.

From a Christian standpoint, we remain humble in the face of human suffering. We want to avoid the simplistic prescriptions of Job's friends, who essentially blamed him for his own woes. Well aware of the awesome power of God's Word, we never want to reduce it to "read these verses and you'll feel better in the morning."

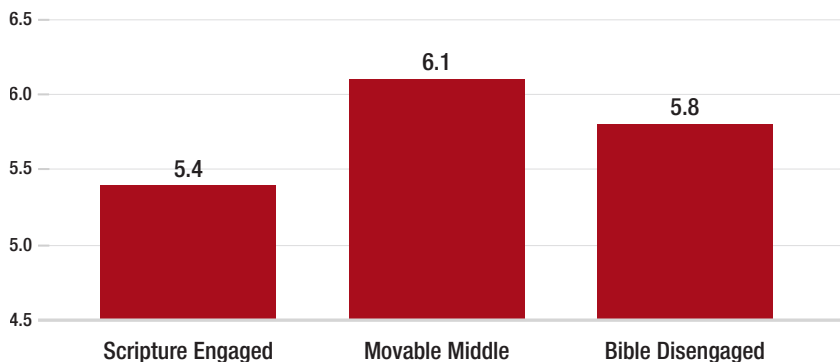
With that said, as we close out this final chapter of our 2023 report, we want to let you know that we're exploring the issue of trauma and will continue to do so. For several years now, we have asked basic

questions about whether people have experienced personal trauma or witnessed it in others. We also ask whether they still feel the effects of that trauma, and if so, how often. In addition, we invite them to rate the severity of their trauma response on a 0–10 scale.³

Trauma affects all types of people, cutting across all demographics and faith categories. Being a Christian, even a thriving one, does not prevent a person from experiencing or witnessing trauma. And yet we do see a few differences in the data that intrigue us.

Scripture Engagement and Rating of Trauma Severity

Mean ratings for those who have personally experienced trauma



Those who are Scripture Engaged rate the effects of trauma in their lives at a lower level of severity than those with less connection to the Bible. These ratings come from those who have experienced personal trauma themselves. And, while that experience continues to bother the vast majority of people in every category (across the

³ The survey offers a definition of trauma as “extreme violence, abuse, or a near-death experience that produces a response of intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” It also suggests “anxiety, crying spells, depression, sleep disturbance, [and] suicidal thoughts” as examples of possible effects.

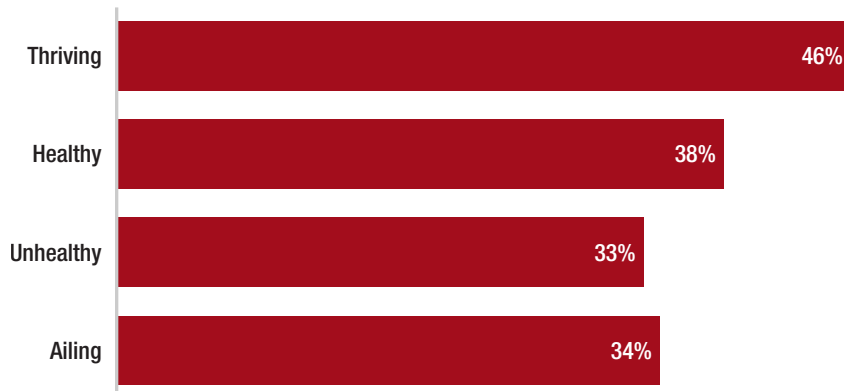
board only one in eight say it “never” affects them anymore), the Scripture Engaged rank the severity much lower.

The Psalmist sings about the word of the Lord “refreshing the soul” and “giving joy to the heart” (Psalm 19:7–8 NIV). Perhaps that’s what we see here—not that Bible-engagers are immune to the effects of trauma, but that they find ongoing healing in their continued attention to what the Lord says.

Personal Trauma Experience by Spiritual Vitality

Have you personally experienced a trauma?

Percent within each SVG group saying yes



Base: Self-identified Christians

This year, for the first time, we were able to cross-tabulate trauma experience with spiritual vitality, as measured by the nine questions of the Spiritual Vitality Gauge. In case you assumed that the strongest Christians lead charmed lives, free of difficulty, with faith that has never been tested, the data point in the opposite direction. Those

in the Thriving category of the SVG are significantly *more* likely to have experienced trauma personally.

What does this mean? Do trauma sufferers seek help from churches and Christians that lead them into a more vital relationship with Christ? Or are strong Christians just more attuned to the language of trauma, more apt to admit that they have suffered? Or does this verify the biblical teaching that invites believers to rejoice “whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete” (James 1:2–4 NIV)?

One clue: Of the nine questions involved in the SVG, only one showed a clear association with the trauma questions: **accountability**. The data show that Christians who let other Christians hold them accountable for their behavior also say the effects of their trauma are less severe.

This makes sense. Counselors have long recognized the value of group therapy. In a variety of small groups, classes, and prayer partnerships, many churches have found this too. Participatory groups like these have also been a major component of the Trauma Healing approach at American Bible Society, now part of a broader ministry initiative called Restoring Hope. When people bottle up their pain, they continue to suffer. When they share it in a safe way, especially with others who are also hurting, then healing can happen.

“Trauma silences people’s voices because it seems too horrific to put into words and it disrupts the normal way our brains put words to events,” explains Rebecca Taguma, executive director of Restoring

“Trauma leaves a permanent mark . . . but we can build resilience for the future with the help of God’s Word.”

Rebecca Taguma

Hope. “A participatory approach gives people the opportunity to recover their voice as they tell their stories to each other. While trauma disconnects people from others, a participatory approach reconnects people in ways that contribute to their healing. It includes mind, emotions, and body, all of which are necessary for healing.”

A quick scan of recent headlines from the U.S. and around the world shows that trauma isn’t going away anytime soon. Collectively, we wallow in it. But followers of Jesus have hope to offer a hurting world. The Bible itself includes frank descriptions of personal trauma, the heartfelt laments of sufferers, and powerful models of faith that grows through tough times.

“Trauma overwhelms us and impacts every area of life,” Taguma adds. “When we begin to unpack our experience and regain our voice and connect with others in a safe environment, it brings healing, and healing brings freedom. Trauma leaves a permanent mark—we never go back to the way we were before—but we can build resilience for the future with the help of God’s Word, especially in community with others.” ■



METHODOLOGY

In 2023, the *State of the Bible* research team at American Bible Society collaborated with NORC at the University of Chicago to design and field a nationally representative survey of American adults on topics related to the Bible, faith, and the church. The study was conducted in English and was presented both online and via telephone to NORC’s AmeriSpeak® Panel, using a 18-minute questionnaire. The study produced 2,761 responses from a representative sample of adults 18 and older within all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data were collected from January 5–30, 2023. The margin of error for a sample of this size is ± 2.59 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

QUALITY AT A GLANCE

Following are key survey quality indicators, excerpted from a report card prepared by NORC at the University of Chicago in compliance with the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative. The full report is available upon request by emailing pr@americanbible.org.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

- **Study Population:** General Population Age 18+
- **Sample Units:** 9,406
- **Completed Units:** 2,761
- **Margin of Error:** $\pm 2.59\%$
- **Average Design Effect:** 1.92
- **Survey Field Period:** January 5–30, 2023
- **Median Duration:** 18 minutes

PANEL OUTCOMES

- **Weighted Household Recruitment Rate:**¹ 19.5%
- **Weighted Household Retention Rate:** 80.4%

SURVEY OUTCOMES

- **Survey Completion Rate:**² 29.4%
- **Weighted Cumulative Response Rate:**³ 4.6%

THE AMERISPEAK® PANEL

Funded and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago, AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. Randomly selected U.S. households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the

- 1 The weighted AAPOR RR III for the AmeriSpeak panel recruitment corresponding to the recruitment cohorts sampled for the study. A recruited household is a household where at least one adult successfully completed the recruitment survey and joined the panel.
- 2 The percent of eligible sample members who completed the survey interview.
- 3 The overall survey response rate that accounts for survey outcomes in all response stages including panel recruitment rate, panel retention rate, and survey completion rate. It is weighted to account for the sample design and differential inclusion probabilities of sample members.

NORC National Sample Frame. These sampled households are then contacted by U.S. mail, telephone, and field interviewers (face to face).

The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97 percent of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with PO Box addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

While most AmeriSpeak households participate in surveys by web, non-internet households can participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by telephone. Households without conventional internet access but having web access via smartphones are allowed to participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by web. AmeriSpeak panelists participate in NORC studies or studies conducted by NORC on behalf of governmental agencies, academic researchers, and media and commercial organizations.

For more information, email AmeriSpeak-BD@norc.org or visit AmeriSpeak.norc.org.

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions. Since 1941, NORC has conducted groundbreaking studies, created and applied innovative methods and tools, and advanced principles of scientific integrity and collaboration. Today, government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world partner with NORC to transform increasingly complex information into useful knowledge. Please visit www.norc.org for more information. ■



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 11 to 26 in 2023. This study includes adults (19–26) in Generation Z.
- **Millennials (1981–1996):** Ages 27 to 42 in 2023.
- **Generation X (1965–1980):** Ages 43 to 58 in 2023.
- **Baby Boomers (1946–1964):** Ages 59 to 77 in 2023.
- **Elders (1928–1945):** Ages 78 to 95 in 2023. This study considers any respondent 78 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.

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 below.

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

Pathway of Scripture Engagement: 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 201 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.

Scripture unengaged: Anyone who scores below 100 on the Scripture Engagement Scale.

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.

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.

1. **Scripture Engaged:** Score = 100 or higher. Includes both the Bible Centered and the Bible Engaged.
2. **Movable Middle:** Score = 70–99. Includes both the Bible Friendly and Bible Neutral categories.
3. **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.

Spiritual Temperaments: Nine ways that people say they connect best with God, from the book *Sacred Pathways* by Gary Thomas. In our survey, people self-identify as naturalist, ascetic, contemplative, sensate, intellectual, traditional, enthusiast, caregiver, or activist.

Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svG): From answers to nine concise questions focusing on beliefs, spiritual practices, and faith in action, the svG yields a score between 0 and 100 as a reliable measure of spiritual health. The svG is used by permission of Renovo.

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 (SES).

The SES is designed to plot an individual's current location on the Pathway and—with repeated measurement—their 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

Since 2011, American Bible Society has sponsored the annual *State of the Bible* research study in an effort to listen carefully to America's voice regarding the Bible, faith, and the church. Today, the science of listening is a main focus of the Ministry Intelligence team at American Bible Society.

This ebook 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. In this thirteenth consecutive year of the *State of the Bible*, we pause to express our gratitude to those who have contributed most to this work.

The *State of the Bible* research team is led by American Bible Society's Chief Program Officer, Dr. John Plake, who joined the 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 Director of Ministry Intelligence, 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 leverages years of research experience to uncover the story behind the numbers.

Angel Mann joined the team this year as Research and Evaluation Manager. Angel performs countless statistical tests and prepares reams of data for our writing and data visualization specialists.

Randy Petersen of Petersen Creative Enterprises serves as *State of the Bible's* managing editor and lead writer. Randy served for nearly four years as American Bible Society's Director of Scripture Engagement Content. During his tenure at ABS, Randy helped the team write about research and data. He has a gift for parsimony: bringing clarity to complexity without sacrificing truth.

Josh Thomassen of Thomassen Collective handles data visualizations, graphic design, and typesetting. He is new to the *State of the Bible* team in 2023, and he is bringing a fresh look to our data visualizations and graphics.

Laura Chan served this year as American Bible Society's Director of Communications. She has the twin gifts of curiosity and intellect that made her an invaluable member of the *State of the Bible* team. Laura has pushed the team to ask relevant questions that can

serve the church with actionable insights and helped us connect this research with the broader stories in America and the interests of key media outlets.

Peter Edman is our quality assurance lead, helping all of us produce a more consistent, high-quality report. Finally, Eric Elinow works behind the scenes, helping ensure that our website connects you to the most recent version of our report. ■

STATE OF THE BIBLE USA 2023

In 2011, American Bible Society launched a landmark annual study of the *State of the Bible* in America. This year's report marks thirteen years of listening and learning how *consistent interaction with the Bible shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships*.

In the 2023 report, the *State of the Bible* research team is tracking America's relationship with the Bible, faith, and the Church. Here are just a few highlights:

1. When people engage deeply with the Bible, their lives are better, their relationships are better, and they flourish.
2. Scripture engagement among American adults fell by 4 percent from 49 million to only 47 million.
3. The Movable Middle expanded again, growing over 15 percent from 65 million to nearly 76 million.
4. A remarkable number of Americans change their faith affiliation over their lifetimes. We profile those changes and highlight some surprising trends.

You'll discover more about the Bible in America, as we release a new chapter each month from April through December.



Insights