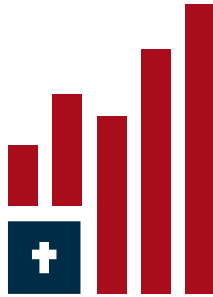


THE STATE OF THE
BIBLE
USA 2021

RESEARCH FROM AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY



THE STATE OF THE BIBLE USA 2021

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Prepared by

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PREFACE

BY DAVID KINNAMAN

Barna Group

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



DAVID KINNAMAN

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



INTRODUCTION

BY JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

American Bible Society

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

205 YEARS OF BIBLE MINISTRY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A SECOND DECADE OF BIBLE RESEARCH

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

BIBLE FOCUSED. RESEARCH INFORMED.

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

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

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

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

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVABLE MIDDLE

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

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

² See Appendix 1: Methodology, page 61.

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

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

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

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

FLOURISHING AND THE BIBLE

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

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

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

TRAUMA AND PAIN

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

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

UNDERSTANDING THE STATE OF THE BIBLE

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

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

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

The initial release of this ebook contains the following chapters:

1. **The Bible in America** examines Scripture engagement and key trends around the Bible since our last study in 2020.
2. **The New Normal** looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's relationship with the Bible and examines the role of the church in helping people progress down the Pathway of Scripture Engagement (see page 71 for more on the *Pathway of Scripture Engagement*).

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

FUTURE INSTALLMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

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

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

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

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THE BIBLE IN AMERICA

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

Rev. Esau McCaulley, Ph.D.

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

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

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

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

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

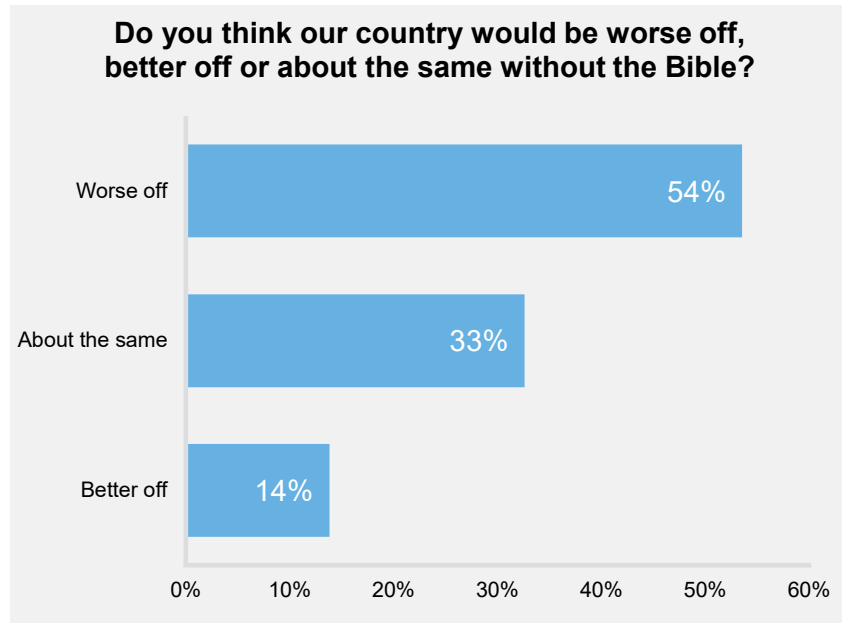
We’ll also examine signs of hope that the Bible remains a strong foundation for America and leads to transformation for both individuals and communities. Further, there is great opportunity for many to move from openness to the Bible to deeper engagement with God’s Word.

WHAT DO AMERICANS THINK ABOUT THE BIBLE?

THE BIBLE'S INFLUENCE IN THE U.S.

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

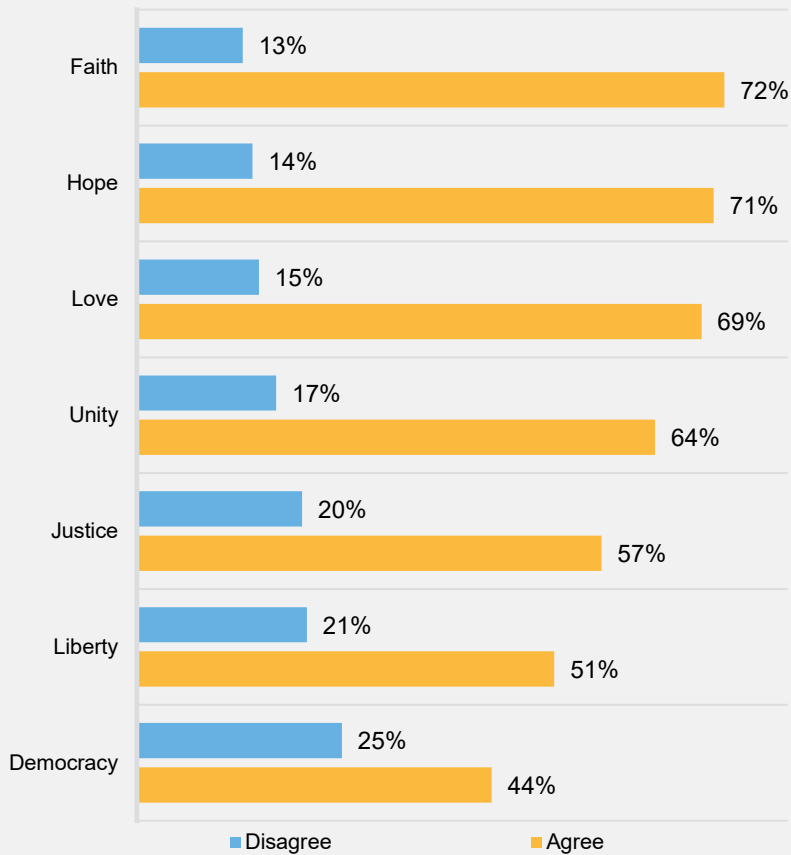
Over half of U.S. adults (54%) believe that America would be worse off without the Bible, which is actually a 5-percent increase since last year (49% in 2020). One in seven Americans (14%) believes the nation would be better without the Bible, essentially the same as last year's 13 percent. While the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



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

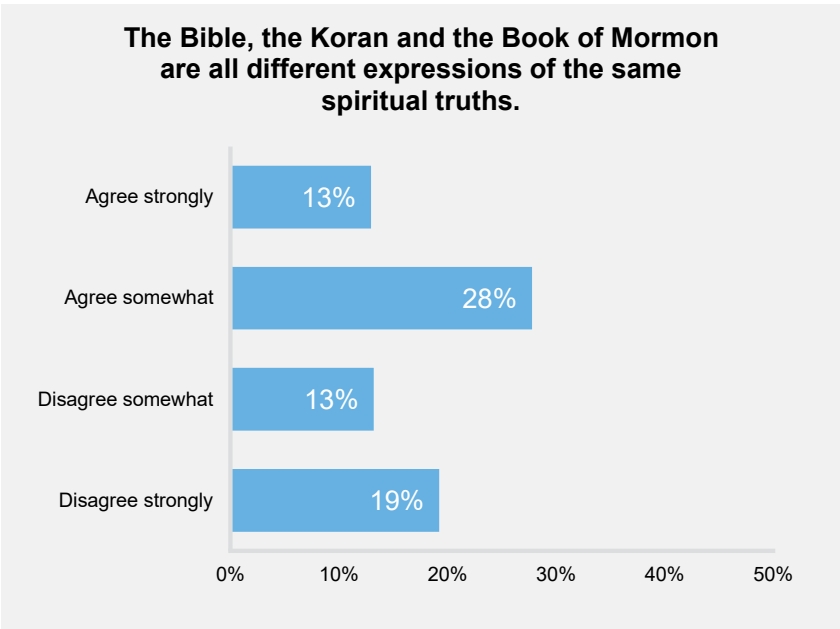
Of the listed American values, only democracy failed to garner agreement from a majority of respondents when asked if the Bible’s teachings are “essential to sustaining the following American ideals.” While only 44 percent agree that the Bible’s teachings underpin American democracy, just one in four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

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



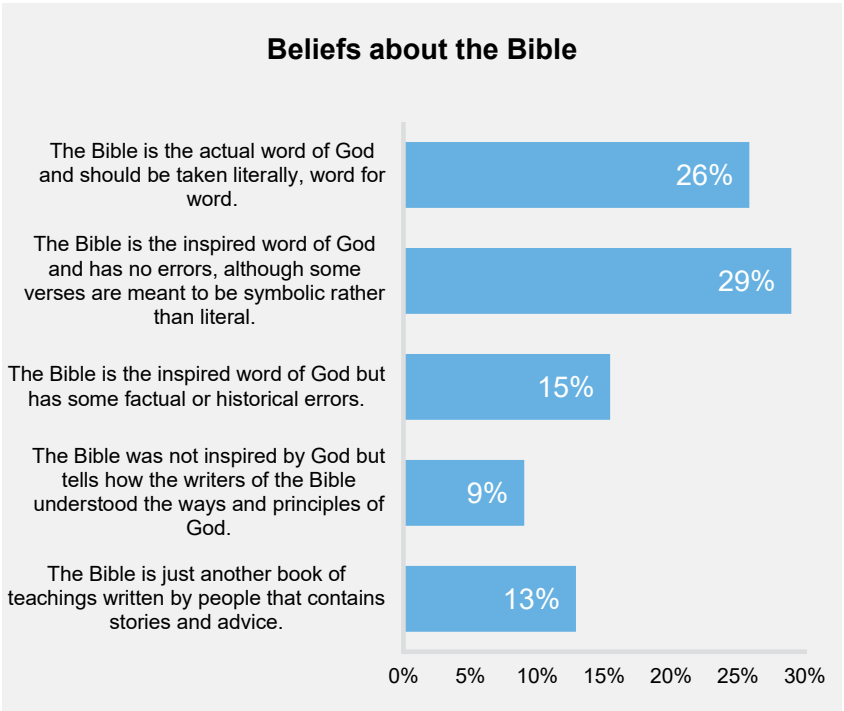
THE BIBLE AS A UNIQUE, TRUE, AND MEANINGFUL WORK

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



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

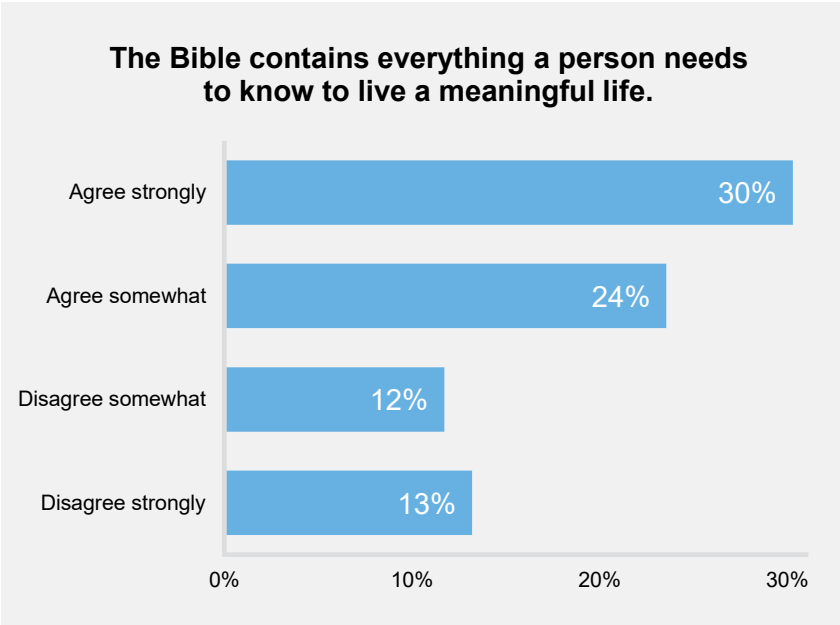
be taken literally. Three in ten (29%) hold the view that the Bible is the word of God and, though it does not have errors, parts of it can be interpreted both literally and symbolically. Sixteen percent say the Bible has some historical or factual errors but is still the word of God. Taken together,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



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

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

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

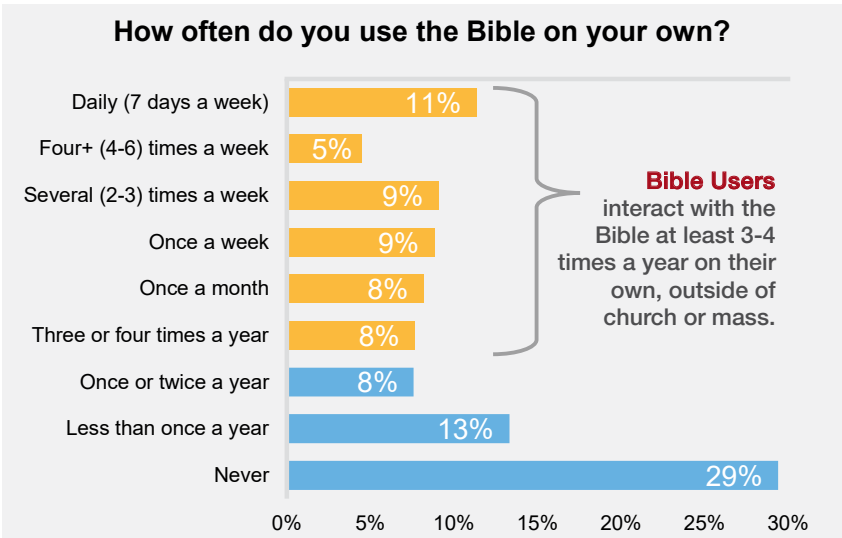


HOW DO AMERICANS ENGAGE WITH THE BIBLE?

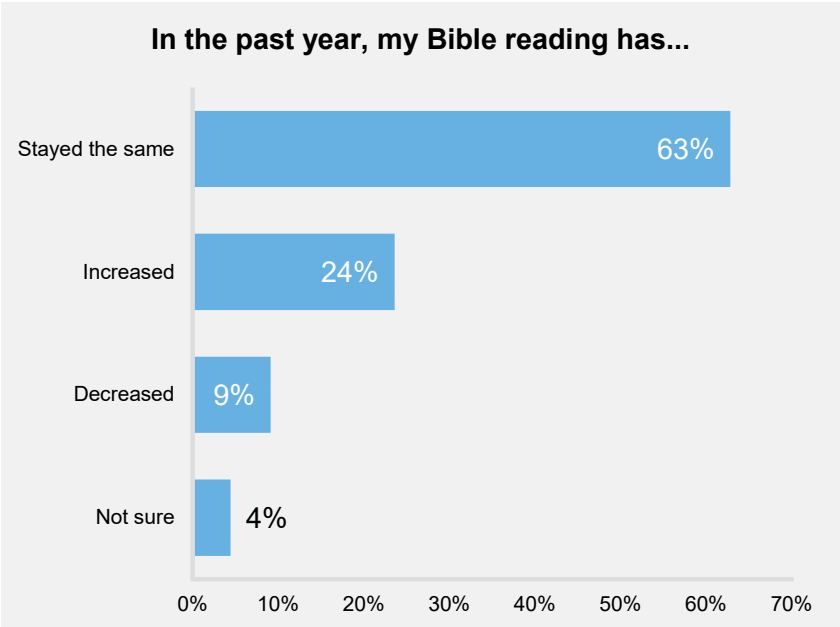
FREQUENCY OF BIBLE USE

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

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



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



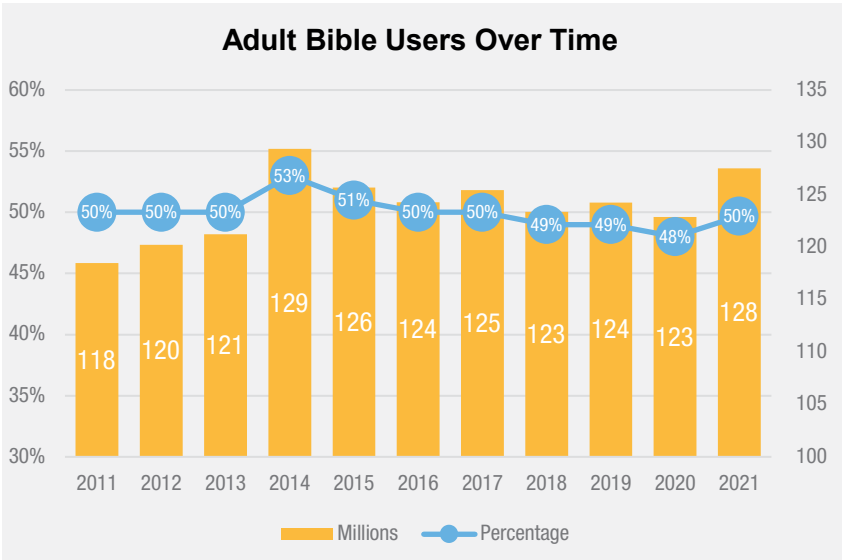
PROFILING BIBLE USERS

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

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

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

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



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



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



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



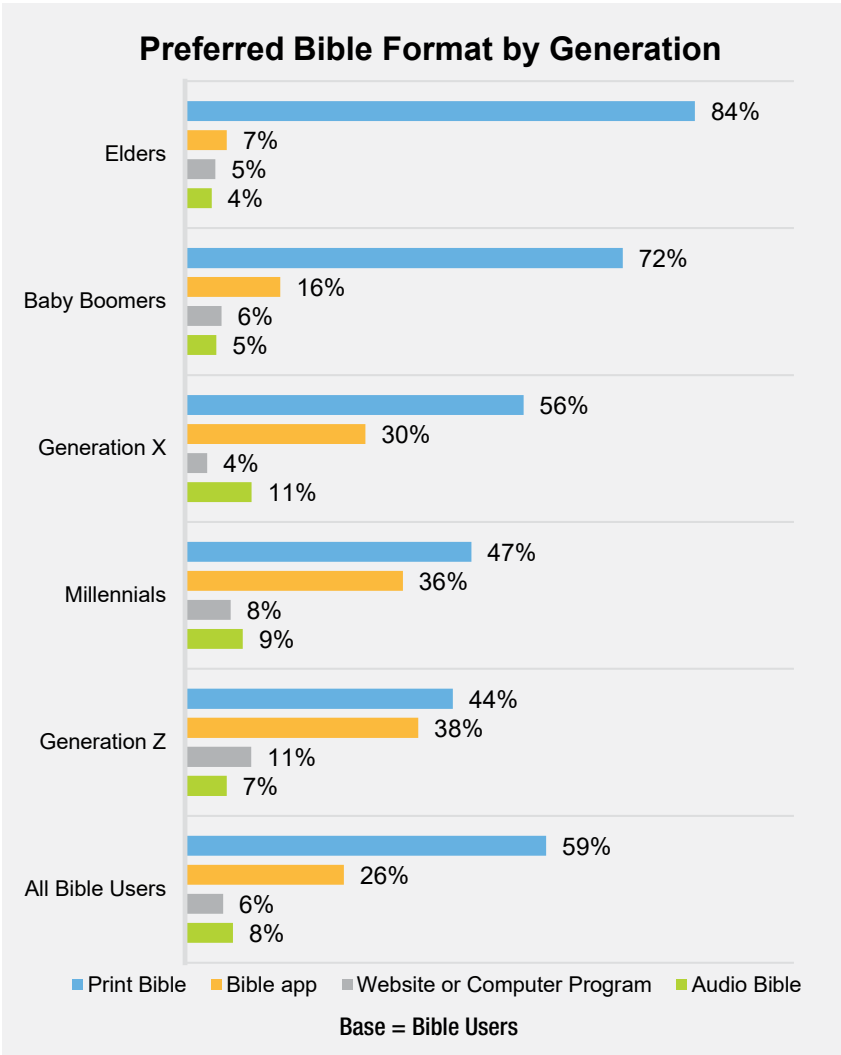
Bible Users are ethnically diverse. Seven in ten Black Americans (69%) and over half of Hispanic Americans (52%) are Bible Users. White Americans (46%) and Asian Americans (44%), by comparison, are less likely to be Bible Users.



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

ON-SCREEN OR ON THE PAGE

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



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

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

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

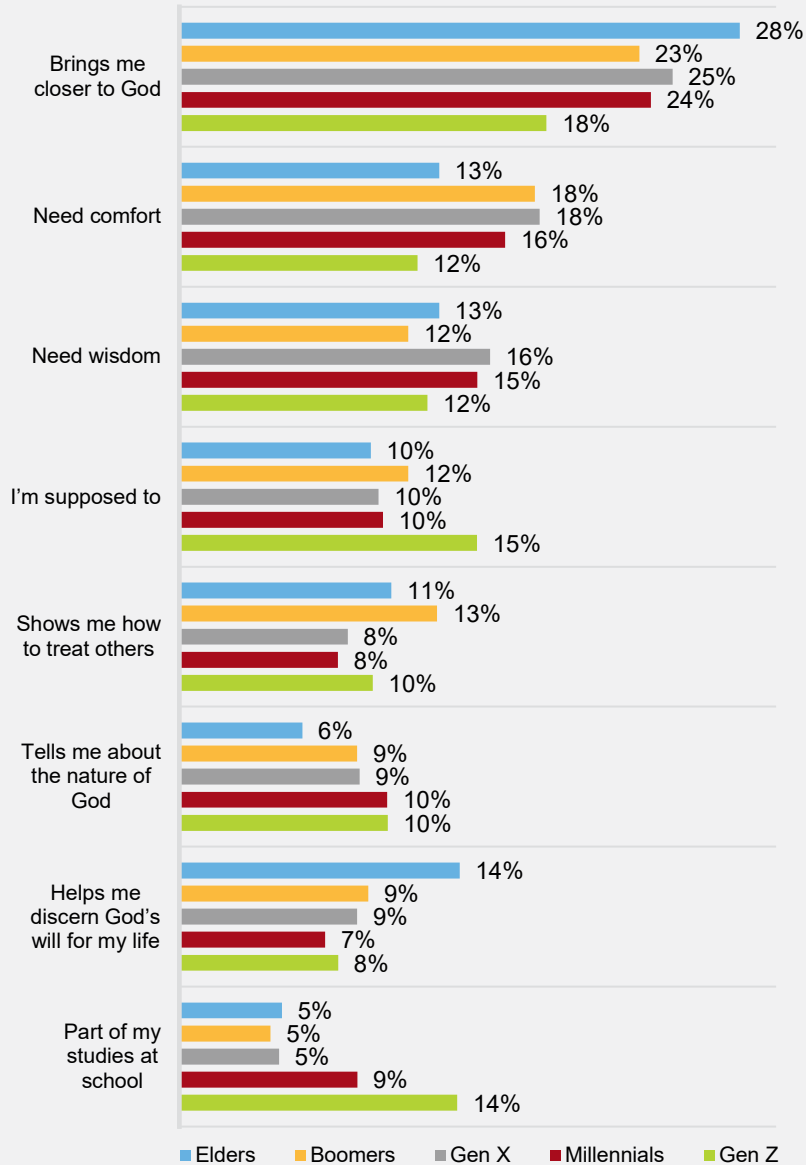
Gen Z and Millennials prefer print Bibles, compared to digital and audio formats. Meanwhile, as few as 7 percent of Elders opt to read their Bibles from a screen, and 84 percent prefer print.

MOTIVATIONS, EMOTIONS, AND FRUSTRATIONS SURROUNDING BIBLE USAGE

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

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

Reasons for Bible Use by Generation

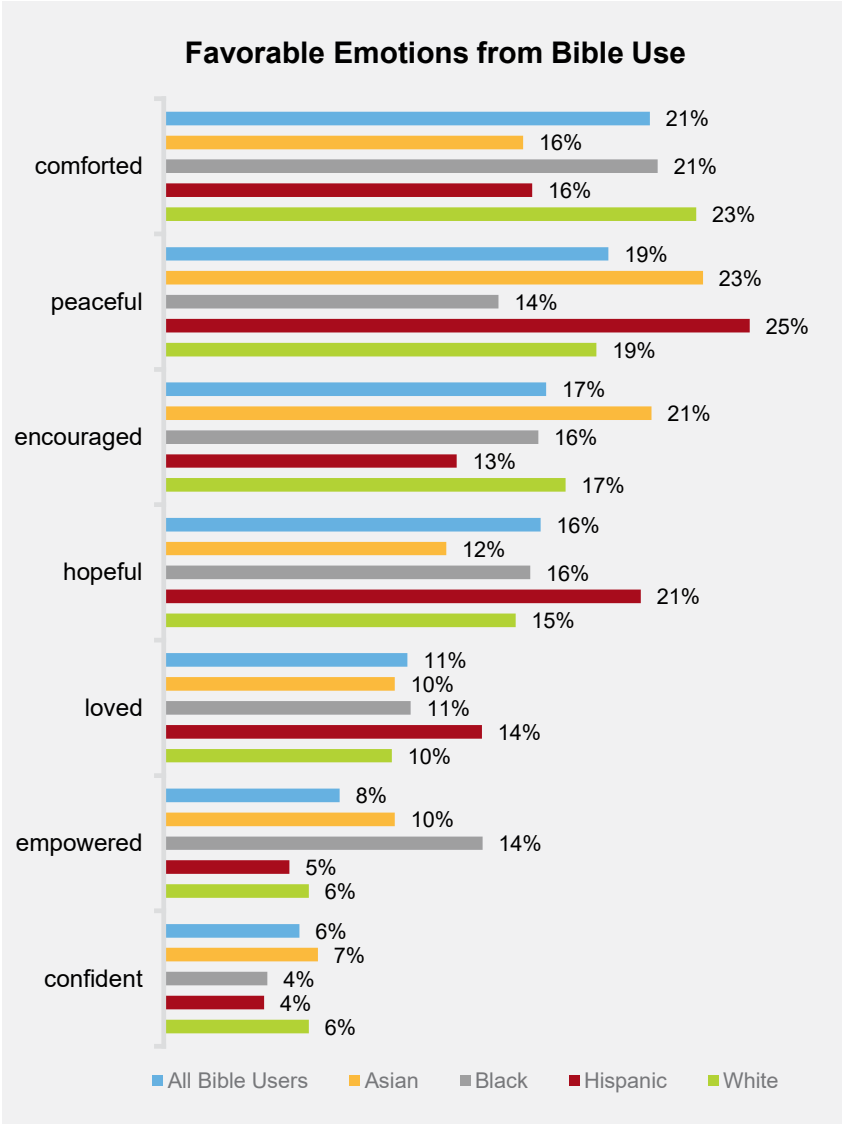


presence, wisdom, and comfort. Elders are more likely to read the Bible to make decisions (14%). When combined with a need for wisdom (13%), these responses suggest God is a source of wisdom. In summary, the Bible is often found to be what people need at critical times in their lives. What they need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

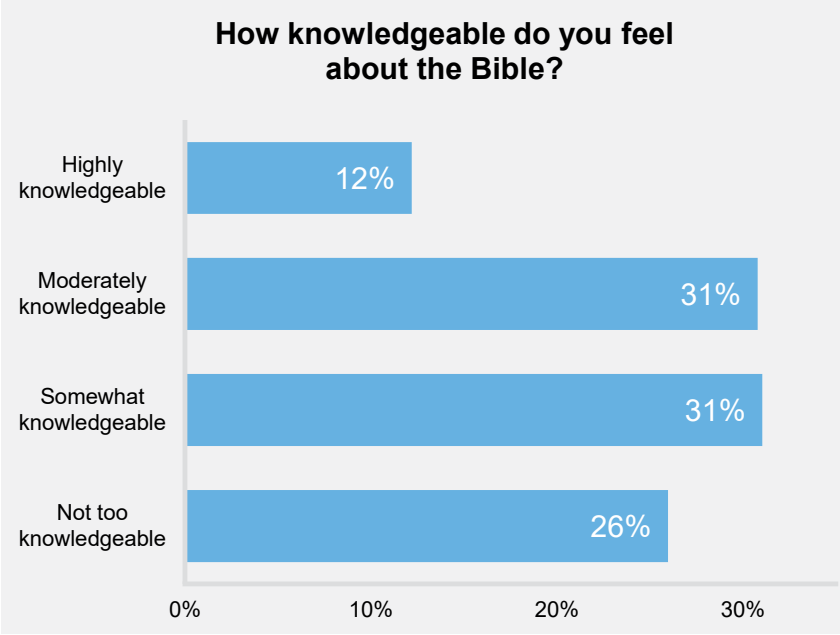
With these positive motivations to engage, people are also quick to describe the Bible as a feel-good read. One in five feels comforted (21%) or peaceful (19%), with encouraged (17%) and hopeful (16%) also among the top favorable words associated with Bible use. Gen Z less often feel comforted (14%),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

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

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

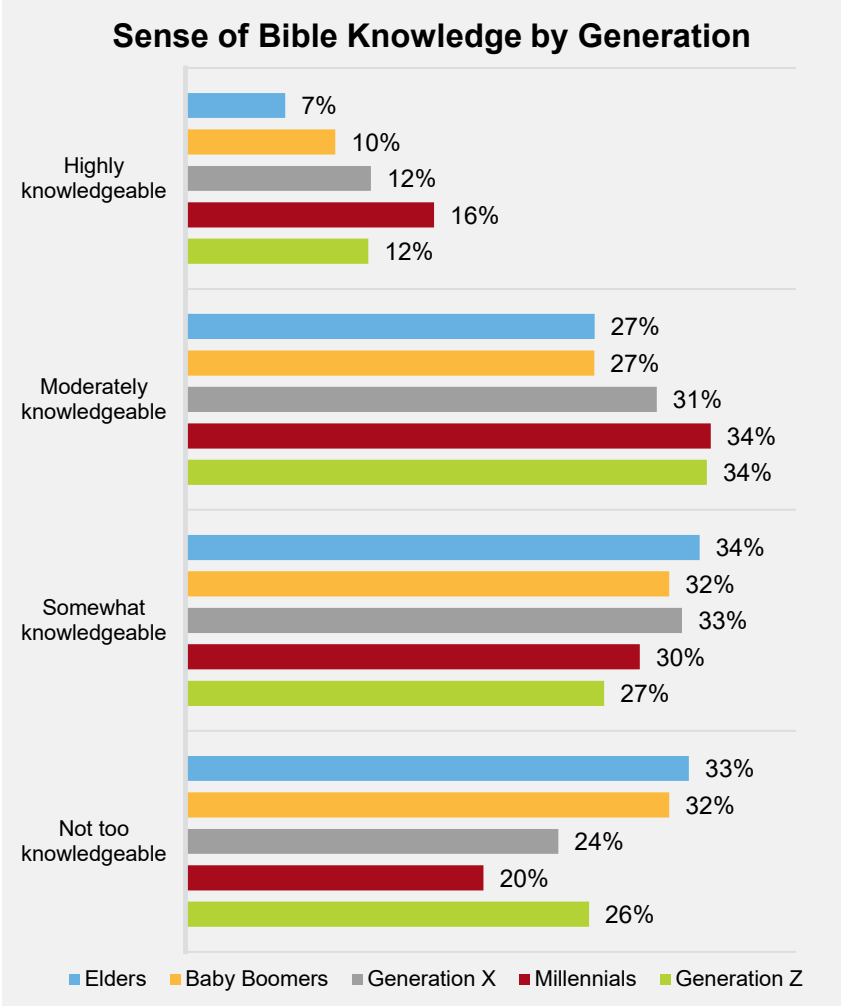


For the most part, U.S. adults don't want to assume too much of their knowledge of Scripture. Three out of five respondents place themselves in at a mid-point on Bible knowledge (31% somewhat or 31% moderately knowledgeable). In general, the more people are engaged with the Bible, the more knowledgeable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



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

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



SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT PROFILES AND TRENDS

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

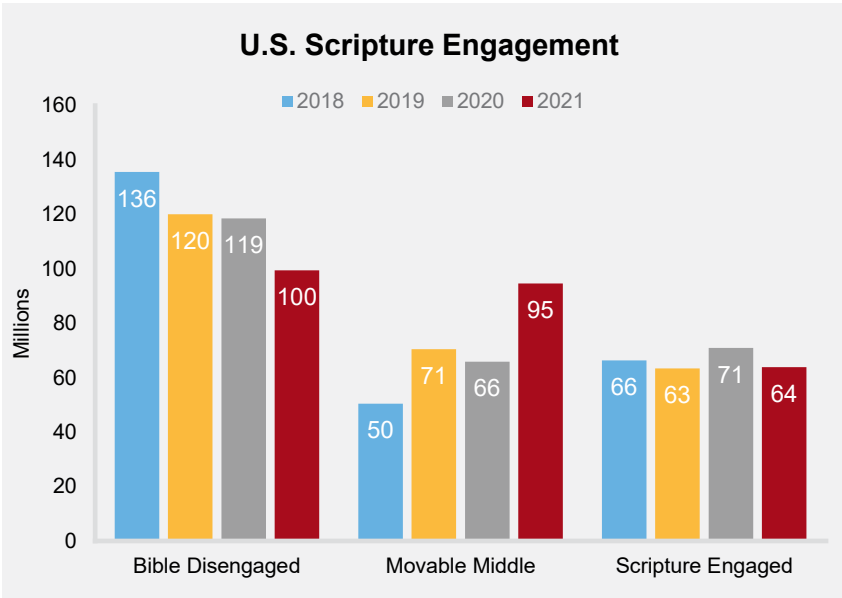
State of the Bible researchers determine levels of Scripture engagement using three important factors:

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

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

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

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

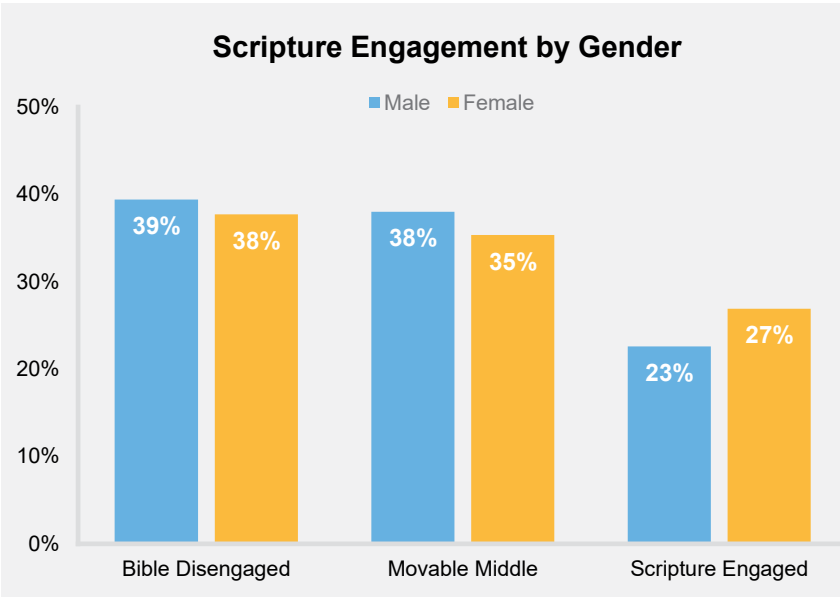


SCRIPTURE ENGAGED

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

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

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

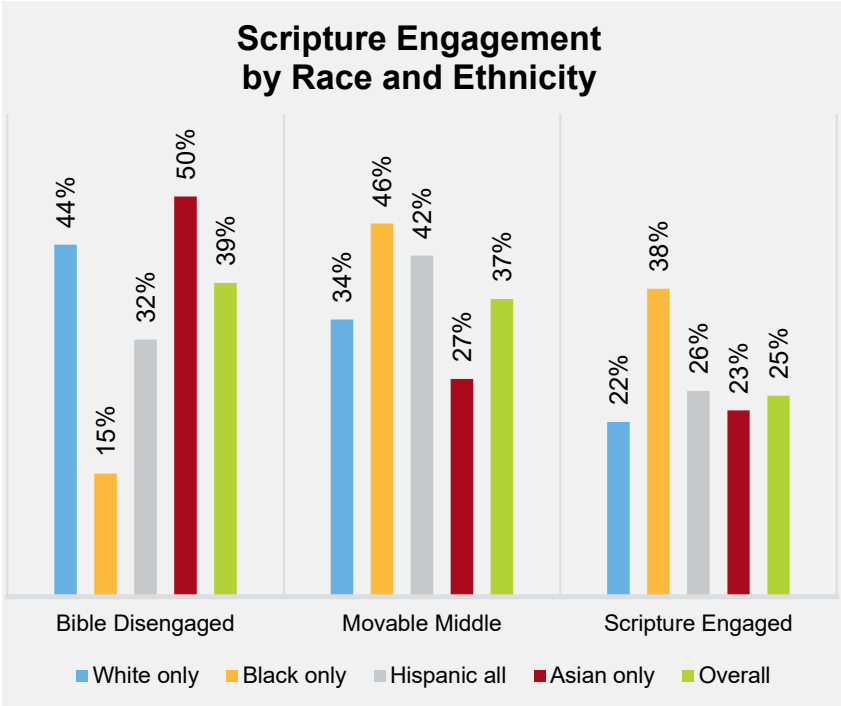


Evangelicals lead the way with Scripture engagement scores. Almost half of evangelical Protestants (46%) are Scripture Engaged (with 16% of those scoring high enough to be considered Bible Centered). Just behind evangelicals, historically Black Protestants rate the highest in Scripture Engagement with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

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

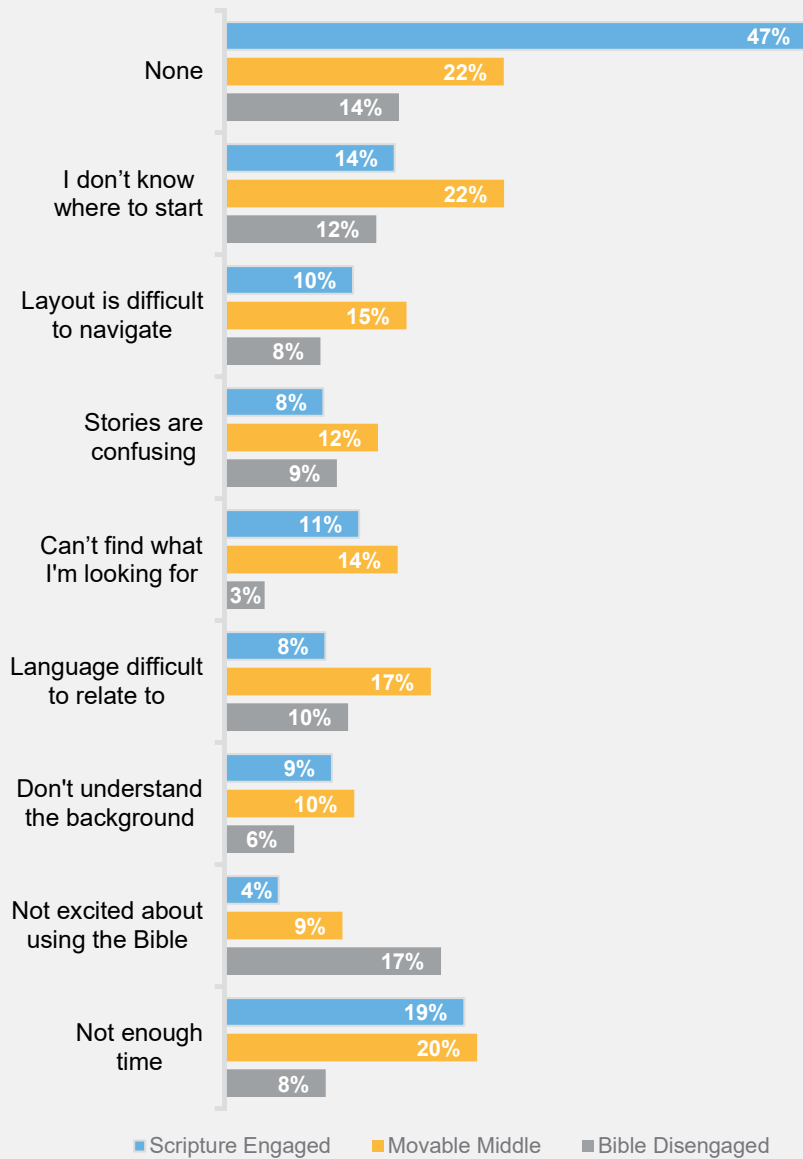
other words, they believe they have more to learn, and, in their case, they appear committed to study.

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



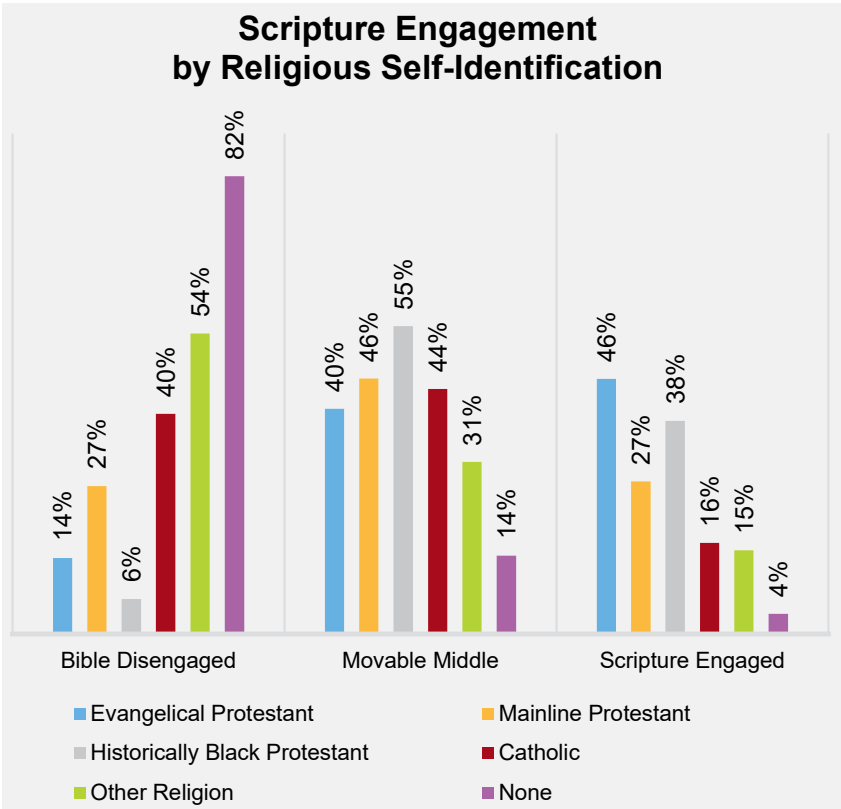
Few Scripture Engaged respondents have frustrations with the Bible. Almost half have none at all (47%). If anything, they just want more time in Scripture: One-fifth (19%) say they “never seem to have enough time” to use their Bible.

Most Significant Frustrations When Using the Bible on My Own



THE MOVABLE MIDDLE

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



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

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

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

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

BIBLE DISENGAGED

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

NEXT STEPS

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

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

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

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

MEASURING SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

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

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

1. Frequency: Does it matter how frequently people interact with the Bible, whether that interaction is through reading, listening, singing, or some other medium?

2. Duration: Does the length of time that someone spends interacting with the Bible in any single instance matter?

3. Modality: How do the social setting and/or physical setting of Bible interactions influence Scripture engagement?

4. Impact: In what ways does interaction with the Bible affect the emotions, spiritual life, and desires of Bible Users??

5. Centrality: How does the Bible influence a person's choices and decisions?

When both Barna's and American Bible Society's research teams looked into answering these questions, an answer emerged:

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

THE SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT SCALE

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

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

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

the other half score below 100.² The Scripture Engagement Scale is also divided into segments, based on its standard deviation, which is set at 15 points. The five **Scripture Engagement Segments** are:

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

¹ See the Definitions on page 65.

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

3. **Bible Friendly:** Score = 85—99. Bible Friendly people interact with the Bible periodically and are open to the Bible as a source of spiritual insight and wisdom. They are almost evenly split between those who read the Bible once a week (22%) and those who read it only once a month (24%) on their own.
4. **Bible Neutral:** Score = 70—84. Bible Neutral people interact with the Bible sporadically and report little influence from the Bible. Nine of ten read the Bible either once a month (37%), three or four times a year (23%), or once or twice a year (32%). This is the most troubled category of respondents, showing high levels of stress and low levels of hope and flourishing.
5. **Bible Disengaged:** Score = Less than 70. Bible Disengaged people interact with the Bible infrequently, if at all, and it has a minimal impact on their lives. Two thirds (66%) never read the Bible on their own, and three in ten (30%) read it only once or twice a year. As a group, Bible Disengaged people rarely seek out the Bible, tending to encounter it through others, rather than by choice.

SIMPLIFIED SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT SEGMENTS

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

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

Disengaged. Those that fit this category interact infrequently with the Bible, and it has minimal influence in their lives. Bible Disengaged people rarely seek out the Bible, and tend to encounter it through others, rather than by choice.

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

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



FINDING THE NEW NORMAL

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

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

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

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

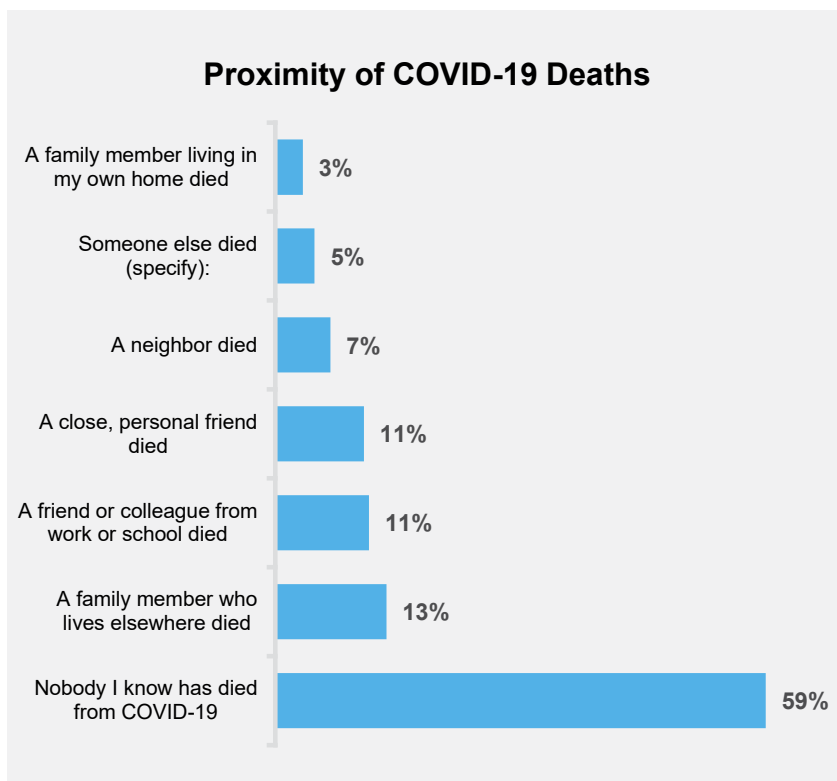
As of May, we're better at coping with the virus, but its long-term effects are still draining us. Average daily cases are still stubbornly high, about the same as last July, but there are signs of hope, too.

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

THE PERSONAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

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

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



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

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

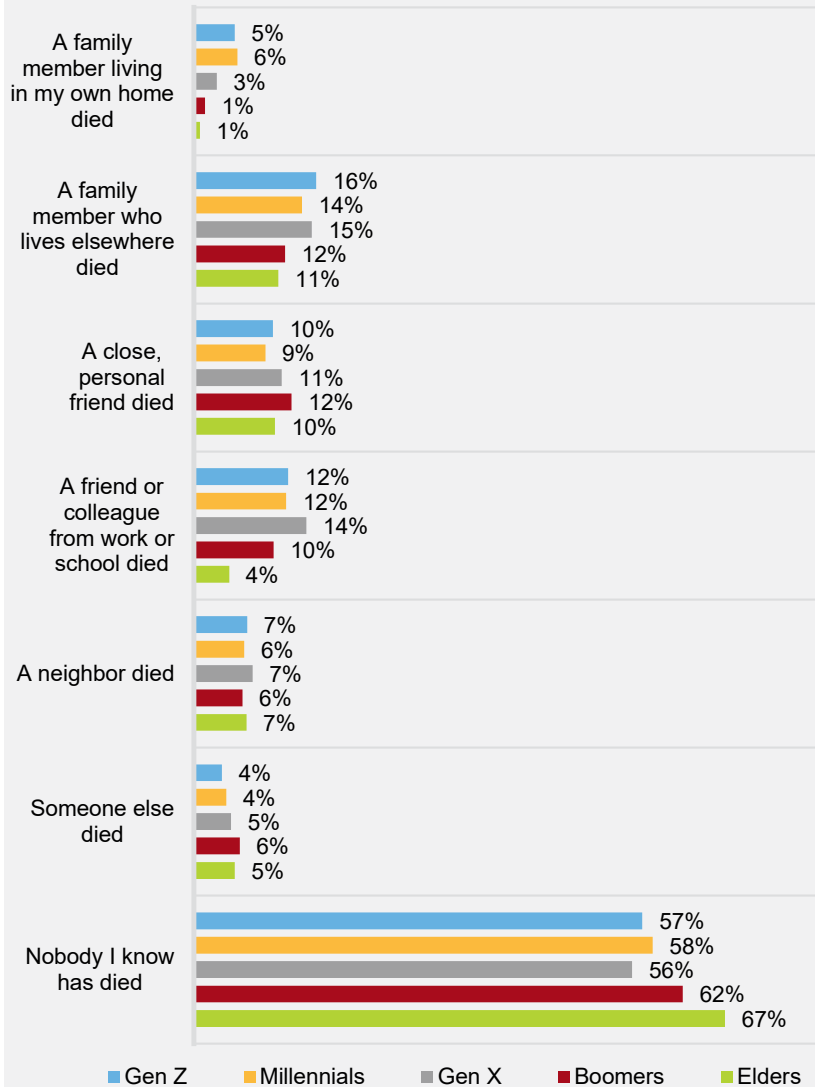
years old. Accordingly, Millennials in our study had the highest hospitalization rate, with almost one-quarter of respondents indicating that they had received urgent medical care in the hospital (24%). Second to Millennials, Gen Z was also hospitalized more than older generations with 17 percent having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

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT AND COVID-19 INFECTIONS

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

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

Proximity of COVID-19 Deaths by Generation



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

HIGH STRESS ACCOMPANIED COVID

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

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

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

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

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

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT TRENDS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

WOMEN BOUNCE BACK FROM 2020

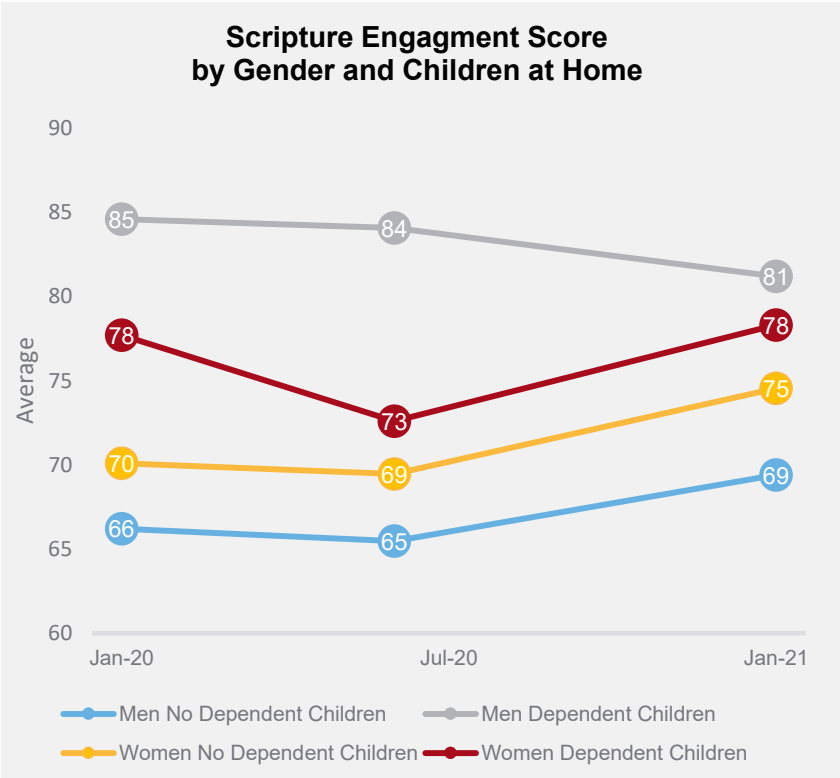
Through the COVID-19 pandemic, women have borne the brunt of childcare duties, with many mothers leaving jobs to stay home with children full time, and others attempting to balance home life with remote work.² Simultaneously, women's Scripture Engagement Scores fell behind men's for the first time during the pandemic.

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

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

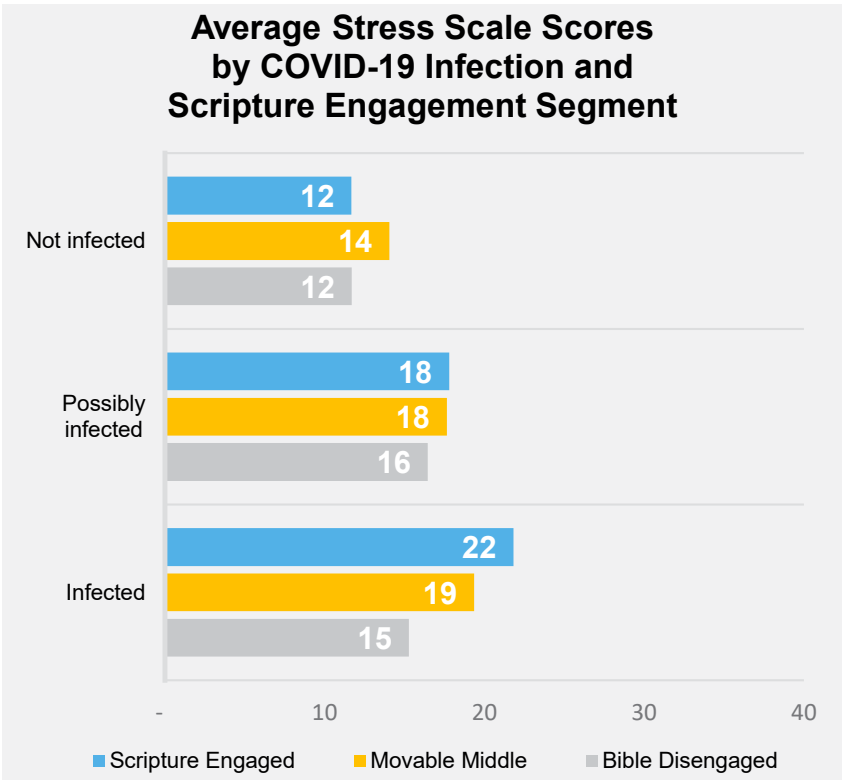
2 See [brookings.edu/essay/why-has-covid-19-been-especially-harmful-for-working-women/](https://www.brookings.edu/essay/why-has-covid-19-been-especially-harmful-for-working-women/)

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



STRESS AND SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

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



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

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

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

CHURCH ENGAGEMENT

POSITIVE HYBRID CHURCH EXPERIENCES

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

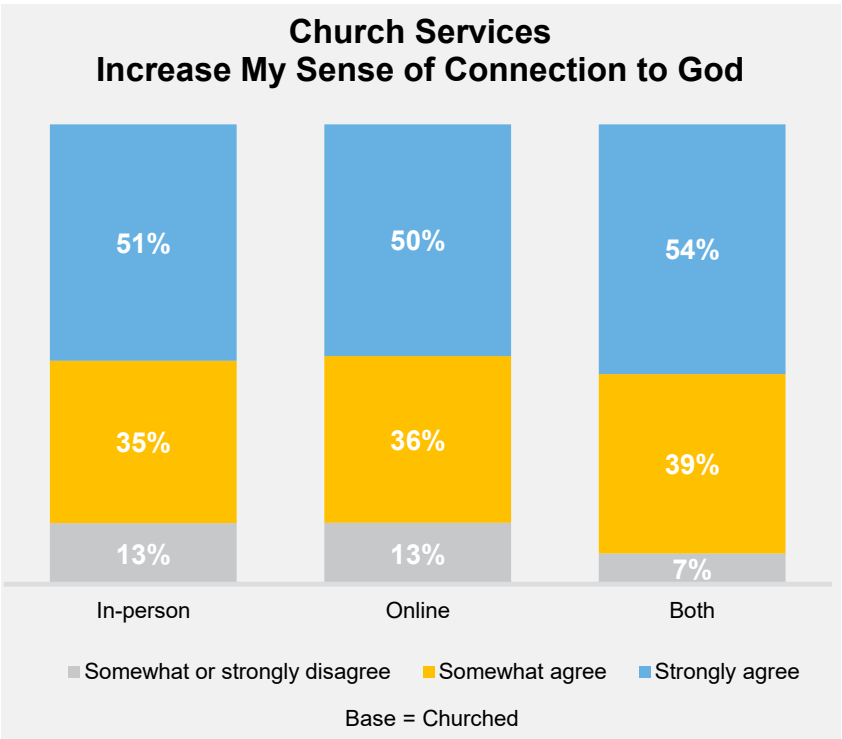
Congregants who attend churches with both in-person and online service options expressed more positive opinions of their church experience than congregants at churches with only one service option. Those who attended both in person and online are most likely to strongly agree (44%) that their church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

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

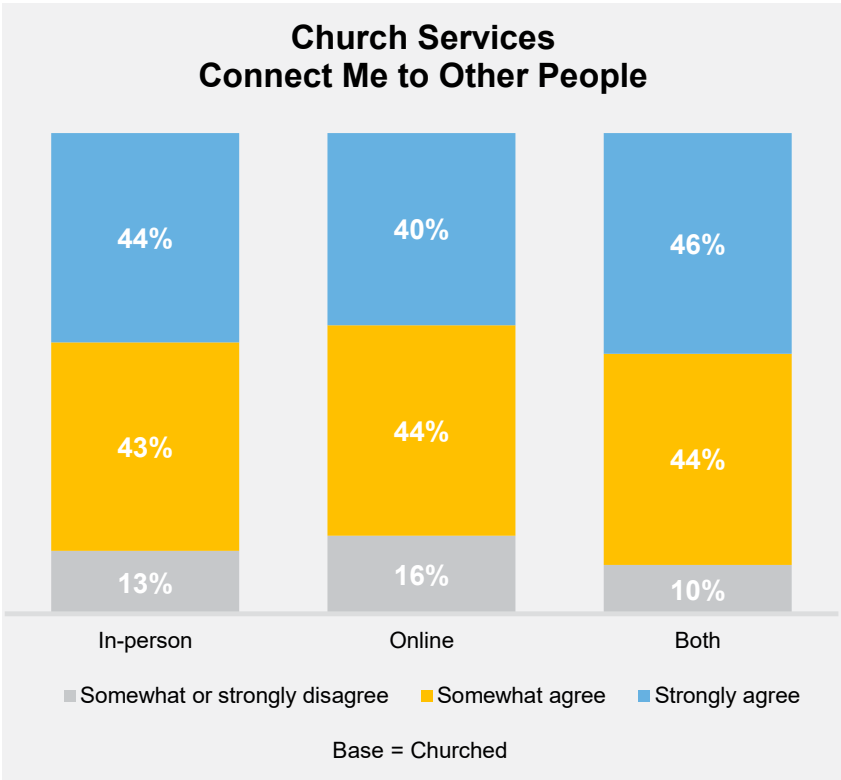
those who attended both online and in person say they strongly agree (50%), and those who met only online (43%) or in person (46%) are less inclined to strongly agree.

CONNECTION MATTERS

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

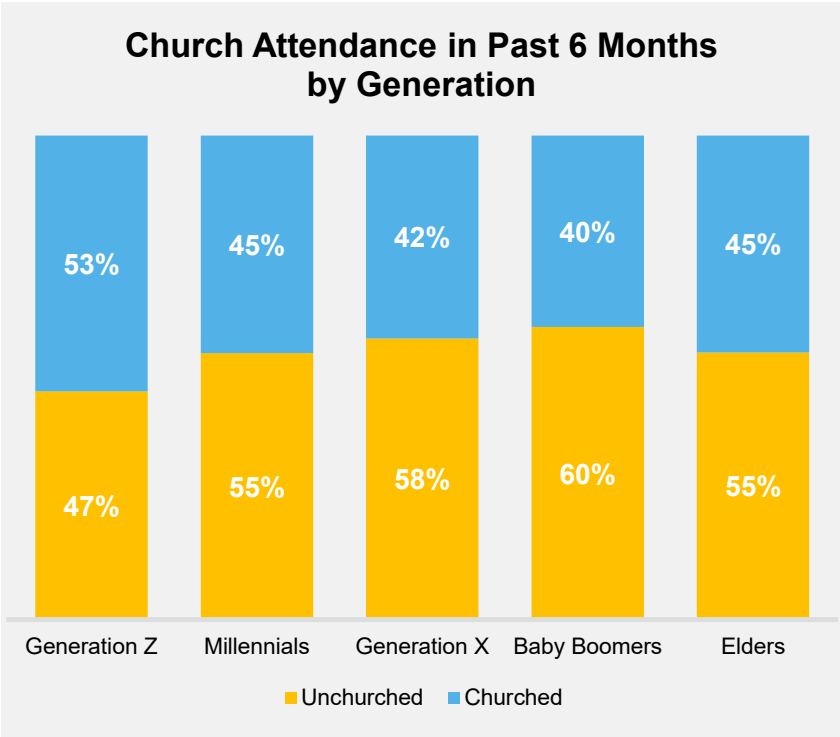


When churched respondents were asked if church services increased their sense of connection to God, roughly half of respondents strongly agree, regardless of whether they attended in person (51%), online (50%), or both (54%). Similar proportions of respondents indicated that church participation connects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



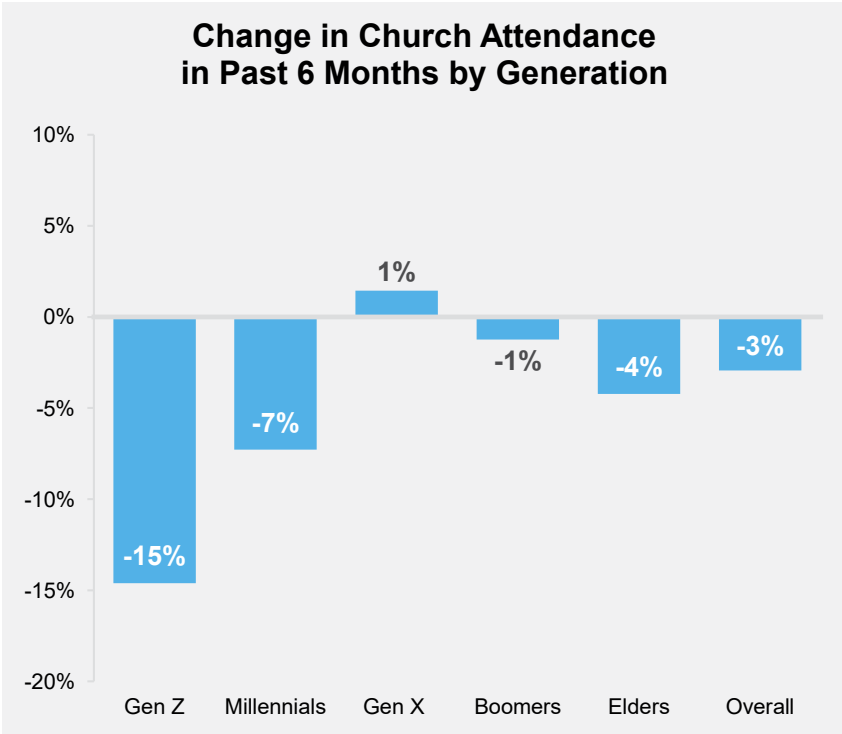
COVID-19 CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY GENERATION

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



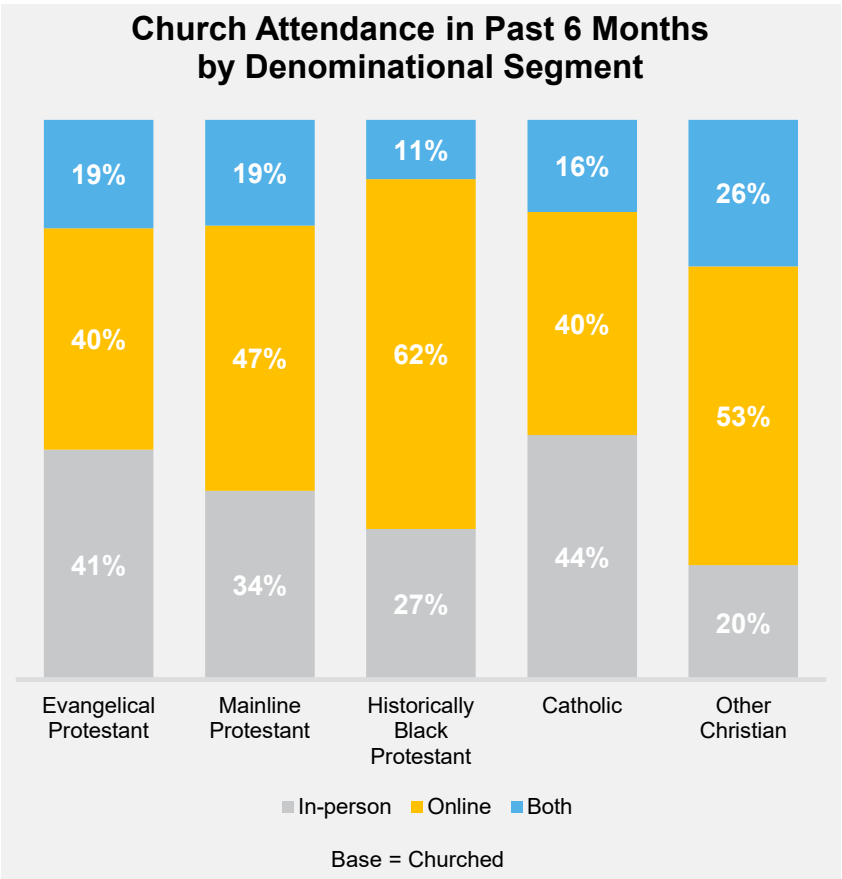
it is an “incomplete” adult generation, containing less than half as many (43%) adult members as the Millennial generation.

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



**COVID-19 CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY
DENOMINATION**

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



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

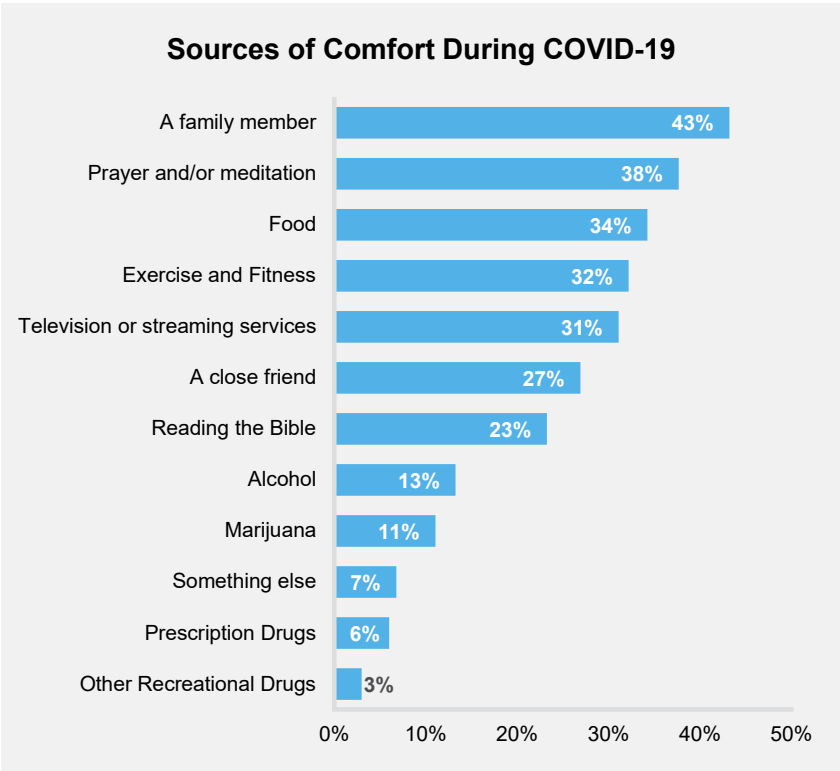
COVID-19 COMFORTS

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

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

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

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



COVID-19 COMFORTS BY GENERATION

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

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

COVID-19 COMFORTS BY ETHNICITY

Black Americans select “reading the Bible” as one of their top three comforts, unlike any other group. This reflects Black Americans’ reputation as being deeply rooted in Scripture.³ Both Black and Hispanic Americans place prayer and/or meditation as their greatest comfort, overall. Regardless of age, they are much more likely than Asian Americans to make this choice. White Americans fall between, with prayer as one of their top three comforts.

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

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

COVID-19 COMFORTS BY SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

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

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

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

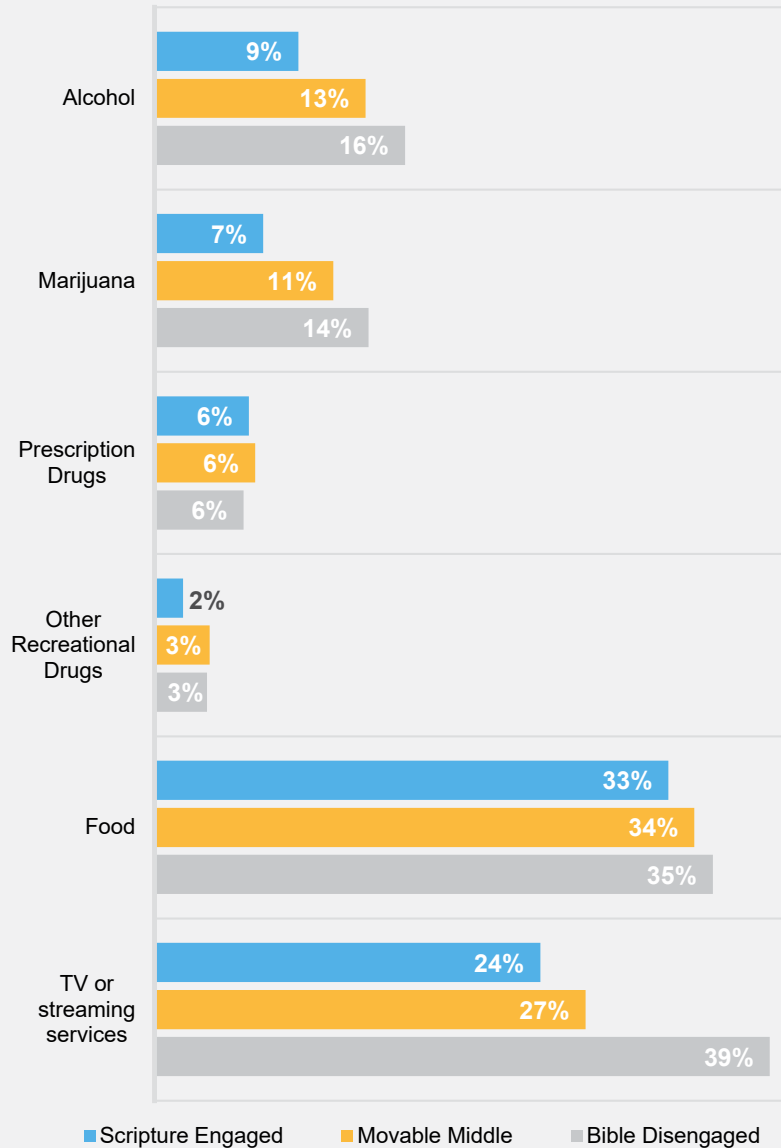
COVID-19 COMFORTS BY DENOMINATIONAL SEGMENTS

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

DYSFUNCTIONAL COMFORTS

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

Dysfunctional Comforts During COVID-19 by Scripture Engagement Segment



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

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

THERE IS HOPE

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

NEXT STEPS

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

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

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



METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

INTERPRETING SURVEY DATA

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

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

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

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

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



DEFINITIONS

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

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

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

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

Division: The U.S. Census Bureau divides the United States into nine geographic divisions, which are groupings of multiple states. These divisions and their population characteristics are used to

ensure that survey responses are demographically representative of the United States as a whole.

Generations:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pathway of Scripture Engagement: is American Bible Society's theory of change: a ten-step logic model describing how individuals with access to the Bible receive it, interact with it, and ultimately are changed by it. See *Pathway of Scripture Engagement* on page 71 for further detail.

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

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

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

Scripture Engagement Scale: Based on responses to 14 survey items about the frequency of Bible use and the impact and centrality its message, this scale provides a high-fidelity, numerical

measure of holistic Scripture engagement among U.S. Bible Users. The Scripture Engagement Scale is centered on 100, meaning that approximately one half of U.S. Bible Users score above 100, and the other half score below 100. The scale's standard deviation is 15.

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

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

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

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.

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

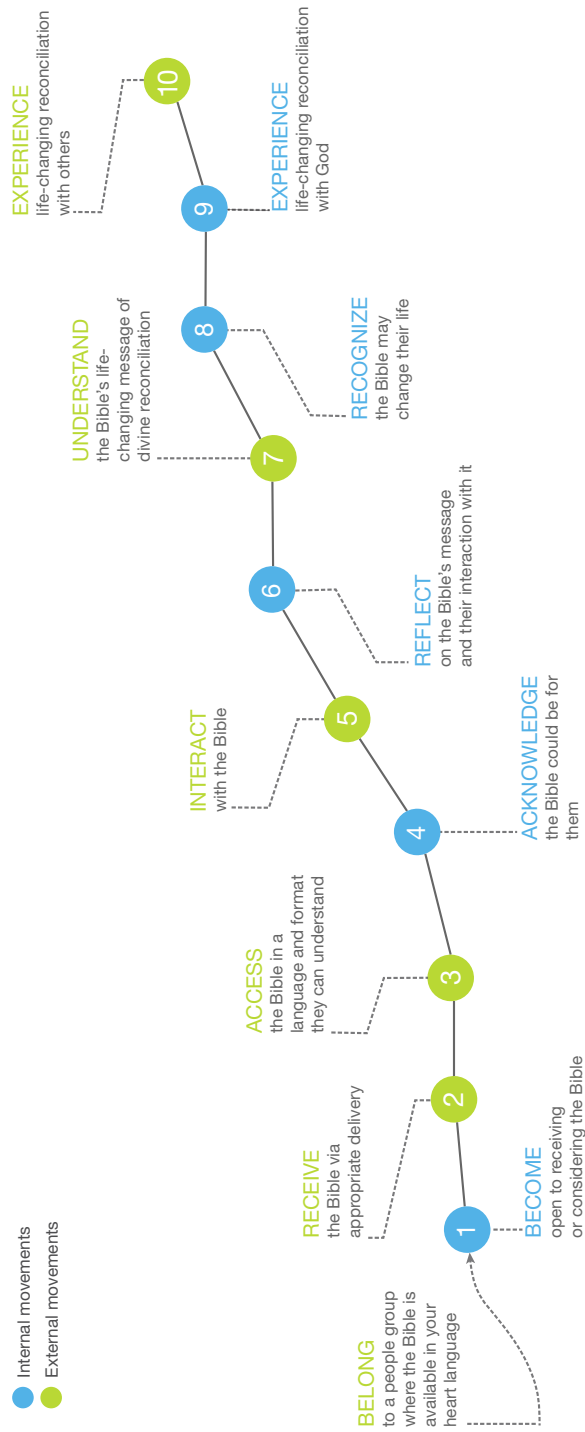
and distribution, pilgrims may enter the Pathway and begin their journey toward reconciliation with God and others.

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).

PATHWAY OF SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

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



PROGRESS ALONG THE PATHWAY

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

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

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



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE STATE OF THE BIBLE 2021

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

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

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

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



Insights