

**2020**  
**State of American Theology**  
**Study**

**RESEARCH REPORT**

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## Executive Summary

The 2020 State of American Theology Study is the fourth in a series of surveys of American adults examining their theological beliefs. Previous surveys were conducted in 2018, 2016 and 2014. Some comparisons are made in this report to questions repeated across multiple years. Other questions have been asked for the first time.

Ligonier Ministries sponsored the 2020 State of American Theology Study conducted by LifeWay Research to measure the current theological awareness of adult Americans and to expand upon earlier findings. Ligonier Ministries identified specific doctrines and heresies to test. LifeWay Research helped refine these questions and subsequently surveyed 3,002 Americans.

Questions focused on six key doctrinal areas and included a number of specific areas where Americans differ from historic and orthodox views.

### Beliefs about God

On all 4 surveys, two-thirds of Americans have considered the resurrection of Jesus an actual occurrence. But, a majority of Americans deny the deity of Christ and that Jesus has always existed. Almost 6 in 10 categorize the Holy Spirit as being a force rather than a personal being. A consistent 7 in 10 Americans believe in one true God in three persons and almost two-thirds believe God is perfect. Almost as many believe God accepts worship from all religions.

- 65% of Americans agree “God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake.”
- 52% of Americans agree “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.”
- 55% of Americans agree “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.”
- Two-thirds of adult Americans agree “Biblical accounts of the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. This event actually occurred.”
- 59% of Americans agree “The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.”
- 19% of Americans agree “The Holy Spirit can tell me to do something which is forbidden in the Bible.
- 72% of Americans agree “There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”
- 64% of Americans agree “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.”

## **Beliefs about Goodness and Sin**

Another consistency across all four surveys is that two-thirds of Americans find most people good by nature. For the first time, more than a quarter of Americans believe any sin deserves eternal punishment. More than half of Americans believe God measures righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ rather than one's works.

- 26% of Americans agree “Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.” This is higher than all previous surveys: 2018 (23%), 2016 (19%) and 2014 (18%).
- Two-thirds agree “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.”
- 56% agree “God counts a person as righteous not because of one's works but only because of one's faith in Jesus Christ.” This is higher than 2018 (53%).

## **Beliefs about Salvation and Religious Texts**

Almost half of Americans believe the Bible is completely accurate and the same number say the Bible is really ancient myths. One thing that undermines opinions of the Bible for more than a third of Americans is the view that science disproves the Bible. 6 in 10 Americans believe that salvation is in “Christ alone,” and a quarter say God chose those who would be saved before creation.

- 48% agree “The Bible is 100% accurate in all that it teaches.”
- 48% agree “The Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true.” This is similar to 2018 (47%) but remains higher than both the 2016 (44%) and 2014 (41%) surveys.
- 34% agree “Modern science disproves the Bible.”
- 60% of Americans agree “Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.”
- 26% agree “God chose the people he would save before he created the world.”

## **Beliefs about Rewards and Punishment**

More than 6 in 10 Americans expect Jesus to return and judge all people. However, fewer expect people to be punished in a place called hell. More than a third believe God always rewards true faith with material blessings in this life.

- 56% of Americans agree “Hell is a real place where certain people will be punished forever.”
- 62% agree “There will be a time when Jesus Christ returns to judge all the people who have lived.”
- 36% agree “God will always reward true faith with material blessings in this life.”

## **Beliefs about the Church**

Almost a quarter of Americans believe Christians should be quiet about political issues. Almost 6 in 10 Americans see valid alternatives to corporate worship. More than a third say entertaining worship services are a “must have” if a church wants to be effective. The vast majority say anyone can learn about theology.

- 58% of Americans agree “Worshiping alone or with one’s family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church.”
- 36% agree “Churches must provide entertaining worship services if they want to be effective.”
- 24% agree “Christians should be silent on issues of politics.”
- 15% agree “Learning about theology is for pastors and scholars only.”

## **Beliefs about Authority**

Americans remain divided down the middle on whether abortion or sex outside of marriage is a sin. A similar half of Americans believe the Bible has authority over our choices. More than half say religious belief is about opinion rather than objective truth. A quarter think God is unconcerned with their daily decisions.

- 54% agree “Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth.” This is lower than 2018 (60%).
- 51% agree “The Bible has the authority to tell us what we must do.”
- 51% agree “Sex outside of traditional marriage is a sin.”
- 51% agree “Abortion is a sin.”
- 25% of Americans agree that “God is unconcerned with my day-to-day decisions.”
- 38% agree “Gender identity is a matter of choice.”
- 40% agree “The Bible’s condemnation of homosexual behavior doesn’t apply today.” This is lower than 2018 (44%) but similar to 2016 (42%).

## Methodology

The 2020 State of American Theology Study was conducted by LifeWay Research. The objective of the study is to quantify among a national sample of Americans indicators of theological understanding today. The project was designed with a large sample to allow for comparisons between groups within Christian churches and those outside the Christian faith.

The project was sponsored by Ligonier Ministries to ascertain the state of theological awareness and belief among Americans, including several subsets of Americans (particularly Evangelicals).

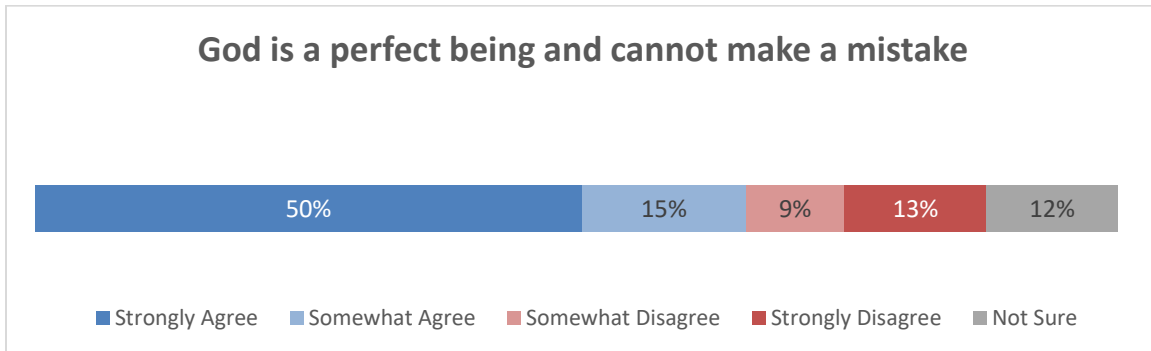
The quantitative survey of American adults was conducted using a large, national online panel. Quotas were in place to ensure the sample was demographically balanced and slight weights were used to ensure the sample matches the population on gender, age, ethnicity, income, region and religion. 3,002 surveys were completed March 10-18, 2020. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed  $\pm 2.0\%$ . Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Ligonier Ministries identified specific doctrines and heresies to test. LifeWay Research helped refine these questions to ensure the following principles were followed throughout the questionnaire:

- Each doctrine or heresy was tested by stating it as fact and asking the respondent to indicate their level of agreement,
- Phrasing that can introduce bias was excluded,
- Questions in which the desired response is agreement and questions in which the desired response is disagreement were mixed throughout the survey, and
- Wording choices sought to use words that would be understood by the typical American.

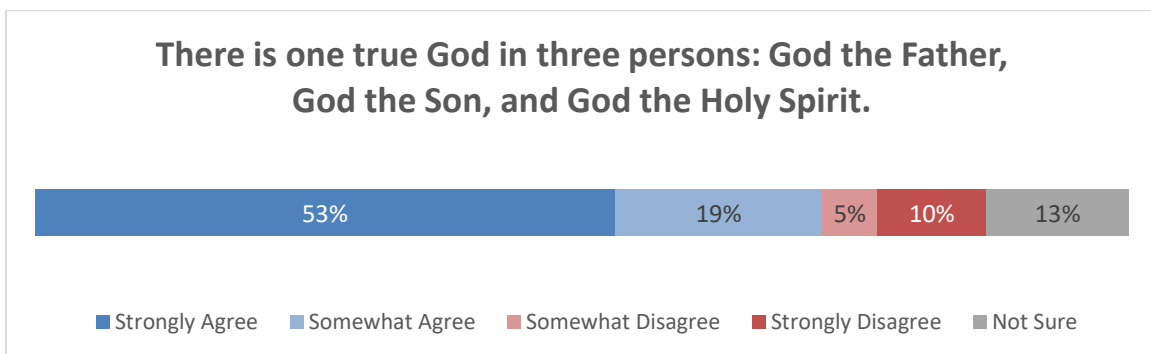
# Quantitative Findings

## BELIEFS ABOUT GOD



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (97% v. 58%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (88% v. 47%). Americans age 18-34 are the least likely to Agree (59%). This is lower than the percentage of young adults agreeing in 2018 (66%).

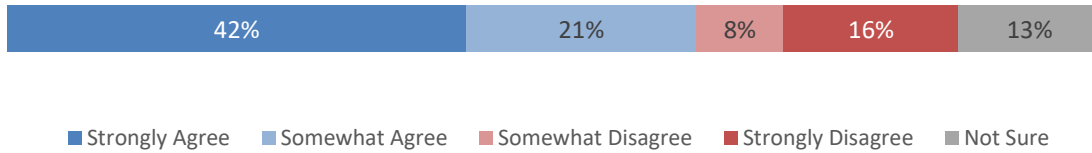
The 65% who Agree is significantly lower than 2018 (69%) and consistent with both the 2016 (65%) and 2014 (63%) surveys.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (96% v. 66%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (90% v. 58%).

The 72% who Agree is consistent with 2018 (70%) and 2014 (71%) but higher than 2016 (69%).

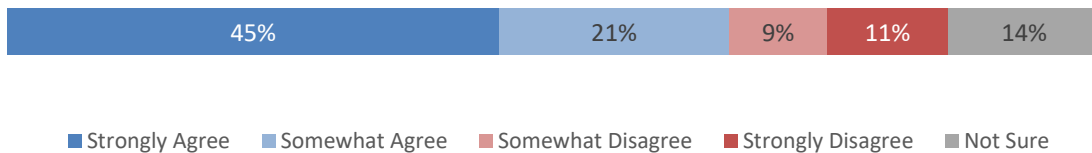
**God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.**



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (49% v. 17%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (30% v. 18%).

The 64% who Agree is consistent with 2018 (66%) and 2016 (64%).

**Biblical accounts of the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. This event actually occurred.**

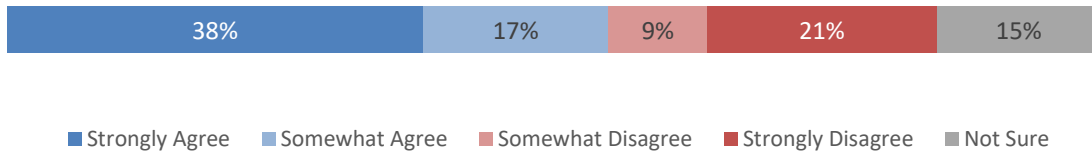


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (98% v. 59%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (89% v. 48%). Americans age 18-34 are the least likely to Agree (59%).

The 66% who Agree is similar to 2018 (66%), 2016 (64%) and 2014 (68%).



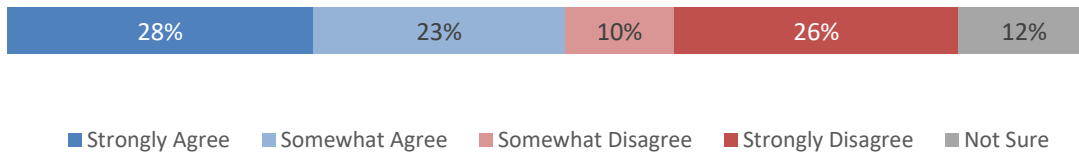
### Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (65% v. 52%). This is a lower percentage of those with Evangelical beliefs agreeing than in 2018 (78%) and 2016 (71%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (68% v. 44%).

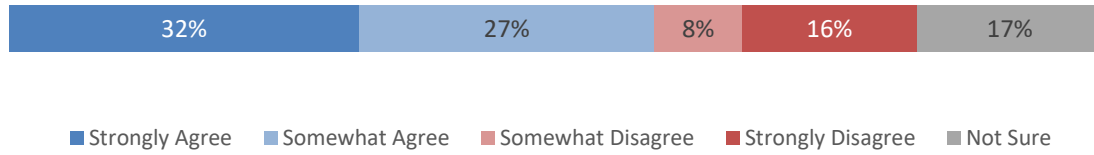
The 55% who Agree is similar to 2018 (57%) and significantly higher than in 2016 (52%).

### Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (66% v. 29%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (50% v. 25%).

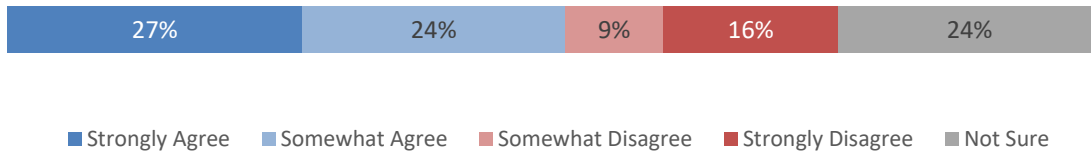
### The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (43% v. 19%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (32% v. 18%).

The 59% who Agree is unchanged from 2018 (59%) and is significantly higher than in 2016 (56%), but less than 2014 (64%).

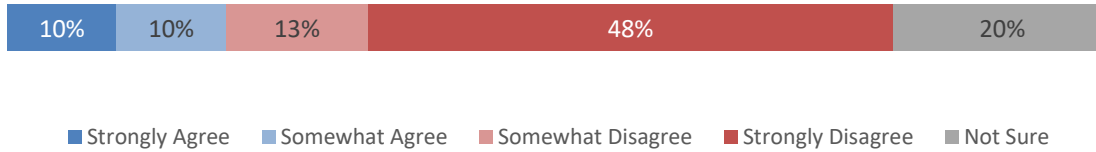
### The Holy Spirit gives a spiritual new birth or new life before a person has faith in Jesus Christ.



Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (63% v. 42%). Americans age 18-34 (54%) and 35-49 (55%) are more likely to Agree than those 50-64 (48%) and 65+ (44%).

The 51% who Agree is unchanged from 2018 (51%) and 2016 (50%) but higher than 2014 (46%).

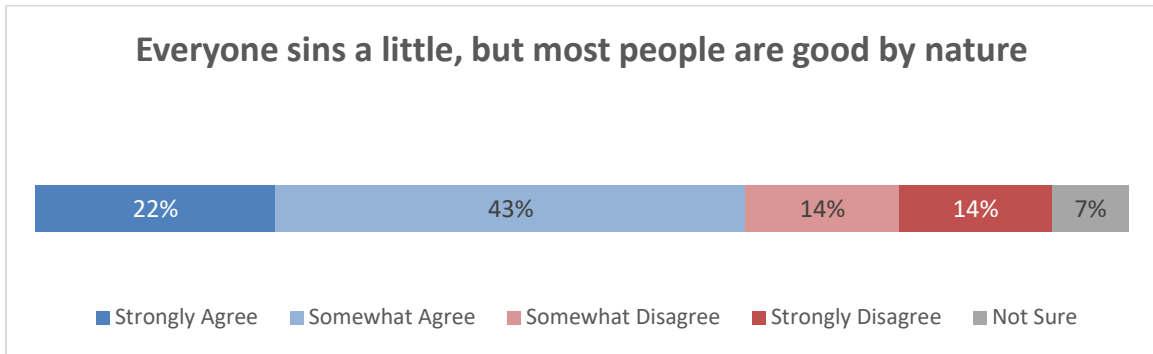
The Holy Spirit can tell me to do something which is forbidden in the Bible.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (78% v. 56%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (26% v. 14%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (28%).

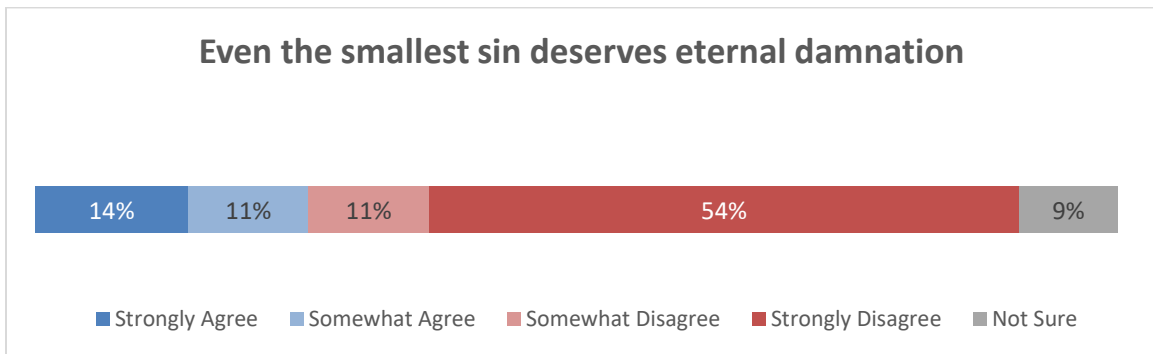
The 19% who Agree is similar to 2018 (20%).

## BELIEFS ABOUT GOODNESS AND SIN



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (49% v. 23%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (34% v. 23%). Americans age 65+ are the most likely to Agree (73%).

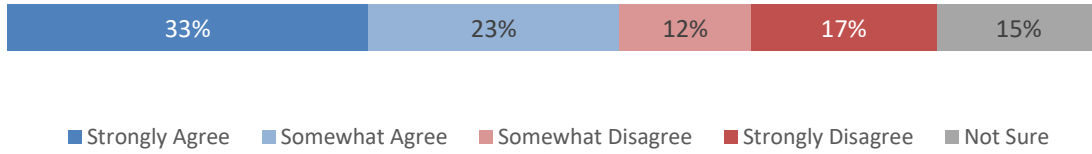
The 65% who Agree is consistent with 2018 (66%), 2016 (65%) and 2014 (67%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (51% v. 19%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (41% v. 13%). Americans age 18-34 (29%) and 35-49 (32%) are more likely to Agree than those Americans who are 50-64 (21%) and 65+ (18%).

The 26% who Agree is significantly higher than 2018 (23%), 2016 (19%) and 2014 (18%).

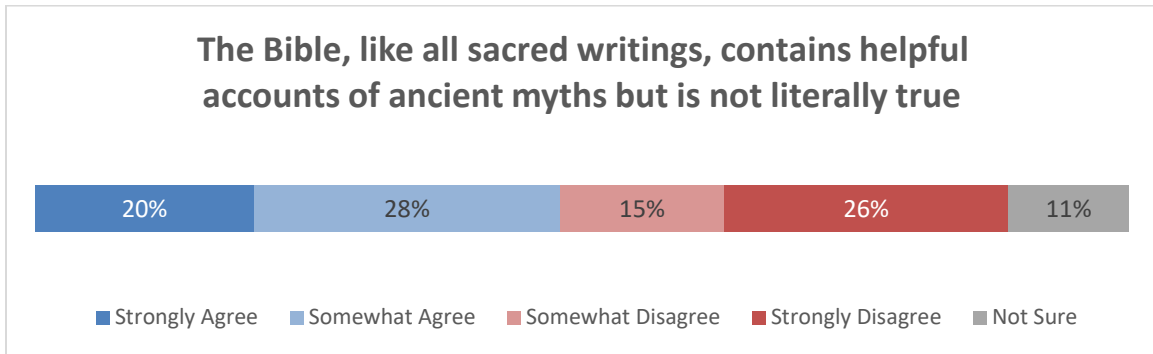
**God counts a person as righteous not because of one's works but only because of one's faith in Jesus Christ.**



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (84% v. 49%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (74% v. 42%).

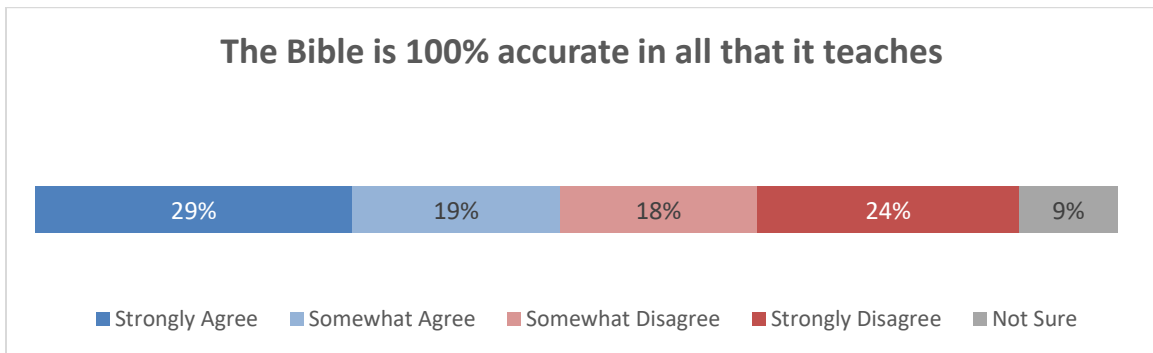
The 56% who Agree is significantly higher than 2018 (53%).

## BELIEFS ABOUT SALVATION AND RELIGIOUS TEXTS



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (81% v. 32%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (57% v. 29%). Americans age 18-34 (50%) and 65+ (52%) are more likely to *Agree* than those 50-64 (42%).

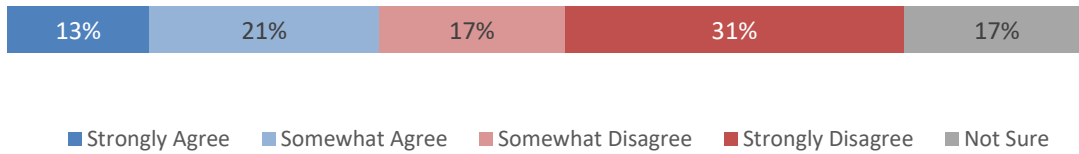
The 48% who *Agree* is similar to 2018 (47%) but significantly higher than both the 2016 (44%) and 2014 (41%) surveys.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Agree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (91% v. 38%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Agree* than those who do not (72% v. 30%). Americans age 35-49 (54%) are more likely to *Agree* than those 18-34 (46%) and 65+ (43%).

The 48% who *Agree* is similar to 2018 (50%) and 2016 (47%) but significantly higher than 2014 (43%).

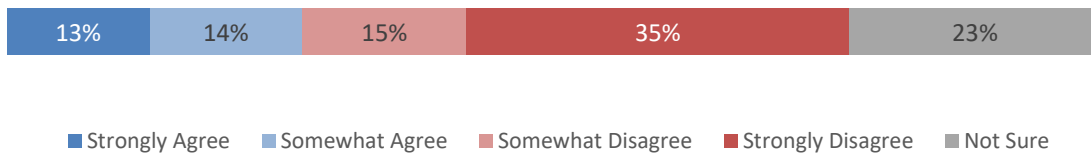
### Modern science disproves the Bible.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (17% v. 38%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are less likely to Agree than those who do not (28% v. 39%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (44%).

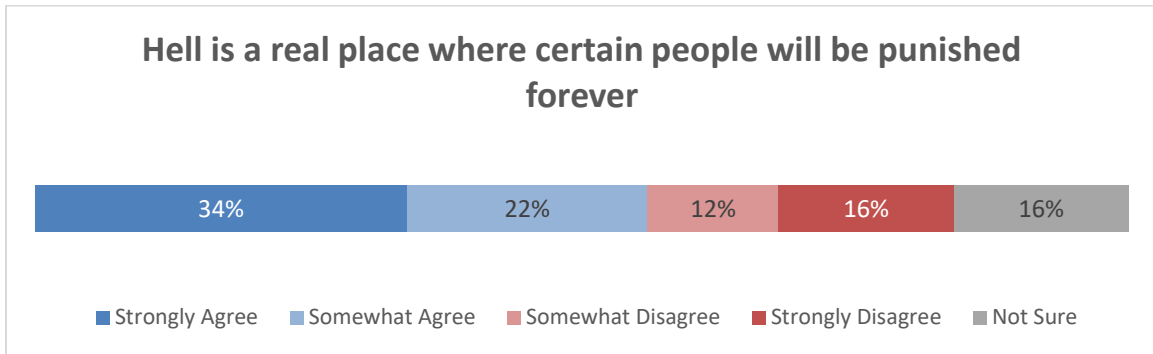
The 34% who Agree is similar to 2018 (36%).

### God chose the people he would save before he created the world.



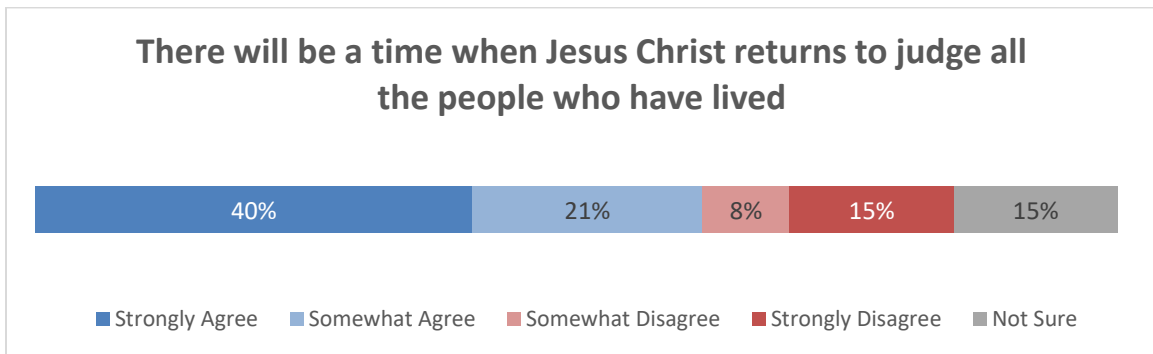
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (38% v. 24%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (39% v. 17%). Americans age 50-64 (57%) and 65+ (61%) are more likely to *Disagree* than those 18-34 (41%) and 35-49 (46%).

## BELIEFS ABOUT REWARDS AND PUNISHMENT



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (92% v. 47%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (77% v. 39%). Americans age 35-49 are the most likely to Agree (64%).

The 56% who Agree is similar to 2018 (54%).

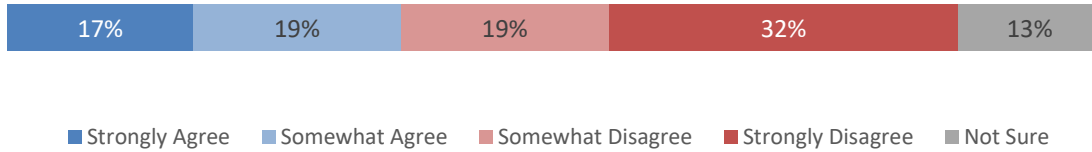


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (97% v. 54%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (84% v. 44%). Americans age 35-49 (67%) and 50-64 (66%) are more likely to Agree than those 18-34 (57%) and 65+ (57%).

The 62% who Agree is similar to 2018 (62%) and 2014 (63%) but higher than 2016 (59%).



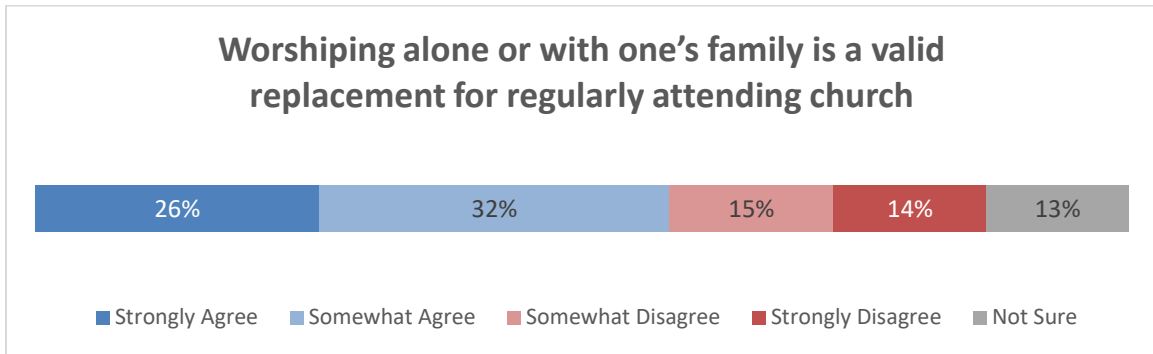
**God will always reward true faith with material blessings  
in this life.**



Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (46% v. 27%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (47%).

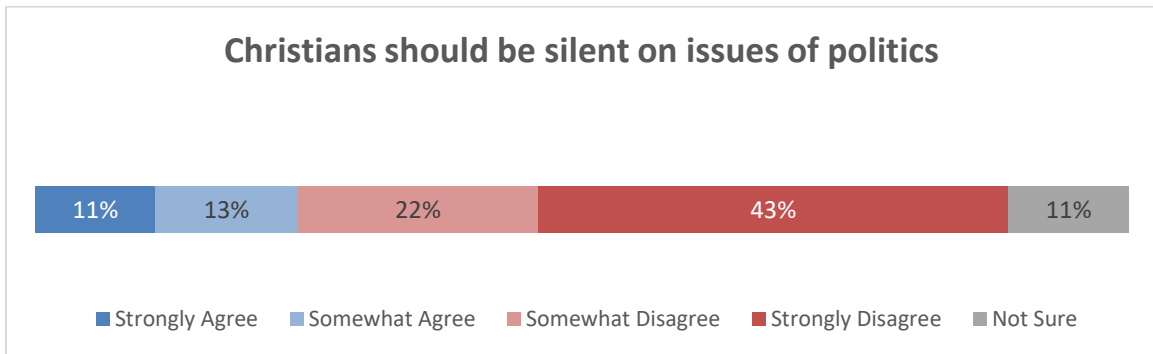
The 36% who Agree is similar to 2018 (34%).

## BELIEFS ABOUT THE CHURCH



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (55% v. 23%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (44% v. 17%).

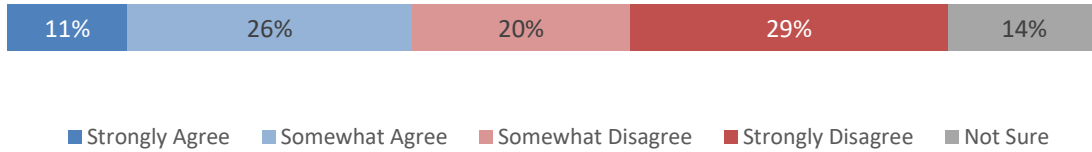
The 58% who Agree is similar to 2018 (58%) and 2016 (59%) and higher than 2014 (52%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (78% v. 62%). Americans age 65+ are the most likely to *Disagree* (81%).

The 24% who Agree that Christians should be silent on political issues is consistent with 2018 (25%).

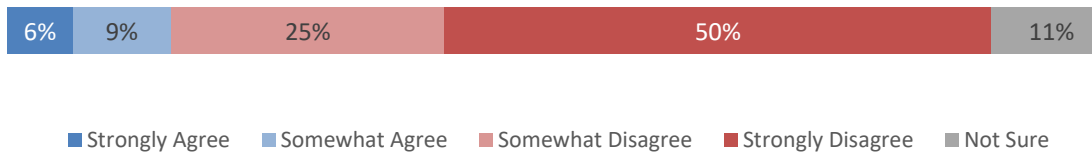
**Churches must provide entertaining worship services if they want to be effective.**



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* (68% v. 45%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to *Agree* (44%).

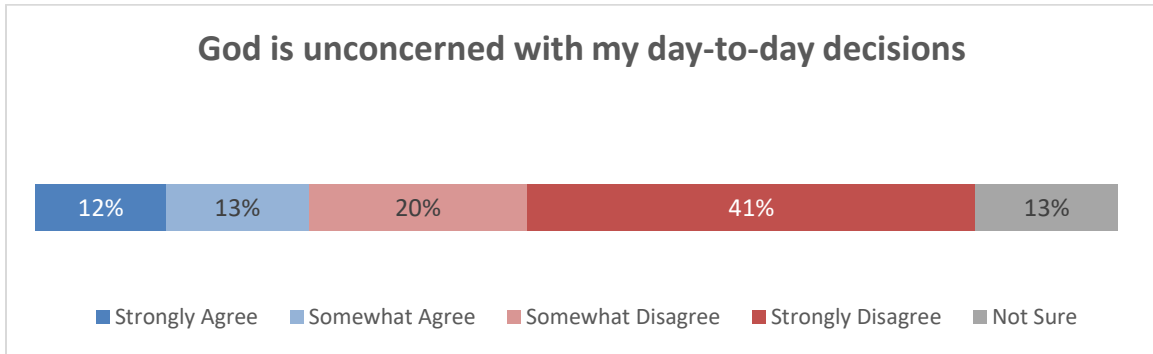
The 36% who *Agree* is consistent with 2018 (37%).

**Learning about theology is for pastors and scholars only.**



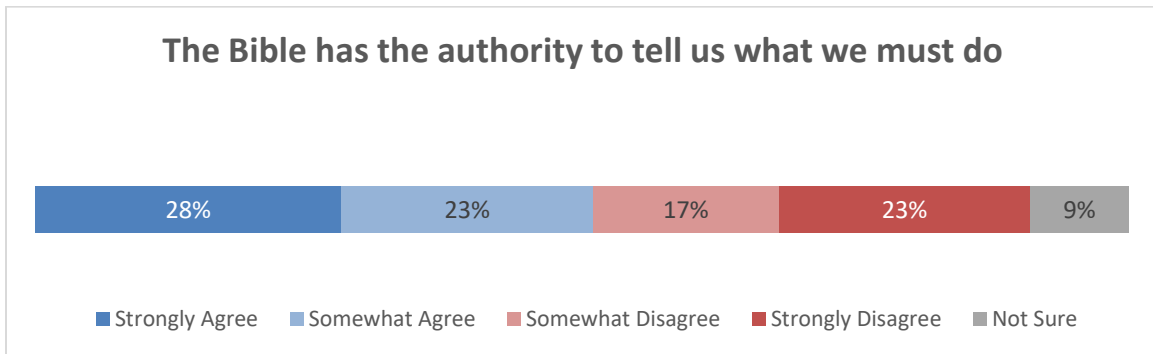
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (85% v. 72%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Agree* than those who do not (20% v. 10%). Americans age 50-64 (85%) and 65+ (88%) are more likely to *Disagree* than those 18-34 (60%) and 35-49 (70%).

## BELIEFS ABOUT AUTHORITY



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (87% v. 56%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (73% v. 52%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (34%).

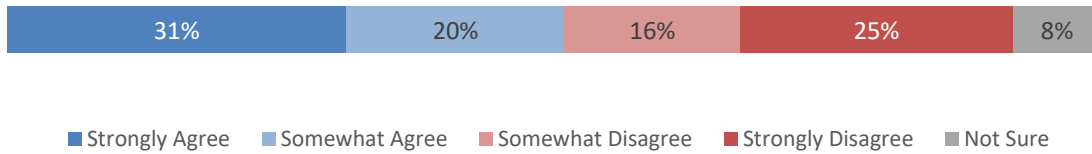
The 25% who Agree is similar to 2018 (26%) and higher than 2014 (20%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (95% v. 41%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (75% v. 32%). Americans age 35-49 (57%) and 50-64 (55%) are more likely to Agree than those 18-34 (45%) and 65+ (48%).

The 51% who Agree is similar to 2018 (53%), 2016 (50%), and 2014 (49%).

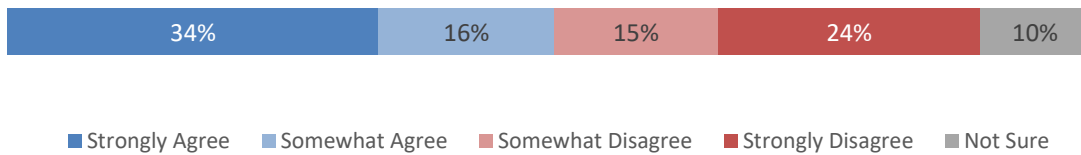
### Sex outside of traditional marriage is a sin



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (90% v. 41%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (71% v. 34%). Americans age 35-49 (57%) are more likely to Agree than those 18-34 (45%) and 65+ (49%).

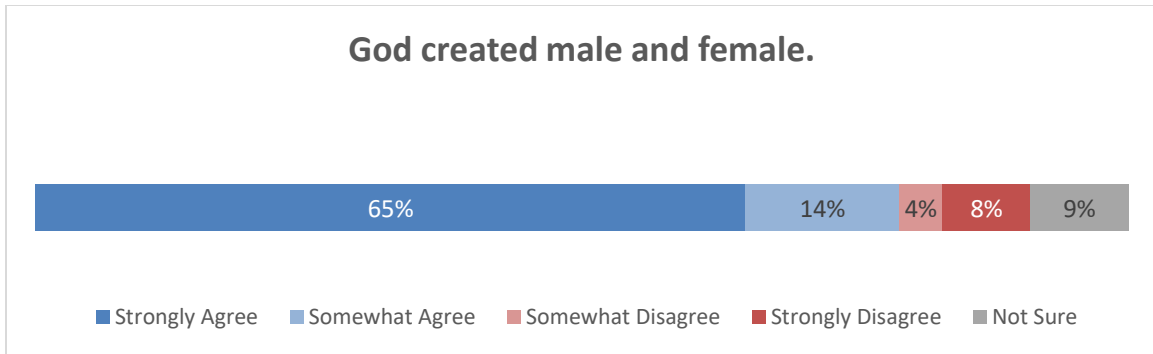
The 51% who Agree is the same as 2018 (51%) and similar to 2016 (49%).

### Abortion is a sin



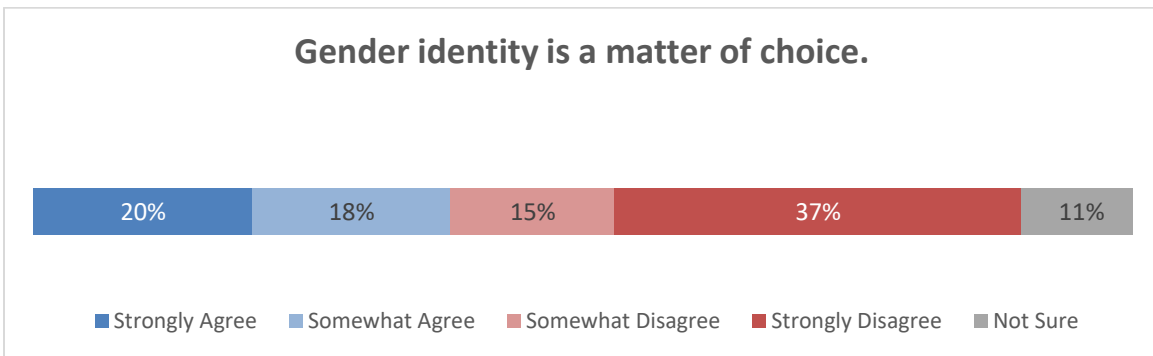
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (88% v. 42%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (68% v. 37%). Americans age 35-49 are the most likely to Agree (58%).

The 51% who Agree is similar to 2018 (52%) and 2016 (49%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (100% v. 74%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (95% v. 67%).

The 79% who Agree is similar to 2018 (77%) and 2016 (77%).

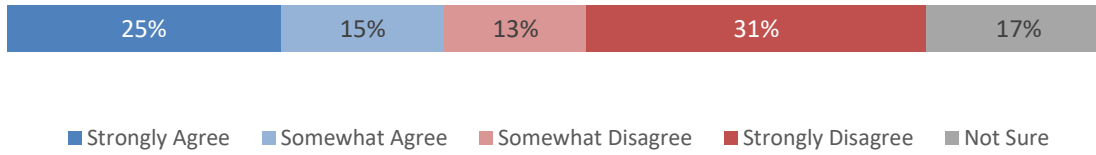


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (73% v. 47%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (57% v. 47%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (50%); Americans age 50-64 are the most likely to *Disagree* (64%).

The 38% who Agree is the same as both 2018 (38%) and 2016 (38%).

Agreement that gender identity is a matter of choice is lower among those who Agree (36%) that God created male and female than among those who Disagree (47%) he created them.

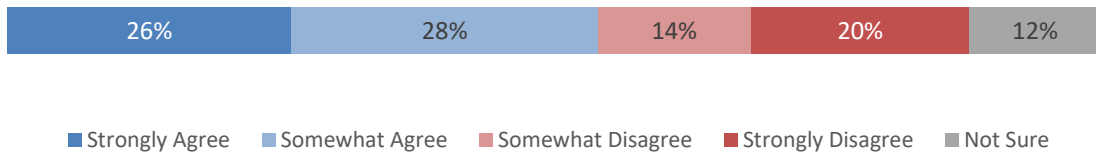
### The Bible's condemnation of homosexual behavior doesn't apply today



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (81% v. 34%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (57% v. 32%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to *Agree* (47%).

The 40% who *Agree* is significantly less than 2018 (44%) but similar to 2016 (42%).

### Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth.

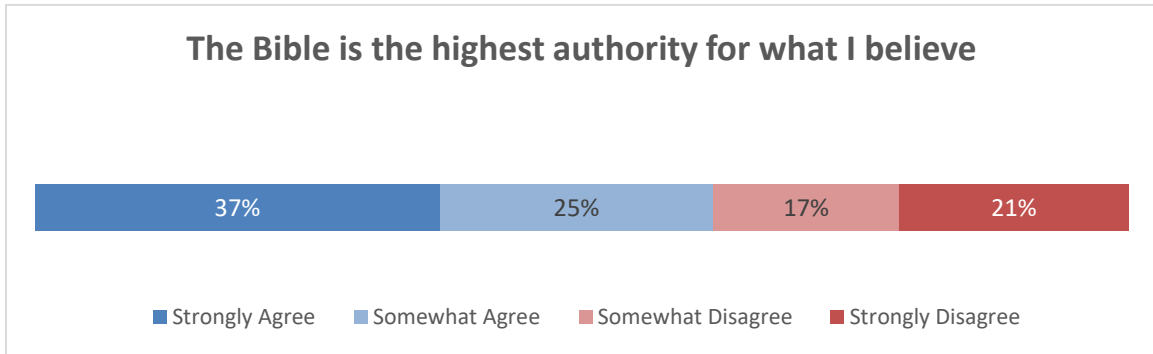


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (68% v. 26%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (48% v. 23%).

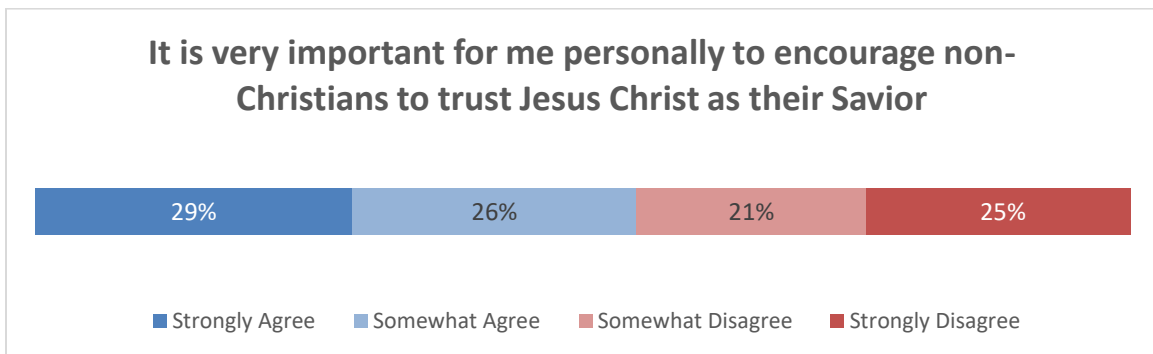
The 54% who *Agree* is significantly less than 2018 (60%).

## NAE LIFEWAY RESEARCH EVANGELICAL BELIEFS DEFINITION

Using this definition, those who agree strongly with all four of these questions are considered to have Evangelical Beliefs:



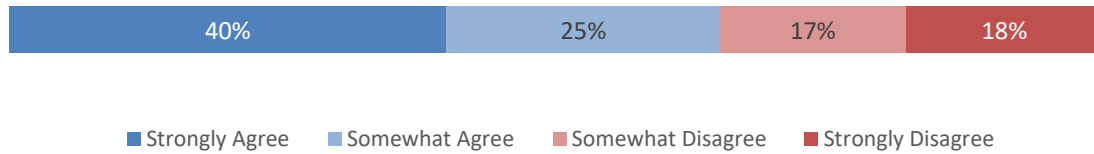
Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (85% v. 43%). Americans age 35-49 (67%) and 50-64 (65%) are more likely to Agree than those 18-34 (57%) and 65+ (59%).



Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (79% v. 35%).



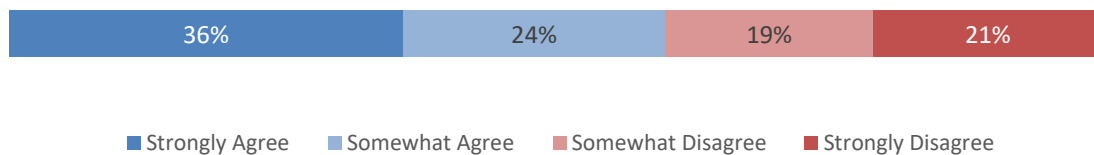
**Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin**



Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (87% v. 47%). Americans age 35-49 (69%) are more likely to Agree than those 65+ (59%).

The 65% who Agree is significantly higher than 2018 (62%) and 2016 (60%).

**Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation**



Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (81% v. 43%). Americans age 65+ are the least likely to Agree (51%).

The 60% who Agree is significantly higher than 2018 (57%) and 2016 (54%).