

2016 State of American Theology Study

**RESEARCH
REPORT**

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Executive Summary

Ligonier Ministries is “committed to faithfully presenting the unvarnished truth of Scripture to help people grow in their knowledge of God and His holiness.” Ligonier realized the value of understanding people’s current knowledge of God through a 2014 Theological Awareness Benchmark Study.

Ligonier Ministries sponsored the 2016 State of American Theology Study 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 that they wanted to test. LifeWay Research helped refine these questions and to conduct a survey of 3,000 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

Almost two-thirds of Americans believe God is perfect, and more than 6 in 10 accept the deity, humanity, and resurrection of Jesus. But half of Americans deny that Jesus has always existed and a similar number relegate the Holy Spirit to being a force rather than a personal being. Almost 7 in 10 Americans believe in one true God. Almost as many believe God accepts worship from all religions.

- 65% of Americans agree “God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake.”
- Two-thirds of Americans (66%) agree “God continues to answer specific prayers.”
- Six in 10 Americans (61%) agree with the doctrine that says “Jesus is truly God and has a divine nature, and Jesus is truly man and has a human nature.”
- 52% of Americans agree “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.”
- Nearly two-thirds of adult Americans (64%) agree “Biblical accounts of the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. This event actually occurred.”
- 56% of Americans agree “The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.”
- Almost 7 in 10 Americans (69%) agree “There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”
- But 64% of Americans agree “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.”

Beliefs about Goodness and Sin

Americans have great difficulty accepting that there are eternal consequences of sin or that people are incapable of turning to God on their own. Actually, the majority of Americans believe the good deeds they do will help them earn a place in heaven.

- 19% of Americans agree “Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.”

- 79% agree with the statement that says “People have the ability to turn to God on their own initiative.”
- Instead of acknowledging depravity, the majority of Americans believe the good in people can outweigh the bad:
 - 65% agree “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.”
 - More than half (52%) agree “By the good deeds that I do, I partly contribute to earning my place in heaven.”

Beliefs about Salvation and Religious Texts

Americans are split down the middle on doctrines related to the Bible. Half of Americans believe the Bible is the written word of God, but a similar number believe the Bible is open to each person’s own interpretation. While more than 4 in 10 agree the Bible is accurate, almost as many believe it is not literally true. A core evangelical doctrine is the exclusivity of belief in Jesus Christ for salvation. While the majority of Americans believe that salvation is in “Christ alone,” many also believe people can through their own effort contribute to salvation.

- 52% agree “The Bible alone is the written word of God.”
- 47% agree “The Bible is 100% accurate in all that it teaches.”
- 44% agree “The Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true.”
- 51% agree “The Bible was written for each person to interpret as he or she chooses.”
- 54% of Americans agree “Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.”
- Many Americans appear to put confidence in their own efforts for salvation rather than God’s grace. This is seen among 77% of Americans who agree “an individual must contribute his or her own effort for personal salvation.” Similarly, 69% of Americans agree “a person obtains peace with God by first taking the initiative to seek God and then God responds with grace.”

Beliefs about Heaven and Hell

Americans are less likely to believe doctrines related to eternal judgment. Only 4 in 10 agree hell is an eternal place of judgment. It is not surprising that 6 in 10 embrace the heresy that all people will go to heaven avoiding such eternal judgment.

- 60% of Americans agree “Heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones.”
- 4 in 10 Americans (40%) agree “Hell is an eternal place of judgment where God sends all people who do not personally trust in Jesus Christ.”
- 57% agree “God would be fair to His wrath against sin.”

Beliefs about the Church

Almost 6 in 10 Americans see valid alternatives to corporate worship. Less than half of Americans see preaching from the Bible as a requirement for Christian churches. The majority of adults see value in studying Christian creeds and confessions.

- 59% of Americans agree “Worshiping alone or with one’s family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church.”
- 45% agree “Churches that do not preach from the Bible should not be considered a Christian church.”
- 58% disagree with the sentiment “There is little value in studying or reciting historical Christian creeds and confessions.”

Beliefs about Authority

Americans today are split evenly on whether sex outside of marriage and abortion are sinful. This tracks closely with half of Americans believing the Bible has authority over our actions. More Americans are willing to recognize God having authority over people and that He cares about their decisions.

- Half agree “The Bible has the authority to tell us what we must do.”
- 49% agree “Sex outside of traditional marriage is a sin.”
- 49% agree “Abortion is a sin.”
- 65% of Americans agree “God has authority over people because He created human beings.”
- 61% of Americans disagree that “God is unconcerned with my day-to-day decisions.”

Methodology

The 2016 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).

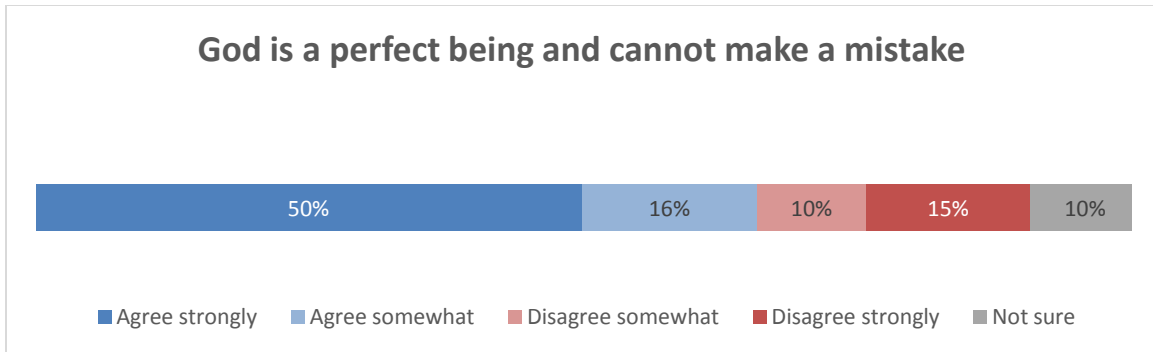
The quantitative survey of American adults was conducted using a large, national online panel. Quotas were in place to ensure the sample was demographically balanced and slight weights were used to ensure the sample matches the population on gender, age, ethnicity, income, region and religion. 3,000 surveys were completed between April 14-20, 2016. 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, in some cases, beliefs historically considered Christian heresies, that they wanted to test. LifeWay Research helped refine these questions to ensure the following principles were followed throughout the questionnaire:

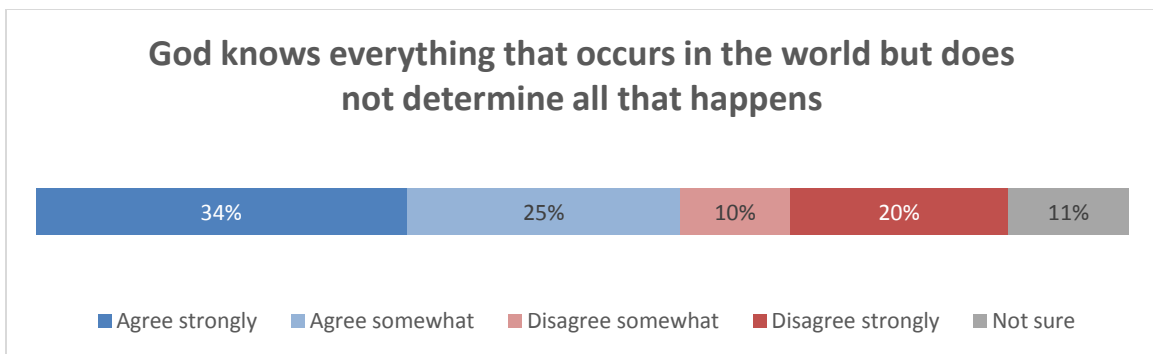
- Multiple questions were asked on each topic,
- Each doctrine or heresy was tested by stating it as fact and asking the respondent to indicate their level of agreement,
- Phrasing that can introduce bias was excluded,
- Questions in which the desired response is agreement and questions in which the 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

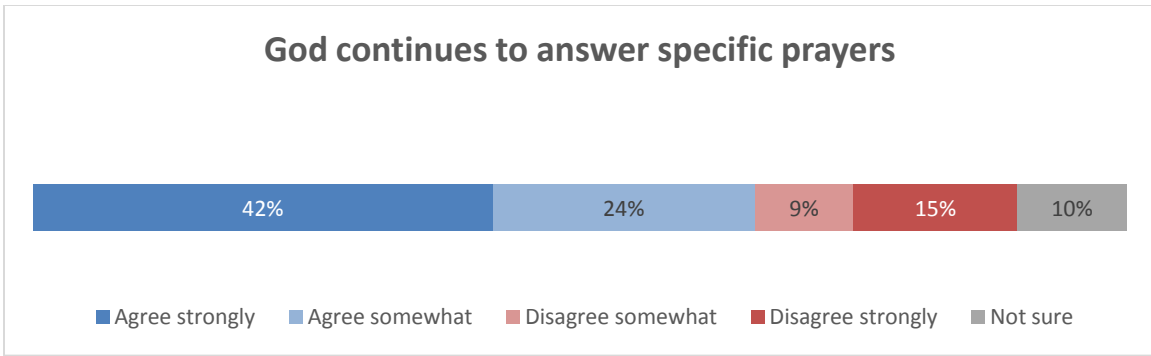
BELIEFS ABOUT GOD



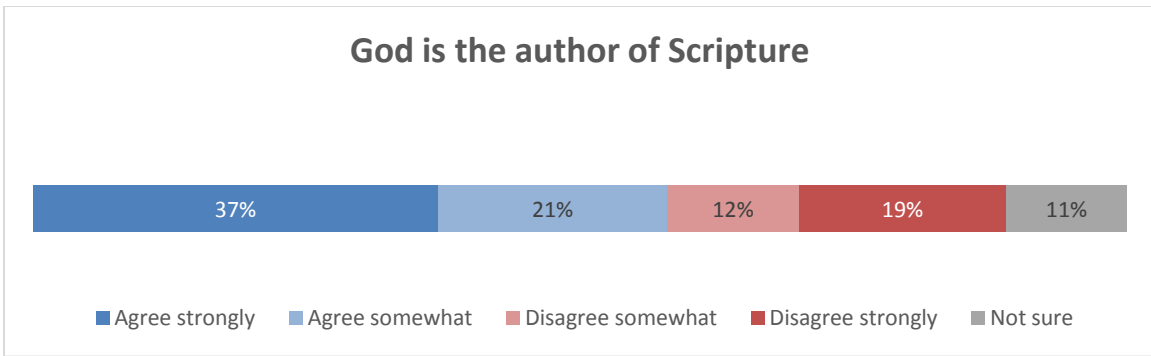
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (97% v. 58%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (86%).



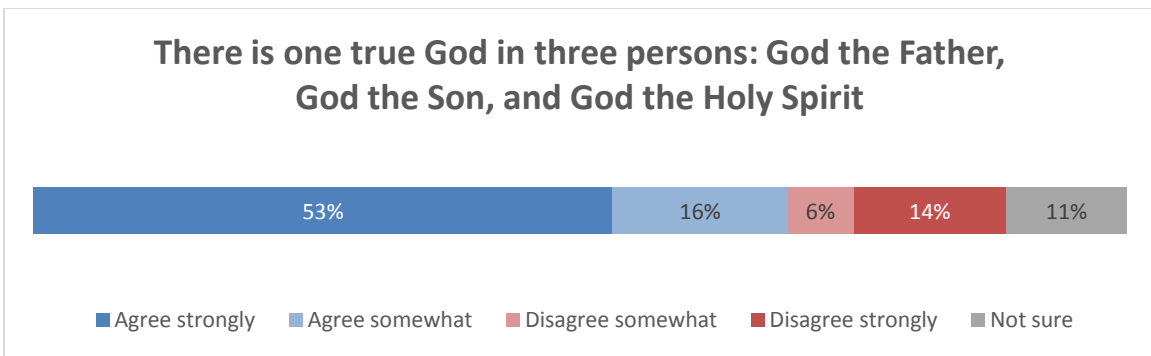
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (65% v. 58%). African-Americans (64%), Hispanics (60%), and Whites (60%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (49%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (94% v. 60%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (82%).

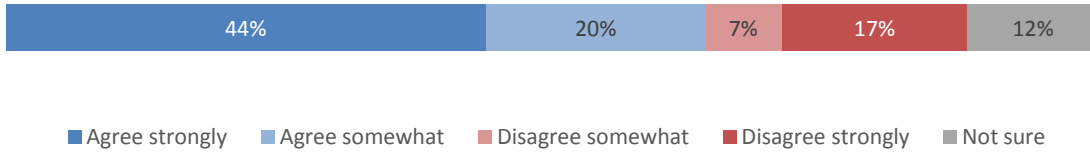


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (94% v. 50%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (72%), followed by Hispanics (63%).



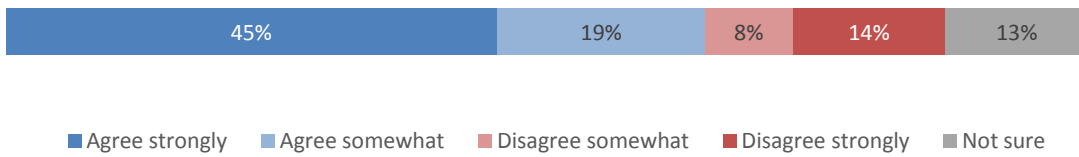
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (97% v. 62%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (84%), followed by Hispanics (74%)

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



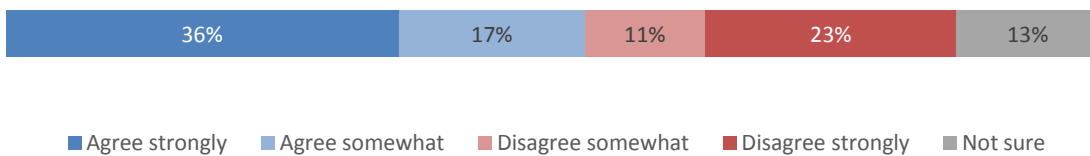
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (48% v. 67%). African-Americans (69%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (57%) and Whites (63%).

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



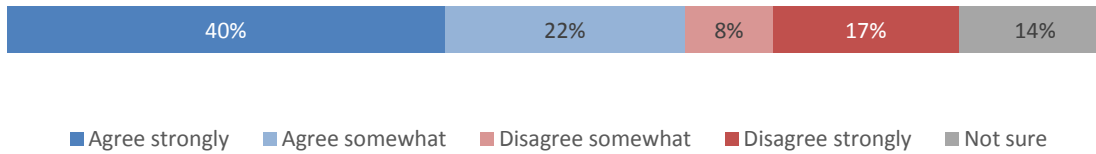
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (98% v. 56%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (77%), followed by Hispanics (69%).

Jesus is the first and greatest creature created by God



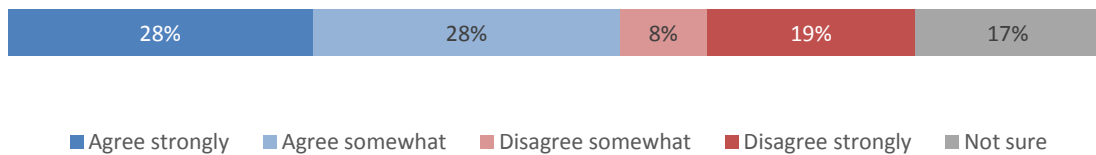
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (71% v. 48%). African-Americans (65%) and Hispanics (58%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (41%), Whites (50%), and Other Ethnicities (37%).

Jesus is truly God and has a divine nature, and Jesus is truly man and has a human nature



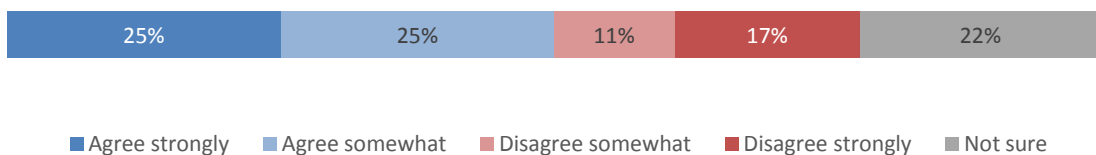
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (85% v. 56%). African-Americans (62%) and Hispanics (65%), and Whites (61%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (51%) and Other Ethnicities (45%).

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



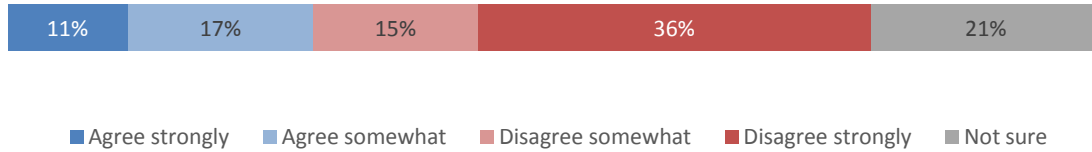
African-Americans (63%) and Hispanics (60%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (51%) and Whites (54%).

The Holy Spirit gives a spiritual new birth or new life before a person has faith



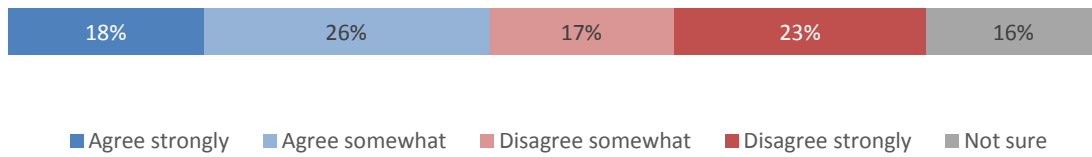
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (62% v. 47%). African-Americans (54%) and Hispanics (58%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (45%), Whites (48%), and Other Ethnicities (37%).

The Holy Spirit is a divine being but is not equal with God the Father and Jesus



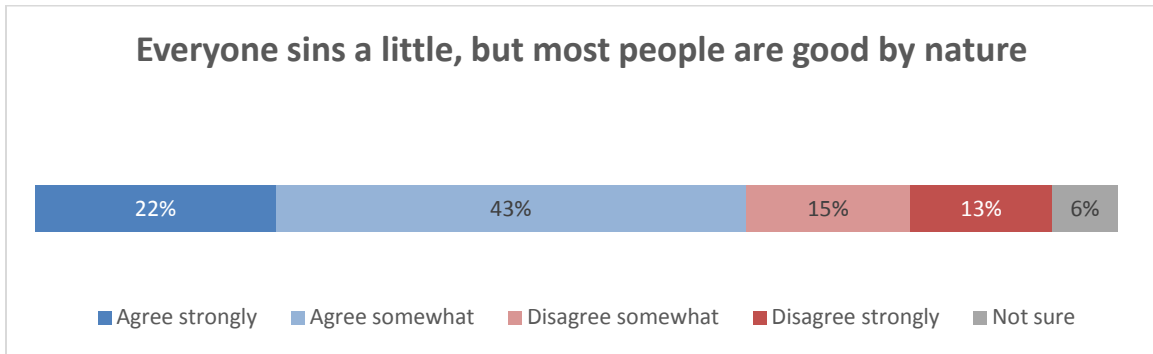
Asian-Americans (33%), African-Americans (31%), and Hispanics (35%) are more likely to Agree than Whites (25%).

Modern science discredits the claims of Christianity

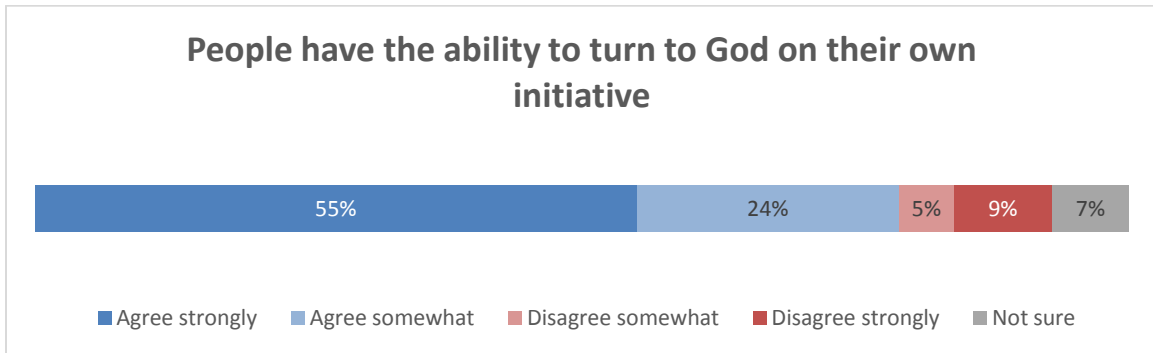


Differences among those who agree by either Evangelical Beliefs or Ethnicity are not significant.

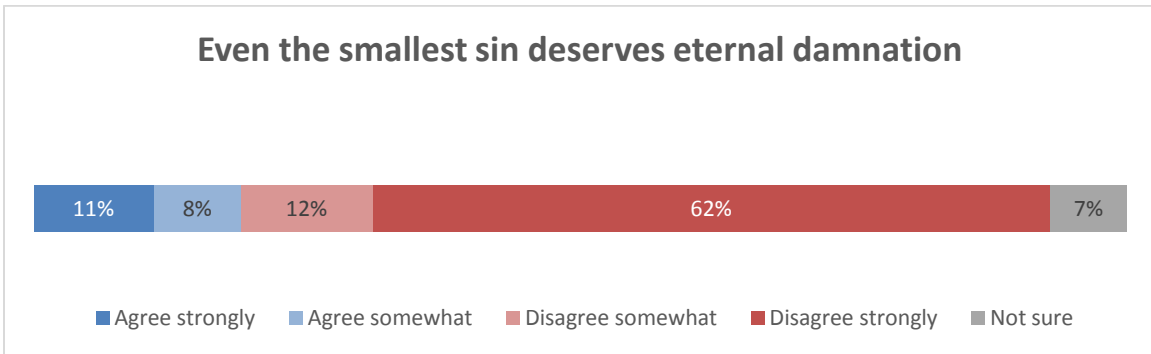
BELIEFS ABOUT GOODNESS AND SIN



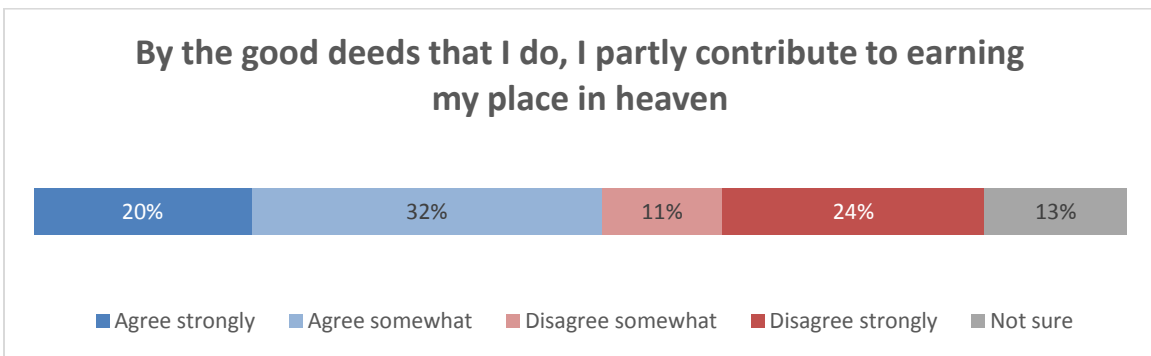
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (54% v. 68%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (82% v. 78%). African-Americans (83%) and Whites (79%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (71%) and Other Ethnicities (70%).

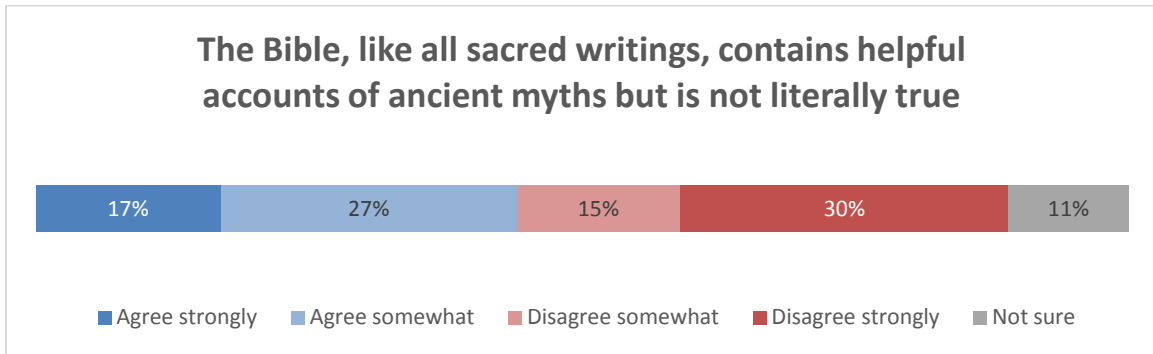


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (47% v. 13%). Asian-Americans (27%), African-Americans (25%), and Hispanics (21%) are more likely to Agree than Whites (17%).

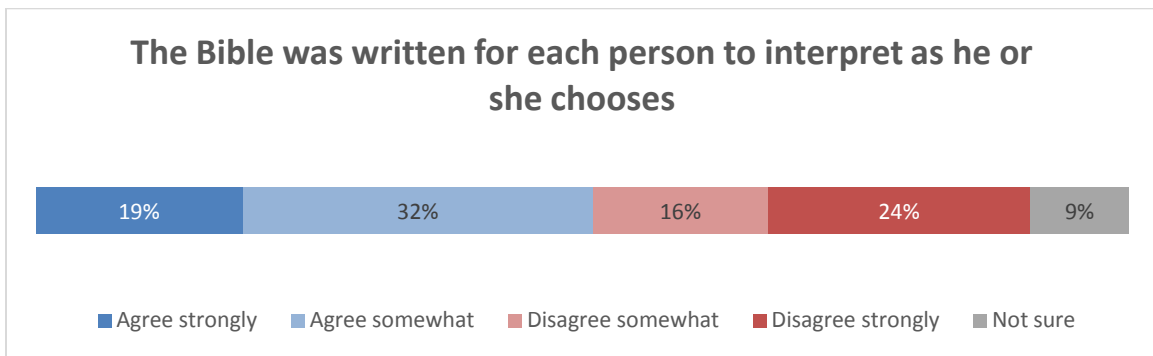


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (39% v. 55%). African-Americans (56%) and Hispanics (56%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (47%) and Other Ethnicities (40%)

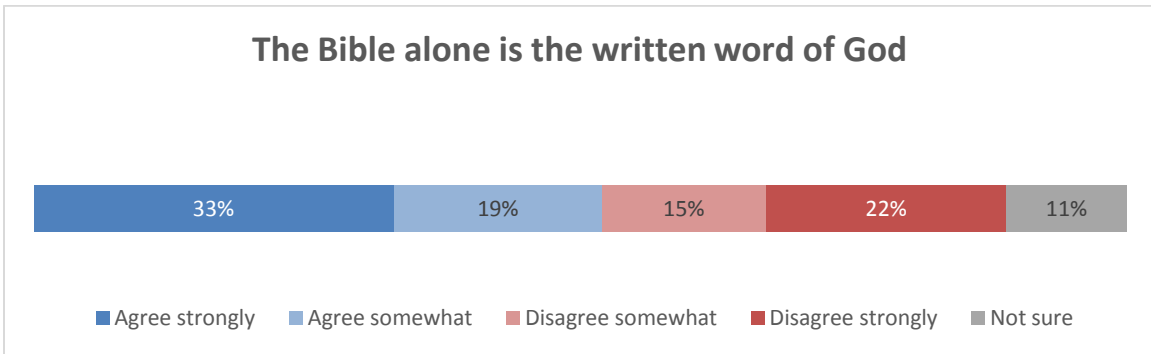
BELIEFS ABOUT SALVATION AND RELIGIOUS TEXTS



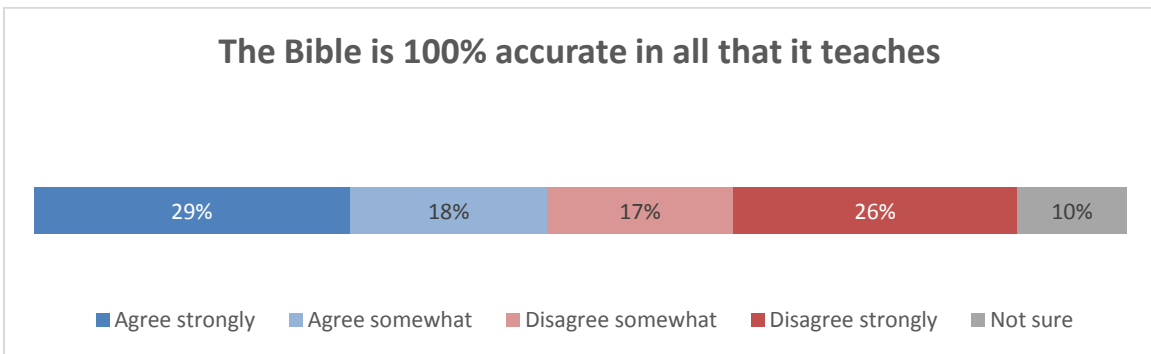
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (17% v. 51%). Asian-Americans (51%), Hispanics (44%), and Whites (47%) are more likely to Agree than African-Americans (31%).



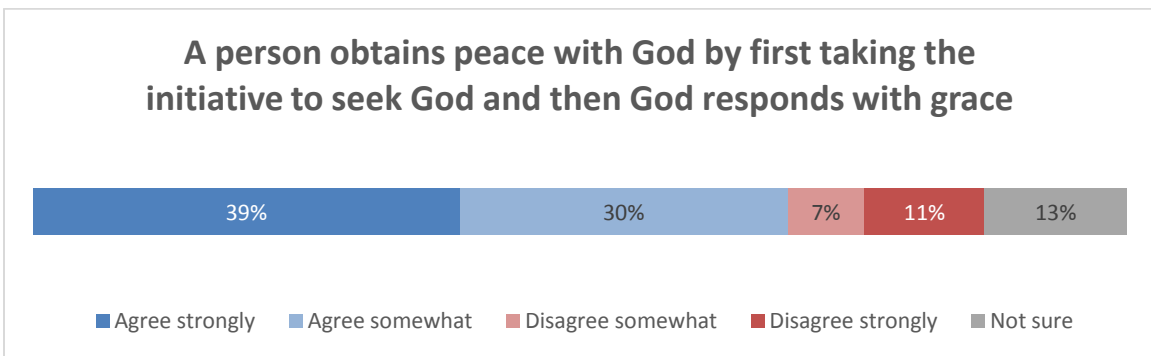
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (30% v. 56%). Asian-Americans (54%), Hispanics (52%), and Whites (53%) are more likely to Agree than African-Americans (41%).



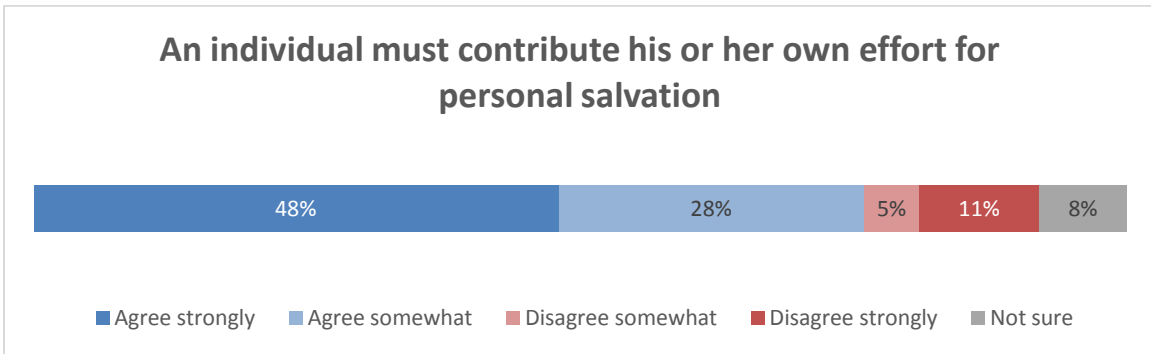
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (95% v. 42%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (69%), followed by Hispanics (55%).



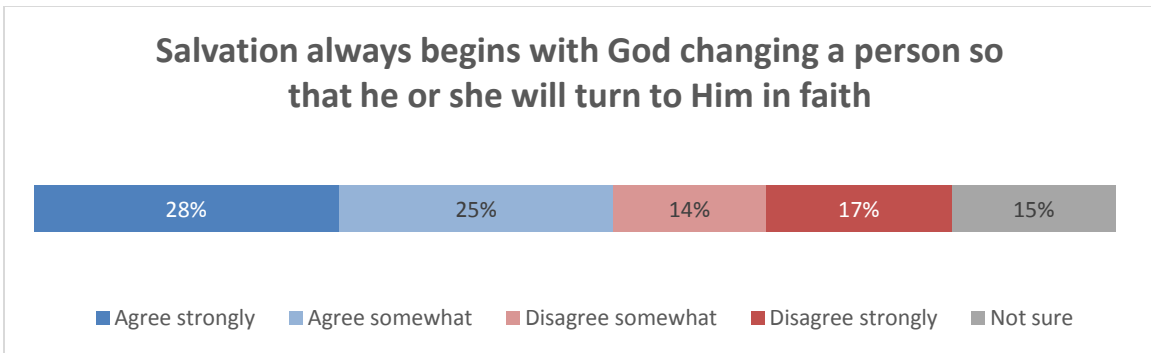
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (95% v. 36%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (67%), followed by Hispanics (53%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (86% v. 65%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (83%), followed by Hispanics (73%).

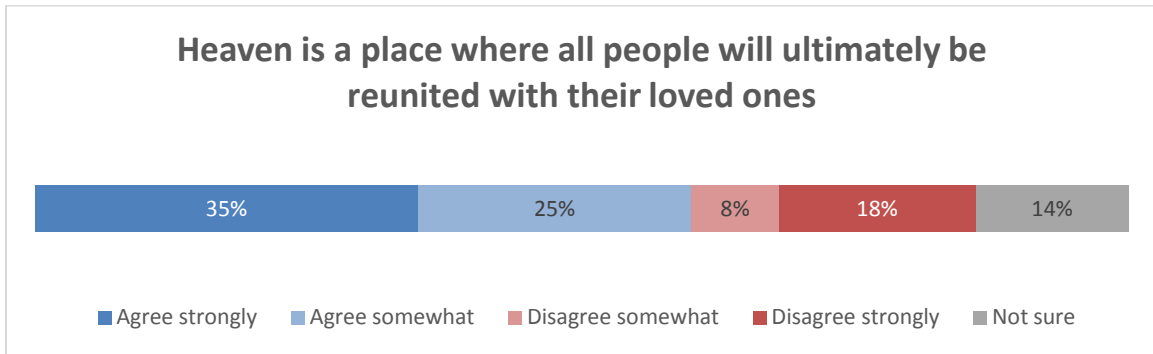


African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (86%).

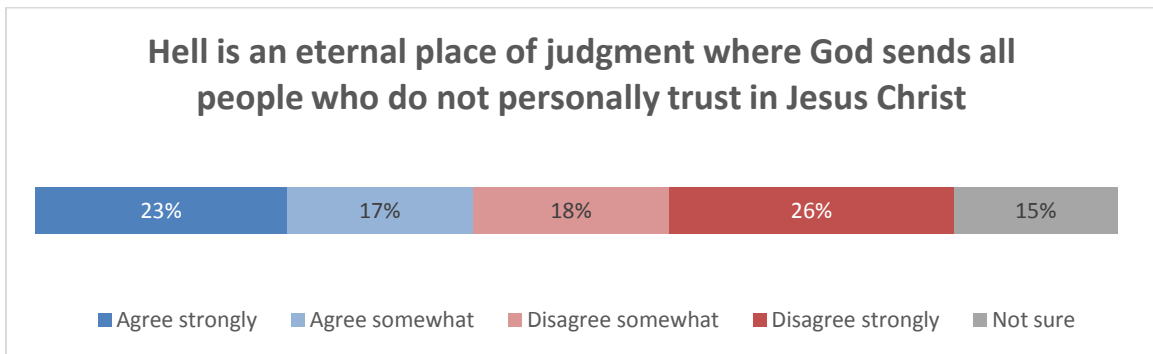


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (80% v. 47%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (71%).

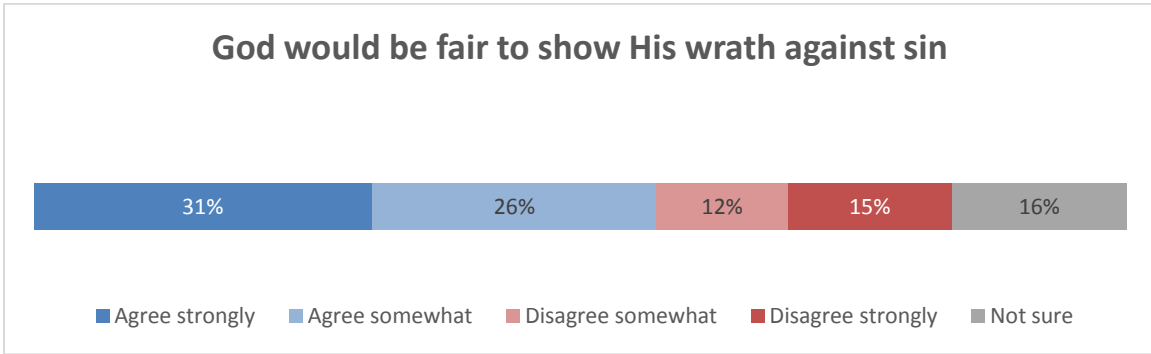
BELIEFS ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL



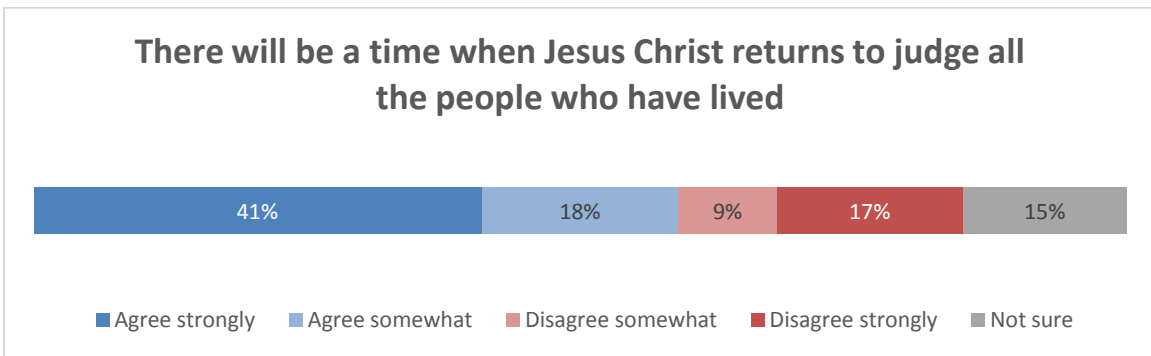
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (64% v. 60%). Hispanics (67%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (51%), Whites (60%), and Other Ethnicities (51%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (84% v. 30%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (57%), followed by Hispanics (44%).

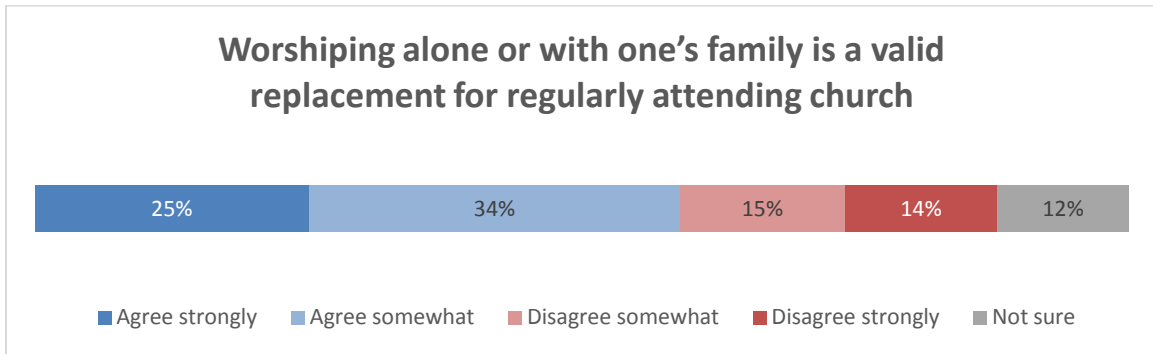


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (92% v. 50%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (70%), followed by Hispanics (62%).

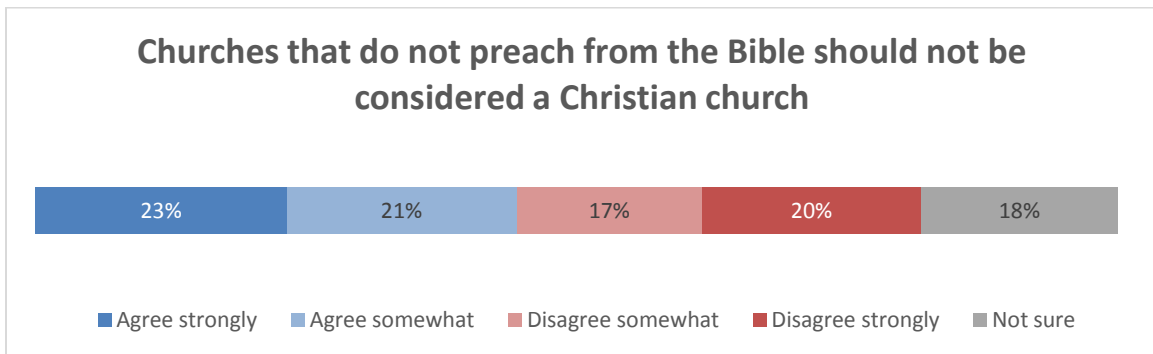


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (96% v. 51%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (79%), followed by Hispanics (65%).

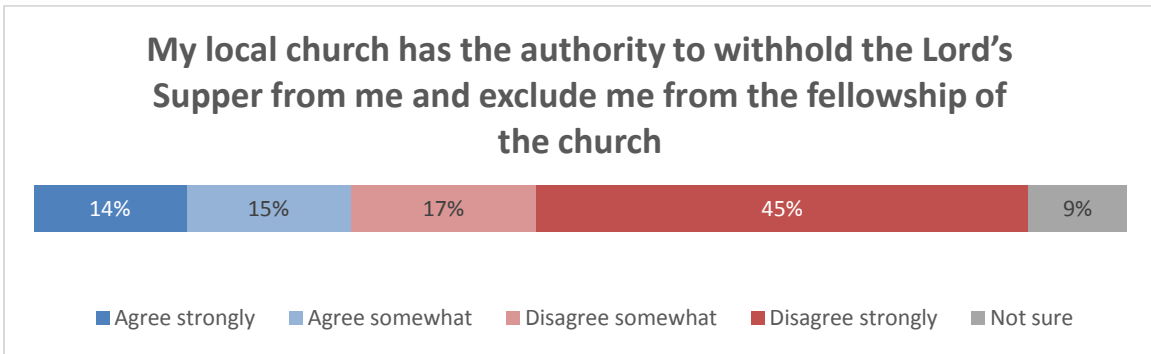
BELIEFS ABOUT THE CHURCH



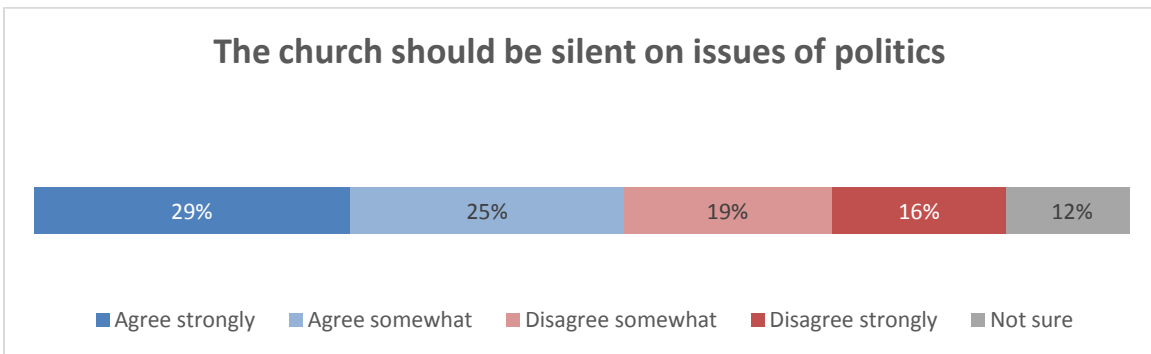
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (42% v. 63%). African-Americans are less likely to Agree (45%) than Hispanics (59%), Whites (62%), and Other Ethnicities (59%).



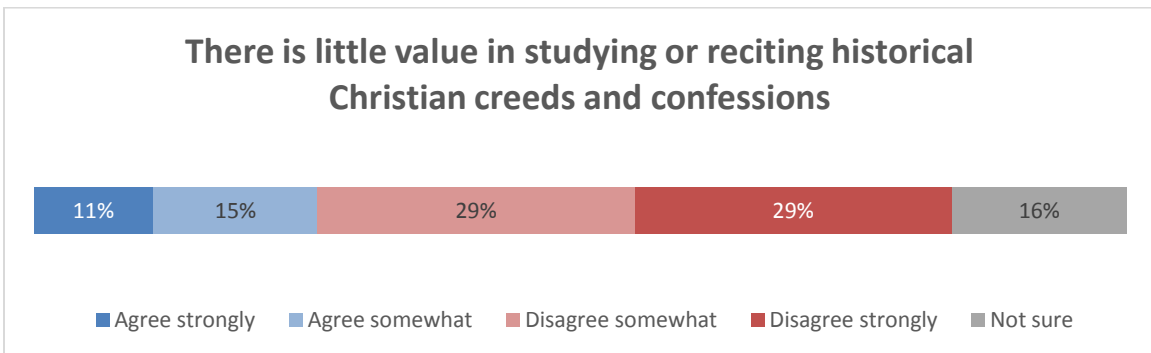
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (81% v. 36%). African-Americans (47%), Hispanics (46%), and Whites (44%) are more likely to Agree than Other Ethnicities (34%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (38% v. 25%). Hispanics (35%) are more likely to Agree than African-Americans (23%) and Whites (28%).

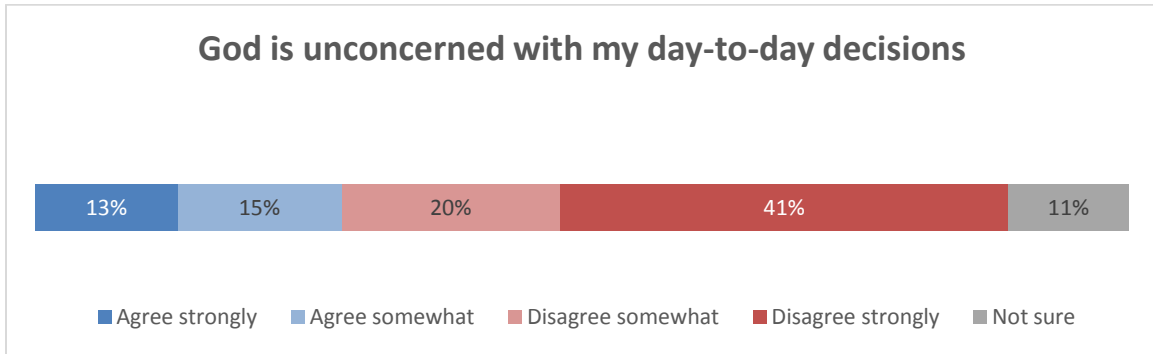


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (39% v. 58%). Asian-Americans (60%), Hispanics (56%), and Whites (57%) are more likely to Agree than African-Americans (37%).

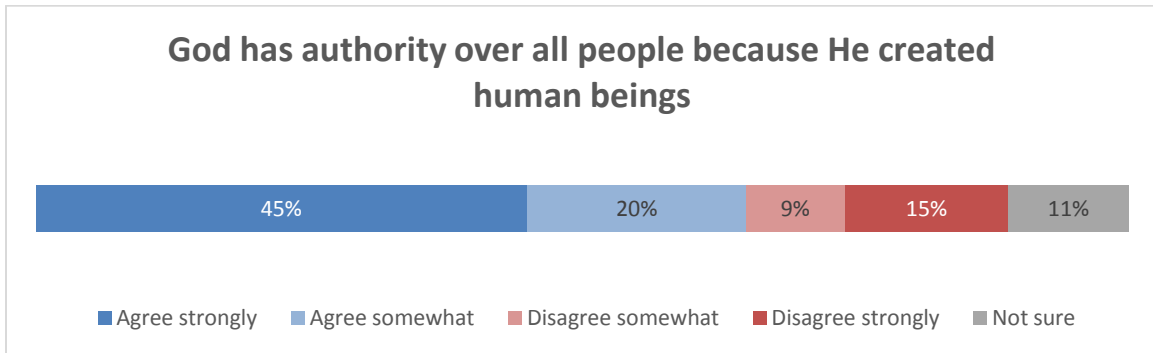


Hispanics (31%) are more likely to Agree than African-Americans (20%) and Whites (25%).

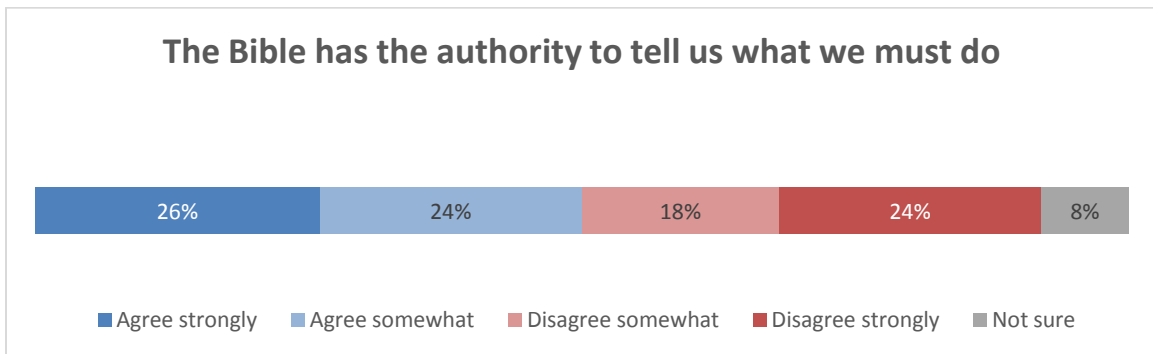
BELIEFS ABOUT AUTHORITY



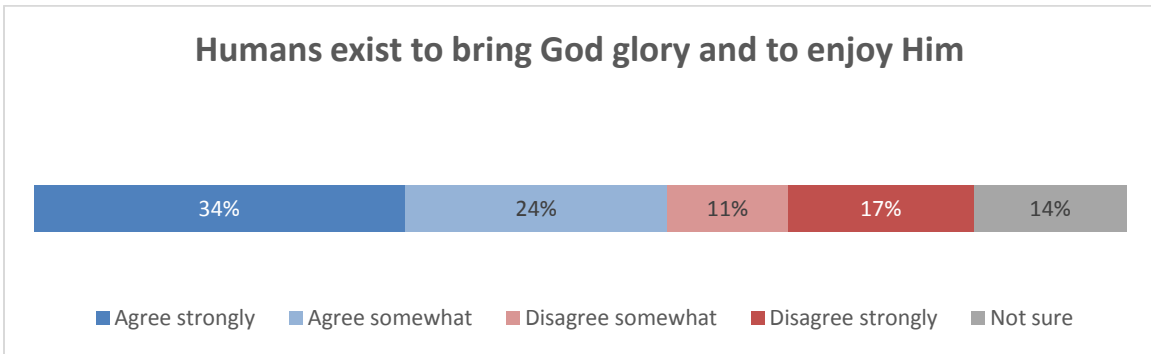
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (16% v. 30%). African-Americans are the least likely to Agree (15%).



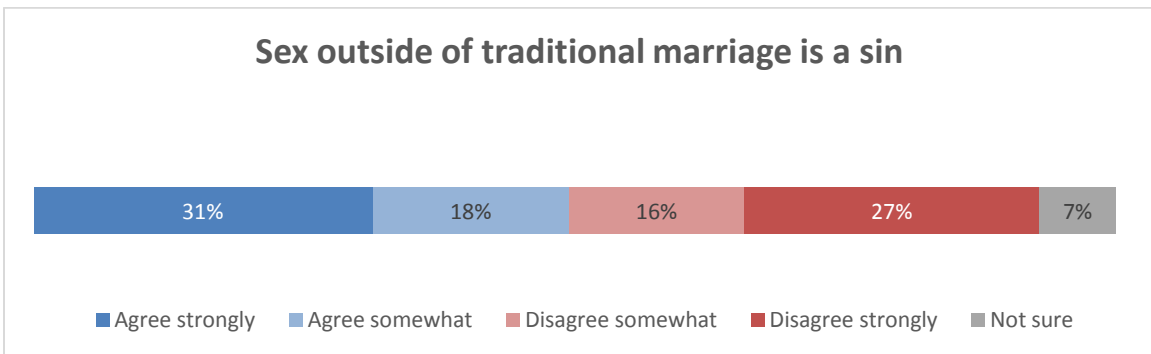
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (97% v. 58%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (85%).



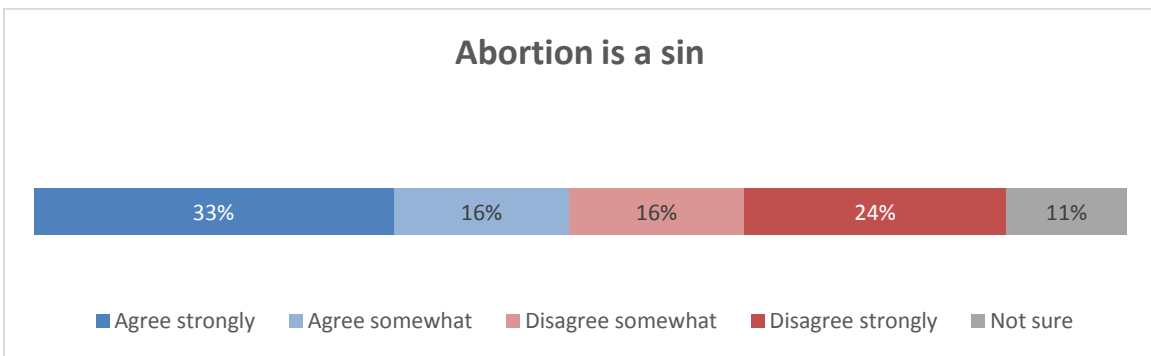
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (95% v. 39%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (72%).



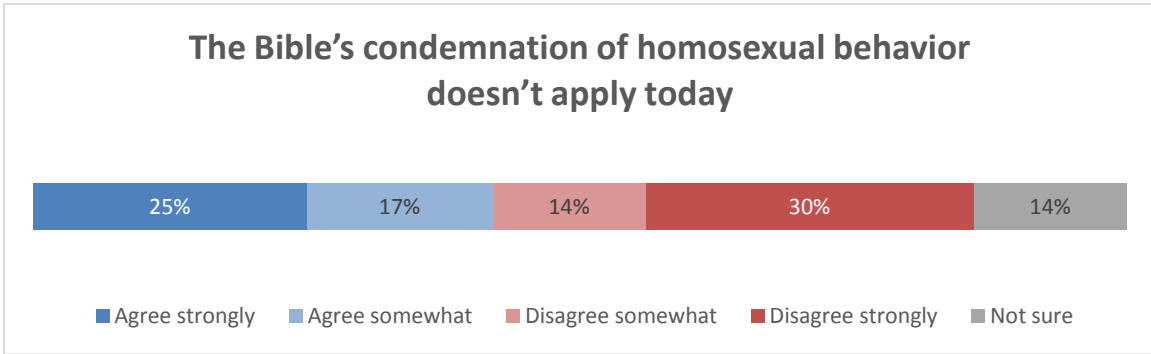
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (95% v. 50%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (78%).



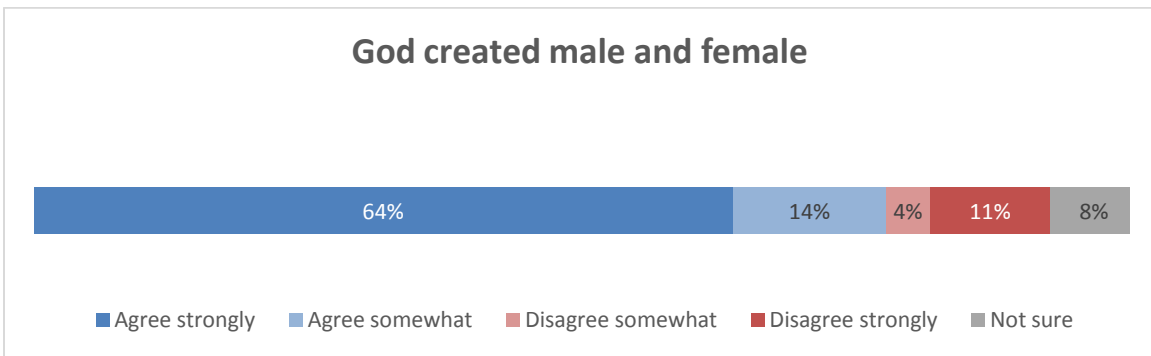
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (91% v. 40%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (69%).



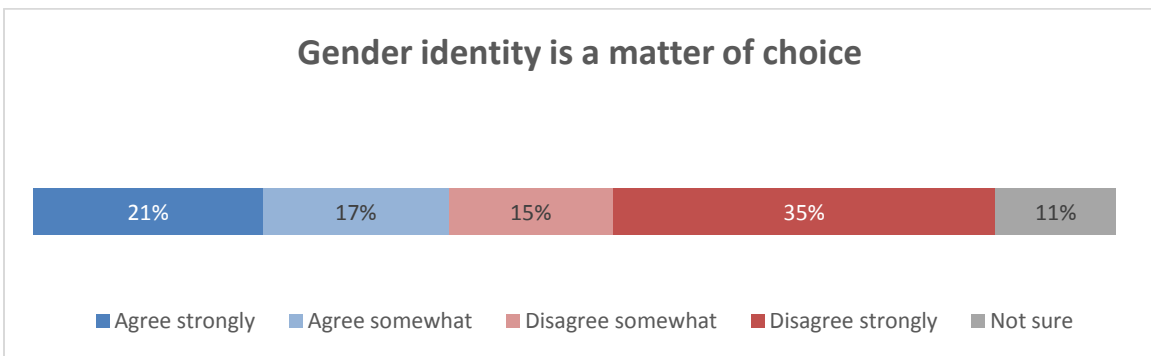
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (87% v. 41%). African-Americans (55%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (43%), Whites (48%), and Other Ethnicities (42%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (19% v. 47%). African-Americans are the least likely to Agree (27%)

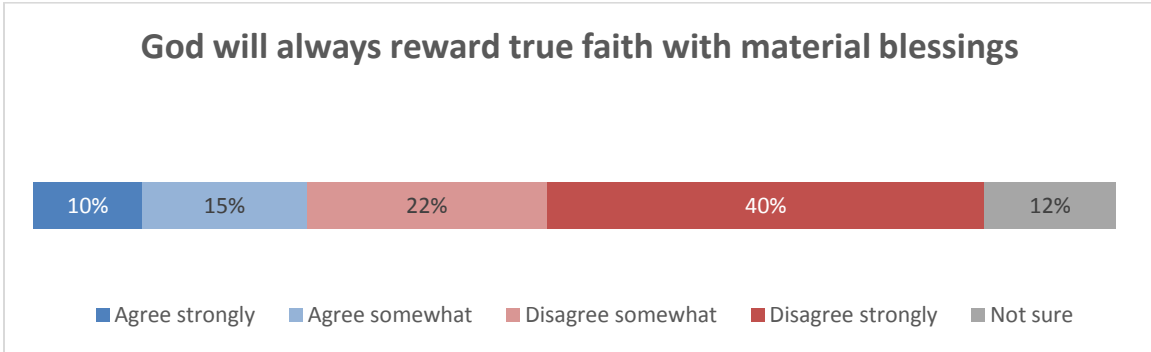


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (>99% v. 72%). African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (94%), followed by Hispanics (81%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree (32% v. 40%). Asian-Americans (44%), African-Americans (41%), and Hispanics (47%) are more likely to Agree than Whites (35%).

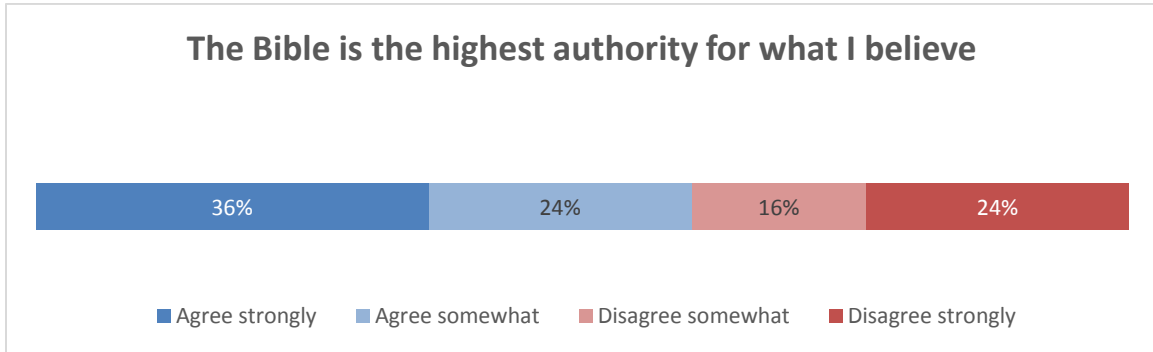
God will always reward true faith with material blessings



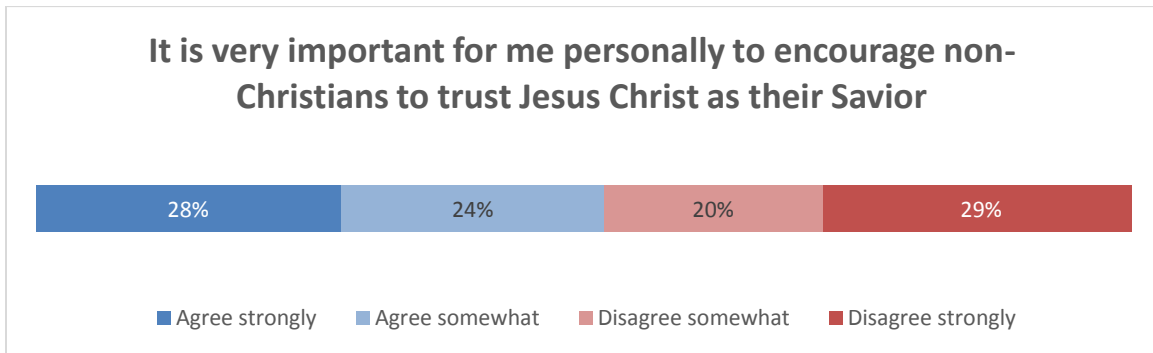
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree (37% v. 23%). African-Americans (38%) are more likely to Agree than Asian-Americans (27%), Whites (21%), and Other Ethnicities (24%).

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:

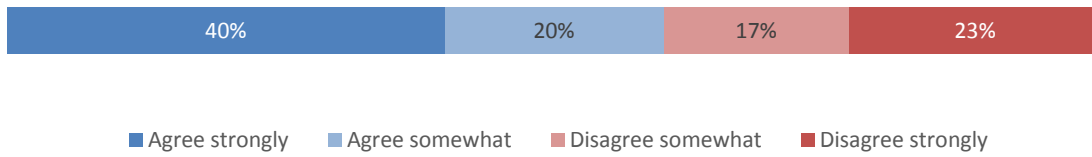


African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (84%).



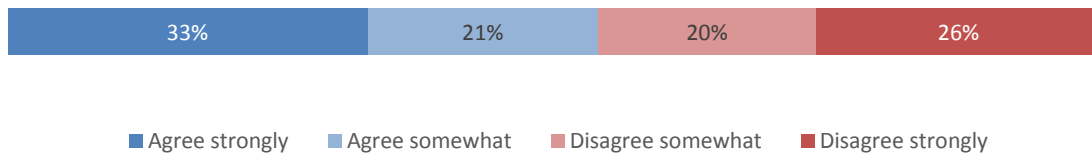
African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (70%), followed by Hispanics (53%).

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



African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (78%).

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



African-Americans are the most likely to Agree (73%).