

## **NAE LifeWay Research Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition**

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) initiated the development of an evangelical beliefs research definition for accurate and consistent use among researchers. In partnership with LifeWay Research the definition was crafted, reviewed and tested for validity.

On October 15, 2015, the NAE Board of Directors adopted the evangelical research definition.

The NAE/LifeWay Research evangelical beliefs research definition uses four questions to measure evangelical beliefs.

Respondents are asked their level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree).

Those who strongly agree with all four statements will be categorized as evangelical:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

The definition is the culmination of a two year, multi-phase research project with input from numerous experts.

The research objective was to identify a simple set of questions measuring evangelical beliefs as defined by the NAE that reliably separates those that share these beliefs and those that do not.

### Development Process

LifeWay Research proposed a research approach designed to involve multiple researchers and theologians in the process. LifeWay Research shared the research objective and proposed approach with several sociologists including Rodney Stark, Christian Smith, Penny Marler, Nancy Ammerman, Mark Chaves, Scott Thumma, and Warren Bird. Input from these researchers led to minor adjustments to the approach. Specifically, the sociologists:

- 1) Affirmed that a definition that was composed of a reliable factor would be helpful and insisted that the factor be a set of 4 or more questions,
- 2) Advised that high correlation between items would be expected and should be allowed,
- 3) Maintained that each item be single-barreled, and
- 4) Noted that previous research showed three elements describe evangelicals: belonging, belief, and behavior. This project's focus on belief must be understood in that context.

The NAE had already had conversations with Ron Sellers, who drafted three initial questions. LifeWay Research tested these questions in an online survey of 1,000 adult Americans using sample from a demographically balanced national panel February 25-March 5, 2014. However, input from the sociologists led to the need for edits and additional questions.

The NAE and LifeWay Research obtained input from theologians including Richard Mouw, Paul Nyquist, and Mark Noll. This input led to 17 new questions. LifeWay Research tested these questions among 1,000 Americans using on a demographically balanced online panel Feb. 17-24, 2015.

Results of this test were analyzed statistically. This included a correlation matrix and factor analysis. Also, questions were tested in multiple regression analysis to see their relationship with self-identification, RELTRAD, and church attendance as dependent variables.

To ensure that the questions were measuring what the original theologians said defined evangelical belief, the questions were sent to 10 additional theologians and religious leaders. Each was asked to review the questions for validity and to prioritize the questions. This larger group of theologians and evangelical leaders included Andre Rogers, Peter Lee, Tammy Dunahoo, Gabriel Salguero, Heather Gonzales, Samuel Rodriguez, Kevin Smith, Jo Anne Lyon, Leith Anderson, and Lynn Cohick.

Four questions emerged as the most valid and the most reliable. These comprise the NAE LifeWay Research evangelical research definition.

A final test was conducted September 8-21, 2015 on a random digit dial phone survey (50% landline, 50% cell) of 1,000 Americans. The first 4 questions in this last test comprise the definition. The order of these four questions was randomized.

Factor analysis confirmed there is an underlying pattern of response to these four questions. The Cronbach Alpha Coefficient is .91 indicating the pattern is highly reliable and that the questions form a scale in this test. As expected, correlations are high between the four items (coefficients .69-.76).

Logistic multiple regression was run to see how well these 4 questions predict self-identification as “an evangelical Christian.” Controls were included for ethnicity, Catholic, and Mainline religious preference to determine if the questions were predictive regardless of the answers to these demographics. All four questions are significant and predictive in the presence of these controls and of one another.

Logistic multiple regression was run to see how well these 4 questions predict weekly (or more frequent) Christian church attendance. Controls were included for ethnicity, Catholic and Mainline religious preference to determine if the questions were predictive regardless of the answers to these demographics. Three questions are significant and predictive in the presence of these controls and of one another.

## Usage

Previous research by Green, Guth, Smidt, and Kellstedt concludes that “Evangelicalism can be measured in at least three ways: acceptance of evangelical core beliefs, affiliation with evangelical movements, and affiliation with evangelical denominations.”<sup>1</sup>

In practice, researchers typically have used only two methods to identify evangelicals: self-identification and denominational affiliation (RELTRAD). In part this use of only two of the three ways has been due to the lack of a valid, reliable definition of evangelical belief.

The NAE LifeWay Research evangelical beliefs research definition provides a valid third method to researchers. The concepts represented in the four questions correspond favorably with beliefs that consistently appear in writings by evangelical scholars.

This measure of evangelical belief can be used by itself or in combination with measures of identity or involvement. For example, a researcher could ask an additional religious preference question to identify Christians with evangelical beliefs. Another example would be to ask an additional religious service attendance frequency question to identify people with evangelical beliefs that attend church regularly.

Researchers are encouraged to use this definition. No prior permission is needed. A typical citation would be, “In this study “evangelical” is defined using the NAE LifeWay Research Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition based on respondent beliefs.”

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<sup>1</sup> Green, John C., James L. Guth, Corwin E. Smidt, and Lyman A. Kellstedt, *Religion and the Culture Wars: Dispatches from the Front* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 1996) p. 247.