

2018
State of American Theology
Study

RESEARCH REPORT

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Executive Summary

The 2018 State of American Theology Study is the third in a series of surveys of American adults examining their theological beliefs. Previous surveys were conducted in 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 2018 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 that they wanted 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

Almost 7 in 10 Americans believe God is perfect, and two-thirds accept the resurrection of Jesus. But an increasing majority 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. A consistent 7 in 10 Americans believe in one true God in three persons. Almost as many believe God accepts worship from all religions.

- 69% of Americans agree “God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake.” This is higher than both the 2016 (65%) and 2014 (63%) surveys.
- 57% of Americans agree “Jesus is the only person who never sinned.”
- 57% of Americans agree “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” This is higher than agreement in 2016 (52%).
- 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.”
- 1 in 5 Americans agree “The Holy Spirit can tell me to do something which is forbidden in the Bible.
- 7 in 10 Americans agree “There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”
- 66% of Americans agree “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.”

Beliefs about Goodness and Sin

More than three-fourths of Americans doubt the eternal consequences of sin. And, two-thirds find most people good by nature. Just over half of Americans believe God measures righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ rather than one's works.

- 23% of Americans agree “Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.” This is higher than both the 2016 (19%) and 2014 (18%) surveys.
- 66% agree “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.”
- 53% agree “God counts a person as righteous not because of one's works but only because of one's faith in Jesus Christ.”

Beliefs about Salvation and Religious Texts

Two trends show how Americans are split on their view of the Bible: More Americans believe the Bible is accurate and a growing number say the Bible is not literally true. One thing that undermines opinions of the Bible for more than a third of Americans is the view that science disproves the Bible. The majority of Americans believe that salvation is in “Christ alone,” and half believe God causes people to trust Jesus Christ.

- 50% agree “The Bible is 100% accurate in all that it teaches.” This is higher than both the 2016 (47%) and 2014 (43%) surveys.
- 47% agree “The Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true.” This is higher than both the 2016 (44%) and 2014 (41%) surveys.
- 36% agree “Modern science disproves the Bible.”
- 57% of Americans agree “Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.”
- 51% agree “Only the power of God can cause people to trust Jesus Christ as their savior.”

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.

- 54% 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.”
- 34% agree “God will always reward true faith with material blessings in this life.”

Beliefs about the Church

Almost 6 in 10 Americans see valid alternatives to corporate worship. More than a third say entertaining worship services is required for churches to be effective. A quarter of Americans say Christians should be quiet about political issues.

- 58% of Americans agree “Worshiping alone or with one’s family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church.”
- 37% agree “Churches must provide entertaining worship services if they want to be effective.”
- 25% agree “Christians should be silent on issues of politics.”

Beliefs about Authority

Americans believing the Bible has authority over our actions grew to a slim majority as did viewing abortion as sinful. Americans remain split on whether sex outside of marriage is sinful. 6 in 10 say religious belief is about opinion rather than objective truth. Nearly 4 in 10 say gender is a matter of choice.

- 60% agree “Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth.”
- 53% agree “The Bible has the authority to tell us what we must do.” This is higher than both the 2016 (50%) and 2014 (49%) surveys.
- 51% agree “Sex outside of traditional marriage is a sin.”
- 52% agree “Abortion is a sin.” This is higher than 2016 (49%).
- 26% of Americans agree that “God is unconcerned with my day-to-day decisions.”
- 38% agree “Gender identity is a matter of choice.”
- 44% agree “The Bible’s condemnation of homosexual behavior doesn’t apply today.”

Methodology

The 2018 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).

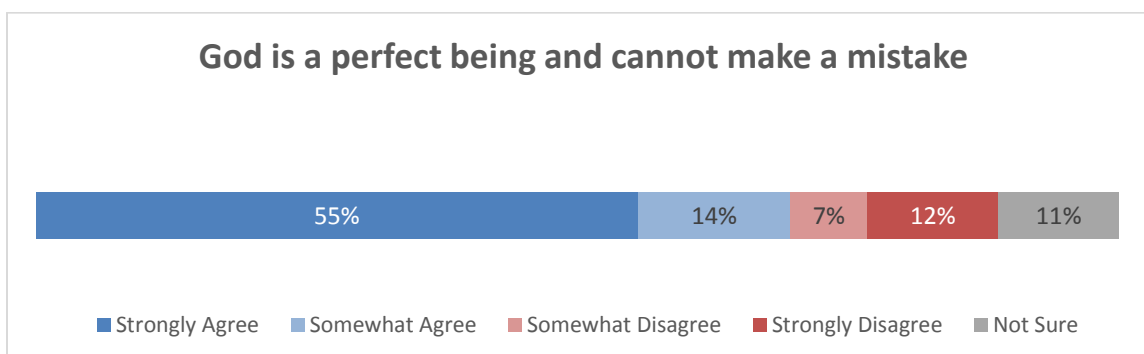
The quantitative survey of American adults was conducted using a large, national online panel. Quotas were in place to ensure the sample was demographically balanced and slight weights were used to ensure the sample matches the population on gender, age, ethnicity, income, region and religion. 3,002 surveys were completed April 24-May 4, 2018. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed $\pm 1.9\%$. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Ligonier Ministries identified specific doctrines and heresies that they wanted 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.

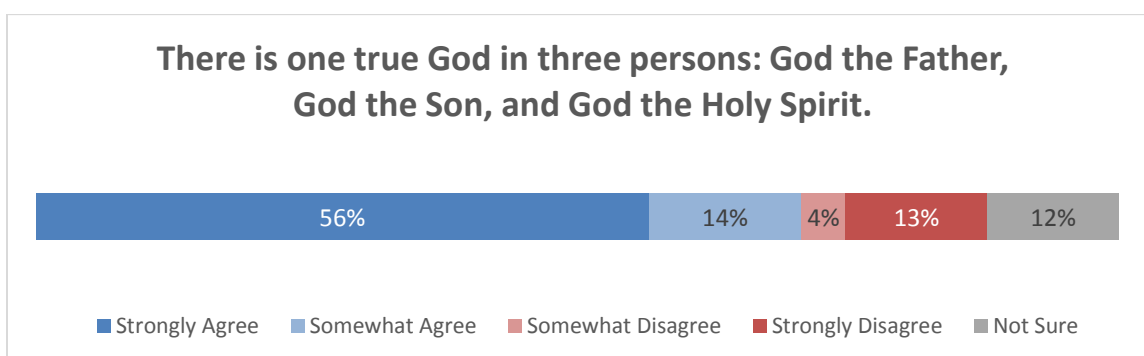
Quantitative Findings

BELIEFS ABOUT GOD



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (98% v. 62%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (92% v. 50%). Americans age 18-34 are the least likely to Agree (66%). This is higher than the percentage of young adults agreeing in 2016 (59%) and 2014 (59%).

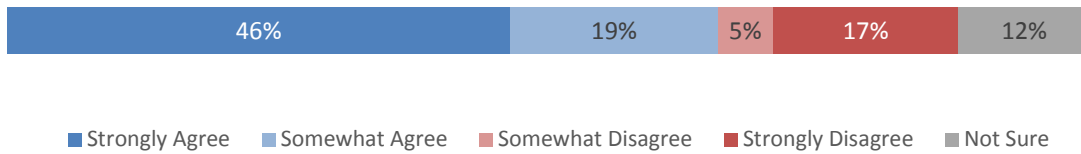
The 69% who Agree is significantly higher than both the 2016 (65%) and 2014 (63%) surveys.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (97% v. 63%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (91% v. 52%).

The 70% who Agree is consistent with 2016 (69%) and 2014 (71%).

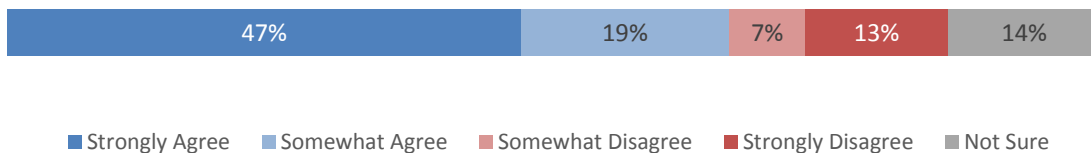
God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are less likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (51% v. 69%). Americans age 50-64 (68%) and 65+ (73%) are more likely to Agree than those 18-34 (62%) and 35-49 (62%).

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

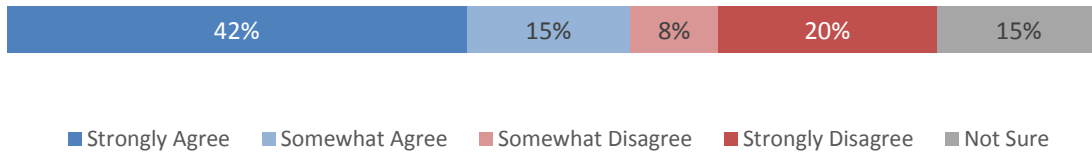
Biblical accounts of the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. This event actually occurred.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (97% v. 59%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (91% v. 46%).

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

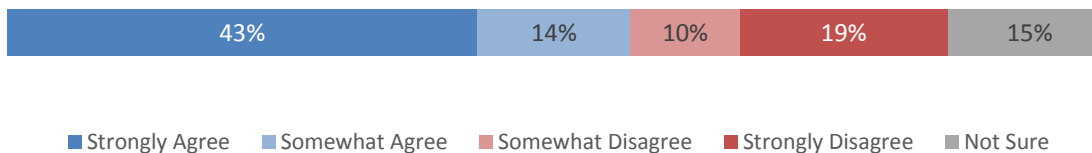
Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (78% v. 52%). This is a larger percentage of those with Evangelical Beliefs agreeing than in 2016 (71%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (73% v. 43%). Americans age 18-34 (57%) are more likely to Agree than in 2016 (48%).

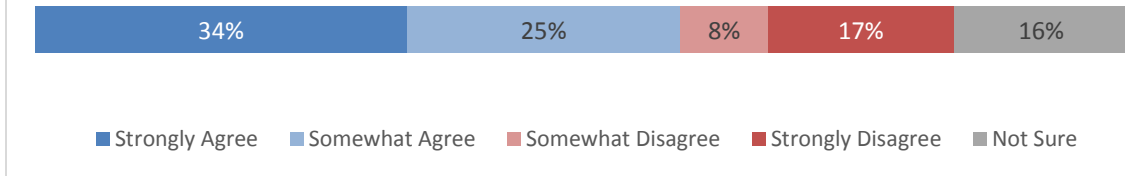
The 57% who Agree is significantly higher than in 2016 (52%).

Jesus Christ is the only person who never sinned.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (92% v. 48%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (80% v. 36%).

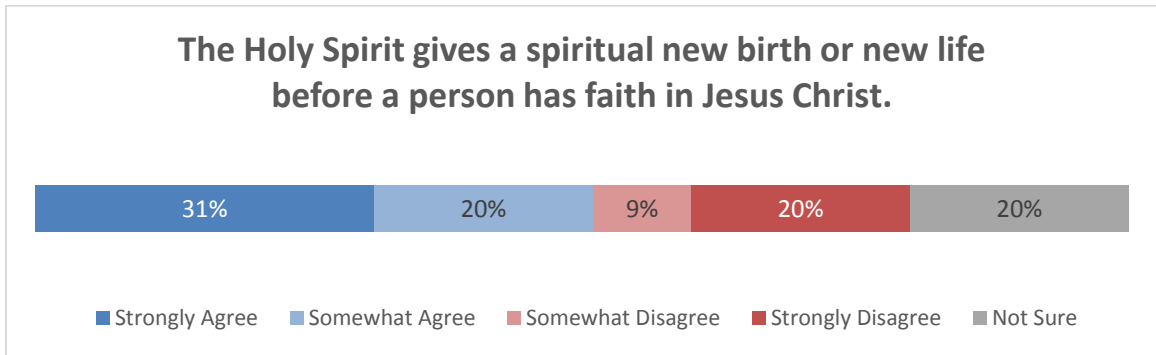
The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (37% v. 22%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Agree* than those who do not (66% v. 52%).

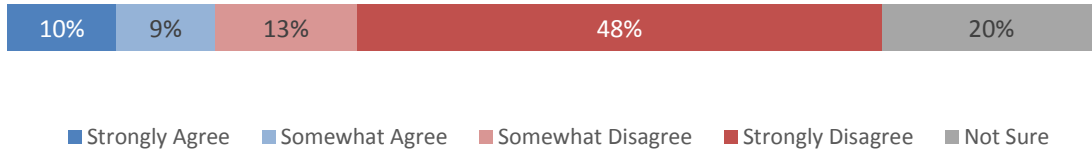
The 59% who *Agree* is significantly higher than in 2016 (56%), but less than 2014 (64%).

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



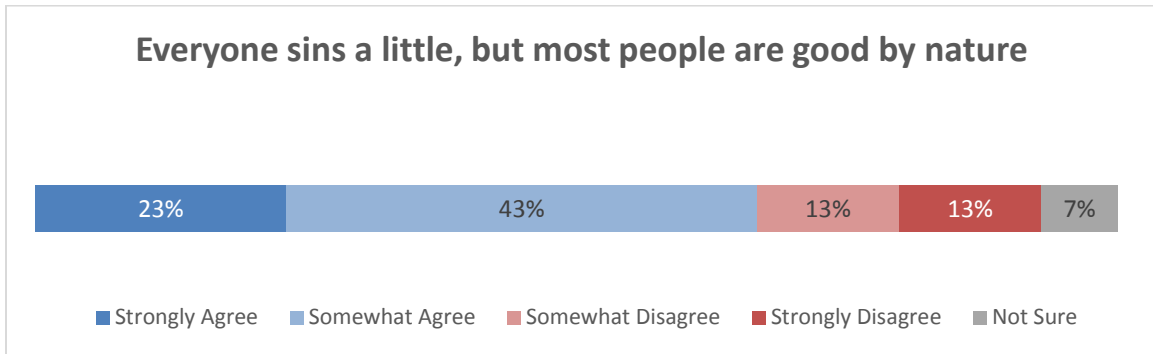
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Agree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (63% v. 48%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Agree* than those who do not (66% v. 38%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to *Agree* (57%) which is higher than in both 2016 (51%) and 2014 (47%).

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



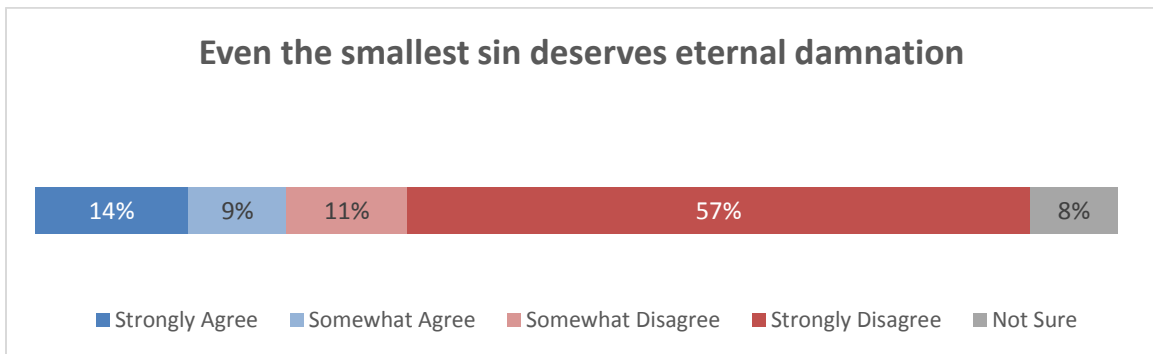
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (73% v. 58%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Agree* than those who do not (27% v. 13%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to *Agree* (30%).

BELIEFS ABOUT GOODNESS AND SIN



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (44% v. 22%). Americans age 65+ are the most likely to Agree (73%).

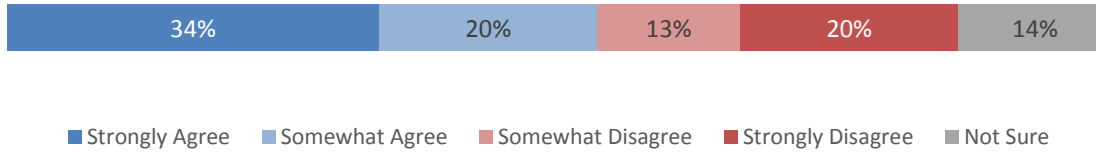
The 66% who Agree is consistent with 2016 (65%) and 2014 (67%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (49% v. 17%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (38% v. 10%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (34%), and those age 65+ are the least likely to Agree (13%). Americans age 18-34 (34%) Agree at a higher level than in both 2016 (21%) and 2014 (19%).

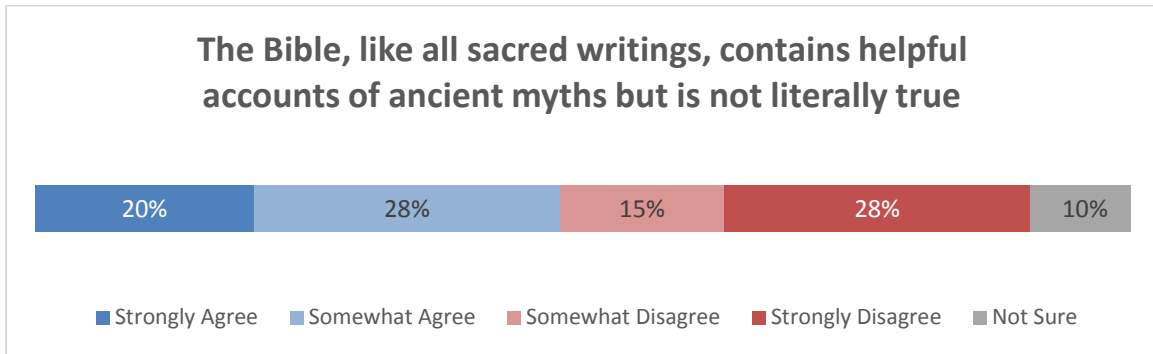
The 23% who Agree is higher than both the 2016 (19%) and 2014 (18%) surveys.

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



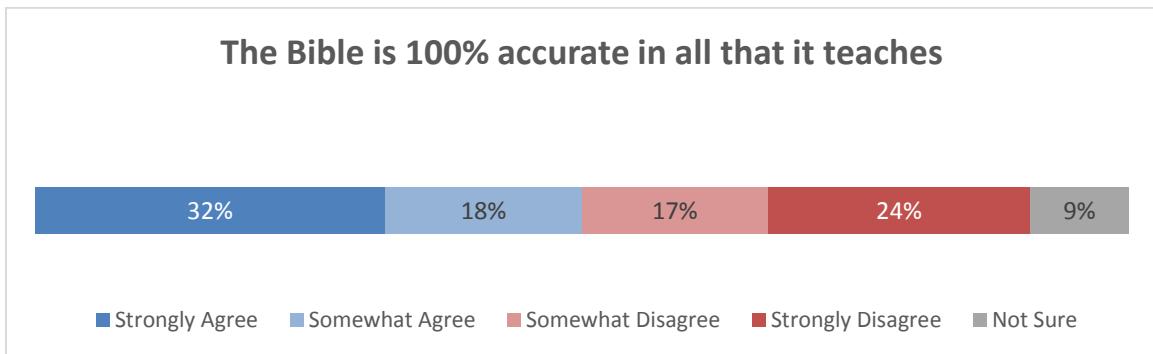
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (91% v. 44%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (74% v. 35%).

BELIEFS ABOUT SALVATION AND RELIGIOUS TEXTS



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (75% v. 35%). Despite the inclination for disagreement, those with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree with this statement than in 2016 (23% v. 17%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (58% v. 30%). Americans age 18-34 (52%) are more likely to Agree than those 35-49 (47%) and 50-64 (41%). More young adults are agreeing than in 2016 (46%) and 2014 (43%).

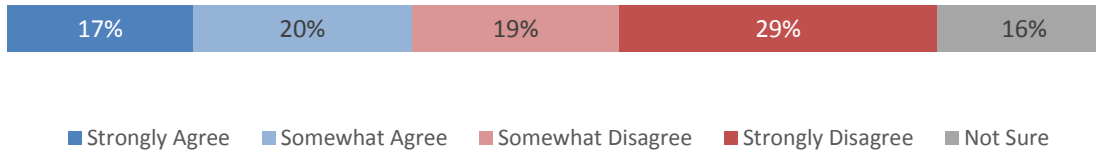
The 47% who Agree is higher than both the 2016 (44%) and 2014 (41%) surveys.



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (96% v. 39%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (76% v. 28%). Americans age 18-34 (53%) are more likely to Agree than in 2016 (45%) and 2014 (39%).

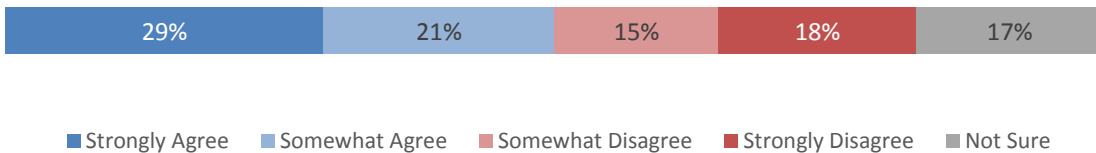
The 50% who Agree is higher than both the 2016 (47%) and 2014 (43%) surveys.

Modern science disproves the Bible.



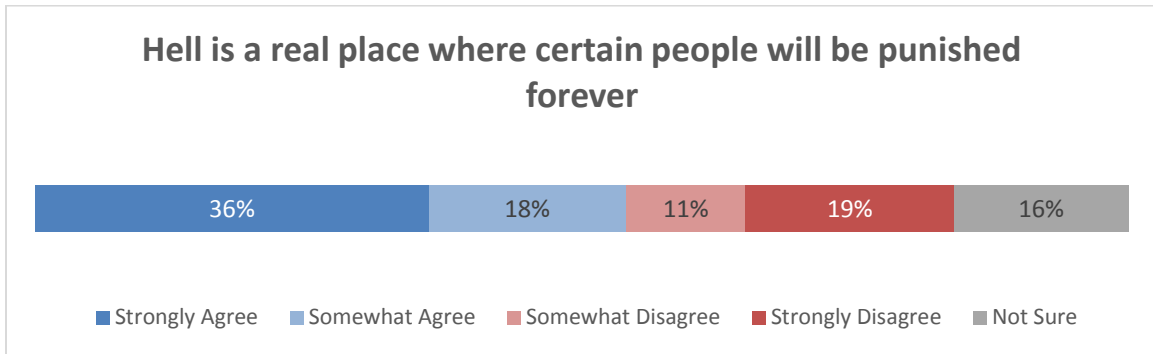
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (67% v. 43%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (60% v. 37%). Americans age 18-34 (47%) and 35-49 (41%) are more likely to *Agree* than those 50-64 (30%) and 65+ (24%).

Only the power of God can cause people to trust Jesus Christ as their savior.

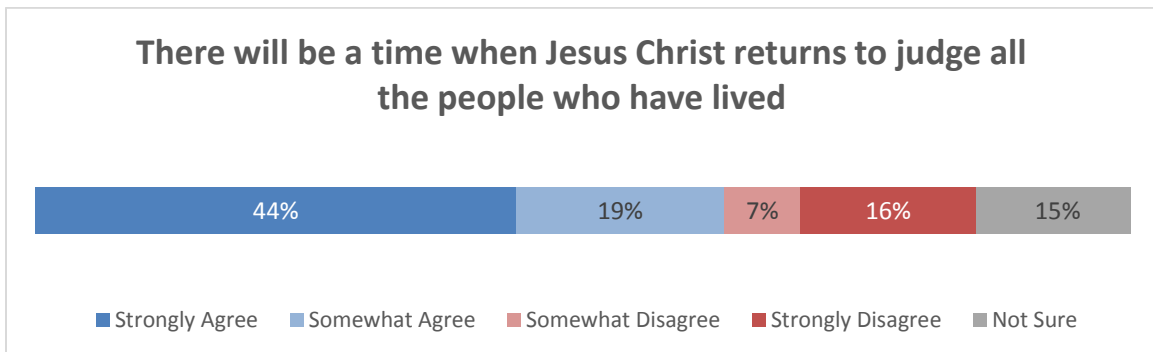


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Agree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (83% v. 43%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Agree* than those who do not (71% v. 33%).

BELIEFS ABOUT REWARDS AND PUNISHMENT



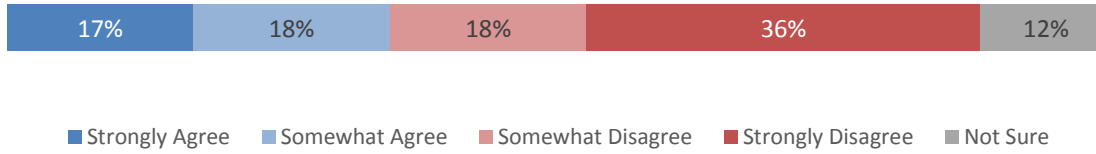
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (93% v. 45%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (78% v. 34%). Americans age 18-34 (58%) and 35-49 (57%) are more likely to Agree than those 65+ (49%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (98% v. 54%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (88% v. 41%). Americans age 18-34 (64%) are more likely to Agree than in 2016 (55%).

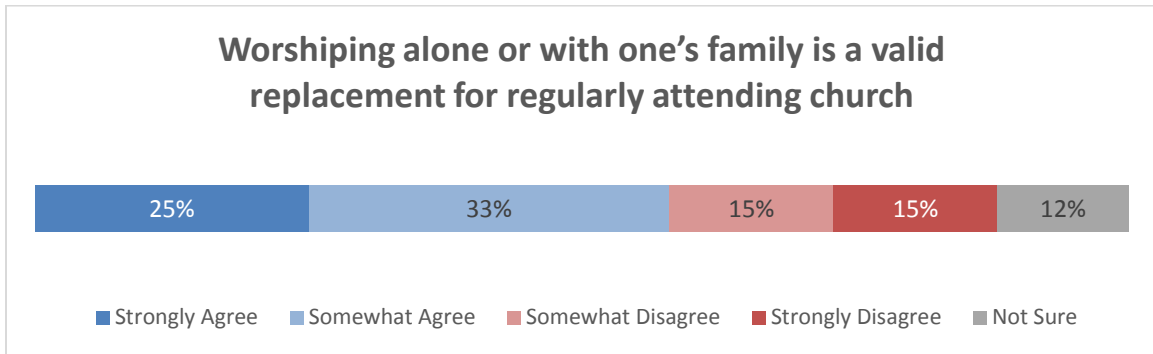
The 62% who Agree is the same as 2014 (63%) but higher than 2016 (59%).

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



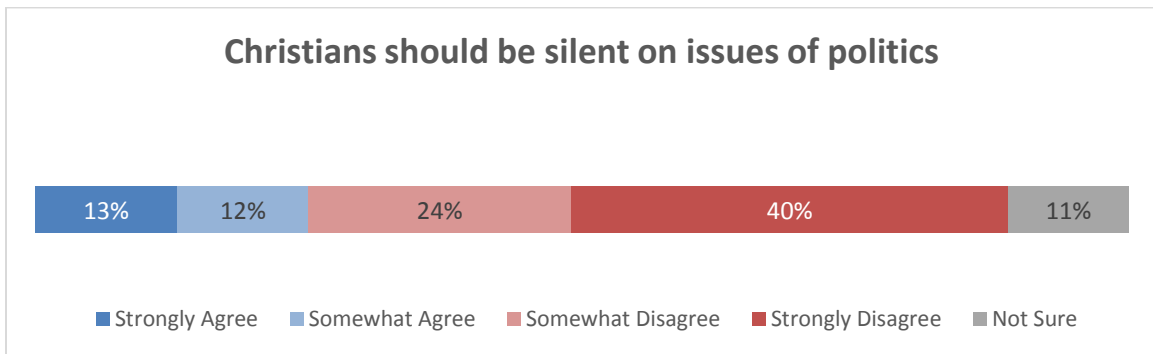
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (46% v. 32%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (47% v. 24%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (43%); those 65+ are the least likely to Agree (25%).

BELIEFS ABOUT THE CHURCH



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (54% v. 24%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (45% v. 16%). Americans age 18-34 (60%) Agree at a similar rate as 2016 (59%) but higher than 2014 (51%).

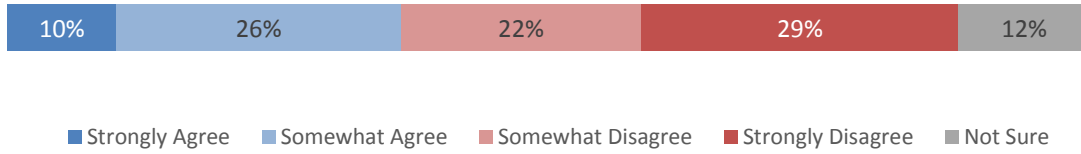
The 58% who Agree is similar to 2016 (59%) which was higher than 2014 (52%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (74% v. 62%). Americans age 18-34 (38%) and 35-49 (27%) are more likely to Agree than those 50-64 (17%) and 65+ (14%).

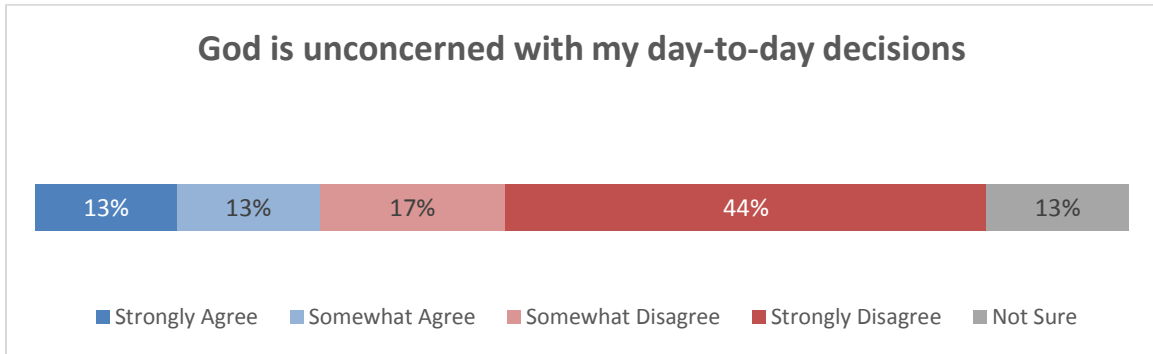
The 25% who Agree that Christians should be silent on political issues is markedly lower than the percentage of Americans in 2016 who agreed that *the church* should be silent on issues of politics (54%).

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



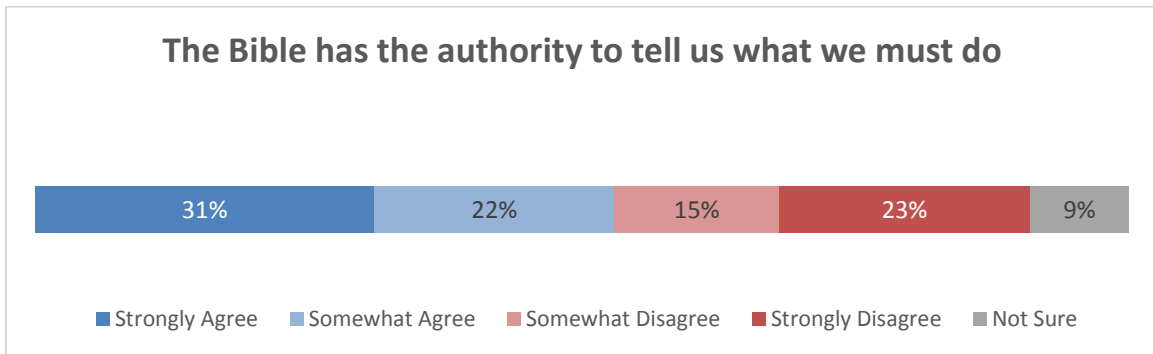
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (61% v. 49%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (46%).

BELIEFS ABOUT AUTHORITY



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (83% v. 56%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (74% v. 50%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to *Agree* (36%), and this is higher than in 2016 (30%) and 2014 (20%).

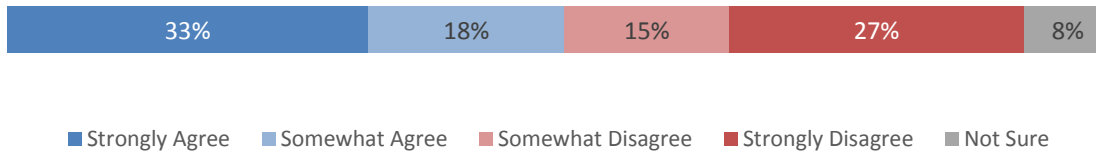
The 26% who *Agree* is similar to 2016 (28%) which was higher than 2014 (20%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Agree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (97% v. 42%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Agree* than those who do not (78% v. 31%). Americans age 18-34 (56%) are more likely to *Agree* than in 2016 (43%) and 2014 (46%).

The 53% who *Agree* is higher than 2016 (50%) and 2014 (49%).

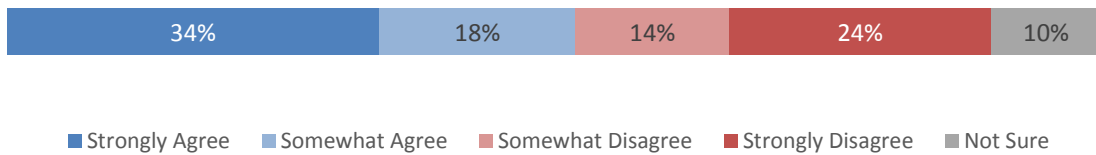
Sex outside of traditional marriage is a sin



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (89% v. 41%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (73% v. 32%). Americans age 18-34 (54%) are more likely to Agree than in 2016 (47%).

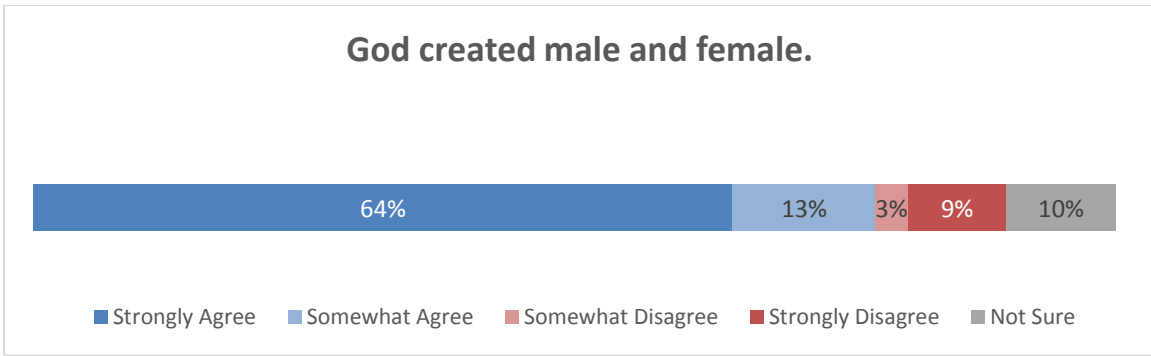
The 51% who Agree is similar to 2016 (49%).

Abortion is a sin



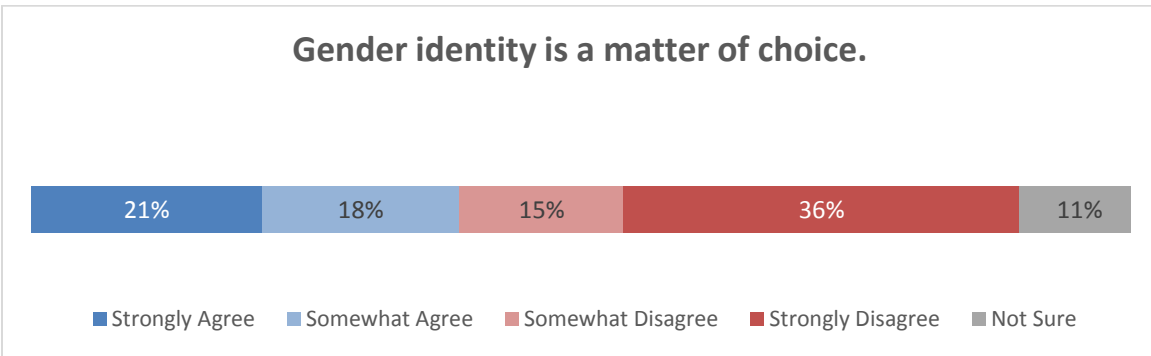
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (88% v. 43%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (75% v. 31%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (57%), and this is higher than in 2016 (50%).

The 52% who Agree is higher than 2016 (49%).



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Agree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (99% v. 72%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (95% v. 62%).

The 77% who Agree is the same as 2016 (77%).

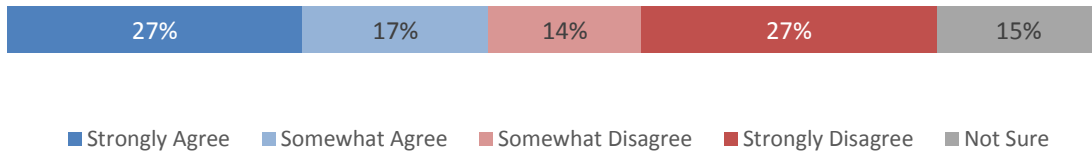


Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (64% v. 48%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (45%).

Among those who Agree God created male and female: 39% Agree gender is a matter of choice. 53% Disagree and 9% are Not sure.

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

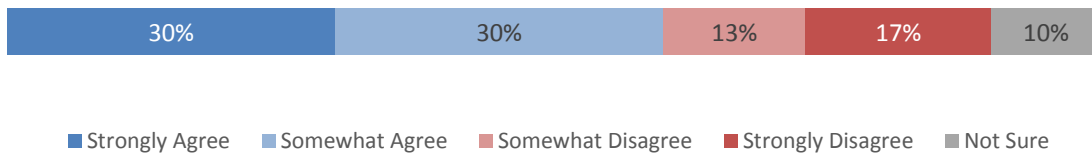
The Bible's condemnation of homosexual behavior doesn't apply today



Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (74% v. 33%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (57% v. 28%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to *Agree* (51%).

The 44% who *Agree* is similar to 2016 (42%).

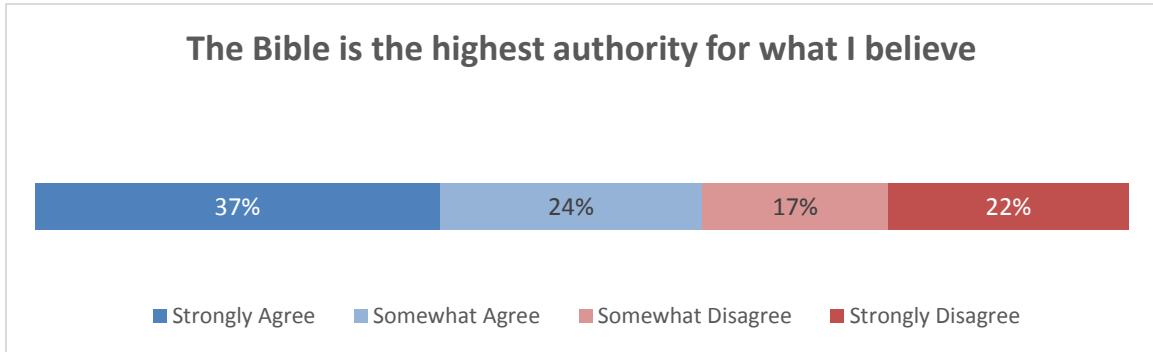
Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth.



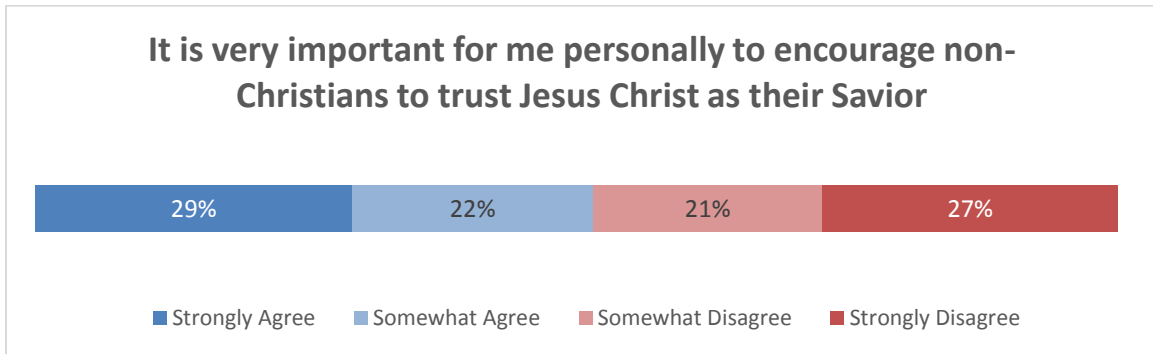
Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to *Disagree* than those without Evangelical Beliefs (62% v. 22%). Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to *Disagree* than those who do not (45% v. 17%).

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:

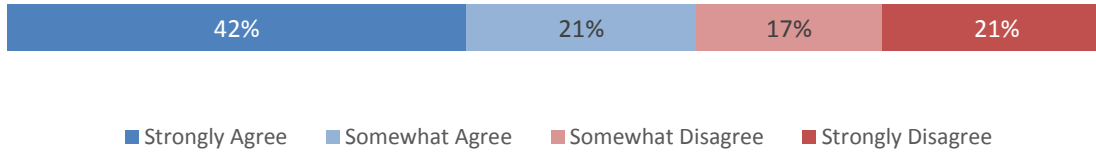


Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (86% v. 40%). Americans age 18-34 (62%) are more likely to Agree than in 2016 (56%).



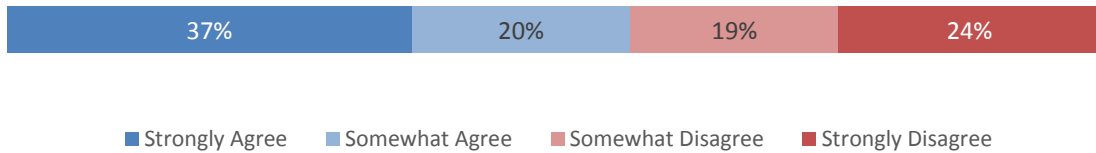
Americans who attend a religious service at least once a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (78% v. 29%). Americans age 18-34 are the most likely to Agree (58%), and this is higher than in 2016 (48%).

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 a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (85% v. 43%).

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 a month are more likely to Agree than those who do not (80% v. 37%). Americans age 18-34 (61%) are more likely to Agree than in 2016 (53%).