

New Study Reveals Scary Lies Infiltrating Americans' Theology

Six in 10 Americans say religious belief is a matter of personal opinion. For 7 in 10 Americans, such religious beliefs include one true God existing in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A similar number say God is perfect. But an increasing majority of Americans deny Jesus has always existed and many say the Holy Spirit is a force rather than a personal being.

Those are among the findings of a new study of American views about Christian theology from Nashville-based LifeWay Research.

“When the majority of Americans believe religious belief is more personal opinion than objective truth, then we expect to see contradictory beliefs and beliefs that change over time,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

The survey of 3,000 Americans was sponsored by Orlando-based Ligonier Ministries. The 2018 State of 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.

Survey questions focused on key doctrinal beliefs and included a number of areas where Americans often differ from historic and orthodox Christian views. Among the findings:

Character of God

A majority of Americans (70 percent) believe there is one true God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Eighteen percent disagree. Twelve percent are not sure. This has

remained consistent since researchers began asking the question in 2014.

Sixty-nine percent of Americans say God is perfect and cannot make a mistake. This is higher than both the 2016 (65 percent) and 2014 (63 percent) surveys.

Two-thirds believe the biblical accounts of the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. Twenty percent disagree. Fourteen percent are not sure.

Fifty-seven percent of Americans say Jesus Christ is the only person who never sinned. Twenty-nine percent disagree. Fifteen percent are not sure.

A similar number say Jesus is a *created* being. Fifty-seven percent agree with the statement “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” Twenty-eight percent disagree, and 15 percent are not sure. That’s a slight increase from 2016 when 52 percent agreed Jesus was created by God.

Almost 6 in 10 (59 percent) say the Holy Spirit is a force rather than a personal being. Twenty-five percent disagree. Sixteen percent are not sure.

A quarter of Americans (26 percent) say God is unconcerned with their day-to-day decisions. Sixty-one percent disagree. Thirteen percent are not sure.

The Bible

Researchers found Americans are split on their views of the Bible. More Americans believe the Bible is completely accurate, however, a growing number say the Bible is not literally true.

In 2018, half of Americans say the Bible is 100 percent accurate in all that it teaches. That’s up from 47 percent in 2016 and 43 percent in 2014.

Fewer than half (47 percent) of Americans agree the Bible contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but isn't literally true. Forty-three percent disagree. In 2016, 44 percent agreed the Bible isn't literally true, and 41 percent said the same in 2014.

Researchers also found 36 percent of Americans say modern science disproves the Bible, while 48 percent disagree.

"The last writing included in the Christian Bible was completed nearly 2,000 years ago," McConnell said. "Yet Americans' beliefs around this book are shifting more than most other theological beliefs."

Sin and Punishment

More than 6 in 10 Americans (62 percent) expect Jesus to return and judge all people. However, fewer expect people to be punished in a place called hell. Fifty-four percent of Americans agree hell is a real place where certain people will be punished forever. Thirty percent disagree.

According to the study, a majority of Americans (66 percent) admit everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature. Twenty-seven percent disagree, while 7 percent aren't sure.

Almost a quarter (23 percent) of Americans say even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation. Sixty-nine percent disagree, and 8 percent aren't sure. However, Americans are more likely to agree now than four years ago about the consequences of sin. In 2014, only 18 percent of Americans said even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation. Nineteen percent agreed in 2016.

Americans with evangelical beliefs are the most likely to agree (49 percent) the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.

Salvation

A majority of Americans believe Jesus is the only way to eternal salvation. Six in 10 (62 percent) agree Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of sin from their lives. Thirty-eight percent disagree.

Fifty-seven percent of Americans say only those who trust in Jesus alone as Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation. Forty-three percent disagree. Those who identify with an evangelical (88 percent) or black Protestant (83 percent) denomination are more likely to agree than mainline Protestants (65 percent) and Catholics (58 percent).

And slightly more than half (53 percent) believe righteousness comes only through faith in Jesus Christ not because of one's actions. A third disagree, while 14 percent aren't sure.

Morality and Moral Authority

The share of Americans who believe the Bible has authority to govern our actions grew to a slim majority in 2018. Fifty-three percent agree "the Bible has the authority to tell us what we must do." This is higher than both the 2016 and 2014 surveys with 50 percent and 49 percent agreeing, respectively.

Six in 10 (62 percent) Americans say the Bible is the highest authority for what they believe. Thirty-eight percent disagree. Americans from an evangelical (92 percent) or black Protestant (90 percent) denomination are more likely to agree than mainline Protestants (74 percent) and Catholics (67 percent).

Americans are fairly split on whether sex outside traditional marriage is a sin. Half (51 percent) say they believe sex outside traditional marriage is a sin including 33 percent who strongly agree. And 41 percent disagree including 27 percent who strongly disagree.

Slightly more than half (52 percent) of Americans say abortion is a sin. Thirty-eight percent disagree, while 10 percent are not sure.

Americans' views of homosexuality continue to shift away from historically orthodox Christian views. Forty-four percent agree the Bible's condemnation of homosexual behavior doesn't apply today. Forty-one percent disagree. And 15 percent are not sure. In 2016, 42 percent agreed, while 44 percent disagreed, and 14 percent weren't sure.

LifeWay Research asked Americans about gender identity. The study found 38 percent believe gender identity is a matter of choice, while 51 percent say it is not a choice. Eleven percent are not sure.

Worship

Almost 6 in 10 Americans see valid alternatives to worshiping in a church with other believers. And more than a third say worship services should be entertaining if churches want to be effective.

Fifty-eight percent of Americans agree that worshiping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church. Thirty percent disagree. Twelve percent are not sure.

Americans with evangelical beliefs are more likely to disagree (54 percent) that worshiping alone or with family is a valid alternative to corporate worship.

Thirty-seven percent of Americans say churches must provide entertaining worship services if they want to be effective. Half (51 percent) disagree. Americans ages 18-34 are the most likely to agree (46 percent). Americans with evangelical beliefs are more likely to disagree than those without evangelical beliefs (61 percent vs. 49 percent).

“Church attendance has long been a measure of religious activity and devotion,” McConnell said. “Today, less than half of religious service attendees see regularly gathering for worship with other believers at church as essential.” {eo}

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