

THE  
**AMERICAN BELIEFS**  
STUDY  
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES & PRACTICES



September 2022

# Meeting Community Needs

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# Meeting Community Needs

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The first paper in this series dipped into the findings of the American Beliefs Study that help us understand recent trends in faith in our communities. This paper focuses on the needs that people in American communities say they feel most acutely now.

The period of time between 2017 and 2021 has been a wrenching time in the country on so many levels. The results of this study in the area of community needs, and the sentiment among American Christians for specific needs, has been widely anticipated.

How has American opinion moved on pivotal issues in our society

today? Where do communities stand on issues we have wrestled with for decades and those that have emerged more recently?

What do Americans believe about God, and Jesus?

And more importantly, how can local churches large and small meet the social needs in their communities in a loving way, in context with their own beliefs and sensibilities?

The authors seek to explore these concepts in this section and address the varied ways in which the American Church might respond.

## Social and Moral Issues

Americans have shifted their stance on 25 social and moral issues over the past few years – in some ways quite significantly. [See Figure 2.1]

A rising share of Americans feel the United States has a moral

responsibility to be a force for good in the world (69% agree, up by 4% since 2017). Our fellow citizens also see America’s standing on the world stage waning (67% agree, up from 65%).

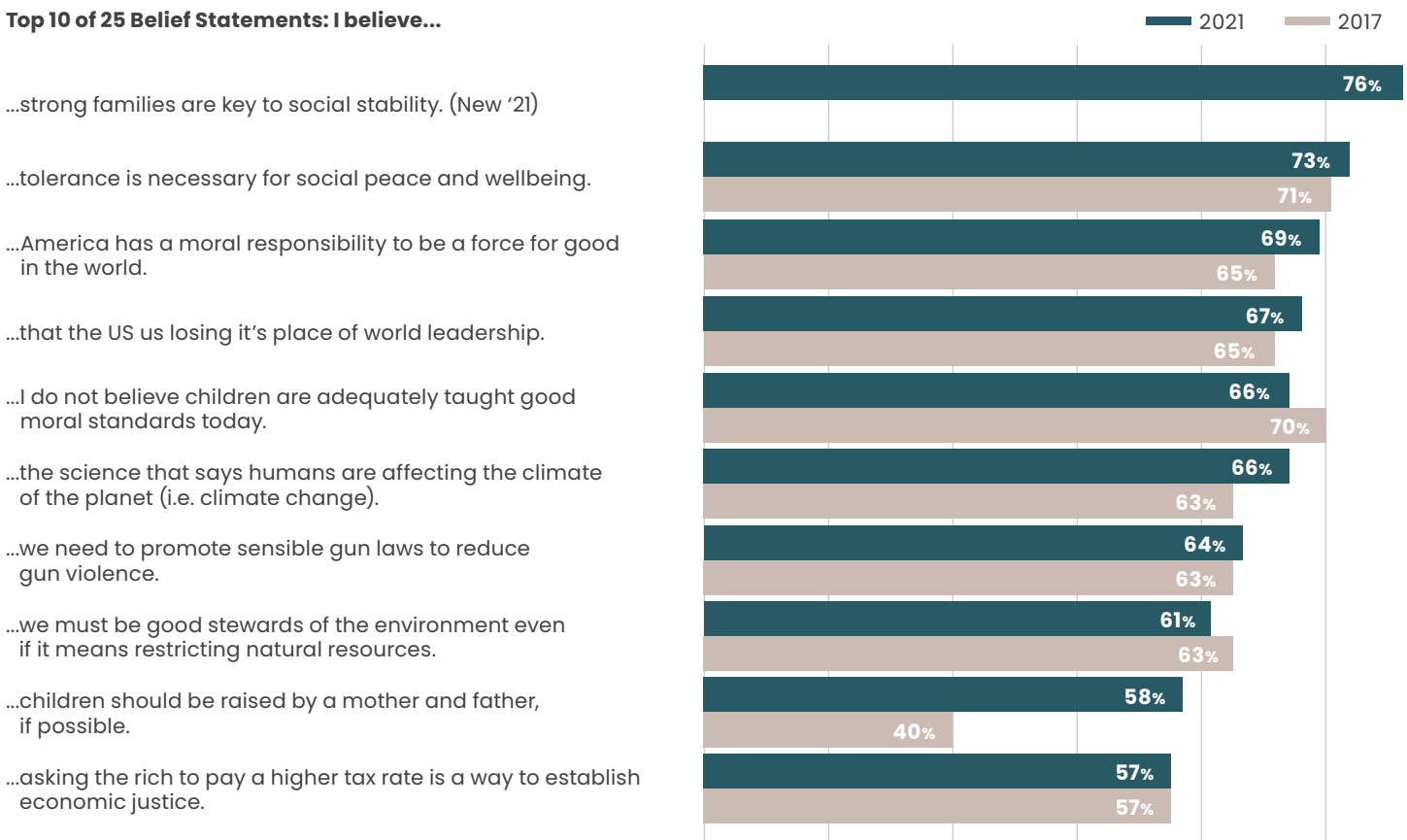
Yet a consistent theme in these results is confusion over what is moral, that is, what qualities U.S. morality should project. As time passes, American opinions on what constitutes morality differ from the tenets taught by faiths based in the Bible.

— FIGURE 2.1

### AMERICANS AGREE MOST ON THE US POSITION IN WORLD AFFAIRS

US world influence shapes opinions on three of the top four social and moral issues rated

#### Top 10 of 25 Belief Statements: I believe...



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

## Social and Moral Issues

### Over time, American moral opinions have diverged from historical biblical teaching.

For instance, a supermajority 66% of Americans believe that U.S. children do not receive good moral instruction (down from 70% in 2017). Yet in a new 2021 question, 53% express no concern over the state of U.S.

education, suggesting most people believe the state should not be responsible for moral training.

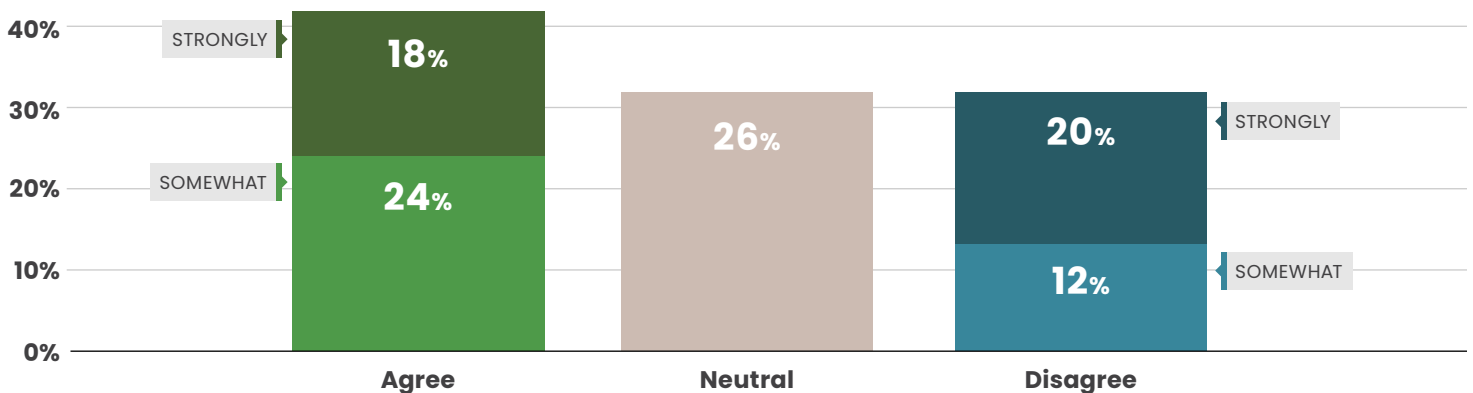
At the same time, the proportion who believe religion should play a primary role in shaping American social morality has declined by one percent since 2017 to 42%, a significant shift given our 15,000 respondents. [See Figure 2.2]

This begs the question: If religion is not responsible for shaping the morality of American society, and the state does not bear this responsibility, from where does that morality come?

— FIGURE 2.2

### AMERICAN OPINIONS SLIGHTLY FAVOR RELIGION AS THE BASIS FOR MORALITY

Americans rate the statement, “I believe religion must play a primary role in shaping social morality”



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
 Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

## Social and Moral Issues

Paradoxically, the strongest movement in these results affirms the centrality of the family in American society. The highest proportion agree that strong families are key to social stability (76% agree). This also appeared in terms of rising agreement that a mother and father should raise children together (up 18% since 2017,

likely due to new wording in 2021) and that traditional marriage is not obsolete (up 2% to 30% since 2017). [See Figure 2.3]

Despite these affirmations of family and marriage, U.S. opinion has clearly changed on what marriage means. Even though the share of Americans who say traditional

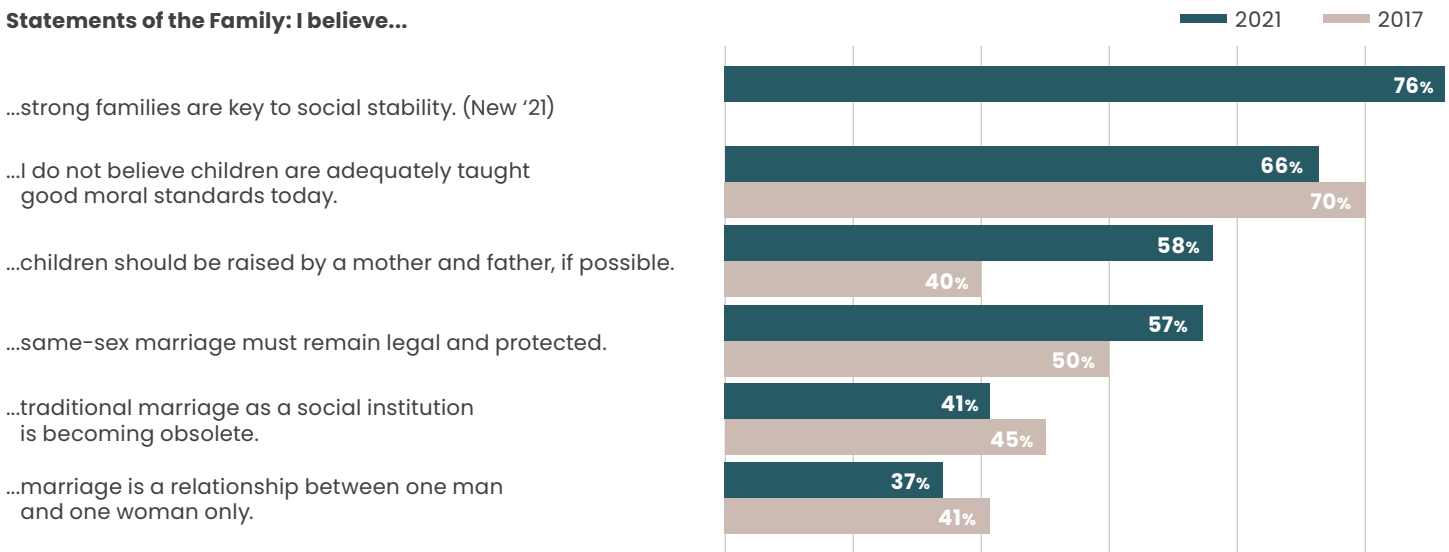
marriage is not obsolete has risen, a much higher share now say legal same-sex marriage must remain protected (up 7% to 57%), and less certain about marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman only (down 4% to 37%).

— FIGURE 2.3

### OPINIONS TEND TOWARD STRONG SUPPORT OF 'THE FAMILY'

Statements on the centrality of the family become more resonant to Americans

#### Statements of the Family: I believe...



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

## Social and Moral Issues

The latest American Beliefs Study show that US opinions have also strongly shifted toward statements supporting tolerance, diversity and justice. The country has moved from agreeing to disagreeing that race and racial issues receive too much attention in the country (41% agree now, down from 50%). This is unsurprising given the timing of the

study – in late 2020 after many US cities saw social upheaval.

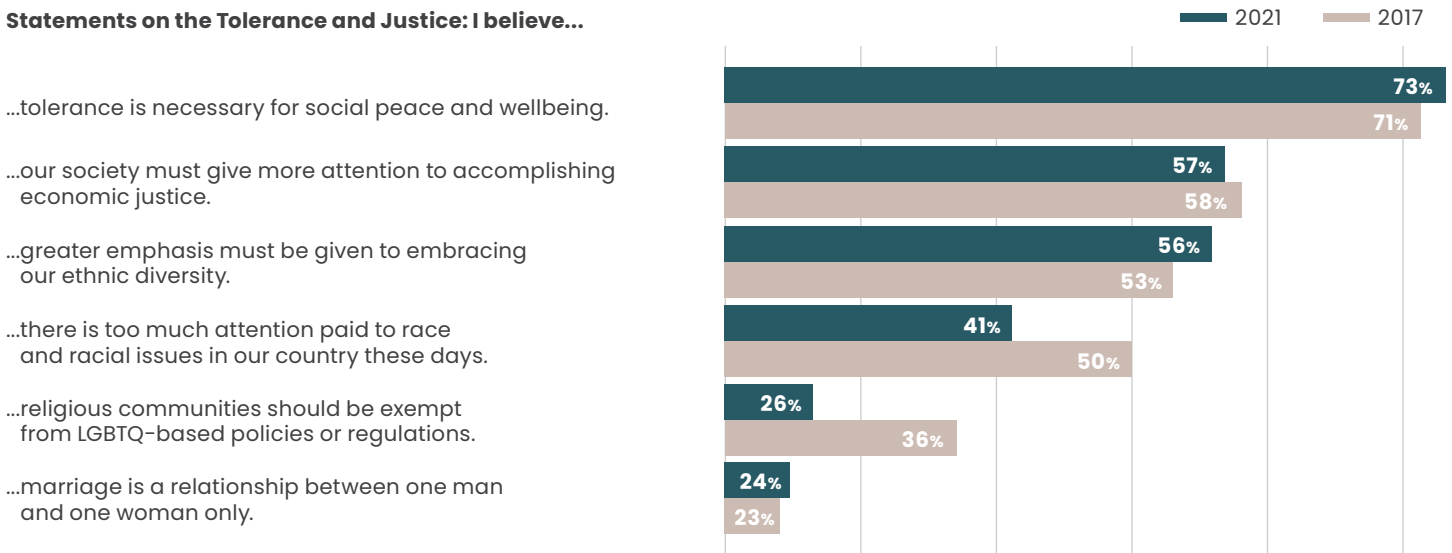
As before, only a quarter of Americans agree that race relations in the US are generally good (24%). We agree more now that tolerance is needed for social peace and that embracing America’s ethnic diversity needs more emphasis

(+3% since 2017). Most of us agree that society should work harder on achieving economic justice (57%). A stable 57% majority agrees with asking the rich to pay higher taxes toward establishing economic justice. [See Figure 2.4]

— FIGURE 2.4  
**AMERICAN SENTIMENT RISES TOWARD TOLERANCE AND JUSTICE**

Half of Americans now believe racial issues need more attention

### Statements on the Tolerance and Justice: I believe...



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
 Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

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## Social and Moral Issues

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On the subject of tolerance, U.S. opinions strongly shifted away from exempting religious communities from LGBTQ-based regulations (36% favored exemptions in 2017, vs. 26% now). Conversely, the share supporting government policies telling churches how to act on LGBTQ issues rose by five points (from 36% in 2017 to 41% in 2021). There are certainly complex issues of the separation of church and state underlying this question, which the instant answers provided by modern survey respondents may well fail to fully contemplate.

**Shifting public sentiment against exempting faith communities from regulations over LGBTQ rights suggests a tipping point has passed.**

A stable 26% of Americans say abortion should become illegal, in line with other recent polling on the issue.

Respondents agree that America should try to stop illegal immigration (56%, up 2% from 2017), at the same time agreeing even more that residents who live and work in America illegally should receive some form of amnesty (56%, up 4% from 2017).

These results suggest that America is at a crossroads, with its citizens conflicted over whether historical biblical morality (e.g., what marriage is, homosexuality, not regulating churches), is the best path forward.

This also suggests the American church faces a crossroads – a tipping point over whether to adhere to traditional stances on these issues or adapt to match changing cultural beliefs. Regardless of stance, it is imperative for churches to understand the ongoing shifts and determine how they can engage with their communities in the midst of them.



## Social and Moral Issues

### Changing Sentiment on Social Issues

The listing below shows all 25 social belief statements and their 2021 response. These are listed in order of the change that appears in public sentiment, from highest to lowest agreement among the 15,000 study respondents. When presented to respondents, the items below were randomized.

- I believe strong families are key to social stability (new, 76%)
- I believe children should be raised by a mother and father, if possible. (up 18%)
- I believe same-sex marriage must remain legal and protected. (up 7%)
- I believe some form of amnesty program for illegal immigrants who have worked and lived in the US (up 4%)
- I believe America has a moral responsibility to be a force for good in the world. (up 4%)
- I believe greater emphasis must be given to embracing our ethnic diversity. (up 3%)
- I believe the science that says humans are affecting the climate of the planet (i.e., climate change). (up 3%)
- I believe tolerance is necessary for social peace and wellbeing. (up 2%)
- I believe that the US is losing its place of world leadership. (up 2%)
- I believe the US should pursue avenues to stop illegal immigration. (up 2%)
- I believe we need to promote sensible gun laws to reduce gun violence. (up 1%)
- I believe race relations in the United States are generally good. (up 1%)
- I believe asking the rich to pay a higher tax rate is a way to establish economic justice. (No change)
- I have great hope for the future of my own community (i.e., neighborhood, village, town). (No change)
- I believe abortion should become illegal. (No change)
- I believe our society must give more attention to accomplishing economic justice. (down 1%)
- I believe religion must play a primary role in shaping social morality. (down 1%)
- I do not believe the government should be deeply involved in solving poverty. (down 1%)
- I believe globalization is a threat to our nation’s economic future. (down 2%)
- I believe we must be good stewards of the environment even if it means restricting natural resource (down 2%)
- I believe marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman only. (down 4%)
- I do not believe children are adequately taught good moral standards today. (down 4%)
- I believe traditional marriage as a social institution is becoming obsolete. (down 4%)
- I believe there is too much attention paid to race and racial issues in our country these days. (down 9%)
- I believe religious communities should be exempt from LGBTQ-based policies or regulations. (down 10%)

## The Significance of Faith

The proportion of Americans who say faith has been of considerable or utmost significance in their lives has stayed the same since 2017 at 38%. However, this share of Americans represents a two percent increase over the 36% who felt the same in 2011.

The proportion of Americans who say faith is of minor significance or less in their life has actually declined in the past few years, from 42% in 2017 to 41% in 2021. The proportion saying that faith is highly significant stayed the same. The share who said faith is of moderate significance increased slightly (20% in 2017 to 21% now).

Though slight, the shift in the significance of faith – from little significance to moderate significance – could be partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People with already strong faith would not have their faith shaken by such an event. People with moderate faith would likely stay at that level. Only people who felt no spiritual ties at all might be moved to a more moderate faith.

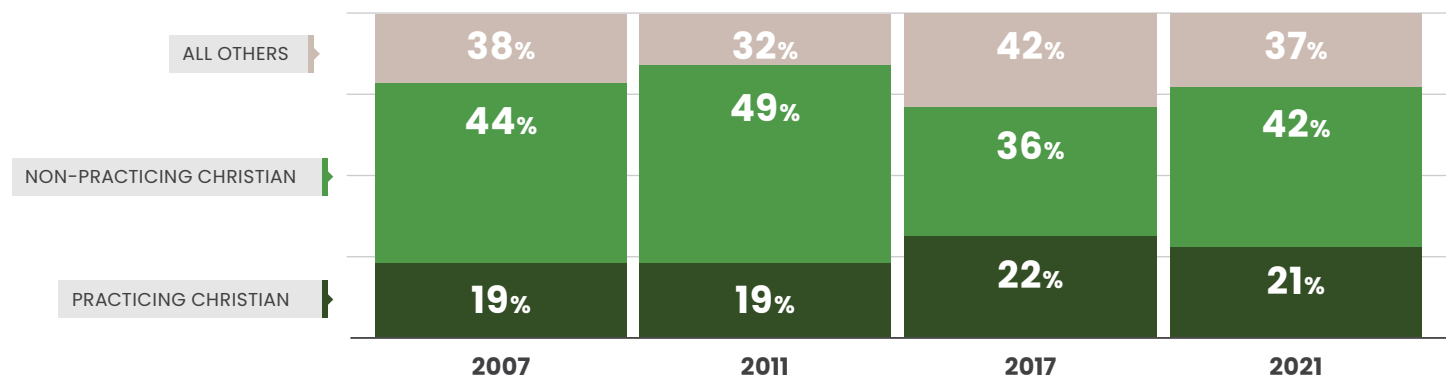
What is compelling is that these results don't suggest a swell of Christian conversion in the face of the threat to life and health from the COVID-19 pandemic. The answers from the American Beliefs Study allowed the researchers to define

a 'practicing Christian' as one who identifies as Christian, attends a fellowship at least monthly and says faith has considerable or utmost impact on their lives. Respondents answered these questions for now and 10 years ago in the 2021 and 2017 studies, providing four points of reference. By this metric, the share of practicing Christians has grown by two percent, from 19% to 21% since 2007. [See Figure 2.5]

— FIGURE 2.5

### THE SHARE OF PRACTICING CHRISTIANS IN AMERICAN SINCE 2007

About one in five Americans might be considered practicing Christians



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

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## The Significance of Faith

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The study also shows that the share of people who prefer Christian traditions over others has fallen by four percent in the same ten years. Sadly, while facing a worldwide pandemic when many people could benefit from spiritual counsel, many US states and health authorities responded by limited access to gathering in faith communities.

In such an environment, it is vital to joyfully welcome newcomers to the spiritual comfort that fellowship in a faith community provides. This does not necessarily mean sitting back and waiting for seekers to come to the Church.

Before the pandemic, only a minority of faith communities were streaming their services online – now it is rare to find churches that are not. The

opportunity at this point in time is not to reset back to a pre-pandemic model of an exclusive, ‘come to us’ format. To welcome people in the modern era, it is increasingly evident that the Church must go to where the people are. The American Beliefs Study clearly shows that people are migrating. As Americans, we are increasingly concerned about more aspects of life. We are often conflicted about what constitutes a moral path. America is now in a more spiritually needy place.

**Americans are increasingly concerned about more aspects of life, conflicted about morality, and more spiritually needy.**

For these reasons, every church that can must consider using the tools they honed during the pandemic to welcome and reach further and deeper into their communities. Whether digitally (social media, websites, streaming), on campus, or through small groups, events, in homes or micro-churches – the duty to engage communities begins within churches. There is ample reason to suggest that the potential way forward is a blended ecology of engagement and faith expression, utilizing the most effective tools at hand alongside the valued expressions of more traditional gatherings. We are clearly in a world where the future is NOT one size or expression of faith will fit everyone.

## Beliefs About God

How does faith manifest itself among American Christian beliefs? Despite the fact that fewer Americans in 2021 call themselves Christian vs. 2011, three percent more of us now agree that we have a ‘relationship with one living God’ (54% now vs. 51% in 2017, although this rise may have been due to adjusted question wording in 2021).

Most Americans also agree that ‘God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship’ (up by 6% to 56% since 2017) and that ‘God created a literal heaven and hell’ (41%, not asked in 2017) – both of which are concepts central to Christianity. [See Figure 2.6]

Along similar lines, fewer Americans now agree with non-Christian tenets such as ‘The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me’ (down nine percent since 2017 to 31% now), ‘God is the full realization of human potential’ (down three percent since 2017 to 33%), and ‘God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve’ (falling four percent in 2017 to 30% now).

Given this shift away from non-Christian tenets, it is odd to see an increase in agreement with the pantheistic ‘There are many gods.’ This rose from nine percent to 15 percent in the past few years.

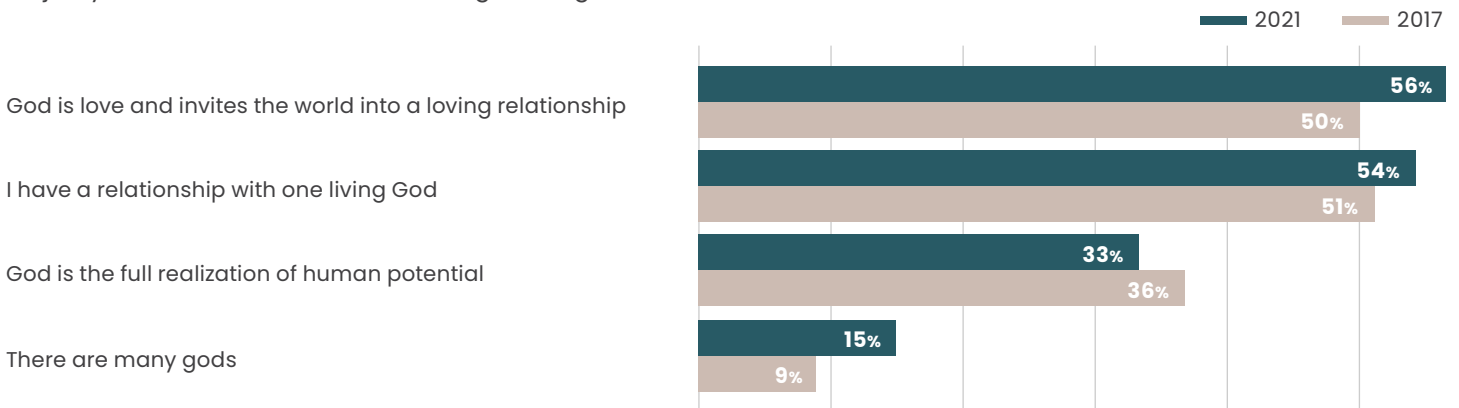
The proportion of people who were unsure about the existence of a god and who deny the existence of a god – traits respectively associated with agnosticism and atheism – remained unchanged.

These results support the conclusion that American society is at something of a spiritual crossroads, with a majority believing in a single, living God and a vocal minority disputing this central, biblical tenet in any number of ways.

— FIGURE 2.6

### BELIEF AMONG AMERICANS GROWS FOR BOTH ONE GOD AND MANY GODS

Majority still holds to the idea of a loving, inviting God



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

## Beliefs About Jesus

While belief in and feelings of connection with a loving God have grown since 2017, beliefs about Jesus have grown more diverse in that span. This trend points toward syncretism, a set of religious beliefs untethered to any specific creed. [See Figure 2.7]

Was Jesus both divine and human? Most Americans said “yes;” only 15% would say “no.” Did he rise from the

dead? Half of the country would say, “yes;” only 20% would disagree.

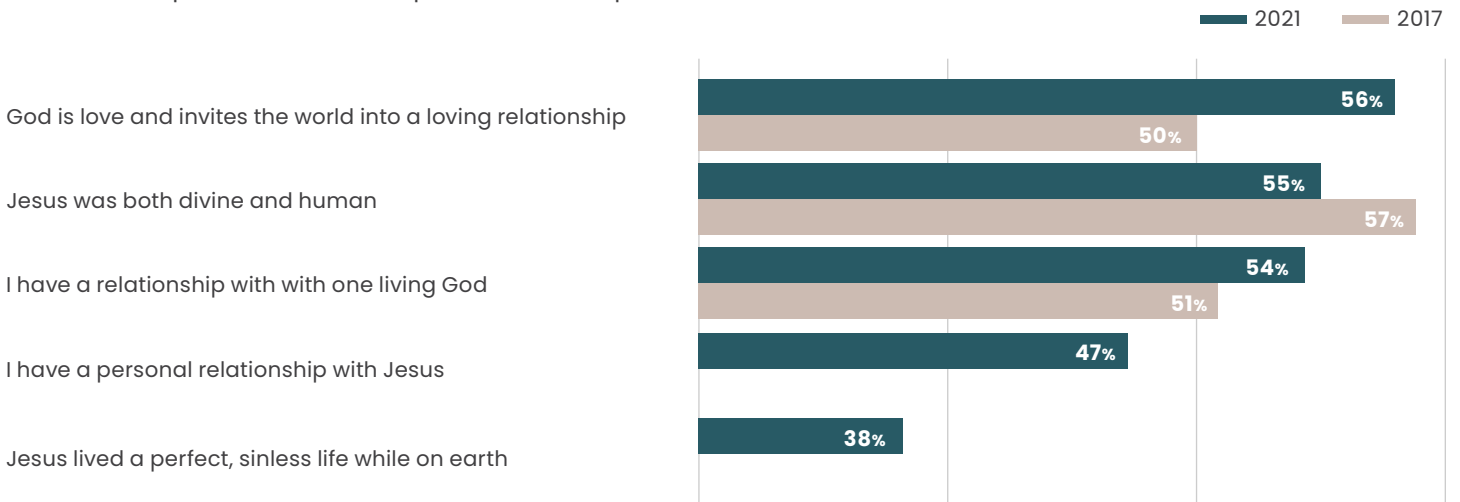
However, it is notable that while 54% of Americans say they have a relationship with one living God, 47% say they have a personal relationship with Jesus. This suggests that these two statements are not equal to them despite the fact that 55% agree that Jesus was both human and divine. And even

though a majority believes in Jesus’ divinity, just 38% agree that Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life on earth. The disparity here suggests that millions of Americans feel they have a personal relationship with a divine Jesus who was a flawed sinner.

— FIGURE 2.7

### A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS BELIEVES JESUS WAS DIVINE

Fewer have a personal relationship or believe Him perfect



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
 Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

## Beliefs About Jesus

Figure 2.8 demonstrates how American beliefs about Jesus are changing. For every statement in our list that appeared in both the 2017 and 2021 surveys, the percentage of those who agree has fallen.

Therein lies a conundrum. At the same time that those who affirm traditional biblical beliefs about God has risen, the share of Americans who hold to traditional Christian beliefs about Jesus is in decline.

An earlier report in this series reported that 64.2% of Americans name Christianity as their religion. There is a significant gap between the number of people who say they are Christians and the number who agree with historic Christian teaching about Jesus. When extrapolated against the American population, this disparity works out to an astonishing 47.1 million doubting believers.

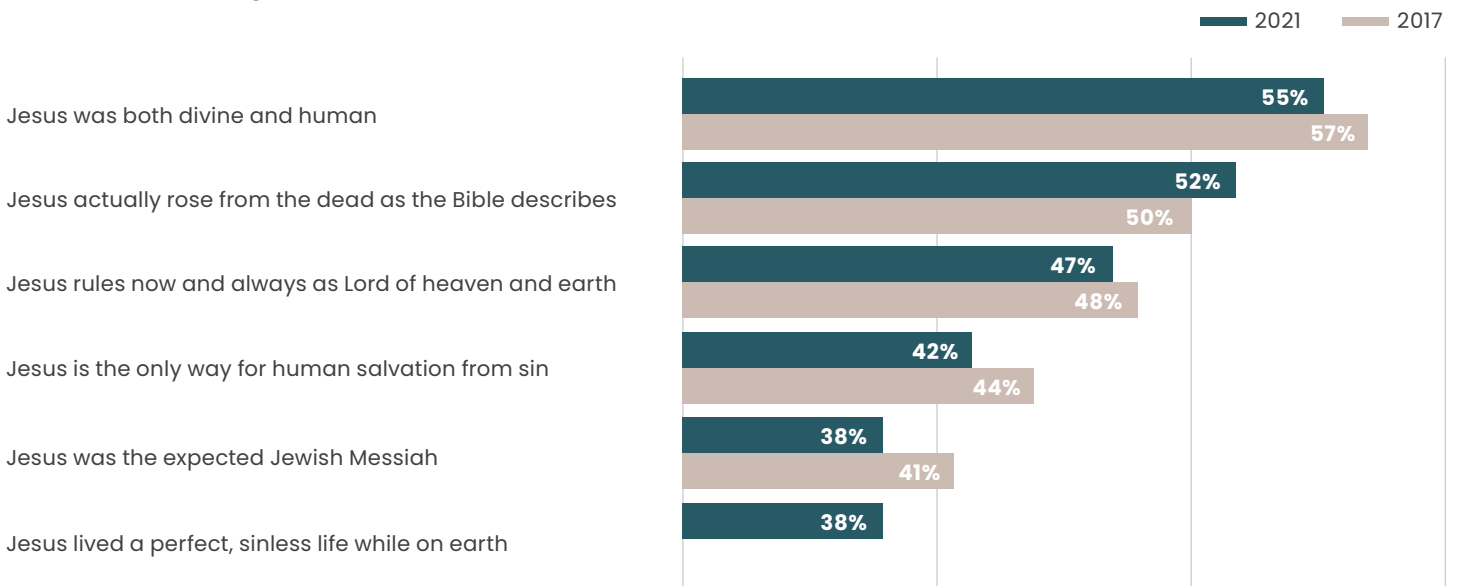
**47 million American Christians don't fully agree that Jesus rose from the dead.**

To be sure, the American religious landscape is diverse. It includes churches that do not teach the physical, bodily resurrection of Christ.

— FIGURE 2.8

### FEWER AMERICANS AGREE WITH CHRISTIAN TEACHING ABOUT JESUS

Millions fewer now agree that Jesus is a Savior vs. 2017



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

## Beliefs About Jesus

Still, membership in these types of churches is not a strong percentage of the national Christian population, and their numbers are in decline. These churches are not large enough to account for the 47.1 million people we are considering here, not the mention the millions more who do not affirm the other statements in the list. This means there are millions of Americans from orthodox or relatively-traditional church background who do not believe, or maybe do not understand, basic Christian doctrine about Jesus Christ.

The largest shift in statements about Jesus over the past few years comes from fewer agreeing with statements on church affiliation. Americans are more likely now to distance themselves from corporate worship by saying that ‘believing in Jesus does not require participating in a church’ (63% now vs. 50% in 2017) and that ‘people in the church don’t behave as Jesus would have’, (61% vs. 32% in 2017). [See Figure 2.9]

This result belies a fast-growing sentiment among all Americans that church members are not truly living up to their faith. Sadly, the perception that Christians are judgmental is even higher among

people attending a faith community than it is among non-attenders. Perhaps by not associating themselves with other believers, unchurched Christian believers avoid such an aspirational struggle.

### A fast-growing majority of Americans think it’s OK to believe in Jesus but not go to church.

The American Beliefs Study clearly shows that the things Americans believe about Jesus are slowly separating from historic Christian tenets. Also, the traditional mindset that linked faith in Jesus with church

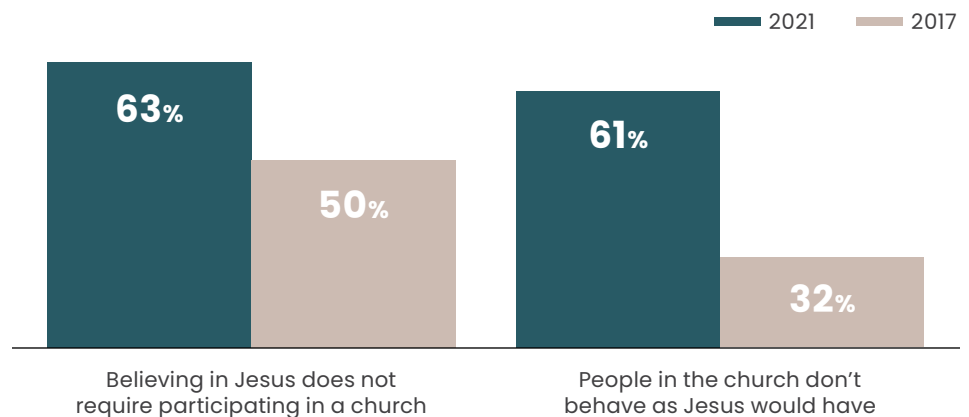
attendance has eroded recently. This change is rapid. And finally, the share of Americans in 2021 who believe people in the church don’t behave as Jesus would have has, incredibly, nearly doubled to 61% in just four short years.

As for the ballooning perception of Christians not acting like Jesus would have, the Study also shows the main reason people give for not getting involved with a church is a belief that church members act in ways counter to the character of Christ – whatever they perceive that character to be.

— FIGURE 2.9

### GROWING MAJORITY OF AMERICANS ISOLATES FROM CHURCH

Six in ten say churchgoing is irrelevant and Christians are hypocritical



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

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## Beliefs About Jesus

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The responsibility for modeling the character of Christ invariably falls upon Christians. Writings from the early Christian church show how an indelible impact grows between mentors who live and act out an example of Christ and those just beginning on their faith journey. Have Christians acted out their faith toward their non-believing friends and neighbors? Have mature Christians exemplified Christ and mentored the many non-Christians in their lives? Personal engagement is just one path toward correcting perceptions of hypocrisy.

Such engagement could also help to re-align beliefs about Jesus with history and counter the view

that faith in Jesus can exist without fellowship. The question becomes, do fewer agree with biblical teachings about Jesus because they're hearing about them and rejecting the teaching? Or do fewer agree with these Christian tenets because they're not hearing them as often. Certainly, being coached on truths about Jesus by a more mature Christian was a crucial aspect of early church expansion. Likewise, hearing Christian tenets affirmed in fellowship settings, through teaching and discussion, can help to grow belief and inspire greater agreement on who Jesus was and what it means to have faith in Him.



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## Summary Highlights

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- American attitudes are broadly conflicted over what morality means and what moral guidance should set the standard for American society.
- A stronger majority of Americans now say they have a 'relationship with one living God.
- A growing share of Americans say faith is significant in their lives.
- Most Americans agree with tenets central to Christian belief, and fewer now hold with non-Christian beliefs.
- Beliefs about Jesus are now more diverse. People are now less likely to acknowledge Jesus' deity.
- American churchgoers are more often seen as hypocritical than not.

- A fast-growing share of Americans feel that believing in Jesus does not require participating in a church fellowship.

Church leaders need to be aware of these trends and prepare to address them clearly, with grace and truth.

These results also point toward neighborhoods and communities that are hurting, both physically and spiritually. Churches must be their own best advocates. Church leaders have an opportunity to bless their members and build authentic relationships with their neighbors with Christlike humility, acceptance, fellowship and healing.

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# A Brief Methodology

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## The Research

This research study of American religious preferences, practices, beliefs and life concerns began in 1991. It has been fielded six times in total, with 2017 and 2021 being the latest editions. ACST is currently responsible for funding this research.

The goal of this study is to equip American Christian churches with hyper-local resources for understanding and reaching their communities. At its heart is a focus on the American religious landscape, especially across generational groups.

This online study among 14,942 American adults was conducted by Campbell Rinker for ACST from October 2020 through February 2021. Results were balanced by US region, 19 'Mosaic' demographic clusters from Experian, and weighted by age to align with known population characteristics. The study carries a margin of error of  $\pm 0.8\%$  at the 99% confidence level. A comparative 2017 study involved the same size audience.

Note: Media outlets quoting from this paper are directed to use the summary paragraph above to describe the study in keeping with AP style.

## The Questions

Several denominational partners helped design the study questionnaire and the fielding methodology. The authors are deeply indebted to them for their commitment to this project.

Developing the questionnaire is a key step in any research effort. 'Longitudinal' studies such as this require even more care for several reasons – for instance, respondents, language and social issues change over time. Changes like this force adaptations in the questions as well.

Through the years, the questionnaire has retained its focus on these core topics:

- Beliefs About God
- Beliefs About Jesus
- Beliefs About Social and Moral Issues
- Faith Involvement or Non-Involvement
- Life Concerns
- Program and Ministry Preferences
- Religious Affiliations
- Religious Preferences

## The Respondents

The study obtained nearly 15,000 completed surveys from a panel of paid respondents. This panel was managed by Dynata, with fielding and analysis conducted by the research firm Campbell Rinker. ACST's partners in this effort followed a rigorous stratified sampling plan carried over from earlier studies.

This plan ensured that the respondent sample accurately represented a distribution across 76 unique groups – 19 geodemographic Mosaic clusters as defined by Experian within each of the four United States Census Bureau regions.

Of course, the nature of surveying involves some level of error. The researchers took care to minimize any bias that might occur with the sampling plan and in framing the questions themselves, including weighting the final data by age to ensure it reflects known proportions in the US population. This weighting delivers a final data set of 14,942 respondents.

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THE  
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STUDY  
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES & PRACTICES

### **About The American Beliefs Study™**

The American Beliefs Study: Religious Preferences & Practices is a national research initiative conducted by ACS Technologies of nearly 15,000 people across The United States of various beliefs and demographics with the goal of being the definitive single source for the best understanding of the religious preferences and practices of Americans.

*AmericanBeliefs.com*

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## **MISSIONINSITE**

### **About MissionInsite**

The American Beliefs Study is best utilized within MissionInsite as a comprehensive demographic and analysis tool that helps churches and organizations understand what is most important to their congregation and community. By combining multiple top data sources it helps leaders learn what people want in a church, their ministry preferences, income levels, church impressions and what will make them keep coming back. It helps discover what people really want in their church to prioritize what will help them the most. In turn, aiding churches in attracting new people locating prime areas of outreach knowing the activities most people are interested in and will respond to. It also helps ministry leaders know the accurate demographic makeup of a church for better church planning of events, giving, new locations and new ministries. Knowing your neighbor to key to loving your neighbor and MissionInsite helps turns these insights into ministry impact.

*MissionInsite.com*

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## **ACS Technologies®**

### **About ACS Technologies®**

Founded in 1978, ACS Technologies is a leading, ministry development company most known for its expertise in being a comprehensive provider of church ministry software and service solutions to nearly 50,000 churches, schools, and organizational offices. With the mission to enable everyone in the Church with a personalized ministry environment to make God-honoring decisions in actionable ways, ACS Technologies desires to build the Kingdom by being a trusted ministry partner in the daily life of every church. ACS Technologies stands apart by providing a whole church approach, meeting the needs of the pastor, staff, and congregant, with ministry development tools unique in value to each role and each ministry goal serving each type of church/parish, denominational office, and diocese. ACS Technologies is a privately held independent Christian family-led company based out of Florence, SC with remote team members and offices across the U.S.

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