

THE
AMERICAN BELIEFS
STUDY
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES & PRACTICES



April 2023

Beliefs about God and Jesus in American Communities

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What Do Americans Believe about God and Jesus?

Most Americans would say they believe in God. But what do they mean when they say that? What kind of God (or god, or gods) do they believe in?

Likewise, most Americans have a positive view of Jesus, but how close to historic Christian teaching are their beliefs about him?

Report 2 in this series on the American Beliefs Study from ACST, “Meeting Community Needs,” presented general findings on what Americans believe about God and Jesus. This Report takes a closer look at how these beliefs vary among different population sectors.

The Study asked participants to rate their level of agreement with 11 statements about God, and another 11 statements about Jesus. Responses to the ‘God’ statements revealed not only who believed in God and who did not, but also their concept of God. These 15,000 participants revealed

the extent to which beliefs that are foreign to a Christian perspective, or even to a general Western-cultural perspective, have seeped into American understanding.

The statements about Jesus not only covered basic theological concepts from the Bible, but also explored how participants personally saw themselves in relation to Jesus.

Other questions in the Study allowed for a deep dive into how beliefs about God and Jesus differ across the American landscape. For instance...

- What do older Americans believe compared to younger Americans?
- Do rural churches and urban churches need to present the Gospel differently because of where their residents live?
- Just how different are beliefs among Practicing Christians compared to Nominal Christians?

These findings are valuable for any Christian who wants to speak, teach, preach, or witness in America today about the Creator God and his Son, Jesus Christ. It’s easy to say “God” and presume the listener interprets the word as the speaker does. Even self-identified Christians express a range of beliefs about who Jesus is. Effective communication requires a clear understanding of beliefs among listeners.

Beliefs by Generations

Much social and religious research in America has found it useful to study differences among generational cohorts. All Americans are deeply affected by the historical and social contexts that we grew up in, and that we have lived our lives in. [See Figure 6.1]

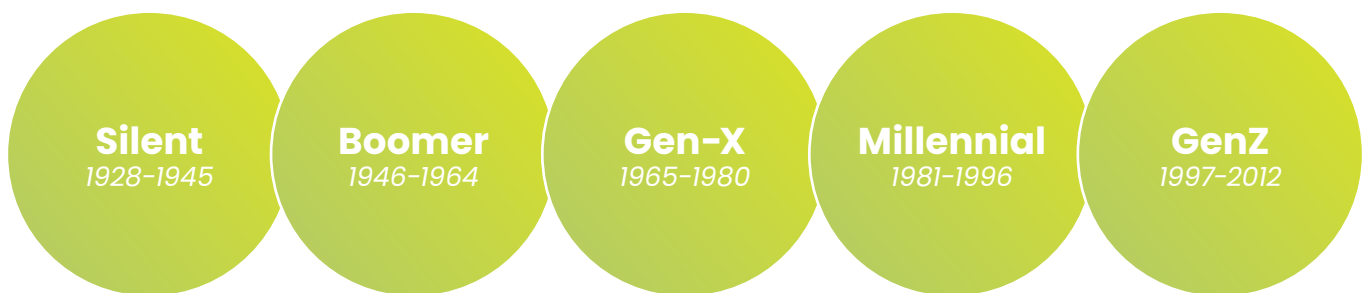
Members of the Silent generation were born into a world very different from that of members of the Millennial generation. This is true of all five age cohorts defined below. The widely-accepted generational framework in Figure 6.1 is adopted by the American Beliefs Study after the example set by Pew Research Center. Note that when this Study was

conducted, there were so few GenZ participants that they were added into the Millennial group.

From one generation to another, perspectives change in response to historical events and social trends. Furthermore, the pace of change has accelerated in recent decades. All these factors are reflected in what members of these cohorts believe about God and Jesus.

— FIGURE 6.1

GENERATIONAL COHORTS



Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research>

Beliefs by Generations

Beliefs about God

Some of the 11 statements about God presented in the Study were clearly aligned with Christian faith, some were clearly opposed to Christian teaching, and others could be interpreted more freely.

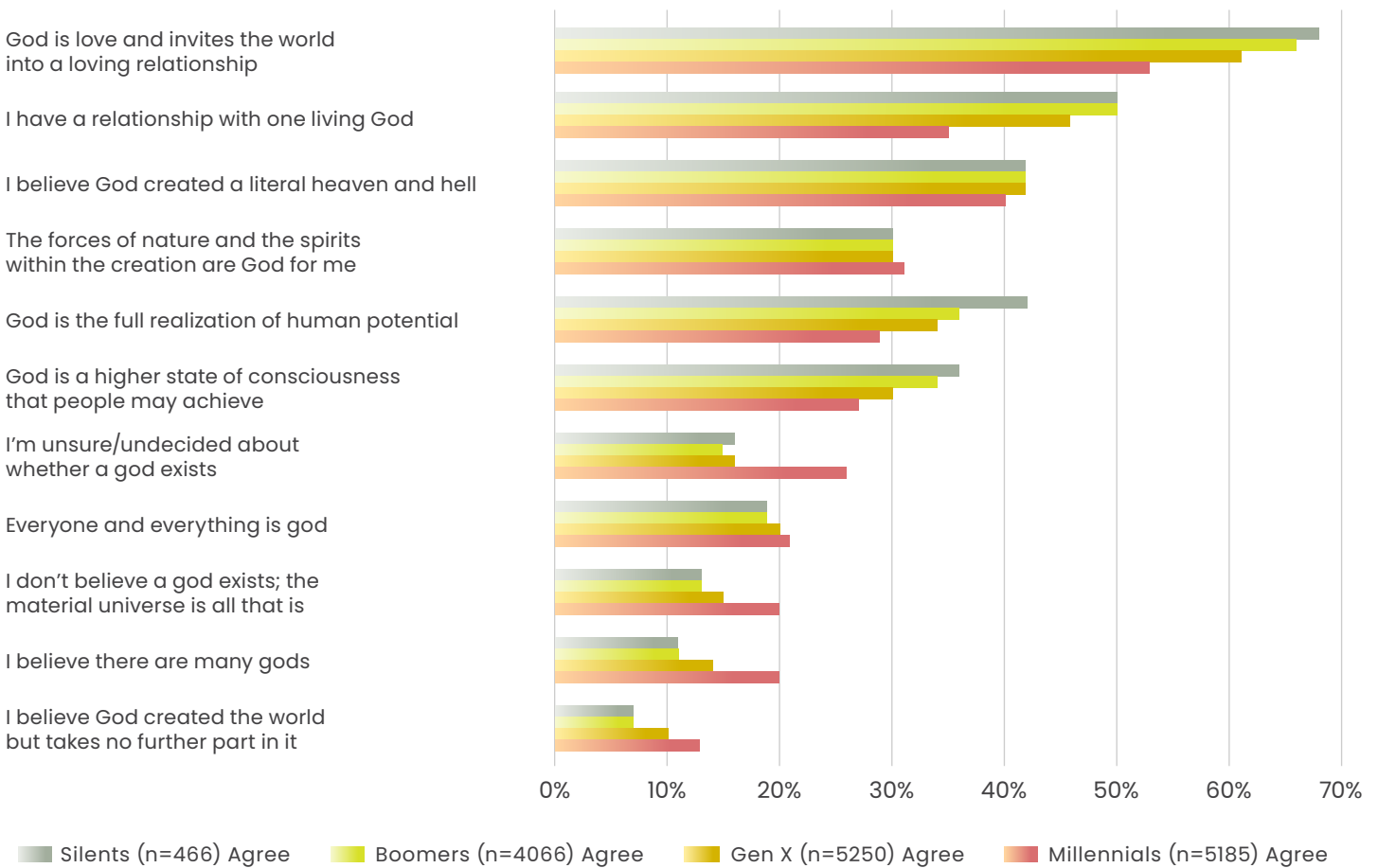
The Silent generation has the highest percentage of self-identified Christians, the Millennial generation the lowest, and the others between, in order. With older generations being raised in the era of Ozzie and Harriet, we might expect to see them agree more with Christian beliefs, and the

younger generations agree less. In fact, the findings did not always sort out as expected. [See Figure 6.2]

Above all, Americans like to think of God as a God of love. The statement, “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship” received

— FIGURE 6.2

BELIEFS ABOUT GOD RANGE WIDELY AMONG AMERICANS OF ALL GENERATIONS



Beliefs by Generations

the highest agreement from all four generations. Responses to this statement sorted out as one might expect, with the highest agreement among Silents and the lowest (while still a majority) from the Millennials.

In light of their other views, it was surprising to see responses to this distinctive Christian teaching, “...God created a literal heaven and hell,” be so close from one generation to another. The three older cohorts all showed a 42% level of agreement, and the Millennials were not far off, at 40%. Given the era in which they grew up, it is somewhat surprising that older cohorts showed relatively low agreement with Christian teaching, and that younger cohorts showed such a high agreement.

Most Americans, of all generations, believe there is a God (or god or gods) of some kind out there. Millennials scored highest for atheism, with one in five agreeing with the statement, “I don’t believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is.” They also scored highest for uncertainty about God’s existence, with 26% affirming, “I’m unsure/undecided about whether a god exists.” In comparison, non-Millennials agreed much less with these two statements, at least

six percentage points less than Millennials on atheism and at least ten percentage points on the statement of uncertainty. At the very least, this rapid decline in theism from one generation to the next demands that Christian leaders redouble their efforts to reassure young seekers that God truly does exist.

While most Americans believe in God, a significantly higher percentage of Millennials do not. This leads to other questions. What do God-believing Millennials believe God to be? Is he (or it, or they) anything like the God of the Bible? Also, what do other generations believe in if not the God described in the Bible?

The Study found a relatively high level of agreement, among all generations, with statements that clearly depart from the Biblical view of God.

Perhaps the most surprising of these results came from two statements that each reflect a relationship between God and humanity that is inconsistent with the teaching of the Bible. Between 29% and 42% agreed with, “God is the full realization of human potential.” Between 27% and 36% agreed with, “God is a higher

state of consciousness that people may achieve.” The surprise is not that such relatively-high percentages hold to these beliefs, but that the highest level of agreement came from the Silent generation, and the lowest from the Millennial generation, on both items. The other generational cohorts ranged between these two extremes. Alongside the evidence presented above, these facts clearly signal that the marginalization of Christianity in American culture has clearly advanced and shows impact across generations – even the Silent generation.

What if the older generational cohorts interpreted these statements in a way more consistent with traditional Christian faith? Maybe they took the statement, “God is the full realization of human potential,” to mean something like, “God helps humans realize their full potential.” On the other hand, the statements in the Study are clear. It’s just as likely that even members of these older generations, to some extent, hold to an idea of God as some kind of positive force within the human experience, rather than as an outside being that would exist in glory even if humanity never existed.

Beliefs by Generations

Christians believe the God of the Bible invites people to join his family and relate to him as his children. Christians might be encouraged, then, to see relatively high percentages state, “I have a relationship with one living God.” While Gen-Xers agree at 56%, agreement among Silents and Boomers was 60% while Millennials agreed at 45%, a rate lower by 15 percentage points. Any encouragement here, though, is tempered by seeing how many Americans’ view of God departs from the Christian understanding of God. Many who say they have a relationship with God likely see the God (or god or gods) they relate to as someone or something different from the God of the Bible. For example ...

- Across the generations, three in ten (30–31%), believe “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me.” Nearly the same proportion in each of the four generations agree on this belief. In contrast, the Bible teaches that God created the natural world, not that God is only a part or aspect of the natural world.

- The Bible teaches there is only one God. Twenty percent of Millennials agreed with the statement, “there are many gods.” In contrast, only 11% of Silents and Boomers agreed with that statement, as did 14% of Gen Xers.
- The Bible teaches that God is everywhere, but not that everything is God. Again, Millennials led all other generations in agreeing with the statement, “Everyone and everything is god,” at 21%. Remarkably, however, the four generational cohorts scored closely on this item, with all within two percentage points. This means that one in five Americans agrees with a pantheist concept of god.

Clearly, some highly-influential belief systems have pulled Americans away from the concepts of God presented in the Bible. While they do not yet command anywhere near a majority in American society, these beliefs are obviously attractive to various generations in surprising ways. Seeing over a quarter of Silent-generation members agree with humanist or animist concepts of god is truly a surprise.

While nowhere near a majority in American society, non-Christian belief systems such as humanism, animism, and polytheism are obviously attractive to various generations in surprising ways.

The third section of this Report also presents the degree to which non-biblical beliefs about God have taken root even among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians.

Beliefs by Generations

Beliefs about Jesus

Many religions teach about the existence of a supreme being. Christianity uniquely sets Jesus at the center of its faith and practice. Jesus himself asked, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). In Christian

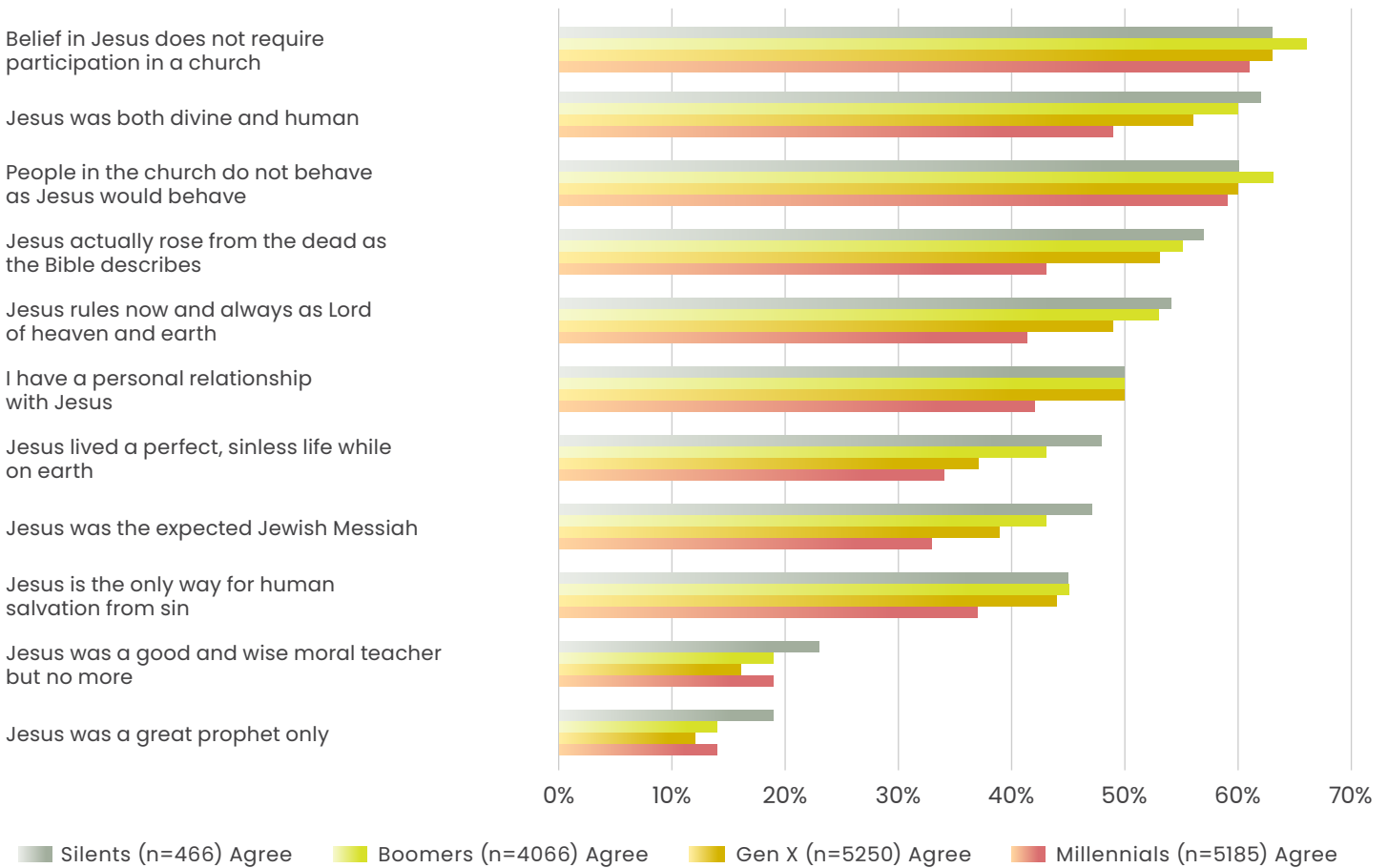
understanding, how people answer that question decides their spiritual destiny, both for this life and for the life to come.

The 11 statements presented to Study respondents cover a wide range of possible beliefs about Jesus, and a

range of possible responses to him. Again, we might expect older cohorts to hold beliefs closer to historic Christianity and younger cohorts to hold beliefs further from the faith. The Study found this to be true to some extent, but not always. [See Figure 6.3]

— FIGURE 6.3

FEWER MILLENNIALS HOLD TRADITIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS



Beliefs by Generations

The four generations hold far different beliefs on six specific statements. In each case, a significantly smaller percentage of Millennials agree with historic Christian teachings.

- “Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth” —only 41% of Millennials agreed, as compared to 49%, 53%, and 54% of Gen X, Boomers, and Silents, respectively.
- “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes” —Millennial agreement ranked 10 percentage points or more behind the other cohorts.
- “Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah” —Millennial agreement was six points behind Gen X response, but ten and 14 points behind Boomer and Silents responses.
- “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth” —Millennial agreement was three percentage points behind Gen X but nine and 14 percentage points behind Boomers and Silents.
- “Jesus was both divine and human” —Millennial agreement ranked at least seven percentage points behind the other generations.

- “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin” —the three older cohorts scored their agreement within one percentage point of each other, at 44% and 45%, while Millennials lagged behind at 37%.

For these beliefs in particular, the Millennial generation exhibits a clear departure from the traditional, Christian understanding of Jesus. And yet the reality is that even in the older cohorts, a majority disagree with core Christian beliefs, and that Christian teaching is essential for even the oldest generations.

Relatively few Americans believe Jesus was only human, that he was just a great teacher or prophet. For the three older age groups, 56% to 62% agreed that “Jesus was both divine and human.” Millennials, however, lagged behind at a significantly lower 49%, meaning that Millennials are evenly divided on the question of Jesus being God.

While those are not overwhelming numbers, agreement levels on more specific options for a human-only Jesus were relatively weak. Just 15% to 23% in any generation agreed that “Jesus was a good and wise moral teacher but no more.” Interestingly, the Silent generation showed the

highest level of agreement with this description, which helps explain their higher levels of acceptance for humanist and transcendental beliefs. Apparently, members of the Silent generation who decided Jesus was not God had also decided that “Jesus was a great prophet only.” One in five Silents (19%) agreed with this compared to just 12–14% of younger generations.

Roughly one in five Silent Generation members agree Jesus was merely a prophet or a good, wise teacher – significantly more than any younger generation.

So in general, what do most Americans believe about Jesus? These are the statements that most (more than 50%) of the Silents, Boomers, and Gen Xers agree with:

- “Belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church.”
- “Jesus was both divine and human.”
- “People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave.”
- “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes.”

Beliefs by Generations

Most Americans of these age cohorts believe Jesus was both divine and human, and that he rose from the dead. On these important, central tenets, they agree with historic, Christian orthodoxy. But their high view of Jesus does not lead to a high view of his church. They believe in Jesus but do not love His church. This presents a great challenge for Christian ministry in this country. Convincing people of the truth of the gospel is one thing. Convincing them of the goodness and importance of his church is quite another.

For some of these statements, the Boomer generation stands in the lead. It had the highest level of agreement with, “Belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church,” and “People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave.” Though the levels of agreement on these are fairly close across generations, Boomers are the cohort that is least positive about the church and its relationship to

Jesus. In this regard they are even more negative than Millennials

In light of other trends already noted, it is no surprise that only

42%

of Millennials claimed to “have a personal relationship with Jesus,” eight percentage points behind the other age groups. Just about exactly half of the Silents, Boomers, and Gen Xers claimed to have that relationship. The Study has found that

64.2%

of Americans self-identify as Christians, and that that percentage is higher in the three older cohorts. The difference between these two percentages says there is a

significant share of self-identified Christians who would not say they “have a personal relationship with Jesus.” Picture the person who would say, “Yes, I’m a Christian, but I wouldn’t say I have a ‘personal relationship’ with Christ.” While that does not represent a majority of self-identified American Christians, this finding certainly presents a challenge for discipleship.

Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

How different from each other are urban, suburban, and rural Americans? The American Beliefs Study allows us to see whether beliefs about God and Jesus vary by population density. The findings can help urban, suburban, and rural churches understand the extent to which their communities require unique expressions of worship, teaching, and service.

Beliefs about God

One might assume that rural Americans would tend to hold beliefs about God that are closer to traditional Christian faith. One might assume that most of the country’s atheists are in the cities, along with most of those who hold to concepts of God influenced by

Eastern religious thought, Buddhism, or Hinduism. Maybe then the beliefs of suburbanites would fall somewhere in between. The reality is that rural, suburban, and urban respondents have quite similar beliefs about God. [See Figure 6.4]

— FIGURE 6.4

URBANITES, SUBURBANITES, AND RURAL-DWELLERS HOLD SIMILAR BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

Beliefs about God by Population

God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship

I have a relationship with one God

I believe God created a literal heaven and hell

God is the full realization of human potential

The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me

God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve

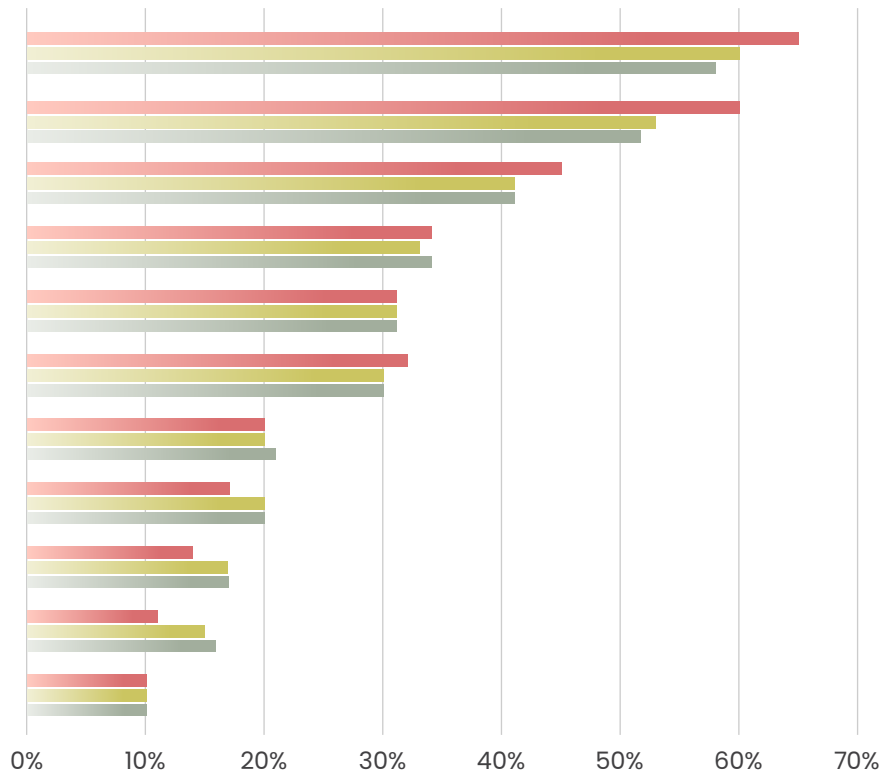
Everyone and everything is god

I'm unsure/undecided about whether a god exists

I don't believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is

I believe there are many gods

I believe God created the world but takes no further part in it



■ Rural (n=1697) Agree
 ■ Suburban (n=10447) Agree
 ■ Urban (n=2797) Agree

Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

For their agreement with the 11 statements about God, responses from the three groups clustered fairly tightly. Only three of the statements produced a difference of five or more percentage points in responses from the three groups, and the largest gap was eight points. Two different statements even produced dead-heat ties between the three groups (when rounded to the nearest whole number, as in Figure 6.4).

These gap figures contrast strongly with the difference in beliefs about God between generational cohorts, as seen earlier in Figure 6.2. On the same statements, the groups showed two 15-point gaps alongside 10- and 13-percentage-point spreads. Overall, the average gap in responses to these statements from generation groups was 8.1 percentage points, as against 3.1 percentage points by population-density groups. The gap in opinions about God by generations is roughly two and a half times wider than the gap in opinions about God by population density.

To be sure, many cultural, social, economic, and political differences exist between urban, suburban, and rural Americans. But when it comes

to what they believe about God, the differences are slight.

Do American rural residents tend to believe in the God of the Bible? Yes and no. In their communities, rural church leaders will find:

- 31% think of God as “the forces of nature and the spirits within creation.”
- 20% believe “Everyone and everything is god.”
- 14% don’t believe a god exists.
- 11% believe there are many gods.

What about American urban residents? Do they tend toward unbelief? Again, yes and no. Of the people that urban churches seek to serve:

- 58% would say, “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.”
- 52% would say, “I have a relationship with one living God.”
- 41% believe “God created a literal heaven and hell.”

For Christian ministry, the teaching of basic theology and the work of apologetics need not be greatly

different in these three contexts to be effective. The mistake would be to assume that ideas about God from non-Christian theology don’t exist in the rural areas, or to assume that urban residents rarely hold views about God in line with Christian teaching. All three population-density sectors have a broad mix of believers and unbelievers.

Rural Americans are more likely than those in denser environs to agree that they either have a relationship with God, or that God invites humankind into a relationship with him.

The picture that emerges most clearly from these results is that rural Americans are more likely than those living elsewhere to say they have a relationship with God, or to feel God seeks a relationship with us.

Though the pattern of responses is quite similar for eight of the 11 statements, the way that responses from the three population-density groups differ is in line with what one might expect. For those eight statements, responses from rural respondents were in strongest agreement with Christian teaching,

Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

responses from urban respondents were furthest from Christian teaching, and responses from suburban respondents were between the two. For example, with the statement “I believe there are many gods,” 16% of urban respondents agreed; 15% of suburban respondents agreed; and only 11% of rural respondents agreed.

Beliefs about Jesus

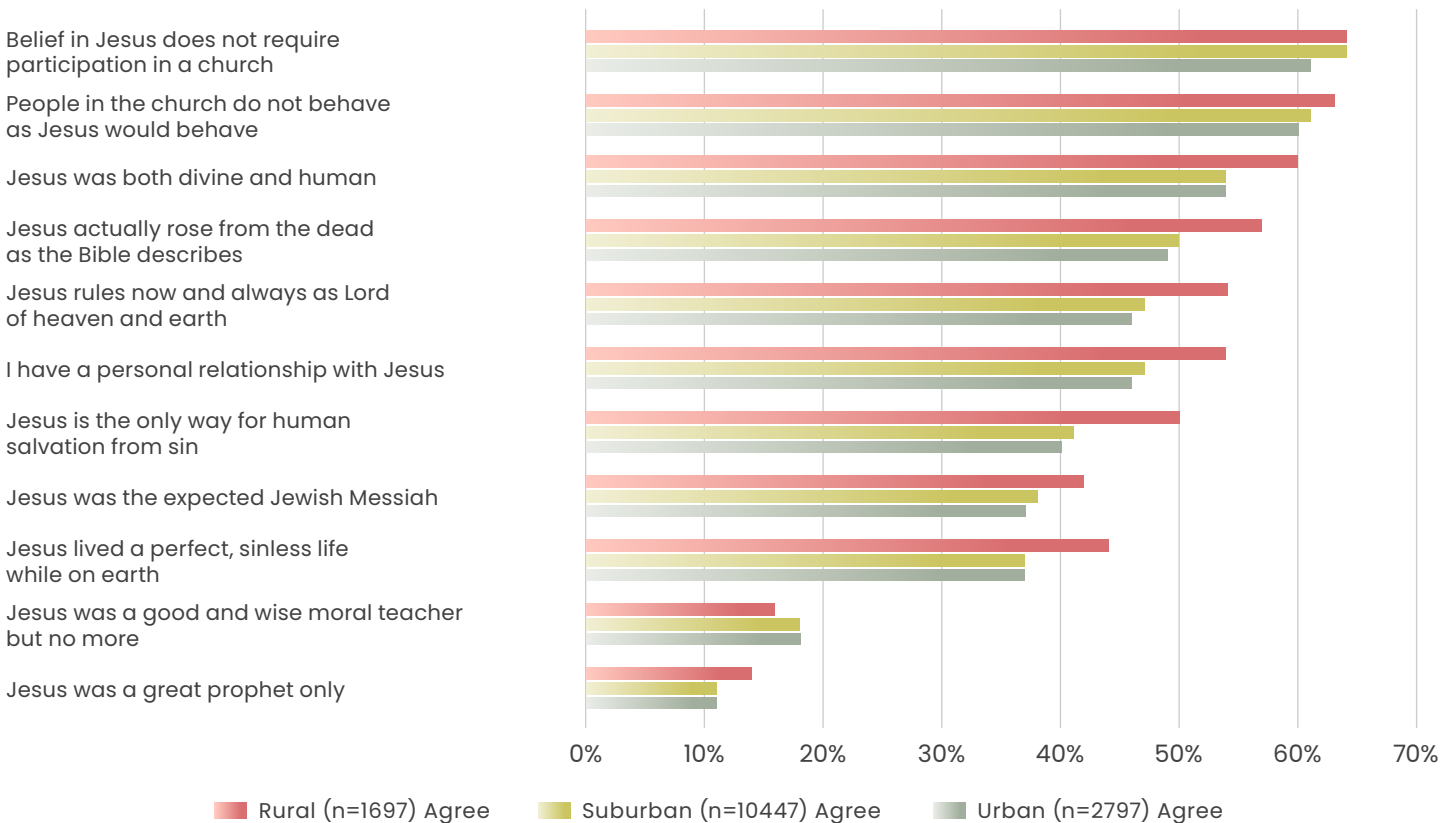
Response patterns change within population density groups when the subject is beliefs about Jesus. Rural respondents stand out much more from the other two groups here, with beliefs that tend to be closer to Christian teaching. Urbanites and suburbanites tend to believe quite

similar things about Jesus, and they differ from rural respondents in some significant, instructive ways. [See Figure 6.5]

The two statements that attracted the strongest agreement between all population groups speak to the relationship between the Jesus of history and the churches of today.

— FIGURE 6.5

URBANITES, SUBURBANITES, AND RURAL-DWELLERS HOLD SIMILAR BELIEFS ABOUT GOD



Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

For Christian ministry in our time, it's not an encouraging picture. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (61% to 64%) agreed that "belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church." Six in ten (60%-63%) agreed that "People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave," noted earlier in the observations about Figure 6.3.

Across rural, suburban, and urban settings, respondents voted both similarly and strongly on these two statements. Of all the 11 statements, this is where they showed the highest level of agreement.

That kind of unity was absent for the other statements. Rural residents had a stronger level of agreement with historic Christian teaching about Jesus than urban or suburban residents. For instance, a gulf of nine percentage points exists between rural and non-rural residents who agree that "Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin."

A seven-percentage-point gap exists between rural respondents and the other two groups on these three statements:

- "Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes."
- "Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth."

- "Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth."

There is an even-greater gap, of nine percentage points, on this statement:

- "Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin"

All four of the statements above align with Christian teaching, and all received a much-higher positive response from rural respondents. What rural Americans tend to believe about Jesus is much closer to historic Christian faith than what urban and suburban Americans tend to believe. It may be no surprise, then, that rural residents also agreed they "have a personal relationship with Jesus" at a rate seven percent higher than urbanites and suburbanites.

The Intersection of Biblical and Unbiblical

Taken together, American beliefs about God and beliefs about Jesus present a paradox. A relatively high percentage agree with statements about God that are clearly non-Christian. At the same time, strong agreement also exists for statements about Jesus that are clearly Christian.

What is amazing is that these groups overlap as much as they do. Many American suburbanites (the largest

Americans have apparently come to see faith as a buffet. They choose tempting spiritual entrees and sides with no concern for whether the dishes complement each other.

population by far) believe in what the Bible teaches about Jesus while at the same time holding to a concept of God (or god or gods) that is very much unlike the God of the Bible.

Americans – both in small towns and big cities – have apparently come to regard faith as a sort of buffet. They choose spiritual entrees and sides that look tempting even if some of the dishes don't taste good together. Consider the following stats among all Americans:

- 54% believe "Jesus was both divine and human."
- 50% believe "Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes."
- 47% believe "Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth."
- 41% believe "Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin."
- 38% believe "Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah."
- 38% believe "Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth."

Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

Shockingly, nearly half (48%) of those who agree that “Jesus was both divine and human” also agree that “God is the full realization of human potential” and four in ten of them (39%) agree “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.” Both of these last statements obviously disagree with the Biblical concept of God.

And half of Americans believe “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes.” But one in three of these resurrection believers (32%) also agree that “the forces of nature and

the spirits within the creation are God for me,” and a quarter of them (23%) say “everything and everyone is God to me.”

Finally, we see that 47% of Americans agree they “have a personal relationship with Jesus.” Amazingly, 42% of this group also says “God is the full realization of human potential” and a third of them (32%) believe “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.”

Christian churches need to teach, preach, and witness about Jesus,

who he was, and what he did for our salvation. But these findings reveal that in America today, it may be even more important to teach, preach, and witness about who God is, and to confront false ideas about God. It’s not good if people believe Jesus is the Son of God if they then think of God in a pantheistic, polytheistic, or animistic way.

Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

The first two sections of this Report analyzed responses from across the religious spectrum in America, showing what Christians and non-Christians alike believe about God and Jesus. Each age cohort and each population density group included both Christian and non-Christian respondents. Those frames support an understanding of the complete context in which churches strive to serve and witness.

This section focuses on the Christian community alone, people who self-identify as “Christian.” One would hope that what these Christians

believe about God and Jesus would be consistent with the Bible and with historic Christian faith and teaching.

But what of any inconsistencies? Churches desire to faithfully shepherd their flock of Practicing Christians while also seeking to encourage Nominal Christians back into the fold. This section is most valuable for digging into the differences in beliefs between Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians. Understanding what each group believes can drive positive ministry outcomes for both.

Practicing Christians are defined as those who identify as Christian, attend a faith fellowship at least once a month, and say their faith has ‘considerable’ or ‘utmost’ significance in their lives.

Nominal Christians are defined as those who identify as Christian, attend a fellowship less than once a month, or say that their faith has at most a ‘moderate’ significance in their lives. Those who attend at least once a month but say that faith isn’t important in their lives are still defined as Nominal. Similarly, those who say faith has ‘considerable’ or ‘utmost’ significance in their lives but who attend less than once a month are still defined as Nominal.

These were the traits available from the Study that best allowed the researchers to distinguish between these two groups.

Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

Beliefs about God

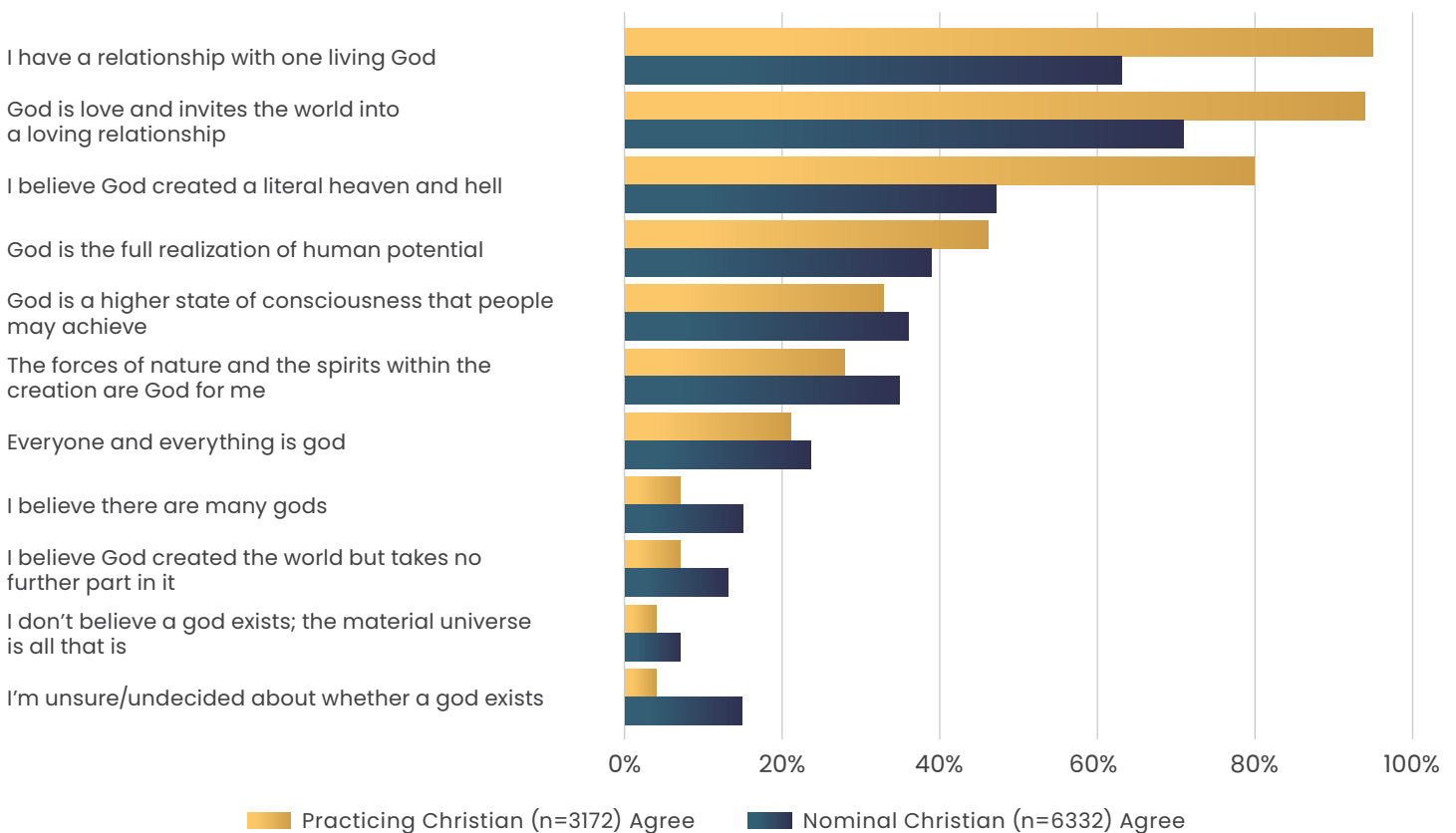
The first sentence of the Bible, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) establishes several important points of Christian theology about God. God is one thing and all of nature is another; they are not the same thing. It speaks of one Creator God,

not many. It says God existed before humanity, affirming His presence outside of human experience. At least since the 1960s, ideas about God that conflict with Biblical teaching have seeped into American culture, from Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American religions, and other sources. To what extent have they seeped into the church as well?

The Study was able to answer this question, with the added benefit of analysis between the beliefs of Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians. [See Figure 6.6]

— FIGURE 6.6

MANY NOMINAL CHRISTIANS DO NOT AGREE WITH BASIC CHRISTIAN TEACHING ABOUT GOD



Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

Nominal Christians, by definition, lag behind Practicing Christians in church attendance and in how important they consider faith to be in their lives. The findings of this Study show that they also lag behind in adherence to important, basic tenets of Christian belief. Of the 11 statements presented about God, Nominal Christian responses show a significant trend of departure from the faith.

- On every statement consistent with historic Christian teaching, fewer Nominal Christians than Practicing Christians agreed.
- On seven of eight statements not in harmony with historic Christian teaching, more Nominal Christians than Practicing Christians agreed.

These figures lead to the conclusion that consistent participation in a Christian faith community is at least one of the factors that influences stronger agreement on a number of traditional biblical beliefs. Other factors may contribute to this apparent correlation.

The largest gap was with the statement, “I believe God created a literal heaven and hell.” Eight in ten Practicing Christians agreed, while only 47% of Nominal Christians

agreed, a gap of 33 percentage points. In fact, 20% of Nominal Christians and 9% of Practicing Christians disagree with this point of Christian theology. (A full 34% of Nominal Christians and 11% of Practicing Christians expressed “No opinion”).

There was a similar, very-large gap with the statement “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.” While 94% of Practicing Christians agreed, only 71% of Nominal Christians agreed. The difference comes as no surprise. Even though 71% is a strong majority, the reality is that nearly three in ten self-identified Christians can’t bring themselves to admit God calls them to a loving relationship with him. These results echo the longing Nominal Christians expressed (as shown in Report 5 of this series) for greater acceptance and less judgement from the Church.

The Study revealed facts about the beliefs of Practicing Christians that are surprising, if not shocking. Substantial numbers even of Practicing Christians agreed with statements about God that clearly depart from Biblical teachings. This reveals the extent to which non-Christian ideas about God have

crept into the thinking even of faithful Christians. Among the most-faithful cohort of Practicing Christians:

- 46% believe “God is the full realization of human potential.”
- 33% believe “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.”
- 28% believe “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me.”
- 21% believe “Everyone and everything is god.”

This again shows the need for more and better instruction in basic Christian theology. Preachers and teachers would do well to understand the non-Christian concepts that have seeped into the wider culture and also into the church. When it comes to basic concepts about God, Christianity does not agree with other religions, especially those with roots in South and East Asia. Church leaders might easily explain the differences.

To a surprising degree, some decidedly non-Christian concepts about God have infiltrated the mindset of even the most devout Christians.

Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

Despite these somewhat-shocking discoveries, there is hope. Relatively few Nominal Christians have completely abandoned belief in God. Just one in seven self-identified Christians (15%) agreed they were “unsure/undecided about whether a god exists,” and only seven percent expressed a clear atheist position by saying they didn’t “believe a god exists.” Respondents could also indicate “No opinion” on any of these statements.

But on the side of continuing faith in God, 64% of Nominal Christians

disagreed with any uncertainty about God’s existence and 72% rejected the notion that there is no God. It is heartening to know that nearly three in four Nominal Christians still believe in God, and that nearly two in three confidently assert that God exists.

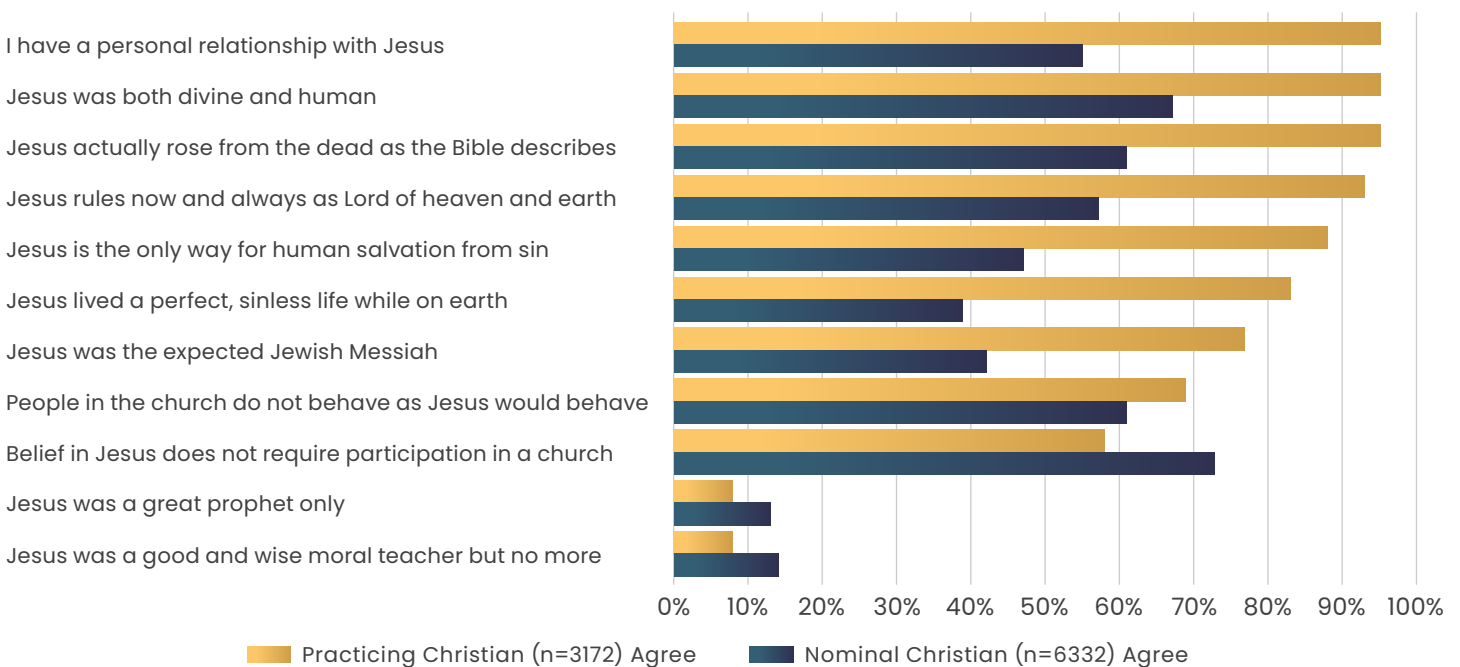
Beliefs about Jesus

Ironically, the section of this Report on beliefs about Jesus among self-identified American Christians shows the widest gaps in beliefs between any two groups analyzed. One might have expected closer agreement.

Of the 11 statements about Jesus, the only one that showed a relatively close agreement between Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians was “People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave” (61% and 69%, respectively). When it comes to beliefs about Jesus, these two groups of Christians are generally far apart, but they unite in believing that church people do not do well in following the example of Jesus – even surpassing the 56% of non-Christians who believe this. That is not encouraging. [See Figure 6.7]

— FIGURE 6.7

NOMINAL CHRISTIANS AND PRACTICING CHRISTIANS DIFFER WIDELY IN BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS



Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

Nineteen in 20 Practicing Christians say they “have a personal relationship with Jesus,” while only 55% of Nominal Christians say the same. This 40-point gap reveals an important point for understanding Nominal Christians: Nearly half of them couldn’t agree that they have a ‘personal relationship’ with Jesus, including 13% who simply disagreed and 32% who were neutral. Beyond not attending church, Nominal Christians also seem to feel out of fellowship with Jesus himself. Their sense of spiritual connection with Jesus erodes alongside their attendance record.

Nearly all Practicing Christians affirm a personal relationship with Jesus, compared to just over half of Nominal Christians.

Six of the 11 statements on this question affirm an important item of historic Christian teaching about Jesus Christ. On every one of these six statements a wide gap exists between what Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians believe.

The gap ranges between 28 and 44 percentage points, with an average gap of 35 percentage points. For example...

- 83% of Practicing Christians believe “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth,” while only 39% of Nominal Christians agree.
- 88% of Practicing Christians believe “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin,” while only 47% of Nominal Christians agree.

So what do Nominal Christians believe about Jesus? Two-thirds (67%) continue to believe “Jesus was both human and divine.” Relatively few have accepted alternatives that depict Jesus as human only. Only 13% would say, “Jesus was a great prophet only,” and only 14% would say, “Jesus was a good and wise moral teacher but no more.”

This helps us understand Nominal Christians and the state of their faith. Maybe they never held strongly to what the Bible teaches about Jesus, or perhaps their beliefs about Jesus

eroded over time as they attended church less. It presents a chicken-and-egg question. Did they become Nominal Christians because they didn’t believe what their churches taught about Jesus, or did they drift into Nominal practices and, over time, find themselves believing less and less? The Study by itself cannot answer that question, but this much is clear: a very large percentage of Nominal Christians don’t agree with essential, basic Christian teachings about Jesus. Any attempt to win them back to deeper faith and greater faithfulness needs to bear that in mind.

Summary Highlights

- | On what they believe about God, all four generational cohorts in the American Beliefs Study (Silents, Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials), ranked this statement highest: “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.” Above all, Americans see God as a God of love, and also see him reaching out to humanity, not remaining distant.
- | Millennials doubt the existence of God significantly more than the other age cohorts. 26% expressed doubt by agreeing with the statement, “I’m unsure/undecided about whether a god exists,” while 20% hold a clearly atheist position, saying, “I don’t believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is.”
- | 60% of Silents and Boomers say they “have a relationship with one living God.” In comparison, only 45% of Millennials would make the same claim.
- | Despite the different social, economic, and political contexts for rural, suburban, and urban Americans, residents of these different population sectors do not differ greatly in what they believe about God and Jesus.
- | A relatively-high percentage of Americans agree with historic Christian teaching about Jesus, but at the same time significant percentages hold to beliefs about God that are influenced by pantheist, polytheist, animist, or other non-Christian religious ideas.
- | Nominal Christians lag far behind Practicing Christians in the extent to which their beliefs about God and Jesus fit with what the Bible teaches. For example, 94% of Practicing Christians said, “I believe God created a literal heaven and hell,” while only 71% of Nominal Christians agreed.
- | Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians differ greatly on how they see their relationship with Jesus. 95% of Practicing Christians affirmed that they “have a personal relationship with Jesus,” while only 55% of Nominal Christians agreed.

A Brief Methodology

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 maximum margin of error of $\pm 1.97\%$ at the 95% confidence level within any US Census region. 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.

THE
AMERICAN BELIEFS
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

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

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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