

This Brief: The Bible Approaches Of U.S. Christians

Results from the Christian Life Survey 2020-2021

Data collected August 2020 through May 2021. Results from U.S. adult residents who self-identify as Christians.



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There are many ways a person can approach the Bible. You can approach the Bible for different uses, for example. You might see it as a text to be studied, or a way to experience the presence of God, or you can see it as a text to be applied to your own life. And that's just three examples. You can also approach the Bible in different ways by perceiving it differently. For example some see it as inspired and others as infallible or both or neither. And you can approach the Bible differently in the forms of it you read. For example, do you read it as a paper book or a digital manuscript.

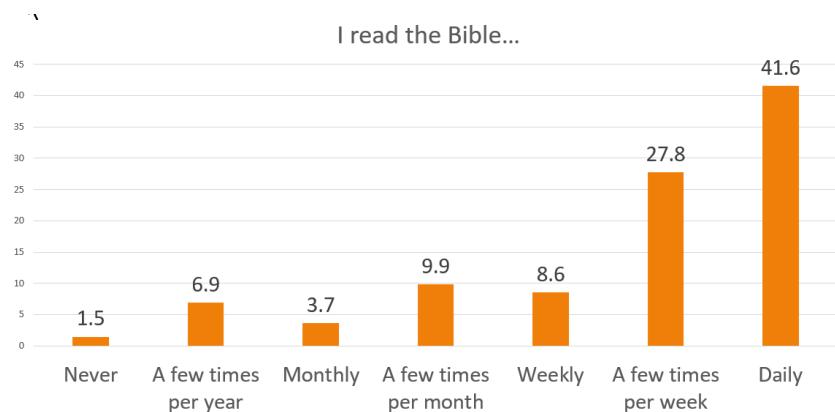
In this summary brief, I'll look at how American Christian adults approach the Bible by analyzing the patterns in the responses from 6,909 people in the United States who are 18 or older and self-identify as a Christian. These people used a free link at Bible Gateway to access the survey sometime between August 2020 and May 2021. People using the survey receive their personal responses via email so they can have a way to think about how they are living the Christian life and how they want to be living the Christian life. All results reported here were statistically weighted for correct representation of American Christians on the basis of age, sex, and race.

It's important to recognize that the results I'm reporting on here are from a lot of people but they are all self-identified adult Christians who

use the scripture engagement section of the Bible Gateway website enough that they found the link to the survey. The folks who use Bible Gateway—and in particular, the folks who use it for more than just searching for Bible verses—are not representative of the larger US population. Not even the population of self-identified Christians. And it's possible that some kinds of folks—pastors, for example—are more likely to be in these data than would be present in the broader population. These data I'm using here, then, are probably more representative of devout Christians more so than just the average self-identified Christian. If you're interested in understanding the patterns of behavior among folks who are Christians and take their spiritual life a bit more seriously, the results I provide here will be helpful for you.

That being said, let's begin by seeing how often these nearly 7000 American Christians read the Bible.

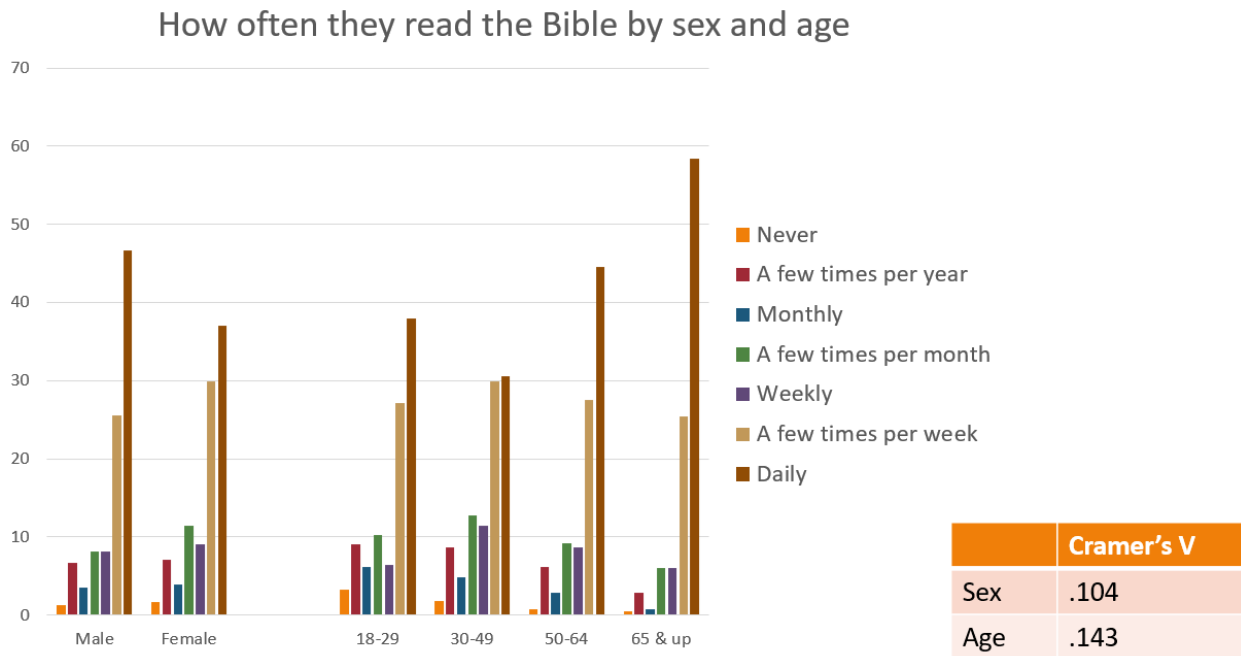
The folks who participated in this survey read the Bible a lot. 42% read the Bible daily and another 28% read it a few times each week. These



survey participants are people who are using a Bible related website enough to find a link to the survey—a link that is not on the front page of the website—so it's not too surprising they are very Bible-engaged.

This pattern of reading the Bible often is true regardless of educational degree or racial group. There is, however a small difference between men and women, and a small difference between age groups.

But, as can be seen, the differences in different age groups or for the different sexes is mainly just between reading the Bible a few times a week and reading the Bible daily. Every group reports that they read the Bible often.



That gives us an idea of who these data represent. So now let's look at how these American Christians use the Bible

In the Christian life Survey (CLS) I measure 6 different ways people can use the Bible:

Applying it to the way they live

Studying it

Applying it to their affective self

—their emotions, motives, and passions

Applying it to society

Using it to experience the presence of God and connecting it to their own identity.

To see which uses American Christians use more or less, the CLS asks a set of 18 questions—three questions for each of the six uses.

Bible Uses.

When you hear or read the Bible, which of these are true for you?

- Personal Application
I try to live out what the passage teaches me (strongly disagree to strongly agree)
I apply the passage to my life
I look for things the passage is telling me to do
- Intellect/Study
I study the facts in the passage
I think carefully about the meaning of the passage
I think about what the passage tells me to believe
- Affective/Emotions
I connect the passage to my feelings
I let the passage shape my hopes and dreams
I look in the passage for the motivations I should have
- Societal Justice
I reflect on what the passage means for others and society
I try to learn what the passage says about justice for everyone
I think about God's response to all humankind (not just me or people close to me) from the passage
- Experience God
I experience the presence of God through interaction with the passage
I am moved by the Spirit as I interact with the passage
I know God more deeply through the passage
- Identity
I look for the larger story in the passage and where I fit in it
I put myself personally into the passage
I let the passage redefine the story of my life

To see if a person uses the Bible in a way that helps them apply it to the way they live their life, for example, I ask how much they agree or disagree with these three statements:

When you hear or read the Bible, which of these are true for you?

I try to live out what the passage teaches me

I apply the passage to my life

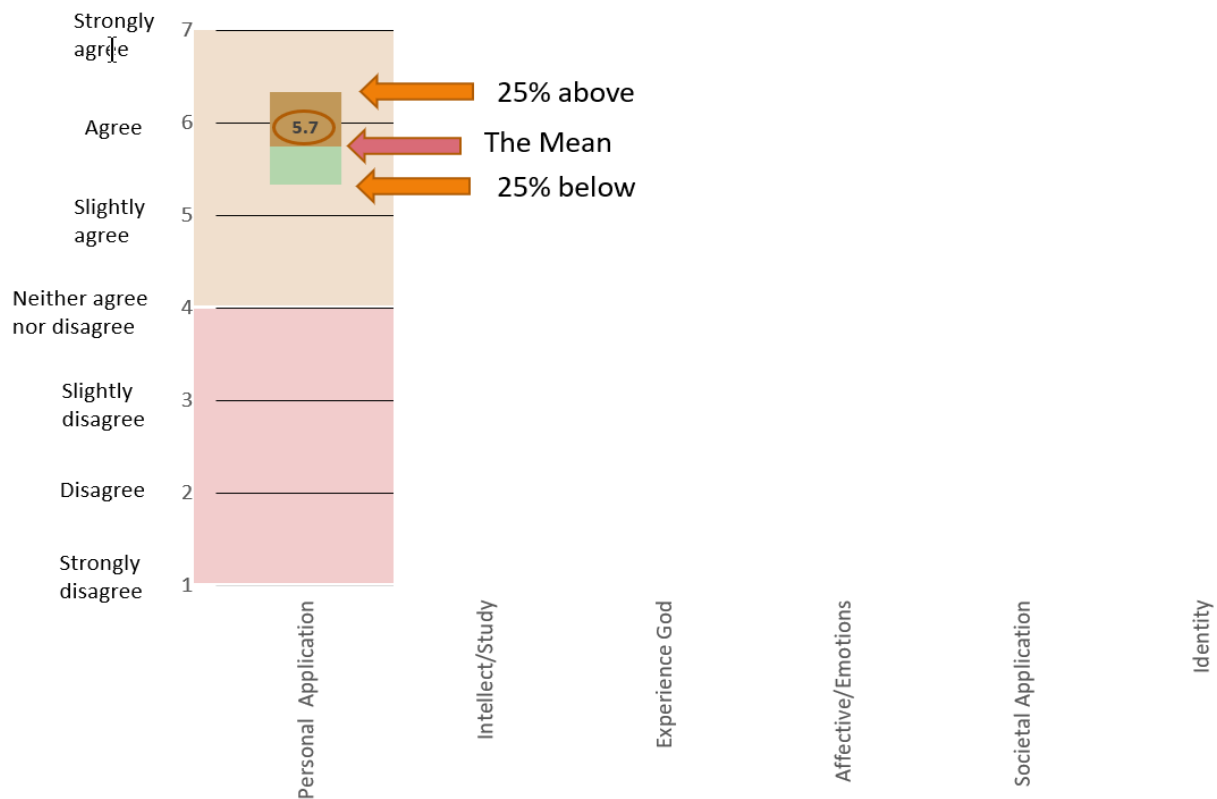
I look for things the passage is telling me to do

For each question a person can strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, agree, or strongly agree.

Asking the same thing in three different ways allows me to make sure people are understanding the question. Each person's three answers are joined together to get an average that is between 1 and 7. One means they strongly disagreed on all three questions and seven means they strongly agreed on all three questions.

You can see all the questions below. There's also a report at the website for the Center for Scripture Engagement about the full methodology used in the Christian Life Survey.

So how do American Christians use the Bible?



To show you what I've learned, I'll use a boxplot. Along the bottom you can see the six ways people can use the Bible. Along the left edge you

can see the answers people could give to the questions. To help us see the trends in people's answers, I'll highlight the top of the chart in one color—that area shows they agree that they use a particular approach—and highlight the bottom in another color—which is the area that shows people tend to disagree that they use an approach.

Let's look at the results for people using the Bible for personal application. This box shows the trends in the results for the 6,909 American Christians whose responses we have here. The bottom of the box shows the value where 25 percent of the people had values below there. The top of the box shows us the value where 25 percent of the people are above that line. The size of the box—how tall or short it is—allows us to see how varied people's use of personal application is. If the box is really tall people's use of this approach varies a lot. If the box is short, people all tended to have about the same value.

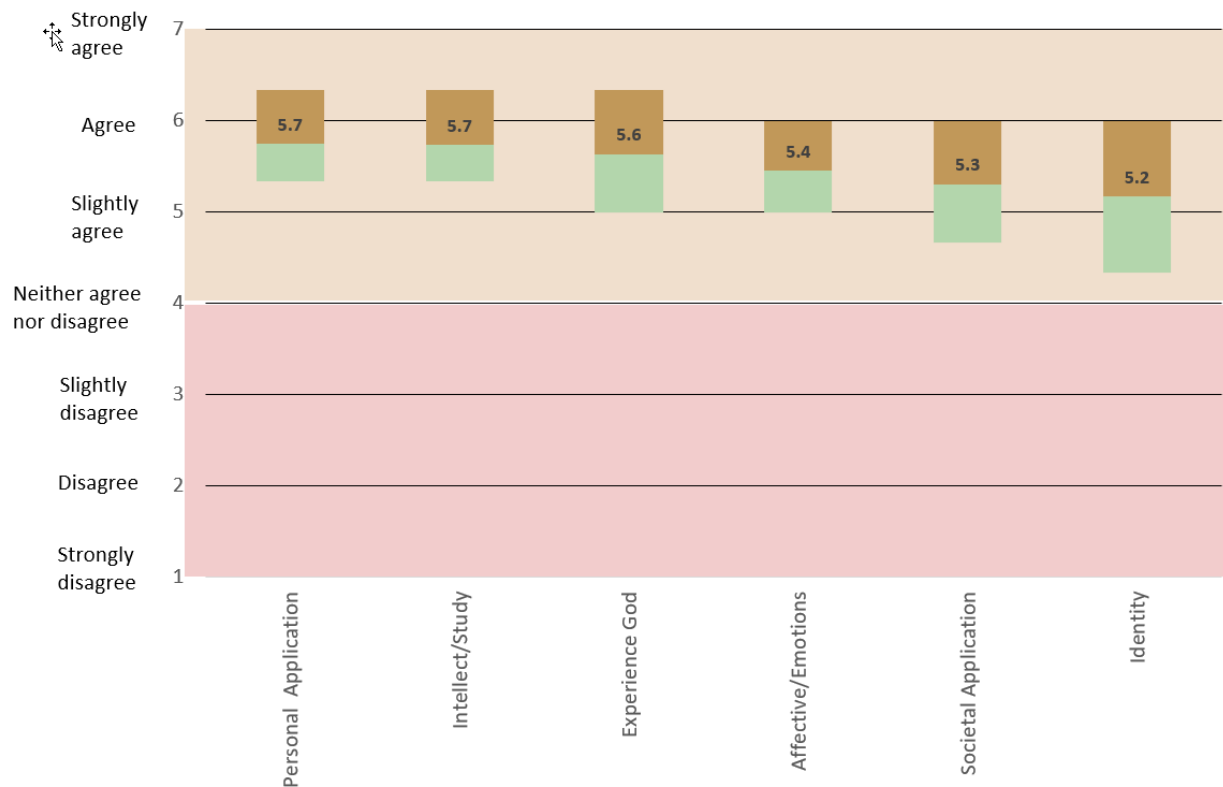
The line inside the box shows the mean average for people. The number shown is the actual mean value. For personal application, on average, these almost 7000 people had a value of 5.7. A value of 6 indicates that they agree that they use this approach while a value of 5 would mean they slightly agree. This value of 5.7, with a short box, tells us that American Christians, on average tend to agree that they approach the Bible as a text to be applied to their life (that's what the mean tells us) and there is not a lot of variation around that trend (shown by the relatively short box).

Let's look at the results for all the uses of the Bible that were measured.

Here are some trends you might notice.

First, all of the results tend to be in the area that identifies agreement. In general, American Christians tend to use all of these approaches. Second, American Christians use the Bible a little less for affective

meaning, for application to society, or to shape their personal identity. Third, there was a little bit more variation in people’s use of the Bible to experience the presence of God, determine what it means for society, or to affect their personal identity—we know this because the boxes for those approaches are a little taller.



Based on this collection of adult American Christians, we can say that American Christians use a wide variety of approaches to the Bible. Intellectual, affective, identity construction, application to self, application to society, and experiencing the presence of God are all commonly used.

Let’s look a little further. Do men and women tend to use different Bible approaches? To answer that I looked at the statistical results for at least a weak effect size. Since there are nearly 7000 people in this data set, virtually all results will be statistically significant. But not all results will show any meaningful effect size. When we compare the

Bible approaches used by men and women, there are no meaningful differences. How about educational groups—those with different educational degrees—do they use different Bible approaches. No, surprisingly, people with different educational attainment don't use different Bible uses. There are, however, differences by race on four of the Bible approaches. And there is a difference for age groups on one Bible use.

Let's look at the differences by race first. The four Bible approaches that are used at different levels by different races are using the Bible to experience the presence of God, experiencing the Bible affectively, societal application, and using the Bible to define your identity.

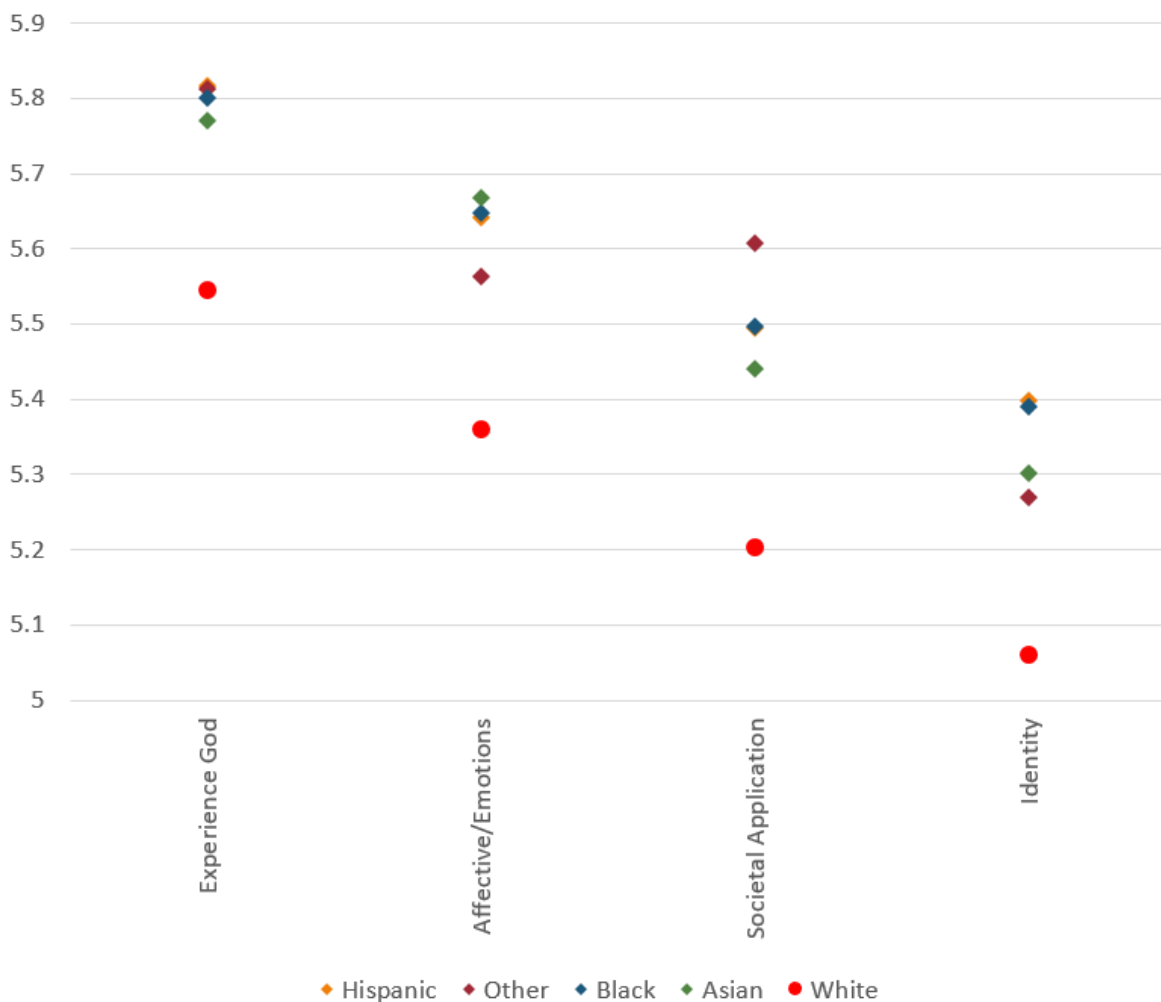
To compare race differences, let's start with our overall results and change the chart to just mark the overall means for each kind of Bible use. Then let's focus in on just the four Bible uses that have race differences. We can put markers on the chart now for each racial group's mean, but it's a little hard to see. So let's zoom in on just the part of the scale that shows the different racial group means and then let's remove the overall mean markers so we just see the markers for each racial group.

Notice that all the racial groups show the same pattern for which approaches they use more, but, more importantly, there is one racial group that is always clearly lower in the use of these four approaches. While all the racial groups tend to use study and personal application at the same levels, White Christians have clearly lower use of these other four approaches. There's a small but real difference in how much Whites use the Bible to experience God's presence, for affective experience, for societal application, or for identity construction.

The other group difference to be found in the Bible uses is for age groups. Specifically for the experiencing God Bible approach. This is a

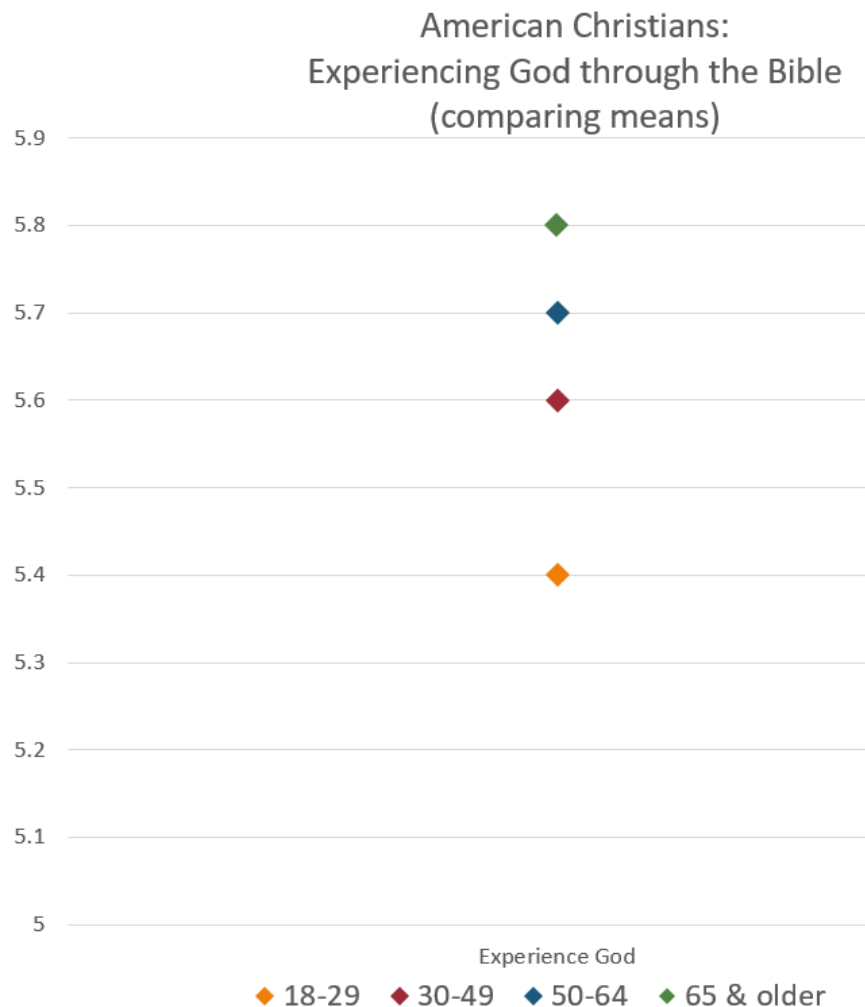
different effect than was true for racial groups. It's not that one group stands out from the others, but, instead, we see that, as people get older, they are more likely to agree that they experience God through the Bible. The different age groups have the same use of the other five Bible approaches, but, for experiencing God, age increases this approach.

American Christians: Selected Bible Approaches



From this research we conclude that American Christians use the Bible in a variety of ways though intellectual study and personal application are the most common. We also learn that White American Christians

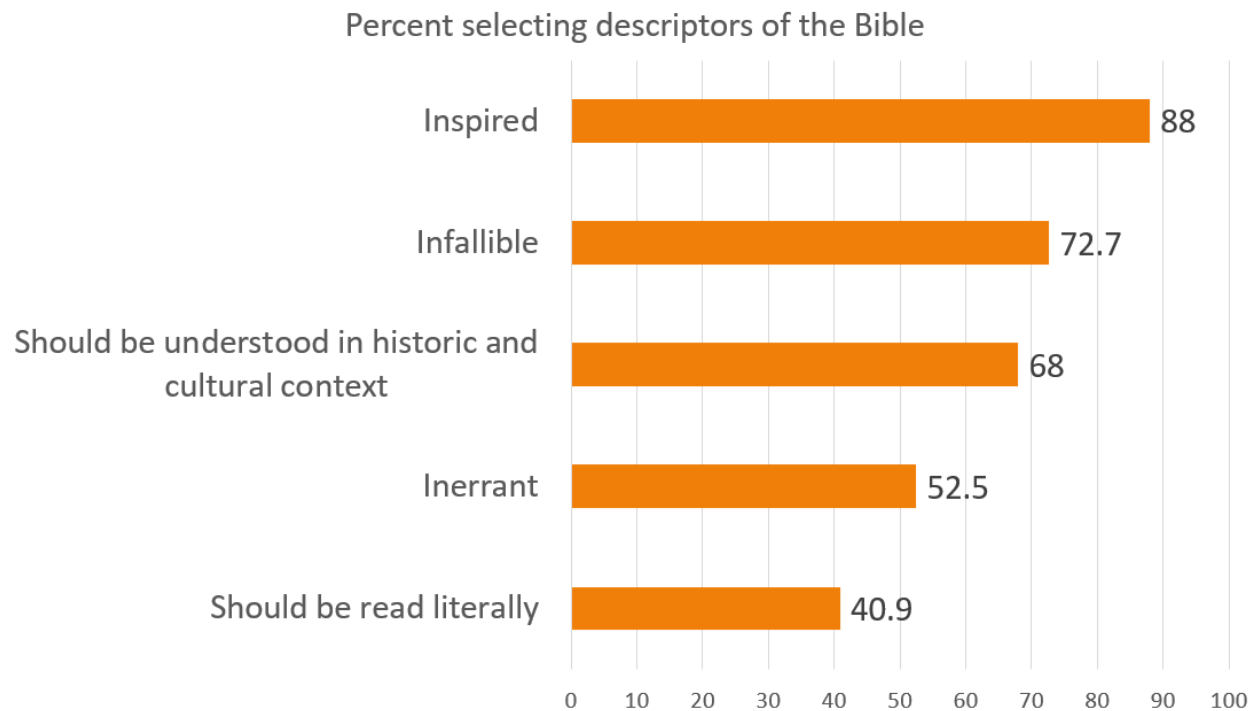
tend to use other approaches less than other racial groups do, and we learn that as people age, they increase their use of the Bible as a means to experience the presence of God.



In the Christian Life Survey, each person is asked which terms they believe describe the Bible. They can choose all, some, or none of the terms. The terms they are offered are “inerrant,” “infallible,” “Should be read literally,” “should be understood in historic and cultural context,” and “inspired.”

We should pause for a moment and recognize that not everyone uses these terms in the same way. Whatever patterns there are in the results, it is possible they are partly due to different understandings of the terms.

A very large majority of the people (88 percent) said the Bible is inspired. A large majority said the Bible is infallible and a large majority said it should be understood in historic and cultural context. The percent saying the Bible is inerrant was just barely a majority, and only 41 percent of the survey participants said the Bible should be read literally.

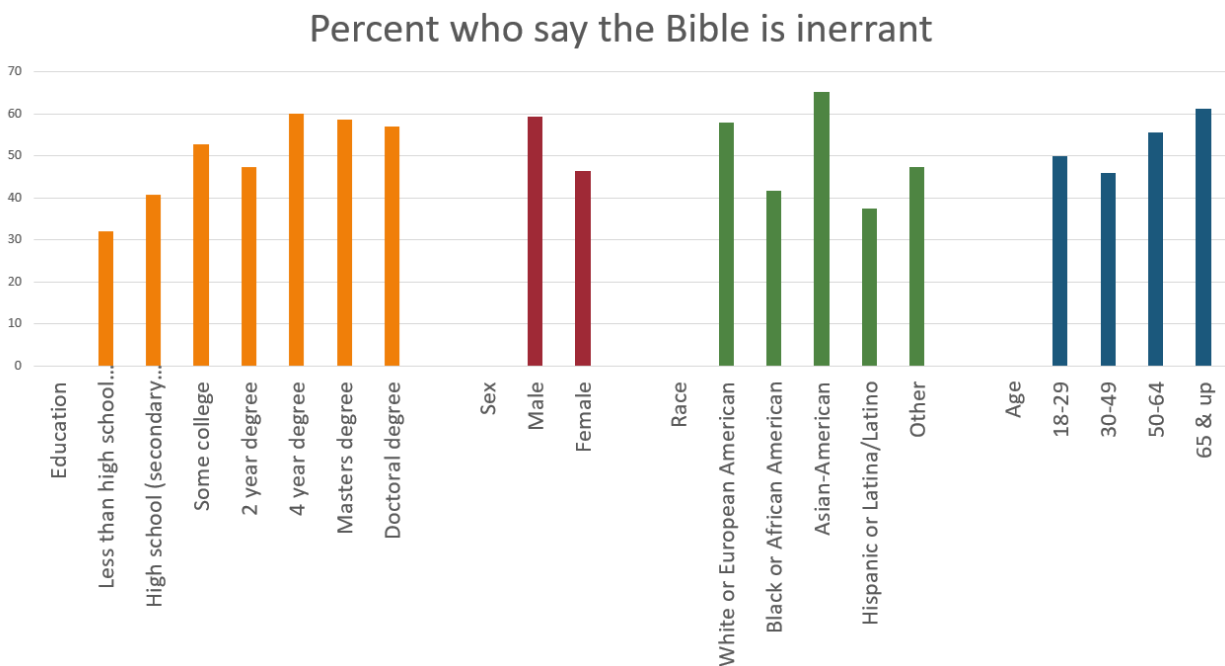


Do education, sex, race or age affect how people describe the Bible? It turns out they do but all of the effects are small. In this table I have provided an effect size measure where any demographic variable affects response patterns.

Cramer's V effect size	EDUCATION	SEX	RACE	AGE
INSPIRED	-	-	-	-
INFALLIBLE	-	-	.117	-
HISTORIC/CULTURAL CONTEXT	.131	-	-	.150
INERRANT	.146	.128	.175	.116
LITERAL	.101	-	-	-

Putting these two sets of results together, we can notice that a very large majority of American Christians say the Bible is inspired and this is true regardless of education, sex, race, or age. Saying the Bible is inspired is broadly accepted and not contested within American Christianity.

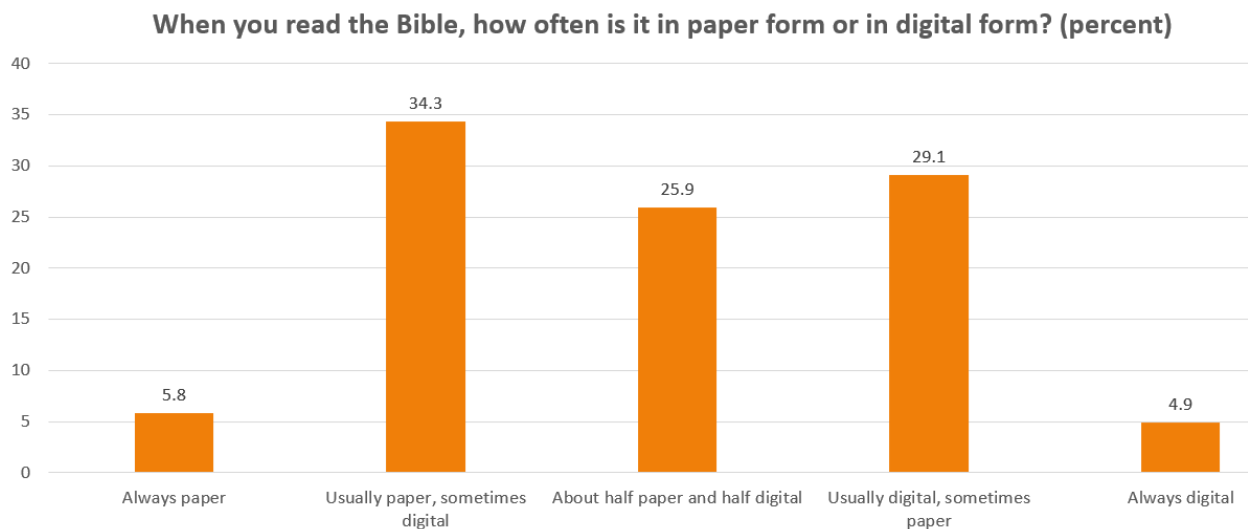
But there are demographic effects for the other descriptors. What I find particularly interesting in these results is the fact that all the demographic variables affect the likelihood that a person will say the Bible is inerrant. Having a bare majority support the term, while also having the use of the term affected by all the demographic variables suggests that inerrancy is the most contested of these terms.



The actual effects are shown here. Increased education leads to increased use of the term, men are more likely to use the term than women, Asian-Americans and European-Americans are more likely than other racial groups to use the term, and older people are more likely to use the term than younger people.

Because I tend to study the religious behavior of Americans—and in particular to put it in the context of generational changes based on life stage effects and the shift in the USA to a late modern society—I sometimes get asked if we should be concerned about younger people using digital Bibles instead of paper Bibles. To answer that question more fully, I'll need to make a video about what effects the choice of Bible media has on other aspects of the Christian life. In this video, which is focused on how devout American Christians approach the Bible, I can only take a quick look at just who is even using digital and/or paper Bibles.

The folks who take the survey are asked if they use a paper or digital Bible with the answer choices “always paper,” “usually paper, sometimes digital,” “about half paper and half digital,” “usually digital, sometimes paper,” and “always digital.”



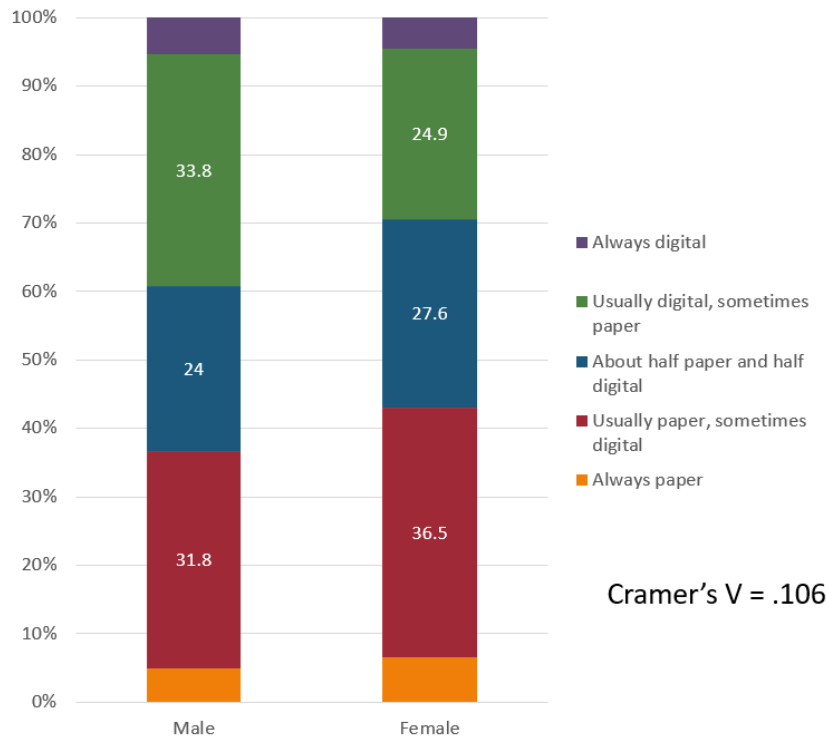
Interestingly, it is a very small percentage of people who say they always use a paper Bible or that they always use a digital Bible. Almost 90 percent of the people indicate that they use both, with 34 percent usually using a paper Bible but sometimes using a digital Bible, 26 percent mixing them up about half and half, and 29 percent usually using a digital Bible but sometimes a paper Bible.

In light of the way this question is usually posed to me, some folks I chat with assume that younger people use the digital Bible more while older people use the paper Bible more. But, in fact, that's not true. The age groups do not show a difference in paper or digital Bible use. Remember that pretty much everybody carries a smart phone now.

Educational attainment also does not have any effect on which kind of Bible people use. Nor does Race. There is a male/female difference but it is small.

Men tend to use digital bibles a little bit more while women tend to use paper Bibles a little bit more.

With regard to paper or digital Bible use, then, the common pattern is a people use both and there is only one difference in any demographic group. While more research will be done, it looks like it is not an issue we need to be worried about.



In this video I've shared a variety of analyses about how devout adult American Christians approach the Bible. They read it often. They use the Bible in a variety of ways, but tend to use it for study and application most. White American Christians are a little less likely to use the Bible in other ways than other racial groups. They see it as inspired and infallible while the term inerrant is quite contested. And, finally, American Christians use both paper and digital Bibles pretty much regardless of all demographic distinctions.

If you'd be interested in using the Christian Life Survey as a tool to take a look at your own Christian life, it can be found at taylor.edu/christianlifesurvey. Thanks for reading these results.



The Christian Life Survey

We were created to have a deep, meaningful, engaging relationship with God. We know it in our souls. But with so many other voices competing for our attention, it can be challenging to break through the noise to figure out how to live out the Christian life on a daily basis. That's why the Christian Life Survey was developed—to give you new ways to think about your walk with God. It will provide insights into your spiritual priorities and areas of focus that can help you engage better with Scripture.

About the Survey

Most people need from 15 to 25 minutes to complete the Christian Life Survey. You'll receive your personal results by email within a few minutes. Your answers will not be shared with anyone other than you, ever.

[Take Survey](#)

- <http://taylor.edu/christianlifesurvey>