

## This Brief: The Spiritual Center Points 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.



If a person is spiritual, something is at the center of their spirituality. I'm not meaning just what they worship—although that will surely be at the center of their spirituality—I'm talking about the focal points that they build their spirituality around. This will become more clear in a moment. In this video, I'll look at what is at the center of American Christians' spiritual lives 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 are not representative of the larger US population. Not even the population of self-identified Christians. 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.

Historically, Christianity has had three center points: God, others, and the Bible.

## Spiritual Centers in Historic Christianity

### • God.

- Jesus replied: “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**”<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22: 37-40)

### • Others.

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### • The Bible.

- **All Scripture is God-breathed** and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the servant of God<sup>[a]</sup> may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The greatest commandment from Matthew chapter 22 reads “Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.” It continues with “And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” This is the basis for building your spiritual life around God and others. And, as was just shown by my using a Bible verse as evidence, Christianity also places the Bible at the center of spirituality. Second Timothy chapter three includes these verses: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

To see what people report is at the center of their spiritual life, I asked them four questions about each potential center—which means a total of 12 questions.

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 multiple ways allows me to make sure people are understanding the question. Each person's four answers for any one of the centers are joined together to get an average that is between 1 and 7. One means they strongly disagreed on all four questions and seven means they strongly agreed on all four questions.

### God at the center

- What God says is what is true, right, and good
- I want God to be pleased with me
- I believe God is actively involved in my life
- I believe the God of the Bible is the one true God

### Others at the center

- I live in ways that help others as much as myself
- I go out of my way to discover the people in need around me that I normally wouldn't see
- I have tremendous love for people I don't know
- I think about strangers' well-being and want what is best for them

### The Bible at the center

- I believe the Bible has decisive authority over what I say and do
- As I go through a normal [day](#) I think of Bible passages relevant to what I am doing
- I talk about Bible passages with my friends
- The Bible is an important part of my daily life

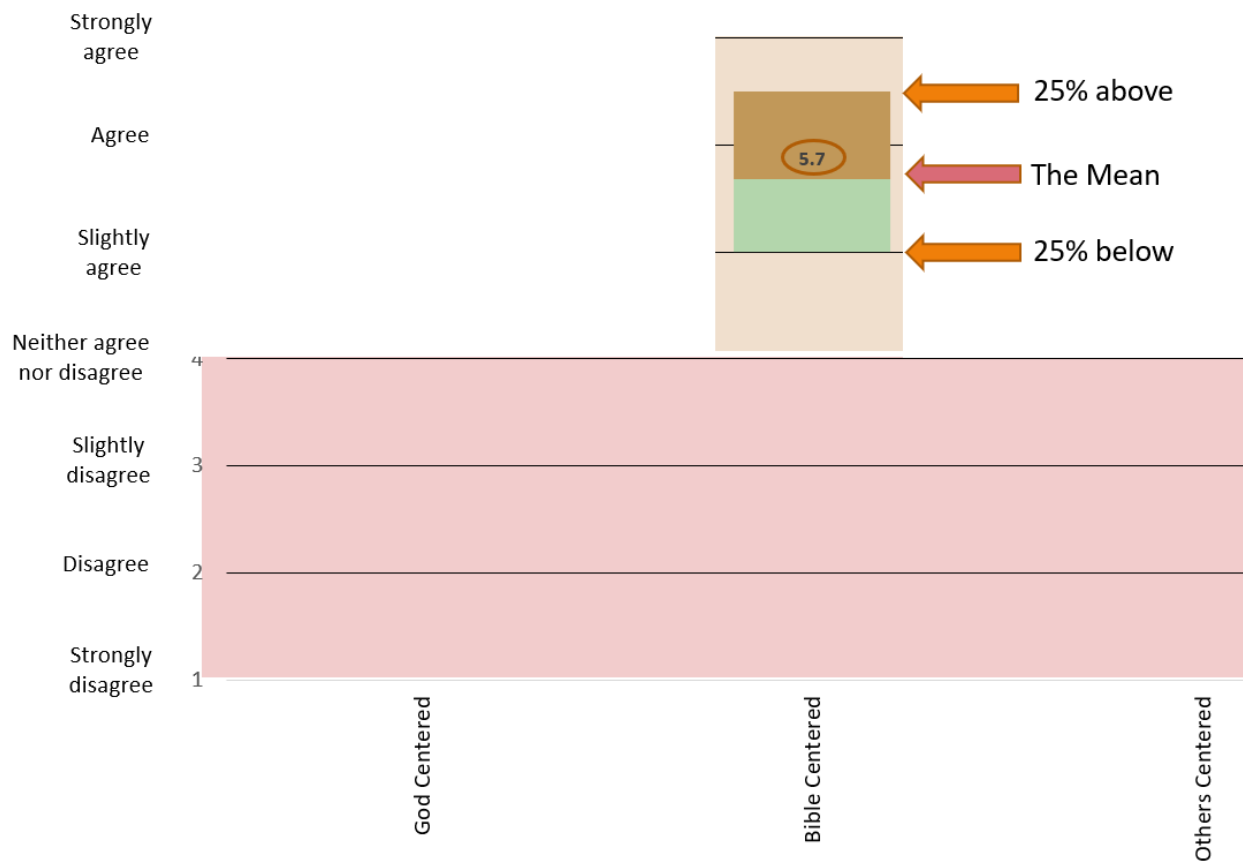
There's also a report at the website for the Center for Scripture Engagement about the full methodology used in the Christian Life Survey.

So what is at the center of the spiritual lives of American Christians?

To show you what I've learned, I'll use a boxplot. Along the bottom you can see the three centers. 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 build their spirituality around that center point—and highlight the bottom in another color—which is the area that shows people tend to disagree that they use a particular spiritual center.

Here are the results for all three centers of the Christian life. To explain what a boxplot tells us, I’ll focus on the center box—it indicates people’s responses about the Bible being at the center of their spiritual life. This box shows the trends in the results for the 6,909 American Christians whose responses we have here.

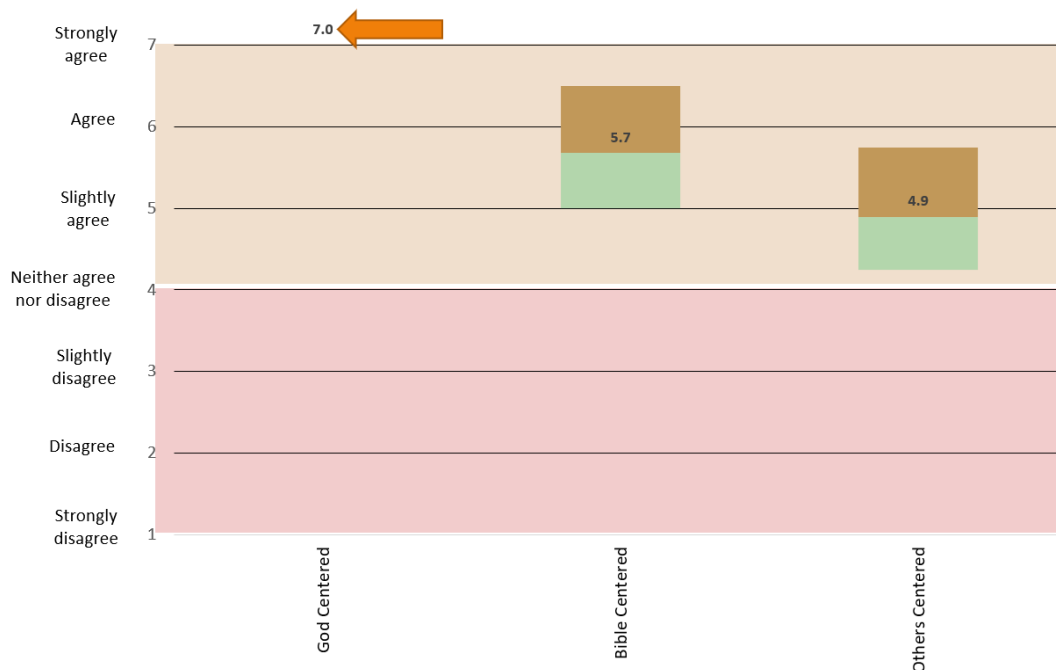


The bottom of the box shows the value where 25 percent of the people had values below there. The top of the box shows us the value where 25 percent of the people are above that line. Using the values where 25% of the people are above the top line and 25% are below the

bottom line is called the interquartile range. The size of the box—how tall or short it is—allows us to see how varied people’s responses were for the centrality of the Bible in their spiritual life. If the box is really tall, people’s responses vary 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 these almost 7000 people, their response about the Bible being at the center of their spirituality was, on average, 5.7. A value of 6 indicates that they agree that this is something that is at the center of their spirituality while a value of 5 would mean they slightly agree. This value of 5.7, with a moderately tall box, tells us that American Christians, on average tend to agree to the set of questions that indicate the Bible is at the center of their spiritual life (that’s what the mean tells us) and there is a moderate amount of variation around that trend (shown by the tallness of the box).

That’s the trend for the Bible being at the center of American Christians’ lives.

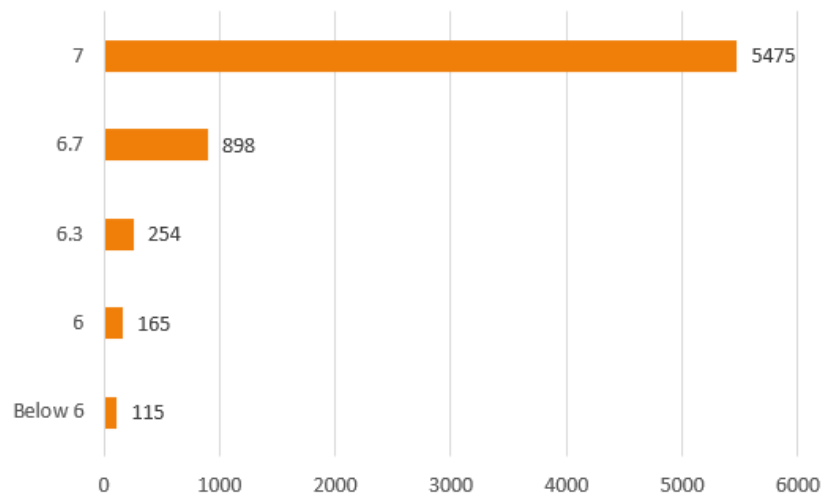


In terms of the second greatest commandment, the average response to the set of questions was only a 4.9—people tended to slightly agree that others were at the center of their spirituality—and there was quite a bit of variation in people’s responses. The box that shows the middle 50 % of the people’s values, reaches almost down to a neutral value and almost up to the agree value.

Finally, let’s look at how people reported the centrality of God in their spiritual lives. Obviously, there’s no box. This is a rare circumstance when there is so little variation and what little variation there is has an unusual shape, that a boxplot doesn’t help us. In essence, I’ve just entered a value of 7 with no box because almost everyone answered nearly all the questions with a strongly agree. Over 90 percent of these folks had a value at, or just a little below, 7. And the people who had values nearer to, or below, 6 create a rather unusual distribution. The numbers are

provided here for you, but rather than explain why a box plot around a mean doesn’t work for these results, I’ll just say that people clearly tend to build their Christian spirituality around God at the center and there is very little variation in that.

Index score	Number of people with that score
7.0	5475
6.7	898
6.3	254
6	165
Below 6	115



Overall, American Christians build their spirituality around God first and foremost, around the Bible, although to varying degrees, and somewhat around others with a good deal of variation in that.

Let's look a little further. Are there demographics that affect what American Christians build their spirituality around? 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 men and women's spiritual centers, there are no meaningful differences. What about education groups—those with different educational degrees—do they tend to have different adoption of the spiritual centers? No, people with different educational attainment don't build their spirituality around different centers. There are also no differences by race, and only one spiritual center is affected by age. Different age groups have the same adoption of having God at the center of their spirituality and having others at the center. There is, though, a difference between age groups on the Bible being at the center of their spiritual lives.

It's a moderately large effect, too.

Effect size ( $\eta^2$ )	Age	Sex	Race	Education
Centered on God				
Centered on the Bible	.054			
Centered on others	.010		.010	

To compare age groups on the extent to which the Bible is at the center of their spiritual life, let's start with our overall results and isolate the results for Bible-centered spirituality. To make it easier to see the differences between the age group's means, we can zoom in on the part of the scale from roughly 5 to 6.

Looking at the means for the age groups, we see that as people get older, they are more likely to report the Bible is at the center of their spiritual life. The youngest age group averages around “slightly agreeing” and the oldest age group averages around “agreeing.” There is

Age Group	Centered on Bible (mean)
65 & up	6.0
50-64	5.8
30-49	5.5
18-29	5.3

clearly an age effect, but these results don’t tell us why that is. It could be that younger generations of American Christians (and in this research that refers to 18 to 29 year olds) have always had less inclination than older groups to center their spirituality on the Bible. It could be that there is a changing approach to the Bible that is affecting younger generations today in a new way. This is something that will need additional research.

In this video I’ve shared some analyses about what devout adult American Christians build their spirituality around. From this research we conclude that American Christians’ spiritual lives are very strongly centered around God. With some variation, they are also centered around the Bible. And with even more variation they are somewhat likely to center their spiritual life around others.

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](http://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](#)