



*A Synopsis of the American Bible Society's
The State of the Bible: USA 2021 (Lisa Cooper,
Jeffrey Fulks, John Farquhar, Alyce Youngblood).*

THE STATE OF THE BIBLE: USA 2021 Research from American Bible Society

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A Synopsis by Tim J. R. Trumper¹
(OPC Ministers' Lunch, July 13, 2021)

Preface by David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group.

Since 2011, *Barna* has worked alongside the American Bible Society to track the state of the Bible in the USA. Most Americans love and revere the Bible, but there is a sizeable and growing segment of adults who are skeptical of the Bible and its influence on society (p. ii). In between are a mass of Americans who are indifferent (who like the Bible lightly). There is a wide gap between the Millennials and Gen Z and the oldest Gen Xers, Boomers and Elders. The church is woefully prepared to answer the questions, mindset, and worldviews of Gen Z. To be clear (cf., p. 66):

Gen Z, were born 1997-2012, age 9-24.

Millennials, 1981-1996, age 25-40.

Gen X, 1965-1980, age 41-56

Baby Boomers, 1946-1964, age 57-75

Elders, 1928-1945, age 76-93

Introduction by John Farquhar Plake

The original *State of the Bible* research dates back to 1812, when missionaries Samuel Mills and John Schermerhorn left New

England to tour the United States reporting on its spiritual condition. They reported a dearth of Bible, ministers, and churches, little respect for the Sabbath, and much profanity, gambling, drunkenness and fighting. The second report in 1816 led to the formation of the American Bible Society (ABS). The ABS operates off three principles: (1) The Bible is needed where it is not available; (2) The Bible is needed where people are hurting; and (3) the Bible is needed where wisdom is in short supply.

The latest survey, begun in January 2012, is based on 3354 online interviews with American adults in 50 states and the District of Columbia. Additionally, a small number of Gen Z youth were invited to participate in the survey, yielding an additional 91 responses. The survey revolves around three key themes: (1) The Movable Middle (those who are Bible neutral and Bible friendly, who are "test-driving the Bible."); (2) human flourishing; (3) trauma and pain.

Chapter 1: The Bible in America

In this season of oppression (e.g., George Floyd), pandemic, and their rage and grief, there is hope the Bible remains a strong foundation for America, leading to individual and communal transformation. There is also hope of moving many from openness to God's Word to deeper engagement with it. Presently:

- Over 54% of Americans think America would be worse off without the Bible ~ a 5% increase from 2020.
- 1 in 7 Americans (14%) think America would be better off without the Bible ~ up 1% from 2020.
- 1 in 3 Americans (33%) believes America would be the same with or without the Bible.
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¹ The synopsis seeks to give a fair account of the survey results. It does not imply agreement with all the comments in the survey, nor does it imply the American Bible Society's accountability for any inaccuracies of reporting or infelicities of

expression. The full report (e-book) is available at <https://sotb.research.bible/>, accessed July 17, 2021.



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- In regard to the Bible's upholding of American values, 72%, 71%, 69% believe the Bible upholds, faith, hope, and love, respectively.
- In regard to the Bible's underpinning of American democracy, only 44% believe it does. 1 in 4 disagrees, leaving 1 in 3 unsure.
- 4 in 10 Americans (41%) somewhat or strongly agree that the Bible, the Koran, and the Book of Mormon express the same spiritual truths. Only one third (32%) see the Bible as unique.
- Yet, most descriptions of what the Bible is, fall within Christian orthodoxy. 26% of respondents believe the Bible is the actual word of God and should be taken literally. Another 19% believe it is the word of God, and is without error, but some should be taken literally and some symbolically. Another 16% say that the Bible has some historical and factual errors, but is still the word of God. Thus, 7 in 10 Americans believe the Bible is the word of God (71%), with 55% holding to a high view of Scripture (the Bible is without error).
- Of the smaller population holding to a lower view of Scripture, 1 in 8, 13% indicates that the Bible is just another book, containing stories and advice. 1 in 10 (9%) holds that the Bible is uninspired, containing solely the writers' understanding of God. 10% are hostile to the Bible, believing it was written to control or to manipulate people.
- A slight majority of Americans agree that the Bible's message is particularly helpful. 54% say that Bible contains everything a person needs to live a meaningful life (down from 68% in 2020!).

Use of the Bible

- Over 181 million Americans opened the Bible in the last year. Up by 7.1% since 2020 (169 million).
- Over one third of the US population (34%) read the Bible at least once a week.
- 50% read the Bible less than twice a year, including never.
- 16% are in the middle, reading the Bible more than twice a year but less than weekly.
- 1 in 6 adults (16%) reads the Bible most days of the week, up from 12% in 2020.
- 63% say their amount of Bible reading is the same as last year, while 9% say it has decreased.

The profile of Bible Users

- As the *adult* population has grown from 237 million in 2011 to nearly 257 million today, the number of adult Bible users in the nation has grown by 10 million to 128 million.
- In January 2020, Bible users in America were at a low point of 48%. By June 2020, those who have never used the Bible had dropped, falling from 35% in 2019, to 31% in September 2020. Yet, by January 2021, the proportion of America adults never to have used the Bible fell to 29%, its lowest point since 2016.
- In addition to the drop in never users is a modest rise in new users. Of the 50% of Americans using the Bible, 37% self-identify with other religions. 31% (3 in 10) Boomers and Elders interact with the Bible multiple times a week, but only 14% of Gen Z. Less than half of Gen Z are Bible users. 69% of Black Americans, 52% of Hispanic Americans, 46% of White Americans, and 44% of Asian Americans are Bible users. Nearly 3 in 5 adults in the South are Bible users (57%), compared to 46% in the Northeast, 45% in the Midwest, and 44% in the West.



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- 59% still prefer print or paper Bibles. Yet, those engaged in reading the Scriptures are twice as likely to prefer reading their Bibles on their smartphones or tablets (27%), compared to the Bible disengaged (14%). Audio programs and computer programs trail at 8 and 6%. Smartphone or tablet use has risen to 38% of Gen Z engaged and 36% of Millennials, compared to 44 and 47% preferring print Bibles. Only 7% of Elders prefer to read from a screen with 84% preferring print.

Motivations, Emotions, and Frustrations Surrounding Bible Usage

- Two of the greatest reasons why Americans read the Bible: It brings them closer to God (24%); it offers comfort (16%).
- Gen Z speaks more in terms of obligation: “I’m supposed to” (15%), “It’s part of my studies at school” (14%). Elders read the Bible for help with decisions (14%), for wisdom (13%).
- Black and Hispanic say the Bible grants them hope (16 and 21%, respectively).
- 25% of adult Bible readers have no frustration with Bible usage. 16% are unsure where to start and 15% that they have insufficient time to read Scripture. Only 11% say they struggle to get excited. Sometimes the language (12%) or the Bible stories (11%), or biblical history create barriers (8%).

Scripture Engagement Trends

To assess the engagement with Scripture, ABS and Barna considered: (1) Frequency (on their own and as part of a large church service); (2) Impact: (on their relationship with God and others); (3) Centrality (the Bible’s influence on life’s choices and decisions).

- *Bible Disengaged:* 54% are followers of other religions. Since 2018, however, the most major shift in Bible usage is the

exodus from Bible disengaged to Movable Middle, reducing Bible disengaged from 54% (2018) to 46% (2020). The remaining Bible Disengaged has now fallen to 39% (men) and 37% (women). Black Americans are the smallest percentage of Bible Disengaged (15%), while white and Asian Americans are the highest (50% and 44%). Thus, since 2020, the Movable Middle has increased from 26% to 37%. Hearts are being softened, but will this trend evolve into a deeper engagement with Scripture?

Bible Disengaged prefer print Bibles to smartphones (68% to 14%), and are more likely than the Scripture Engaged to use a computer program (15%). 1 in 5 Bible Disengaged (20%) say they open the Bible because they are supposed to. Bible Disengaged adults are disproportionately single (40%) and members of Gen Z (43%). They feel some social pressure to read Scripture as opposed to the Elders who have a desire to reach for it for their own support and guidance.

- *Bible Engaged:* Since mid-2020, women have returned to being more engaged with Scripture than men (27 to 23%). Black Americans score highest ethnically (38%), followed by Hispanics (26%). Theologically, evangelical Protestants lead the way with Scripture engagement (46%, with 16% scoring high enough to be labeled Bible centered). Evangelicals are followed by “historically Black Protestants” (38%). Of the Scripture Engaged, 4 in 10 use Scripture to get closer to God. 88% of them find meaning in the Bible. Few Scripture Engaged have frustration with the Bible, with 47% of them having none at all.
- *Movable Middle:* This group is occupied by historically Black Protestants (55%), mainline Protestants (47%), and Roman Catholics (44%). Yet, 31% are followers of other religions, a significant number of whom have begun a journey with the Bible. Those in the Movable Middle are more likely to



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experience frustration, most frequently where to start (23%). 66% find meaning for their lives, 22% find comfort, and 25% feel closer to God. They need resources to reduce their frustration.

Conclusions

1. During a tumultuous period in America people have been reaching out for the Bible. The Movable Middle now amounts to 95 million adults.
2. New Bible readers find the Bible difficult to navigate and to understand. They will need relational guides to help them and digital tools to improve their access to Scripture.
3. America's youngest generations are reaching for electronic devices when they want to explore the Bible.

Chapter 2: Finding the New Normal.

As COVID subsides, will Americans continue to reach for their Bibles? Will they continue to seek the Lord in times of stress, finding connection with church services (online or in person)? As of April 2021, 550,000 have died of COVID, 41% of respondents (54% in cities) say they knew someone who has died from the virus. COVID has impacted families, friends, churches, and schools. Among the respondents, Millennials have had the highest hospitalization rate.

Interestingly, across the country infection was more likely among the Scripture Engaged than the Scripture Disengaged: 20% (22% seeking in-patient care) among the Scripture engaged; 19% (19% seeking in-patient care) among the Movable Middle; and 16% (11% seeking in-patient care) among the Bible Disengaged. Scripture Engaged are also more likely to know someone who died: 49%;

moveable Middle 44%; and Bible Disengaged 33%. There is no indication in the data as to why this is: "Lifestyle issues, including inability or unwillingness to maintain social distance and being a member of a large family or social network may play a role" (p. 38). Though older generations are more vulnerable, Gen Z has known the most stress with most lifestyle changes.

Scripture Engagement Trends²

- Women bore the brunt of childcare duties during COVID so it is perhaps unsurprising that their Scripture engagement fell behind men's for the first time.
- In 2020, men and women without dependant children saw a non-significant decrease in Scripture engagement, but by January 2021, this increased (men +4, women, +6).
- Among parents with dependent children the story is mixed. January-June 2020, COVID had little impact on the engagement of fathers with Scripture, but there was a sharp decline among mothers (falling on average from 78 to 73). Mothers with children have now recovered to 78).
- The evidence suggests higher stress levels across the categories, including the Scripture engaged. Yet the Scripture engaged register better well-being scores than the Bible Disengaged.

Church Engagement Trends

- March 2020, only 3% of churches remained open for normal use with 73% completely shut.
- By the fall of 2020, 75% of churched adults reported having watched a church service on line.
- 60% of adults told Barna that online services were the only digital activity their churches made available, suggesting a

² The following numbers are not percentages. See the full report for their meaning.



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need for a more holistic approach to online or hybrid ministry.

- 44% who attended in-person services said that their desire to read the Bible increased, but only 33% of those who attended digitally.
- The evidence of COVID suggests that connection to God and a community is one of the main benefits that a church community has to offer. 51% said in-person church services increased their sense of connection to God, 50% online, and 54% both. 44% said church serves increased connection to other people, 40% online, 46% both.
- In comparison to levels of church attendance in June 2020, church attendance in person and online has fallen across America by 3%. Overall, 44% of adults have attended a church service in the past 6 months. Gen Z is the most likely group to attend, but their participation has fallen by 15%. In the past 6 months (Nov. 2020–May 2021) church attendance has been as follows: Gen Z 53%, Millennials 45%, Gen X 42%, Boomers 40%, and Elders 45%.
- As we come out of COVID, it will be particularly important for church leaders to re-engage Gen Z and Millennials in the corporate practice of their faith.
- Most churched adults favor a mix of in-person and online services. In the past 6 months, Evangelical Protestant attendance has been as follows: 19% both, 40% online, and 41% in-person. Evangelical and mainline Protestants are more likely to report hybrid attendance, but their preference is in-person attendance (41% evangelicals, 48% mainline Protestants).

COVID-19 Comforts

The synopsis largely omits this section, and weaves some of its comments in elsewhere.

- The comforts include relationships (53%), activity (52%), substance (46%), and spiritual comforts (44%).
- Most popular comforts: seeking out a family member (43%), prayer and/or meditation (38%), food (34%). Reading the Bible ranks seventh at 23%.
- Gen Z and Millennials stand out from older adults in not listing prayer or meditation as one of their top three comforts. Older generations hold prayer in the highest regard.
- Black Americans select “Reading the Bible” as one of their top three comforts, unlike any other group. Both Black and Hispanic place prayer/mediation as their greatest comfort. Regardless of age, they are much more likely to choose this than Asian Americans. White Americans fall between, with prayer as one of their top three comforts. Historically Black and Evangelical Protestants lead the way in listing spiritual comforts, prioritizing prayer, family members, and Bible reading among their top three sources of comfort.
- “Religious nones” place television, food, and family atop their sources of comfort.
- Dysfunctional comforts are less popular. Among the Scripture Engaged, Movable Middle, and Bible Disengaged: Alcohol (9, 13, 16%), Marijuana (7, 11, 14%), Prescription drugs (6, 6, 6%); Other recreational drugs (2, 3, 3); Food (33, 34, 35%); TV or streaming services (24, 27, 39%).

The Scripture Engaged, though greatly challenged, remain engaged in their faith and in their Bible. As we move more cautiously toward “a new normal” many Americans are looking to God for help.



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Pathway of Scripture Engagement

See the diagram on p. 75.