

# Evangelical label and beliefs often at odds, research says

December 8, 2017

NASHVILLE (BP)—About one in four Americans say they are evangelical Christians. Most of them are white, live in the South and identify as Republican. Many go to church every week. But they're not always sure what they believe.

## Gap between identity and belief

Fewer than half of those who identify as evangelicals (45 percent) strongly agree with core evangelical beliefs, according to a survey by LifeWay Research.

"There's a gap between who evangelicals say they are and what they believe," said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research, based in Nashville.

Three out of 10 evangelical believers reject the term "evangelical." The survey revealed 69 percent of respondents who hold evangelical beliefs self-identify as evangelicals.

For the past few years, LifeWay Research has been looking at the intersection of belief and belonging in the evangelical movement.

Some research studies define "evangelical" by self-identification, with respondents picking from a list of religious traditions. Others categorize people as evangelical by the churches with which they identify.

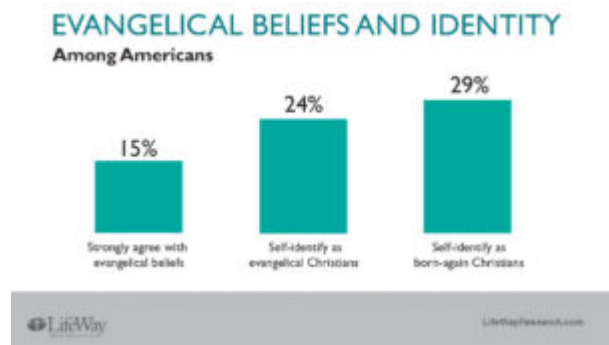
In this new survey, LifeWay used a set of four questions about the Bible, Jesus, salvation and evangelism developed in partnership with the National

Association of Evangelicals.

Respondents are categorized as having evangelical beliefs if they strongly agree with all four statements: The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe; it is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior; Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin; and only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

## Evangelical belief

Fifteen percent of Americans are evangelicals by belief, according to LifeWay Research. By contrast, 24 percent of Americans self-identify as evangelicals.



Researchers found some significant differences between the two groups.

Evangelicals by belief are more diverse than self-identified evangelicals. Fifty-eight percent, from the standpoint of beliefs, are white, 23 percent are African-American and 14 percent are Hispanic. Five percent claim another ethnicity.

By contrast, 70 percent of self-identified evangelicals are white; 14 percent are African-Americans; 12 percent are Hispanic; and 4 percent claim another ethnicity.

Evangelicals by belief go to church more often. Seventy-three percent say they attend services once a week or more. That drops to 61 percent for self-

identified evangelicals.

The two groups of evangelicals share some similarities. About half are Southerners, and most are Republicans.

## Geography matters

Just over half (55 percent) of evangelicals by belief live in the South; 22 percent are in the Midwest; 16 percent in the West; and 6 percent in the Northeast.



Among self-identified evangelicals, 48 percent live in the South, 25 percent in the Midwest, 17 percent in West and 9 percent in the Northeast.

“If you are an evangelical who lives in the South, you’re often going to run into people who believe the same things you do,” McConnell said. “In the Northeast, you’re often going to feel alone.”

Two-thirds of evangelicals by belief (65 percent) are Republicans or lean Republican while 30 percent are Democrats or lean Democratic and 4 percent are undecided or independent.

Among self-identified evangelicals, 64 percent are Republicans or lean Republican, 33 percent are Democrats or lean Democratic, and 3 percent are undecided or independent.

Both groups also tend to be older, with 31 percent of Americans 65 and

older identifying as evangelicals. That drops to 22 percent among those 18 to 34. Meanwhile, 19 percent of those 65 and older hold evangelical beliefs, dropping to 10 percent for those 18 to 34.

The more education Americans have, the less likely they are to be evangelicals of either type. A quarter of Americans with a high school diploma or less (26 percent) or some college (28 percent) identify as evangelicals, whereas 18 percent of those with a bachelor's degree say they are evangelicals.

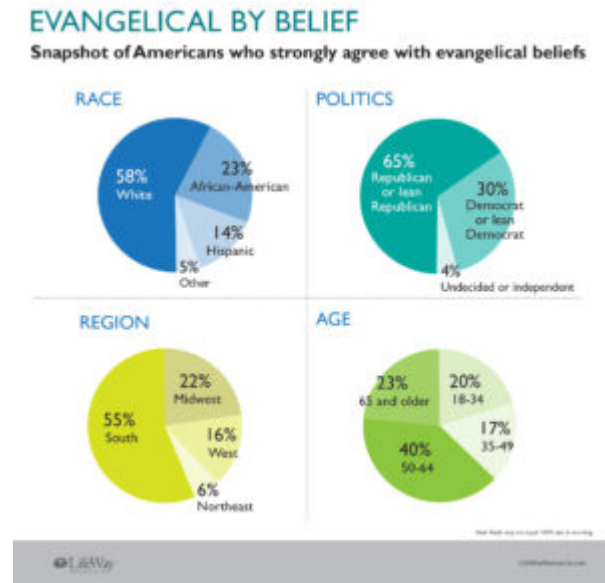
Americans with some college (20 percent) are more likely to have evangelical beliefs than those with a bachelor's degree (9 percent) or graduate degree (12 percent).

## **Politics and religion**

Some of the results surprised McConnell, especially when it came to politics. He expected more political differences between the two types of evangelicals.

"The political differences between them turn out to be very small," he said.

LifeWay Research also asked if politics played a role in whether Americans identify as evangelicals. It appears that few evangelicals shun the term because of its political implications.



When asked, “If the term had nothing to do with politics, would you consider yourself an evangelical Christian?” one in four Americans say yes—almost identical to the number who identify as evangelicals without any political qualifications.

McConnell suspects party affiliation and race play a bigger role in how people vote than faith does.

“Evangelical religious beliefs by themselves do not explain political behavior,” he said. “Ethnic group is a better predictor of political behavior, but the best predictor of voting patterns is one’s political party identification.”

## **African-Americans prefer ‘born again’ label**

The term “born again” often has been used as a synonym for self-identified evangelicals. LifeWay Research found some overlap between the two groups.

Two-thirds (66 percent) of self-identified born-again Americans say they are evangelicals. That remains true even if the term evangelical didn't have political implications (67 percent).

Like self-identified evangelicals, fewer than half (45 percent) hold evangelical beliefs. And they are less likely (56 percent) to attend services once a week or more than either type of evangelicals.

Born-again Americans have more political parity than either type of evangelicals. Fifty-six percent are Republican or lean Republican; 39 percent are Democrats or lean Democratic; and 5 percent are undecided or independent.

African-American Christians appear to find the term "born again" more appealing than "evangelical."

African-Americans are more likely to say they are born again (49 percent) than whites (27 percent), Hispanics (24 percent) or those from other ethnicities (19 percent).

African-Americans are also the most likely to have evangelical beliefs (30 percent). Whites (13 percent), Hispanics (13 percent) and those from other ethnicities are less likely (9 percent). African-Americans (30 percent) and whites (26 percent) are more likely to say they are evangelical than Hispanics (18 percent) or those from other ethnicities (11 percent).

Some research groups in the past limited the term "evangelical" to white Christians, McConnell noted. Others have focused on white evangelical voters, leaving out other ethnic groups.

"For many African-Americans, the term 'evangelical' is a turn-off, even though they hold evangelical beliefs," McConnell said. "The term 'evangelical' is often viewed as applying to white Christians only. And that's unfortunate. It's lost some of its religious meaning that actually unites

these groups.”

LifeWay Research conducted the study Nov. 10-12 using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. People in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the Web-enabled KnowledgePanel. Those who agree to participate but do not have Internet access are provided a laptop and Internet connection at no cost.

For this survey, a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults (18 and older) was selected from the KnowledgePanel. Analysts used sample stratification and base weights for gender, age, race/ethnicity, region, metro/non-metro, home ownership, education and income to reflect the most recent U.S. Census data. Study-specific weights included for gender by age, race/ethnicity, region and education to reflect 2016 General Social Survey data.

The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.1 percent. Margins of error are higher in subgroups.