

What Is Sin?

Evangelical Beliefs and Behaviors



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1 Over 99% of evangelical Protestants believe in the concept of sin.
- 2 Exactly what behaviors evangelicals define as “sin” varies widely, from just 6% who say dancing is sin to 96% who feel adultery is sin.
- 3 Behaviors that at least three out of four evangelicals consider to be sinful:
 - Adultery (96%)
 - Racism (87%)
 - Reading/watching pornography (86%)
 - Homosexual activity or sex (86%)
 - Antisemitism (84%)
 - Using hard drugs (84%)
 - Sexual thoughts about someone you are not married to (83%)
 - Sex before marriage (82%)
 - Having an abortion (81%)
 - Gossip (78%)
 - Homosexual thoughts (78%)
 - Not saying anything if a cashier gives you too much change back (77%)
 - Swearing or cursing (76%)
- 4 On two behaviors, we can compare beliefs with actions. One is tithing. Among evangelicals who believe it is a sin not to tithe, just 14% come anywhere close to a tithe in their own giving. In fact, twice as many (27%) gave not a penny to church or charity in the past 12 months.
- 5 The average total generosity among those who say failing to tithe is a sin is 2.7% of household income given to church or charity.

6 The other behavior is worship attendance. Three out of four evangelicals who do not believe failure to attend worship services regularly is sinful still typically attend each week (digitally or in person). Among those who do believe this is sin, 36% do not attend weekly, and 24% do not even attend monthly.

7 Fifteen of the 26 behaviors we measured show no differences in being viewed as sinful according to political beliefs. Evangelicals who are politically liberal are less likely than conservatives to view ten of the behaviors as sinful.

8 However, a clear majority of liberal evangelicals still view as sinful behaviors including having an abortion (62%), homosexual activity (70%), and sex before marriage (73%).

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1973 book *Whatever Became of Sin?* psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote,

“The word ‘sin,’ which seems to have disappeared, was a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. It described a central point in every civilized human being’s life plan and lifestyle. But the word went away. It has almost disappeared—the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn’t anyone sin anymore? Doesn’t anyone believe in sin?”

Thirty-four years later, in 2007, Grey Matter Research conducted a nationwide study and found **87% of American adults believed there is such a thing as sin**. This was not a study of Christians, but a study of Americans in general.

The key is just *what* people defined as sinful. This ranged from 4% of all Americans who believed dancing is sinful to 81% who said this about adultery.

Today, 51 years after Dr. Menninger’s book, [Grey Matter Research](#) and [Infinity Concepts](#) have partnered to look at how evangelical Protestants view the concept of sin.

A Universal Belief

In the 2007 study, we first got everyone on the same page regarding sin.

Since many people from different religions or no religion took part in the study, we defined the concept very broadly, rather than from a specifically Christian perspective: “The word ‘sin’ is often used to describe something that is almost always considered wrong, particularly from a religious or moral perspective.” We also made sure to explain that the question is not whether they agree or disagree with each behavior we tested, but whether they believe it typically represents *sin*.

For consistency, we defined things the same way in this 2024 study.

Belief in sin is not one of the four core beliefs we use to define evangelicals (partly because most non-evangelicals also believe in sin, so it is not a strongly differentiating factor). But less than 1% of evangelical Protestants do not believe there is such a thing as sin.

Although belief in sin does not define one as an evangelical, it is fair to say belief that sin exists is, for all practical matters, a universal evangelical belief.

99%
of evangelicals
believe in the
concept of sin

Where Do You Stand?

What do you believe typically qualifies as sin?

You can fill out the checklist below before reading the results of the study in order to compare your perspectives to American evangelical Protestants today.

BEHAVIOR	YES	NO
Adultery	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sex before marriage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual thoughts about someone you are not married to	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading or watching pornography	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Homosexual activity or sex	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Homosexual thoughts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Having an abortion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Using “hard” drugs such as cocaine, heroin, meth, LSD, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Smoking marijuana	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting drunk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drinking any alcohol	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Using tobacco	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Racism	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Antisemitism	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gossip	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not saying anything if a cashier gives you too much change back	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not reporting some income on your tax returns	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Telling a “little white lie” to avoid hurting someone’s feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swearing/cursing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gambling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dancing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not taking proper care of your body	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Being significantly overweight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not giving 10% of your income to a church or charity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not attending church or religious worship services on a regular basis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working on Sunday/the Sabbath	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Not So Universal

While nearly every evangelical Protestant believes in the concept of sin, what evangelicals define as sin varies tremendously from one person to the next.

We asked evangelicals about 26 different things—would they usually define each one as sin or sinful behavior? The average evangelical defines 17 of these 26 behaviors as sin.

There are two common themes in terms of how evangelicals define sin. For one thing, **women typically see more things as sinful than men.** Women are more likely to define ten of the 26 behaviors as sinful. Men, for their part, are not more likely than women to define even one of them as sinful.

The other common theme is that **the more engaged people are in their faith, the more likely they are to define these various behaviors as sin.**

Grey Matter Research has developed two models measuring spiritual engagement. The Spiritual Engagement score is based on how frequently (if at all) people pray, attend worship services, attend small group Bible studies or prayer groups, read the Bible, and study the Bible. We categorize engagement levels as Full, High, Moderate, Low, and None (with the evangelical population, None is infrequent enough that we combine the bottom two categories into Low/None).

Evangelicals with Spiritual Engagement Scores of Full and High are more likely than others to believe 17 of the 26 behaviors we asked about are sinful.

The Christian Media Score is based on how frequently (if at all) they engage with specifically Christian television, radio, or music. In this study, given the levels of engagement among this population, we combine Full and High engagement (calling it High), and combine all levels below High into Lower.

Those with a High Christian Media Score are more likely than those with a Lower score to consider 16 of the 26 behaviors as sinful.

Are those with higher spiritual engagement more unnecessarily legalistic? Or do they have a better understanding of what really separates us from God? Obviously, your answer to that will depend on just how you define sin.

In total, out of the 26 behaviors we evaluated, half are considered to be sin by at least three out of every four evangelicals.

Sexuality

We asked about six areas of sexuality, plus abortion.

While abortion is not sexual behavior, it results from sexual behavior. All seven of these behaviors are considered to be sin by at least three out of four evangelicals.

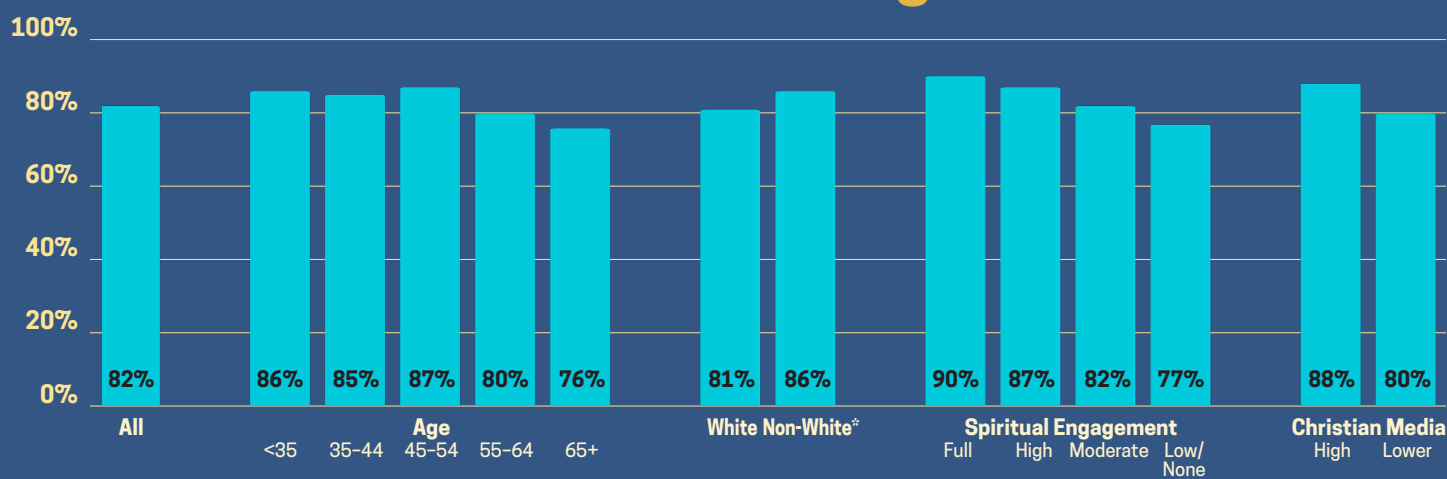
ADULTERY – 96%

The behavior most commonly considered to be sinful (among all behaviors we tested—not just those related to sexuality) is adultery. Ninety-six percent of evangelicals believe adultery to be sinful. When anything is so close to 100%, there are rarely subgroup differences. Adultery is no exception—it is close to universally viewed as a sin by every type of evangelical.

SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE – 82%

While almost all evangelicals consider adultery sinful, fewer (82%) believe sex *before* marriage is a sin. **Younger evangelicals are actually more conservative on this than are those 55 and older.** As with many other behaviors, with higher Spiritual Engagement Scores and Christian Media Scores come greater agreement that this represents sinful behavior. But even among evangelicals with low or no spiritual engagement, more than three out of four consider sex before marriage to be sinful.

Is Sex Before Marriage a Sin?

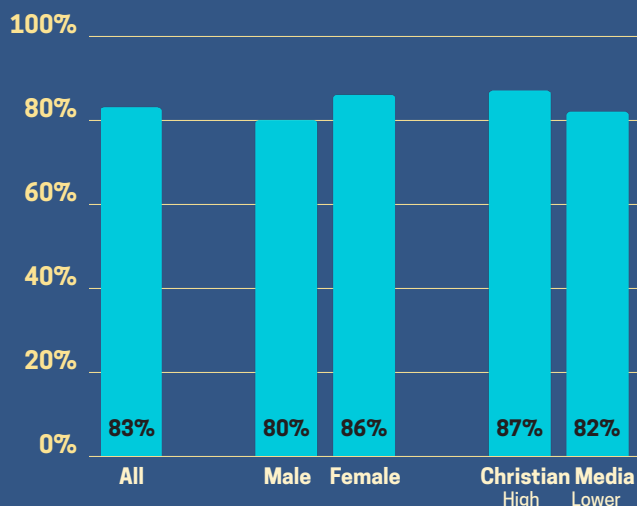


*Although Latinos are part of the Caucasian race, as an ethnic group they are included under Non-White rather than White.

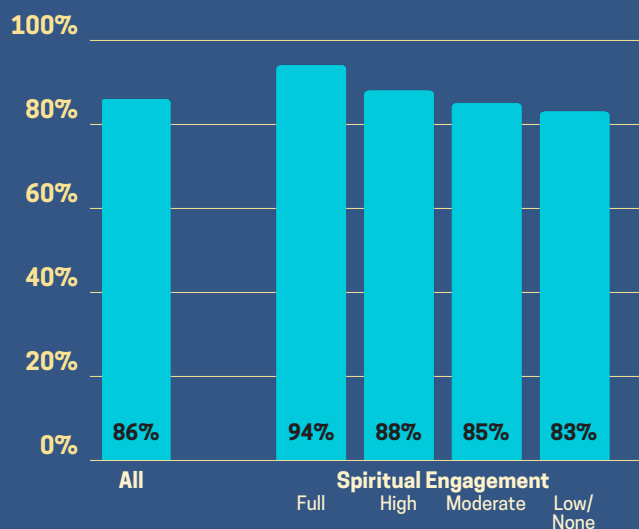
SEXUAL THOUGHTS ABOUT SOMEONE YOU ARE NOT MARRIED TO – 83%

Right about the same proportion feel sexual thoughts about someone to whom they are not married fits the definition of “sin.” There are few subgroup differences on this. Women are somewhat more likely than men to define this as sin, and people with a higher Christian Media Score are a bit more likely to think this than are evangelicals with less engagement with Christian media.

Are Sexual Thoughts a Sin?



Is Pornography a Sin?



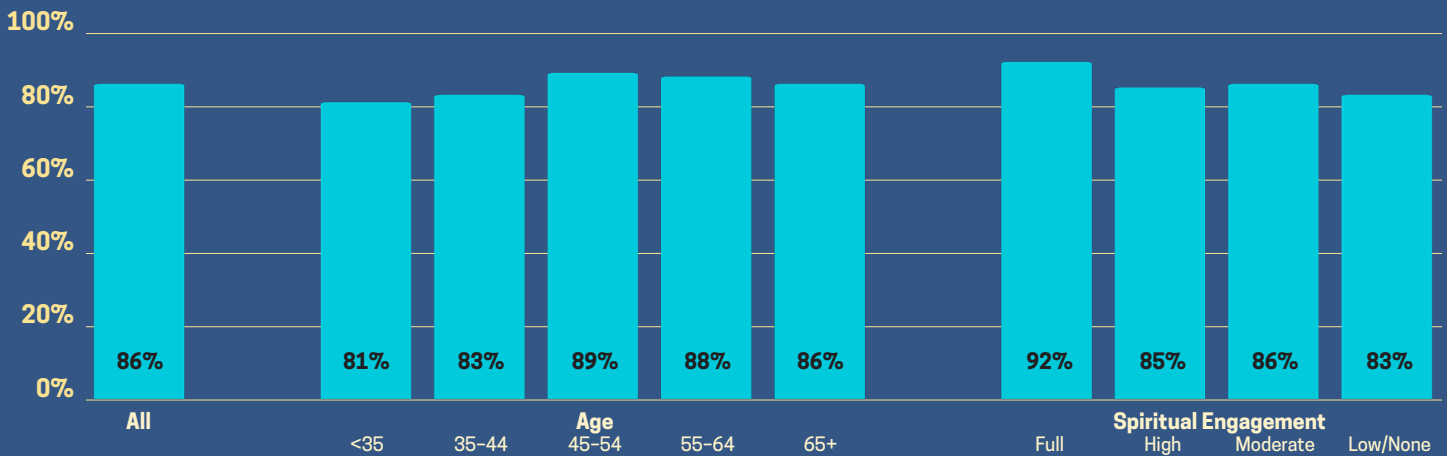
READING OR WATCHING PORNOGRAPHY – 86%

Nearly nine out of ten evangelicals consider pornography to be a sin. The only subgroup variation on this behavior is that evangelicals with higher Spiritual Engagement Scores are especially likely to consider this as sinful behavior. There is no significant variation by age or gender.

HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY OR SEX – 86%

The vast majority of evangelicals consider homosexual activity/sex to be a sin. This is somewhat lower among people under age 45, as well as among evangelicals with lower Spiritual Engagement Scores. Still, the proportion is at least 80% for every subgroup.

Is Homosexual Activity a Sin?



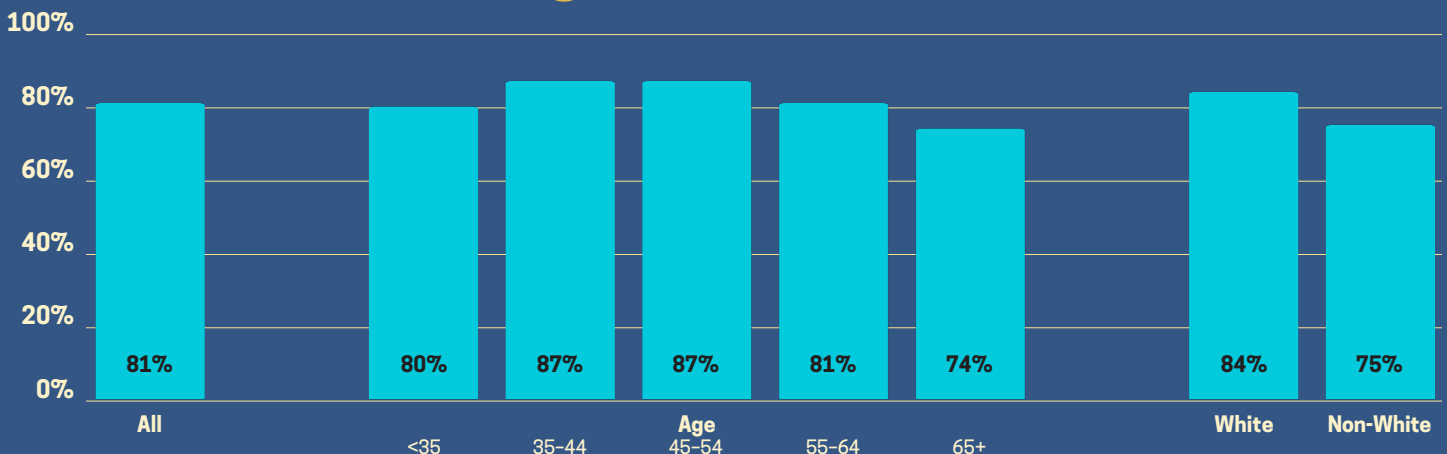
HOMOSEXUAL THOUGHTS – 78%

While 86% believe homosexual activity is sinful, that drops a bit when the issue in question is homosexual thoughts. And while for homosexual activity there are some differences by age and spiritual engagement, those differences for homosexual thoughts are small enough as to be statistically insignificant.

HAVING AN ABORTION – 81%

Evangelicals age 35 to 54 are the most likely to consider abortion a sin; those who are under 35 or 55+ (especially 65+) are less likely to view it in that manner. Evangelicals of color also are somewhat less likely than others to view abortion as sinful. This does not vary by spiritual engagement or Christian media use.

Is Having an Abortion a Sin?



Substance Use

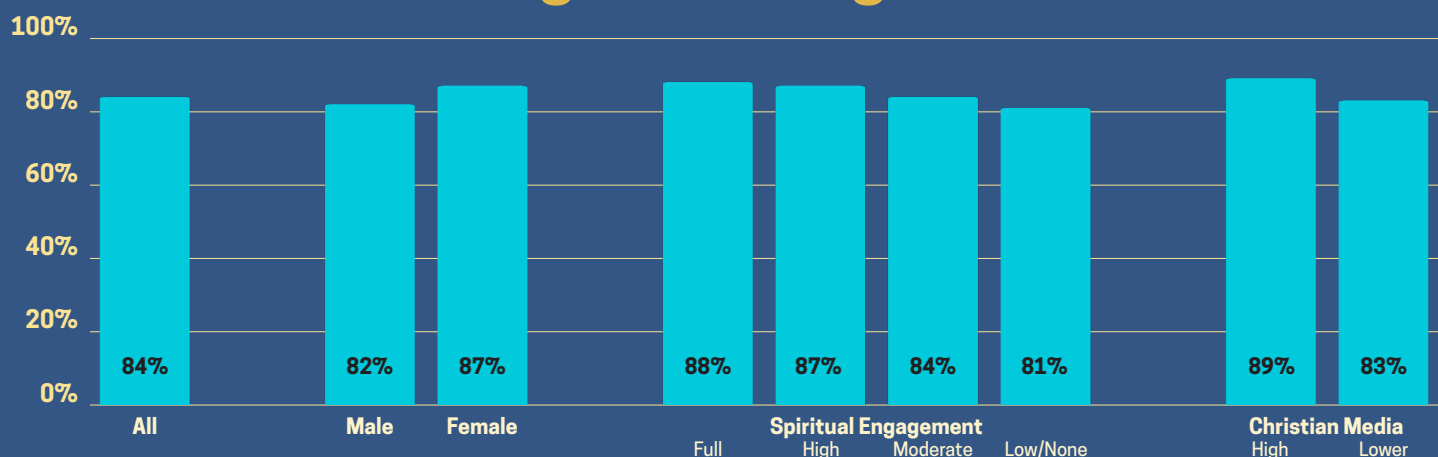
Evangelical attitudes about substance use often are inconsistent, varying substantially by the type and the amount of the usage.

Most believe hard drugs are sinful, but only half feel this way about marijuana. A majority say getting drunk is a sin, but relatively few see alcohol use in and of itself as a sin.

USING HARD DRUGS – 84%

Using “hard” drugs such as cocaine, heroin, meth, or LSD is considered a sin by 84% of evangelicals. Women are a bit more likely to consider this as sinful, and the greater the involvement in spiritual activities and Christian media, the more likely evangelicals are to feel hard drugs are sinful.

Is Using Hard Drugs a Sin?

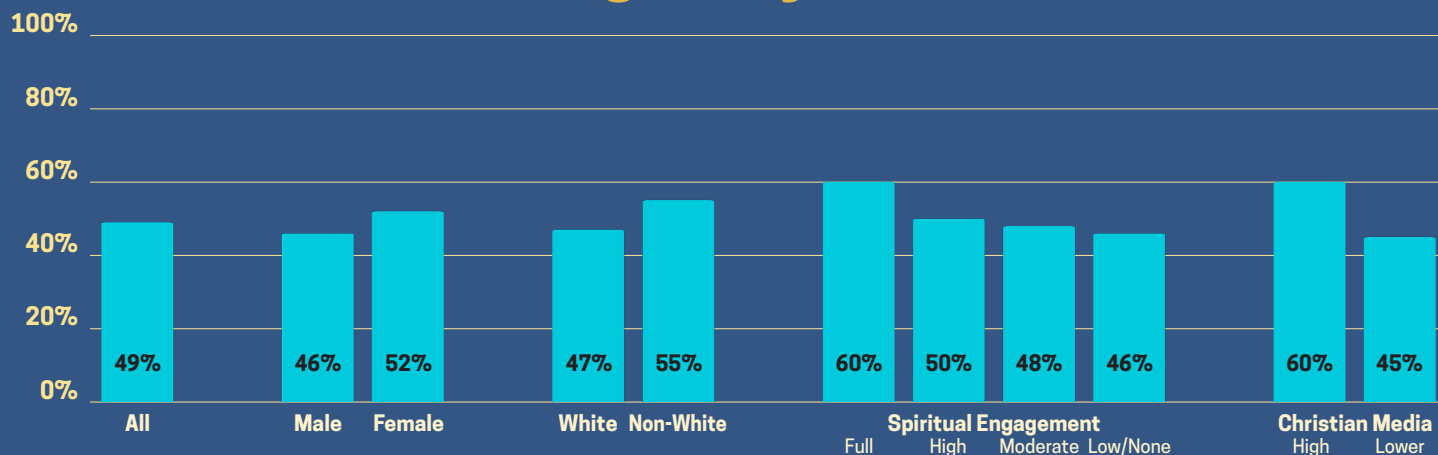


SMOKING MARIJUANA – 49%

While most evangelicals feel hard drugs are sinful, they are split on the issue of marijuana. Only half believe marijuana is sinful. Women, evangelicals of color, and those with higher levels of spiritual engagement and Christian media use are more likely to find this sinful, but the differences are not massive. Even among those with a Spiritual Engagement Score of Full, 40% do not believe smoking marijuana qualifies as a sin.

Although it is often assumed that younger people have more permissive attitudes toward marijuana, at least among evangelicals, that is not the case—**all age groups have nearly identical opinions on whether marijuana is a sin.**

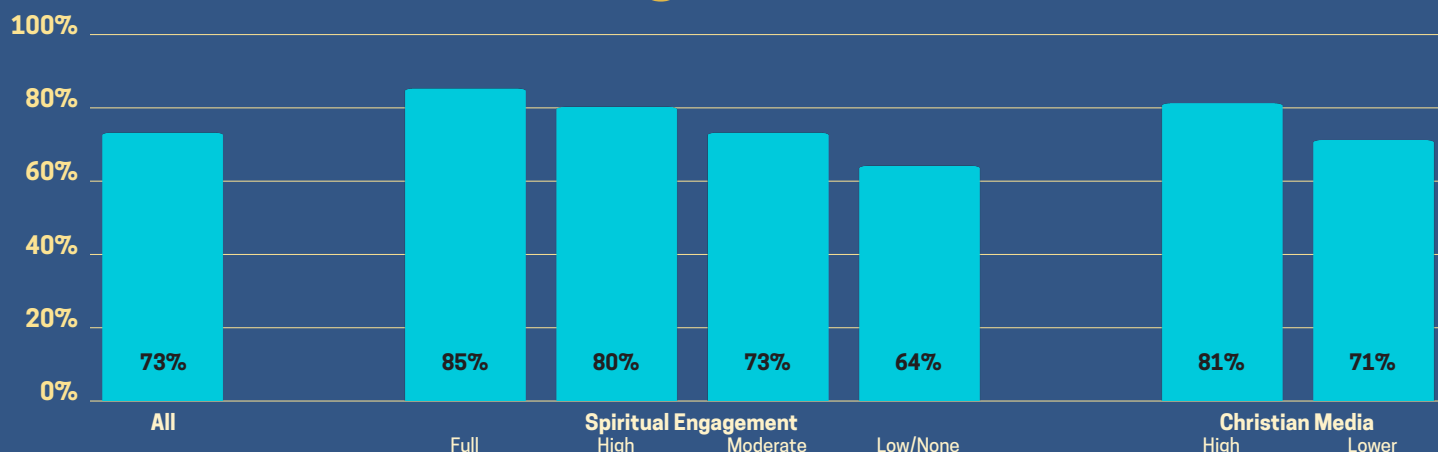
Is Smoking Marijuana a Sin?



GETTING DRUNK – 73%

One out of four evangelicals does not believe there is anything sinful about getting drunk. There is no variation on this by demographic factors such as age, gender, or race/ethnicity, but there are significant differences by spiritual engagement. For those with low or no spiritual engagement, a majority (64%) still see drunkenness as sinful. This is far below the proportion who see hard drugs as sinful (81%). But this ramps up as spiritual engagement increases; among those with full engagement, 85% see getting drunk as a sin—almost the same as the proportion who see hard drugs as sinful (88%).

Is Getting Drunk a Sin?

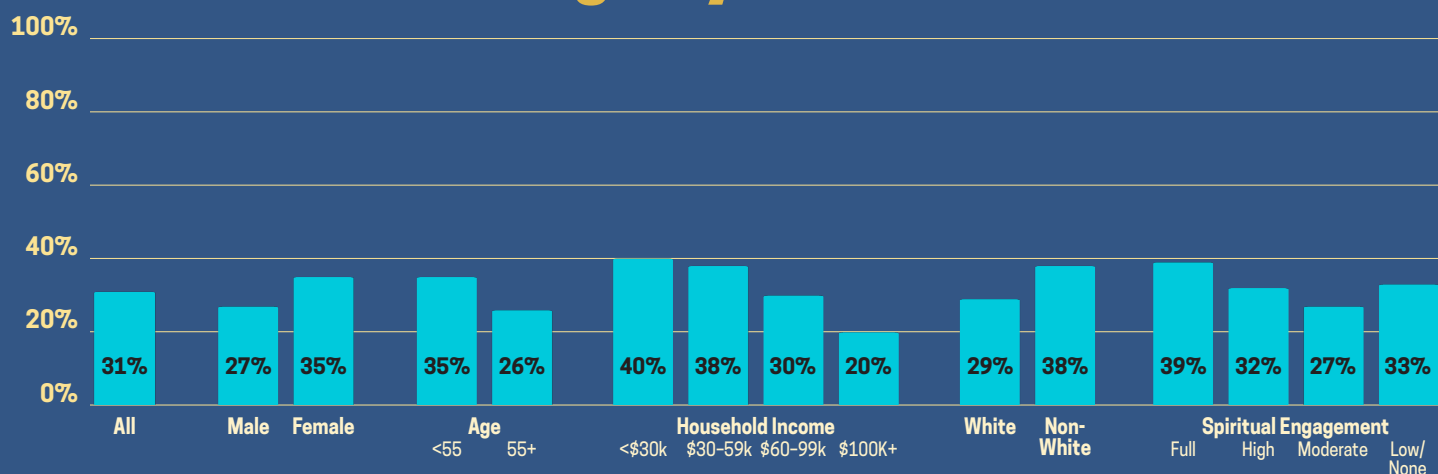


DRINKING ANY ALCOHOL – 31%

Most evangelicals see drinking to excess as sinful, but just 31% see alcohol use as sinful. This varies only a little bit by Spiritual Engagement Score. Women and evangelicals of color are somewhat more likely to see alcohol as sinful, and there is a divide at age 55—people 55 and older are less likely to see alcohol as sinful than are younger believers.

There is also a substantial difference by household income. Among the lowest-income believers, 40% consider alcohol sinful. This is similar among people with household incomes from \$30,000 to \$59,999 (38%), but it drops among those earning \$60,000 to \$99,999 (30%), and is especially low among higher-income evangelicals (20%).

Is Drinking Any Alcohol a Sin?



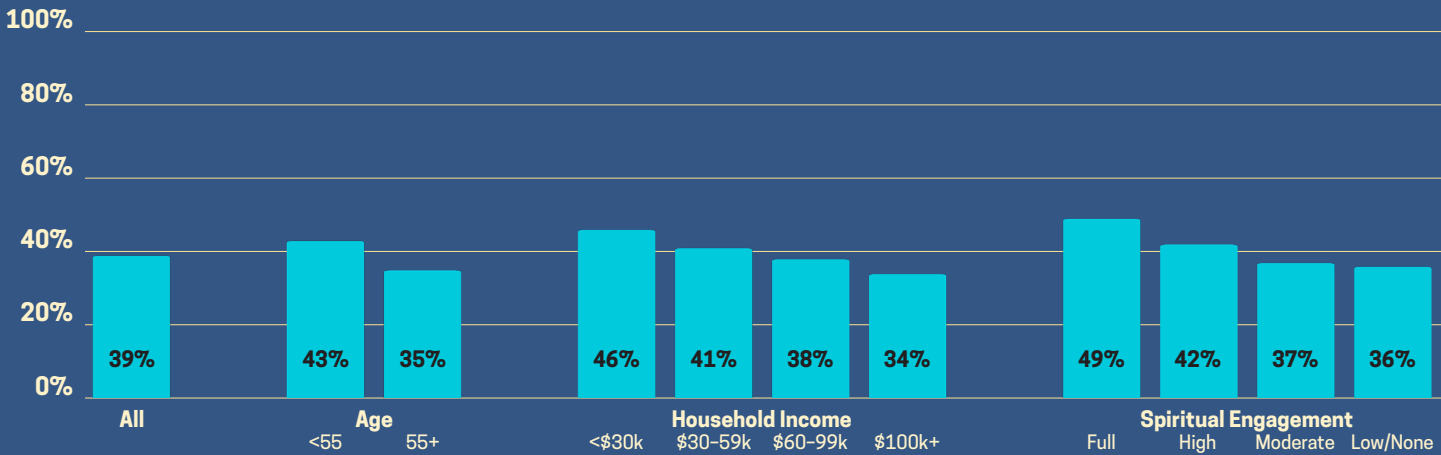
USING TOBACCO – 39%

Four out of ten evangelicals believe tobacco use is sinful. Like alcohol, tobacco sees a divide at age 55, with older evangelicals being more permissive on this than younger evangelicals. And, just like alcohol, this varies by household income. The lower the income, the greater the propensity of evangelicals to see tobacco use as sinful.

The irony in this is that among all Americans, smoking is dramatically more common among lower-income individuals. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2021, 12% of Americans smoked cigarettes. However, this ranges from a low of just 7% in high income groups to 12% in middle income and 18% among low-income adults.

Also, like alcohol, tobacco is more likely to be seen as sinful when people are more spiritually engaged.

Is Using Tobacco a Sin?



How We Treat Others

There are, of course, many ways to treat people. We focused on three of them: racism, antisemitism, and gossip. All three are considered sins by most evangelicals.

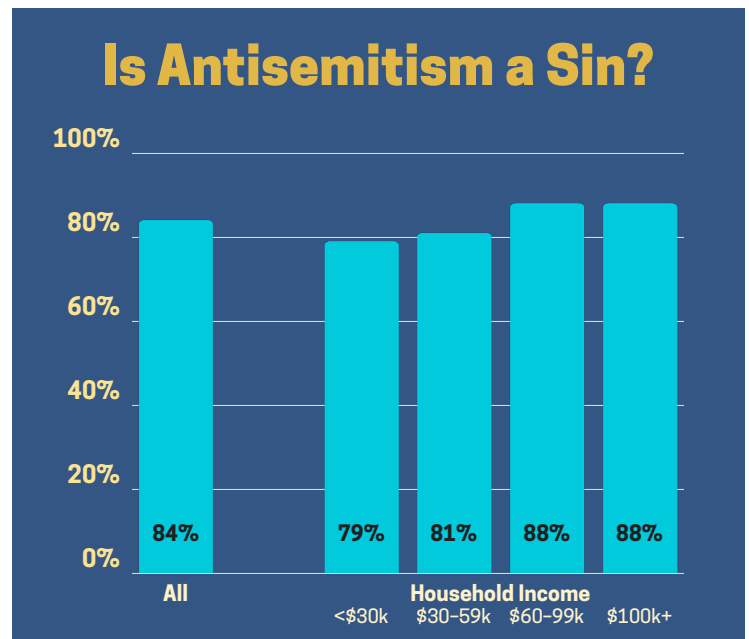
RACISM – 87%

Evangelicals across the board see racism as sinful. There are no subgroup differences of note—including by racial or ethnic background. Evangelicals of color and White evangelicals are equally likely to view racism as a sin.

ANTISEMITISM – 84%

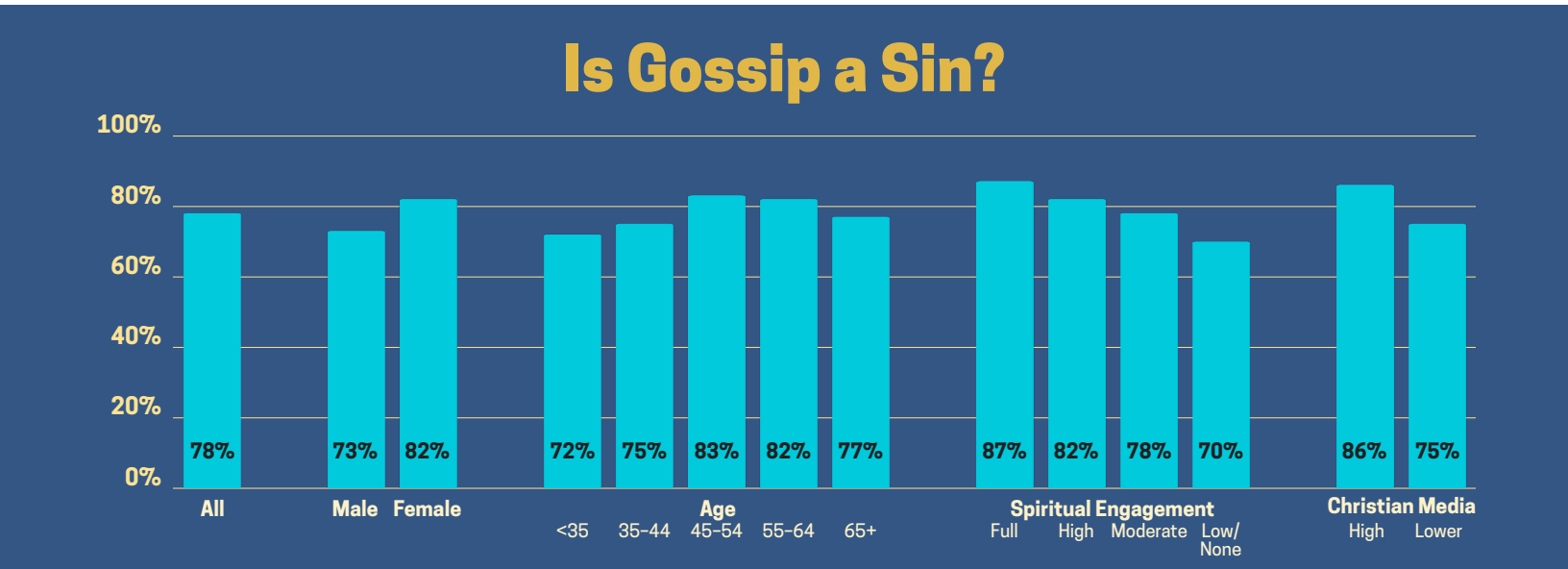
There is little variation on this point, with no significant differences by gender, age, race/ethnicity, spiritual engagement, etc. Only in the area of household income do we see some differences. The lower the income, the less likely are evangelicals to see antisemitism as sinful.

Also, note that thoughts on antisemitism and racism do not vary much. Seventy-nine percent of evangelicals consider both to be sinful. Eight percent define racism as a sin, but not antisemitism. In the reverse, 5% say antisemitism is sinful, but not racism. Eight percent believe neither one qualifies as sin.



GOSSIP – 78%

Women are more likely than men to believe gossip is a sin. It is more likely to be seen as sinful among evangelicals 45 to 64 years old than by other age groups. The higher the Spiritual Engagement Score and Christian Media Score, the more likely the individual is to see gossip as sinful.



Honesty

Most people would consider dishonesty to be wrong. But what, in daily life, actually counts as dishonesty?

A majority of evangelicals consider all three of our scenarios to represent sinful behavior. A very interesting dynamic is how evangelicals of different ages see this. For simplicity, we will just compare the youngest group (under 35) and the oldest group (65 and older).

In the minds of young evangelicals, keeping wrong change you are given by a cashier (68%) and failing to report all of your income on tax returns (63%) are both less likely to be viewed as sinful than is telling a “little white lie” in an attempt to spare someone’s feelings (72%).

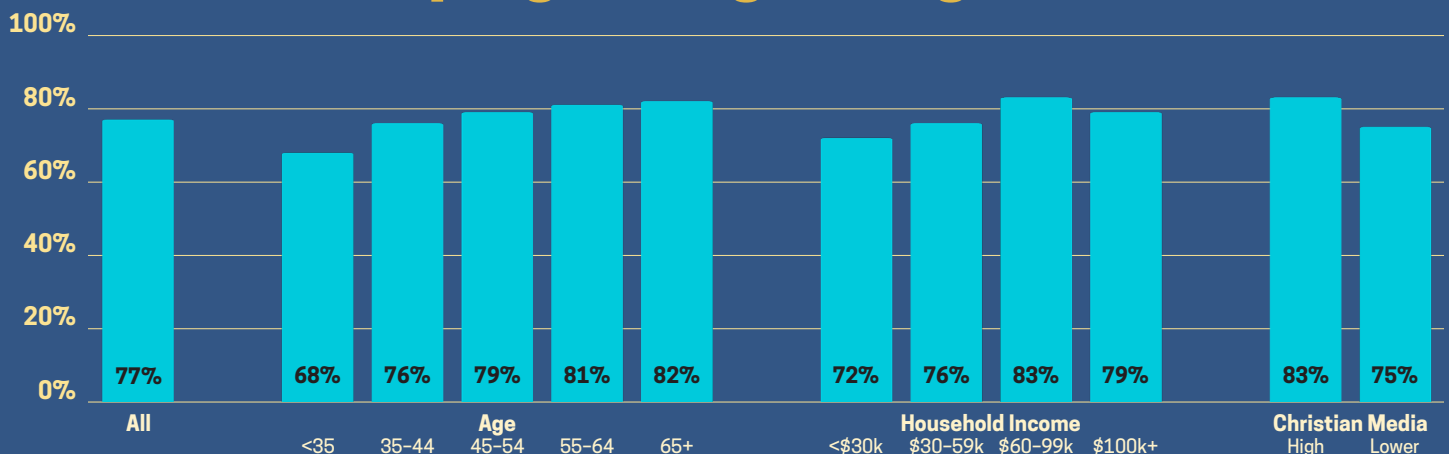
Older evangelicals are exactly the opposite. Keeping wrong change is more likely to be considered sinful (82%) than underreporting income on tax returns (76%), which in turn is more likely to be seen as sinful than telling a “little white lie” (60%).

All three of these represent dishonesty, but **they are viewed in very different ways according to the age of evangelicals.**

NOT SAYING ANYTHING IF A CASHIER GIVES YOU TOO MUCH CHANGE BACK – 77%

The younger the evangelical, and the lower the income, the less likely that person is to consider this behavior sinful. There is no difference by spiritual engagement, but heavier Christian media users are more likely to see this as sinful.

Is Keeping Wrong Change a Sin?

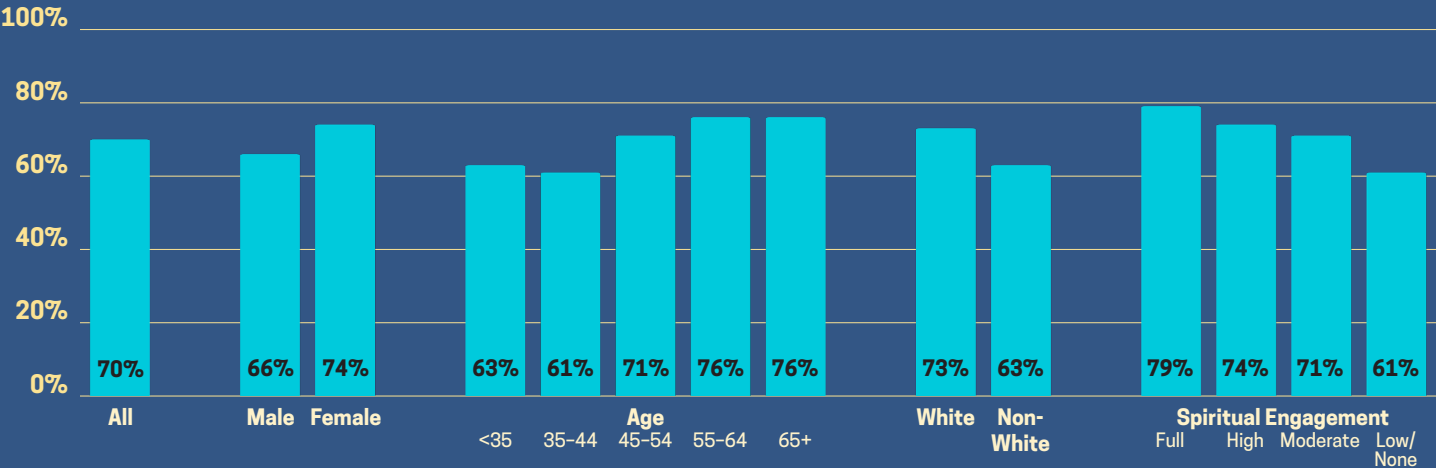


NOT REPORTING SOME INCOME ON YOUR TAX RETURNS – 70%

Apparently, there is a small proportion of evangelicals who believe it is wrong to keep extra change a cashier gives you by mistake, but it is okay to cheat Uncle Sam. While 77% say the former is sinful, this drops to 70% for the latter.

Still, seven out of ten evangelicals consider underreporting income to be sinful. It is particularly high among women, older evangelicals, Whites, and those with higher levels of spiritual engagement.

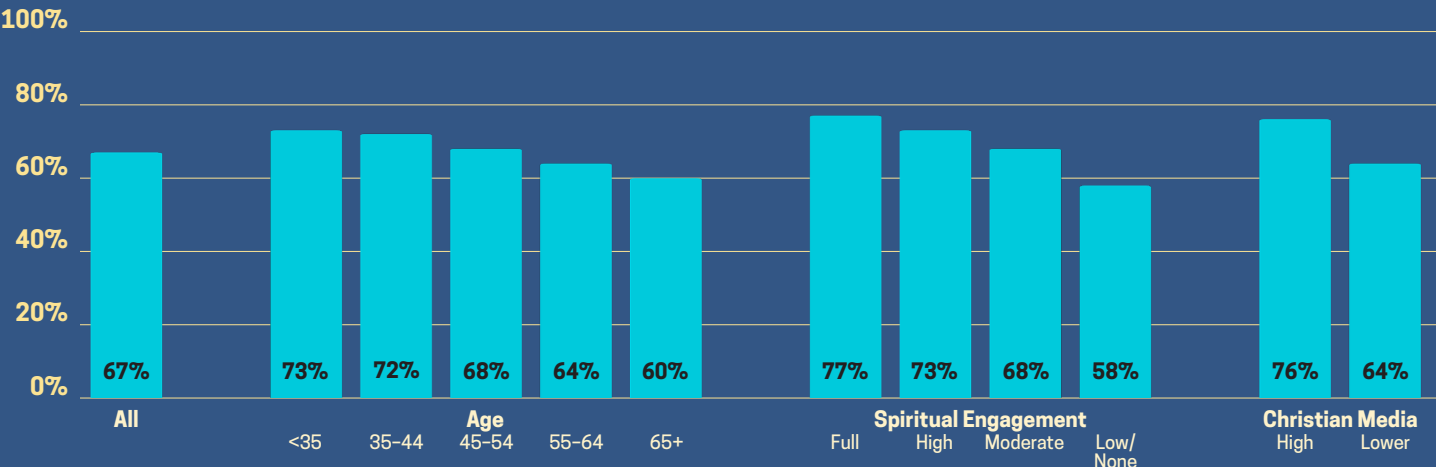
Is Underreporting Income to the IRS a Sin?



TELLING A “LITTLE WHITE LIE” TO AVOID HURTING SOMEONE’S FEELINGS – 67%

Two out of three evangelicals see this behavior as sinful. It is higher among younger people and declines as age increases. It is also much higher among those with higher spiritual engagement and greater involvement with Christian media.

Is Telling a “Little White Lie” a Sin?



Personal Behavior

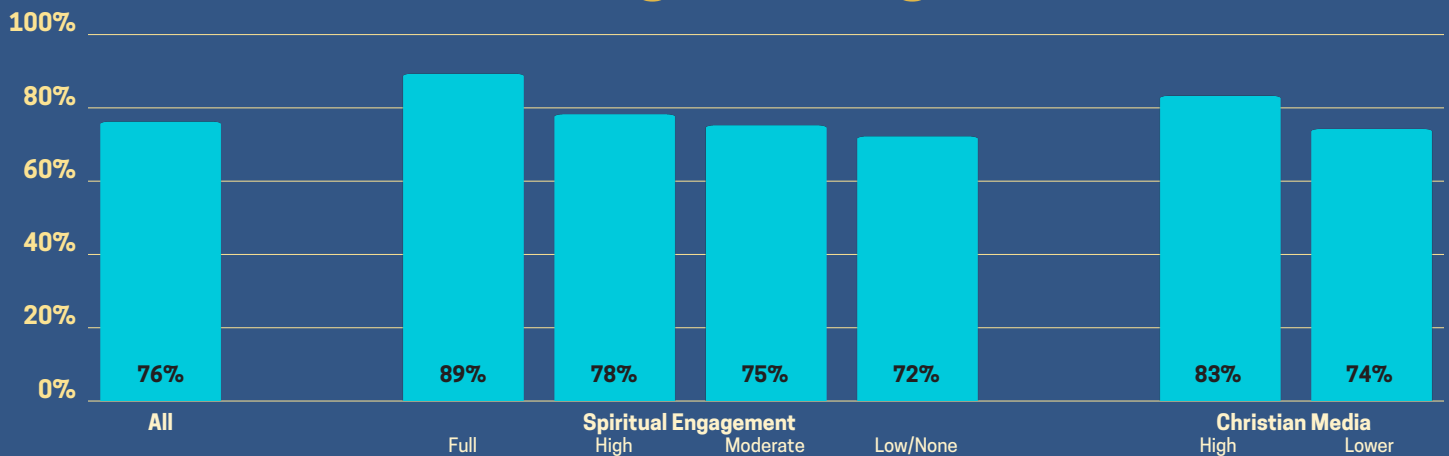
Rarely is dancing considered to be sin, but a majority do believe gambling and swearing/cursing represent sinful behavior.

SWEARING/CURSING – 76%

Three out of four evangelicals believe it is a sin to swear. Of course, this might vary according to what words are used, but we did not get that granular in the study (nor did we figure many people would appreciate being asked about specific examples of blue language in a survey).

There are no demographic differences for swearing/cursing, but significant differences by both Christian Media Score and Spiritual Engagement Score.

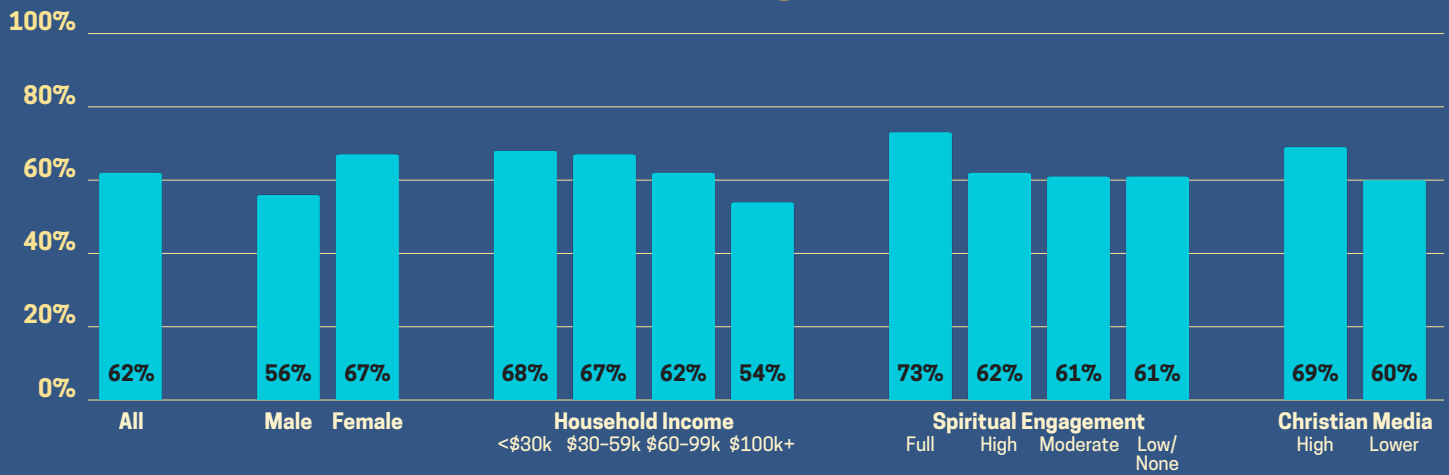
Is Swearing/Cursing a Sin?



GAMBLING – 62%

Fewer evangelicals—but still a clear majority—consider gambling to be a sin. This is more common among women, evangelicals with lower income levels, and those with full spiritual engagement and high Christian media engagement

Is Gambling a Sin?



DANCING – 6%

Despite what movies such as *Dirty Dancing* might lead you to believe, very few evangelicals consider dancing to be sinful. There are no noteworthy differences among different types of evangelicals.

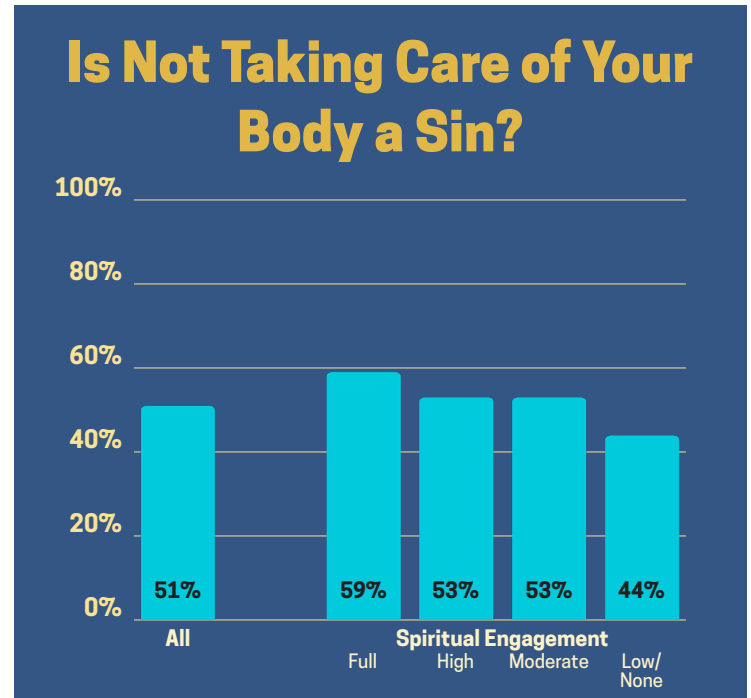
Self-care

The two areas we evaluated in this section bring out an odd, inconsistent definition of sin among evangelicals.

NOT TAKING PROPER CARE OF YOUR BODY – 51%

“Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit” is the biblical phrase often used to explain why some evangelicals believe smoking, drinking, drug use, and other physically detrimental activities are sinful. However, only half of evangelicals believe not taking proper care of their bodies represents sin.

The only subgroup difference is by Spiritual Engagement Score. The higher the score, the more likely the individual is to consider this to be sinful.

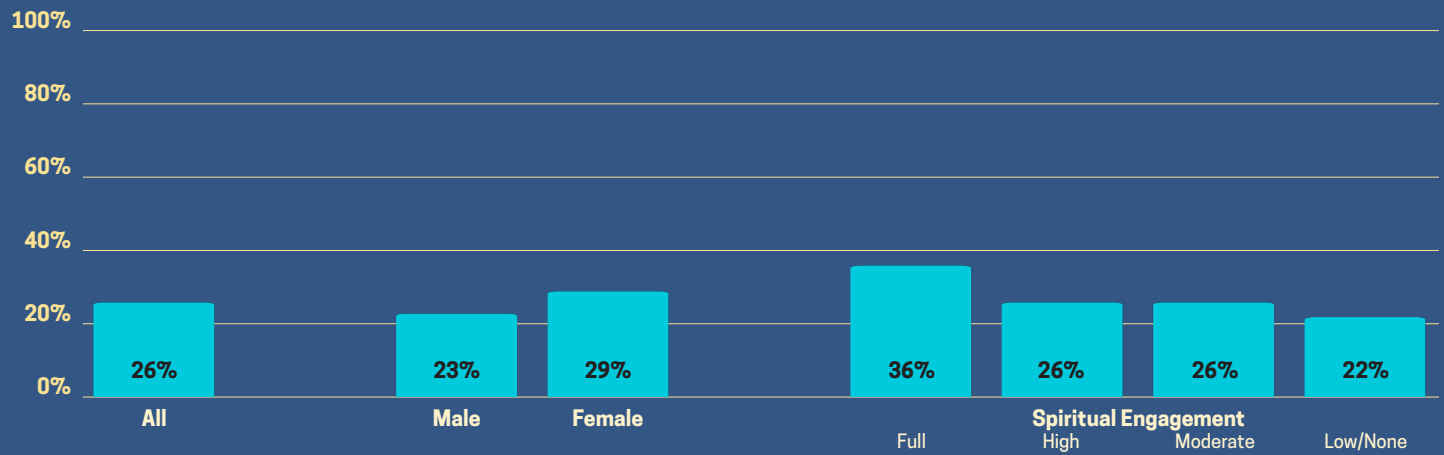


BEING SIGNIFICANTLY OVERWEIGHT – 26%

Medical science tells us one of the worst things for our physical bodies is obesity. Yet while half of evangelicals believe not taking proper care of their bodies is sinful, just one out of four will say this about being significantly overweight. It is an odd level of reasoning—rather like saying it is critical to keep your car in peak condition, but you do not need to bother changing your oil.

Women are a bit more likely than men to consider being significantly overweight as sinful, and those with greater spiritual engagement are also more likely to feel this qualifies as sin.

Is Being Significantly Overweight a Sin?



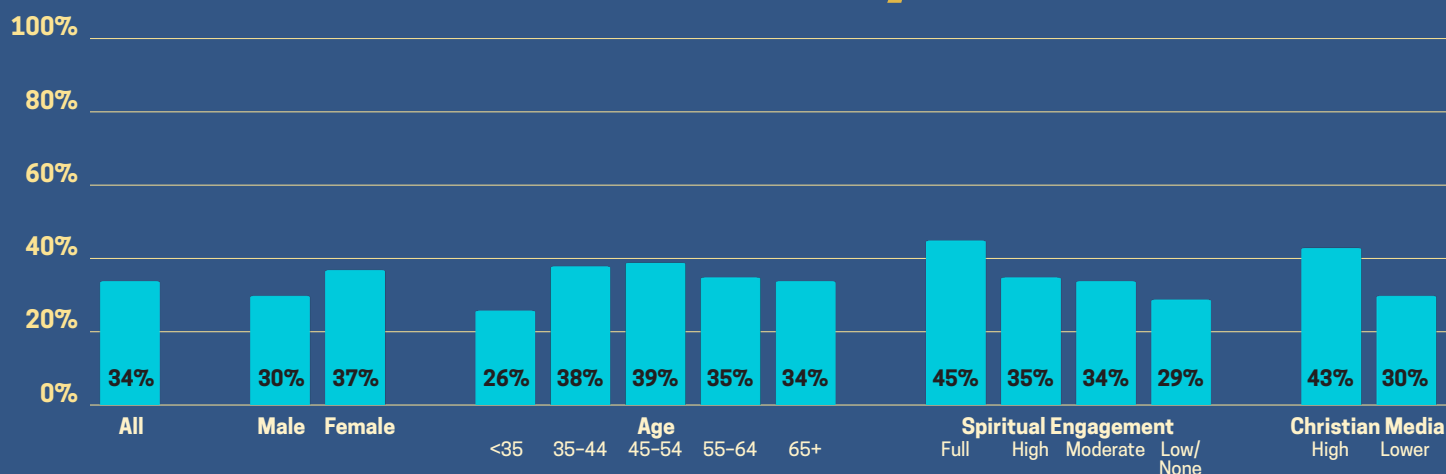
Faith Activities

This section provides a couple of opportunities to see how much evangelicals live up to their own beliefs.

NOT GIVING 10% OF YOUR INCOME TO A CHURCH OR CHARITY – 34%

One-third of evangelicals believe it is a sin not to tithe. Feeling this is sin is a bit more common among women than among men. It is much higher among people with strong spiritual engagement and greater use of Christian media. Evangelicals under age 35 are less likely than others to feel this is sinful.

Is Not Giving 10% of Your Income to a Church or Charity a Sin?



For most of these questions, it is impossible for us to look at the actual behavior alongside the belief. We do not have a measure of how often believers gamble or swear or get drunk, for instance. But in the case of tithing, we do have such a measure. In this same study, we measured how much evangelicals actually give to church and charity.

Among people who believe it is a sin not to tithe, 27% did not make any donation to either church or charity in the past 12 months. This is statistically indistinguishable from the 32% who do not believe failing to tithe is a sin and who did not give to church or charity.

Generosity, defined as the amount of money they gave away as a proportion of their total household income, is only slightly higher among people who believe failing to tithe is a sin.

But as the graph shows, the average evangelical who believes failing to tithe is a sin gives 2.7% of his or her income to church and/or charity, not 10%. This is not a tremendous amount higher than the average of 2.1% among those who do not believe failing to tithe is a sin.

In fact, among evangelicals who see this as sinful, only 14% actually give away even close to 10% of household income to church or charity (because generosity is an estimate, we are generous in our definition, and consider anything at 8% or higher to be a tithe). Among people who do not believe this is a sin, 8% tithe or are close to it.

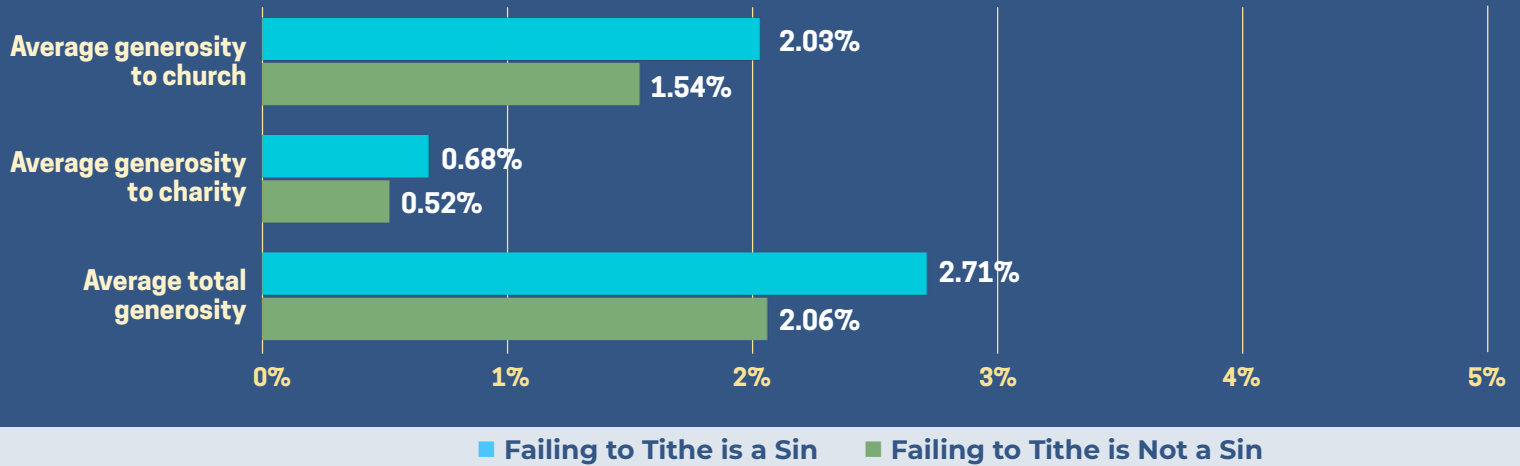
Think about that for a moment. Thirty percent of all evangelical Protestants believe they are sinning if they do not give 10% of their income to church or charity, but still do not do so.

Other studies Grey Matter Research has done show donors badly overestimate their giving when asked about what *percent of income* they give, as opposed to *how many dollars* they give. So, it might be understandable if someone were giving 6% or 8% and thought they were tithing. But among those who say failing to tithe is a sin, 27% gave nothing at all to church or charity in the past 12 months. Another 30% gave under 1% combined. It is hard to believe you are tithing when the actual percentage being given is under 1%. It is impossible to believe this when you are fully aware you gave nothing. This 30% is mostly people who fully believe they are sinning and continue not tithing anyway. So, in essence, six out of ten Protestants who believe it is sinful not to tithe not only are not giving away a tenth ... they are not even giving away a tenth of a tenth.

In fact, evangelicals who believe it is a sin not to tithe are twice as likely to give nothing at all as they are to come close to a tithe (27% to 14%).

Average Generosity

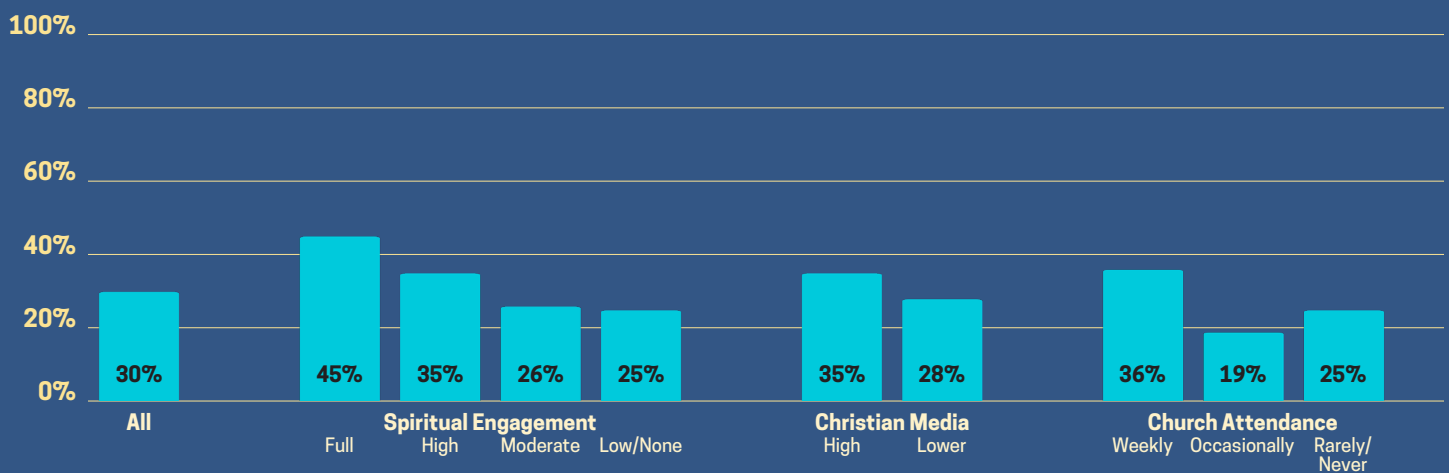
By Belief That Failing to Tithe Is a Sin



NOT ATTENDING CHURCH OR RELIGIOUS WORSHIP SERVICES ON A REGULAR BASIS – 30%

Only three out of ten evangelicals believe failing to attend worship regularly is sinful. Most of the differences we can see have to do with spiritual engagement, but even among those who have a Spiritual Engagement Score of Full, fewer than half believe it is sin not to attend worship.

Is Not Regularly Attending Church a Sin?



As with tithing, we can compare stated beliefs with actual behavior. It is obvious most churchgoing evangelicals attend not because they want to avoid sinning—they attend for other reasons. Among people who attend worship at least once a week (either digitally or in person), just 33% believe to stop doing so would be sinful.

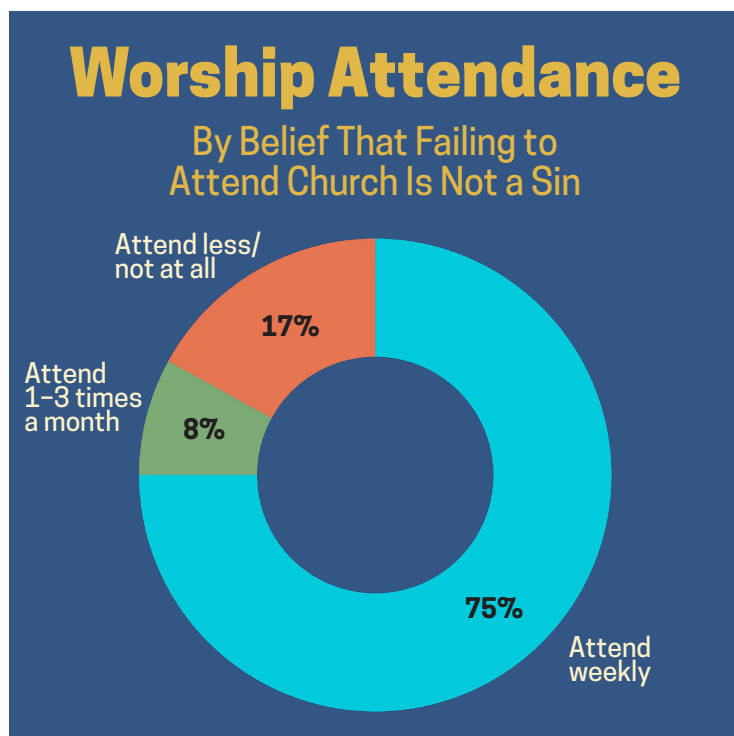
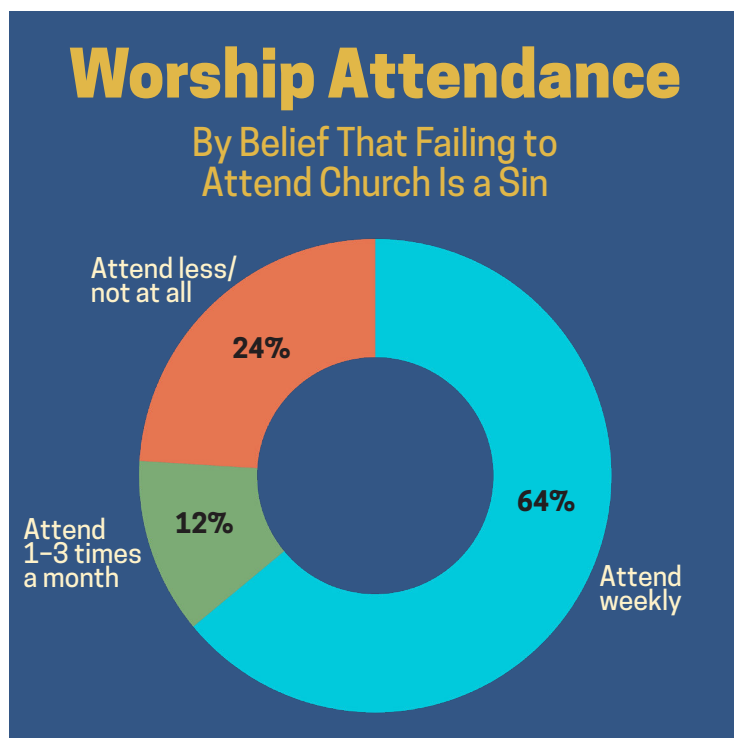
At the same time, 23% of those who rarely or never attend church believe that not regularly attending worship is sinful. The same is true for 22% of those who attend one to three times a month.

This means 8% of all evangelical Protestant adults believe it is a sin not to attend church regularly, but they still typically do not go weekly. The majority of them rarely or never attend.

Three out of four evangelicals who believe failure to attend church regularly is not sinful still typically attend at least once a week.

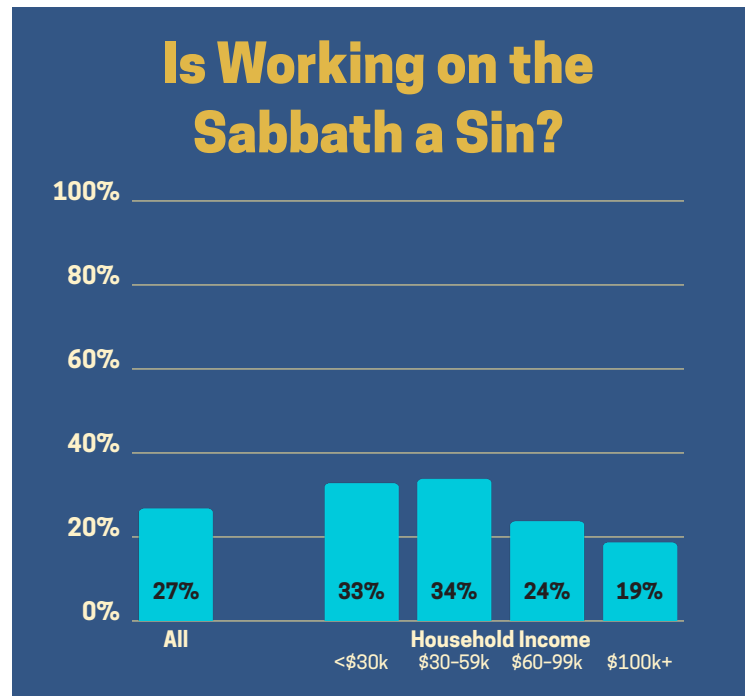
Conversely, **among those who believe staying away from church is sinful, 36% do not typically attend worship each week, including 24% who do not attend even once a month.**

Consider this for the other 24 measurements of sin. How many evangelicals believe having sex outside of marriage or telling “little white lies” or racism are wrong, but knowingly engage in those things anyway?



WORKING ON SUNDAY/THE SABBATH – 27%

Just 27% of evangelicals believe it is sinful to work on the Sabbath. Unlike many of the behaviors we examined, perspectives on this do not vary at all according to Spiritual Engagement Score. In fact, the only difference we see is by household income. Evangelicals from households earning more than \$60,000 annually are less likely than others to see this as sinful.



Sin, by Political Beliefs

As we detailed in [*Evangelicals in the Public Arena*](#), a majority of politically liberal evangelicals believe having an abortion is sinful, even though the assumption is often that liberals all are pro-choice.

What other assumptions or stereotypes about liberals and conservatives may be incorrect?

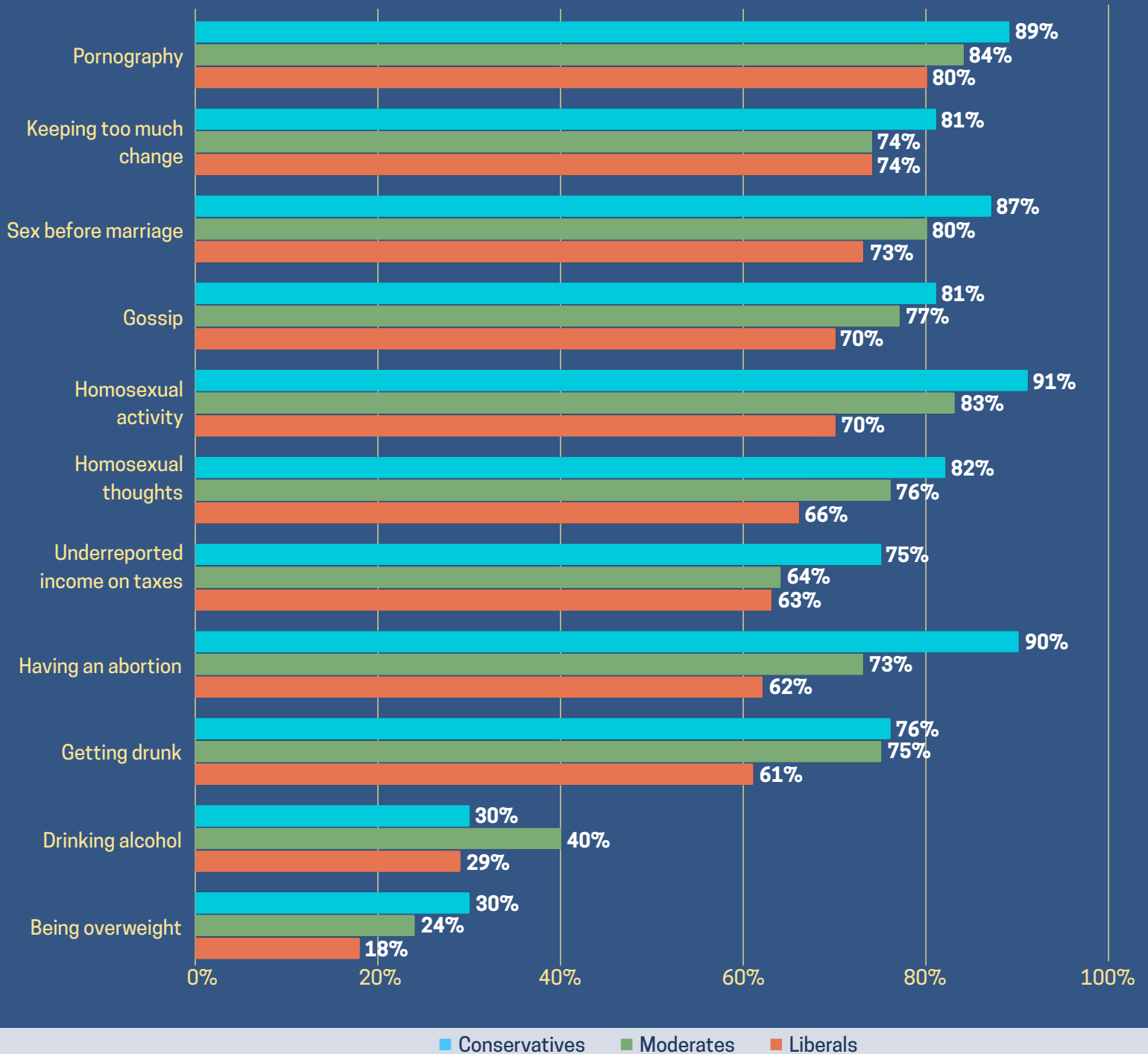
For 15 of the 26 behaviors we tested, there is little difference in whether conservatives, liberals, or moderates believe each one is a sin. This includes behaviors such as marijuana use, gambling, and dancing.

On 11 of the behaviors, there are differences. In most cases, the differences are that conservatives are more ... well, conservative, seeing the behavior as sinful. Liberals are more liberal regarding most of these behaviors.

However, **a clear majority of politically liberal evangelicals rate things such as homosexual activity (70%), abortion (62%), and pornography (80%) as sins.** And many of the differences between liberals and conservatives are not enormous. In short, it may be time to reassess some of the stereotypes about what liberals and conservatives believe in—at least when it comes to the evangelical population.

Definition of Sin

By Political Perspectives



What Does It All Mean?

It is important to remember this is a study of what evangelicals *believe*, and not necessarily how they *actually behave*.

As the data shows for tithing and for worship attendance, quite a few evangelicals knowingly live their lives in a way they believe to be sinful. They believe it is sin not to attend worship and/or not to tithe, yet they knowingly fail to do these things anyway.

One can only assume the same disparity applies to pornography, gambling, sex before marriage, and other behaviors evangelicals commonly believe to be sinful.

The Apostle Paul struggled with this very issue. “For I do not do the good that I want to do,” he laments in Romans 7:19 (CSB), “but I practice the evil that I do not want to do.” In other words, I know it is sin, but I do it anyway. Paul’s struggles do not excuse what is fairly common behavior among evangelicals, but hopefully provide at least a little context.

Although evangelicals (like many other groups) may believe something and yet not live up to that belief, it is still highly instructive to see what believers feel qualifies as sin and what does not. The reaction among Christian leaders will undoubtedly vary a lot according to how each leader interprets Scripture. If you believe dancing or drinking alcohol or working on the Sabbath are sinful, you need to realize fairly small proportions of evangelicals share your perspectives.

Even for the behaviors most evangelicals do define as sinful, such as getting drunk or having sex outside of marriage, there are some evangelicals who will not see these activities the same way you do. For that matter, the same is true of some Christian leaders.

There is substantial differentiation in what behaviors evangelicals categorize as sin. Interestingly, for any given behavior, there are not radical differences in *what kinds of evangelicals* see that behavior as sinful.

As we have pointed out throughout the report, perspectives on sin do vary by age, gender, spiritual engagement, race/ethnicity, and other factors. But while those differences

definitely exist, they are rarely massive. For example, 73% of the youngest evangelicals believe “little white lies” are sin, compared to 60% of the oldest evangelicals. While that unquestionably represents a difference, it does not represent a huge gap in beliefs.

While beliefs vary a lot according to what behavior is being discussed, there are not widespread divisions by income, race, or other factors. **There is more unity than division among different types of evangelicals on what constitutes sin.** This in itself is probably a surprise to a lot of people.

Probably from time immemorial, older people have viewed younger people as too permissive. In the 1920s, it was flappers, jazz, and women driving. In the 1950s, it was blue jeans and Elvis Presley. In the 1970s, it was drugs, sex, and bell-bottoms. In the 2000s, it was piercings, rap, and tattoos. Who knows what it might have been in the 1830s or 1690s?

But the truth is right now, young evangelicals, at least in their beliefs about sin, are rarely more permissive than older evangelicals. On only five of the 26 behaviors are older people more likely to see those behaviors as sinful, while on four of the 26 behaviors, young evangelicals actually have stricter standards than do older believers. Other times, it is people in the middle-age groups who are most likely to define something as sinful. Often, the age groups see things largely the same way.

The story is much the same according to political perspectives. Liberal evangelicals do tend to be more liberal toward some behaviors, but only on a minority of them. Even then, as with age, the gaps do not tend to be enormous. On the subject of sin, liberal and conservative evangelicals agree far more often than they disagree.

Both of these issues point out how important it is not to accept “conventional wisdom” as especially wise; not to fall prey to stereotypes that may or may not be only partially correct or entirely wrong.

In light of this research, it is evident that understanding and addressing sin is not just a theological exercise but a vital part of fostering a spiritually vibrant and engaged evangelical community.

By embracing these insights, church leaders and members alike have the opportunity to deepen their faith, align their actions with their beliefs, and support one another in their spiritual journeys.

Methodology and Definitions

Researchers have defined “evangelical” in ways that have them representing 7%, 23%, and even 35% or more of American adults. For this study, we considered an evangelical to be someone who agrees strongly with all four of the following theological positions:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is important for me 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.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.

This is the definition favored by the National Association of Evangelicals, which [Grey Matter Research](#) and Lifeway Research helped create.

Further, we limited this study to exclude those who identify with a non-Protestant group, such as Mormon, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox. This is a study of evangelical Protestants, a group representing 23% of American adults, or about 59 million people.

The study was conducted online, through a blend of research access panels. Stringent quality control was used to eliminate any responses from bots, click farms, and disengaged or fraudulent respondents. A demographically representative sample was screened for evangelical beliefs and lack of non-Protestant affiliation. Data was gathered in early 2024. A total of 1,039 evangelical Protestants participated in this study.

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**5331 Triangle Lane
Export, PA 15632**

**724.733.1200
www.InfinityConcepts.com**



GREY MATTER
RESEARCH & CONSULTING

**3298 North Glassford Hill Road
Suite 104-329
Prescott Valley, AZ 86314-1294**

**602.684.6294
www.GreyMatterResearch.com**