

The Christian Life Survey 2014-2015 Administration at 22 Christian Colleges



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Students' views of the Bible: Authoritative, contextual, nuanced

How do devout students at Christian colleges view the Bible?

The students were asked, "What is your view of the Bible?" and were presented with a randomized list of 11 phrases. For each phrase they had the option to say strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

As shown in Chart One, there was one phrase they commonly believed described the Bible. Ninety-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed that the phrase "the Bible is the authoritative word of God" is in keeping with their view of the Bible. This was the only phrase that had three-fourths of the students strongly agree.

There were five phrases with which roughly 70 to 90 percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed. For each of these phrases, half (or nearly half) of the students strongly agreed:

The Bible should be understood within its historic context and culture (87 percent)

The Bible is without error in all that it affirms (79 percent)

The Bible is in exactly the form God wants it to be in (77 percent)

The Bible is infallible (75 percent)

The Bible is inerrant—it has no error in it (73 percent)

Two additional phrases had small amounts of students (less than one-fourth) strongly agree with them but still had 59 to 66 percent agree or strongly agree: "the Bible can be interpreted in more than one way" (66 percent) and "the Bible should be read as different kinds of literature" (59 percent).

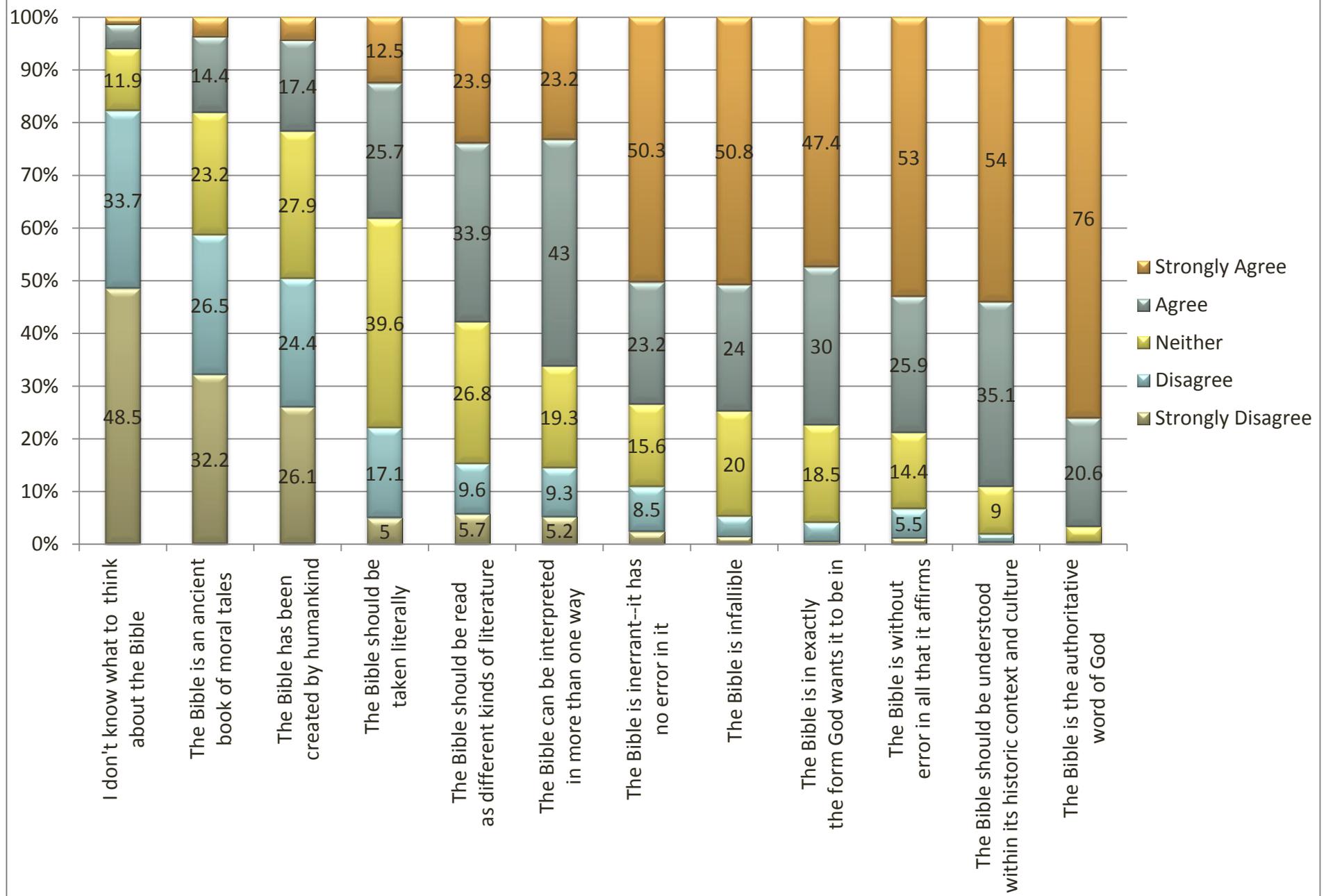
Small percentages of students agreed or strongly agreed with the last four statements: "the Bible should be taken literally" (38 percent), "the Bible has been created by humankind" (22 percent), "the Bible is an ancient book of moral tales" (18 percent), and "I don't know what to think about the Bible" (6 percent).

Beyond these general patterns in the students' preferences for different phrases, there are a couple of particular findings worth noting. First, these 6,000-plus students have great confidence in the authority of the Bible but understand it to be contextually understood. While 97 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the Bible is the authoritative word of God—in fact 76 percent strongly agreed—and only six percent agreed or strongly agreed that they don't know what to think about the Bible, 89 percent agreed or strongly agreed that it should be understood within historic and cultural context.

Also, these students have a nuanced understanding of the Bible as a source of truth. While 66 percent of them agreed or strongly agreed that the Bible can be interpreted in more than one way, 69 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the Bible is infallible. They are quite comfortable with an understanding of the Bible as an infallible source of insight that speaks in different ways to different people or in different situations.

In sum, then, students at Christian colleges in the United States embrace the Bible as being the authoritative word of God that should be understood within its historic context and culture, and they are quite confident in their views of the Bible. These students have a nuanced understanding of the Bible: in their view it is not a simple book nor a fallible one.

Chart One: Students' views of the Bible (percents)



Who are the students in this study?

In the 2014-2015 school year, the Christian Life Survey was administered to students at 25 Christian colleges in the United States. The results shown in this summary brief, however, are only for the traditional-age, traditional-program freshmen through seniors from the 22 colleges that provided population proportions that allowed representative weighting to be used. Students are weighted to be proportionately representative for sex and year in school for their colleges.

These results are for 6,074 students from 22 Christian colleges in the United States.

The students are overwhelmingly Protestant Christians who are serious about their spiritual life (they chose to attend a Christian college and they agreed to participate in a half-hour survey about their spiritual life).

The students represented here, then, are traditional-age, devout Christians attending 22 Christian colleges in the USA. Great care should be employed when generalizing these results to any other groups.

How was this topic measured?

The survey question used:

Participants were asked, “What is your view of the Bible?” For each phrase presented they could respond strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

Eleven items were presented and the list was randomized (the online surveying software put the items in a random order for each student so responses would not be systematically affected by the order in which the items were listed).

The survey:

The Christian Life Survey (CLS) is an online, half-hour survey on Spiritual Formation, Spiritual Orientation (lifestyle), and Scripture Engagement and was conducted in the 2014-2015 school year at the following Christian colleges: Bethel; Biola; California Baptist; Charleston Southern; Corban; Cornerstone; Crown; Fresno Pacific; George Fox; Gordon; Houghton; Judson; The Kings; LeTourneau; Northwest Nazarene; Nyack; Patrick Henry College; Spring Arbor; Tabor; Taylor; Union; Wheaton.



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