AMERICA'S DEFINITION: WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN?

GREY MATTER RESEARCH & CONSULTING
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INTRODUCTION

The word "evangelical" is used frequently. It appears in news stories, political pundits discuss how the evangelical vote will impact the next election (or how it impacted the last one), and *Time* magazine even lists the 25 most influential evangelical leaders in America.

There are thousands of organizations that lay some claim to belonging to this group, simply by their name alone: National Association of Evangelicals, Evangelical Press Association, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Evangelical Christian Credit Union, Evangelical Environmental Network, Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, Evangelicals for Human Rights, The Evangelical Alliance Mission, etc.

But while the media, consultants, politicians, pollsters, and even evangelicals themselves often discuss evangelicals, there are two critical questions that infrequently get asked:

- *Just what is an evangelical?*
- *When you talk about "evangelicals," does anyone really know who you're talking about?*

The answer to the first question is, "It depends on who you ask."

The answer to the second question is, "Frequently, no – Americans often have no idea just what an evangelical actually is." This answer is demonstrated all too clearly by a study conducted by Grey Matter Research & Consulting, which showed that Americans themselves are often clueless about how to define or recognize what an evangelical is.

Grey Matter Research has been studying the religious community in a variety of ways for the past 12 years, and company president Ron Sellers has been integrally involved in research on religious attitudes and behaviors for 18 of his 21 years in the research field. "Evangelicals" are frequently defined in research studies, but in a variety of ways. This led Grey Matter Research to try to find out how Americans themselves define "evangelical."

The answers were surprising.

HOW DO PEOPLE DEFINE "EVANGELICAL"?

No matter how research studies define "evangelicals," or how the media or experts use this term, it's important to know what the typical American believes is an evangelical. It's especially important during political season, since the media and many political consultants and candidates consider evangelicals to be a critical voting bloc, like Hispanics or Catholics.

To understand how Americans define the term "evangelical," Grey Matter Research actually went out and asked them.

Our study was conducted among 1,007 American adults age 18 or over. The entire study was designed and funded independently by Grey Matter Research, with no involvement, influence, or sponsorship from external sources. The sample was balanced by age, gender, geography, household income, and race/ethnicity, with the resulting data re-weighted by these factors to correct for minor fluctuations in response rate among different demographic categories. The sample was from a nationally representative online research panel.

Respondents were asked a very simple question, and given the opportunity to reply in their own words:

- The phrase "evangelical Christian" is used in the media a lot. In your own words, how would you define exactly what an "evangelical Christian" is? Please be as specific and complete as you can in your answer.

Their responses were then analyzed and coded into groups of similar answers. Responses often included multiple lines of thought; for example, someone who said, "It's a person who goes to church and is very politically active" would have both elements of their answer included in separate categories. For this reason, the categories add to more than 100%.

So what exactly do Americans believe an evangelical is? Below are the categories of answers people gave, along with a few sample quotes that were coded within each category.

I Have No Idea – 36% admitted they had no idea at all just what an evangelical is. People who attend Roman Catholic worship services or who do not attend any sort of worship, political moderates, Democrats, and independents were particularly unlikely to have even a glimpse of an answer to this question.

- "I haven't the foggiest idea." (40 year-old Black man from Maryland, politically conservative, attends a non-denominational church and knows an evangelical casually)
- "No idea what that really means." (42 year-old White man from Maryland, slightly liberal, doesn't attend worship, isn't sure whether he knows any evangelicals)

- "I'm not sure; all I can think of is Billy Graham." (40 year-old White woman from Florida, conservative, does not attend worship and is not sure whether she knows any evangelicals)
- "I never heard the word before." (49 year-old Hispanic man from Texas, very liberal, does not attend worship and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)
- "I don't know how to describe it. It's just a Christian person I guess." (69 year-old White woman from Ohio, moderate, does not attend worship and is not sure whether she knows any evangelicals)
- "I am not sure, and I am a Christian." (55 year-old White man from Indiana, moderate, does not attend worship and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)

Evangelism – 18% said an evangelical is a Christian who tries to spread his or her faith. Sometimes this was stated in a negative manner (they proselytize, they try to recruit people), and sometimes in a neutral or positive manner (they tell others about Jesus, they try to convert others, they focus on evangelism). Answers in this category were especially common among people who attended Protestant worship services, and among both political liberals and conservatives (much more than among moderates).

- "It's a Christian sect that uses evangelization to try and bring others to Christ." (33 year-old White man from Florida, conservative, attends a Roman Catholic church, does not know any evangelicals)
- "A Christian who converts others to his or her faith." (21 year-old Black man from Vermont, moderate, attends a Jehovah's Witness congregation and knows an evangelical very well)
- "A believer in Jesus Christ that communicates their belief and faith in Jesus with others. They share the good news about Jesus with others who may not know or believe in Jesus." (36 year-old White woman from Florida, very conservative, attends a Calvary Chapel and calls herself an evangelical)
- "An evangelical Christian proselytizes and has a tendency to see their beliefs as the only valid beliefs, thus disrespecting and opposing on others' beliefs." (26 year-old White woman from Pennsylvania, very liberal, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)
- "A Christian who is willing to spread the word of the Lord through evangelism without worry of persecution from non-Christians." (51 year-old White woman from Pennsylvania, liberal, attends an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and calls herself an evangelical)
- "A Christian whose main focus is on spreading the gospel (however, they rarely do this)." (26 year-old White man from Colorado, conservative, attends a non-denominational church, knows an evangelical very well)

A Type of Christian – 9% said evangelicals are just a specific type of Christian: Protestant, born again, charismatic or spirit-filled, liberal, modern, White, etc. This answer was particularly common among women, Republicans, and people 55 or older.

- "A charismatic Christian, not afraid to worship raising hands in the air and/or clapping to more upbeat worship music." (40 year-old White man from New Jersey, slightly conservative, attends a National Baptist church and knows an evangelical very well)
- "An evangelical Christian to me is a born again Christian, no matter what particular religion they may or may not belong to. An evangelical Christian also includes religious beliefs and biblical references in living their everyday life." (48 year-old White woman from Nevada, moderate, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)
- "A born again, conservative, fundamentalist Christian." (22 year-old Black man from California, moderate, attends an Episcopal church and calls himself an evangelical)
- "Speaking in tongues and their services are filled with a 'joyful sound.' They believe in the Bible and try to stay true to the Word." (60 year-old White woman from Pennsylvania, slightly liberal, attends a Unitarian church and knows an evangelical casually)
- "A Christian with no actual ties to a specific religion. Non-denominational." (59 year-old White woman from California, conservative, does not attend worship and does not know any evangelicals)
- "I believe it's Baptist." (57 year-old White woman from Nevada, slightly conservative, attends a Roman Catholic church and knows an evangelical casually)

Zealous or Devoted – 9% said evangelicals are just Christians who are particularly devoted or zealous about their faith (although not to the point of fanaticism, which is another category). These people said evangelicals are especially devout, more religious than average, totally sold out to their beliefs, have a particularly deep faith, or that religion permeates their lives.

- "One who is not afraid to stand up and defend the word of God." (56 year-old White man from Kansas, moderate, attends a Baptist church but is not sure what kind, calls himself an evangelical)
- "A person who has a deep understanding of their religion." (68 year-old White woman from Florida, conservative, does not attend worship and is not sure whether she knows any evangelicals)
- "I think an evangelical Christian is someone who does not waver on their beliefs in the truth of the Word of God (the Bible) and the presence of God in our country. I believe they are more concerned about what God thinks of them than what the world thinks of them and is willing to say what needs to be said to fight to keep God in our country." (35 year-old White woman from Ohio, conservative, attends a non-denominational church and calls herself an evangelical)
- "Someone who is deeply religious." (24 year-old White woman from California, moderate, does not attend worship and does not know any evangelicals)
- "I think that an evangelical Christian is one who is very strong with their ideas about their faith and in turn might push those ideas onto others." (22 year-old Black woman from Virginia, slightly liberal, does not attend worship and does not know any evangelicals)

- "A very strong believer/born again Christian." (65 year-old White man from Missouri, conservative, does not attend worship but calls himself an evangelical)

Reliance on the Bible – 8% believed what separates evangelicals is their strong focus on the Bible. They said evangelicals believe the Bible as God's word, they believe it's inerrant, they allow it to guide their lives, they believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, etc. The older the respondent, the more likely they were to define evangelicalism by this standard. This group of answers was also more common than average among Protestant churchgoers, political conservatives, and Republicans.

- "A person who believes in the entirety of the Bible, and who it says Jesus Christ is, and conducts his life according to the Bible's precepts." (37 year-old White man from Oregon, slightly conservative, attends a Calvary Chapel and calls himself evangelical)
- "Those Christians who interpret the Bible literally." (65 year-old White man from Nevada, conservative, does not attend worship but call himself an evangelical)
- "People who use the Bible as either their sole source, or major source, of religious and moral guidance." (65 year-old White man from Ohio, very conservative, attends a Roman Catholic church and knows an evangelical very well)
- "One who believes in the inerrant word of the Bible. That it is to be taken literally and that one is a born again, blood bought, baptized believer." (73 year-old White woman from Missouri, conservative, attends a Southern Baptist church and calls herself an evangelical)
- "One that adheres closely to the teachings in the Bible. For example, an evangelical Christian is opposed to abortion which to them is considered murder (supported by one of the commandments)." (64 year-old White woman from North Carolina, conservative, attends a United Methodist church and knows an evangelical casually)
- "Someone who has a strong Bible-based faith and follows Bible law." (47 year-old White man from Georgia, moderate, attends an independent Baptist church and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)

Theology – 8% gave a specific theological definition of evangelicalism that had at least some accuracy or insight to it. These people said evangelicals are saved by Christ, saved by grace, believe in a born-again experience, believe in eternal life through Christ, etc. Protestant churchgoers, Republicans, and political conservatives were particularly likely to give an answer such as this.

- "One who considers him/herself personally saved by Christ and who believes the Bible is the actual word of God." (66 year-old White man from California, liberal, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)
- "A person who holds the essence of the gospel consists mainly in its doctrine of man's sinful condition and need of salvation." (68 year-old White woman from New Hampshire, moderate, attends an American Baptist church and calls herself an evangelical)

- "One who believes that the Bible is the absolute word of God and who believes that 'salvation' is reserved only for those who accept Jesus as their personal savior." (76 year-old White woman from California, liberal, attends a Unitarian church and does not know any evangelicals)
- "Evangelical Christians are not mainstream Christians. They do not believe that you are saved through your works while on earth, but simply by asking Jesus to be your personal savior." (36 year-old White woman from Kansas, conservative, attends a Mormon congregation and knows an evangelical casually)
- "1. The Bible as the written Word of God. 2. The Virgin Birth. 3. The Deity of Jesus the Christ. 4. Salvation through atonement. 5. The guidance of our life through prayer. 6. The return of the Savior. 7. The eternal reign of Christ." (23 year-old White woman from North Carolina, slightly liberal, attends an Episcopal church and knows an evangelical casually)

Worldview or Politics – 6% said evangelicals are defined according to their political worldview. These people said evangelicals are conservative, ultra-conservative or radical right, anti-homosexual, Republican, highly involved in politics, etc. Men, liberals, and older Americans, particularly, used this definition.

- "A member of a Protestant religious organization that has taken conservative political positions on a range of social issues based on their interpretation of scripture, including views on marriage, family, sex, reproduction, abortion, stem cell research, etc." (59 year-old White man from Oregon, slightly liberal, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)
- "An arch-conservative." (63 year-old White man from Georgia, moderate, does not attend worship and does not now any evangelicals)
- "Radical right." (36 year-old White man from Maryland, moderate, does not attend worship and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)
- "An evangelical Christian is a believer in Jesus Christ. He tends to be conservative in his beliefs and at times radical in his approach to religion and politics." (61 year-old White man from Minnesota, moderate, attends a Roman Catholic church and does not know any evangelicals)
- "White Protestant mostly with a very conservative viewpoint." (50 year-old Black man from Florida, conservative, attends a Baptist church but is not sure which kind, not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)
- "Follower of the Christian right which is a very conservative group which wants to tell you what is right and not right; for example, Jerry Falwell." (70 year-old White woman from Texas, moderate, attends a United Methodist church but does not know any evangelicals)

Fanatical – 5% said evangelicals are simply fanatical about their beliefs, and they expressed this in a negative manner. They blindly follow their beliefs, they have radical ideas or extreme views, they're Bible-thumpers, holy rollers, or overly religious. This definition was more common than average among people who attend Roman Catholic worship, or who were political liberals.

- "Fanatic, wants to impose religious law on others who do share those beliefs. Wants to forcibly convert non-believers and subject those who refuse to penalties." (47 year-old White man from Texas, slightly conservative, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)
- "A Bible-thumper." (47 year-old White man from Ohio, moderate, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)
- "Christians that try very hard to bring everyone around to their way of thinking. Most are benign, but some of the more extreme are just as dangerous as the fundamentalists of other religions. These extremists are a grave threat to personal freedoms and democracy in this country and worldwide." (57 year-old White man from Wisconsin, very liberal, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)
- "A fundamental extremist Christian." (41 year-old White man from Michigan, moderate, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)
- "Extremists. I think ECs use Christianity to turn off a lot of people, and are out of touch with reality. In 2004, they used homosexuality to justify the war in Iraq. Wrong is wrong, and manipulating religion to commit one crime over another is hypocritical." (30 year-old Black man from California, liberal, attends a non-denominational church but does not know any evangelicals)

Assorted Critical Views – 4% didn't really provide a definition – just criticism. These were people who said evangelicals are hypocritical, bigots, stupid, manipulative, etc. – and some of the answers were negative and even hate-filled in the extreme. These answers were almost exclusively from men, and particularly common among the unmarried, political liberals, and people who did not attend worship services. A few of the answers could not even be reprinted here due to indecency.

- "A psycho who thinks that their way is the only way." (41 year-old White man from Pennsylvania, slightly liberal, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)
- "Just another word for how Christians rape children." (58 year-old White man from California, very liberal, does not attend worship and does not know any evangelicals)
- "A spiritual hypocrite. Says one thing to win the religious voters and then practices a different type of morality at home." (38 year-old White man from North Carolina, moderate, does not attend worship and does not know any evangelicals)
- "An annoying pest." (36 year-old White man from Pennsylvania, moderate, does not attend worship and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)
- "A narrow-minded Bible-thumping simpleton." (44 year-old White man from Florida, liberal, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)
- "A religious zealot who uses the Bible to justify their own racism." (37 year-old Black woman from Oklahoma, liberal, does not attend worship and does not know any evangelicals)

- "Extremists with very small brains, so other ideas and perspectives can't fit in there." (38 year-old Black man from Texas, slightly liberal, attends an Episcopal church, does not know any evangelicals)

Closed-minded – 4% said evangelicals are simply people who are closed-minded about religion. They don't like people who believe differently, they believe they're the only ones who are right, or they are rigid and intolerant. Whites and political liberals, especially, included this in their definition.

- "As far as I know, the term refers to one who views the Christian beliefs as the only ones which are right and refuses to accept or even to consider other beliefs." (51 year-old White male from Massachusetts, slightly conservative, does not attend worship and does not know any evangelicals)
- "A Christian who condemns all other Christians who don't believe as they do. They take every word in the Bible as 'gospel.' They are intolerant of all people who don't believe as they do. They are pro-life and they believe that everyone should be so. Many are also hypocrites. They scream their message to anyone who will listen. They keep screaming even if people don't want to hear their narrow-minded beliefs. I believe that evangelical Christians have been brought up by parents that instilled in them that there is only one way, and that is 'Their' way and want everyone to believe as they do. I think they are dangerous." (65 year-old White female from Washington, liberal, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)
- "A wacko with a very narrow mind who will tell you that you are going to hell because you don't believe as they do." (62 year-old White man from New York, conservative, attends a Wesleyan church and knows an evangelical very well)
- "When I hear 'evangelical Christian,' I think of someone who is very closed minded to the evidence that is available against their beliefs. Although, I think it is perfectly okay for them to believe what they want I think that the church uses scare tactics to keep people from straying. However, I do not personally know anyone who claims to be an evangelical Christian, so I am not in a position to describe one." (22 year-old White man from Tennessee, very liberal, attends a Baptist church but is not sure which kind, not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)

Greedy or Focused on Money – 3% defined evangelicalism as a focus on the Almighty Dollar rather than on Almighty God. These Americans said evangelicals worship money, use religion for profit, preach about money a lot, or are always asking for money.

- "Someone who is always asking for money. That is all I ever hear them asking for. That and they seem to have it out for specific groups. They target minorities such as homosexuals, smaller religious sects, etc. I never hear much good about what they really do." (30 year-old White man from Arizona, liberal, does not attend worship and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)
- "People wanting your money for their own benefit." (45 year-old White woman from Michigan, moderate, does not attend worship and is not sure whether she knows any evangelicals)

- "You really want my answer on this? Okay. My answer is 'Nutcases' – people who take religion *way too far* and Bible thump everybody to death to 'follow them' (Like a *cult*!) Oh, and the most important reason: *money!!!* Follow me, I will show you the way into heaven as long as your bank account still has some money in it." (50 year-old White man from California, moderate, does not attend worship and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)
- "One who has a television program, rants and raves, and continues to ask for more and more money." (59 year-old Black woman from Tennessee, liberal, attends a United Methodist church and does not know any evangelicals)
- "Not sure – I would say someone who is in the religion for the money and not the seriousness of the religion. Very religious-right wing-conservative." (49 year-old White woman from California, moderate, does not attend worship and is not sure whether she knows any evangelicals)

Impose Their Beliefs on Others – 3% believed this is the hallmark of evangelicals. They want to impose their beliefs or standards on others, they forcibly convert people (although exactly how they supposedly did this was not clarified), they want to run things, or they're always in your face. This definition was especially common among those who did not attend worship services of any type, as well as among political liberals.

- "Someone who is pushy and can't keep their nose out of other people's personal business. They turn people off of Christianity, not onto it. Most of the time, they're religious nut jobs." (25 year-old White man from Vermont, very liberal, does not attend worship and does not know any evangelicals)
- "A right-wing, conservative, non-Catholic with a political agenda and an intolerance of anyone/thing that disagrees, with a desire to impose their beliefs on every aspect of life and everyone's life too." (45 year-old White woman from California, liberal, does not attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)
- "An evangelical is one who is usually literalist and fundamentalist, thinks Christianity is the only true religion, and that belief in it is essential for salvation/avoiding hell. Most claim to be 'born again' and on the whole are less educated and/or intelligent than those more liberal in their faith. Many feel justified in forcing their beliefs on others." (58 year-old White woman from Texas, very liberal, attends an Episcopal church and knows an evangelical very well)
- "A Christian who is more radical and fire and brimstone and often pushes religion in the faces of people." (41 year-old White woman from Washington, slightly liberal, doesn't attend worship and is not sure whether she knows any evangelicals)
- "Someone who thinks they are better than everyone else. Someone who is prejudiced. Someone who is dishonest with themselves so they can justify their own actions and beliefs without feeling any guilt. Someone who thumbs their nose at others who do not believe as they do. Someone who proselytizes their beliefs, constantly shoving them down the throats of anyone who they can get to listen." (53 year-old Hispanic man from Ohio, slightly conservative, attends a Roman Catholic church and knows an evangelical very well)

- "Evangelicals are Protestants that have decided that nobody, anywhere, should be having any more fun than they are, and use literal interpretations of scripture to support their position. Evangelicals feel that it is not possible for someone to gain admittance to heaven unless they believe *exactly* what they do." (33 year-old White man from Washington, very liberal, doesn't attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)

Flashy – 2% feel evangelicals are people who are particularly showy or flashy, particularly in their worship. They related evangelicals to what they see from some televangelists – dramatic, show-biz style, sensationalist, demonstrative, etc. These comments came mostly from men.

- "The ones you see on TV with lots of flash and grandeur, almost like a drama." (31 year-old White man from North Dakota, conservative, doesn't attend worship and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)
- "Evangelical Christianity is what can be referred to as 'Showbiz Christianity.' It's all smoke and mirrors more focused on the collection plate than spirituality." (25 year-old White man from Michigan, slightly liberal, attends a non-instrumental Church of Christ but does not call himself evangelical and does not know any)
- "Extreme Christian – lots of singing and gestures at services." (54 year-old White woman from Texas, slightly conservative, attends a Roman Catholic church and knows an evangelical very well)
- "A Christian that is more involved in the actual worship service and is more spirit filled than you would find in a traditional 'preach and listen' service." (43 year-old White man from Nevada, slightly conservative, attends a Lutheran church but doesn't know any evangelicals)
- "A holy roller. Someone who dances and sings to worship God. Loud and boisterous." (31 year-old White woman from New York, moderate, attends a non-denominational church and calls herself an evangelical)
- "One that makes people believe with a lot of glitz and glamour." (31 year-old White man from Wisconsin, slightly conservative, attends an Episcopal church and doesn't know any evangelicals)

Off-base Theology – 2% gave a theological definition of what it means to be an evangelical, but it was dramatically off-base or so general as to be meaningless. Examples were that evangelicals are a type of Catholic, that they live according to the laws of the Torah, or that they worship angels.

- "One living as close to the Torah as they know how." (67 year-old White woman from Oregon, moderate, attends a Nazarene church and knows an evangelical casually)
- "It's a Mormon." (59 year-old White man from New York, moderate, doesn't attend worship and is not sure whether he knows any evangelicals)
- "A devoted Catholic." (71 year-old White man from Florida, very conservative, attends an Episcopal church and calls himself evangelical)

- "Sounds like someone who follows Billy Graham. Also sounds like the worship of angels through Christ." (26 year-old Hispanic man from Texas, liberal, doesn't attend worship and doesn't know any evangelicals)
- "Someone who follows the Old Testament and wants no one to deviate from it." (66 year-old White woman from Kentucky, moderate, doesn't attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)
- "A New Age Christian." (21 year-old White man from California, slightly liberal, doesn't attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)

Ministry Professionals – 2% believed evangelicals are "professional Christians" – meaning they are paid ministers, professional evangelists, or traveling preachers. Many of the answers made it fairly clear that these people had confused "evangelical" with "evangelist." Almost everyone who believed this was 35 – 54 years old, and it was particularly common among political conservatives, Republicans, and people from the South.

- "A Christian who travels and preaches to the public." (45 year-old from Kentucky, slightly conservative, attends a Southern Baptist church but doesn't know any evangelicals)
- "I think an evangelical Christian reaches outside the traditional pulpit to teach Christ through the media; i.e. T.V. and radio." (53 year-old White woman from Texas, conservative, attends a Church of Christ and isn't sure whether she knows any evangelicals)
- "One that shares scripture and Christian lifestyles with the public through radio and television." (65 year-old White woman from Kansas, very conservative, attends an American Baptist church and knows an evangelical casually)
- "He or she is one who preaches to a congregation." (56 year-old White man from Indiana, moderate, attends a Southern Baptist church and knows an evangelical very well)
- "An evangelical is a traveling preacher who carries the word around the world. Letting everyone know what is going to happen when Christ returns. Teaches about Jesus, God and the Holy Ghost. They really don't have a home church. They visit different places." (49 year-old White woman from Alabama, moderate, attends a Pentecostal church and knows an evangelical very well)

Christ-like or Followers of Christ – just 1% said evangelicals are those who attempt to follow Jesus' lifestyle as closely as they can, or they attempt to be like Christ in their thoughts and ways.

- "Very spiritual Christ-followers with a narrow view of religion and its relation to life; possibly including literal interpretations of the Bible. Very prone to proselytize their faith, but in a good way." (56 year-old White man from Connecticut, slightly liberal, doesn't attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)
- "True to the teachings of the Son of God." (59 year-old Black man from Pennsylvania, moderate, attends an American Baptist church and calls himself evangelical)

- "Followers of Christ." (25 year-old White man from Pennsylvania, slightly conservative, doesn't attend worship but knows an evangelical very well)
- "A Christ-centered religion." (39 year-old White woman from Arizona, moderate, attends a Mormon congregation but knows an evangelical very well)

Activities – 1% defined evangelicals according to specific activities in which they partake: church attendance, Bible study, outreach ministry, etc.

- "One who attends church regularly." (50 year-old Hispanic man from California, slightly liberal, attends a Christian & Missionary Alliance church and calls himself evangelical)
- "Someone that believes in God and performs duties that are positive and helps others and for the good of others." (51 year-old White woman from Washington, moderate, doesn't attend worship but knows an evangelical well)
- "Someone saved and still reading the Bible and still attending church." (36 year-old White woman from Hawaii, liberal, attends a Pentecostal church and knows an evangelical very well)
- "A Christian who regularly attends church and whose political beliefs match their religious beliefs." (30 year-old White man from Ohio, moderate, doesn't attend worship but knows an evangelical casually)

Definition of "Evangelical Christian"

Category	Percentage
No Idea	36%
They Evangelize	18%
A Type of Christian	9%
Zealous or Devoted	9%
Rely on the Biblw	8%
Theology	8%
Worldview or Politics	6%
Fanatics	5%
Assorted Criticisms	4%
Closed-minded	4%
Greedy	3%
Impose Beliefs on Others	3%
Flashy	2%
Theology Definition (Wrong)	2%
Professionals	2%
Follow Christ	1%
Activities	1%
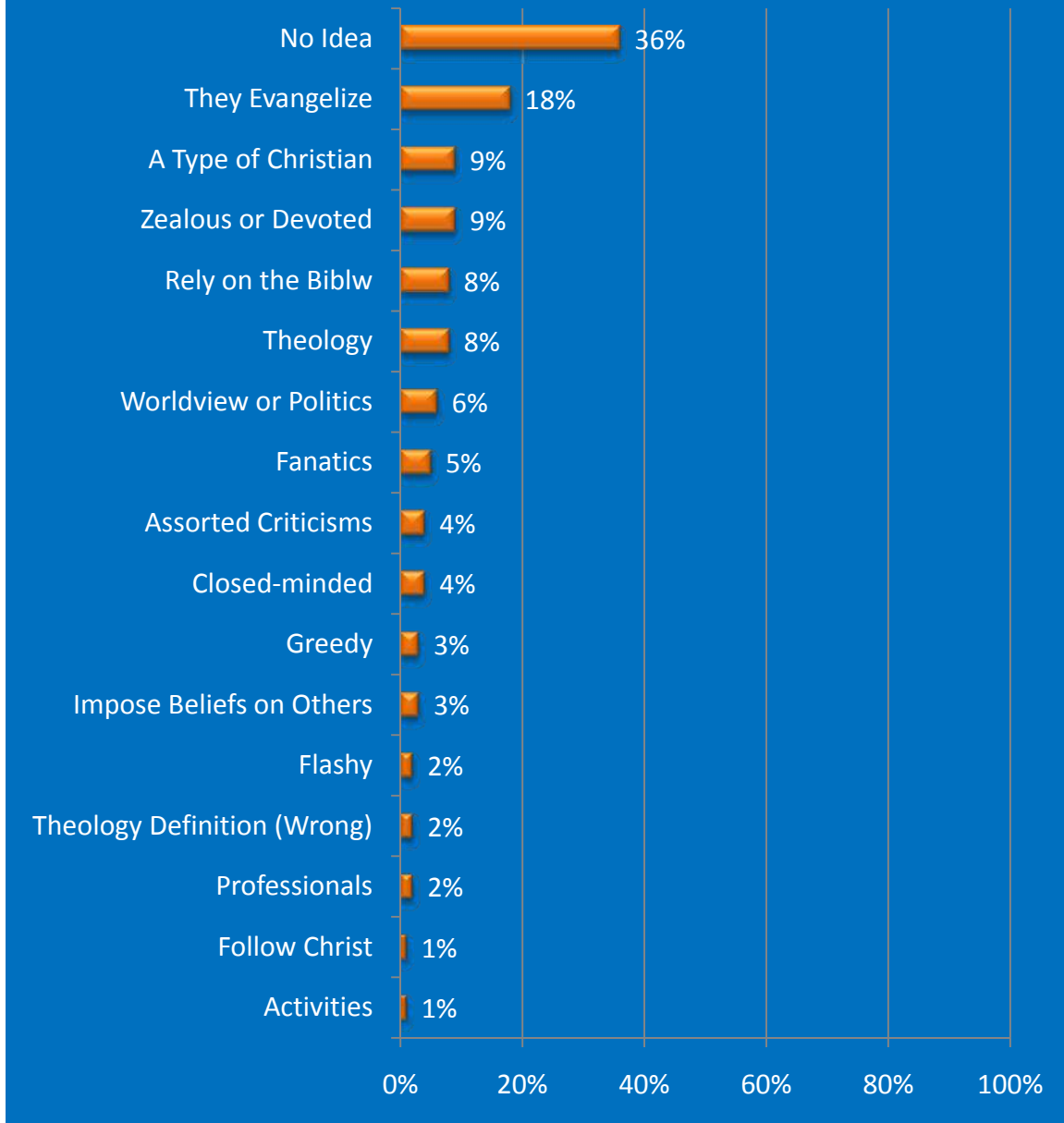
In total, just 56% gave any kind of substantive answer to this question (beyond saying they didn't know, or simply being critical) – regardless of whether that answer was even close to having any truth to it.

As noted throughout discussion of the individual response categories, there were some differences by age and gender. Men were more likely than women to seen evangelicals in a highly negative light – that they're greedy, hypocritical, style over substance, etc. The younger the respondent, the less likely he or she was even to have any guess what an evangelical is.

Substantive answer (right or wrong), 56%

No substantive answer, 44%
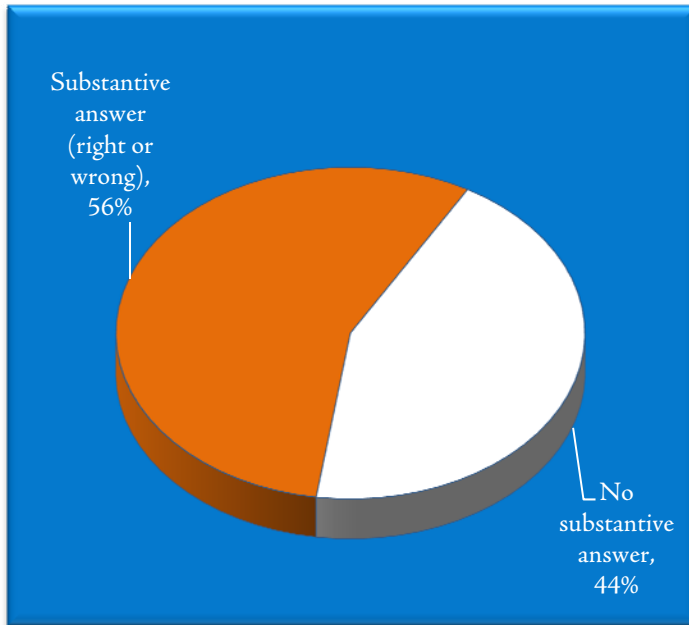
Older people were more likely than younger Americans to say evangelicals are a certain type of Christian, that they evangelize, and particularly that they rely on the Bible to guide their lives.

Not surprisingly, people who called themselves evangelical were much more likely to have an actual definition for the word than were those who did not describe themselves in this way. Furthermore, their definitions were much more often positive ones, and much less likely negative ones. Still, it's fascinating that 14% of all Americans who would call themselves "evangelical" couldn't even hazard a guess as to what an evangelical is. Self-described evangelicals were far more likely than others to define "evangelical" by evangelism activities, reliance on the Bible, or theological beliefs, and far less likely to have negative descriptions (e.g. greedy, fanatical, closed-minded).

In general, people who attended worship services on a regular basis were more likely than those who don't attend worship to have some definition, and for that definition to be substantive rather than simply disparaging.

Response Categories, by Gender and Age

Answer Category	All	Male	Female	Age <35	Age 35 – 54	Age 55+
No idea	36%	32%	39%	46%	37%	29%
They evangelize	18	19	16	16	16	21
A type of Christian	9	6	12	5	8	14
Zealous/devoted	9	10	9	8	9	10
Rely on the Bible	8	8	8	3	7	13
Theology	8	8	8	8	6	10
Worldview/politics	6	8	4	6	4	9
Fanatics	5	4	6	5	6	4
Assorted criticisms	4	7	2	5	5	3
Closed-minded	4	3	4	4	4	4
Greedy	3	4	2	3	4	2
Impose their beliefs	3	3	4	2	3	4
Flashy	2	4	1	2	4	1
Theology definition (wrong)	2	3	1	3	2	2
Professional ministers	2	2	2	--	4	--
They follow Christ	1	1	1	--	--	1
Activities	1	1	1	--	2	1

Not surprisingly, people who called themselves evangelical were much more likely to have an actual definition for the word than were those who did not describe themselves in this way. Furthermore, their definitions were much more often positive ones, and much less likely negative ones. Still, it's fascinating that 14% of all Americans who would call themselves "evangelical" couldn't even hazard a guess as to what an evangelical is. Self-described evangelicals were far more likely than others to define "evangelical" by evangelism activities, reliance on the Bible, or theological beliefs, and far less likely to have negative descriptions (e.g. greedy, fanatical, closed-minded).

In general, people who attended worship services on a regular basis were more likely than those who don't attend worship to have some definition, and for that definition to be substantive rather than simply disparaging.

Response Categories, by Self-description and Worship Attendance

Answer Category	Call Self Evangelical	Don't Call Self Evangelical	Attend Worship	Don't Attend Worship
No idea	14%	40%	30%	42%
They evangelize	30	15	22	14
A type of Christian	14	8	10	9
Zealous/devoted	10	9	10	9
Rely on the Bible	20	6	11	6
Theology	27	4	12	4
Worldview/politics	6	6	6	6
Fanatics	1	6	4	6
Assorted criticisms	1	5	2	7
Closed-minded	--	4	3	5
Greedy	1	3	2	3
Impose their beliefs	1	4	1	5
Flashy	--	3	3	2
Theology definition (wrong)	4	2	3	1
Professional ministers	--	2	2	1
They follow Christ	2	--	1	--
Activities	3	1	2	1

Some of the biggest differences in how this term is defined could be find along political ideology lines. Moderates were especially unlikely to have any clue what an evangelical is, while liberals were particularly likely to have disapproving comments about them. Liberals were nine times as likely as conservatives to define evangelicals as being closed-minded, more than three times as likely to feel they are fanatics, four times as likely to level assorted criticisms at them (e.g. that they're hypocritical or racist), and over three times more likely to say the definition includes the feeling that they want to impose their beliefs on others.

Response Categories, by Self-described Political Views and Affiliation

Answer Category	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	GOP	Independent	Democrat
No idea	27%	45%	34%	29%	37%	38%
They evangelize	23	12	19	18	16	19
A type of Christian	11	9	7	14	7	9
Zealous/devoted	11	8	9	10	10	9
Rely on the Bible	12	5	8	13	5	8
Theology	13	4	6	12	7	6
Worldview/politics	6	4	9	7	5	7
Fanatics	3	4	10	2	6	7
Assorted criticisms	2	3	8	3	6	4
Closed-minded	1	2	9	1	5	5
Greedy	2	4	2	2	4	2
Impose their beliefs	2	2	7	2	4	3
Flashy	2	3	2	2	4	2
Theology definition (wrong)	2	3	2	2	4	1
Professional ministers	3	2	--	4	1	1
They follow Christ	1	1	--	1	1	--
Activities	1	1	2	1	1	1

THE IMPLICATIONS

There are a few things to consider from all of these answers. One that might be a bit surprising, given how often the term is used in connection with reports on voting or on various groups' stances on political or social issues, is how few people defined evangelicals primarily from a political or social standpoint. That was actually one of the less common definitions. Americans generally do not define evangelicals simply according to their supposed stances on political issues or candidates.

However, that's not to say that people of different political leanings see evangelicals in the same light. Self-described political conservatives tended to define evangelicals according to theology, reliance on the Bible, or their actions in evangelism. Liberals, on the other hand, are far more likely than political conservatives to have strongly negative views of evangelicals, even if they aren't truly definitions: that they're fanatical, closed-minded, racist, or pushy, for instance.

In fact, another thing to take away from this study is how much negativity there is toward evangelicals in general – and not just from political liberals. Evangelicals were called psychos, stupid, narrow-minded, bigots, idiots, manipulative, fanatics, greedy, pushy, loud-mouthed, nut cases, hypocrites, illiterate, screaming loons, delusional, fake, annoying pests, frauds, simpletons, idolatrous, racist, pompous, morons, dangerous, ethnocentric, cruel, liars, dishonest, crazy, nut jobs, nitwits, and freaks. And that is not including some comments which cannot be reprinted here because of the language and/or bodily references involved. The invective and vitriol directed at this population group by some Americans was truly shocking. Some people don't have any idea what evangelicals actually are or what they believe – they just know they can't stand evangelicals, whatever they might be.

Another major point to take away from study this was the diversity of thought about what evangelicals are. Aside from the lack of knowledge admitted by many and the disdain shown by others, the actual definitions were quite varied, from theology to politics to level of devotion or involvement to activities and actions.

Interestingly, almost no one defined evangelicals according to any of the three most common polling approaches: what they call themselves, where they attend church, or their very specific religious beliefs.

Even among evangelicals (no matter how this group is defined), there was little agreement over what they themselves actually are, and anywhere from 12% to 28% who would fall into the "evangelical" category by one of these three definitions admitted that they did not know what an evangelical actually is.
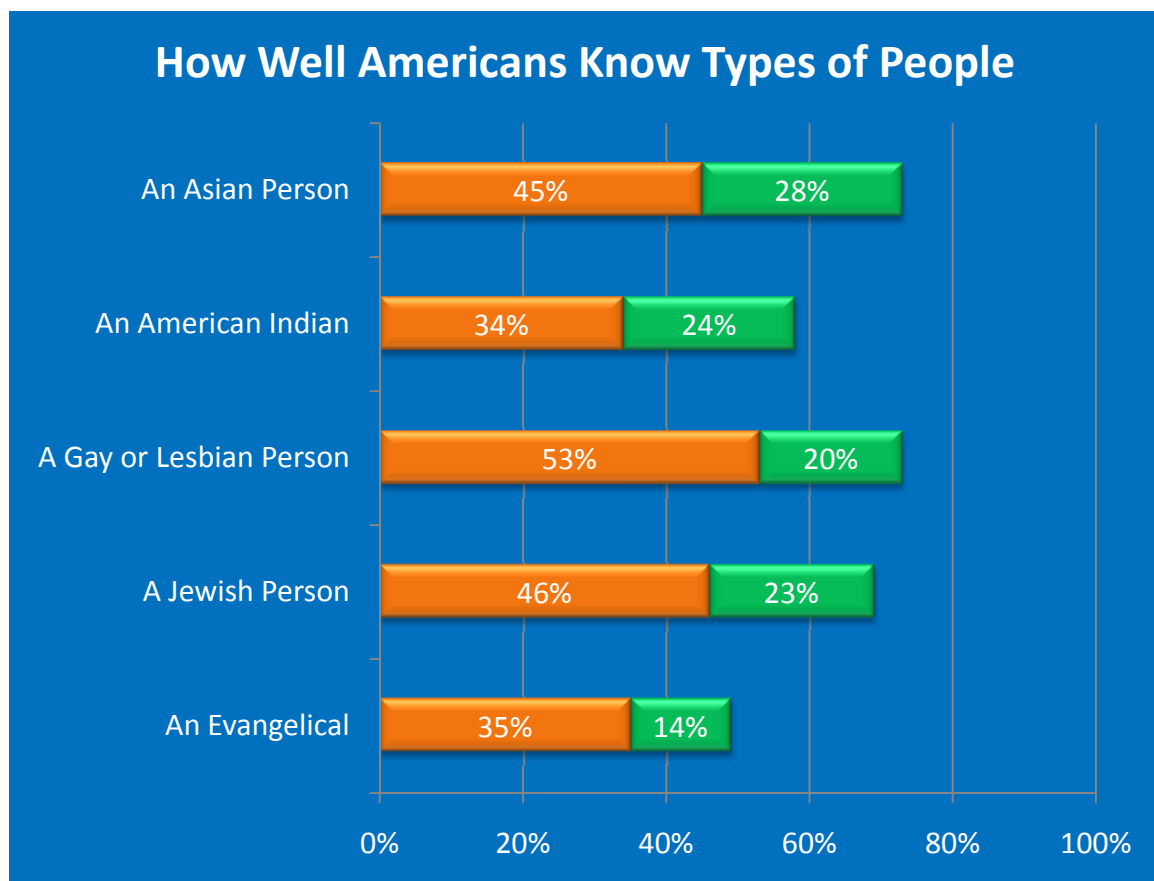
Possibly the most important thing to take away from these findings is that almost half of Americans could not give a definition of "evangelical" that had any substance to it – and that

doesn't even include the ones who gave a definition that few experts would say has any accuracy (e.g. that they follow the Torah closely).

When the media reports something about "evangelical leaders" Chuck Colson or James Dobson, or describes a political candidate as meeting with an evangelical group, or polls likely voters and reports that evangelicals are backing the underdog, many Americans honestly don't have the faintest notion of just who belongs to that group that is being described, while others are completely off-base in their assumptions of who the report is describing.

In a sense, this should not be surprising. Another recent Grey Matter Research study showed that only 35% of all Americans said they actually know an evangelical Christian very well, and just 49% said they know one even casually. One-third of all Americans said they have never known an evangelical at any point in their lives.

Americans were less likely to know an evangelical Christian than they were to know a Jewish person, an American Indian, an Asian person, or a gay or lesbian person – all of whom represent populations that are considerably smaller than the evangelical population in this country, no matter how it is defined.

How Well Americans Know Types of People

Type of Person	Know Casually	Know Very Well
An Asian Person	45%	28%
An American Indian	34%	24%
A Gay or Lesbian Person	53%	20%
A Jewish Person	46%	23%
An Evangelical	35%	14%

In short, evangelicals are a population that is described differently by different people who are asked (including those "in the know" or even who are supposedly part of the evangelical community itself), that is simply an unknown to many Americans, that is disrespected and disliked by many (even if they really don't know quite what one is), and that cannot even really define itself in any consistent terms.

Yet this population supposedly has enormous spending power, media power, and voting power. When an article says "The evangelical vote very well may decide the upcoming election," or "Evangelicals are protesting this circuit court decision," one really is led to wonder just who that reporter is really writing about? This study demonstrates that the average American doesn't really know.

BACKGROUND ON DEFINITIONS

We asked a number of knowledgeable people to define just what is an evangelical, and reviewed some recent literature for definitions.

American Heritage dictionary:
Of, relating to, or in accordance with the Christian gospel, especially one of the four gospel books of the New Testament. Of, relating to, or being a Protestant church that founds its teaching on the gospel. Of, relating to, or being a Christian church believing in the sole authority and inerrancy of the Bible, in salvation only through regeneration, and in a spiritually transformed personal life.

Jeffrey Weiss, Religion Reporter, *The Dallas Morning News*:
It's a trick question, in a way. Theologically, anyone who says he or she is Christian and takes the Great Commission seriously could be considered to be "evangelical." But that definition is much broader than current popular usage. In her new book, Christine Wicker makes a case that the term has become synonymous with "Religious Right." But I think that's a bit more narrow than current popular usage. When I use it, I try to pair the word with some actual beliefs or positions relevant to what I'm writing about, but that's not always possible. I think for most people, an evangelical Christian is someone who says they take the Bible very seriously and may well use the word "inerrant", believe they have an urgent divine mandate to proselytize people of other religions, consider "soul-saving" mission work as ultimately more important than "social gospel" mission work, and probably consider themselves to be politically conservative. That scratches the surface of a complex and hardly monolithic public understanding of a complex and hardly monolithic religious identity.

Dr. Leon Morris, World Evangelical Alliance (from the website www.worldevangelicals.org):
An evangelical is a gospel man, a gospel woman. "Evangelical" derives from *'evangel'* : "gospel". By definition an evangelical is someone concerned for the gospel. This means more than that he preaches the gospel now and then. It means that for him the gospel of Christ is central. It is, of course, his message and he preaches it, constantly. But it is more than a subject of preaching. The gospel is at the centre of his thinking and living.
The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians of the gospel he had brought them by saying that it is of the first importance that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor.15:3). It seems to me that everything that matters to the evangelical arises from this basic proposition.

Time Magazine:
Protestants who believe that the Bible is literally true, that salvation requires a "born again" conversion, and that one must share that faith with others. Some belong to established groups like Methodist and Baptist churches.

Dr. Brad Waggoner, President, B&H Publishing Group (Southern Baptist Convention):
An Evangelical is anyone who has experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ by faith and grace alone and who embraces a core set of theological beliefs such as the inerrancy of the Bible, the Trinity (the existence of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit who is the creator and sustainer of the universe and is all powerful, eternal, and all knowing), the virgin birth of Christ, His sinless life on earth as fully God and fully man, His bodily death and resurrection, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at the point of conversion, the atoning work of Christ on the cross (serving as a substitution sparing those who place faith in Christ from the wrath of God), the conviction that salvation is possible only through the death and resurrection of Christ, the belief that those who are regenerate will spend an eternity with God in heaven and those who do not place genuine faith is Jesus Christ will be eternally separated from God in a literal hell, belief in a literal enemy called Satan, belief in the second coming of Christ, belief in the necessity of identification with a local church, and conviction that all believers are responsible to share the gospel with the lost.

Terry Mattingly, Scripps Howard News Service religion columnist (quoted from a 2004 article at www.getreligion.org):
"…(Y)ou might assume that the world's most famous evangelist has an easy answer for this tricky political question: 'What does the word "evangelical" mean?' If you assumed this, you would be wrong. In fact, Graham once bounced that question right back at me.
'Actually, that's a question I'd like to ask somebody, too,' he said, during a 1987 interview in his mountainside home office in Montreat, N.C. This oft-abused term has 'become blurred. … You go all the way from the extreme fundamentalists to the extreme liberals and, somewhere in between, there are the evangelicals.'
Wait a minute, I said. If Billy Graham doesn't know what 'evangelical' means, then who does? Graham agreed that this is a problem for journalists and historians. One man's 'evangelical' is another's 'fundamentalist.'
Long ago, Graham stressed that this term must be understood in doctrinal terms, if it is to be understood at all. He finally defined an 'evangelical' as someone who believes all the doctrines in the ancient Nicene Creed. Graham stressed the centrality of the resurrection and the belief that salvation is through Jesus, alone.
'I think there are evangelicals in the Roman Catholic Church, and the Eastern Orthodox churches,' he said."

Cathy Lynn Grossman, religion reporter, *USA Today* (from a 2007 article):
"Until last year the answer seemed clear: 'Evangelical' was the label of choice of Christians with conservative views on politics, economics and biblical morality.
Now the word may be losing its moorings, sliding toward the same linguistic demise that 'fundamentalist' met decades ago because it has been misunderstood, misappropriated and maligned."

ABOUT GREY MATTER RESEARCH

Since 1996, Grey Matter Research has been conducting both qualitative and quantitative research for a wide variety of for-profit and non-profit organizations. Some clients are clearly secular, with no connection to the religious world, some are in the Christian community and generally would be considered evangelical, and others are in the Christian community but generally not defined as evangelical. Although our clients are highly diverse and our work is very broad-based (financial services, automotive, sports, etc.), one of the areas in which we have specialized is research related to religion.

RELIGIOUS CLIENTS WE HAVE SERVED INCLUDE:

- National Association of Evangelicals
- United Methodist Publishing
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- World Concern
- Alliance Defense Fund
- LifeWay Christian Stores
- Evangelical Environmental Network

We have also conducted numerous studies at our own expense to understand the American mindset more thoroughly, often on topics related to religion and society.

Results from our studies have been covered in the international media, such as *Pravda*, *USA Today*, *The Financial Times of London*, Associated Press, MSNBC, *Los Angeles Times*, USA Radio Network, *Dallas Morning News*, *Clergy Journal*, *Detroit News*, and many other outlets in the USA, China, England, Russia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Korea, Sweden, Hungary, the Philippines, Australia, and other parts of the world.

More information on the company is available on our website: www.greymatterresearch.com.

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