

Most Americans Believe in Concept of Sin

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(March 14, 2008) A new study released by Ellison Research finds that a vast majority of Americans (87%) believe in the concept of sin, but differ widely on what constitutes a sin.

The study polled more than 1,000 Americans from all races and backgrounds and found that even people who are not regular church-goers still believe in the concept of sin.

“Among Americans who regularly attend religious worship services, 94 percent believe in the concept of sin, although this only drops to 80 percent among those who do not attend services,” the report found.

“Among those who attend services, the concept of sin is fairly universal among Protestants (96%), Roman Catholics (91%), and those who attend other types of religious services (94%).”

Women tend to have a longer list of sins than men. “Women are more likely than men to include racism, gossip, use of hard drugs, marijuana, adultery, pornography, not reporting income on taxes, abortion, failing to say anything if given too much change, and swearing as sinful behavior,” the study found.

The real surprise in the report was that the greatest differences were found along political lines. “Among political conservatives, 94 percent believe there is such a thing as sin. This is also true among 89 percent of moderates. But only 77 percent of political liberals believe in the concept of sin.”

Most of the people polled said they believed the following behaviors are sinful: adultery (81%), racism (74%), using hard drugs such as cocaine or heroine (65%), not saying anything if a cashier gives you too much change (63%), having an abortion (56%), homosexual activity or sex (52%) and not reporting some income on your tax returns (52%).

A significant number of Americans think using pornography is sinful (50%), as well as gossiping (47%), sex before marriage (45%), and swearing (46%). Forty-three percent think having sexual thoughts about someone you are not married to is sinful and forty-one percent agreed that harming the environment, smoking marijuana and getting drunk is sinful.

Gambling and telling “little white lies” to avoid hurting someone’s feelings are considered sinful by about 30 percent. Only 23 percent believe smoking cigarettes is sinful. Very few Americans believe it is sinful to skip church (18%), watch an R-rated movies (18%), work on the Sabbath (14%).

The report found that Americans have a tendency to define sinful behavior by degrees; for instance, while 81 percent believe adultery is sinful, only 43 percent say it is wrong to have sexual thoughts about someone to whom they are not married. Forty-one percent believe getting

drunk is sinful but only 14 percent believe drinking even a little alcohol is a sin. Thirty percent say gambling is sinful, but only 18 percent think it is wrong to play the lottery. And while 65 percent believe using drugs such as meth or cocaine is sinful, only 41 percent say it's wrong to smoke marijuana.

“We can see numerous inconsistent patterns of thought and belief throughout the responses,” said Ron Sellers, president of Ellison Research.

“For instance, over a third of all Americans believe failing to take proper care of their bodies is sinful. Yet far fewer believe tobacco or obesity are sins – even though medical science consistently shows using tobacco and being overweight are two of the most harmful things they can do to their bodies.”

Sellers pointed out other inconsistencies found in the study:

- More than four out of ten evangelicals believe it is a sin not to tithe, while other studies consistently show that relatively few evangelicals actually do so.
- The Catholic Church consistently teaches that sex before marriage, abortion, pornography, and homosexual activity are sins, yet as many as half of all practicing Catholics do not personally define each of these as sinful.
- Forty-three percent of Democrats believe homosexual activity is sinful, and half believe this about having an abortion, even though their political party consistently supports gay rights and access to abortion.
- While most religions teach that lying is morally wrong, the vast majority of Americans – including a third of evangelicals, a majority of all Protestants, and three out of four Catholics, don't believe telling a “little white lie” is a sin.

Sellers suggests that religious leaders take a hard look at how the findings of this study compare to their own teachings.

“If your church is teaching that working on the Sabbath is sinful, or that drinking or abortion or gossip are sinful, it's likely that many of your own people don't agree with you. Leaders need to understand why this is, so they can figure out how to respond.

“Rather than just teaching, they need to discuss these issues with people – getting feedback on why so many of their own people differ with them may help them understand how to reach those people more effectively with their teaching.”

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