

This Brief: The Spiritual Lifestyles Of U.S. Christians

Results from the Christian Life Survey 2020-2021

Data collected August 2020 through May 2021. Results from adult U.S. residents who self-identify as Christians.



Steven Bird, PhD

There are a lot of ways to live out the Christian life. There are different Christian practices you can use—like fasting or attending worship services. There are different principles that might guide the way you live out Christianity—like asceticism or living a life focused on service. In fact, there are many “right” ways to be a Christian and it might say something about us when we adopt one or another Christian way of living—what I’m going to call Christian lifestyles.

One thing that is certain is that there are so many of these different ways of living out Christianity, that any list I create will leave some off.

In this summary brief, I’ll look at some Christian lifestyles I’ve been able to study analytically by analyzing the patterns in the responses from 6,909 people in the United States who are 18 or older and self-identify as a Christian. These people used a free link at Bible Gateway to access the survey sometime between August 2020 and May 2021. People using the survey receive their personal responses via email so they can have a way to think about how they are living the Christian life and how they want to be living the Christian life. All results reported here were statistically weighted for correct representation of American Christians on the basis of age, sex, and race.

It's important to recognize that the results I’m reporting on here are from a lot of people, but they are all self-identified adult Christians who use the scripture engagement section of the Bible Gateway website

enough that they found the link to the survey. The folks who use Bible Gateway are not representative of the larger US population. Not even the population of self-identified Christians. These data I'm using here, then, are probably more representative of devout Christians more so than just the average self-identified Christian. If you're interested in understanding the patterns of behavior among folks who are Christians and take their spiritual life a bit more seriously, the results I provide here will be helpful for you.

When the Christian Life Survey was first used in 2010, I created a large set of questions about the ways people can live the Christian life and then found which ones held up analytically—which ones I could build good measures of. Across the years since then, with nearly thirty thousand people having used the CLS to look at their own spiritual life, I've been able to refine the process to look at seven different Christian lifestyles. A person can be high or low on none, any, or all of them.

Those seven Christian lifestyles are Connectedness, Asceticism, Appetites, Reflectiveness, Evangelism, Service, and Stewardship.

These terms can mean different things to different people. I'll give you a quick definition here and then show you the exact questions that were used. This will allow you to see what is actually being measured.

For my purposes here, "connectedness" means a person lives out their Christianity by getting together with others in worship or study or other spiritual activities. "Asceticism" refers to a lifestyle of separation and self-denial to promote spiritual growth. What I call the "appetites" lifestyle refers to an intentional effort to manage appetites that can guide a person into sin. The "reflective" lifestyle is one of, well, reflection on spiritual things. "Evangelism" refers to a lifestyle focused on inviting non-Christians to become Christians. A lifestyle of "service" is oriented on helping those the Bible calls "the least of these" (Matt.

25:31-46). And the “stewardship” lifestyle refers to systematically seeking to use your talents and resources for God’s purposes.

For each of these seven Christian lifestyles, I have developed a set of three to six questions that provide a comprehensive measure of a person’s adoption of that lifestyle. It is important to have multiple questions about any one lifestyle to see if a person has adopted a lifestyle rather than just one or another isolated behavior.

Connected

I attend worship services

I engage in fellowship with Christians

I meet with a spiritual small group or spiritual mentor

Ascetic

I have times of solitude to increase my spiritual life

I practice important times of silence as part of my spiritual practices

I intentionally practice submission of self to a spiritual purpose

I make serious sacrifices in the ways I live so I can grow spiritually

Appetites

I make intentional disciplined efforts to maintain a healthy appetite toward sex

I make intentional disciplined efforts to maintain a healthy appetite toward alcohol

I make intentional disciplined efforts to maintain a healthy appetite toward social approval

I make intentional disciplined efforts to maintain a healthy appetite toward wealth

I make intentional disciplined efforts to maintain a healthy appetite toward power and control

I make intentional disciplined efforts to maintain a healthy appetite toward fame

Reflective

I reflect on what it means for me to be a Christian

I reflect on the meaning of scripture in my life

I reflect on the meaning of prayer in my life

I reflect on what is good and right

I reflect on who God is

Evangelism

I talk to non-believers in ways that I think will help them come closer to Christ

I go out of my way to be in contact with people who don't share my beliefs

I act in specific ways around non-believers so they might come closer to Christ

I try to evangelize others so they will become Christians

Service

I serve those in need

I serve the people around me

I help people who are treated unjustly

I help others who are in difficulty

Stewardship

I make intentional disciplined efforts to use my money for God's purposes

I make intentional disciplined efforts to use my time for God's purposes

I make intentional disciplined efforts to use my talents and skills for God's purposes

I make intentional disciplined efforts to use my freedoms for God's purposes

I make intentional disciplined efforts to use my privileges for God's purposes

I make intentional disciplined efforts to use my relationships for God's purposes

For the lifestyles built around appetite control and stewardship each question is answered with strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, agree, or strongly agree. For the other five lifestyles, people reported the frequency they do particular behaviors by choosing from the answers never, a few times a year, monthly, a few times a month, weekly, a few times a week, or daily.

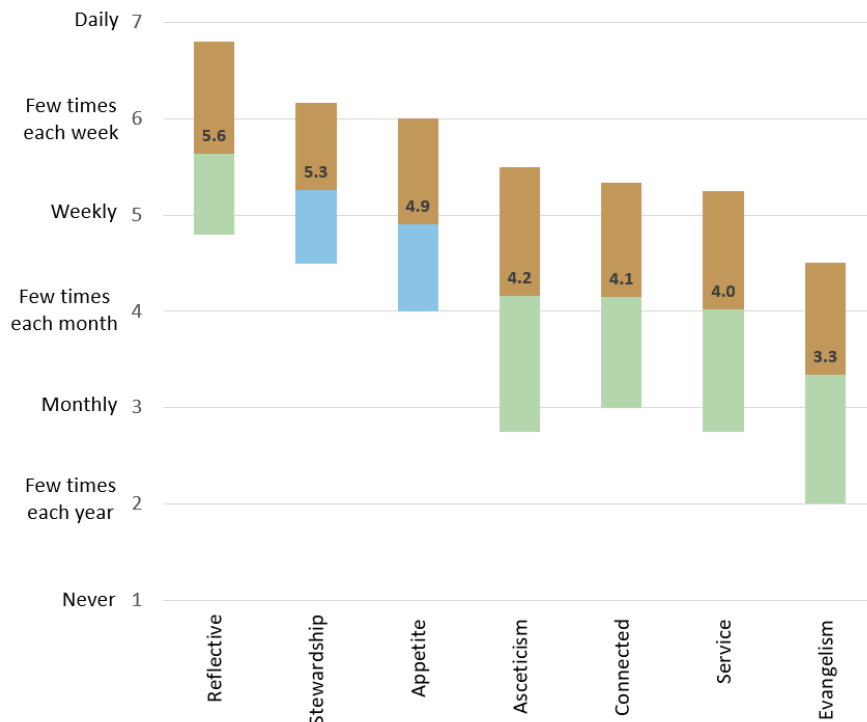
Each person's answers for the questions about any one lifestyle are joined together to get an average that is between 1 and 7. One means they strongly disagreed on all the questions and seven means they strongly agreed on all the questions or, if the questions focus on frequency of behaviors, a one means they never engage in any of the behaviors and a seven means they do them all daily.

There's also a report at the website for the Center for Scripture Engagement about the full methodology used in the Christian Life Survey.

So which lifestyles do American Christians adopt more or less?

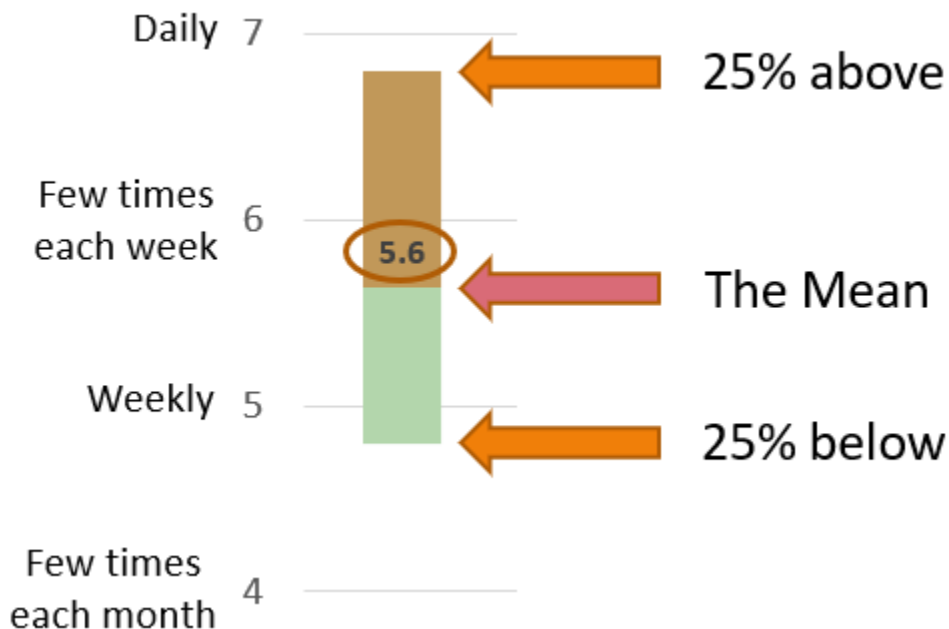
To show you what I've learned, I'll use a boxplot. Along the bottom you can see the names of the lifestyles. Along the left edge you can see the answers people could give to the questions. For the questions that measure five of the lifestyles the options ranged from never to daily, but for two of the lifestyles the questions' answers ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Since all the lifestyle's summary indexes are on a 1 to 7 scale, I'll display the results for all of them on one chart—we'll just remember that two of the lifestyles are measured by agreement rather than frequency.

Here are the results for all seven lifestyles. Notice that there are two boxes that use a different color—that's just to remind us that those two lifestyles are measured on agreement rather than frequency.



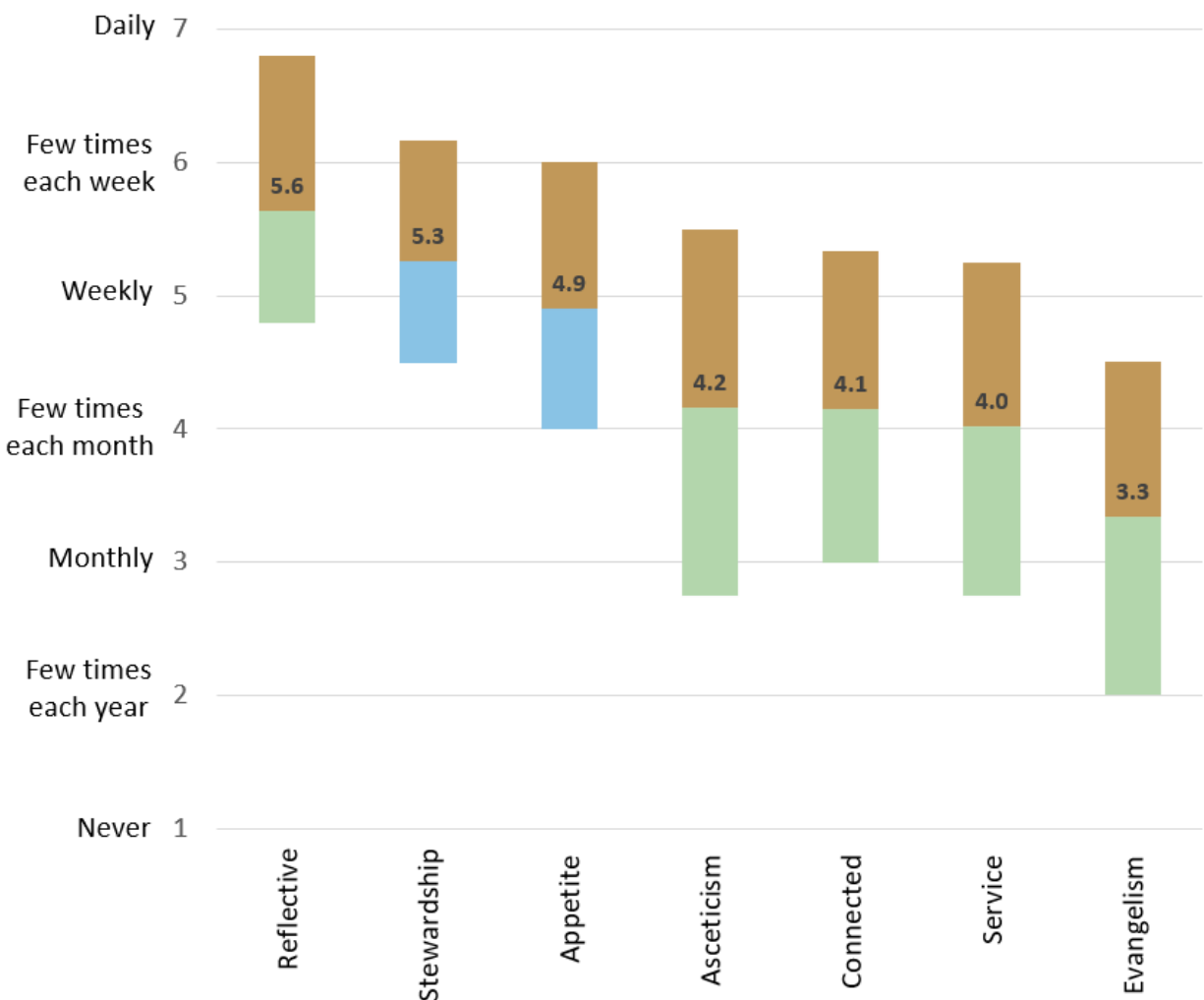
To explain what a boxplot tells us, I'll focus on the results for being a reflective Christian—the “reflective” lifestyle indicates people’s responses about reflecting on the meaning of God, the Bible and other aspects of the Christian life—all summed together.

This box shows the trends in the results for the 6,909 American Christians whose responses we have here. The bottom of the box shows the value where 25 percent of the people had values below there. The top of the box shows us the value where 25 percent of the people are above that line. Using the values where 25% of the people are above the top line and 25% are below the bottom line is called the interquartile range. The size of the box—how tall or short it is—allows us to see how varied people’s responses were for being, in this example, reflective Christians. If the box is really tall, people’s responses vary a lot. If the box is short, people all tended to have about the same value.



The line inside the box shows the mean average for people. The number shown is the actual mean value. For these almost 7000 people, their response about being reflective Christians was, on average, 5.6. A value of 6 indicates that they are involved in spiritual reflection, on average, a few times each week while a value of 5 would mean they are involved in spiritual reflection weekly. This value of 5.6, with a moderately tall box, tells us that American Christians, on average tend to engage in spiritual reflection a few times a week (that's what the mean tells us) and there is a moderate amount of variation around that trend (shown by the tallness of the box).

Let's look at all the results for all the lifestyles.



As you can see, I've put them in order from the most adopted to the least adopted, but we need to be careful here. Some of these lifestyles are lived out in your own home and others are lived out in other places. It shouldn't surprise us that the lifestyles that involve being in other places might be harder to practice as often, and so they will have a lower average for how often people do those things.

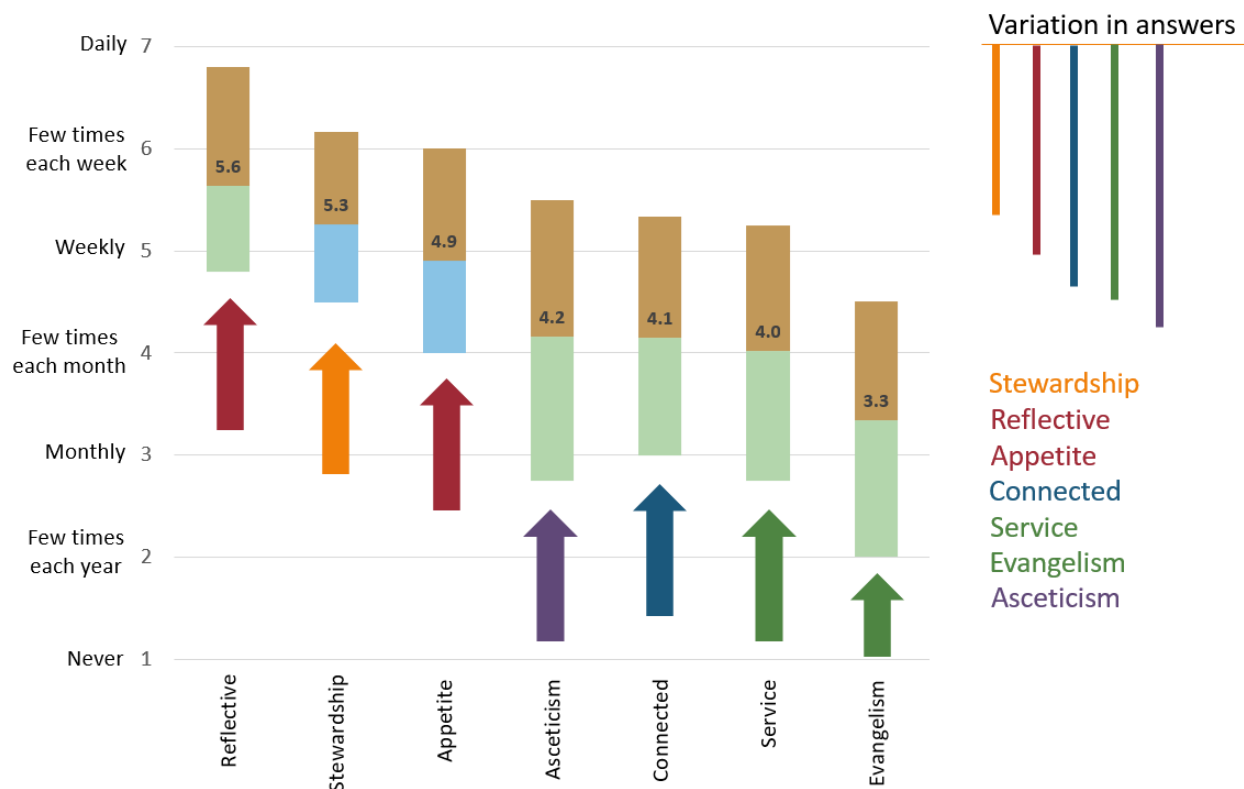
Notice the three lifestyles with the highest adoption. Here are a few observations. We've already considered being reflective. The other two are stewardship and a right relation to appetites. These are the two lifestyles that are hard to measure by asking how often someone does particular things and so I asked them how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. But the answers when you ask how often someone does a particular action tend to be more precise than questions about their agreement that they do those things. A person who only does specific acts related to stewardship once a month might feel comfortable agreeing (rather than slightly agreeing) that they practice stewardship. This means the average for the agreement-based questions is likely to be higher just because of the way the questions are built. Even so, people report more reflection, stewardship, and efforts to have a right relation to their appetites than they do the other lifestyles.

The next three lifestyles all have roughly the same mean average. American Christians indicate that they practice asceticism, spiritual practices connected to others, and acts of service to the needy a few times each month. Evangelism is the least practiced lifestyle with American Christians indicating they engage in acts related to evangelism about once a month.

It's worth mentioning again that these lifestyles are dissimilar in how private they are. Reflection, stewardship, and appetite management

can be practiced on a personal basis. Asceticism, on the other hand, will probably have more impact on the folks around you, and engaging in connectedness, service, and evangelism definitely tend to take a person out of their own private space. This probably explains some of the differences in the adoption of these lifestyles.

While we're at this, let's take a quick look at much variation there is in people's adoption of each lifestyle. This is shown by the tallness—or shortness—of the boxes.



The lifestyle with the least variation in American Christians' values is stewardship. There's still a large enough box to say there is some notable spread in people's answers, but there is even more spread in people's answers on all the other lifestyles. I've put a little bar to the top right of the chart to show the height of the box.

Two lifestyles with just a bit more variation in answers are being reflective and seeking a right relation to appetites. Connectedness is next with more variation in the answers, and Service and evangelism come after that. The lifestyle with the greatest variation in people's answers is asceticism and there is a lot of variation in people's adoption of asceticism.

We can only speculate the causes of these differences in variation of answers, but one interesting thing to note is that the three lifestyles with the greatest variation in people's answers (service, evangelism, and asceticism) require a person to do things that are more likely to affect people around them and so might be the ones most likely to require people to move out of their comfort zones.

Finally, let's consider the effect of demographics on these lifestyles. Do people from different sexes, races, age groups, or degree attainment groups adopt lifestyles at different rates?

To answer that, I've built a table that gives Eta-squared values to show the amount of effect each demographic has on lifestyle adoption. I've bolded the values that indicate enough effect to be mentioned. I have not included statistical significance indicators since, with so many cases, almost every result is statistically significant. Instead, I've just provided the effect sizes so we can identify the demographics that have a notable effect on any particular lifestyle.

η^2 values	Age	Race	Degree	Sex
Reflective	.049	.004	.003	.000
Stewardship	.052	.005	.015	.000
Appetite	.013	.012	.031	.002
Asceticism	.032	.006	.003	.005
Connected	.019	.005	.014	.002
Service	.003	.009	.005	.004
Evangelism	.003	.002	.002	.004

The first thing to notice is that all the bolded effects are small. The bolded numbers indicate there is an effect worth noting—but the numbers are small enough that we can conclude these effects are not large. Next, we can note that two demographics account for nearly all the effects: age and degree. By looking at the data behind these numbers I can tell you that when people get older there is a small increase in their adoption of the five bolded lifestyles. And I can tell you that, as people get more advanced degrees, they tend to have a small increase in their adoption of the three bolded lifestyles.

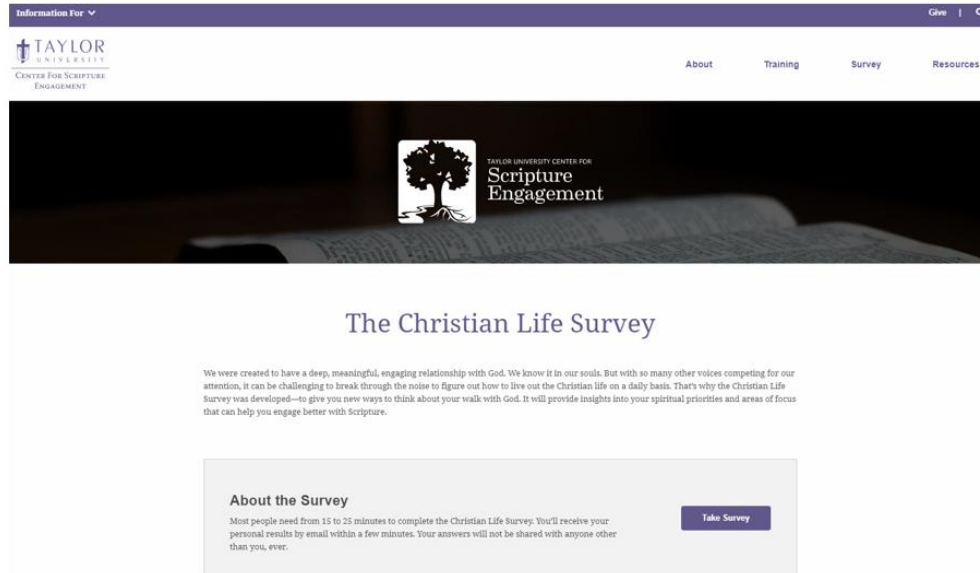
One other thing to notice: None of the demographics affect service or evangelism. Men and women are equally likely to adopt either of them, different age groups are equally likely, and so forth.

What might it mean that these two lifestyles—service and evangelism—are the two people adopt the least, are the two with some of the highest variation in people’s adoption, and yet are the two not affected by any demographics?

All of that together suggests that neither of these lifestyles are in the mainstream of Christianity in America—regardless of what groups we consider. American Christianity, as practiced by these nearly 7,000 people, is a personal spirituality rather than a spirituality that extends out into the communities around them.

In this summary brief I’ve shared some analyses about what spiritual lifestyles devout adult American Christians adopt. From this research we conclude that American Christians’ spiritual lives are lived out most commonly through personal reflection, stewardship, and appetite management, and, a bit less frequently, through lifestyles that take them out of their personal spaces.

If you'd be interested in using the Christian Life Survey as a tool, to take a look at your own Christian life, it can be found at taylor.edu/christianlifesurvey. Thanks for reading these results.



The screenshot shows the website for the Taylor University Center for Scripture Engagement. The header includes the Taylor University logo and navigation links for About, Training, Survey, and Resources. The main content area features a banner with a tree logo and the text "TAYLOR UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR Scripture Engagement". Below this is the title "The Christian Life Survey" and a paragraph explaining the survey's purpose. A section titled "About the Survey" provides details on completion time and privacy, accompanied by a "Take Survey" button.

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TAYLOR UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

About Training Survey Resources

TAYLOR UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR
Scripture
Engagement

The Christian Life Survey

We were created to have a deep, meaningful, engaging relationship with God. We know it in our souls. But with so many other voices competing for our attention, it can be challenging to break through the noise to figure out how to live out the Christian life on a daily basis. That's why the Christian Life Survey was developed—to give you new ways to think about your walk with God. It will provide insights into your spiritual priorities and areas of focus that can help you engage better with Scripture.

About the Survey

Most people need from 15 to 25 minutes to complete the Christian Life Survey. You'll receive your personal results by email within a few minutes. Your answers will not be shared with anyone other than you, ever.

[Take Survey](#)

- <http://taylor.edu/christianlifesurvey>