

**Barna Report (April 2009): Beliefs of “Christians” Vary Widely  
Summarized and posted by Bob Young  
May 2010**

*A Barna survey reveals that a majority of Americans who call themselves Christians believe that Satan “is not a living being, but a symbol of evil.” Four out of ten (40%) said they “strongly agree” with the statement and 19% said they “agree somewhat.” Also, 58% of Americans who call themselves Christians said they either “strongly agree” or “agree somewhat” that the Holy Spirit is “a symbol of God’s power or presence, but not a living entity.”*

A nationwide survey of adults’ spiritual beliefs suggests that Americans who consider themselves to be Christian have a diverse set of beliefs—but many of those beliefs are contradictory or, at least, inconsistent. The survey explored beliefs about spiritual beings, the influence of faith on their life, views of the Bible, and reactions to faiths other than their own.

### **Views on Spiritual Beings**

The survey asked questions about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Satan, and demons. All 1,871 self-described Christians were asked about their perception of God. Three-fourths (78%) said he is the “all-powerful, all-knowing Creator of the universe who rules the world today.” The remaining one-fourth chose other descriptions of God – depictions that are not consistent with biblical teaching (e.g., everyone is god, god refers to the realization of human potential, etc.).

For the other survey items a four-point opinion scale was used to measure people’s reactions to specific statements about each spiritual entity.

Four out of ten Christians (40%) strongly agreed that Satan “is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.” An additional two out of ten Christians (19%) said they “agree somewhat” with that perspective. A minority of Christians indicated that they believe Satan is real by disagreeing with the statement: one-fourth (26%) disagreed strongly and about one-tenth (9%) disagreed somewhat. The remaining 8% were not sure what they believe about the existence of Satan.

Although a core teaching of the Christian faith is the divinity and perfection of Jesus Christ, tens of millions of Christians do not accept that teaching. More than one-fifth (22%) strongly agreed that Jesus Christ sinned when He lived on earth, with an additional 17% agreeing somewhat. Holding the opposing view were 9% who disagreed somewhat and 46% who disagreed strongly. Six percent did not have an opinion on this matter.

Much like their perceptions of Satan, most Christians do not believe that the Holy Spirit is a living force, either. Overall, 38% strongly agreed and 20% agreed somewhat that the Holy Spirit is “a symbol of God’s power or presence but is not a living entity.” Just one-third of Christians disagreed that the Holy Spirit is not a living force (9% disagreed somewhat, 25% disagreed strongly) while 9% were not sure.

A majority of Christians believe that a person can be under the influence of spiritual forces, such as demons or evil spirits. Two out of three Christians agreed that such influence is real (39% agreed strongly, 25% agreed somewhat), while just three out of ten rejected the influence of supernatural forces (18% disagreed strongly, 10% disagreed somewhat). The remaining 8% were undecided on this matter.

## **Influence of Faith**

Most self-described Christians contend their religious faith has significantly impacted their life.

Almost six out of ten adults (59%) said their faith had “greatly transformed” their life, while 29% said their faith “has been helpful but has not greatly transformed” their life and 9% stated that their religious faith “has not made much of a difference” in who they are and how they live.

Christians were asked if they believed that a person must either side with God or with the devil – that there is no in-between position. A large majority strongly agreed with the notion (61%) while an additional 15% agreed somewhat. Just one out of ten adults disagreed somewhat (10%) and a similar proportion (11%) disagreed strongly. Surprisingly few adults (3%) did not have an opinion on this matter.

A large majority of Christians also proclaimed that the most important purpose in their life is to “love God with all their heart, mind, strength and soul,” a notion drawn directly from the Bible (Mark 12:29-30). Three-fourths of self-described Christians (74%) strongly affirmed that idea, while 15% more agreed somewhat with the statement. Just 4% strongly disagreed and 7% somewhat disagreed with the statement. Three percent said they were not sure.

## **Thoughts on Other Faiths**

Among self-identified Christians, few held a positive opinion of Wicca. Overall, just 5% had a positive opinion while 55% had a negative opinion of Wicca. However, a huge segment (40%) did not know enough about Wicca to have formed an opinion of it, despite it being described to them as “an organized form of witchcraft.”

Survey respondents were asked whether they believed that Mormons are Christians. Mormons themselves claim to be Christian, but most evangelical leaders say that they are not. There was no clear-cut perspective among the self-described Christians: four out of ten felt Mormons were Christian (18% strongly agreed, 21% somewhat agreed), three out of ten disagreed (17% strongly, 12% somewhat), and three out of ten were not sure what to think.

When asked whether it was important to them to have “active, healthy relationships with people who belong to religious faiths that do not accept the central beliefs of your faith,” about two-thirds of the self-professed Christians claimed it was important. Thirty-six percent agreed strongly with the notion, and 29% agreed somewhat, while 11% disagreed strongly and 16% disagreed somewhat. The other 8% did not have an opinion.

## **Views on the Bible**

A slight majority of Christians (55%) strongly agree that the Bible is accurate in all of the principles it teaches, with another 18% agreeing somewhat. About one out of five either disagree strongly (9%) or somewhat (13%) with this statement, and 5% aren’t sure what to believe. [Note that the wording of the question asks about ‘principles’, and does not imply that these believe the Bible is completely accurate.—by]

There is no similar clarity among self-defined Christians regarding how the Bible compares to other holy books. When faced with the statement that “the Bible, the Koran and the Book of Mormon are all different expressions of the same spiritual truths,” the group was evenly split between those who accepted the idea (19% agreed strongly, 22% agreed

somewhat) and those who rejected it (28% disagreed strongly, 12% disagreed somewhat), while leaving a sizeable portion (20%) undecided.

### **Inconsistencies Noted**

The study identified a number of instances in which people's beliefs seemed inconsistent. Among those were the following:

- \_ About half (47%) of the Christians who believed that Satan is merely a symbol of evil nevertheless agreed that a person can be under the influence of spiritual forces such as demons.
- \_ About half (49%) of those who agreed that the Holy Spirit is only a symbol but not a living entity also agreed that the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches, even though the Bible clearly describes the Holy Spirit as more than a symbolic reference to God's power or presence.
- \_ About one-third (33%) of the self-defined Christians who agree that the Bible, Koran and Book of Mormon all teach the same truths simultaneously contend that the Bible is totally accurate in its principles, even though the three sacred books have very different ideas about truth, salvation, and the nature of God.

### **How "Born Agains" Differ**

The study examined how one segment of the Christian population—those whose beliefs about salvation categorize them as "born again"—differ from the beliefs of people who describe themselves as Christian but do not base their view of salvation solely on confession of sin and God's grace received through Jesus Christ. (Barna has labeled the latter group "notional Christians.") For each of the 13 questions examined in the study, there were statistically significant differences between these two segments of the Christian population. Among the most significant gaps in belief were the following:

- \_ Born again adults are at least twice as likely as notionals to strongly agree that the Bible is accurate in all the principles it teaches; that their life has been greatly transformed by their faith; that a person can be under the influence of spiritual forces such as demons; and to hold an unfavorable opinion of Wicca.
- \_ Born again adults are more than twice as likely as notionals to strongly disagree that Satan is just a symbol of evil, and that Jesus sinned while He lived on earth.
- \_ Born again adults are more than three times as likely as notionals to strongly disagree that the Holy Spirit is merely a symbol of God's power or presence; that Mormons are Christians; and that the Bible, Koran and Book of Mormon teach the same truths.
- \_ Born again adults are one-third more likely than notionals to possess a definition of God as the omniscient, omnipotent creator and ruler of the world; nearly 60% more likely to believe that you either side with God or Satan because there is no in-between position; and slightly more than 50% more likely to say their chief purpose in life is to love God with all their heart, mind, strength and soul.
- \_ The smallest difference between the two segments related to the importance of having active relationships with people who reject the central tenets of the person's faith. Born again adults were slightly more likely to strongly agree that such relationships were important to them (39% versus 31%).

### **Americans Are Struggling to Make Sense of Their Faith**

George Barna, the author of nearly four dozen books analyzing research concerning America's faith, suggested that Americans are constantly trying to figure out how to make sense of biblical teachings in light of their daily experiences.

“Most Americans, even those who say they are Christian, have doubts about the intrusion of the supernatural into the natural world. Hollywood has made evil accessible and tame, making Satan and demons less worrisome than the Bible suggests they really are. It's hard for achievement-driven, self-reliant, independent people to believe that their lives can be impacted by unseen forces. At the same time, through sheer force of repetition, many Americans intellectually accept some ideas – such as the fact that you either side with God or Satan, there's no in-between – that do not get translated into practice.”

Barna also noted that Christians tend to be open to co-existence with other faiths. “Most people understand that America's religious life is diverse,” explained the author of a forthcoming book about the nation's faith segments, *The Seven Faith Tribes*. “A majority of Christians are generally open to maintaining relationships with people of other faiths, and most are not predisposed to judging people of different faiths, such as Mormons or Wiccans. But that open-mindedness is sometimes due to their limited knowledge about the principles of their own faith and ignorance about other faiths as it is to a purposeful acceptance of other faiths.”