

Christians Say They Do Best At Relationships, Worst In Bible Knowledge

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(Ventura, CA) - Nine out of ten adults contend that their faith is very important in their life, and three out of every four adults who consider themselves to be Christian say there are aspects of their faith life they would like to improve. A new national survey by The Barna Group discovered that there are two faith dimensions in which people are most likely to desire such improvement, but that few people believe that they are immature in any of seven aspects of faith practice.

Spiritual Maturity Ratings

Each adult surveyed was asked to rate their maturity in relation to seven dimensions of their spiritual life. Overall, people were most likely to see themselves as possessing average maturity in those areas, with none of the seven dimensions showing even half of the respondents describing themselves as "completely" or "highly developed" in that dimension, but not even one-fourth of the sample admitting to being "not too" or "not at all developed" in any of those areas.

The dimension in which the largest proportion of people considered themselves to be above average in spiritual maturity was "maintaining healthy relationships." Among adults who deem themselves to be Christian, almost half (48%) rated themselves above average in their ability to develop and maintain such relationships, compared to only 5% who rated themselves below average.

People were nearly as likely to describe their involvement in serving other people as "highly" or "completely developed." Overall, four out of ten adults (41%) felt they were above the norm in this aspect of their faith, while only 8% felt they were below average. The other half of the respondents said they were about average in this regard.

By a five-to-one margin, adults were more likely to portray themselves as doing an above average job of "consistently living your faith principles" than to say they were below average on this factor. About one-third of adults (36%) said they were above average in this regard, while a majority (55%) rated themselves as average. Only 7% of adults claim to be below average at consistently carrying out the principles of their faith.

One-third of adults (36%) stated that they are completely or highly developed in the area of worship, with just one out of seven (14%) saying they are below average in this faith domain. Almost identical ratings were provided in regard to providing spiritual leadership to their family (33% above average, 14% below average).

The two aspects of spiritual life that people were most likely to acknowledge struggling with were "sharing your faith with others" (23% above average, 23% below average, with 53% average) and "Bible knowledge" (21% above average, 25% below average, 53% average).

Faith Segments Respond Differently

Upon dividing the self-described Christian population into three different segments based upon their beliefs, the results look quite different. Evangelicals, who comprise 7% of the national population, are distinguished by their affirmation of salvation by grace and adherence to core biblical perspectives regarding the nature of God, the reality of Satan, and a deeper commitment to practicing biblical commands. (See the survey definitions of these three faith segments in the Methodology section of this report.) There were four faith dimensions for which a majority of evangelicals claimed to be more mature than average: worship (61%), living their faith principles (61%), maintaining healthy relationships (55%) and serving other people (55%). The only area in which more than one out of every ten evangelicals felt they were below average was in sharing their faith with non-Christians (14% said they were below average, while 32% claimed to be above average).

Born again Christians who were not evangelical painted a much different self-portrait. The only area for which at least half of the group said they were above average was in maintaining healthy relationships: 50% said they do well at this. There were no areas for which a greater percentage of non-evangelical born again people said they were below average than claimed to be above average, although three dimensions reached double-digits regarding below average performance (Bible knowledge, sharing faith and spiritual leadership of the family).

Notional Christians, defined as people who consider themselves to be Christian but who are not born again, have various issues to work through in their faith. There were two of the seven dimensions for which a larger percentage claimed to be below average than above average (Bible knowledge and sharing their faith), and two dimensions for which equal percentages of people in this group said they were below average as claimed to be above average (worship and leadership in family faith).

Other Segments Have Particular Struggles

The demographics related to people's self-assessment of their faith maturity produced a few discernible patterns.

The most pronounced pattern was that adults involved in either a house church or in some type of marketplace ministry consistently rated themselves as more mature in each of the faith dimensions than did people associated with a typical church.

People who claim to hold liberal social and political views were more likely than those possessing moderate or conservative views to see themselves as below average in matters of faith maturity. Self-professed liberals were especially likely to rate themselves relatively low in worship, Bible knowledge, family faith leadership, maintaining healthy relationships and living their faith with consistency.

Adults who attend small churches - i.e., those averaging fewer than 100 adults on a typical weekend - were more likely than people attending larger congregations to admit to struggling with Bible knowledge and consistently practicing their faith principles.

Young adults - especially those under 30 years of age - were comparatively likely to describe themselves as missing the mark in relation to worship and Bible knowledge.

Those who attend mainline Protestant churches were more likely than people who attend other Protestant congregations to rate themselves below average in worship, sharing their faith, and Bible knowledge.

Areas of Desired Improvement

Each survey respondent was also asked to identify an aspect of their faith that they would most like to improve. No particular dimension dominated the list; the highest rated aspects were listed by less than one out of every five people. The most common responses were a desire to upgrade their personal commitment to their faith (13%) and to increase their knowledge of the Bible (12%). No other responses reached double figures.

Other answers mentioned by at least 3% of the public included enhancing their prayer life (7%), building healthier relationships (4%), serving other people (4%), understanding Christianity more completely (4%), sharing their faith (4%), attending church more consistently (3%), forgiving others (3%) and developing better character (3%). Three percent said there was nothing they needed to improve, and one-quarter of the sample (25%) said they had no idea what needed to improve.

Among the improvements listed by 1% or less of the population were loving people, accountability, financial generosity, living consistent with their faith principles, prioritizing their faith, enhancing the role of faith in their family, and having influence based on their faith.

Observations about the Research Findings

Asked how churches and Christian leaders might benefit from the information drawn from the survey, George Barna, who directed the research, identified several possibilities. "The data show that millions of people who are aligned with the Christian faith have not thought very much or very clearly about what spiritual maturity means. Perhaps the outcomes of the survey will encourage church leaders to help people not only prioritize their spiritual development, but also to consider what spiritual transformation looks like in practical terms. The old adage tells us that 'you get what you measure' and the survey revealed that most Christians don't measure much of anything beyond church attendance when it comes to their spiritual maturity. This information could help leaders assist followers of Christ in connecting the dots regarding the meaning of and the route to spiritual growth."

Barna also cautioned people regarding the interpretation of the results. "Keep in mind that people's self-assessment was subjective. The same behavior that constituted complete development' to one respondent may have been described as 'average development' to another. That very confusion highlights the challenge in the Church: most people do not know what faith maturity looks like. Equipping people to be more sensitive to their spiritual development, and to become more specific and objective about their spiritual maturity, would be enormously helpful in guiding them to become more like Jesus Christ."

Faith Dimension	How Americans Rate Their Faith Maturity		
	Completely or Highly Mature	Average Maturity	Not Too or Not At All Mature
worship	36%	48%	14%
sharing your faith with others	23%	53%	23%
Bible knowledge	21%	53%	25%
consistently living your faith principles	36%	55%	7%
serving people	41%	49%	8%
maintaining healthy relationships	48%	46%	5%
spiritually leading your family	33%	51%	14%

(Source: The Barna Group, Ventura, CA)

Research Source and Methodology

The data reported in this summary are based upon telephone interviews with a nationwide random sample of 1008 adults conducted in May of 2005 by The Barna Group. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample is ± 3.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. All non-institutionalized adults in the 48 contiguous states were eligible to be interviewed and the distribution of respondents in the survey sample corresponds to the geographic dispersion of the U.S. adult population. The data were subjected to slight statistical weighting procedures to calibrate the survey base to national demographic proportions. Households selected for inclusion in the survey sample received multiple callbacks to increase the probability of obtaining a representative distribution of adults.

"Born again Christians" were defined in these surveys as people who said they have made "a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today" and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents were **not** asked to describe themselves as "born again." Being classified as "born again" is not dependent upon church or denominational affiliation or involvement.

"Evangelicals" are a subset of born again Christians in Barna surveys. In addition to meeting the born again criteria, evangelicals also meet seven other conditions. Those include saying their faith is very important in their life today; contending that they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; stating that Satan exists; maintaining that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; asserting that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; saying that the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Further, respondents were **not** asked to describe themselves as "evangelical." Being classified as "evangelical" is not dependent upon any church or denominational affiliation or involvement.

"Notional" Christians are those who describe themselves as Christian but do not meet the born again criteria outlined above.

"Mainline Protestant churches" are those associated with the following denominations: American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian Church in the USA, and United Methodist.

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