

**How the Faith of African-Americans Has Changed
Barna Report: July 2009**

**“Implications for Evangelism”
Summarized and posted by Bob Young
May 2010**

From the earliest days of United States’ history, a deep-rooted spirituality has been one of the hallmarks of the black population in this nation. A study released by The Barna Group underscores that the passage of time has not diminished the importance of faith in the lives of African-Americans. The study examined the religious beliefs and behaviors of the black population, today and in comparison to 15 years ago, as well as comparing the faith of blacks to that of the U.S. population as a whole.

Religious Beliefs

The research explored 12 religious beliefs. The current data indicates that among the four largest ethnic groups in the nation – whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asians – blacks had the highest score on 10 of the 12 belief indicators.

Survey respondents reacted to nine statements regarding faith. Blacks were highest among the four ethnic groups in relation to eight of those nine statements. Those were as follows:

Belief	U.S.	Blacks	Whites	
the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches	49%	66%	46%	*
have personal responsibility to tell others your religious beliefs	34	46	32	*
your religious faith is very important in your life	72	86	70	*
Satan/devil is not a living being but is a symbol of evil	39	46	38	*
when He lived on earth, Jesus Christ committed sins	43	54	32	*
single, most important purpose of your life is to love God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul	66	85	63	*
God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today	70	84	69	**
your highest priority in your life these days is your faith	11	18	11	***

- * = answered “strongly agree” with the statement posed
- ** = chose this description from several options
- *** = gave this response (i.e., “faith”) without prompting or options to choose from

The only faith statement for which the African-American response was similar to that of the U.S. average was “if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in Heaven.”

There were three other belief oriented results in the survey, and African-Americans were the highest ethnic group on two of those three. Specifically, blacks were the group most likely to be born again Christians (59%, compared to a national average of 46%) and were the ethnic segment most likely to consider themselves to be Christian (92% did so, versus 85% nationally). However, they were no more likely than average to qualify as evangelical Christians.

Religious Behavior

The Barna study examined 13 religious behaviors. Again demonstrating their spiritual uniqueness, African-Americans ranked highest among the four ethnic groups on eight of those 13 indicators and lowest on two of them. In all, blacks differed significantly from the national average on nine of the behaviors.

Compared to the other three ethnic groups, blacks emerged as the most likely to engage in each of five church-related activities in a typical week (attending church services, participating in a small group, attending a Sunday school class, praying, and reading the Bible). They were also the most likely to have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life and to have an “active faith” (i.e., attend church services, pray to God and read from the Bible during the week). They also had the lowest proportion of unchurched adults and were the ethnic group least likely to be Catholic.

Religious behaviors and choices among blacks that occur at levels equivalent to the national average are being “absolutely committed to the Christian faith” and having shared one’s faith in Christ with others during the past year.

Changes Over Time

The Barna study compared current statistics for African-American faith with that measured 15 years ago and found substantial change during that period.

Six of seven measures of belief had changed significantly. Blacks today are more likely than they were in the early 1990s to believe that the principles taught in the Bible are totally accurate; to say that their religious faith is very important in their life; to have a biblically orthodox understanding of the nature of God; and to be born again. They are also less likely to strongly affirm that Satan is symbolic, not real; and to contend that a good person can earn his/her way into Heaven. The measure that had not changed was the sense of personal responsibility to discuss their beliefs with others.

Three of the five behavioral measures that were evaluated both recently and 15 years ago showed substantial change. Those efforts included an increase in the proportion of African-Americans who have made a personally important commitment to Christ, church attendance, and Bible reading. The measures that reflected no movement were Sunday school attendance and affiliating with the Catholic Church.

African-American Faith in Context

The African-American population is presently about 15% of the national population. Other research conducted by Barna has indicated that spirituality is generally a more central element in the lives of blacks than in the lives of people from other ethnic groups. That spiritual emphasis accounts for some of the higher levels of religious activity and the more biblically-oriented beliefs registered within the black community.

While the beliefs and behaviors of America's white population have changed little since the early 1990s, the new research underscored that the faith of African-Americans is dynamic, generally moving in a direction that is more aligned with conservative biblical teachings.