

Spiritual Gifts Survey
Summarized by Bob Young
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The Barna report released this week (February 9, 2009) sheds light on current understandings of spiritual gifts among those claiming to be Christians. Only 68% of those who say they are Christians say they have heard of spiritual gifts. That is a small decline (about .005, ½ of 1%, from previous surveys in 1995 and 2000). Awareness of spiritual gifts was highest in the South (75%) and West (71%), lowest in the Midwest (63%) and Northeast (58%). More significant is that 99% of evangelicals have heard of spiritual gifts, 74% of non-evangelical born again Christians, and 58% of notional Christians. Another large gap in awareness was reflected between Protestants (75%) and Catholics (54%). Among Protestants a noteworthy gap exists between those who attend a mainline church (68%) and those who attend a congregation not associated with a mainline denomination (78%).

Survey participants who claimed to be Christians and were aware of gifts were asked which gifts God has given them. Commonly claimed gifts were teaching (9%), service (8%) and faith (7%), encouragement (4%), healing (4%), knowledge (4%), and tongues (3%). The gift of leadership was mentioned by just 2%. The survey notes other significant variations. Evangelicals were more likely than other Christians to say that they had gifts of teaching (28%), service (12%), encouragement (10%), and administration (7%). Non-evangelical, born again Christians were most likely to claim the gifts of faith (10%) and hospitality (3%). A report section labeled "False Gifts" reports that over one-fifth (21%) of the gifts cited by respondents do not fit the lists of gifts which appear in the Bible (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:7-16; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). Why this is so is worthy of further study, although obvious possibilities include lack of Bible knowledge and the teaching on gifts that appears in popular literature and is repeated in many churches.

The data for born again Christians shows several changes over the past 13 years. The number claiming the gift of encouragement has grown steadily from 2% in 1995 to 6% today. Over the same period, the proportion claiming the gift of evangelism dropped from 4% to 1%. Those who do not know what their gift is rose from 8% in 2000 to 13% today.

The reports typically summarize the research by suggesting some of the more salient points.

- Nearly two-thirds of the Christians who claim to have heard of spiritual gifts have not been able to apply what they have heard or what the Bible teaches on the subject to their lives.
- Overall, 13% of Christian adults claim to have one of more of the charismatic gifts (e.g., healing, interpretation, knowledge, miracles, prophecy, and tongues). Those most likely to say they have a charismatic gift are woman (twice as likely as men); people with no college education; born again Christians; and people 45 or older. Almost one-fourth of the respondents characterize themselves as charismatic.
- More than one-quarter of evangelicals (28%) claim the gift of teaching. This may raise expectations about the quality of sermons and teaching received at their church. Evangelicals are more likely to claim the gifts of administration and service, reflecting their tendency to be well-organized and generous in donating its time and energy.
- The number of born again Christians who claim to be leaders is much higher than the number saying they have been given the spiritual gift of leadership. This suggests that Christian leaders may be relying on their natural talent and training rather than depending upon God's gifts to empower their leadership. This issue may be even broader. The struggle for faith in our nation may be related to the fact that a large share of believers engaged in ministry do so on the basis of personal preference and natural talent rather than spiritual capacities and gifts, resulting in ineffective ministry.
- The stagnation of evangelism relates to many factors, but one of those is probably the fact that just 1% of Christian adults claim the gift of evangelism. While the Bible never says one must possess this gift in order to share the gospel, the small proportion of believers who claim that gift reflects the stalled growth of Christianity in the United States.

For the full report, visit www.barna.org. You may subscribe to free updates at the Barna website. Additional research-based resources, both free and at discounted prices, are also available.