

Satan & the Spirit

April 13, 2009

Results from a new [survey](#) conducted by [The Barna Group](#) reveal most Americans don't believe in either Satan or the Holy Spirit.

The Barna survey examined the beliefs of 1,871 "self-described Christians" across the nation.

Almost four out of five respondents (78%) said they believe God is the "all-powerful, all-knowing Creator of the universe who rules the world today." The others provided descriptions of God the Barna staff called "depictions that are not consistent with biblical teaching (e.g., everyone is god, god refers to the realization of human potential, etc.)."

The survey went downhill from there.

No Satan, no Spirit

Almost six in 10 U.S. Christians said they strongly agree (40%) or somewhat agree (19%) Satan "is not a living being but is a symbol of evil." About one-quarter of U.S. Christians (26%) strongly believe in the devil, and a smaller portion (9%) somewhat believe in him.

Similarly, almost six in 10 American Christians strongly agree (38%) or somewhat agree (20%) the Holy Spirit is "a symbol of God's power or presence but is not a living entity." Meanwhile, about a third (34%) strongly believe (25%) in the Holy Spirit or somewhat believe (9%) in the Spirit.

I've been trying to figure out which of these findings is most bothersome, and I've come down on unbelief in the Holy Spirit.

Biblical belief

On one level, it's a biblical issue.

To my reading, the Bible clearly presents Satan as a living being. I can see how some people might interpret Satan as a metaphor for cosmic evil. But the Scriptures describe struggles with a real, tangible Satan. At least that's how I read them.

But I don't see how anyone who takes the Bible seriously can deny the existence of the Holy Spirit. For example, I'm preparing to preach next Sunday from John 20, and the resurrected Jesus tells his disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit." That is only one reference, among many, to the Spirit as a real, living entity. In fact, you can't comprehend the notion of a Trinitarian God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—without the spirit.

Practical reality

On another level, it's a practical issue.

How can you read the newspaper or witness the world without believing in Satan? Perhaps a nebulous existence of evil seems reasonable to some, but the persistent intentionality of so much wickedness—to say nothing of the persistent temptation to sin—provides evidence of an evil designer.

To the other extreme, the denial of the Holy Spirit is utterly lamentable. Life is hard. And Christians who do not rely upon the strength and comfort of the Holy Spirit have chosen to go it alone. We forego the dynamic power of God available through the Spirit if we do not believe in and lean into, or upon, the One who comes along beside us.

No wonder so many Christians are so weak and so many churches are so tepid. Failing to call and rely upon the Holy Spirit is about like refusing radiation for your cancer because you cannot see the rays or watching your house burn down because you've never seen water come out of the fire hydrant on the corner.

Actually, the paucity of reliance upon the Holy Spirit is worse than the results of the Barna research. That's because most Baptists would say they believe in the Holy Spirit. But practically speaking, many Baptists are bi-tarian—so afraid of abuses of those who claim a special relationship with the Spirit that they avoid the Spirit altogether.

Yet when I read the book of Acts and the history of the church, the power I see springs from the vibrancy of the Spirit. And it's strong enough to defeat Satan.