

How Do Christian Youth Hear from God?



*Research Brief
November 2011*

In our research over the last several years, the Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) has asked several thousand people many questions about their spiritual lives. Their answers reveal many similarities as well as remarkable differences.

One nearly universal concept is communicating with God through prayer. Most Americans say they communicate with God through prayer and do so on a fairly regular basis.

There is not such universal agreement in people's understanding of how God communicates with them. About two-fifths of Americans either believe that God does not communicate with them or don't know how He does.

Many others rely on their feelings, signs, and answers to prayer to hear from God. Certainly God is at work in the world. However, as Isaiah 55:8 tells us

*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD.*

Thus, our own understanding and feelings in reaction to what our human eyes see is not the most reliable method for hearing from God.

Diversity among the American population is not surprising given how much people vary in their faith beliefs and practices. What about the youth in our church youth groups? What do they believe about how God communicates? To answer this question, CBE conducted a special study of 1,564 teens attending a weekend event. Their responses reveal how they listen for God's voice in their lives and, for some, how they struggle in this area.

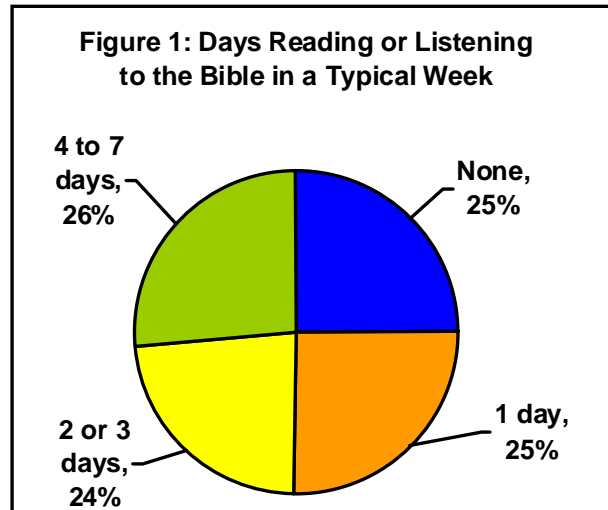
Teens are very active in their church, but vary in their personal faith practices

Generally, the youth participating in this study were involved in the life of their churches, had been following Christ for several years, and expressed a strong commitment to their faith. For example:

- ◆ Youth had been Christ-followers for an average of nine years.
- ◆ Four out of five had been baptized.



- ◆ The vast majority attends church weekly (84%) and participates in Sunday School (87%).
- ◆ Nine out of ten say their faith is “extremely important” to them.
- ◆ Three-fourths frequently sense the presence of God when they pray.
- ◆ Two-thirds pray daily.
- ◆ Three out of five read the Bible as a family.
- ◆ In a typical week, half do not read or listen to the Bible at all (25%) or engage scripture only once (25%).
- ◆ Only one-fourth (26%) hears from God through His Word most days of the week.



Youth hear from God primarily through prayer, other people... and, sometimes, the Bible.

Similar to what we have seen with other populations, Christian teens provided a wide variety of answers to the question about how God communicates with them. Prayer was the top answer, with 27% of responses. Some simply stated “prayer” or “through praying”. Others expanded their answers to include more details:

By praying to him and learning of his will.

I also hear from him through my prayers. I may not hear back right away but I always hear back.

I pray to Him, He gives me guidance and understanding.

I don't know really kind of when he here's my prayers.

I feel His presence in prayer and through other peoples' words.

I hear Him in prayer, and I can feel His presence at time

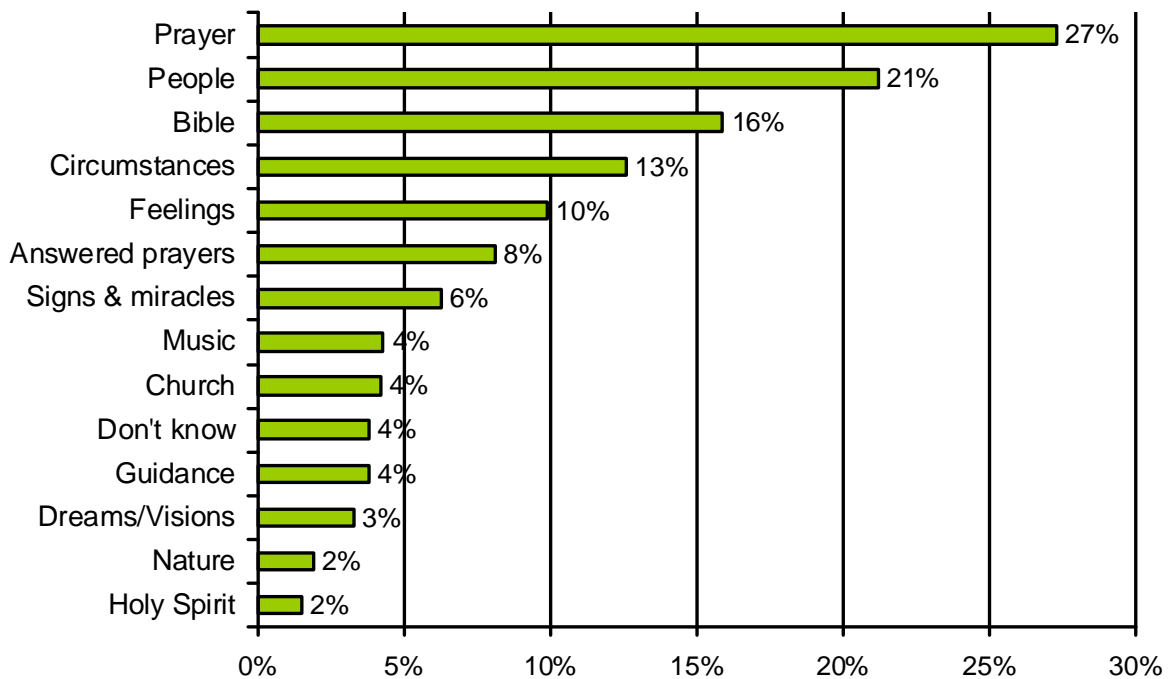
I just can feel in my heart that He's there with me, listening to my prayers.

God speaking to you through other people was the second most common answer. One-fifth of youth gave a response with this theme. Some named specific people such as their parents, pastor, friends, or youth leader. Others just stated people's words and actions in general.

Among these Christian youth, who have been very involved in their church and faith, only 16% named the Bible as a way they hear from God. Older teens and those more engaged in the Bible were more likely to include scripture in their response.

As Figure 2 shows, beyond these top three responses, youth also looked to other ways that God would communicate with them. These include their life circumstances or what happens to them (13%), their feelings (10%), answered prayers (8%), and signs & miracles (6%).

Figure 2. How Do You Hear From God?



Conclusions

In this study, we explored what Christian youth believe about how God communicates with them. The 1,500 teens who participated differ from the average American teen in many ways. Most notably, they are extremely committed to their faith, have followed Jesus for an average of nine years, frequently attend church and Sunday School, and completed the survey at a Christian youth event.

Despite all of these differences, these Christian youth resemble American teens in general in their beliefs about hearing from God. They give a wide variety of answers from prayer to the people in their lives to feelings and their life circumstances. The Bible is only one among these many different answers, with less than one-fifth mentioning it at all.

Why is the Bible not at the top of Christian youths' minds as a way to hear from God? For our study participants is certainly isn't because they haven't been exposed to the Bible. They have been in church and Sunday School. Most have read the Bible with their families, agree that the Bible is relevant to every day life and believe the Bible can answer today's problems.

Our data suggest that the problem is really engaging the Bible – receiving, reflecting, and responding to it in their daily lives. Three-fourths do not engage scripture regularly now. One-third believes that the Bible has errors and two-fifths do not turn to scripture in difficult times.

Some of the teens who participated in our study articulated this disconnection between the Bible and hearing from God themselves:

Closing my eyes and concentrating, but I don't think I've ever heard God.

Don't really, just kind fell his presence

Honestly I still wonder how to hear God. How he speaks and such

I assume that the opportunities and events that arise in my life that I didn't bring about myself are good actions. I don't much (hear from God)

I don't hear from God but maybe one day I will.

I don't really. I kinda gave up on that

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About the Center for Bible Engagement:

The Center for Bible Engagement (CBE), a research and development division of Back to the Bible, seeks to answer the question: Why do so many people own Bibles but so few read them? The center goes beyond simply usage statistics to consider attitudes and behaviors that significantly impact spiritual growth and a person's relationship with God. The primary goal of the CBE is to develop tools and resources that will engage people with God's Word. Since its inception in 2003, CBE has become the major world center addressing Bible engagement and spiritual growth.