

SURVEY FINDS AMERICA'S TRADITIONAL MORAL PILLARS ARE FADING AWAY

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Our nation is facing a potential moral freefall unthinkable to earlier generations—with a majority of Americans today no longer embracing values of honesty, respect for the rule of law, the sanctity of life, and traditional sexual morality when facing moral issues.

The latest research from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University shows that America is undergoing a radical reshaping of what constitutes morally acceptable behavior, as American adults increasingly reject biblical teaching and absolute moral truth as the basis of moral decision-making. The study finds that American adults are as likely to rely on other people (30%) or their own personal beliefs, feelings or experiences (31%) as they are religious faith (29%) when making moral choices.

As a result, Americans today are drawing very different moral lines than did previous generations. For example, those surveyed were more likely to say it was morally unacceptable to renege on repaying a small debt to a relative (61%) than to have an abortion (44%). Less than half of those surveyed (47%) said it was morally unacceptable to tell a “little white lie” or “fib” to protect their personal interest or reputation, with 19% saying it was morally acceptable and 13% saying it was not a moral issue.

When asked their view on engaging in “sexual relations with someone that they love and expect to marry in the future,” a majority (56%) of Americans perceive this behavior to be either morally acceptable (38%) or not a moral issue (18%). Just half as many (27%) say this is morally unacceptable.

According to Dr. George Barna, CRC Director of Research, “Americans have been aggressively redefining the nation’s morality for the past several decades. That shift is still in progress. Our research provides a compelling picture of our nation’s ongoing moral recalibration—away from biblical truth and the biblical worldview.”

The research shows this seismic shift occurring even among people of faith. Although born-again Christians in the survey were three times as likely to rely on the Bible for primary moral guidance, less than half (48%) do so. Those most likely to rely upon a religious resource, usually the Bible, were those aligned with either an evangelical (58%) or Pentecostal church (62%). People associated with a mainline Protestant congregation were most likely to rely upon themselves for moral wisdom (34%). Catholics were most likely to turn to others (34%).

The latest findings of the American Worldview Inventory 2020 show that political ideology dramatically affects Americans' sources of moral guidance. Political conservatives were most likely to rely upon the Bible (40%), while moderates (17%) and liberals (11%) were least likely, instead relying on their own feelings, beliefs, and knowledge for moral direction.

Age also has a dramatic effect. Younger Americans (18-29) are least likely (15%) to consider the Bible in moral decisions and instead look to themselves (29%) or to family (25%). About one-quarter of older Americans look to the Bible, including 23% of those ages 30 to 49, 25% of those 50 to 64, and 26% of those over 64.

Full results of the sixth of 10 biweekly releases of the American Worldview Inventory 2020 follow.

With six out of ten adults now contending that there are no moral absolutes, it's not surprising that traditional moral choices are being redefined. What may be unexpected is the way in which Americans are making their moral and ethical decisions.

Sources of Moral Guidance

A nationwide worldview survey by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University shows that adults are equally likely to turn to one of three sources for moral guidance: other people (30%), their personal beliefs, feelings, and experiences (31%), or religious faith (29%).

Sources of Moral Guidance								
Question: When you have an important moral or ethical decision to make, which one of the following is the source of guidance that you, personally, are most likely to rely upon?								
	All Adults	Church Affiliation				Political Ideology		
		Evan	Pent	MLP	Cath	Cons	Mod	Lib
Yourself	31%	13%	11%	34%	33%	23%	34%	36%
Trusted people	30%	23%	22%	27%	34%	24%	32%	37%
Family	19	13	13	17	21	14	21	19
Friends and peers	5	2	2	4	6	3	6	10
Religious leaders	3	5	4	2	4	4	2	3
Trained professionals	3	3	3	4	3	2	3	5
Faith-related sources	29%	58%	62%	29%	23%	48%	23%	16%
The Bible	23	51	55	24	15	40	17	11
Direct, divine intervention	6	7	7	5	8	8	6	5
Other sources	5%	4%	5%	7%	8%	5%	6%	8%
Society's standards	2	2	3	3	4	2	2	4
Other sources	3	2	2	4	4	3	4	4
Don't know	4%	2%	1%	3%	3%	2%	6%	3%
Abbreviations: Evan – attend evangelical church Pent – attend Pentecostal church MLP – attend Mainline Protestant church Cath – attend Catholic church Cons – politically conservative Mod –politically moderate Lib – politically liberal								
Source: American Worldview Inventory 2020; Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. N=2,000 adults (18 or older).								

As expected, the type of church a person attends is related to their primary source of moral guidance. The adults most likely to rely upon a religious resource—usually the Bible—were those aligned with either an evangelical church (58%) or Pentecostal church (62%). People associated with a mainline Protestant congregation were most likely to rely upon themselves for moral wisdom (34%). Catholics were most likely to turn to other people (34%).

Adults who qualify theologically as born-again Christians were three times as likely as other self-identified Christians who are not born-again to rely on the Bible for their primary moral guidance. Even so, less than half of the born-again segment (48%) turns to the Bible for moral direction. Among people associated with non-Christian religions, only one out of ten trust religious sources for moral guidance. Not surprisingly, only 1% of religious skeptics rely upon religious sources for moral guidance. Most Skeptics (52%) said they would simply trust themselves to ascertain their best moral decisions. Across America only 6% have a biblical worldview, yet nine out of ten of those who do have a biblical worldview seek guidance from faith-related sources on moral issues.

Preferred sources of moral guidance were also related to political ideology. Political conservatives were the most likely of the three major ideological segments to rely upon the Bible (40%). In contrast, moderates and liberals were most likely to seek insight either from other people or to rely upon their own feelings, beliefs, and knowledge for moral direction. Both moderates (17%) and liberals (11%) were less than half as likely as conservatives to seek moral guidance primarily from the Bible.

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Practical Morality

What does morality look like these days in practical terms? The survey posed five scenarios to respondents and asked whether they would advise a friend that the behavior described was morally acceptable, morally unacceptable, or not a moral issue. Respondents were also allowed to say they would not give their friend advice about the morality of the situation, or to admit that they did not know how to categorize the morality of the behavior.

Scenario 1:

Not repaying a small amount of money borrowed from a relative because the relative hasn't mentioned repaying it and doesn't need the money, but your friend does.

This scenario was the most clear-cut in the minds of survey respondents. In total, six out of ten adults (61%) stated that the intentional failure to repay the loan was morally unacceptable. Just one out of ten (11%) called the behavior morally acceptable, while slightly more (13%) said it was not a moral issue. Fifteen percent would either not offer any advice about the situation or said they did not know what to make of it.

The types of people who were most likely to describe the choice to not repay the loan as immoral were those with a biblical worldview (90%), SAGE Cons (83%), born-again Christians (72%), and attenders of an evangelical church (70%). (SAGE Cons is the acronym for Spiritually Active Governance Engaged Conservative Christians.)

The people groups least likely to say this behavior was morally unacceptable were adults who are not registered to vote (49%), people under 30 years of age (53%), and people who are aligned with a non-Christian faith (53%) or no faith at all (55%).

Scenario 2:

Telling a falsehood of minor consequence in order to protect their personal best interests or reputation. Slightly less than half of adults (47%) described what is popularly known as a "white lie" or a "fib" as morally unacceptable, while one-third (32%) said such an act is either morally acceptable (19%) or not a moral issue (13%).

A minority of several people groups argued that the lie described was immoral. Those included Catholics (43%), people associated with non-Christian faiths (39%), spiritual skeptics (32%), and adults who are not registered to vote (38%).

The segments most likely to characterize the lie described as an immoral act were those with a biblical worldview (88%), SAGE Cons (i.e., Spiritually Active Governance Engaged Conservative Christians – 75%), born-again Christians (61%), and attenders of Pentecostal (65%) and evangelical (60%) churches.

The Moral Acceptability of Specific Behaviors					
Question: Imagine that someone came to you for advice about a personal situation. For each situation I describe, please tell me how you would advise them about the situation. Please answer based on what you would say, personally, not what you think other people might say or expect you to say. If you do not know what to say, or think you should not give advice on that situation, just indicate that.					
Morally acceptable?	Yes	No	Not a moral issue	Would offer no advice	Don't know
Telling a falsehood of minor consequence in order to protect their personal best interests or reputation	19%	47%	13%	13%	7%
Having an abortion because their partner has left and your friend knows they cannot reasonably take care of the child	22	44	11	15	8
Not repaying a small amount of money they borrowed from a relative because the relative hasn't mentioned repaying it and doesn't need the money, but your friend does	11	61	13	9	6
Late at night, in a non-residential area, with no other cars on the road, they drove 80 mph in a 55-mph zone, without getting caught	12	39	33	10	5
Having sexual relations with someone they love and expect to marry in the future	38	27	18	13	5

Source: American Worldview Inventory 2020, Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,000 adults (18 or older).

Scenario 3:

Having an abortion because their partner has left, and your friend knows they cannot reasonably take care of the child.

In this situation 44% said having an abortion is morally unacceptable while 33% said it is either morally acceptable (22%) or not a moral issue (11%).

This behavior was indisputably the most polarizing of the five behaviors tested. Nine out of ten adults with a biblical worldview (92%) and eight out of ten SAGE Cons (83%) defined it as an immoral action. At the other end of the continuum—indicating that having an abortion is not immoral—were spiritual skeptics (17%), political liberals (22%), and adults connected to a non-Christian faith (29%).

Scenario 4:

Late at night, in a non-residential area, with no other cars on the road, they drove 80 miles per hour in a 55-mph zone, without getting caught.

About four out of ten adults (39%) believe that breaking the speed limit, even under these circumstances, is not morally acceptable. A larger share of the population, however, believes it is either morally acceptable (12%) or that it is not a moral issue (33%).

Surprisingly few segments featured a majority who portrayed speeding as immoral. Besides majorities of the two segments that consistently embraced a traditional moral perspective, i.e., SAGE Cons (58%) and adults with a biblical worldview (65%), most of those who attend a Pentecostal church (56%) joined the chorus.

The groups least likely to critique speeding as immoral were not only the groups that consistently rejected traditional moral views, i.e., Catholics, people from non-Christian faiths, and spiritual skeptics, but also political liberals and Independent voters.

Scenario 5:

Having sexual relations with someone that they love and expect to marry in the future. Of the five morality scenarios tested, this was the behavior that people were most likely to find morally acceptable. A majority of Americans perceive this behavior to be either morally acceptable (38%) or not a moral issue (18%). Just half as many (27%) say this is morally unacceptable. Another 13% would not give the person any advice on this matter, and 5% more do not know what to make of the situation.

The same subgroups that usually lent their support for or opposition to behaviors based on traditional morality views responded in a predictable manner regarding sex outside of marriage. For instance, individuals possessing a biblical worldview (85%), SAGE Cons (71%), and people attending a Pentecostal church (59%) were the only segments for which a majority described that behavior as immoral.

Falling in line among the groups least likely to decry non-marital sex as immoral were spiritual skeptics (7%), political liberals (14%), and people associated with a non-Christian faith (20%). Adults under age 30 were also very unlikely to call unmarried sex immoral (20%).

Restoring the Foundations

The moral standards emerging from the survey bear little resemblance to those detailed in the Bible, but that outcome was not unexpected to Dr. George Barna, the veteran researcher who produced the American Worldview Inventory 2020 research.

“Americans have been aggressively redefining the nation’s morality for the past several decades,” Barna commented. “That shift is still in progress. Our research provides a compelling context for such a moral recalibration. After all, the percentage of adults with a biblical worldview has been sliced in half since 1995, one out of three adults believe there are moral absolutes, four out of ten people say the Bible is God’s word and true, almost two out of three people rely upon their feelings or other people for primary moral direction, and six out of ten adults do not believe God is the basis of truth.

“The historic foundation of biblical truth and its impacts on family, faith, education, arts and entertainment, and public policy is mostly a distant memory,” the researcher continued. “Unless Christian churches return to the basics to restore the foundations of the Christian faith, and parents train their children to embrace those foundations, there is little reason to believe that the coming quarter-century in America will include our historical levels of freedom. As Americans embrace the consequences of unrestrained moral choices, we will see further rejections of traditional marriage, conventional child-rearing practices and objectives, millions more abortions, excessive substance abuse, and wider acceptance of suicide, polygamy, sexual perversion, and religious persecution. Any society that substitutes humanity’s latest and greatest ideas for God’s truth and authority is on the fast track to ruin.”

Having written numerous research-based books about cultural demise and transformation, Barna encouraged people not to give up hope. “The restoration of biblical truth can facilitate the turnaround of a declining society,” the bestselling author explained. “It starts with churches relentlessly and consistently teaching biblical truth principles for practical application within all dimensions of life. It requires churches equipping parents to teach those truth principles to their children. It demands parents placing their young people in educational, relational, and entertainment environments where God’s truth principles are respected and practiced.”

“It advances by electing public officials who pass civil laws in harmony with God’s religious Law. Restoring our foundations will be neither easy nor quick, but such a turnaround can happen if a remnant of God’s people devotes themselves to such a process of cultural deliverance.”

About the Research

The American Worldview Inventory 2020 (AWVI) is an annual survey that estimates how many adults have a biblical worldview. The assessment is based on 51 worldview-related questions drawn from eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior. AWVI 2020 was undertaken in January 2020 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of indeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity.

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) is under the auspices of Arizona Christian University and is located on the school’s campus in Glendale, Arizona. CRC conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to transform American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith but remains non-partisan and inter-denominational. Access to past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is available at www.culturalresearchcenter.com.