

CURRENT VIEW OF ‘TRADITIONAL MORAL VALUES’ EXCLUDES ‘BIBLICAL MORALITY’

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research

Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University

Release Date: November 1, 2022

One of the hallmarks of America is the concept of traditional moral values. That body of moral standards serves as one of the foundations on which the nation was built. Until recently there was no argument that those moral standards—i.e., the basis of determining right from wrong— were derived from biblical principles.

As the nation continues to fight for a set of values and morals that will define its future, a new survey from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University notes that seven out of 10 adults (71%) claim to support traditional moral values in America today. However, the same survey highlights significant transitions in the public perception of the Bible’s role in defining traditional moral values.

In fact, slightly less than half of all adults who said they support traditional moral values also embrace “biblical morality” as one of their core values. Rather than pointing to the Bible as the best source of morality, 42% say that “what you feel in your heart” is the surest moral guide for life.

Support for Traditional Moral Values

It is not uncommon for conservative leaders to refer to their embrace of “traditional moral values.” The America’s Values Study, commissioned by [AmericasOne](#), discovered, however, that conservatives are not the only group to get behind the concept.

Among people who identify as conservative on social and political matters, nine out of 10 (89%) indicated that they “support traditional moral values.” In addition, a small majority of those who identify as liberal on social and political issues (52%) offer such support, while more than two-thirds of those who are regarded as moderates on social and political concerns (70%) also lend such support.

Most Americans, regardless of their religious faith, champion traditional moral values. While such support was most common among self-identified Christians (82%), affirmation of such values was also found among two-thirds of all people committed to a non-Christian faith (67%), and even from half of those who have no religious faith (50%).

Perceptions of the Bible and its role in determining one's morality also suggest that support for traditional moral values spans the gamut. Four out of five adults who believe that the Bible is God's true words to humankind support traditional moral values (83%), but even close to two-thirds of those who do not perceive the Bible to be the true and accurate words of God endorse traditional moral values (63%).

In addition, at least half of all adults support traditional moral values regardless of their primary source of moral guidance. A whopping nine out of 10 adults who list the Bible as their primary moral guide support traditional moral values (91%), but two-thirds or more of those who turn to society for their primary moral guidance (74%), or rely upon family (71%) or self (67%) for such moral direction also embrace traditional moral values. Lowest on the list of advocates are those who turn to science to determine what to do morally, but even half of that group (50%) admits to supporting traditional moral values.

Demographically, support for traditional moral values covers the spectrum, with little difference across population segments based upon educational achievement, income levels, region of residence, or race and ethnicity. Young adults were the age group least likely to support traditional moral values, but almost six out of 10 people 18-29 offer such backing (56%), compared to three-quarters (76%) of people 30 or older.

Dismissing “Biblical Morality”:

Unexpectedly, slightly less than half of all adults who said they support traditional moral values embrace “biblical morality” as one of their core values. Just 49% of adults endorse traditional moral values indicated they consider biblical morality to be one of their personal values. In a nod to the dramatic moral and spiritual reformation that has happened in the United States over the past quarter-century, millions of Americans now deem the idea of “traditional moral values” to suggest notions of right and wrong that transcend guidance provided solely—or, perhaps, even in part—by the Bible.

Establishing that point, when asked to identify the nation's most appropriate determinant of right and wrong, regardless of people's religious faith, a plurality (42%) suggested that “what you feel in your heart” is the best guide, compared to much lower numbers who said we should base morality on majority rule (29%) or principles taught in the Bible (29%). Stated differently, seven out of 10 adults (71%) now contend that human beings rather than God should be the judge of right and wrong. Most of the subgroups in the population opined that personal feelings would serve Americans best as the arbiter of right and wrong. The segments reflecting a majority expressing that sentiment included people who have no religious affiliation (53% opted for emotions as the determinant of right and wrong), people whose priority values for life are happiness, comfort, and equality (51%), and self-described LGBTQ adults (50%).

Identifying the Appropriate Basis of American Morality:

Subgroups boasting a majority listing the Bible as their main source of determining right and wrong were typically either politically or spiritually conservative. Those segments were SAGE Cons (66% of adults who are Spiritually Active, Governance Engaged Conservative Christians), adults who possess

a biblical worldview (66%), people who attend an evangelical church (62%), Republican conservatives (58%), and theologically-defined born-again Christians (54%).

No subgroups surveyed had a majority who preferred majority rule to determine right and wrong.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome was discovering a plurality of Catholics (46%) selecting feelings rather than the Bible as the best determinant of right and wrong.

What Are Traditional Moral Values?

There is no official source of what is commonly referred to as traditional moral values. One way of determining what such values are perceived by Americans to be these days, is to identify the consensual values adopted by a cross-section of population segments defined by spiritual perspectives. Moral values, after all, refer to right and wrong, which is the jurisdiction of the spiritual realm. Ideally, the government then codifies those consensual values into a legal code.

Identifying the Appropriate Basis of American Morality			
Question: Regardless of your religious faith, America's foundation for determining right and wrong should be (choose one): the Bible, what you feel in your heart, or majority rule. (Shown in the table: the most common response from the population segment in question.)			
Population segment	The Bible	What you feel in your heart	Majority Rule
<i>Demographic segments:</i>			
Age 18-29		47%	
Age 30-49		44	
Age 50+	39%		
Male		39	
Female		44	
White		40	
Hispanic		47	
Black		43	
Asian		48	
Married		39	
Single, never been married		46	
Self-identified LGBTQ		50	
<i>Religious segments:</i>			
Self-identified Christian	38		
Faith other than Christianity		45	
No faith		53	
Attend an evangelical church	62		
Attend a mainline Protestant church	36		
Attend a Catholic church		46	
Attend a Protestant church (any type)	39		
Theologically-defined born-again	54		
Possess a biblical worldview	66		
<i>Political segments:</i>			
Self-identified ideology: Conservative	49		
Self-identified ideology: Moderate		47	
Self-identified ideology: Liberal		46	
Party identification: Republican	45		
Party identification: Democrat		46	
Party identification: Independent		47	
Republican and conservative	57		
Republican and moderate		38	
Source: <i>America's Values Study</i> , commissioned by AmericasOne, conducted by Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,275 adults 18+.			

Considering the views of the three major spiritual segments in America—self-identified Christians, people who identify with a non-Christian faith, and those who reject religious faith altogether (i.e., “the nones”)—the result is a group of nine moral values that majorities of each of the three spiritual segments embrace. Those values are also accepted by a majority of the public that claims to support traditional moral values. Those moral values are: integrity, justice, kindness, non-discrimination, trustworthiness, free expression, property ownership, individual growth, and self-control.

It should be noted that the three spiritual segments described above agree on more than these nine values, but the other values on which they concur are not “moral values” in the sense that they determine right or wrong choices. Such “core values” that are not moral in this sense include family, character, purpose or meaning in life, and stability, among others. These are conditions or attributes that Americans highly value but cannot necessarily rely upon to discern right from wrong.

Who Defines Morality?

The research highlights a significant shift occurring in American morality, according to George Barna, who directed the survey for the Cultural Research Center on behalf of AmericasOne.

“Three-quarters of Americans maintain that people are basically good, and less than half of all Americans believing in God or that the Bible is God’s true, relevant and reliable words to humanity,” Barna explained. “Consequently, Americans have become comfortable with the idea of being the arbiters of morality. In the same way that most Americans contend that there is no absolute moral truth, they now believe that there is no divine guidance required or even available to define right and wrong.”

Barna also noted that the task of defining morality has shifted from churches to the government.

“The research indicates that people are now more likely to take their moral cues from government laws and policies than from church teachings about biblical principles,” the researcher explained. “Americans have historically said that when they elect a president they are choosing a chief executive, not a pastor-in-chief, but that distinction appears to be passé. One could reasonably argue that the nation’s ideas about right and wrong are now more likely to come from the White House and the halls of Congress, than from our houses of worship. The laws of the land are replacing the laws of God in determining good and evil in America.”

One of the chilling implications of that transition of moral authority is that government may even be called upon to redefine values that Americans widely embrace—values that to this point have been defined by biblical teaching rather than government pronouncements.

“If you consider the list of factors that are gaining acceptance as ‘traditional moral values,’ with the public unlikely to turn to churches or the Bible to define values such as integrity and justice, that responsibility is likely to fall on the shoulders of government,” Barna lamented. “Given how government leaders have been aggressively redefining other terms and concepts in recent years, recasting previously unthinkable behaviors as normative, one can barely imagine what our future moral code will look like with the government leading that redefinition process.”

About the Research:

The data referred to in this report are taken from the American Worldview Inventory (AWVI), an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over). Begun as an annual tracking study in 2020, the assessment is based on several dozen worldview-related questions that fall within eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

The American Worldview Inventory 2021 is the first-ever national survey conducted in the United States measuring the incidence of both biblical and competing worldviews. It was undertaken in February 2021 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) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school's campus in Glendale, Arizona, in the Phoenix metropolitan area. In addition to conducting the annual American Worldview Inventory, CRC also introduced the ACU Student Worldview Inventory (SWVI) in 2020. That survey is administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, and a final administration is undertaken among students just prior to their graduation. The ACU SWVI enables the University to track the worldview development of its student body and to make changes to that process as recommended by the research. The Cultural Research Center also conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to facilitating the positive transformation of American culture with biblical truth.

CRC is guided by George Barna, Director of Research, and Tracy Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity. The Center works in cooperation with a variety of Bible-centric, theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. Access to the results from past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is accessible at www.culturalresearchcenter.com. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.arizonachristian.edu.