



Morality Gone Bust?

Americans see themselves as concerned about morality and view themselves as moral people. But they disagree on what a “moral” life should look like; how to define moral standards; and how ethical decisions should be made. “Moral values are shifting very quickly and significantly *within* the Christian community as well as outside of it.”

A new study by the Barna Group indicates there is a significant difference between the moral beliefs and practices of American adults above and below the age of 40. Perhaps no moral dimension has changed as much as sexuality. “Among the 32 factors examined in the research, eight of them related to such topics as extramarital sex, pornography, homosexuality, and sexual fantasies. In all eight of these areas, Busters were significantly different from older Americans.”

Most “Busters” (Americans in their 20s and 30s) believed that engaging in sex outside of marriage and viewing pornography are not morally problematic, while only one-third of pre-Busters (Americans over 40) agreed. Almost half of Busters believed that sexual relationships between people of the same sex are acceptable, compared with one-quarter of older adults. Busters were also twice as likely to have viewed sexually explicit movies or videos; two and a half times more likely to report having had a sexual encounter outside of marriage; and three times more likely to have viewed sexually graphic content online.

This difference extended to other behaviors as well. Younger adults were significantly more likely to accept gambling, profanity, intoxication, and illegal drug use as morally acceptable behaviors.

Views about Morality

The generational gaps were evident when the survey explored how people decide what is right and wrong as well. “Nearly half of all pre-Busters said they view moral truth as absolute, but only three out of 10 Busters

embraced the concept of absolute truth. Two-thirds of those over 40 said humans should determine what is right and wrong morally by examining God's principles; less than half of Busters felt this way. Instead, nearly half of Busters said that ethics and morals are based on "what is right for the person," compared with just one-quarter of pre-Busters. . . . When asked to describe how they make moral and ethical choices, a majority of pre-Busters said they follow a set of principles or guidelines, while less than half of Busters (including just one-third of those in their twenties) said they follow such external ideals."

A "born-again" faith commitment had less impact than we might expect. Among born again Busters, a majority (59%) believed that cohabitation was morally acceptable, while only 33% of pre-Buster born again adults thought living together was okay. Among non-Christians, 65% of older adults concurred, while 80% of non-Christian Busters felt cohabitation was acceptable. "This same response pattern was evident when it came to gambling, sexual fantasies, abortion, sex outside of marriage, profanity, pornography, same-sex marriage, and the use of illegal drugs"

The director of the research, David Kinnaman, pointed out, "The research shows that people's moral profile is more likely to resemble that of their peer group than it is to take shape around the tenets of a person's faith. This research paints a compelling picture that moral values are shifting very quickly and significantly *within* the Christian community as well as outside of it."

For more information on the religious beliefs and practices of Americans, see the Barna Group at: barna.org. For more information on this topic, see the 10/31/06 update entitled, "A New Generation of Adults Bends Moral and Sexual Rules to Their Liking."