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## Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings

February 12, 2002

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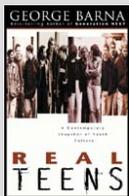
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(Ventura, CA) - Americans unanimously denounced the September 11 terrorist attacks as a textbook example of evil, suggesting that there is a foundational belief in an absolute standard of right and wrong. Subsequent research, however, has shown that in the aftermath of the attacks, a minority of Americans believes in the existence of absolute moral truth. Even more surprising, the data from a pair of nationwide studies conducted by the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California showed that less than one out of three born again Christians adopt the notion of absolute moral truth. The surveys also found that few Americans turn to their faith as the primary guide for their moral and ethical decisions.

### **Truth Is Relative, Say Americans**

In two national surveys conducted by Barna Research, one among adults and one among teenagers, people were asked if they believe that there are moral absolutes that are unchanging or that moral truth is relative to the circumstances. By a 3-to-1 margin (64% vs. 22%) adults said truth is always relative to the person and their situation. The perspective was even more lopsided among teenagers, 83% of whom said moral truth depends on the circumstances, and only 6% of whom said moral truth is absolute.

The gap between teen and adult views was not surprising, however, when the adult views are considered by generation. While six out of ten people 36 and older embraced moral relativism, 75% of the adults 18 to 35 did so. Thus, it appears that relativism is gaining ground,

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largely because relativism appears to have taken root with the generation that preceded today's teens.

The Barna study also showed that there is a racial component to this issue, as well. Among whites, 60% endorse relativism, compared to 26% who adopt absolutism. Among non-whites, however, 74% support relativism and just 15% believe in absolute morality. (Fifteen percent of Hispanic adults and only 10% of African-American adults contended that moral truth is absolute.)

Not surprisingly, born again Christians were more likely than non-born again individuals to accept moral absolutes. Among adults, 32% of those who were born again said they believe in moral absolutes, compared to just half as many (15%) among the non-born again contingent. Among teenagers, there was still a 2-to-1 ratio evident, but the numbers were much less impressive: only 9% of born again teens believe in moral absolutes versus 4% of the non-born again teens.

### **Moral Decision-Making**

The surveys also asked people to indicate the basis on which they make their moral and ethical decisions. Six different approaches were listed by at least 5% of the teenagers interviewed, and eight approaches were listed by at least 5% of adults. In spite of the variety communicated, there was a clear pattern within both groups. By far the most common basis for moral decision-making was doing whatever feels right or comfortable in a situation. Nearly four out of ten teens (38%) and three out of ten adults (31%) described that as their primary consideration.

Among adults, other popular means of moral decision-making were on the basis of the values they had learned from their parents (15%), on the basis of principles taught in the Bible (13%), and based on whatever outcome would produce the most personally beneficial results (10%).

Teenagers were slightly different in their approach. One out of six (16%) said they made their choices on the basis of whatever would produce the most beneficial results for them. Three alternative foundations were each identified by one out of ten teens: whatever would make the most people happy, whatever they thought their family and friends expected of them, and on the basis of the values taught by their parents. Just 7% of teenagers said their moral choices were based on biblical principles.

Once again, the age pattern was evident. People 36 or older were more than twice as likely as adults in the 18-to-35 age group to identify the Bible as their basis of moral choices (18% vs. 7%). The proportion of young adults who selected the Bible as their primary moral filter was identical to that of teenagers. In contrast, more than half of the young adults (52%) and teenagers (54%) base their moral choices on feelings and beneficial outcomes compared to just one-third of adults 36 and older who do so (32%).

The racial pattern was evident on this matter, too. White adults were nearly three times as likely as non-white adults to base their moral choices on the Bible (17% vs. 6%). Blacks were four times more likely than whites (23% vs. 6%), and Hispanics were more than twice as likely as whites (16% vs. 6%) to base their moral decisions on the potential benefits of their choice.

### **What It Means**

These figures were cited by George Barna, whose firm conducted the research, as a major reason underlying the data he released in a controversial recent public presentation about the moral views and behaviors of Christians. In that forum, which is now available on videotape from Barna Research ("Morality and the Church"), Barna noted that substantial numbers of Christians believe that activities such as abortion, gay sex, sexual fantasies, cohabitation, drunkenness and viewing pornography are morally acceptable. "Without some firm and compelling basis for suggesting that such acts are inappropriate, people are left with philosophies such as 'if it feels good, do it,' 'everyone else is doing it' or 'as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, it's permissible.' In fact, the alarmingly fast decline of moral foundations among our young people has culminated in a one-word worldview: 'whatever.' The result is a mentality that esteems pluralism, relativism, tolerance, and diversity without critical reflection of the implications of particular views and actions."

Barna emphasized the importance of the data related to the views of teenagers and the born again population. "Just one out of ten of our country's born again teenagers believe in absolute moral truth - a statistic that is nearly identical to that of non-born again teens. Christian families, educators and churches must prioritize this matter if the Christian community hopes to have any distinctiveness in our culture. The virtual disappearance of this cornerstone of the Christian faith - that is, God has communicated a series of moral principles in the Bible that are meant to be the basis of our thoughts and actions, regardless of our preferences, feelings or situations - is probably the

best indicator of the waning strength of the Christian Church in America today."

The researcher stated that the difference in truth views between born again and non-born again adults was statistically significant, but not much to cheer about. "When a majority of Christian adults, including three out of four born again Baby Busters, as well as three out of four born again teens proudly cast their vote for moral relativism, the Church is in trouble. Continuing to preach more sermons, teach more Sunday school classes and enroll more people in Bible study groups won't solve the problem since most of these people don't accept the basis of the principles being taught in those venues. The failure to address this issue at its root, and to do so quickly and persuasively, will undermine the strength of the church for at least another generation, and probably longer."

Barna also reported that compared to a similar study his firm conducted a decade ago, the basis of people's moral and ethical decisions these days is more likely to be feelings and less likely to be the Bible.

### **Survey Methodology**

The data in this report are based on two nationwide telephone surveys conducted by the Barna Research Group from its telephone interviewing facility in Ventura, CA. The interviews among a national random sample of 1010 adults were conducted in late October and early November 2001. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample is  $\pm 3$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The interviews among a national random sample of 604 teenagers (ages 13 to 18) were conducted in November 2001. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample is  $\pm 4$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. In both studies, people in the 48 continental states were eligible to be interviewed and the distribution of those individuals coincided with the geographic dispersion of the U.S. population. Multiple callbacks were used to increase the probability of including a reliable distribution of qualified individuals.

"Born again Christians" were defined in these surveys as people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents were **not** asked to describe themselves as "born again."

The Barna Research Group, Ltd. is an independent marketing research company located in southern California. Since 1984, it has been studying cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. This research was funded solely by Barna Research as part of its regular tracking of attitudes, values and behavior.

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**Survey Question:** Some people believe that there are moral truths that are absolute, meaning that those moral truths or principles do not change according to the circumstances. Other people believe that moral truth always depends upon the situation, meaning that their moral and ethical decisions depend upon the circumstances. How about you? Do you believe that there are moral absolutes that are unchanging, or that moral truth is relative to the circumstances, or is this something you have never really thought about?

### Adults (N=1010)

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Moral truth...	All	ages 18-35	ages 36-55	ages 56+	born again	non born-again
is unchanging	22%	14%	33%	24%	32%	15%
depends on the situation	64	75	55	61	54	71
don't know	14	11	12	15	14	14

## Teenagers (N=604)

Moral truth...	All	born again	non-born again
is unchanging	6%	9%	4%
depends on the situation	83	76	87
don't know	11	15	9

**Survey Question:** Think about the choices you face everyday. People make their decisions in different ways. When you are faced with a moral or ethical choice, which ONE of the following best describes how you, yourself, decide what to do? (IF "PRINCIPLES OR STANDARDS" ASK: What is the basis or source of those principles and standards that you take into consideration? In other words, where do those standards and principles come from - what would you turn to in order to discover the appropriate principles?)

## Adults (N=1010)

	All	ages 18-35	ages 36-55	ages 56+	born again	non born-again
whatever will make the most people happy or create the least conflict	7%	8%	6%	5%	4%	8%
whatever you think your family or friends would expect you to do	5	5	5	4	4	5
follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: the law	1	1	1	1	1	1

<b>follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: the Bible</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: values taught by your parents</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: other religious input</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: lessons from past experience</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>what you believe most other people would do in that situation</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>whatever feels right or comfortable in that situation</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>whatever will produce the most positive outcome for you, personally</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>

**Teenagers (N=604)**

	<b>All</b>	<b>born again</b>	<b>non-born again</b>
whatever will make the most people happy or create the least conflict	10%	12%	8%
whatever you think your family or friends would expect you to do	10	6	11
follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: the law	*	*	*
follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: the Bible	7	12	2
follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: values taught by your parents	10	10	10
follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: other religious input	2	2	1
follow a set of specific principles or standards you believe in, that serve as guidelines for your behavior: lessons from past experience	1	1	2
what you believe most other people would do in that situation	3	2	3
whatever feels right or comfortable in that situation	38	34	40
whatever will produce the most positive outcome for you, personally	16	13	17

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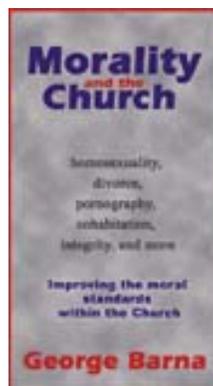
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## Morality and the Church

Description: Looking for a hot discussion starter for a small group or Sunday school class? Pop this video in and let George Barna provide a revealing and challenging look at the moral views and behaviors of born again Christians – the backbone of the Church. Using recent research, he addresses issues such as homosexuality, pornography, divorce, cohabitation, integrity and more. The presentation includes specific steps for improving the moral standards within the Church. The tape is 32-minutes long – ideal for a class setting.



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