

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

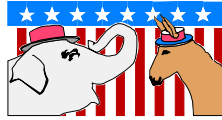


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Which moral values?

According to a poll taken immediately after the recent U.S. election, moral values were the main basis on which voters decided which presidential candidate to vote for. And a high proportion of voters on the winning side were Christians active in churches.



Those two findings don't seem to match. Many of the moral values influencing those Christians weren't the main values Jesus emphasized. Some of the most influential ones weren't mentioned by Jesus. Some are contrary to much that Jesus reportedly said and did. What does this say about what Christians consider the main moral values of Christianity?

We're very selective

For one thing, it says Christians are very selective about which scriptures they use as the basis for their moral values. Even the Christians who claim to be most faithful to the Bible's words are actually quite selective about which of its words they choose to obey. But the current situation in the U.S. also says we all need to be more deliberate in asking ourselves which moral values are most strongly emphasized in the Bible and how they apply to today's world. This Advent season is a good time to let what we hear about the birth of Jesus remind us of the need to ask such questions and to open ourselves to whatever new insights we receive.

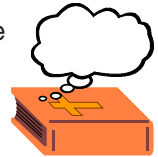


What words and actions of Jesus relate most closely to the issues that are being publicly discussed in the U.S., in the press, by government leaders, and by other citizens? Based on the Gospels' reports of Jesus's actions and words, what issues should have our highest priority? As Christians, shouldn't we base our moral values on his?



The number-one moral issue?

Abortion is an issue that the Bible doesn't directly address. Yet it seems to be the number-one moral issue for many contemporary Christians. It's apparently their main basis for evaluating candidates for public office. I'm not sure why.



Abortion is killing, of course, and we're commanded not to kill. But why don't the Christians who oppose all abortion also oppose war, which is wholesale killing? Why don't they also oppose capital punishment, which sometimes kills people for crimes they didn't even commit? Why don't the Christian opponents of abortion also oppose civilian ownership of guns designed only for military use, or at least insist on licensing of guns? That doesn't make sense to me.



It doesn't make sense, either, that so many vocal opponents of abortion are men. Why do men feel entitled to make decisions about women's bodies?

A unique situation

The desire to protect the unborn person is the reason for wanting to ban all abortion, of course, but unlike every other potential victim of murder, that unborn person is contained within the body of another person. It's like a part of her body. So killing a fetus is different from all other kinds of killing. It's doing something to a person's body against her wishes. That's sinful, if anything is.

A pregnant woman may well be committing a sin if she chooses to kill the unborn life within her, but how is that different from any other sin that a person chooses to commit? It's an issue between the sinner and God. We may be morally obligated to try to persuade people not to commit sin, but do we have the right to prevent them forcibly?



Personally I can't imagine ever choosing to have an abortion, but who among us can say what we'd do if confronted by a situation we've never actually had to confront? So despite the fact that I consider abortion wrong, I'm strongly opposed to having laws that forbid it. For me that's a moral value.

The Bible's top moral values

If we based our moral values on the overall message of the Bible, we'd give these top priority, it seems to me. They apparently got the most attention not only from Jesus but also from the prophets we read about in the Old Testament.



√ Care for the poor and the powerless

Jesus and the prophets all strongly emphasized providing food, clothing, and shelter for the poor. They also warned the rich about the sinfulness of accumulating more money and material goods than they needed.

The Bible stresses the obligation to care not just for the poor but also for others who can't support themselves.



Specifically mentioned often in scripture are widows and orphans. What groups are powerless in our society today?

A certain ruler asked [Jesus], "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "... Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor ... then come, follow me." But when he heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich.
—Luke 18:18-23

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven."
—Matthew 19:23

√ Healing for the physically and mentally ill

The Gospels contain many accounts of Jesus healing sick people. What does this say about our obligation to provide health care today? Does it mean only praying for the sick and laying hands on them as Jesus did, or does it also include providing professional care through hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, and pharmacies?



√ Equality for social outcasts

In Jesus's time on earth, the social outcasts apparently included Samaritans, lepers, and to some extent women, among others. Many people who were different from the majority in some way were evidently treated as outcasts or at least as inferiors.

Rather than following traditions and customs that required shunning such people or demeaning them, however, Jesus touched them, talked with them, and warned others not to reject or punish them. Yet even in our churches we're still treating women as inferior to men in many ways. Our society still treats some racial groups as inferior. We're denying homosexual people rights that heterosexuals have. Our moral values with regard to these customs don't seem to match those of Jesus.



√ Nonviolent efforts for peace

How to deal with enemies is one of today's most controversial subjects. Whether it's our nation's enemies or the people who infringe on our personal safety by committing crimes in our neighborhoods, we feel we must defend ourselves, often by killing the enemies, even if it means killing noncombatants as well as fighters.

Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.
—Romans 14:19

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
—Matthew 5:9



"If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty give them something to drink ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."
—Romans 12:20-21

Self-defense may be justified, and of course in the Old Testament we find instances of God commanding the people of Israel to slaughter enemies. Yet Jesus apparently advocated something very different. Christians understandably come to different

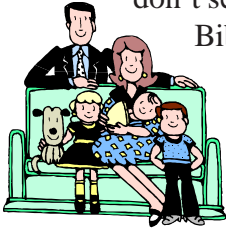
conclusions about war, all citing scripture as evidence that their conclusion is right. But don't we at

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ... Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ... But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return ..."
—Luke 6:27-35

least need to be discussing all the options openly in our churches, without calling members who disagree with us unchristian or unpatriotic?

Moral values that Jesus didn't advocate

Besides ignoring these moral values that Jesus evidently emphasized most, many Christians today are adamantly advocating other moral values that don't seem to have any valid basis in the Bible, especially in the teachings and actions of Jesus. Many of these pseudo-Christian values are being called "family values," implying that only one kind of family has God's approval.



One of the so-called family values that many Christians emphasize today is the obligation to give our biological family priority over all other relationships. Yet that's apparently not what Jesus advocated.

Most values that are falsely being

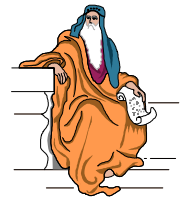


called family values relate specifically to marriage. Oddly, their Christian advocates don't oppose divorce, although the Gospels in one place show Jesus permitting it only in cases of infidelity, and in another place forbidding it under all circumstances.

Someone told [Jesus], "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ... Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

—Matthew 12:47-48

Most Christians see polygamy as unacceptable, yet many of the characters we admire in the Old Testament had more than one wife. Many had concubines too. We excuse this by acknowledging that like slavery these were merely customs typical of the culture of the time, about which we now know better. Yet we don't admit that biblical statements condemning homosexuality also reflect the culture in which they arose, and are not consistent with the commandment to love one another, to which Jesus gave great emphasis. In fact, they deal with a subject Jesus apparently never mentioned.



Christians are very selective and inconsistent in deciding which scriptures to use as a basis for their moral values.

Government or individuals?

Much of today's disagreement in the U.S. about helping the poor, the weak, and the ill relates to the question of what should be done by the federal government and supported by taxes, and what should be done by states or individuals instead. But much



that was done by individuals in earlier centuries has to be done by governments or other institutions today if it's to get done. It now relates to systemic ills and to medical treatment too specialized and costly for individuals to do.

The question of who performs these services, however, seems much less important than the question of whether the services get done or not. What matters is that the sick receive treatment and the poor get food, clothing, and shelter, whether those

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 12 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

are provided by the government, by private enterprise, by churches or other nonprofit agencies, or by individuals. If we want to be faithful Christians, we can't let disagreements about the method keep the goals from being accomplished.

I hope that in the coming months and years we Christians can look more carefully at what the moral values of Jesus were, and can help to get more of them into effect in our world.

Barbara



“When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... All the nations will be gathered before him, and he ... will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... ; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when ... ?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

—Matthew 25:31-40



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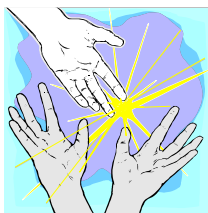
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Which moral values?

December 2004

Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?



Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly ...

Then you shall call, and [God] will answer; you shall cry for help, and [God] will say, Here I am.



—Isaiah 58:2-9