

A NEW GENERATION OF ADULTS BEND MORAL AND SEXUAL RULES TO SUIT THEMSELVES

Editors note: This article and the survey results it reveals should ring alarm bells for the future spiritual and moral health of western nations whose society's have been built on biblical values. Unless the Church is able to find meaningful ways of communicating biblical truth on moral values to a generation that is not listening to "outdated" moralising, western civilisation will not survive. Is this the outcome "we had to have" resulting from the Church's failure over many years to call "sin" for what it really is?

Most people say they are concerned about moral values and the vast majority of adults describe themselves as moral people. But many have difficulty agreeing on what a "moral" life should look like - much less how to make ethical decisions or how to define moral standards.

A new nationwide survey from The Barna Group in America examines the difference between those in their twenties and thirties (the so-called "Buster" generation), and those over the age of 40.

The new study shows a significant divide between the nation's young adults and its older residents. Perhaps no moral dimension has changed as much as people's perspectives and behaviours related to 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.

Some of these differences show up in the sexual activities engaged in during the past month. Busters were 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.

But many Busters also defy sexual convention in their attitudes. For instance, more than two-thirds of the generation said that cohabitation and sexual fantasies are morally acceptable behaviours, compared with half of older adults. Almost half of Busters believed that sexual relationships between people of the same sex are acceptable, compared with one-quarter of older adults.

The new rules of morality also affect how young adults interact with others, creating less civility, respect, or patience. Busters were twice as likely as their parents' generation to use profanity in public, to talk about others behind their back, to lie or do something to get back at someone who hurts or offends them, to steal, or engage in acts of violence.

Given their familiarity with and access to technology, the study also showed that young adults were ten times more likely than older adults to download or trade music online illegally. While some of that gap can be attributed to the relative comfort of the younger adults with the technologies involved, a considerable degree of the gap must be credited to the different moral standards of the two adult segments.

The lifestyles of young and old were indistinguishable in a few ways. Out of the 16 areas of moral behaviour, adults across the generations were equally likely to have given someone "the finger" while driving, to smoke, to buy a lottery ticket, and to place a bet or gamble. Busters' perspectives were no different from that of their elders on three issues: the acceptability of abortion, allowing the "f-word" on broadcast television, and deeming divorce not to be a sin.

However, other large generational gaps emerged when the survey explored how people decide what is right and wrong. 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.

To what extent does faith make a difference among Busters? Born again Busters were somewhat less likely to illegally download music, to smoke, to view pornography, to purchase a lottery ticket, or to use profanity. However, young believers were actually more likely than non-believers to try to get back at someone and to have stolen something. Moreover, on eight of the 16 behaviours, the profile of born again Busters was virtually identical to that of non-born again Busters.

In terms of attitudes, the typical pattern was for born again adults over 40 to be most closely aligned with biblical perspectives, followed far behind by other segments, including younger Christians. For example, just 33% of born again pre-Busters believe that cohabitation is morally acceptable. However, among born again Busters nearly twice as many (59%) agreed, representing a majority of young Christian adults. 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."

When asked to put the findings about Busters in context, especially in comparison to the views and behaviours of Baby Boomers, Kinnaman explained that "the morality of Busters comes from a very different background. For instance, divorce, crime, single-parent households, and suicide were much more prevalent while Busters grew up. Boomers took moral experimentation to new heights, but Busters now live in a world where such experimentation is the norm, not the exception. Busters have a more disconnected, individualized, less trusting spin on morality. They are trying to create a sense of identity because they feel that shaping influences such as family, church, and community have failed them. Boomers experimented to overthrow the morals of their parents, while Busters live with a mindset of trying to survive.

"It is important for churches to understand the natural scepticism of Busters as well as their desire for spiritual and conversational depth," he continued. "Young adults do not want to hear on-the-stage monologues about moral regulations. To earn access to their hearts and minds, you have to understand each person's unique background, identity, and doubts, and must tangibly model a biblical lifestyle for them beyond the walls of the church."

The researcher also put the sexuality data in perspective. "It is rare to see such large gaps between population segments and it confirms a major shift in the way Busters think and behave sexually. Sexual experimentation is not new. But it is striking to see sexual behaviours and attitudes that were uncommon now becoming part of the accepted, mainstream experience of young people." The Vice President of the Barna Group added, "We expect to see this mindset of sexual entitlement translate into increased appetites for pornography, unfiltered acceptance of sexual themes and content in media, and continued dissolution of marriages due to infidelity. It seems entirely possible that current events such as instances of abuse by clergy, and the sexually oriented school shootings of recent months are not mere aberrations, but symptoms of a sexually unrestrained society."

Kinnaman encouraged churches to help individuals grasp sexuality from a biblical perspective in ways that do not demean people's personal struggles in the blunt and permissive culture we inhabit. "Young adults are deaf to the same old complaints and cautions typically offered up by church leaders, whether those conditions are biblically accurate or not. Busters have created their own music, language, media, technology and relational networks. For Christians to connect with Busters requires fresh ideas and connecting points to help young adults deal with overwhelming amounts of sexually

charged media. The strategies that affected Boomers are falling flat among Busters. We need thoughtful means of intervention and discussion, a new emphasis on biblical counselling, and meaningful forms of accountability. Every church has a responsibility to provide its congregants with a menu of relevant and biblical resources that will help people live morally healthy and fulfilled lives."

Source: Barna Research Group