

Southern evangelicals not guided by Bible for view on torture

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ATLANTA (ABP)—A new survey suggests the very Americans who claim to follow the Bible most assiduously don't consult it when forming their views about torture and government policy.

The poll of 600 Southern white evangelicals was released Sept. 11 in Atlanta in connection with a national religious summit on torture. It shows not only are white evangelical Southerners more likely than the general populace to believe torture is sometimes or often justified, but also that they are far more likely—to tweak a phrase from Proverbs—to “lean on their own understanding” regarding the subject.

However, their views seemed to change when asked to consider torture policy in light of the Golden Rule. When respondents were asked if the United States should “never use methods against our enemies that we would not want used on American soldiers,” more than half agreed.

While a recent Pew survey showed 48 percent of the general public believes torture sometimes or often is justified in order to obtain information from suspected terrorists, the new poll shows 57 percent of white Southern evangelicals hold that belief.

Among that demographic and despite their high levels of religious belief and practice, the survey found, “white evangelicals in the South are significantly more likely to rely on life experiences and common sense (44 percent) than Christian teachings or beliefs (28 percent) when thinking about the acceptability of torture.”

Meanwhile, among the minority who pointed to the Bible and Christian doctrine as the primary influences on their view of torture, more than half—52 percent—oppose government use of such tactics.

“This is a spiritual crisis, I suggest, that should alarm all Christian leaders regardless of what we think about torture,” said Tyler Wigg Stevenson, a Baptist minister and human-rights activist from Nashville, Tenn., at a press conference announcing the survey’s results. “This bad news for the church is a plus for any special interest who wants to take advantage of us.”

However, he added, “The good news this poll reminds us of is that, as with any issue when Christians remember that our calling is to follow Jesus, he changes everything.”

The study was commissioned by Mercer University and Faith in Public Life. Its results were announced during the “Religious Faith, Torture and our National Soul” conference held on Mercer’s Atlanta campus. The meeting was sponsored by the two organizations that commissioned the poll and a host of other religious groups, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Evangelicals for Human Rights, the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and the Islamic Society of North America.

David Gushee, a Mercer professor and president of Evangelicals for Human Rights (and also a columnist for Associated Baptist Press) said the poll results should tell both of the major-party presidential candidates how to lead when it comes to addressing the subject of torture.

Both GOP nominee John McCain and his Democratic rival, Barack Obama, have expressed opposition to the United States’ use of torture on terrorism suspects.

“My message to [Illinois] Sen. Barack Obama...is that you have an opportunity to make torture a moral and, in fact a religious issue—a values issue,” said Gushee, who teaches Christian ethics. “This is in your interest,

because you are trying to communicate to religious Americans—and especially to evangelicals.”

But he warned Obama not to soft-pedal the torture issue in his campaign speeches for fear of alienating middle-of-the-road voters. “I say: Say more about the issue of torture and not less,” Gushee said. “Don’t run away from the issue.”

For McCain, the veteran Arizona senator who endured years of torture while he was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, Gushee had different advice. “I say to Sen. McCain: Make the tie between your personal narrative and your policy stance on human rights perfectly clear,” he said.

Gushee, noting that two-thirds of those in the poll who said they were supporting McCain also support torture, added, “Tell your own voters why they are wrong on this issue, and why you are committed to the positions that you have articulated since 2002-2003 on the issue of torture.”

During a question-and-answer session, Gushee said he was disappointed with McCain’s actions on specific legislation earlier this year that seemed to indicate he was backtracking on his previous anti-torture stance. Gushee said one vote in particular was “grievously disappointing to all who follow ... this battle for our national soul.”

Nonetheless, the professor said, McCain’s original position on torture is more in line with the candidate’s overall message.

“It fits entirely with [McCain’s] vision of national honor, it fits entirely with his vision of the discipline and grandeur of the U.S. military,” Gushee said. “I think his whole appeal—his whole stated appeal—for his candidacy is a maverick who stands up for what is right. And I want him to be who he says he is.”