

Voices: The ‘moral guidebook’ approach to Scripture isn’t working

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The Baptist Standard recently [covered a story](#) about a LifeWay Research survey of Americans’ views on the Bible. (You can read the full survey results [here](#)). Among the questions asked was: “Which of the following describe the Bible?” Possible answers ranged from “historical account” and “good source of morals” to “outdated” and “bigoted.” The survey asked respondents to select all characteristics that applied.



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The most commonly selected answer—and the only answer more than half of respondents indicated—was “good source of morals.” Fifty-two percent of respondents selected this answer, including 75 percent of Evangelicals surveyed. The second-most common answer was “historical account,” with 38 percent of respondents selecting this option, including 55 percent of Evangelicals.

Unfortunately, the survey did not indicate what percentage of people who chose one of these categories also chose the other, but we can speculate

based on what we have. The percentage of people who felt the Bible was a “good source of morals” was 18 points higher than those who believe the Bible to be a “historical account.” Among Evangelicals, the disparity is actually slightly greater, with 20 percent more Evangelicals comfortable calling the Bible “a good source of morals” than “a historical account.”

Biblical presupposition



So, what is the Bible? It seems even Evangelicals aren't entirely sure.

The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth wrote: “The question, ‘What is in the Bible?’ has a mortifying way of turning into the opposing question: ‘Well, what do you want?’” He’s right. We tend to find in Scripture what we want to find in it. If we’re hoping for a rulebook, we can find it. If we believe it’s a nasty, bigoted book, we will find plenty to back that up, as well.

What we presuppose about the Bible is what we find in it. What we find in it is what we read in it. What we read in it, we believe about it.

So why is the idea of the Bible as a “good source of morals” more comfortable than a “historical account” to so many? First, there’s the immediate problem of defining what “historical account” means. For a book replete with history, poetry, parables, short stories and so on, this phrase is not particularly clear. Some of those who chose not to call the Bible a “historical account” may have done so because of the baggage associated with the “Battles for the Bible” of the last 30 years.

I’d like to propose an alternative reason why more people would call the

Bible a “good source of morals” than a “historical account”: Morals are easy.

Disconcerting trend

There’s nothing especially Christian about not committing murder or adultery. As Jesus said: Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Both the “conservative” and “progressive” branches of contemporary Christianity fall into this trap constantly.

Conservative-leaning churches often slip into a legalistic moralism—the point of Christianity is to keep people from drinking, smoking, watching R-rated movies and so on. Progressive-leaning churches frequently do the same thing, but with social justice and the inclusion of marginalized groups as the underlying principle Scripture is interpreted through. Again, personal morality and social justice are wonderful things, but not specifically “Christian” virtues in and of themselves.

I’m glad Christians are deriving their morals from Scripture. I believe we should.

But I am concerned the trend appears to be to divorce of the ethics of Scripture from the historical reality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The love of enemies, as well as concern for the poor and needy, only works because of the work of Christ. Living a good and just life is an easy-enough concept to sell to people, but this isn’t what Christians are first called to proclaim or what our Scripture primarily testifies to. We as followers of Christ are given the difficult responsibility of proclaiming to the world that God took on human flesh, lived among us, was crucified and raised from the dead. Only because of this can we then proclaim the need for personal holiness and the freedom of captives.

The importance of Scripture to American churches seems to be declining. According to the Lifeway survey, only 61 percent of American Christians believe that the Bible is “helpful today.”

We shouldn’t jump to blame this on “the liberals” or “the fundamentalists.” Blame is seldom a helpful thing, anyway. Rather, it seems the American church needs to reconsider the meaning and function of Scripture now that we know that the “moral guidebook” approach isn’t working on its own.

Texas Baptists, you have your charge.

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