



"We choose the thoughts we allow ourselves to think, the passions we allow ourselves to feel, and the actions we allow ourselves to perform. Each choice is made in the context of whatever value system we've selected to govern our lives."

—Benjamin Franklin

**23-Feb-07**

## *Shifting American Values*

Fifteen years ago, the subject of "values" was on everyone's lips, reaching its crescendo during the political campaigns of the time. While the hubbub surrounding those national debates has died down, the importance of the subject to American life has become more critical as society has continued to coarsen and deteriorate in the intervening years. At the time, topics like homosexual unions, partial-birth abortions, ubiquitous Islamic terrorism, global warming, and illegal immigration were barely blips on the radar, while front-and-center were single-motherhood, AIDS, a desultory economy, whether Bill Clinton had inhaled, and George H.W. Bush's "read my lips: no new taxes" promise. To put it another way, in 1992, Americans were glued to the tube to watch *Roseanne* and *Murphy Brown*, and in 2007, they watch *Desperate Housewives* and *Two and a Half Men* with equal fascination. Plainly, our values have not improved.

While most pundits generalize the divide over values as a societal conflict between the Left and the Right—or Liberals versus Conservatives—this is ultimately an oversimplification. Missing from this analysis is a huge group of Moderates or Centrists that bounce from one side to the other depending on the issue. Beyond this, some groups—like apolitical churches—do not fit on this political-cultural spectrum at all, although they are frequently stuck on the extreme right wing by default. These last groups are unfortunately too insignificant (numerically) and too politically impotent (by choice) to make much of a difference to the pundits.

However, the Liberal-Conservative spectrum is instructive as a starting point in analyzing the foundational values of Americans. These labels divide the nation into progressives and traditionalists—or, in other words, those who promote experimentation and change and those who want to maintain the status quo, respectively. In more philosophic terms, left of center are those who are either passionately or unconcernedly eager to enter the brave new world of relativist humanism, while right of center are those who distrust and resist it with varying degrees of rigor.

What most analysts miss is that the entire spectrum has steadily shifted leftward since at least the early decades of the twentieth century. It has been observed, for instance, that Conservative Republican Ronald Reagan's tax cuts were similar to Liberal Democratic John F. Kennedy's twenty years before. Another example is Richard Nixon's impeachment and subsequent resignation as opposed to Bill Clinton's impeachment and subsequent non-resignation. A third illustration is the press corps' hush-hush attitude toward Kennedy's questionable affairs versus the media's indulgence toward Clinton's peccadilloes. In other words, what is considered to be radical at one time becomes mainstream a generation later. While these examples focus on presidential matters, a similar movement is easily seen in dress, speech, music, visual arts, and even religious belief. If unchecked, values tend to slide downhill.

This shift indicates a major weakness in America's values: They are no longer anchored to immovable principle. Beyond the fact that they are no longer fixed in Scripture, American cultural and political standards have only a tenuous hold on the founding principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution! In order to legitimize progressive rights—read, "demands"—activist judges must either stretch a Constitutional principle to the breaking point, or appeal to non-American sources, such as United Nations treaties or European Union law, to justify their existence in American jurisprudence. This is why liberal politicians advocate considering the Constitution as a "living"—read, "malleable"—document, while conservatives generally support its "original intent," meaning that its principles are "fixed." To this point—and the odds of returning to Constitutional principles are eroding daily—the progressives are sweeping to victory.

It is America's untethering from Christian and Constitutional values that keeps members of God's church from appearing anywhere on the Liberal-Conservative spectrum. When the nation upheld a modicum of godly or biblical principles, true Christians could perhaps identify with a fair number of their fellow citizens who were also God-fearing. But now, beyond the chasm that separates us doctrinally from mainstream Christianity, we even find few fellow-travelers who desire a free, sovereign, republican America! In short, whether the issue is religious or patriotic, our views do not even register on the chart.

This is reminiscent of [John 15:19](#): "If you were of [the world](#), the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." We cannot expect to have much of anything in common with this world, even with our fellow citizens—those we play with, go to school with, or work with. Their values are not our values. Their hopes are not our hopes. Their goals are not our goals. We are called to be different, set apart, sanctified by God.

Later, in His prayer before He was arrested, [Jesus](#) asks the Father:

I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. . . . Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to you. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. . . . I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. . . . Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. ([John 17:9](#), 11, 14-15, 17)

We are both set apart and kept, or guarded, by God's Word, the truth. It is the certain and authoritative bedrock of our values. As long as we hold on to it firmly, the truth will make us very different from those around us, but it will also guide us and preserve us toward God's Kingdom, where our true citizenship resides. In these days of societal degeneration, of values lurching toward Gomorrah, our foundation stands strong, and we will too, if we keep it firmly under us.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## *From the Archives: Featured Sermon*

### [Values and Conversion](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh insists that our natural carnal human nature (our heart, Jeremiah 17:9) is committed to values that are destroying us spiritually. These are values derived from family, religious, and cultural traditions?old wine that cannot go into new wineskins. Conversion involves incorporating new and godly values and tastes, which clash violently with what we already are (Roman 8:7). God's Word sets the value system for those who believe in Him, setting them apart (John 17:17) from other destructive value

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systems, freeing them from death (John 6:63). Repentance involves incorporating God's values, alien to our human nature?ones that will unify us with God and with others who accept His value system.

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## *From the Archives: Featured Article*

### **[The Zeitgeist of Suicide \(Part Two\): Causes and Results of Rejecting True Values](#)**

by Charles Whitaker

What are the causes—moral, social, and technological—behind the new demographic realities? Perhaps more importantly, what will be their consequences? Charles Whitaker spotlights the value of children to society—onethat is increasingly ignored in this age of materialism.

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