

Values and virtues: Virtues are displayed through lives of conviction sustained over time

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After the battle of the presidential election came the battle over the meaning of the election. Exit polls were dissected to discern the nation's character, especially its moral values. That a fifth of voters cited "moral values" as their key concern, and 80 percent of those voters backed George Bush, inspired talk of a values "gap" and a near-unanimous bit of advice for the Democrats: talk more about values.

But what values? Americans' values are famously contradictory. Americans astonish the world with their religious fervor—and their material acquisitiveness. They cherish rural traditions but abuse the land. They treasure individualism but revere big corporations. They disdain elites but love celebrities. America's many "born-again" Christians champion marriage but rank among the highest in divorce rates. The popular Fox TV network touts conservative family values in its news programs and presses lewdness in its entertainment shows. To understand American values, one needs a novelist more than a pollster—Nathanael West more than George Gallup.

The problem with values in the modern world is not that people don't have them or talk about them, but that they are fragmentary and incoherent. Or as G. K. Chesterton once put it, values are wandering around, isolated from each other.

Mainline Christians—who voted, narrowly, for Bush—have resources with which to move beyond the chatter about values. To begin with, they are not likely to think that those who vote according to a different set of priorities occupy a totally alien universe. After all, the red-state/blue-state divide passes through most of their own congregations.

Christians are also prepared to recognize that all of us need to have our "values" expanded and deepened—that the values that are wandering around in the culture and in our lives need to be gathered together. Some of us need to learn that caring

for family and neighbor includes not only how we regulate marriage or treat embryos and fetuses but also how we treat the poor, care for the sick, distribute tax burdens, protect the environment and use military force. And yes, some of us need to reconsider how caring for family and neighbor includes respect for marriage and incipient human life.

Finally, Christians know that what matters most are not values but virtues. Values may be cited in an answer to a pollster; virtues are displayed through lives of conviction sustained over time. In the congregations we know, such lives are far richer than any pollster's checklist.