

**Critical Junctures in American Evangelicalism: IV
The Rise of the Religious Right**

By Randall Balmer

By now, well into the twenty-first century, the story of the rise of the Religious Right, the loose coalition of politically conservative individuals, congregations, and organizations, is well known. On January 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision that effectively struck down all laws banning abortion until “viability,” the point at which a fetus could survive outside the womb. The Roman Catholic Church had been arguing against legalized abortion for a very long time, but sheer outrage at the *Roe* decision had the effect of rallying evangelicals to the antiabortion cause.

For most of the twentieth century, evangelicals had been content to exist within the safety of their subculture, this network of institutions they had constructed in earnest following the Scopes trial of 1925. The subculture functioned as a kind of bulwark against the corruptions of the larger world, and evangelicals’ wholesale adoption of dispensational premillennialism late in the previous century effectively absolved them from concerns about social amelioration. Although many evangelicals, including Billy Graham, railed against “godless Communism” during the cold war, their fixation with the imminent return of Jesus rationalized their lack of interest in the present world. “Believing the Bible as I do,” Jerry Falwell declared in 1965, “I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else – including fighting Communism, or participating in civil-rights reforms.”

Dealing with the victims of systemic discrimination and racist violence was one thing, however, but the defense of those poor, defenseless babies was another. The *Roe* decision of 1973 shook evangelical leaders out of their complacency; even though their own congregants did not want them involved in political matters, the urgency of the *Roe* ruling compelled them to action. They were willing to take on the risk of alienating their own constituencies because of the greater moral imperative of fighting the scourge of abortion.

These leaders of the Religious Right looked for ways to justify their sudden, albeit reluctant, plunge into politics, so they began to refer to themselves as the “new abolitionists,” an effort to align themselves with the nineteenth-century opponents of slavery. The political activism on the part of these evangelical leaders was initially viewed with suspicion by rank-and-file evangelicals, but they quickly were persuaded of the moral urgency of fighting abortion.

The scenario about the rise of the Religious Right I’ve just rehearsed is compelling and familiar. It’s also a work of fiction. The only factual elements of the preceding story are the 1965 quotation from Jerry Falwell, the self-designated use of the term “new abolitionists,” and the Roman Catholic Church’s longstanding arguments against abortion. As early as the Iowa precinct caucuses in 1972, the bishops were urging their communicants to support candidates opposed to abortion.

Evangelicals, however, took a very different view of the matter in the early 1970s. Meeting in St. Louis during the summer of 1971, the messengers (delegates)

to the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution that stated, "we call upon Southern Baptists to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother." After the *Roe* decision was handed down on January 22, 1973, W. A. Criswell, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, expressed his satisfaction with the ruling. "I have always felt that it was only after a child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person," one of the most famous fundamentalists of the twentieth century declared, "and it has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed."

While a few evangelical voices, including *Christianity Today* magazine, mildly questioned the ruling, the overwhelming response on the part of evangelicals was silence, even approval; Baptists, in particular, applauded the decision as an appropriate articulation of the line of division between church and state, between personal morality and state regulation of individual behavior. "Religious liberty, human equality and justice are advanced by the Supreme Court abortion decision," W. Barry Garrett of *Baptist Press* wrote.

If the *Roe* decision was not the precipitating cause for the rise of the Religious Right, however, what was? The catalyst for the Religious Right was indeed a court decision, but it was a lower court decision, *Green v. Connally*, not *Roe v. Wade*. In the early 1970s, the federal government was looking for ways to extend the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the landmark legislation that Lyndon Johnson pushed through Congress and signed into law during the summer of 1964. The Civil Rights Act forbade racial segregation and discrimination, and in looking for ways to enforce that law the Internal Revenue Service ruled that any organization that engaged in racial discrimination was not, by definition, a charitable organization and therefore should be denied tax-exempt status and, furthermore, that contributions to such institutions no longer qualified for tax-exemption.

On June 30, 1971, the three-judge District Court for the District of Columbia affirmed the IRS in its *Green v. Connally* decision. Although *Green v. Connally* addressed the case of a segregated school in Mississippi, the ramifications of the ruling were widespread. Institutions that engaged in racial discrimination, be they churches, clubs, or schools, were no longer tax-exempt. As the IRS prepared to apply the ruling, one of the schools directly in its crosshairs was a fundamentalist institution in Greenville, South Carolina: Bob Jones University. Founded in Florida by arch-fundamentalist Bob Jones in 1926, the school had been located for a time in Cleveland, Tennessee, before moving to South Carolina in 1947. In response to *Green v. Connally*, Bob Jones University decided to admit students of color in 1971, but the school maintained its restrictions against admitting unmarried African Americans until 1975. Even then, however, the school stipulated that interracial dating would be grounds for expulsion, and the school also promised that any

students who “espouse, promote, or encourage others to violate the University’s dating rules and regulations will be expelled.”

The Internal Revenue Service pressed its case against Bob Jones University and on April 16, 1975, notified the school of the proposed revocation of its tax-exempt status. On January 19, 1976, the IRS officially revoked Bob Jones University’s tax-exempt status, effective retroactively to 1970, when the school had first been formally notified of the IRS policy.

Bob Jones University sued to retain its tax exemption, and conservative activist Paul Weyrich saw an opening. Weyrich had been fighting for conservative causes going back to Barry Goldwater’s failed bid for the presidency in 1964. He sensed the electoral potential of enlisting evangelical voters in conservative causes, and he had been trying throughout the early 1970s to generate some interest from evangelical leaders on matters like abortion, school prayer, and the proposed equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution. “I was trying to get those people interested in those issues and I utterly failed,” Weyrich recalled in the 1990s. “What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter’s intervention against Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation.”

The Bob Jones case caught the attention of evangelical leaders, although I do not believe that the primary motivation for the galvanization of evangelicals was racism. Rather, they saw themselves as defending what they considered the sanctity of the evangelical subculture from outside interference. As I was growing up in evangelicalism in the 1950s and 1960s, I recall the visits of a succession of presidents of various Bible colleges and Bible institutes. They were raising money and recruiting students, and one of their mantras was that their institutions did not accept federal money; therefore, the government couldn’t tell them how to run their shops, who they admitted or not, who they hired or fired.

Green v. Connally changed that. Evangelical leaders, prodded by Weyrich, chose to interpret the IRS ruling against segregationist schools as an assault on the integrity and the sanctity of the evangelical subculture. And that is what prompted them to action and to organize into a political movement. “What cause the movement to surface,” Weyrich reiterated, “was the federal government’s moves against Christian schools,” which, he added, “enraged the Christian community.” Ed Dobson, formerly Falwell’s assistant at Moral Majority, has corroborated Weyrich’s account. “The Religious New Right did not start because of a concern about abortion,” he said in 1990. “I sat in the non-smoke-filled back room with the Moral Majority, and I frankly do not remember abortion being mentioned as a reason why we ought to do something.”

The Bob Jones case found its way all the way to the Supreme Court in 1982, when the Reagan administration argued on behalf of Bob Jones University. On May 24, 1983, however, the Court ruled against Bob Jones. The evangelical defense of Bob Jones University and its racially discriminatory policies may not have been motivated primarily by racism. Still, it’s fair to point out the paradox that the very people who style themselves the “new abolitionists” to emphasize their

moral kinship with the nineteenth-century opponents of slavery actually coalesced as a political movement effectively to defend racial discrimination.

And how did opposition to abortion become part of the Religious Right's program? According to Weyrich, once these evangelical leaders had mobilized in defense of Bob Jones University, they held a conference call to discuss the possibility of other political activities. Several people suggested possible issues and finally a voice on the end of one of the lines said "How about abortion?" And that, according to Weyrich, was how abortion was cobbled into the agenda of the Religious Right – in the late 1970s, not as a direct response to the January 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Another element of Paul Weyrich's statement merits closer examination. Looking back on the formation of the Religious Right, Weyrich insisted that opposition to abortion was not the precipitating cause behind evangelical political activism. His alternate explanation reads as follows: "What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter's intervention against Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation."

Here, Weyrich displays his genius for political maneuvering and chicanery. The Internal Revenue Service had initiated its action against Bob Jones University in 1970, and they informed the school in 1975 that it would revoke its tax exemption. Jimmy Carter was still running for the Democratic nomination when Bob Jones University received that news, and he was inaugurated president on January 20, 1977, precisely one full year and a day after the IRS finally rescinded the school's tax-exempt status. And yet, according to Weyrich, it was "Jimmy Carter's intervention against Christian schools" that precipitated the rise of the Religious Right.

As president of the United States in the final years of the 1970s, Carter was dealt a bad hand – the Arab Oil Embargo and the concomitant energy crisis, high interest rates, the Iranian hostage situation – and it is a hand that, in many respects, he played badly. But he also fought against some lavishly funded, highly organized, and fiendishly deceptive opponents who would do almost anything to undermine him. Weyrich's attribution to Carter of the IRS action against Bob Jones University provides a case in point. Even though the action was consummated a full year before Carter even took office, when Gerald Ford was still president, Weyrich succeeded in pinning this unpopular action on the Democratic president and using it to organize a movement to deny him reelection in 1980.

One of the many ironies surrounding the Religious Right, of course, is that evangelicals had helped sweep Carter to victory in the presidential election of 1976. His rhetoric about being a "born again Christian" had energized evangelicals, many of whom had been resolutely apolitical until the mid-1970s. His improbable run for the presidency, his candor about his religious convictions, and his promise to restore probity to the White House resonated with many Americans, especially after having endured Richard Nixon's endless prevarications. But no group responded more enthusiastically than evangelicals themselves. Many of them registered to vote for the first time in order to cast their ballots for the Sunday-school teacher from Plains,

Georgia, and even televangelist Pat Robertson later boasted that he had done everything short of violating FCC regulations to ensure Carter's election.

Not all evangelicals were enthusiastic about Carter, however. Tim LaHaye insisted that he had been suspicious from the beginning. Once they had galvanized as a political movement, leaders of the Religious Right claimed that Carter's unwillingness to outlaw abortion provided a compelling reason to work against him – Carter had taken the position during the 1976 campaign that he was “personally opposed” to abortion but that he did not want to make it illegal – but that was a retrospective judgment because evangelicals did not embrace abortion as an issue until the 1980 campaign.

What about other issues that fed the rise of the Religious Right? Phyllis Schlafly, a Roman Catholic, had been opposing the proposed equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution, but the issue had little traction among evangelicals in the early 1970s. As the Religious Right was gearing up in preparation for the 1980 election, however, Beverly LaHaye started a new organization, Concerned Women for America, in 1979, claiming that she resented the assumption on the part of feminist leaders that they spoke for all women.

The decision on the part of the Religious Right to oppose feminism as part of their agenda was a curious one. Following the lead of Charles Finney and Phoebe Palmer and Sarah Lankford and countless Quaker women, evangelicals had been in the forefront of the women's rights movement throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. An essential part of the argument for women's suffrage was that women could bring moral arguments to bear on social issues, especially temperance. Given their own legacy, evangelical women should have been marching beside people like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and one can only speculate about the ways in which America might have looked different in the final decades of the twentieth century had they done so. At the very least, it seems likely that an evangelical presence in the women's movement might have curbed some of the more radical elements of feminism. But that, of course, is speculation. Instead, the leaders of the Religious Right, who were and are overwhelmingly male, opposed the women's movement, thereby betraying evangelicalism's own heritage as nineteenth-century feminists.

In their search for a comprehensive political agenda, the leaders of the Religious Right grabbed onto such issues as support for Israel, derived from their chiliastic reading of biblical prophecies, and the abolition of the Department of Education. But in establishing a social agenda, which they insisted was based directly on the teachings of scripture, they ignored the issue of divorce in favor of opposition to abortion and, later, homosexuality.

On the face of it, this was a curious move. The Bible, not to mention Jesus himself, says a great deal about divorce – and none of it good. The Bible says relatively little about homosexuality and probably nothing at all about abortion, though pro-life advocates routinely cite a couple of verses. Jesus himself said nothing whatsoever about sexuality, though he did talk a good bit about money. Still, the preponderance of the biblical witness, which the Religious Right claims as

formative, is directed toward the believer's responsibility to those Jesus calls "the least of these," toward an honoring of the meek and peacemakers, and, on social matters, against divorce. Yet the Religious Right made no attempt to outlaw divorce.

Why is that? First, the divorce rate among evangelicals by the late 1970s, when the Religious Right was gearing up, was roughly the same as that of the larger population. Second, the person that the Religious Right exalted as their political savior in 1980 was Ronald Reagan, a divorced and remarried man who, as governor of California, had signed a bill into law legalizing abortion. The Religious Right's designation of abortion and homosexuality as the central issues of their social agenda allowed them to divert attention from their embrace of Reagan but also to locate "sin" outside of the evangelical subculture (or so they thought).

This attempt to externalize the enemy proved effective. By the logic of their own professed fidelity to the scriptures, the leaders of the Religious Right should have been working to make divorce illegal, except in cases of infidelity. Not more difficult, but illegal, because they seek to outlaw abortion. Instead, they have chosen to be draconian on abortion and homosexuality, even though the biblical mandate on those matters is considerably more ambiguous. The Religious Right's opposition to abortion has been weakened, moreover, by its insistent refusal to be consistently "pro-life." Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which, following the lead of the late Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago, has talked about a "consistent life ethic," the leaders of the Religious Right have failed to condemn capital punishment or even the use of torture by the Bush administration. The failure to oppose capital punishment and torture leaves the Religious Right open to the charge that their agenda is driven by hard-right ideologues rather than by moral conviction. And what do we make of the fact that the Republican-Religious Right coalition has controlled all three branches of the federal government since Samuel Alito's confirmation to the Supreme Court on February 1, 2006, and yet this coalition has made no effort to outlaw abortion?

Despite the internal contradictions and ironies surrounding the Religious Right, no one can deny its political effectiveness. The Religious Right more than likely provided the margin of victory for Reagan in 1980 over two evangelical opponents: Carter, the incumbent, and John B. Anderson, Republican member of Congress from Illinois who was running as an independent. The Religious Right help to reelect Reagan four years later and to elect Reagan's vice president, George H. W. Bush, in 1988, even though the support from politically conservative evangelicals was considerably more tepid. The Religious Right viewed the Clinton years as something of an interregnum; as someone shaped by the Baptist tradition in the South and as someone clearly at ease behind the pulpit of an African American congregation, Clinton was able to siphon enough evangelical votes away from the Republicans to win election in 1992 and reelection four years later.

The Religious Right never forgave Clinton for interrupting their ascendancy. With the emergence of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, they pounced with a vengeance, and their failure to remove him from office by impeachment was

a source of unmitigated disappointment. They finally had Clinton in their sights, but the Senate failed to pull the trigger, despite the Republican majority. Ed Dobson and Cal Thomas, both of them former assistants to Jerry Falwell, published a bitter lamentation about the betrayal of the Religious Right by the political process. Their book, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?*, answered the subtitle with an emphatic no. Politics, they argued, was an arena of compromise, not suited to religious convictions. Besides, what had the Republican Party actually delivered to politically conservative evangelicals?

A fair question. No one can deny the political influence of the Religious Right or the leaders' proximity to powerful politicians. Since the 1980s, politically conservative evangelicals have supplied the Republican Party with the foot soldiers that labor unions once provided for the Democratic Party. But what have evangelicals received in return?

Both Reagan and George H. W. Bush (who had run for the Republican presidential nomination in 1980 as a pro-choice Republican) promised a constitutional amendment banning abortion, but neither made a serious effort to amend the Constitution. Reagan appointed C. Everett Koop, an evangelical and an abortion opponent, to the position of surgeon-general, and Gary Bauer held a policy position in the Reagan White House. But the legislative accomplishments of the Religious Right, despite the putative allegiance of a majority of Congress to the agenda of the Religious Right, is negligible. Even George W. Bush's much-trumpeted faith-based initiatives program has fallen far short of his promises; according to *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction*, by David Kuo, formerly the assistant in Bush's office of faith-based initiatives, Bush had delivered only \$80 million of the \$8 billion dollars he promised to the program, less than 1 percent. "In 2004 we really did break our necks to turn out the vote, James Dobson complained in September 2004. "For the two years since then, I have been extremely disappointed with what the Republicans have done with the power they were given."

The Rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s and its pandering after power provides an important lesson about evangelicalism. The widespread attempt on the part of the Religious Right to compromise the First Amendment – by means of faith-based initiatives, public prayer in public schools, the use of taxpayer vouchers for religious schools, emblazoning the Ten Commandments and other religious sentiments on public places – all of these efforts ultimately undermine the faith by identifying it with the state and by suggesting that the faith needs the imprimatur of the government for legitimacy. After Judge Myron Thompson ruled (correctly) that the granite monument placed by Roy Moore in the lobby of the Alabama Judicial Building represented a violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause, one of the protesters screamed, "Get your hands off my God!" This protester may have forgotten that one of the commandments etched into that block of granite said something about graven images, but the entire incident illustrated the dangers of trivializing or fetishizing the faith by associating it with the state. The overwhelming lesson of American religious history is that religion, especially evangelicalism, has flourished here as nowhere else precisely because we

have followed Roger Williams's dictum that the church should remain separate from the state, lest the "garden of the church" be overcome by the "wilderness of the world."

The other lesson for evangelicals in American religious history is that religion always functions best at the margins of society and not in the councils of power. Methodism of the nineteenth century comes to mind, as does Mormonism and the holiness movement. In the twentieth century, pentecostalism provides the best example of a religious movement operating at the fringes of society – and flourishing. When the faith panders after political power or cultural respectability, however, it loses its prophetic edge. The failure of the Religious Right to condemn the Bush administration's policies on torture provides perhaps the most egregious example. But twentieth-century American history provides another example as well: the white-middle-class aspirations of mainline Protestants and the ecumenical movement in the cold war era that led to an enervation of mainline Protestantism. Paradoxically, it was the resurgence of evangelicalism, coming from the margins, that re-energized Protestantism. Now, because of the Religious Right's dalliance with the Republican Party in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, it is evangelicalism itself that stands in need of renewal.

And there is evidence that this is already taking place. Midway through George W. Bush's second term in office, in the face of economic stagnation, policies that overwhelmingly favor the affluent, indifference toward the poor and the environment, and moral malpractice in the use of torture and the conduct of the war in Iraq, evangelical voices have begun to rise in opposition, calling evangelicalism to its better self. Evangelicals like Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo are beginning to be heard, and a new group calling itself "Red Letter Christians," a reference to the words of Jesus in many editions of the New Testament, organized in September 2006 to offer an alternative evangelical voice. Indeed, history may very well judge the ascendancy of the Religious Right in the final decades of the twentieth century as an aberration because of its distortion of the New Testament and its failure to honor the legacy of nineteenth-century evangelical activists.

Because of its malleability, its populism, and its uncanny knack to speak the idiom of the culture, evangelicalism will continue to be America's folk religion well into the twenty-first century. The mechanisms for course corrections are inherent to evangelicalism, which has always remained remarkably free of the institutional machinery of episcopacy, creed, tradition, or denominational bureaucracy. And the unparalleled ability to communicate to the masses, from the open-air preaching of George Whitefield in the eighteenth century to the stadium crusades of Billy Graham in the twentieth century, has always ensured that evangelicalism remains accessible to all Americans.

The history of evangelicalism in America reveals its suppleness, its infinite adaptability to cultural circumstances. The adoption of a novel configuration of church and state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provides one example, and the theological shift from Calvinism to Arminianism in the new nation provides another. The move from postmillennialism to premillennialism may have had the

unfortunate effect of removing evangelicals from the arena of social amelioration, but it was an understandable response to the seismic social and demographic shifts of the nineteenth century. Evangelicals responded to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and to the Scopes trial by constructing and burrowing into their own subculture, and the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s represented a response to the perceived attacks on the sanctity of the subculture. The attempt on the part of the leaders of the Religious Right to obfuscate the real origins of the movement suggests a level of deception that should be disturbing to any believer. The effect of the Religious Right has been to deliver the faith into the captivity of right-wing politics.

Evangelicalism has profoundly shaped American history and culture. The challenge facing evangelicals now in the early years of the twenty-first century lies in finding a way to reclaim the faith from the depredations and distortions of the Religious Right.