

WEEK 7

Evangelicals in the Political Arena After the 1970s

Evangelicals have had a voice in politics throughout American history. This week will continue to trace this history from the 1800s to the present. These weeks have been divided into two periods: before and after the 1970s.

DEFINITION: An **evangelical** today is someone who has had a conversion experience, seeks to express the gospel, has a particular regard for the Bible, and stresses the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

QUESTION: Evangelical leaders commonly used fear and anger to mobilize conservatives. What are some problems with this approach? What is a more biblical motivation for engaging government?

QUESTION: Reclaiming Christian civilization or “taking back America” are not biblical goals. What were some of the consequences when evangelicals pursued these goals?

DETAILED OUTLINE

I. From Saving Souls to Saving America (1970-1979)

Two unlikely fundamentalist pastors organized evangelical concern into political activism. They were Southern Baptist ministers, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. An unlikely scholar living in Switzerland, Francis Schaeffer, emerged with dire warnings and a call to action.

A. Leading the Charge

The new evangelicals desired to engage the world. Yet, America's sharp moral decline in the 1960s and 70s redirected their engagement. Jerry Falwell began to use his television and radio ministry to rally evangelicals to take political action. Pat Robertson did the same with his *700 Club*. Evangelicals had heard warnings and calls to repentance from Billy Graham. These men, however, called evangelicals to revive America through politics.

B. Making the Case

The decision of *Roe v. Wade* (1972) went unnoticed until Francis Schaeffer's *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1979). If Robertson and Falwell led the charge for political activism, Schaeffer made the case. By the end of the 1970s, moral conservatives realized the awful implications of abortion-on-demand.

As theological distinctions diminished, moral distinctions grew in importance. Thus, evangelicals pursued fellowship with conservative Jews, Catholics, Mormons, and even some theological liberals. Vast coalitions, such as the Moral Majority (1979), formed.

American Protestants have historically linked their love of God to their love of country, their Christianity to their patriotism. As the nation slid, it seems many would agree that, "For the love of God, we must save America!"

II. Married to the Republican Party (1980-1997)

The Christian Right was often lockstep with the Republican Party. They were faithful throughout these years, though their faithfulness was rarely rewarded.

A. Evangelicals Emergence

Newsweek had declared 1976 as the "Year of the Evangelical." The embers of their discontent would grow ablaze in the election of 1980. Evangelicals emerged as a political force, well-organized and solidly behind Ronald Reagan. President Carter was a Southern Baptist with all the evangelical credentials. Reagan, however, gave the Christian Right a sense of importance at the outset of their relationship.

Voter registrations and political rallies bolstered evangelical influence in the elections of 1980 and '84. President Reagan continued to court evangelicals, and they

endorsed him without hesitation. Evangelical leaders, however, such as Jerry Falwell and Paul Weyrich had been growing disappointed. They gave the President all they had, and in return, he gave them, “meaningless access.” The Christian Right could boast of little.

B. New Tactics, Same Results

Pat Robertson was so angry with the Republican Party that he ran for President in 1988 and created the Christian Coalition (1989). Robertson selected Ralph Reed to lead the Coalition. Unlike other evangelical leaders, Reed had no fundamentalist roots nor was he a pastor. He was a young politico who believed the ends justify his means. Ultimately, Reed shifted evangelical activism to being “pro-family.”

The Christian Coalition distributed tens of millions of voting guides and bolstered conservative voters. In fact, evangelicals had become to Republicans what organized labor had been to Democrats. Evangelicals won numerous political races, and their organizations were flood with financial support in the early 90s. Yet, other than Clarence Thomas’ nomination (1991), the Christian Right had few accomplishments.

III. The Disillusioned and the Determined (1998-2008)

Political hardliners such as James Dobson believed Falwell, Robertson, and Reed failed because of their penchant for compromise. Others such as Cal Thomas now viewed the Right as biblically wrong. Nonetheless, evangelicals stood with George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004.

A. Political Victories

Focus on the Family (1977) emerged in the late 90s as the chief political platform for evangelicals. The Christian Right had regularly taken aim at Democrats. Dobson, however, took aim at Republicans. He excoriated politicians, by name, who received evangelical votes without advancing the evangelical agenda. Demanding and uncompromising, Dobson pushed evangelicals to engage the world much differently.

The Right regained its stride with President George W. Bush, an evangelical who surrounded himself with evangelical advisors. Bush’s first Presidential act was to announce a National Day of Prayer. He also established the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives and reinstated the Mexico City policy to end federal funding for abortions here and overseas (2001).

B. Politicizing Faith

Evangelicals identified more strongly with President Bush than they had with any former president. His faith was perceived as their faith, his initiatives as their initiatives, and his popularity translated to their popularity. Media attention of evangelicals did not tend to be negative during the president’s first term (2000-04).

President Bush's approval ratings, however, slid during his second term. As Bush left office, evangelicals left the political arena experiencing the same negativity as their president. They could reflect upon some political victories. Yet, even evangelicals in the Bush Administration such as Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner admitted that the Christian Right had no influence upon America. As Dobson retired in 2009, he lamented that all the battles to save America were now lost: "We are awash in evil."

IV. From the Wilderness to the Promised Land (2009-)

Evangelical voter turnout fell sharply, and Christian Right organizations struggled to raise support. A backlash had been growing against the Right, and an Evangelical Left began to emerge in politics. The Right, however, endured but coalesced around an unlikely candidate, the thrice-married celebrity and casino magnate, Donald J. Trump.

A. Backlash and the Evangelical Left

The politization of Christianity created a backlash by the next generation that gave rise to an evangelical left. These were not theological liberals but evangelicals such as Jim Wallis who believed the Bible also spoke about issues such as poverty and racism. Finding common ground with Democrats, the evangelical left helped to elect President Barak Obama.

B. Loss of a Distinctly Christian Witness

The prospect of having another U.S. President who would listen to conservative evangelicals and work to restore America was energizing. Whether eagerly or hesitantly, 81% of evangelicals voted to elect Donald Trump in 2016. With Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell, Jr., and Pat Robertson all endorsing Trump, Michael Gerson, Russell Moore, and others have questioned what's left of evangelicalism and its gospel witness.

ENGAGING THE POLITICAL ARENA

The past two weeks have focused upon a history of evangelicals in the political arena. We will soon boil the entire class into five principles for engaging the political arena. In preparation for this, please review some of the statements issued by a variety of evangelical leaders. Read each and then explain some of the problems you see (use Scripture as much as possible).

1. *If righteousness is going to prevail, if paganism is going to be turned back, then we must move to restore this nation to being a Christian nation. Otherwise we will lose the war for America's soul, and the United States as we know it will perish.* — Randall Terry.
2. *...there are bigger issues now, we can argue about theology later after we save the country.* — Jerry Falwell, Jr., speaking to Glenn Beck who is a Mormon.
3. *The new political philosophy must be defined by us in moral terms, packaged in non-religious language, and propagated throughout the country by our new coalition.* — Paul Weyrich.
4. *Christianity and Patriotism are synonymous terms... and hell and traitors are synonymous.* — Billy Sunday.
5. *All ills from which America suffers can be traced back to the teaching of evolution.* — William Jennings Bryan.