

From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin

Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism



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*To Jeremy Beer, Jeff Cain, and Mark Henrie,
who welcomed me into their little platoon*

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INTRODUCTION

Irreconcilable Differences? Evangelicals and American Conservatives



For over twenty-five years an axiom of American politics has been that evangelical Protestantism is politically conservative. This notion involves the assumption that conservative religion and conservative politics go hand in hand. Prior to the 1970s, of course, evangelicals were known more for an other-worldly faith that made them more concerned with saving souls for the world to come than with turning out voters to decide on matters of the here and now. That is why evangelicals prior to the Reagan revolution had the reputation for being politically passive.

The word *reputation* needs to be emphasized because most evangelicals, like my parents, who did not have a television and so carted my brother and me over to our uncle's to see a Goldwater-Johnson debate during the 1964 presidential campaign, cared about their nation and voted in ways that students of American religion and politics back then rarely noticed. During the 1960s no one really knew about the "God vote" except when Protestants pulled levers and punched chads for candidates who were not Roman Catholic. What is accurate to say of twentieth-century evangelicalism is that from World War II until the rise of the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, and Focus on the Family, born-again Protestants lacked notable religious or political leaders or institutions that could rally them as an electoral bloc. Since Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980, however, evan-

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gelicalism has been a vocal and visible member of the political coalition identified as conservative.

In point of fact, this axiom of American electoral politics is looking less certain as the years pass. Figures such as Pat Robertson and James Dobson still preside over their parachurch fiefdoms and are capable of marshaling supporters to call congressional delegates or vote for specific candidates. But these evangelical leaders are old (since I began working on this book, Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy have died) and the ones who are filling the void are not inclined to identify themselves as conservative. Indeed, a transition is underway in which the born-again Greatest Generation is giving way to a generation of evangelical baby-boomers every bit as unpredictable as their secular, Roman Catholic, or mainline Protestant counterparts. This generational succession suggests that the days of goodwill and harmonious relations between evangelicals and conservatives may be coming to an end. Whether the final break will be on the order of an ugly divorce or simply a mutually-agreed-upon decision just to be friends, the tensions surfacing between evangelicals and the Right are reaching the threshold of irreconcilable differences.

The Religious Right in the Age of Obama

The recent leftward drift of evangelical Protestants, not to mention the uneasy alliance between born-again religion and political conservatism since 1980, may sound farfetched at a time when the two most popular evangelicals in contemporary American politics are Rick Warren and Sarah Palin, both of whom tap social convictions that drive liberals crazy. But as much as evangelicals like Warren and Palin may cause indigestion among Americans left of center, these evangelicals' ideas and behavior also create considerable discomfort for conservatives. In fact, the disparity between evangelicalism and conservatism was fully on display between Palin's nomination in September 2008 as John McCain's vice-presidential running mate and Warren's participation in the January 2009 inauguration of President Barack Obama.

Palin initially gave McCain a ratings boost by energizing the

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evangelical base, the very outcome for which the advisors to the Republicans' top candidate had hoped. Not only was Palin an evangelical — though few knew the exact variety — but she had recently given birth to a baby with Down syndrome who typically would have been screened and recommended for abortion. Adding to the appeal was her status as a governor of Alaska; she brought some executive credibility to a ticket that needed it. Just as important was her anti-establishment rhetoric and apparent independence from entrenched interests within either the GOP or the Washington Beltway. Almost as soon as her name surfaced as McCain's pick, Palin became the fulfillment of those hoping for an evangelical Mrs. Smith who would go to Washington and provide even more straight talk than her running mate — in part because she could speak in the cadence of conservative Christianity.

But within a week of the Republican national convention, the wheels began to wobble on the Palin bandwagon. Reporters explored the nature of her convictions and unearthed the fact that as governor she had signed a proclamation that honored Christian Heritage Week in Alaska. They also discovered that Palin had remarked that creationism should be part of the discussion in public school classrooms about human origins. Reports circulated that the governor had invoked God in prayers for the construction of a natural gas pipeline and for American soldiers in the Iraq war. This caught the McCain campaign off guard, and campaign officials refused to comment on Palin's beliefs. A McCain spokeswoman told one reporter, "I think talking about where [Palin] worships today and how she characterizes herself speaks for itself about where she is today."¹ For some Republicans, Palin was clearly a breath of fresh air precisely *because* of her faith; according to former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, "It's obvious that's a woman with a world view. I could see it in the way she looked at her family. I could see it in the discussion around her child. It's obvious her faith is her foundation."² But evangelical spokesmen, arguably with the most to lose from an embarrassing vice-presidential candi-

1. Quotation from http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/09/sarah_palins_re.html.

2. DeLay quotation from http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/09/tom_delay_on_pa.html.

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date, were cautious. Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council responded to a question about how Palin's beliefs would translate into policy: "There's not a lot of evidence in Alaska other than, you know, she's conservative. . . . [Y]ou can't point to a lot of policies that people say [she adopted] because she's a conservative evangelical."³

Then came the infamous interview on prime-time television with Katie Couric. The CBS anchor asked Palin about hot-button issues in the culture wars regarding global warming, abortion, contraception, evolution, and homosexuality. Palin clearly sensed that Couric was highlighting positions that would alienate moderates. For instance, on contraception Palin said, "Well, I am all for contraception. And I am all for preventative measures that are legal and safe, and should be taken, but Katie, again, I am one to believe that life starts at the moment of conception." On evolution Palin told Couric, "I think it should be taught as an accepted principle." She credited her daughter's science teacher with instilling "a respect for science." Palin admitted that she saw the hand of God in "this beautiful creation that is Earth" but denied that she had inserted God into the Alaska science curriculum: "Science should be taught in science class."⁴ A month later, when Focus on the Family's James Dobson interviewed Palin, she felt freer than with Couric to highlight her socially conservative positions. "This is a strong platform built around the planks in this platform that respect life and respect the entrepreneurial spirit of this great country and those things, back to the social issues that are what Republicans, at least in the past, had articulated and tried to stand on," she explained. "Now, finally, we have very solid planks in the platform that will allow us to build an even stronger foundation for our country."⁵

Sentiments like those, however, were not sufficiently persuasive to move enough evangelicals to vote in the November election for the Republican ticket. Although born-again Protestants again voted over-

3. Perkins quotation from http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/09/belief_barrier.html.

4. Transcript of the Palin/Couric interview from http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/09/palin_speaks_to.html.

5. Interview available at http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/10/james_dobson_in.html.

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whelmingly for a Republican presidential candidate according to tabulations by the Pew Research Center — McCain received seventy-three percent of the evangelical vote — this was down from the 2004 election, when Bush had received seventy-nine percent in his race against John Kerry. To be sure, a variety of factors, especially fatigue from the Iraq war and worries about the economy, were responsible for McCain's defeat. But Palin's performance failed to generate the evangelical votes necessary for Republican victory. In fact, her quirky combination of faith and social conservatism alienated many Americans and some born-again Protestants looking for regime change.

Rick Warren's contributions to the 2008 presidential contest and outcome were more ambiguous than Palin's but also indicated the drift of evangelical baby boomers away from the Right. On August 16, 2008, Warren bolstered his status as a public figure by hosting a forum at his Saddleback Church in which he asked questions of McCain and Obama about the nation and its affairs. McCain appeared to emerge from this event with a significant edge over Obama in the evangelical sweepstakes by answering questions about abortion in ways that affirmed born-again convictions. When McCain said that human rights begin at conception and that he would be a pro-life president, he delighted the evangelical audience. Meanwhile, when Obama answered with the infelicitous line that answers to these questions were "above my pay grade," observers wondered if Warren had suckered the Democratic nominee into a gaffe that could cost the election.

Throughout the rest of the fall Warren kept a low profile. He did appear with Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes on their Fox News show after the election to discuss McCain's defeat. When Colmes asked the Southern California pastor about McCain's loss of votes among evangelicals, the co-host was raising a legitimate question, since Warren's own humanitarian activities pointed to the dawning of a new evangelical electorate, one more willing to fight against global warming and HIV/AIDS than to oppose such perennial bogeymen as abortion and gay marriage. Colmes asked whether Darfur and the environment were responsible for Obama's gaining more votes from evangelicals than John Kerry had in 2004. Warren responded: "Actually, I think, Alan, in this particular election, the economy

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trumped literally everything else. People were worried about the bread and butter issues.” Colmes followed with a question about the effects of the forum at Saddleback Church: “Do you think your forum with both candidates had any effect on what happened during this election?” Warren replied, “I don’t know.” He added, “I don’t think evangelicals have changed on any of their core issues at all, not at all. But I do think that, in this particular election, that the economy came up at the top.”⁶

But that was not the last word from Warren. Approximately six weeks after the election, the president-elect invited Warren to give the invocation at the January inauguration. The reaction from Obama’s base was intense and formidable, particularly because of Warren’s initial support for Proposition 8, a ballot initiative that prohibited the legalization of gay marriage in California. One blogger announced that Obama had chosen “Prop 8 Homophobe” Warren and in so doing had offended gays and lesbians who had mustered unprecedented support and votes for the president-elect.⁷ In point of fact, Warren had waffled on the measure, first supporting it and then backtracking during a televised interview with Larry King. Meanwhile, Warren drew flack from evangelicals who could not understand how the purpose-driven pastor could endorse the new president by giving God’s blessing, or how he could appear in the same program with Gene Robinson, the gay Episcopal bishop who would also be part of the ceremonies. Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson did defend Warren’s decision. The latter said, “All he’s been asked to do is give an invocation. He isn’t asked to endorse Obama. He’s going to stand up there on the steps of the Capitol and he’s going to say, God, please bless this country. And he will do that very well.”⁸ The Episcopalian Robinson, however, was not so charitable: “I’m all for Rick Warren being at the table but we’re not talking about a discussion, we’re talking about putting someone up front and center at what will be the most watched

6. Transcript of interview available at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/11/pastor_rick_warren_on_hannity.html.

7. Quotation from http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/12/obama_defends_r.html.

8. Graham and Robertson quotations from http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/12/rick_warren_rem.html.

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inauguration in history, and asking his blessing on the nation. And the God that he's praying to is not the God that I know."⁹

As the 2008 campaign ended and the Obama administration began, Warren had the last evangelical word. In his invocation, he prayed:

Help us, O God, to remember that we are Americans, united not by race, or religion, or blood, but to our commitment to freedom and justice for all. When we focus on ourselves, when we fight each other, when we forget you, forgive us. When we presume that our greatness and our prosperity is ours alone, forgive us. When we fail to treat our fellow human beings and all the earth with the respect that they deserve, forgive us. And as we face these difficult days ahead, may we have a new birth of clarity in our aims, responsibility in our actions, humility in our approaches, and civility in our attitudes, even when we differ.

Help us to share, to serve and to seek the common good of all. May all people of goodwill today join together to work for a more just, a more healthy and a more prosperous nation and a peaceful planet. And may we never forget that one day all nations and all people will stand accountable before you. We now commit our new president and his wife, Michelle, and his daughters, Malia and Sasha, into your loving care.¹⁰

These were petitions that resonated with remarks that Warren made to *Christianity Today* during an interview a few days before the inauguration: "President-elect Obama has again demonstrated his genuine commitment to bringing all Americans of goodwill together in search of common ground. I applaud his desire to be the president of every citizen." (Warren failed to clarify whether Obama was presiding over the citizens of the United States or the occupants of planet Earth, since his vision in the invocation was not national but global.)

What is striking about these two figures who dominated coverage

9. Robinson quotation from http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2009/01/warren_applauds.html.

10. Text available at http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2009/01/rick_warrens_in.html.

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of evangelicals during the 2008 election and beyond is their common convictions and differing styles. For both Palin and Warren, the issues of sex, marriage, and family are of great importance. Each taps well the primary concerns that mark evangelicals as social conservatives. Yet Warren and Palin also reveal a growing divide among evangelicals. Some, like Palin, are still willing to identify with political conservatism, even if they don't necessarily understand its subtleties or appreciate its underlying philosophy. Others, like Warren, are looking for a less abrasive public reputation and so are inclined to expand their moral convictions beyond the realm of sex and marriage to the environment, war, poverty, and human rights. Obviously, Palin carries on the tradition of Falwell, Robertson, and Dobson, those evangelical leaders who funneled born-again Protestants into the Reagan coalition. In contrast, Warren echoes figures like Mark Hatfield and Jim Wallis, evangelicals motivated by Christian morality but who care little for a conservative outlook that might shape such ethical concerns.

No matter what Palin or Warren might indicate about the political direction of evangelicals in the era of Obama, their recent performance confirms an important point of this book, namely, that after thirty years of laboring with and supposedly listening to political conservatives, evangelicals have not expanded their intellectual repertoire significantly beyond the moral imperatives of the Bible. In fact, born-again Protestants show no more capacity to think conservatively than they did in the age of Billy Graham's greatest popularity. They do not know how to yell "stop" to the engines of modernity the way that conservatives typically have. They have not learned to be wary of concentrations of power and wealth, frustrated with mass society and popular culture's distraction from "permanent things," or skeptical about any humanitarian plan to end human misery. Instead, evangelicals are more likely to support political plans to improve society, grow the economy, and expand the United States' global presence as long as doctors are not performing abortions and ministers are not presiding over the marriages of gay couples.

The star power of Warren and Palin, along with the limits of Red-State-Blue State analysis, have obscured this disparity between evangelicalism and conservatism. To be sure, many evangelicals in the pews continue to vote consistently for the Republican Party, but their

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reasons for doing so are morally thick and politically thin. This is not to say that the GOP itself is the arbiter of political conservatism properly understood. In fact, the close identification of conservatives with Republicans has obscured the supposition, articulated over a half century ago by conservative writers like Russell Kirk, the author of *The Conservative Mind* (1953), that culture is more important and more basic than elections and legislation, that politics is merely a reflection of a culture's health. Still, whether like Palin, who tried to align her convictions with McCain's platform, or Warren, who tried to find a *via media* between Obama and McCain, evangelicals do not think or act like conservatives. This failure stems from the odd combination of certainty about morals and indifference to first-order political considerations about legitimate authority, national sovereignty, freedom, the common good, civic virtue, and the best conditions for human flourishing.

Separate Paths to the Reagan Revolution

Evangelicalism's discomfort with conservatism has been evident for some time, even if the elasticity of the Reagan coalition hid this reality. One way to illustrate the point is to examine the landmark history of modern American conservatism, George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*. Judging a book by its index has its limitations, of course, but it can be revealing. Glancing through Nash's index yields no trouble in finding such conservative luminaries as Russell Kirk, the so-called father of modern American conservatism, or William F. Buckley Jr., the founder of *The National Review*, or Frederick A. Hayek, whose book *The Road to Serfdom* alerted Americans to the perils of big government and economic planning whether in Moscow or Washington, D.C., or Frank S. Meyer, a regular contributor to *National Review* who popularized conservative ideas, or Brent Bozell, the ghost writer for Barry Goldwater's *Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), or Wilmore Kendall, one of Buckley's professors at Yale in political science whom the student recruited to be a founding editor of *National Review*. Much harder to find — impossible, in fact — is a reference to any evangelical in the post-World War II move-

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ment that launched Fuller Seminary, *Christianity Today*, or the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

This may have been an oversight by Nash, an indication that he was defining modern conservatism too narrowly or was ignorant of the born-again Protestant world. But in the second edition of the book, published in 1996, evangelicalism was still a cipher. Nash did devote three pages to evangelical Protestants as part of the Reagan coalition and conceded that they shared worries with political conservatives about the health of the United States. But he also identified an important difficulty that would take some time to play out. “Whereas the traditionalists of the 1940s and 1950s had largely been academics in revolt *against* secularized, mass society,” Nash clarified, evangelical support for Reagan was “a revolt *by* the ‘masses’ against the secular virus and its aggressive carriers in the nation’s elites.”¹¹ Nash saw that, unlike conservatives, evangelicals were oblivious to the structural problems of mass society that went deeper than abortion, gay marriage, or pornography. Although he did not say so explicitly, Nash intuited that evangelicalism was a form of Christianity essentially uncritical of modernity, since as a mass movement itself born-again Protestantism depended for its very well-being upon social forces such as mass communication, political and economic centralization, and cultural homogeneity that sustained the social and cultural ills evangelicals lamented. These Protestants could readily identify specific sins but lacked the capacity to account for the social patterns that nurtured such evils.

To be sure, the idea that evangelical Protestants are not politically conservative is implausible if the only alternative is liberalism. Aside from sectional disputes that always made southern evangelicals wary of Republicans — unless the Democratic alternative was Roman Catholic — American evangelicals generally supported the GOP throughout the twentieth century. An important factor was ambivalence about the big government programs associated with twentieth-century liberalism in the form of either FDR’s New Deal or LBJ’s Great Society. Also, evangelicals’ patriotism made them receptive to conser-

11. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (1976; Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 1996), 334.

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vative defenses of the integrity and sovereignty of the United States. Furthermore, because evangelicals affirmed the sinfulness of human nature and feared the corrupting influence of power, they were often suspicious of government programs (especially Democratic ones) to end suffering or engineer the good society. For born-again Protestants, sin was so intractable that not policy but the gospel was the only remedy. So, if the options were between liberty or tyranny, free markets or state planning, rewarding responsible behavior or providing welfare for those capable of work, strong national defense or negotiating with hostile regimes, preserving private property or increasing the federal budget, evangelicals chose from the conservative column.

Nevertheless, the Protestants responsible for the post-World War II evangelical resurgence were bystanders to the arguments and institutions that came to define American conservatism. As Nash explains, postwar conservatism emerged from three significant concerns. Some conservatives, including traditionalists like Richard Weaver (the author of *Ideas Have Consequences*) and Russell Kirk, recognized the importance of cultural conventions handed down by previous generations, the imaginative and spiritual capacities of the human person reflected in the West's literary and philosophical contribution, and the genuine pleasures derived from ordinary human experience. Others came to a conservative position on a path trod by the likes of Whittaker Chambers, whose book *Witness* exposed not only the conspiratorial treachery of communism but also its inherently spiritual declaration of independence for human beings from the revealed truths of their creator. For these anti-communists, the Cold War was more than a political rivalry between NATO and the Soviet Union; it was a metaphysical contest between faith and unbelief. Still another strand of conservative arguments came from libertarians such as Hayek and Meyer who feared the economic, political, and cultural consequences of socialism. State planning carried out by either democratic or Communist governments was at odds with spontaneous order and political liberty. By no means did traditionalists, anti-Communists, and libertarians add up to a coherent intellectual synthesis. But in the pages of *National Review* and *Modern Age*, conservatives debated and reaffirmed the value of limited government, the sanctity of human life in its social and individual dimensions, private

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property, and the Augustinian suspicion of political schemes designed to end human suffering.

Evangelicalism — a form of Protestantism distinct from the mainline or liberal denominations — arose in the same years as modern American conservatism, and yet despite supplying voters for conservative politicians, the born-again faith added nothing to the conservative mind. At the beginning of the twentieth century America's largest Protestant denominations were generally unified in their understanding of the churches' responsibilities for the social order and national purpose. This outlook combined both evangelism and social activism, also known as the Social Gospel. But the fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s split American Protestants into religiously conservative and liberal camps. Evangelicals retained the convictions that nurtured evangelism and foreign missions; liberals kept alive the notion that the church had responsibility for a just society. Those Protestants who identify as evangelical generally descend from believers who were known in the 1920s as fundamentalists. Rather than trying to adapt Christianity to new intellectual and social realities for the sake of a socially and intellectually engaged faith as liberal Protestants did, evangelicals were committed to forms of ministry and devotion forged during the revivals of the Second Great Awakening.

The National Association of Evangelicals, founded in 1942, was the first of several organizations designed to create a distinct identity as well as a more unified outlet for the variety of independent congregations, small denominations, Bible schools, and missions agencies that lacked a national voice. The NAE's purpose was not simply to avoid duplication and coordinate common endeavors, but also to cultivate a warmer and more winsome image than the acerbic reputation from which fundamentalism suffered. Other evangelical initiatives soon capitalized on this new and improved version of conservative Protestantism. Billy Graham, who was closely linked to the networks that consolidated around the NAE, became a national spokesman in the late 1940s and early 1950s when he emerged as the twentieth century's greatest evangelist. In 1956 evangelicals secured a regular publishing vehicle for their concerns with the creation of the magazine *Christianity Today*. Meanwhile, the NAE established a presence in

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Washington, D.C., to coordinate relations with the federal government for missionaries, military chaplains, and religious broadcasters; it eventually added the task of lobbying the federal government on public policy. Although committed to the spiritual value of evangelism and missions, these conservative Protestants also saw these activities as essential for the health and well-being of the nation, just as the proponents of the Second Great Awakening had during the antebellum era.

Despite the generally conservative American assumption that faith is essential to a good society, and despite such conservative openness to traditional Christianity, evangelicals did not identify with political conservatism until the late 1970s, with the emergence of the Religious Right and the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Indeed, after *Newsweek* declared 1976 the “Year of the Evangelical,” conservative Protestants suddenly went from political anonymity to electoral celebrity. Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority was the first outlet for distinctly evangelical political motivation and action; Pat Robertson would soon follow with the Christian Coalition. These organizations did not have direct ties to post-World War II evangelical institutions like the NAE. But because practically every Protestant thought to be conservative in belief was lumped together by the media, groups as distinct as the NAE and the Moral Majority were stuffed into the broad and electorally significant constituency of *evangelical*. By then evangelicals had earned the moniker “New Christian Right” or “Religious Right.” But their outlook was several steps removed from the political Right. Evangelicals had been too busy worrying about the United States’ identity as a Christian nation to take notice of conservative debates about the United States’ political identity and order.

Definitions and the Scope of the Book

Despite historical and religious affinities, evangelicalism and conservatism did not overlap either intellectually or demographically for some very important reasons. Perhaps most prominently, most of the leading conservatives were Roman Catholics or would convert to Rome, and in the 1950s and 1960s most American Protestants la-

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bored under a long-standing suspicion of Roman Catholicism. To have overcome this hostility for the sake of shared political theory was as unthinkable as it was anachronistic.

Additional factors prevented born-again Protestants from recognizing the emergence of American conservatism as a welcome development that could buttress their own efforts to restore America's moral standards. One important difference between political conservatism and evangelical Protestantism is the populist character of evangelical piety. Born-again Protestantism has always been more comfortable in the vernacular of mass forms of communication than the learned or formal expressions that characterized the conservative intellectual movement; evangelicalism was and continues to be primarily a popular as opposed to an intellectual phenomenon. While they may not have agreed on all points of policy or theory, political conservatives sponsored a number of high-level debates about the state, human nature, freedom, and virtue that nurtured intellectual rigor. In contrast, pastors and parachurch leaders with inspirational and therapeutic appeal dominated evangelicalism. In their institutions and publications, evangelical leaders by and large discouraged intellectual debates, especially on hot-button issues, lest such differences split the movement.

Consequently, while evangelicalism and conservatism elude simple definition, the latter has been easier to identify than the former thanks to the kind of institutions and publications that have sustained political conservatism. For some, being conservative is little more than support for small government and free markets. One challenge for this brand of conservatism is that it is usually synonymous with a large and centralized military-industrial complex that sustains the United States not as a diversely federated republic, but as a global superpower. For others, conservatism is a set of intuitions about human relations, the created order, and humanity's place on earth from which proceed ideas about the scale of government, the rule of law, the inviolability of private property, and the importance of families, neighborhoods, and community organizations. Still others conceive of conservatism as an effort to maintain and defend so-called traditional morality; this morality, accordingly, is not merely old but timeless by virtue of being derived from transcendent truth. The source of these truths can be either

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the natural order or sacred writings, depending on whether these conservatives are Roman Catholic or Protestant.

The faith and piety of evangelical Protestantism have no direct or obvious tie to political conservatism. To insist upon a conversion experience or new birth, to regard the Bible as the sole source of truth, to emphasize the personal nature of Christ's saving work, and to look for evidence of true faith in a life devoted to godly or holy living — these evangelical attributes are hardly foundational for an account of a good, ordered, and free society. Actually, political historians from the ethno-cultural school have detected parallels between the revivals and reforms of the Second Great Awakening (1810-1850) and the understanding of the United States that first the Whig and then the Republican parties embraced. Unlike Democrats of the time, who advocated a limited, populist government that did not legislate social behavior but rather gave room for the expression of self-interest and local autonomy, Republicans trusted government to enact laws based on eternal truths that would nurture virtuous citizens and build a righteous society. Generally speaking, since 1830 Anglo-American Protestants who supported revivals have been more comfortable with a state that promotes Christian norms as national standards than with a political order that cultivates religious diversity and the integrity of mediating institutions.

In fact, at bottom, evangelical moral idealism may actually be at odds with political conservatism, as odd as that may sound. If conservatism were simply about public morality and virtues, then the habit of pundits and scholars referring to born-again Protestants as “social conservatives” would make sense. But such conservatism did not characterize the Right prior to the Reagan coalition. Indeed, a plausible perspective on post-1950 conservatism is that evangelicals were interlopers within the American Right because they knew so little about the concerns of conservatives. To be sure, evangelicals spoke the language of limited government and free markets, not only to gain a hearing but also because such ideas are part of the traditional fabric of American politics. Nevertheless, evangelicals' moral idealism was alien to American conservatism. In fact, a moral idealism divorced from prior political or philosophical considerations leads inevitably to the kind of radicalism and social engineering that conservatives have historically

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opposed. Yet the rub for evangelicals is that to insist that public morality needs to be grounded in philosophical or political considerations is to deny the priority of faith to all aspects of human existence; it is to suggest that Christ or the prophet Amos needs to take notes from lectures by Aristotle, John Locke, or James Madison.

What follows is primarily a historical account of evangelical political reflection since World War II with an eye toward evangelical arguments about the American state and the health of its society. The literary evidence in the following pages reveals that evangelical political thought developed independently from the debates that shaped modern conservatism. Instead of relying on conservative insights about order, liberty, and the health of civil society, evangelicals habitually resorted to their Bibles. Indeed, for evangelicals, Scripture was a better guide to the affairs of the United States than the demands of republicanism, constitutionalism, federalism, or the balance of powers.

This means that interpreters of evangelical Protestant politics need to look beyond voting data and consider the reasons that representative born-again Protestant academics and pastors give for political participation, their understanding of the good society, or the value of the American polity. Those interpreters will see that the historical voting data and the philosophy behind it do not necessarily point to the same future. Rank-and-file evangelicals did vote overwhelmingly for Republicans in 2008, and the attraction of “Tea Party” candidates for born-again voters in the 2010 midterm contests is another apparent indication of an affinity between conservatism and evangelicalism. But even while many ordinary evangelicals continue to balk at the Democratic Party and its candidates, the evangelical intelligentsia is tracking toward the political Left and away from conservative politics and the Republican Party. These left-leaning Protestants are the ones writing books, teaching at Christian colleges, and training future evangelical pastors at seminaries. Their understanding of United States politics and biblical teaching on a good society (they will invariably speak of such goodness in terms of “doing justice”) is leading them farther and farther away from the arguments, assumptions, and dispositions of conservative writers and thinkers.

Readers may object that evaluating evangelicals by the standards of American conservatism is unfair. Such a reaction is understandable

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if it relies upon a suspicion that the author himself is a conservative and is faulting evangelicals for not measuring up to his own political outlook. Indeed, this book is based on the conviction that modern American conservatism, as it emerged during the 1950s in the debates among traditionalists, libertarians, and anti-communists, has much to teach evangelicals and all Americans about the polity of the United States and the implications of the nation's subsequent development from a federated republic to an international superpower. Conservative wariness about progress, efficiency, wealth, concentrated power, and mass culture is hardly reactionary but redolent with wisdom about human nature, social relations, and even the meaning of the United States. But aside from the outlook that informs this book, judging evangelicals by conservative standards is fitting if born-again Protestants themselves *claim* to be conservative. If the assumptions and aims of evangelicals are at odds with conservatism, then concluding that born-again Protestantism is not conservative is not only fair, but correct. A narrative revealing this tension may well be valuable if only to help evangelicals and conservatives adjust their expectations of each other.

Aside from facilitating a better understanding of differences between evangelicals and conservatives, this book may also help evangelicals who want to be conservative but do not know how. On the one hand, evangelicals will need to see that the way they understand morality, civil society, and the function of government is actually more compatible with the idealism of the Left than with the realism of the Right. In fact, one of the great ironies of the Religious Right is that its promotion of a biblically informed and faith-based politics cleared the way for a swath of evangelical writers who are now clearly opposed to conservatism and inclined to identify with the Left. At one point in the narrative that follows, an evangelical Left looked like the way forward for born-again Protestant politics more than support for the Right. The contemporary dominance of evangelical authors and activists on the liberal side of the political spectrum may very well be a return to the natural state of born-again politics.

On the other hand, if evangelicals want to be classically conservative, they will need to reconsider the way that faith relates to politics, especially within the polity of the United States. This reconsider-

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ation will involve the recovery of an older Augustinian view of the relationship between the City of God and the City of Man, in which the ultimate purposes of history are not located in the rise and fall of empires or republics but in the church of Jesus Christ. This religious re-orientation is closely related to the political transformation evangelicals will need to undergo. Rather than looking at the American nation as a divinely instituted polity to make straight the way of the Lord, evangelicals will need to take counsel from conservatives on the relative unimportance of the nation-state for securing the truly human goods of the created order. Born-again Protestants will also need to consider the ways in which the American form of government places limits on the central political institutions for the sake of human institutions that do a better job of generating real community and cultivating responsible persons. In other words, evangelicals will need to learn from conservatives that the United States is valuable less for what it says about religion than for its specific understanding of the state and the need to keep branches of government, as well as national and local authorities, in check so that the other agencies may discharge their appropriate responsibilities.

If evangelicals can come to the realization that the United States is the more superior the less it is a religious juggernaut or a military hyperpower, they may actually become truly conservative. This change of outlook will not be easy. Then again, evangelicals are a people of profound death-to-life experiences; radical transformation is part of their genetic code. To help the conservative medicine go down, familiarity with the way that evangelicals have reflected on the United States may function as the needed spoonful of sugar.

ONE

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In 1940 white American Protestants appeared to have only two options for religious identity. Either they could belong to one of the older and larger denominations that constituted the Protestant Establishment or they could side with the critical dissidents, also known as fundamentalists, who believed that the established denominations had abandoned the true faith. The Protestant mainline possessed significant resources and a measure of institutional coherence in such organizations as the Federal Council of Churches (renamed in 1951 the National Council of Churches). Fundamentalists were disorganized at the national level, even if individual pastors or schools had a following that extended well beyond local networks.

Fundamentalists also had little standing among the academics and journalists who shaped public perception of American Protestantism. At the popular level, journalists such as H. L. Mencken regularly issued witty epigrams that indicated the distance between fundamentalism and popular opinion. The Baltimore journalist popularized the notion that fundamentalism was the “basic religion of the American clod-hopper.” He also opined that “Homo boobiens is a fundamentalist for the precise reason that he is uneducated.” To add insult to injury, Mencken asserted that fundamentalists “constituted, perhaps, the most ignorant class of teachers ever set up to lead a civilized peo-

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ple; they are even more ignorant than the county superintendents of schools.”¹

In the academy fundamentalism fared no better. In his article for the *Encyclopedia of Social Science*, H. Richard Niebuhr established the standard and patronizing notion that fundamentalism was simply a product of backward social conditions. He wrote that this form of Protestantism was “closely related to the conflict between rural and urban cultures in America. . . . its rise coincided with the depression of agricultural values after the world war; it achieved little strength in the urban and industrial sections of the country but was active in many rural states.” In sum, in its most vigorous forms, fundamentalism was “prevalent in those isolated communities in which the traditions of pioneer society had been most effectively preserved and which were least subject to the influence of modern science and industrial civilization.”²

For some conservative Protestants, the way out of fundamentalism’s black hole was through the construction of a new label — one that would still be traditional but not as backward or belligerent as *fundamentalist*. The word that stuck was *evangelical*. On April 7, 1942, 150 delegates gathered in St. Louis for the first meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals. In addition to rallying Protestants outside the mainline for cooperation in evangelistic and other religious aims, the NAE hoped to create for conservative Protestants an identity different from fundamentalism. If Protestant conservatives were going to restore Christianity in America, they would have to find a more positive and attractive rationale than the one forged during the 1920s by critics of liberal Protestantism. As Stephen W. Paine, president of Houghton College, said at the NAE’s first conference, “many sincere Christians are impelled to united action by negative motives.” But without genuinely “*cohesive* qualities . . . constructively-minded Christians” hesitated joining associations based simply on shared opposition.³

1. H. L. Mencken, “The Collapse of Protestantism,” in *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (1925; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 79.

2. H. Richard Niebuhr, “Fundamentalism,” in *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937) 6:526-27.

3. Stephen W. Paine, “The Possibility of United Action,” in Executive Committee

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The founding of an organization for conservative Protestants who were somewhere between theological liberals and fundamentalists was mainly religious in motivation, but it had important implications for evangelical political involvement. In fact, the NAE was a rival organization to the American Council of Christian Churches, founded a year earlier by Carl McIntire, a fundamentalist Presbyterian who was gaining a reputation for opposition to Soviet communism and any whiff of socialism in the United States. The leaders of the NAE decided that McIntire's organization was too militant and too political — in other words, it retained all of fundamentalism's defects. So by repudiating fundamentalism, the new evangelicals were putting some distance between themselves and a variety of religious agitators who were prone to conspiracy theories, millennial hysteria, and rhetorical bombast.

Nevertheless, this new breed of evangelicalism would not go in the other direction and endorse the Social Gospel of the mainline churches. The new evangelicals wanted to Christianize the social order without abandoning the proposition that Christianity was first and foremost a religion that renovated individuals rather than institutions. These were white American Protestants, after all, for whom the republican ideals of the Founding Fathers were uncontested. They believed that a free society depended on a virtuous citizenry and that such virtue could only be produced by religion. The Protestants who joined and supported the NAE assumed that America was a Christian (read: Protestant) nation and that individual pastors and church members should do all in their power to preserve the United States' cultural heritage. The result was a Protestant constituency that was wary of government but not directly engaged either in policy or electoral politics. They were generally content to remain silent, choose from the candidates nominated by the political parties, and delight whenever one of their own rubbed elbows with the leader of the free world.

of the NAE, *Evangelical Action! A Report of the Organization of the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action* (Boston: United Action Press, 1942), 54, 56.

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Old Christian Right

Before the rise of a centrist, conciliating form of evangelicalism in the 1940s, conservative Protestant politics were associated invariably with the social activism of fundamentalists. One of the ironies of fundamentalism's reputation is that this form of Protestantism regularly receives criticism for being uninterested in earthly affairs, including the health and order of society. At the same time, critics faulted fundamentalists for promoting naive, nativist, and divisive political crusades. This was the classic case of being damned if you don't, and damned if you do. Fundamentalists clearly made the eternal destiny of men and women, boys and girls, a priority ahead of government or the economy. But they were also patriotic Americans who cared deeply about the health of their nation. Consequently, they had little trouble entering the public square, even if their presence lacked the manners and good graces of other occupants.

Fundamentalism was a movement among American Protestants to rid the church and society of theological modernism. It prompted a culture war on two fronts, one in the churches and one in the courtrooms. The first unleashed denominational battles among northern Presbyterians and Baptists that had no direct bearing on American politics. It did rearrange the chairs in the parlor of America's Protestant denominations, but these controversies did little to undermine the prestige or clout of the so-called Protestant Establishment. The second front involved the infamous showdown in Dayton, Tennessee, between William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow at the Scopes Trial. The latter episode demonstrates that the evangelistic priorities of conservative Protestants allowed plenty of room for political involvement. And when fundamentalists did rally for the good of their society, they drew on an incongruous mixture of egalitarian populism, middle-class domesticity, and American exceptionalism.

Fundamentalist opposition to evolution was widespread after World War I but did not find a political outlet until legislatures in southern states, Tennessee among them, passed laws that prohibited the teaching of Darwinism in public schools. In the minds of many conservative Protestants, evolution undermined biblical morality and reduced human motivation to animalistic self-preservation. Further-

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more, the source of America's superiority was biblical religion, according to fundamentalists, and to preserve this foundation opposition to evolution was essential. Darwinism was especially worrisome for what it could do to young people: a rising generation reared on godless science portended disaster for the United States — much in the same way, fundamentalists believed, as it had for Germany in the First World War.

Although various fundamentalists and related organizations opposed evolution, William Jennings Bryan almost single-handedly turned it into a political cause. He was convinced that the acceptance of Darwinism had already unleashed barbarism in Europe and would undermine Christian civilization in the United States. In 1921 Bryan devoted his energies to refuting evolution. In syndicated newspaper columns, speeches (he was a hugely popular speaker on the Chautauqua circuit), and books, the retired politician attacked the degraded view of humanity implied by the Darwinian account of man's descent from apes. Moved by the arguments from Bryan's bully pulpit, several southern states in 1922 and 1923 passed legislation that prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools. Although the trial of John T. Scopes, the biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, who became the test case for that state's anti-evolution legislation, exposed the simplistic elements of Bryan's campaign, his arguments tapped mainstream political ideals in the United States. Clarence Darrow, attorney for the defense, was able to turn Bryan's own testimony on the stand into a risible expression of biblical literalism. But Bryan's case against Darwinism was not simply that it was at odds with the creation narrative in Genesis; he also appealed to majority rule and to the rights of local governments to determine the purposes for which tax dollars would be spent. Bryan argued repeatedly that the majority of citizens in a state should not be forced to pay for teaching that would undermine their children's faith. He believed that public schools were under the jurisdiction of state governments and should not be coerced to conform to national educational standards. The fundamentalism that Bryan represented suffered the defeat of public humiliation through journalistic accounts that portrayed it as a backward, rural, unlearned faith, but fundamentalists did not waver, and they remained a deeply egalitarian and demo-

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cratic political constituency that could be readily marshaled under the right circumstances.

Another popular political crusade of the 1920s that revealed fundamentalism to be more than simply an otherworldly faith was Prohibition. Of course, temperance reforms had deep roots in Anglo-American Protestantism, and the criminalization of the sale and distribution of alcohol was no more exclusively a fundamentalist issue than it was a modernist one. For instance, during the 1920s, when the northern Presbyterian Church found ways to tolerate modernist theology, it also repeatedly issued official support for the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act.

Even so, the cause of Prohibition reveals that fundamentalists were not as apolitical or as otherworldly as caricatures imply. Here the case of Billy Sunday is instructive. Arguably the most popular evangelist in the twentieth century prior to Billy Graham, Sunday was a professional baseball player who got religion and left the major leagues for the sawdust trail. For the first three decades of the twentieth century Sunday took his unique pulpit antics and vivid colloquial style across the United States in hopes of converting the lost. One of his most popular sermons was entitled "Get on the Water Wagon." In it he railed against the saloon as the chief source of vice in urban America; he also identified the major breweries and distilleries as monopolies intent on profiting from human weakness. Alcohol was also a threat to the family and home. According to Sunday, "the American home is the dearest heritage of the people, for the people, by the people, and when a man can go from home in the morning with the kisses of his wife and children on his lips, and come back at night with an empty dinner bucket to a happy home, that man is a better man." Conversely, he warned, "whatever invades the sanctity of the home, is the deadliest foe to the home, to church, to state and school, and the saloon is the deadliest foe to the home, the church and the state, on top of God Almighty's dirt."⁴ After 1907 Sunday delivered this sermon in each of his city crusades and frequently gave it as a stand-alone exhortation in smaller towns and communities. Historians estimate

4. Billy Sunday, "Get on the Water Wagon," quoted in Lyle W. Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 190.

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that his popular and vigorous opposition to alcohol enabled nineteen states to pass dry legislation. Sunday also campaigned actively for national prohibition and was clearly responsible for rallying support from a large swath of born-again Protestants.

Sunday's crusade on behalf of prohibition tapped Anglo-American Protestant ideals of domesticity and the middle-class family. Ever since the middle decades of the nineteenth century, when Protestants established a variety of voluntary associations to check moral license and promote personal and social godliness, evangelicals looked at American society and its political order through the lens of the nuclear family. This made sense because of the family's crucial role in passing on habits and virtues to the next generation. Public education was another issue that motivated Protestant political engagement; Protestants put great stock in the capacity of schools to nurture a civil religion that grounded public virtues in a generic form of Protestantism. The saloon and its menu of beverages, as Sunday's sermon indicated, directly challenged Protestant ideals of hearth and home. As Thomas R. Pegram has observed in *Battling Demon Rum*, "Many native Protestant households felt themselves under assault from a reckless saloon trade that separated husbands from wives and parents from children." "In defense of their families," he adds, "they marshaled the weapons of democracy — political parties, the public schools, and ultimately the power of the state — to defend community standards and suppress the noxious traffic in intoxicants."⁵ Billy Sunday's campaign against booze advanced this approach to American public life. Not even their beliefs about the imminent return of Christ and the need to proselytize the lost could dissuade conservative Protestants from a deep-rooted sense of being responsible for the moral health and stability of the republic.

Despite the consolidating power of the federal government that reforms such as Prohibition encouraged, fundamentalists feared big government and easily enlisted for opposition to communism in the Soviet Union and any hint of socialism in Washington. Gerald Burton Winrod (1900-1957), a religious publisher and antag-

5. Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for Dry America, 1800-1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 77.

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onist during the church controversies of the 1920s, was one fundamentalist who eventually ran for the Senate in Republican primaries in Kansas because of opposition to the New Deal. His understanding of biblical prophecy and the role that European nations and the United States would play in the events leading to the return of Christ at times pushed Winrod toward conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism. These peculiar ideas prevented Winrod's candidacy from ever gaining a wide following and eventually in the 1940s prompted federal authorities to suspect Winrod of Nazi sympathies that were supposedly responsible for insubordination in the armed forces. But as bizarre as Winrod's outlook may have appeared to non-fundamentalists, his anxiety about big government tapped born-again Protestants' fears of expanding federal programs that might take the United States down a socialist path.

Carl McIntire also nurtured hostility to communism and Washington's bureaus through a small empire that included radio, publishing, schools and churches. For preachers like McIntire, communism was chiefly objectionable as a form of atheism. It denied God, Christ, and the spiritual reality of human existence and closed churches and Christian missions wherever it was tried. But for McIntire, communism was also opposed to the West's ideals of human freedom. Consequently, in order to protect the United States, Christians needed to oppose communism in all forms. This included opposing any political or religious institution that was soft on communism.

These examples demonstrate that fundamentalism was by no means an apolitical religious movement completely absorbed exclusively with soul-winning. Its political ideals may not have been coherent, but they tapped longstanding American notions about freedom, limited government, and the importance of the family. To these convictions fundamentalists added conspiracy theories and millennial ideas about America's status as a redeemer nation that informed both their militant opposition to theological liberalism and their engagement with the nation's politics. Despite their reliance on basic Protestant assumptions about American public life, fundamentalist politics gained the reputation for being extreme, divisive, and even paranoid. It was obvious that evangelicals needed to seek an alternative identity.

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Conservative but Not Combative

The new evangelicals who emerged as a distinct constituency within American Protestantism during the 1940s wanted to escape the reputation that haunted conservative Protestants like Bryan, Sunday, Winrod, and McIntire. This was true not only in the realm of politics but also in religion itself. Evangelicals believed that fundamentalists would fail to capture the hearts and minds of many Americans, let alone rally the energy and resources of conservative Protestants, because fundamentalism was only negative all the time. The strategy that evangelicals believed would win was a positive mission and outlook. It was not sufficient merely to stand *against* liberalism. Evangelicals intended to stand *for* basic Christianity.

The creation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942 became the institutional outlet for evangelicals' positive mission. The organization's first magazine was *United Evangelical Action*, and the title said a good deal about the positive thrust of the new evangelicals. The NAE was an effort to unite conservative Protestants for specific activities that would lead America back to Christ during a time of cultural crisis. The Second World War and the negative image of conservative Protestants prompted the creation of institutions that would rival the liberal Protestant churches in as winsome a manner as possible.

On simply practical grounds, the war posed a number of hurdles that prompted evangelicals to start a new agency. For instance, if born-again Protestants wanted to serve in the military as chaplains, they would have had to go through channels established and controlled by the Federal Council of Churches, the mainline Protestant ecumenical agency from which most evangelicals were alienated. A related difficulty, though not directly resulting from the war, was the new medium of the radio and the acquisition of time for religious broadcasting. During the 1940s some of the most popular radio preachers were ministers outside the mainline Protestant fold, such as Charles Fuller in Los Angeles, Paul Rader in Chicago, and Donald Grey Barnhouse in Philadelphia. These radio preachers used their entrepreneurial gifts and charisma to establish national audiences on the existing networks. But in the 1940s the Federal Communications

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Commission began to regulate religious broadcasting and teamed up with the Federal Council of Churches to determine which Protestants would have access to the airwaves. The new evangelical organization, the NAE, was designed to represent the interests of conservative Protestants before the federal government and demonstrate that the mainline denominations had no monopoly on American Protestantism. It would be a mistake to call the NAE a lobbying endeavor, but the new evangelical organization sought to promote born-again Protestantism in a way that could readily spill over to a variety of advocacy outlets.

The Second World War and the growth of the federal bureaucracy it fed during the 1940s did more than reveal the need for an evangelical organization to counter the mainline churches' control of Protestantism's public voice. The war also proved to be an incentive for born-again Protestants to show why the world still needed the good news of the Christian faith. As Harold John Ockenga, pastor at Boston's Park Street Church and founding president of the NAE, declared to the Association's first delegates:

Let us learn something from the Soviets and the Nazis. If the children of this world are wiser than the children of light, then it is time for the children of light to open their eyes and learn how to carry on God's work. This is the time, the day for the offensive. Personally I am just as tired of defensive tactics in ecclesiastical matters as the Americans are tired of defensive tactics on the part of the United Nations. . . . Do not be so foolish as to think that though your own personal work is thriving at the present time you will escape.⁶

The particular offensive that Ockenga had in mind was an evangelical parry to the thrusts of Roman Catholicism, liberal Protestantism, and secularism. In fact, the leaders of the NAE believed that the fortunes of Western civilization both in Europe and the United States depended on a vigorous assertion of orthodox Protestantism. Never

6. Harold J. Ockenga, "Unvoiced Multitudes," in *Evangelical Action! A Report of the Organization of the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action* (Boston: United Action Press, 1942), 19.

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mind that Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants also believed and asserted that their version of Christianity best preserved the political ideals and cultural conventions of the West. Like most Anglo-American Protestants before them, the new evangelicals assumed that the health of a free society depended on a virtuous people, and that the true source of virtue was their own brand of Christianity. According to Ockenga, a revolution had already taken place in the United States with dire consequences for conservative Protestantism. “The crisis is greater than any of us realize,” he warned. “Now, if ever, we need some organ to speak for the evangelical interests, to represent men who, like myself, are ‘lone wolves’ in the church.”⁷

These close ties between evangelism and preserving a Christian America meant that the NAE had implications for politics, even if the organization was explicitly religious in purpose and the rise of the Religious Right was three decades away. One indication of the implicit political engagement of the new evangelicalism came from Carl F. H. Henry in a book long regarded as the manifesto for this new breed of conservative Protestants. Published in 1947, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* tapped evangelical discontentment with the belligerency associated with fundamentalism and tried to position the new evangelicals as the harbinger of a more winsome and socially engaged faith.⁸ This faith would not be narrowly religious but would strive to address the needs of postwar America.

At the time of its publication in 1947, Henry was a young Baptist theologian completing a doctorate in theology at Boston University and soon to become a member of the faculty at Fuller Seminary, a school founded to be the think tank of the new evangelicalism. *The Uneasy Conscience* actually stemmed from a more ambitious book Henry had written the year before; in that book, *Remaking the Modern Mind*, he argued that Western civilization was bankrupt because of its humanistic philosophy. This situation provided the new evangelicals with a tremendous opportunity to include cultural renewal as part of their mission.

7. Ockenga, “Unvoiced Multitudes,” 19.

8. Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

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The Uneasy Conscience critiqued fundamentalists for failing to tackle the West's cultural crisis. Unless born-again Protestants were willing to move beyond questions of ecclesiastical purity and personal morality, Henry warned, the gospel would be dismissed as irrelevant. He complained in one of the more memorable illustrations from the book that while fundamentalists were debating the propriety of playing cards, "the nations of the world are playing with fire."⁹ Henry proposed a "progressive fundamentalism" that would tap the sort of social activism that had characterized nineteenth-century evangelicalism, such as crusades against drunkenness and slavery. In effect, the new evangelicalism would go beyond fundamentalism and add social involvement to soul-winning. Henry believed this was a viable combination because the world's problems could only be solved through Christianity.¹⁰ Of course soul-winning was still primary, but for Henry social reform followed naturally from evangelism.

In hindsight, Henry's attempt to provide an evangelical alternative to the mainline churches' Social Gospel lacked muscle even while opening a wedge for later evangelical political involvement. As some critics have claimed, the social evils that *The Uneasy Conscience* listed were not far removed from the sort of sins that animated fundamentalists. Billy Sunday and William Jennings Bryan would have applauded Henry's denunciation of "aggressive warfare, racial hatred and intolerance, the liquor traffic, and exploitation of labor or management, whichever it may be."¹¹ Furthermore, his invoking of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:17 for bi-partisanship in Washington — "seek first, not a Republican victory, or a labor victory, but the kingdom of God and His righteousness"¹² — sounded idealistic and naive. Even so, Henry's bland social imperatives indicated that the new evangelicalism was not simply going to be a religious identity. These born-again Protestants wanted a seat at the proverbial table to counter the influence of the mainline denominations and to insure the continuation of America's Christian heritage.

9. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience*, 20.

10. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience*, 45.

11. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience*, 17.

12. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience*, 85.

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Evangelicalism before the Religious Right

As much as the new evangelicals wanted to have a voice in the public sphere, especially since they regarded the United States as a Protestant country and their variety of Protestantism as the genuine article, they also believed the church's primary task was religious. The Social Gospel of liberal Protestantism had damaged the Protestant denominations' credibility while also embracing a variety of reforms that were unhealthy for a free society, such as increasing the size and role of the federal government in American life. As such, the political engagement recommended by born-again Protestants was right of center but not particularly reflective. Most evangelicals during the middle decades of the twentieth century defended and advocated liberty, democracy, and small government and viewed totalitarian forms of government such as the Soviet Union as the exact opposite of a free and just society.

A variety of political scientists and historians who have written on American evangelicalism of the 1950s and 1960s era have concluded that these Protestants were in fact conservative. According to University of Wisconsin scholar Robert Booth Fowler, evangelicals supported such "standard conservative ideas as a balanced budget and the prevention of any more erosion of America's traditional freedoms."¹³ This outlook also meant that evangelicals were generally much more willing to defend America's political institutions, heritage, and Cold War foreign policy than the 1960s chorus of critics who faulted the United States for racial, class, and gender discrimination. Of course, Protestants who stood as heirs to a religious tradition that had regularly lamented the decline of Christian standards in American society were not likely to be uncritical of aspects of postwar American life. Among the most objectionable facets of the United States during the twenty-five years after World War II was materialism. As one writer in *Christianity Today* put it, Americans were increasingly "hedonistic, materialistic, . . . hungry for profit."¹⁴ Even so, despite

13. Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 25.

14. Fowler, *A New Engagement*, 30.

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certain acknowledged faults of the United States, evangelicals remained patriotic. And despite their nation's blemishes, born-again Protestants held that the church's place was not to reform society or engage in political activism. Individual evangelicals might well be called to perform public service. But the religious mission of the church was a task that transcended politics, and churches that forgot this truth, like the mainline Protestant denominations, tended to substitute a social gospel for the genuine article.

Arguably, the most serious threat to the American way of life for many evangelicals was the Soviet Union. Between 1958 and 1967 the NAE issued seven different resolutions on communism, the most of any topic. The first in 1958 expressed concern over the infiltration of communism in American institutions, including the inability of men in the armed forces to "meet the inroads" of such ideology. To address the problem the Association called on public schools to do a better job of teaching "the principles of our democracy, with its Christian heritage in contrast to the atheistic materialism of Marxian Communism." Two years later, the NAE highlighted communism's atheistic assumptions and hostility to faith: "Coexistence with the devil is repugnant to any Christian and as followers of Christ we cannot pursue a policy of 'live and let live' with hell. We cannot close our eyes to the slavery, cruelty, theft and deceit with which Red Communism has enveloped more than a third of the human race and is creeping relentlessly forward to engulf the whole world." The Association called upon its members as well as all American Christians to engage in an "aggressive and unrelenting campaign against this enemy of righteousness and freedom."

These two initial resolutions captured the tenor of evangelical reflection on American society and its political ideals. For most Protestants, the United States owed its freedom and respect for the rule of law to its Christian origins. Communism was not simply a political threat, however, but first and foremost a religious one. As a 1962 resolution put it, "communism is only one of many avenues through which Satan employs his powers of spiritual wickedness." Consequently, the Association called on Americans to fight communism not by political means but by religious ones. "The church should endeavor to use this emphasis to call Christians to prayer and the re-

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dedication of their lives to God and the fulfillment of their Christian responsibilities,” it read, because a spiritual awakening in the church and nation “is the most effective way to combat communism.” Part of the motive for spiritualizing communism owed to missionary efforts by evangelicals to proselytize in Soviet-dominated societies. Without access, evangelicals understandably regarded communism as another religion.

When evangelicals attempted to expose the *political* deficiencies of communism, they invariably spoke in terms of tyranny versus free markets. In a 1963 resolution the NAE determined that mere opposition was insufficient in combating communism; evangelicals also needed to *affirm* the sort of political and economic system that was most compatible with Christianity. Consequently, the statement expressed gratitude for “the larger liberties we enjoy,” and called upon evangelicals to “dedicate ourselves afresh to those biblical principles of duty and freedom promotive of social justice and enduring peace.” These principles included the state as a means for restraining evil and “man’s right of private property and responsibility for its voluntary stewardship as a divine entrustment.” These were standards that just four years later prompted the NAE to express concern over a growing disregard in American churches and the federal government for “the rights of the private sector” along with an increasing acceptance of the doctrine, “‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his need’ not as a Christian principle but as a fixed economic law.” In fact, the NAE declared in 1967 that restraints on free-market economics went hand in hand with a “total secularization as a way of life” and a “passion to eliminate distinctions or differences of any kind.”

The evangelical approach to public life may have involved a fear of big government, but this concern did not outweigh the perennial Anglo-American Protestant activism that used legislation to curb vice. A favorite target was beverage alcohol. Although many evangelicals believed that personal consumption was wrong, the Association’s rationale for opposing alcohol at an institutional and policy level was not individual but social. In 1957 its resolution identified several ways that alcohol was harming the body politic: it aggravated the “disintegration of the American family,” it placed “spiritual, mental, and physical strain” on the health of the American people, and the liquor

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industry was “having a corrupting influence” upon American politics. For these reasons the NAE advocated all forms of legislation to protect “the home, the church, the state and the economic order” from advertising for liquor and favored educational and promotional campaigns to persuade Americans of the deleterious consequences of beverage alcohol. The 1957 resolution also commended Congress for its recent passage of legislation prohibiting “liquor service” on board all American commercial and military flights, and it deplored the use of alcohol by public officials, those to whom had been committed the responsibility for policies affecting the “destiny of our own country” and even the destinies of other nations.

Two years later the NAE noted the social problems posed by drunk driving and the use of alcohol in criminal activity, declared opposition to all forms of consuming liquor, and called upon its member churches to institute educational programs on alcohol’s dangers. At the same time, the NAE attempted to keep pressure on Congress to pass legislation that would “eliminate the interstate advertising of alcoholic beverages as a major step in protecting the homes and highways of our nation against the devastating effects of alcohol.” The Association took similar stands, for instance, against gambling (1966) — especially state lotteries — and obscene literature (1965). In each case it assumed a proprietary relationship between Protestants and the United States, while skimping on the specific implementation of policies and ignoring the relationship between federal and local government.

One last indication of evangelical political conviction in the era before Reagan was religion and education. Here the NAE’s members tried to affirm the separation of church and state while also holding that the United States government possessed an obligation to support rather than suppress religion in public institutions. On the one hand, evangelicals endorsed religious liberty and conceived of the United States as the product of Protestant endeavors to find a political shelter for the freedom to worship and teach according to the dictates of conscience. This meant that evangelicals were regularly on guard against any policy or legislation that might regulate and limit religious freedom. As the Association put it in a 1957 resolution, “we view with growing concern acts of government that would control religion and

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education, and policies of church that would dominate government.” The necessary balance was to protect “our great American heritage of freedom and . . . protest against compromise of the historic principle of separation of church and state.”

One point of possible compromise was state funding for church-related schools, but in 1963 the Association asserted that public funding for parochial schools was at odds with the separation of church and state. Although evangelicals affirmed the necessity of maintaining the church’s independence from state control, the subtext of its argument was to restrict state funding for Roman Catholic schools. This ulterior motive was evident in the Association’s disapproval of the Supreme Court decision in *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947), which upheld the constitutionality of public funding for the bus transportation of Roman Catholic students in New Jersey. In fact, in a separate resolution in 1964 the Association held that because bus transportation was a “necessary part of most modern educational systems,” “any educational system motivated by religious and/or sectarian purposes should provide its own facilities and tax funds should not be appropriated to convey children to schools providing religious instruction.” This would, of course, have included Lutheran, Episcopalian, and some Reformed private schools. But like most American Protestants before them, evangelicals of the time saw Catholic schools as a threat to a unified, Christian (read: Protestant) America, and they appealed to the separation of church and state to restrict Roman Catholic access to public funds.

On the other hand, evangelicals stated the separation-of-church-and-state principle differently when the subject was religion in public schools. Here the effort was to keep religion and politics distinct without succumbing to a secular public realm. In a 1963 statement, the NAE held that a firm commitment to the separation of church and state “should not imply an espousal of secularism or practical atheism through the exclusion of all reference to God in the public schools.” Although public schools needed to be kept free from the specific tenets of any one sect or denomination, “they should by all means provide the students with an atmosphere of friendliness to and acceptance of the concepts of the existence of God, man’s responsibility to God and to fellowmen, and the benefits of promoting godliness.”

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To that end, the Association endorsed six “courses of action” to maintain a religion-friendly system of public education. The first called upon Congress to amend the Constitution in a manner that would “strengthen the present provision for the free exercise of religion in our national life and allow reference to, belief in, reliance upon, or invoking the aid of God, in any governmental or public document, proceeding, activity, ceremony, school or institution.” The second reminded Americans of public education’s duty to expose students to the contribution that the Christian tradition had made to the development of American society. The next called for public schools to teach “the Bible as history and/or literature” as a legitimate and integral part of the curriculum. Fourth, the Association asserted the need for academic freedom for “Christian teachers to teach from a Christian standpoint and to witness by example and personal life to the effects of Christian commitment.” The resolution was also directed to families; its fifth recommendation called upon parents to conduct religious devotions in the home to develop children’s “moral and spiritual nature.” The final point called upon evangelicals to resist “any hostility toward a religiously based view of life as it may appear in the public schools” and raised the possibility of establishing Christian day schools “to safeguard the American Christian heritage.” (The Association did not mention whether the buses taking evangelicals to such schools should benefit from public funding.)

The final sentence of the NAE’s statement on the separation of church and state captured the dilemma that evangelicals had inherited from their Protestant forebears. Evangelicals believed that America was “a nation under God” to which applied the scriptural admonition, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.” The problem was how to reconcile the biblical norm of a state based on the true faith (i.e. Old Testament Israel) with the modern expectation that church and state be separate. The way around this dilemma was to keep religion formally out of public institutions while supporting it informally.

The problem with this approach was that evangelicals were not the dominant figures in American public life that they had been before the split between fundamentalists and mainline Protestants of the 1920s. Before it balkanized into its theological right and left wings, Anglo-American Protestantism was sufficiently established in

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the nation's elite institutions that a strategy of informal establishment for Protestantism worked relatively well. It allowed Protestants the ability to affirm the national ideals of religious liberty and separation of church and state while still possessing more political leverage than any other religious group in the United States. Evangelicals knew no other approach to public life. But informal establishment assumed a form of cultural hegemony that evangelicals abandoned when they left the mainline Protestant institutions to form their own.

Aside from the structural problems inherent in the new evangelical ideas about American politics, intellectual confusion also riddled the new born-again Protestant activism, as the rhetoric and proposals of the NAE indicate. Evangelicals desired to preserve a society that reflected a specific form of Protestantism; they also believed that born-again Protestants should be active in American politics in a way that was less bellicose than fundamentalists but still truer to older Protestant ideals than the mainline Protestant churches were willing to espouse. But aside from these aims, the new evangelicals gave little attention to the formal arrangements of American politics or to theoretical reflection on the nature of the good society and the forms of government that encouraged both public and private virtue. In that sense, evangelicals may have looked conservative because they desired to protect traditional American society. But they were several steps removed from the debates and institutions in which American conservatives weighed the future of their ideas.

Indicative of evangelical confusion was the indifference that *Christianity Today* displayed toward the candidacy of Barry Goldwater, the first presidential nominee to be clearly identified with the American Right. While conservative pundits offered support and counsel — William F. Buckley Jr.'s brother-in-law, Brent Bozell, even ghostwrote Goldwater's bestseller, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960) — evangelicals remained aloof. In fact, *Christianity Today* carried only two news stories, and the main point of both concerned the lack of objectivity about Goldwater in the secular and religious press. In these reports, the one item that stood out as the most significant religious aspect of the campaign was Oregon governor Mark O. Hatfield's speech at the 1964 Republican convention. Hatfield's call for a "spiritual renaissance" and government to set an example for "high stan-

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dards of ethics and morality” was encouraging. But Goldwater’s choice of a Roman Catholic, William E. Miller — the first ever on a Republican ticket — raised evangelical eyebrows.

Conventional Protestantism

Evangelicals may have considered themselves a different kind of Protestant from both the liberal mainline churches and the strident fundamentalists, but their political assumptions were actually fairly close to mainstream American Protestant thought, even if they had abandoned the historic institutions of mainstream Protestantism. For most intents and purposes, the defining moment for American Protestant politics was not the Scopes Trial but the formation in 1856 of the Republican Party. From the middle of the nineteenth century until today, most Protestants of Anglo-Saxon stock, whether religiously liberal or conservative, have identified politically with the Whig-Republican tradition. This close identification between American Protestants and Republicanism stemmed from a peculiar blend of religious devotion and political motivation.

At the risk of oversimplifying a complicated situation, the division between Republicans and Democrats on the eve of the Civil War reflected a basic difference between low-church and high-church expressions of Christianity. The newly founded Republican Party was the political outlet for Protestants who had been deeply influenced by revivalism and the Second Great Awakening. This form of devotion was characterized by individual zeal, commitment to Christ, and the self-conscious resolution by each convert to lead a disciplined and holy life. This version of Protestantism emphasized individual responsibility and self-denial, and it dovetailed well with Whig-Republican attitudes that promoted “rational order over irrational spontaneity” and “self-control over self-expression.”¹⁵ Revivalist Protestantism also fit well with the demands of an expanding market economy, which the

15. Daniel Walker Howe, “Religion and Politics in the Antebellum North,” in Mark A. Noll, ed., *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 124.

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Whigs and Republicans favored, and provided the rationale for any number of social reforms that were designed to Christianize America (a revivalist desire) and enforce Anglo-conformity (a Whig-Republican goal).

Revivalist Protestants gave first the Whigs and then the Republican Party a Protestant character after the arrival in the 1840s of large numbers of Roman Catholic immigrants who identified with the Democratic Party. Democratic candidates did not merely appeal to Roman Catholics but also to Episcopalians, Lutherans, German and Dutch Reformed, and some Presbyterians. The Democrats' efforts on behalf of populist and limited government provided high-church Christians (who were often, though not always, part of ethno-cultural minorities) with a measure of reassurance that the state would not encroach on their churches, parochial schools, or the lives of their members. In contrast, low-church Protestants in the Republican Party trusted government to enact laws based on eternal truths which would nurture virtuous citizens and a righteous society.

The legacy of Protestant republicanism was a peculiar blend of religious and national ideals that assumed a privileged place for low-church Protestantism in maintaining and defending the United States' political order. Mark A. Noll summarizes well this mixture of religion and politics at the beginning of the twentieth century:

Protestants in the progressive era relied instinctively on the Bible to provide their ideals of justice. They believed in the power of Christ to expand the Kingdom of God through the efforts of faithful believers. They were reformists at home and missionaries abroad who felt that cooperation among Protestants signaled the advance of civilization. They were thoroughly and uncritically patriotic. On more specific issues, they continued to suspect Catholics as being anti-American, they promoted the public schools as agents of a broad form of Christianization, and they were overwhelmingly united behind prohibition as the key step toward a renewed society.¹⁶

16. Mark A. Noll, "The Scandal of Evangelical Political Reflection," in Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel, eds., *Being Christian Today: An American Conversation* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy, 1992), 73.

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This was the outlook shared by Protestants on both sides of the 1920s fundamentalist controversy. As much as they disagreed about the nature of genuine Christianity, they thought about the United States and the place of Protestantism in American society in remarkably similar ways. One group might insist on the necessity of the virgin birth of Christ and the other might have reservations about Christ's deity, but both sides were confident that Protestantism provided the right amount of religious direction for a free people and a republican form of government.

Instead of representing a new approach to American public life, mid-twentieth-century evangelicals were simply heirs to the politics that had sustained Protestants since the middle of the nineteenth century. But the America of which they claimed moral and cultural leadership had changed, and the shifting of the religious landscape had fractured the Protestant majority beyond repair. In fact, across the theological spectrum, the Protestant outlook on the United States was generally oblivious to the sort of structural changes that had transformed America from a decentralized, largely agrarian republic into a liberal democratic superpower. And for American Protestants, whether theologically doctrinaire or tolerant, Protestant Christianity was still crucial to the well-being of the United States. Only after 1970, when a variety of Supreme Court decisions, policy initiatives, and protest movements challenged the Protestant character of the United States and threatened evangelical institutions, would evangelicals switch from silent minority to Moral Majority.

TWO

Young and Leftist



Over the Thanksgiving weekend of 1973, a group of fifty evangelicals, primarily young faculty and students, gathered at the YMCA in Chicago to express dissatisfaction with the political status quo. To suggest that this meeting was an instance of baby boomer evangelicals rebelling against the politics of born-again Protestants' Greatest Generation would be simplistic. Even so, the Protestants who digested their holiday meals while hammering out a call for evangelical social engagement were fed up with the direction in which the United States was heading — and not particularly pleased by their parents' support for the Republican Party or its indifference to the concerns of America's blacks, women, and impoverished.

The work of this group duly appeared as the “Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern.” It mixed Christian themes of faith and repentance with American realities of poverty and war. First, these evangelicals declared that God requires justice, and then they confessed that American conservative Protestants had been woefully delinquent in pursuing a just society. “We deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism,” the signers declared, and “we have failed to condemn the exploitation of racism at home and abroad by our economic system.” The statement went on to call for an “attack” on America’s materialism and the “maldistribution of the nation’s wealth and services.” “Before God and a billion hungry neighbors, we must rethink our values regarding our present standard of liv-

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ing and promote a more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources." Also, as citizens the signers acknowledged a duty to challenge "the misplaced trust of the nation in economic and military might — a proud trust that promotes a national pathology of war and violence that victimizes our neighbors at home and abroad." For good measure, the "Chicago Declaration" addressed men's and women's roles by confessing the error of teaching that led men to "prideful domination" and women to "irresponsible passivity." In turn it called men and women to "mutual submission and active discipleship." If the authors of this document felt better for having gotten these objections off their collective chest, their parents may have experienced indigestion that extended beyond holiday overeating.¹

No matter what the older evangelicals thought of the "Chicago Declaration," the early returns were favorable. Writing for the *Washington Post*, Marjorie Hyer speculated the young evangelicals' discussions "could well change the face of both religion and politics in America."² Meanwhile, the *Chicago Sun-Times* religion reporter wrote that "Someday American church historians may write that the most significant church-related event of 1973 took place last week at the YMCA hotel on S. Wabash." That estimate gave historian Joel A. Carpenter room to conclude that the "Chicago Declaration" represented a "radical shift" among evangelicals from a form of political meddling that an older generation believed sold out the gospel to a pursuit of "the righteousness that exalts a nation."³

In point of fact, the rise of the Religious Right at the end of the 1970s would swamp the nascent radicalism expressed in the fall of 1973 among the evangelicals assembled in the Windy City. Yet for a brief period, especially in the immediate aftermath of Richard Nixon's scandals, baby boomer evangelicals believed they were forging a new initiative for faith-based activism. But their arguments also revealed a confusion that ran deep in the political soul of born-again Protestants.

1. The "Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern," reprinted in Ronald J. Sider, ed., *The Chicago Declaration* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, 1974).

2. Hyer quoted in Joel Carpenter, "Compassionate Evangelicalism," *Christianity Today* 47:12 (Dec. 2003), 41.

3. Carpenter, "Compassionate Evangelicalism," 41.