

## Politics: Evangelicals vs. the Religious Right

Sex or social justice? The war between the religious right and believers who want to go broader.

By Lisa Miller

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Nov. 13, 2006 issue - It was a cold Halloween in Colorado Springs—The high barely hit 27 degrees—as Dr. James Dobson went about his work last week on the sprawling Focus on the Family campus he built in the shadows of the Rockies. From the evangelical organization's lofty perch (the city sits 6,035 feet above sea level), in the spirit of a day devoted to ghosts and goblins, Dobson's radio show, which reaches 220 million people worldwide, evoked what he hoped would be dark and scary visions for his fellow evangelical Christians: a nation filled with married gay couples. With same-sex-marriage initiatives on ballots in eight states, Dobson told his flock in a taped broadcast, they could not afford to stay home on Election Day. If they did, "we could ... begin to have same-sex marriage in places all over the country."

Meanwhile, in Leawood, Kans., a suburb near the Missouri border, a 42-year-old evangelical pastor named Adam Hamilton was preaching an entirely different message. He was helping his 14,000 members parse the parables in Matthew 13—the wheat and the weeds, the good fish and bad. "Our task is not to go around judging people—Jesus didn't do that," he tells NEWSWEEK. He encourages his congregation to vote, he says, but when they do they're neither predictably Republican nor Democratic. On the issues, many are increasingly frustrated with the war in Iraq; they're conservative on abortion, but they "express compassion" for homosexuals. The religious right has "gone too far," says Hamilton. "They've lost their focus on the spirit of Jesus and have separated the world into black and white, when the world is much more gray." He adds: "I can't see Jesus standing with signs at an anti-gay rally. It's hard to picture that."

Two men of God, two flocks, two starkly opposing visions: from Dobson to Hamilton and through the geographical heart of the country runs a fault line that is increasingly dividing evangelical Christians in America in the first years of the 21st century, revealing the movement to be more complex, and more interesting, than the usual caricatures suggest. It is all too easy for those who do not share the evangelical faith to turn into latter-day H. L. Menckens, dismissing the movement as a collection of hard-shells and hypocrites; the news that the Rev. Ted Haggard, the former president of the National Association of Evangelicals, is now caught up in a sex-and-meth scandal involving a male prostitute only reinforces the instinct to consign the religious right to the fringe of American life and politics.

But now, more than three decades after *Roe v. Wade* propelled religious conservatives fully into the arena, a new generation of evangelical believers is pressing beyond the religious right of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, trying to broaden the movement's focus from the familiar wars about sex to include issues of social and economic justice. The result is a new hour of decision for evangelicals: How much do they have to show for the decades of activism? And if they are to turn from what Roger Williams called "the garden of Christ's church" to fight the battles of "the wilderness of the world," what should those battles be?

For the first time in a long while, then, there is a serious rethinking of the politics of Jesus in America—or at least the efforts of different elements in the country, from believers of progressive, moderate and conservative bents, to claim they are acting in his name in the public sphere. "In this world ye shall have tribulation," Jesus told his disciples—a decided understatement. Though he added the reassurance that they should "be of good cheer; I have overcome the world," those disciples and their heirs down two millennia still face tribulation and trouble, and currently stand at a crossroads. Can they move beyond the apparent confines of the religious right as popularly understood, or are they destined to seem harsh and intolerant—the opposite of what their own faith would have them be? The search for an answer to that question goes to the heart of what American life and politics will look like as we face a landmark midterm election this week and a wide-open presidential race two years hence.

Some Christians, exhausted by divisive wedge politics, are going back to the Bible and embracing a wider-ranging agenda, one that emphasizes reaching out to the poor and disenfranchised. Almost unanimously, these evangelicals cite as a model Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif. Members of his church sign up for missionary stints in Africa, resolve to feed the homeless and see themselves as part of a global Christian community. Over the past six months, Warren has added his name to a public letter condemning abortion and embryonic-stem-cell research, as well as to one demanding an end to atrocities in Darfur and another denouncing torture. "Rick Warren ... has a lightness of being," says John DiIulio, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania and former Bush White House staffer. "How do you get coordinates for a guy who talks about poverty like a liberal Catholic?"

Others who say they're disillusioned that the power they entrusted to the religious right has produced so few results prefer a break from politics—as former Bush aide David Kuo puts it, "a fast." "You can't find a values leader out there that is not disappointed, discouraged," says Richard Viguerie, who was one of the architects of the Moral Majority, a forerunner of the religious right.

In his *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, Randall Balmer defines evangelicals, broadly, as Protestants who emphasize conversion and who are characterized by "a suspicion of wealth, worldliness and ecclesiastical pretension." By that definition, Jonathan Edwards and the other characters in the First—and Second—Great Awakenings were evangelicals, as were many of the great political activists of the 19th century: the abolitionists, the suffragists, the advocates for prison reform.

In the early part of the 20th century, a movement called "fundamentalism" grew out of a series of pamphlets published by conservative Protestants to counter what they saw as creeping modern secularism. These pamphlets, called *The Fundamentals*, emphasized Biblical truth—what we call "literalism." The Virgin Birth was authentically true, they said, as were the Resurrection, the accounts of Jesus' miracles and the Creation story in Genesis.

Not every believer took the same literalist line. In 1922, a sermon by an urbane Baptist preacher in New York City named Harry Emerson Fosdick separated the world into fundamentalists and other Protestants. Fundamentalists were opposed to change, history and progress, he said; the challenge for everyone else was to embrace it.

Three years later, in faraway Dayton, Tenn., the fundamentalist proposition was put to a very public test when the American Civil Liberties Union hired an unremarkable science teacher named John Scopes to teach the theory of evolution in a public school. Scopes was arrested, and the ACLU hired Clarence Darrow to defend him. The fundamentalists hired none other than the great populist presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. Darrow routed Bryan; beaten, the fundamentalists went back to their homes and their Bibles.

The defeat raised an important issue: who is an insider, who is an outsider? After Scopes, evangelicals felt a chill from America's elites—and the culture warmed only slowly, over the middle decades of the century, as Billy Graham rose to prominence. He understood the seductiveness of a simple, populist message. Confess your sins, come to Jesus and be saved. By definition, politics divides; let others worry about campaigns and legislation and petitions.

While Graham was a country boy from North Carolina—even today, he says he's still amazed he's "off the farm"—William F. Buckley Jr. grew up in a very different America, the Eastern milieu of Connecticut wealth and Roman Catholicism. But circumstance put the two on parallel paths in the middle of the American Century. In 1951, just out of Yale, Buckley wrote a book called *"God and Man at Yale,"* in which he railed against the elite faculty for its postwar leftism, secularism and atheism.

Buckley proposed the paradoxical notion that Christian conservatives needed to delve into politics in order to save themselves from it. This idea found adherents in the early 1960s, when the Supreme Court handed down decisions that restricted prayer in schools and limited the ability of states to ban the use of contraceptives. In 1973, after *Roe v. Wade*, disengagement was no longer an option. For the first time, evangelicals and Catholics—worlds apart doctrinally—became political friends. "You cannot understand the evangelical involvement without understanding

that sea change," says Richard Land, leader of the Southern Baptist Convention. "It's more complicated than just abortion, but without abortion there would not have been the emergence of the evangelical movement."

Fast-forward to 1976, the first election after Watergate, when Jimmy Carter—who, incidentally, had participated in Graham's crusade work—ran on a platform of personal integrity and honesty. "I will never lie to you," he said. One afternoon, before a fund-raiser, Carter told a Washington Post reporter that he had been "born again." He had realized, he said, that he "lacked something very precious—a complete commitment to Christ, a presence of the Holy Spirit in my life in a profound and personal way." In subsequent interviews, he said he prayed to God "not continually but many times a day."

In the North, Carter's God talk was seen as an oddity, but in the South it meant something. Tourists and reporters mobbed the little church where he and his wife, Rosalynn, attended services and where he taught Sunday school. Carter decisively won the South that year.

By the time he ran for re-election in 1980, the world had changed, but no one knew it yet. Jerry Rafshoon remembers the story well. He had quit his post as Carter's White House communications director to run the media campaign in the president's bid for re-election. Rafshoon wasn't worried about the South; campaign dollars would be better spent elsewhere. Then one day early in the fall, Rafshoon received a disturbing call. A preacher named Jerry Falwell, with an outfit called the Moral Majority, had spent massive sums on anti-Carter radio ads in the South. They were "saying that Jimmy Carter isn't a Christian, and there are homosexuals in the Oval Office and all kinds of crap," Rafshoon says. "Rosalynn went to church one time and came back in tears—a bunch of women were picketing her, saying your husband is not a Christian. We lost most of the South."

The Moral Majority had been launched in 1979 as a political-action committee, an alliance of Christian conservatives—evangelicals and Catholics, Washington types and, of course, Falwell—who wanted to crush Carter and all he stood for. The stated agenda was clear: pro-life, pro-traditional family, pro-Israel and for a strong national defense. It was against gays, drugs, pornography and the Equal Rights Amendment. Ronald Reagan's dubious evangelical credentials—divorced, movie star, sporadic churchgoer—didn't matter. He was deeply and properly conservative.

For Christian conservatives, these were heady times. According to Cal Thomas, who worked as Falwell's spokesman in the early 1980s, the Moral Majority and similar groups registered between 4 million and 5 million new voters by 1981. Donations were pouring into the Moral Majority's coffers at the rate of about \$1 million a month. And so the insiders were outsiders, and the outsiders were in.

Yet power corrupts. that's the message of "Blinded by Might," Thomas's 1999 memoir, with Ed Dobson, of their tenure with the Moral Majority. How does a group of people who have a religious and cultural identity as outsiders, who value service to others and believe in living as much as possible like Jesus, sustain this identity when they not only have a seat at the table, but they own the seat—and a good part of the table?

The answer, according to Thomas, is that they don't. "Christians are humans, too," says Thomas, now a conservative columnist. "They like to be paid attention to; they like to have their picture taken with the president." In 1985 Thomas walked away from his job at the Moral Majority to focus on his own writing. Politics is a game of compromise, he says, faith isn't.

And yet many evangelicals are now part of the establishment they once ran against. George W. Bush credits Billy Graham with saving him from a life of drift and drink; the 43rd president has spoken of how Jesus can "change your heart." To keep lines of communication open after the 2000 election, the White House began making weekly calls to the evangelical community—an opportunity for Christians to air grievances and make demands. Land is frequently on those calls, as is Gary Bauer, president of the conservative group American Values. The shift in emphasis from issues of sexual morality to social justice does not mean evangelicals are ceding ground on sex; far from it. But there is clearly discomfort with the movement's apparent obsession with sins of the flesh.

Why is this change happening now? Chuck Colson, who founded the faith-based group Prison Fellowship after

being incarcerated for his involvement in the Watergate scandal, says the evangelical movement has "matured." Christians, he says, have great access to the president, who is interested in a broad range of issues beyond the hot buttons of abortion and same-sex marriage. "I was the one who brought the sexual-trafficking issue to Bush personally," says Colson, clearly relishing his high-level access.

Over the past few months, though, certain visible Christians have expressed frustration and even anger with the Bush administration. In his new book, "Tempting Faith," David Kuo, who worked for more than two years in the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, describes an administration more interested in public relations than programs. "It will be generations before evangelicals put so much faith in another president based simply on his religious convictions," he says. "Jesus needs to be about more than being precinct captain. Jesus' message of love is really the transcendent message I care about the most."

Kuo's yearning resonates with millions of American evangelicals eager to shed the Darth Vader image they've inherited from the religious right. Cal Thomas hits a common refrain: "What are Christians known for? We're against abortion, against same-sex marriage. But what are we for?" Labels matter, but are, as always, tricky. In a recent issue of Christianity Today, evangelicals debated the proper use of what they called "the E word," much as feminists and blacks did before them. "I'm a social-justice evangelical," says Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine, pleading to be spared his usual label: left-wing evangelical.

Bill Hybels, who leads the Willow Creek organization of megachurches—an association of 11,000 churches in 45 countries—has recently befriended the Irish rock star Bono. At Willow Creek's annual meeting last summer, the highlight was a video of Hybels and Bono hashing over the fate of the world. Bono quoted Scripture (Luke, chapter 4); the crowd wept. Cally Parkinson, who runs the Willow Creek media-relations department, was there. As she was leaving, she overheard one pastor say to another, "I went in there wondering if Bono was a Christian, and I came out wondering if I was."

To a large degree, the evolution is generational; evangelicals who voted Republican over the past 30 years had parents who were Democrats. And as intellectuals continue to debate the semantics, a diverse group continues to gather under the tent. "Evangelical" is no longer equivalent to "fundamentalist." Today an evangelical church can be white, black, Asian or Hispanic, Pentecostal, charismatic, fundamentalist, nondenominational—or even Catholic. According to the new NEWSWEEK Poll, evangelicals agree with the general public on issues ranging from stem cells to health care.

Despite the evangelical evolution, wedge politics are still sharp—from stem cells to gay marriage to late-term abortion. "Where you get such strong support is on issues where there is clarity," says Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council. "For those who believe in the Bible, there's no question in marriage, there's no question on the sanctity of human life."

On these issues, James Dobson remains the man to see—and hear. With a mailing list of a million names and a following built up over the years, he's a force to be reckoned with. "It's painful to have him angry at you," says Dick Arme, former House majority leader and chairman of a conservative Washington think tank. "He responds in a manner that's damaging. You know, he'll say, 'I'm leaving, and I promise you, I'm taking a lot of people with me.' Well, elected officials know what that means ... I think we call it a Dobson's choice."

In the East Room of the White House on the National Day of Prayer in 2005—an event organized by Dobson's wife, Shirley—President Bush told an old story about Abraham Lincoln. A minister once remarked to Lincoln that he hoped God was on the president's side. No, Lincoln replied, that wasn't quite right: it was Lincoln's job to make sure he was on the Lord's side, for "the Lord was always on the side of the right." In the wars of our own time, we can hope, too, that we will end up on that side, whether we come from the right, the left or somewhere in between.

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The Christian right or the religious right are conservative Christian political factions that are characterized by their strong support of socially conservative policies. Christian conservatives seek to influence politics and public policy with their interpretation of the teachings of Christianity. In the United States, the Christian right is an informal coalition formed around a core of conservative evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics. The Christian right draws additional support from For decades, the religious right held power within the conservative movement and the Republican Party based on the idea that millions of voters cared deeply about religiously inflected issues: abortion, same-sex marriage, school choice and school prayer, and deeper problems with a hypersexualized mass culture that takes sex outside of marriage as a given. And white evangelicals aren't turned off at all. Even as voters in other groups have cooled on him, in the wake of the leaked "pussy tape" and the allegations from a dozen women that he nonconsensually kissed or groped them, white evangelicals have stayed relatively firm.