

Evangelical Television and the Politicizing of the Evangelical Message, 1950-1994:

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Evangelical Television and the Politicizing of the Evangelical Message, 1950-1994

Joanna L. Kelly

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This project tells the unlikely story of how evangelical efforts to get and stay on television helped to transform evangelicals from nonpolitical outsiders to vocal political insiders. Over the course of fifty years evangelicals utilized new technology and built a vast media infrastructure, culminating in the creation of a cultural empire that took evangelicalism from a fringe religion to a top tier cultural and political force. The path for evangelicals was necessarily political, but not inevitably partisan. When evangelical broadcasters first tried to get on television, evangelicalism was an immature movement opposed by liberal and mainline denominations, and unknown by much of America. Getting on the air was therefore an uphill battle, but these early challenges were formative. Initial efforts spurred evangelicals to organize, which led to the formation of the National Religious Broadcasters and expanded evangelical networks. Over time, they built relationships with government officials and built their own network of technical and political knowledge to ensure that religious broadcasting was successful. They increasingly gained access to airtime, and as their power increased, their message of faith evolved into a message of faith paired with politics. Soon these beliefs were asserted and reaffirmed over the airways, directly into households across America. This powerful messaging tool allowed evangelicals to raise their profiles and their influence, taking them from late-night paid programming ministers to prime time commenters on the issues that mattered most in America.

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Introduction

In May 1995, six months after the midterm elections of 1994, Ralph Reed, the executive director of Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Republican politicians and Christian Coalition chapter leaders to announce the 'Contract with the American Family.'

Today we are unveiling a bold and a dramatic agenda to strengthen families and restore common sense values. As religious conservatives we have finally gained what we have always sought, a place at the table, a sense of legitimacy and a voice in the conversation that we call democracy. I think the salient question facing our movement is, now that we have gained that place at the table, what will we do with it? What will we seek to legislate? What will be our agenda not only for ourselves but for the nation? Today we answer that question.¹

The Christian Coalition had spent more than one million dollars supporting the Republican 'Contract with America,' organizing a grassroots effort complete with voter guides and phone banks. It was this support, Reed reminded the audience, which had earned evangelicals their seat at the table. They supported the 'Contract with America' because of economic concerns but, crucially, because it also addressed cultural issues. Reed went on:

Today we take a second step and we release the 'Contract with the American Family,' which contains ten proposals that will hold government accountable for the cultural crisis that has afflicted our nation for the past three decades. This is not a Christian agenda, it is not a Republican agenda, it is not a special interest agenda, it is a pro-family agenda, and it is supported by the vast majority of the American people, Republican and Democrat, Christian and Jew, black and white, Protestant and Catholic.²

¹ "Contract American Family, May 17 1995 | Video | C-SPAN.Org," accessed December 19, 2017, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?65156-1/contract-american-family>.

² Ibid.

This was evangelicals' declaration that they were no longer outsiders. They were mainstream, and they spoke for all Americans.

This dissertation argues that over the course of half a century, evangelicals utilized new technology and built a vast media infrastructure, culminating in the creation of a cultural empire that took evangelicalism from a fringe religion to a top tier cultural and political force. Religious broadcasters first normalized evangelicalism and made their little known faith an accepted part of the cultural landscape. Then, with the cultural and political shifts of the sixties and seventies, they politicized their message, and by the nineties they were a centerpiece of the American conservative movement.

Denominations and Definitions

Before we go any further it is important to define our terms. As with any group, there is variation amongst evangelicals and their beliefs. Evangelicalism is a broad term that encompasses numerous groups of denominational and nondenominational Christians. Evangelical groups are united by their belief in the centrality of the 'born again' experience, the authority of the Bible, and a Christian's duty to spread their faith.

A major contingent within evangelicalism is fundamentalism. Fundamentalism, while also varied, can be more specifically defined as a conservative millenarian Christian movement that began in the early 20th century with the articulation of five fundamentals of faith: the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the vicarious atonement of Christ for humanity's sins, Christ's miracles, and Christ's physical resurrection.³ Charismatics, such as Pentecostals, share many of the same beliefs

³ R. A. Torrey and A.C. eds. Dixon, *The Fundamentals* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House, 1917).

as fundamentalists. The distinguishing feature of Charismatics is the belief in the baptism of the Holy Spirit as evidenced through glossolalia (also known as speaking in tongues) and divine healing. For the purposes of this project, attention to denominational and individual faith differences will be attended to when those factors are defining, but, unless otherwise specified, the terms ‘evangelical,’ and ‘evangelicalism,’ will be used to speak broadly about conservative, born again Christians including fundamentalists and Charismatics. To this end, the terms ‘religious broadcaster,’ ‘televangelist,’ ‘evangelical broadcasters’ and ‘conservative broadcasters’ are all used interchangeably throughout the project unless specifically noted. These terms describe evangelicals engaged in television broadcasting.

Race is an important aspect of evangelical history. The history of the black church, the history of racism within white evangelicalism, and the impact of race relations more generally in the second half of the twentieth century, all require detail and attention that is beyond the scope of this study. Gender is likewise a crucially important piece of how evangelicals order their beliefs and their conception of society. But again, a proper examination of how evangelicals define gender and gender roles requires an additional set of studies unto themselves. Thus, questions of race and gender in relation to the rise of evangelical broadcasting and, crucially, the political messaging of evangelicals will be attended to only as they relate to our central story, but not in the detail or depth that they rightly deserve on their own. These questions are respectfully placed to the side to be attentively tackled in other projects.

The Story Ahead

This project tells the unlikely story of how evangelical efforts to get and stay on television helped to transform evangelicals from nonpolitical outsiders to vocal political insiders. The path for evangelicals was necessarily political, but not inevitably partisan. Religious broadcasters did not set out to create a politically potent national message that would influence the direction of conservatism. Historically they had largely ignored politics and might well have continued to do so if not for the question of access to television airtime. Spreading the faith to nonbelievers is foundational to the evangelical movement, and the new technology of television represented an irresistible opportunity to reach people like never before. But first, they had to get on the air. From the very beginning evangelicals faced hurdles securing airtime. Government regulations kept evangelicals from accessing the free airtime given away by stations, and further regulation ensured that buying airtime was nearly impossible.

In response, evangelicals began to organize. They created the National Religious Broadcasters in 1944 and began to lobby politicians and the Federal Communications Commission to make regulations that would allow evangelical broadcasters to get on the air. These early interactions with the government were focused on gaining access to airtime in order to share a message of faith and nothing more; again, this first foray into politics was necessarily political, but not partisan. Their advocacy was met with slow but sure success, and evangelicals were increasingly able to bring their message to television. Over time, they built relationships with government officials and built their own network of technical and political knowledge to ensure that religious broadcasting was successful.

As Ralph Reed pointed out in his 1995 announcement, the 1960s marked a seismic cultural shift for evangelicals. And as the culture shifted, so did evangelicals' attitudes towards politics. By the seventies, evangelicals were poised for action and the legalization of abortion in 1973 was the spark that lit their fire. The political strategies that had helped them find success in media had made them more accustomed to working in the political realm and now those structures were expanded, mobilized, and transformed into overt political messaging.

This mobilization saw the creation of religious interest groups and political organizations. Evangelical television ministers fused their faith with politics and activated a new group of voters that turned out in force. This process was not straightforward: evangelicalism, conservatism and the overlap of the two experienced scandals and setbacks. But, by the 1994 midterm election, evangelicals had carved out a permanent role for themselves in politics. They had helped to deliver electoral wins for conservatives and, in turn, they declared their standing to speak for the nation.

This dissertation traces this rise and transformation of evangelical broadcasting. Chapter one outlines the history of evangelicalism, from the Scopes Trial of 1925 through the days of radio, and goes on to discuss the early years of television and the regulations that first kept evangelicals off the air. Chapter two shows how evangelicals increasingly banded together and formed the National Religious Broadcasters organization, and the important changes in regulation that evangelicals capitalized on. Chapter three explores the cultural landscape of the 1970s, as evangelicalism rose to prominence in American culture, and evangelicals evolved their religious message to address broader moral and social concerns.

Chapter four finds an evangelicalism that had come into its own. This chapter traces the movement from the end of the seventies through the mid-eighties, showing how evangelicals took advantage of their new prominence and started to fuse overtly political arguments to their messages of faith. Finally, Chapter five discusses the fall and resurrection of evangelical broadcasting and influence, as they weathered the sexual and financial televangelist scandals of the 1980s, and emerged with powerful instruments of overt political influence.

By the end of our story, evangelicals had normalized their role in American culture and created a politicized message that seamlessly fused the religious with the political. Evangelicals were a recognized constituency, and religious broadcasters were the creators and disseminators of their message. The religious broadcasters, who had first normalized the evangelical faith and worked to get their message on the air, were now essential enablers of the sustained power and influence of the modern movement.

From the beginning, evangelicals recognized television's potential, but they knew that they were underdogs in the fight to get on the airwaves. They proved to be adaptable and strategic, forming networks of knowledge and advocacy that steadily tipped the scales in their favor. They increasingly gained access to airtime, and as their power increased, their message of faith evolved into a message of faith paired with politics. Soon these beliefs were asserted and reaffirmed over the airways, directly into households across America. This powerful messaging tool allowed evangelicals to raise their profiles and their influence, taking them from late-night paid programming ministers to prime time commenters on the issues that mattered most in America.

Chapter 1: Testing, Testing...Evangelicals On the Air

You there in front of your television set, I'm talking to you.
-Percy Crawford, *Youth on the March*, 1949

The roots of evangelical television lie in evangelical radio. And, if we keep digging, the roots of evangelical radio can be traced back, somewhat surprisingly, to a courtroom in Tennessee.

The Scopes Trial of 1925 would not, on its surface, appear to be an important moment in the rise of evangelical media, but this trial was a critical flashpoint for the development of evangelical belief and identity. The characters at the center of the Scopes Trial story are fundamentalists, a subsection of evangelicals who were ardently opposed to the morality that they felt came with modernization. As the preeminent historian of fundamentalism George Marsden once put it, “a fundamentalist is an ‘evangelical who is mad about something.’”⁴ As evangelicalism developed throughout the twentieth century, the anger and deep conservatism of fundamentalism became a part of evangelicalism more generally. As we discuss the fundamentalists of the Scopes Trial, we are addressing a subsection of evangelicalism but also a history that is a part of all conservative evangelicalism. The Scopes Trial was an inflection point for evangelical beliefs and identity, and the experience of the Trial and its aftermath imbued evangelicalism with a deep sense of alienation from broader American culture that remained a part of evangelicalism through their rise to prominence decades later. This trial is furthermore a

⁴ Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Baylor University Press, 2004); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

useful illustration of the state of American religious thinking in the early twentieth century: this is the soil in which evangelicalism would grow

1.1 The Scopes Trial of 1925

In 1925 there was a growing sentiment that the country was abandoning biblical principles and falling victim to a menacing secular modernity.⁵ The Moody Bible Institute, a leading fundamentalist evangelical institution, described the threat in their magazine in a May 1922 editorial, stating:

It has gone by different names at different periods, but is now very generally known as “Liberalism” or “Modernism” as some prefer to call it. As to its nature, it is a denial of about everything vital to evangelical Christianity, or, for that matter, any kind of Christianity whatsoever. It denies that the Bible is a divine revelation and regards it as a piece of human literature.... With the Bible out of the way, everything that rests upon the Bible goes with it.⁶

Fundamentalists cited rising crime, women working outside the home and the breakdown of the family as signs of the moral decay caused by modernism.⁷ Children were considered particularly vulnerable to rising secularism and the influence of liberal Christianity. To protect children, fundamentalists started to conceive of education in public schools as a battleground where they were fighting the “viper of Modernism.”⁸

⁵ A.Z. Conrad, “Modernism and the Minimum of Faith,” *Moody Monthly*, April 1923; Louise Benjamin, *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2009); Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶ “Editorial Notes,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, May 1922.

⁷ John Roach Stranton, “How Rationalism in the Pulpit Makes Worldiness in the Pew,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, January 1923; John Roach Stranton, “Modernism and Crime,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, December 1925; Conrad, “Modernism and the Minimum of Faith”; A.R. Funderburk, “Serving the God of Fashion - Plain Speech from Pastor to People,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, July 1925.

⁸ “Evolution in the Schools,” June 1925; M.H. Duncan, “A National Association for Christian Education,” *Moody Monthly*, June 1925.

Many modern ideas were perceived as threats to America's youth, but none more so than the teaching of evolution. By the 1920s, the theory of evolution was gaining popularity, and it was increasingly finding its way into classrooms across the nation. Fundamentalists saw the teaching of evolution as a direct attack on biblical authority, one that threatened to corrupt those exposed to it. As it was put in another article from *The Moody Bible Institute Monthly*:

The lot of unfortunate dupes of the teachers of evolution will be bad enough, but woe be unto the teachers themselves. It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for them... The doctrine of evolution is the spiritual path that leads to Sodom.⁹

Soon enough the legal protection against the threat of evolution was realized into law when the Tennessee state legislature passed, by a margin of 71 to 5, the Butler Act banning the teaching of evolution in public schools. The first section of the act read:

It shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the universities, normals and all other public schools of the state, which are supported in the whole or in part by the public school funds of the state, to teach any theory that denies the story of the divine creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.¹⁰

Believing that the bill would never be enforced, Governor Austin Peay signed the bill into law in March 1925.¹¹

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sought to challenge the constitutionality of the law and offered to defend any teacher who was prosecuted under the Butler Act. High school science teacher John Scopes volunteered and was arrested on

⁹ R.J. Alderman, "Evolution Leads to Sodom," *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, September 1922.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Moran, *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002).

¹¹ Ibid.; Edward Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

May 7th, 1925 for teaching the theory of evolution.¹² The local case soon became national news when well-known politician and fundamentalist hero William Jennings Bryan signed on for the anti-evolution prosecution, and Clarence Darrow, noted agnostic, signed on to defend Scopes. Fundamentalists saw the Tennessee law as a defense of biblical truth and faith, in an era of waning belief and creeping modernism.¹³ Unfortunately, the way it played out, fundamentalists saw their hopes dashed rather than realized as a result of the events in Tennessee.

The “Scopes Monkey Trial” took over the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, for eight days of proceedings. The trial soon became, nearly literally, a circus, with chimpanzees performing on the lawn of the courthouse and the famed prosecutor himself taking the stand as a witness. The trial was moved outside due to the excessive July heat in a courtroom packed with observers, and the examination of Bryan was broadcast over the radio for the whole country to hear.¹⁴

In the end, fundamentalists won the court case, but they lost the war in the public eye. Darrow had embarrassed Bryan on the stand, generally by challenging his faith, and specifically by trying to poke holes in the fundamentally held belief that the Bible should be read literally. Darrow hammered Bryan on whether Eve was literally created from Adam’s rib, where Cain’s wife came from and whether Joshua had commanded the sun

¹² “ACLU History: The Scopes ‘Monkey Trial,’” American Civil Liberties Union, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/other/aclu-history-scopes-monkey-trial>; Moran, *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents*; Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*.

¹³ Ellis, Charles, “A ‘Knock-out’ for Evolution,” *Moody Monthly*, July 1924; Duncan, “A National Association for Christian Education”; “Evolution in the Primary Schools,” *Moody Monthly*, June 1925; “Evolution and Facts,” *Moody Monthly*, July 1925; James Gray, “Why a Christian Cannot Be an Evolutionist,” *Moody Monthly*, August 1925; Harwood, Luther, “Why Christians Are Opposed to Evolution,” *Moody Monthly*, November 1925; “William Jennings Bryan at the Fundamentals Convention,” *Moody Monthly*, July 1925; “William Jennings Bryan,” *Moody Monthly*, September 1925.

¹⁴ Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*; Moran, *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents*.

to stand still.¹⁵ Journalist and cultural commentator H.L. Mencken took fundamentalists to task in articles colorfully titled ‘Trial as Religious Orgy,’ and ‘Souls Need Reconversion Nightly,’ and ‘Homo Neanderthalensis,’ while the national press carried cartoons and stories that painted the barely decades-old evangelical movement as backward and ignorant.¹⁶ The final emotional blow came five days after the trial when William Jennings Bryan, still lionized by fundamentalists, died in Dayton after attending morning church services.¹⁷ For many Americans, this was the first time they had heard of fundamentalism, and the impression was not positive. Fundamentalists had been tarred by the trial and labeled as backward, anti-modern, and even silly.¹⁸ As a result, the trial and its publicity had a lasting impact on fundamentalists and, as fundamentalism and evangelicalism progressed, the alienation and rejection of the Scopes Trial would become a part of the broader evangelical identity.

While this is clearly an important moment, the impact of the Scopes Trial on evangelicalism has at times been overstated, particularly in the early literature.¹⁹ These accounts argue that the Scopes Trial was nearly a death knell to the movement, forcing evangelicals into hiding and leading to a fallow period. Historians like Joel Carpenter have countered this perspective, showing that while evangelicals had withdrawn from

¹⁵ Moran, *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents*.

¹⁶ H.L. Mencken, “Homo Neanderthalensis,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, June 29, 1925; H.L. Mencken, “Trial as Religious Orgy,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 11, 1925; H.L. Mencken, “Souls Need Reconversion Nightly,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 13, 1925.

¹⁷ Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*, 2007, 294; “William Jennings Bryan.”

¹⁸ Mark Ward Sr., *Air of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House, 1994).

¹⁹ Stewart Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1931); Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962); Norman Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954).

wider society in many ways, the period following the Scopes Trial was nonetheless a period of dynamic growth.²⁰

It is true that there was an era when evangelicals, at a broad scale, withheld their opinions and their faith from the public sphere, and were hesitant to take public stands on political or cultural issues. But this was not a period of fading away, simply a period of turning inward. While the world wasn't looking, evangelicals built infrastructure, creating their own parachurch institutions and schools. Before long, they had created a broad network of self-sufficient institutions that would later undergird the emergence of evangelicalism in the latter half of the twentieth century.²¹

Therefore, it is crucial to understand the post-Scopes period in terms of how it impacted evangelical networks, institutions and identity. This was a moment of public embarrassment followed by decades of being ostracized by wider society and barred from access to tools, such as radio, that other Christians had access to. This experience deeply affected the rhetorical positioning of evangelicals. It was these years of separation from engagement in politics and broader culture that had allowed evangelicals to craft a powerful rhetorical position as *oppressed outsiders*, noble virtuous *victims* under attack by an immoral world. This position became deeply entrenched, and was maintained as a central evangelical narrative even as they gained power, numbers, and influence throughout society.

²⁰ Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

²¹ Ibid.

1.2 Right of the Dial: Evangelicals on the Radio

The story of evangelicals' forays into radio mirrors the varied, upstart nature of evangelicalism itself; the revivalist impulse, a lack of hierarchies and the authority of individual experience were all a part of how evangelicals approached the radio.²²

Ironically, evangelicals, usually suspicious of modernity in general, were early and eager adopters of new technology.²³ This trait would prove especially valuable in their post-Scopes time in the wilderness, as they sought to practice and spread their faith without the benefit of larger uniting organizations. While some congregations were building larger organizations, for instance the Assemblies of God, most of evangelicalism was operating without the leadership of larger denominational or interdenominational organizations.²⁴

The decentralized nature of evangelicalism meant that efforts to organize larger governing bodies were not straightforward, and were regarded with suspicion by the most conservative components of the community. Still, as evangelicals made efforts to build schools and parachurch organizations, the need for unity soon became apparent, especially in the face of an organized and institutionalized liberal Christianity. The most prominent embodiment of this more-liberal brand of Christianity was the Federal Council of Churches. The Federal Council was founded in 1908 with 32 member denominations, before transforming into the National Council of Churches in 1950.²⁵ It originally organized around a social creed focused on labor rights, but soon became an advocacy

²² Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (Yale University Press, 1989).

²³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

²⁴ Margaret Poloma and John Green, *The Assemblies of God: Godly Love and the Revitalization of American Pentecostalism* (NYU Press, 2010).

²⁵ The Federal Council of Churches will never be referred to here as the FCC. The FCC will only refer to the Federal Communications Commission.

group for liberal Protestantism ensuring that members' rights were protected, with a specific emphasis on ensuring that they had media access.²⁶ Given this focus, evangelical ministers who were trying to gain their own access to radio airtime were likely to meet opposition from Christianity's more liberal factions.

Tona Hangen details the history of religious radio in *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America*.²⁷ She follows the rise of radio ministers like Paul Rader, the first national radio evangelist and minister of Moody Church in Chicago, Aimee Semple McPherson, a celebrity Pentecostal radio evangelist and founder of Foursquare Church in Los Angeles, and Charles Fuller a Baptist evangelist whose radio program *The Old Fashion Revival Hour* ran from 1937 to 1968. Hangen shows how the fits and starts of religious broadcasting in the 1920s transformed into an established industry by the 1950s.²⁸ Hangen's work, when paired with Joel Carpenter's *Revive Us Again*, shows how the post-Scopes period was a creative rather than fallow period for evangelicalism. Hangen specifically tackles the role that radio played for fundamentalists, who lacked the larger parent organizations that liberal churches enjoyed (such as the Federal Council of Churches, but also individual denominational hierarchies). In short, the ensuing battle for radio laid the groundwork for how early television would later be regulated, and in this battle evangelicals were starting at a loss.

The regulation of radio was overseen by the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) until 1934 when the FRC was transformed through an act of congress into the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC was empowered to regulate all forms of

²⁶ "National Council of Churches - About NCC - History," accessed June 20, 2019, <http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/about/history.php>.

²⁷ Tona Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²⁸ Ibid.

electronic vocal transmission, which would importantly include television.²⁹ When the government first started regulating the airwaves and approving station licenses, they created a provision that required all stations to devote a small amount of their weekly airtime towards programming that would contribute towards the public good. This public service airtime was called ‘sustaining time’ or ‘educational time:’ it was intended to *sustain* the public interest through educational or informational material. This sustaining time included airing news programs, political conventions, and crucially, religious programming.³⁰ This concept of sustaining time turned out to be a critical battlefield for evangelical broadcasters. It was their exclusion from sustaining time in the early years of broadcasting that first led them to engage with the government and advocate as a more organized group. Then, as regulations changed, the battle for sustaining time was one that evangelicals continued to adapt to fight.

1.2.1 Liberals, Conservatives and the Regulation of Radio

In the midst of the Depression and World War II, while the nation united against a common enemy, the conflicts between evangelical and mainline Protestants continued to rage.³¹ But this time, the battlefield was the airwaves. The few decades since Scopes had seen the growth of radio accelerate. Between 1930 and 1935 the number of radios in homes doubled, reaching over 18 million. This meant that 60 percent of homes in America had a radio in them. Then, by 1939, that number more than doubled again,

²⁹ “Communications Act of 1934,” Pub. L. No. 47 U.S.C. § 151 (1934).

³⁰ Hal Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1992).

³¹ Benjamin, *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926–1945*.

reaching 44 million total radios and 86 percent coverage.³² With the introduction of FM radio in 1940, the FCC planned to issue as many as 1,000 new radio station licenses within the next year.³³ That sounds like a large number of licenses, but there were a lot of people who had dedicated their lives to reaching as many people as possible, and they recognized the opportunity that radio represented. Before long, syndicated ministers and upstart preachers alike were fighting over limited airtime, trying to reach larger and more dispersed audiences.

The ground shifted in the early 1940s, when the liberal Federal Council of Churches lobbied the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to change the rules surrounding sustaining time. The liberal Federal Council was successful in arguing that religious broadcasting should be limited to recognized ministers from established churches.³⁴ Furthermore, the Federal Council of Churches had persuaded two of the major radio networks, CBS and NBC, to refuse to sell airtime to conservative broadcasters. Instead they urged them to allot that time to “recognized” faith communities, i.e. mainline denominations and not evangelicals.³⁵ NBC went so far as to create an advisory council of its own, which created guidelines further limiting conservatives access to airtime; the regulations would remain in place throughout the forties.³⁶ Mutual Radio Network followed suit not long after, further constricting evangelicals’ ability to get airtime.³⁷ The combined effects of the FCC ruling and the networks’ decisions struck at the heart of evangelical broadcasting; evangelicals had been

³² Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*.

³³ “One Thousand New FM Stations Foreseen,” *Broadcasting*, June 1, 1940.

³⁴ Williams, *God’s Own Party*.

³⁵ Grant Wacker, *America’s Pastor* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

³⁶ Benjamin, *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945*.

³⁷ Ben Armstrong, *The Electric Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers Inc., 1979); Benjamin, *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945*.

blocked from the freely provided airtime and they faced barriers to buying any airtime at all.³⁸

Over the coming decades, evangelicals would become savvy in the ways of politics and influence. But their introduction to that world was a harsh one: they'd been outflanked by the liberals, who'd used their influence to deny evangelicals access to the air. Evangelicals would not forget this lesson. They internalized their status as outsiders and soon turned these early disadvantages into their path to success.

1.2.2 Controversial Conservatives and the Creation of the NRB

Since its time as the Federal Radio Commission, the FCC had been hesitant to get involved in religious matters for fear of violating First Amendment rights. But the FCC was eventually forced to regulate due to pressure from the Federal Council of Churches, combined with the controversies surrounding the sermons of Father Charles Coughlin.³⁹ Coughlin was a Michigan-based radio priest who gained notoriety for his sermons that included anti-Semitic and anti-fascist rhetoric. Coughlin made overtly political statements, first supporting and then opposing President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and as a result the FCC could no longer pretend that religious radio was noncontroversial and in no need of regulation.⁴⁰

³⁸ Williams, *God's Own Party*; Armstrong, *The Electric Church*.

³⁹ Benjamin, *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945*; Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921-1991: The Programs and Personalities*; Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America*; Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & the Great Depression* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011); David Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁰ Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America*; Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s*; Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & the Great Depression*.

The FCC passed regulations that specifically barred ministers from editorializing or commenting on political concerns. Instituted in 1939, and then confirmed by the “Mayflower Decision” in 1941, these rulings stated that stations must follow the ‘unbiased’ rule or face losing station ownership. The Mayflower Doctrine required stations to provide equal time for opposing views and was in place until 1949 when it was replaced with the Fairness Doctrine, which explicitly required stations to address controversial issues that were of interest to the public but do so in a fair way that provided equal time to opposing viewpoints. The importance of the Mayflower Doctrine for religious broadcasters was the limitation it placed on anything seemingly ‘controversial.’ Stations did not want to contend with problems from the FCC and worried that a fiery sermon from a revival evangelical would do just that. Thus, many stations refused to sell time to evangelicals altogether. Additionally, religious programming was not to get into specific matters of faith. This latter point was particularly problematic for evangelicals, whose belief in the fundamentals and biblical prophecy remained foreign to many Americans. Finally, broadcasters were not allowed to solicit financial support over the radio, which was a problem for conservative broadcasters who, having been barred from the free sustaining time, were paying for their airtime. These rules, while not often enforced during the war, remained on the books, and the specter of their existence loomed over everything the conservatives did. The mere possibility of a problem led networks to refuse to sell or give airtime to conservatives.⁴¹ The question of television remained untouched because, while television technology existed before the US entered World War II, its development languished while the

⁴¹ Benjamin, *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945*; Williams, *God’s Own Party*.

country's technological and industrial efforts were all focused on supporting the war effort.

In short, the fragmented and unorganized nature of conservative evangelicals meant that their access to radio was limited and, if they found airtime, it was expensive. They were not considered established mainline denominations, which largely blocked them from the free sustaining time, and they had no advocacy from an organizational body like the Federal Council of Churches to help to them find other means to airtime. The rules were aligned against them, and they lacked the clout to change them. It was in this context that, in 1942, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was created.

The NAE was founded explicitly as an evangelical counter to the Federal Council of Churches. The aim was to organize conservative churches and guide the direction of evangelicalism in America.⁴² In its first year, the NAE opened offices in Washington DC, in large part to facilitate lobbying the FCC on behalf of conservative broadcasters. Quickly it became clear that the NAE required a specific task force to advocate for access to the booming technology of radio. This led to the creation, only two years later, of the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) at the annual meeting of the NAE in Columbus, Ohio.⁴³

The NRB would grow into its own organization focused on advocacy, as well as training and professionalization of religious broadcasters; chapter 2 will discuss the organization's eventual rise under the leadership of Ben Armstrong. But even in its early years, the NRB is noteworthy for its production of a magazine for member broadcasters. This magazine, *Religious Broadcasting*, focused on improving broadcast standards and

⁴² Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*.

⁴³ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*; Ward Sr., *Air of Salvation*; Williams, *God's Own Party*.

kept members apprised of changes in regulation, representing an early attempt to build consensus among evangelicals about how to most effectively leverage technology to spread their message.

1.3 Regulating Television: More Complicated Than It Looks

Television in America got off to a rocky start. In 1941 the FCC officially authorized commercial television in the U.S., and thirty stations started operations. But as a result of the war, within one year, most of those stations had stopped operating. All technical expertise and manufacturing were redirected towards the war effort, and the unproven technology of television languished.⁴⁴ After the war, companies started pivoting their focus back on commercial production, and before long there was a renewed interest in television.

The new problem for conservative broadcasters was that there was no broadcast standard for television, which meant that audiences were divided across bandwidths and regions, and, even more problematically, often did not even have the right technology to tune in if a broadcast was available. Since conservative broadcasters relied on paid programming, the financial viability of the new medium was questionable.

On the technical side, companies developing technology pursued two paths. RCA had been working on technology that would broadcast over VHF (Very High Frequency) channels, specifically channels number 2 through 13. CBS, meanwhile, had developed technology utilizing UHF (Ultra High Frequency), which covered channels 14 through 82.

⁴⁴ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*; Patrick Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Temple University Press, 2008).

It should be noted that channel frequency is not the same as television channels that appear to the home user. Rather, the ‘transmit’ channel is the wavelength of the transmission and the ‘virtual’ channel is what the user sees. The ‘virtual’ channel numbering occurred in the mid-fifties when the FCC wanted to standardize television, creating a system known as PSIP (Program and System Information Protocol). What this means practically is that a viewer’s channel 7 might actually be transmitting over transmit channel 21.⁴⁵

From the manufacturing and consumer’s side, VHF and UHF required different technology within a given television in order to receive the signal and show the picture. Both RCA and CBS wanted their approach to be adopted by the FCC as the lone option. Consumers just wanted a television that worked. The FCC initially moved forward with the VHF system in 1945. Still, they left the door open to incorporate UHF, because CBS had promised the possibility of higher definition and color broadcasting on their system. In 1947, however, the FCC officially denied the petition from CBS for UHF color broadcasting, seeming to set VHF as the standard. The FCC decision led to an explosion of applications for station licenses, especially in urban centers with high viewership. However, the real result of this explosion was stagnation rather than growth, as an overwhelmed FCC decided to freeze the allocation of stations altogether in 1948.⁴⁶ For conservative broadcasters that did not have any institutional support in the form of free sustaining time, the effect of all of the technical unknowns was that they scarcely had any access to television airtime at all.

⁴⁵ Parsons, *Blue Skies*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.; Patrick Parsons and Robert Frieden, *The Cable and Satellite Television Industries* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998); Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

The FCC freeze was born of both practical problems and paperwork problems. In the face of high demand for station licenses, the FCC simply could not process all of the paperwork that the requests necessitated. There was also the question of how many miles a station's broadcast would be allowed to reach. Originally stations were given a 200-mile radius, which meant that a station theoretically owned that airwave frequency for 200 miles. However, that mileage was dropped to 150 miles in order to try to meet the demand for more stations on the limited spectrum of VHF broadcasting. The thinking was that broadcasts sent out more than 100 miles apart would not interfere with one another, but in practice this was not the case, and there were constant problems with interference between broadcasts. The decision was made to pause everything while the FCC figured out how to regulate the expanding medium, and only stations that had been issued licenses previously were allowed to continue broadcasting.⁴⁷

The freeze drastically outlasted its planned six-month duration, remaining in place from 1948 through 1952 when the FCC issued its Sixth Report and Order that ended the freeze and set a new broadcast standard that utilized both VHF and UHF frequencies.⁴⁸ After the issuance of the report, hundreds of new station licenses were issued. The report set regulations that standardized the industry, and television went from being in 34% of American homes to 87% by the end of the fifties.⁴⁹

While the report set technical standards, it was also a political document that solidified the FCC's view that television should be universally accessible, but also locally concerned. Regulations like sustaining time were derived from the FCC's guiding

⁴⁷ Douglas Gomery, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Blackwell Publishers, 2008); Parsons, *Blue Skies*.

⁴⁸ Parsons, *Blue Skies*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

principle that the airwaves (first radio, now television) should fundamentally serve the public. This view was sharpened to specifically elevate local issues and expressions as the primary concerns being served, as opposed to national-scale interests.⁵⁰

The FCC's goal in 1952 was to get one, possibly two, stations in every area – a far cry from today's hundreds of channels. The localism of the new regulations, while perhaps noble in spirit, had the consequence of severely limiting the number of stations that a community could support. The financial barrier to entry into television was high. In rural areas where there was not a population large enough to support the ad-driven business model, diversity of options suffered, with scant few organizations and individuals able to afford to be on the air. Again, for conservatives who were not awarded free sustaining time, the hurdles to getting and staying on the air were enormous. Finding a station willing to sell them airtime, amassing the start-up cost to get on the air if they could find a willing station, and then raising enough recurring funds from a limited audience proved to be more than most evangelical broadcasters could muster.

There were still further technical hurdles to diversity in broadcasting: as a result of the FCC's initial preference for VHF broadcasts, most Americans owned TV sets that were designed to exclusively receive VHF signals. These TVs required an additional, expensive antenna to receive UHF broadcasts, and viewers were not always willing or able to buy into that capability. As a result, few stations, especially in rural areas, could afford to take a risk on a UHF license when there was little promise of a return in profit. Thus, despite the FCC's intentions to democratize access to the new medium, many of their actions had the opposite result. This fallow period lasted for 10 years, until the FCC

⁵⁰ Ibid.; Parsons and Frieden, *The Cable and Satellite Television Industries*; Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*.

finally passed the 1962 All-Channel Receivers Act that required all new television sets be equipped with UHF tuners.⁵¹

The barriers to establishing large-scale broadcasting in many areas led to the creation of an alternative way for consumers to gain access to additional stations-- CATV (community antenna television or community access television), the full impact of which wouldn't be known for decades. Early CATV systems involved setting up a large antenna with receiving capability beyond that of an individual television set. The signal received by this antenna would then be broadcast to individual homes in the area via a physical coaxial cable. In this way, communities too small to support their own television stations could receive stations from larger, adjoining areas. There were limitations (the serial nature of the circuit meant that a single disruption could disable an entire region) but the conceptual groundwork for sending television over the wire had been laid.⁵² Later, this approach would develop into cable television as we know it, featuring stations in numbers and variety never before seen, unrestrained by the limitations of the increasingly crowded airwaves.⁵³ Conservative broadcasters in particular would thrive on cable, and later on satellite-based alternatives to broadcast television, because of regulatory differences for those channels, and the comparatively bountiful capacity to provide access to multiple stations.

The FCC was born from of a need to regulate radio, and its attempt to apply the same lessons to television carried some unexpected consequences. Television technology

⁵¹ Parsons, *Blue Skies*; Parsons and Frieden, *The Cable and Satellite Television Industries*; Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*.

⁵² Parsons and Frieden, *The Cable and Satellite Television Industries*; Parsons, *Blue Skies*; Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*.

⁵³ Parsons and Frieden, *The Cable and Satellite Television Industries*; Parsons, *Blue Skies*; Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*.

and the rules that governed it had an asymmetrical effect on different classes of creators and consumers alike. By initially favoring one technology, the already isolated audiences in some areas faced the additional hurdle of technical access to new stations. Further, the favoring of mainline denominations in the awarding of sustaining time meant that conservative broadcasters faced both access and financial barriers to getting on the air. The disparities created during this era affected the evangelical strategy for decades to come. In the face of adversity, evangelicals organized and then advocated to the FCC in their first foray into politics. They built up their own technical and institutional knowledge, started networking, and built relationships with the government that over time led them further down a political path. Their goal was sharing their faith and when they faced obstacles, they had to innovate.

1.4 Airwave War 2: Seeing is Believing

The end of the war and the return of soldiers brought a transformation in the landscape of America. Evangelicals, like most Americans, were moving to the suburbs. The combined effects of suburbanization, technological advancement, and a booming consumption economy took television from a relatively small audience in 1950, to the ubiquitous centerpiece of the American home by the end of the decade. The country's religious landscape continued to evolve, and it was becoming clear that television was a crucial tool for any who hoped to bring Americans into their fold. The question remained, would the FCC regulation of television follow the same path as its regulation of radio, or could religious television broadcasters shape a different destiny?

The liberal organization, the Federal Council of Churches, conducted its first television broadcasting Easter week 1940.⁵⁴ Liberals made early inroads into religious television with a CBS program “Lamp Unto My Feet” which ran from 1948 until 1979.⁵⁵ The Federal Council remained concerned about the threat of evangelicalism feeling that evangelical beliefs, especially their revival and charismatic impulses, were problematic and had the potential to damage all Christianity by association. To combat this threat, the Federal Council continued to lobby the FCC to ensure access to the new medium for their churches and limit the reach of the evangelical message. Evangelicals were enthusiastic about expanding into the new technology but the existing regulations, official and unofficial, that limited their access to radio seemed to be carried over into television.⁵⁶

While there were some early religious television programs in the forties, most were liberal, sermon-only broadcasts during sustaining time. The shift from radio to television did not take place in earnest until the 1950s, when radio, nonradio, and lay preachers alike were ignited with the spirit to share their message on this new innovative format. As a result, like so many aspects of evangelical impulse, the result was a varied and vibrant chorus of approaches.

The concept of sustaining time was carried over intact from radio to television and fell under the purview of the Federal Communications Commission. Mainline denominations, and in some areas Catholicism and Judaism, dominated the religious landscape at the time that these rules were put into place.⁵⁷ These faiths were reflective of

⁵⁴ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*, 7.

⁵⁵ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

⁵⁶ Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America*.

⁵⁷ Benjamin, *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945*.

those in charge of television programming, which led to the allotted sustaining time being awarded to mainline denominations. Evangelicals found it difficult to gain access to free airtime, and even when they resorted to paid programming, their efforts were limited by restrictions on fundraising and bias rules.

Another point that the Federal Council of Churches pointed to in the contestation for television airtime was what they saw as a lack of technical standards. Liberal churches that had been awarded sustaining time were supported by the networks they were broadcasting on, and the quality of their programming reflected it. This enabled the Federal Council of Churches to argue that the comparatively amateur-looking evangelical programming should not be allowed on the air. The FCC was sympathetic to their argument; it was interested in promoting the new medium, and was invested in making sure that television looked professional. Further, the FCC had built a relationship with the Federal Council of Churches since the days of radio, and treated them as a sort of denominationally-neutral advisory board, which enabled the FCC to maintain an arms-length distance from religious matters and avoid controversy. The result for evangelicals was a lack of access and a growing feeling that they were being made victims by both liberal Christians and the government. While there were early pioneers like Oral Roberts and Rex Humbard who were able to create and air more polished programming, as a whole, conservative Christians were fighting an uphill battle.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

1.5 Percy Crawford's Church on the Air

One success story of this early period is the often-overlooked contribution of Percy Bartimus Crawford. Crawford was born in 1902 and raised in Vancouver, Canada. He moved to the United States in 1921 in search of opportunity, and took a room at the YMCA in Los Angeles. Crawford soon stumbled upon the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA), which was in the same complex as the YMCA.⁵⁹ Crawford quickly became engrossed in the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s, studying under Ruben A. Torrey, a leader in fundamentalism. Crawford graduated BIOLA and was involved in a number of part-time ministries until 1931, when he started his radio program *Young People's Church of the Air (YPCA)*. The broadcast only initially went out over one station, but in the next decade the program would run on over 400 radio stations across the country.⁶⁰

Crawford pioneered a new approach to radio ministry by placing his radio audience at the heart of the broadcast. At the time many of the other programs were simply simulcasts of a regular church service. The preachers on these programs directed their remarks to the people assembled before them, leading to sermons that didn't always engage radio listeners. Crawford, on the other hand, primarily focused on creating an engaging and entertaining program that would capture the attention of his radio audience. His sermons were animated and rapid-fire, much more akin to radio news programs than to other religious broadcasts. A major difference in Crawford's broadcasts was the use of music, which often included jazzier versions of gospel tunes played by live bands and

⁵⁹ Dan Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)* (Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, n.d.).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

performers.⁶¹ At the time, the use of music beyond traditional hymns in their original arrangement was viewed with skepticism, and as a possible sign of the encroachment of the secular. Crawford maintained that as long as the program remained Christ-focused, the use of more popular-sounding music was just another tool to save more souls.⁶²

Crawford was always eager to “reach the most with the least,” so in 1949 when ABC changed its policy and announced that they would accept paid religious broadcasting, Crawford jumped at the chance to try to reach more people with new technology.⁶³ He took *YPCA* to television, now calling the program *Youth on the March*.⁶⁴ The program premiered on October 9th 1949, making it the first coast-to-coast evangelistic program on TV.⁶⁵ Crawford remained on ABC from 1949-1952. Crawford’s formula fed off the energy of the rallies and revivals he led all over the country with his wife Ruth. He took their evangelizing duo to the air, making the television broadcast a family affair; Ruth performed, as did their four sons Don, Dick, Dan and Dean who were billed as “The 4 Ds.” The youngest, daughter Donna Lee, also joined in.⁶⁶ This family-centric approach to religious television, while new at the time, would become a familiar format to television viewers in decades to come.

Crawford had the energy and motivation to create television programming, but funding was always an issue. Broadcasters could not overtly solicit funds on the air, so Crawford simply mentioned the cost of producing the program to his viewers and then invited them to be a part of the show’s efforts. Information for reaching the evangelist

⁶¹ Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*.

⁶² Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)*.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. It should be noted that Dan of “the 4 Ds” and Percy’s son is the author of *A Thirst for Souls*.

⁶⁵ “Papers of Percy Bartimus Crawford and Ruth Crawford Porter - Collection 357,” accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/357.htm#1>.

⁶⁶ Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)*.

was then made available. It was a thin line to walk, but the money received at the in-person revival campaigns simply was not enough to cover the cost of the television efforts, and so Crawford and others like him had to be creative. By 1952 the DuMont network was also airing religious broadcasting, but at a lower price point. Eager to save money, Crawford moved networks. However, even with a lower cost to make it to air, television was not proving to be financially viable and Crawford looked to move back to radio within the year.⁶⁷

Still, in his time on the air Crawford had pioneered a format that was lively and entertaining, while remaining Christ-focused. This approach would later be borrowed and adapted by the most successful religious broadcasters. In part, the success of his programming was due to the combination of creativity and production value that came from Crawford's partnership with Irvin "Shorty" Yeaworth. Yeaworth brought technical expertise that helped to make the show look more akin to the variety show programming of secular television than to other religious television. After parting ways with Crawford Yeaworth went on to secular success in Hollywood notably directing 1958's *The Blob*.⁶⁸ He eventually moved back into religious broadcasting, and was one of many evangelicals that would develop technical expertise in secular television that could then be used to improve religious programming.

While this period in conservative broadcasting can largely be characterized as unsuccessful, there were a few other exceptions to the rule. Rex Humbard was another television pioneer. He first went on the air in 1949, but it wasn't until 1952 that his program took off, which led Humbard to build the *Cathedral of Tomorrow* church in

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.; *The Blob*, accessed June 4, 2019, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0051418/>.

Ohio.⁶⁹ Humbard was the first to build a church with broadcasting technology incorporated directly into the building itself. While the program would run through 1982, Humbard was dogged by problems with the government dating back to the fundraising for the Cathedral.⁷⁰ Humbard faced inquiries from the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) about the unregistered securities used to finance construction on the Cathedral, and again later related to money management questions about his ministry.⁷¹ Both for his innovative approach to television production and for his financial scandals, Humbard was a forerunner to other televangelists who would follow.⁷² Another early success story was Walter Maier whose successful radio broadcast *The Lutheran Hour*, migrated to television in 1948. And later, Pastor George Vandeman became the first religious program to broadcast in color with his bible study program *It Is Written*, which still runs today.

But the successes of Crawford, Humbard, Maier and Vandeman were more exceptions than the rule. The lack of institutional support, the absence of technical knowhow and limited funds meant that most preachers who attempted to start television programs quickly failed. Even Billy Graham could not maintain a regular broadcast, writing to Crawford in 1951 that producing a television program was time-consuming, and that he felt his program lacked thrill compared to Crawford's work.⁷³ While Graham's celebrity meant that funding was not his main issue, the lack of knowhow and the competition for his attention from other projects he was involved in led him to

⁶⁹ "Televangelist Rex Humbard, Known for His Cathedral of Tomorrow, Dies at 88," *Associated Press International*, September 22, 2007, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁷⁰ Allan Sloan and Anne Bagamery, "The Electronic Pulpit," *Forbes*, July 7, 1980.

⁷¹ Ibid.; Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*; "Televangelist Rex Humbard, Known for His Cathedral of Tomorrow, Dies at 88."

⁷² Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

⁷³ Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)*.

abandon his regular television broadcast. Instead, Graham favored the special event format, with one-off programs that would feature various kinds of events, for example, one of his revivals.⁷⁴ By and large, conservatives were unsuccessful at getting and staying on the air. The few who had successful programs were noteworthy precisely because they succeeded where so many others failed.

1.6 Modest Ground, Twice Won

There were undeniably flashes of success in the early evangelical efforts to reach people via television. Still, conservatives faced an uphill battle getting, and stay on television. The old fights from radio would have to be fought all over again if evangelicals were to succeed. Conservatives had established themselves in radio, scraping their way to modest success via independent radio stations. But now the limits of the new TV technology meant that they were back at square one, and by the end of the 1950s evangelicals had only had limited success getting on the television airwaves. There were no successful evangelical-specific television stations, and gaining access to other stations' airtime remained difficult.

However, evangelicals had started to lay the groundwork. This early period had seen the establishment of the National Religious Broadcasters. Evangelicals had gained a foothold in Washington D.C. with NAE offices, and the effort to get evangelicals on television had started to take shape. Specifically, the NRB focused on a three-pronged approach: a political effort aimed at gaining sustaining time, regulation reform efforts that would award station ownership to evangelicals, and an effort by broadcasters to gain

⁷⁴ Ibid.; Wacker, *America's Pastor*.

other types of time on television, namely, paid programming. In addition, early steps towards professionalization were made. The NRB magazine included information on the latest technology available and urged that ministers on the air maintain decorum. While these efforts were in their early stages, momentum was beginning to grow. Their efforts were directed at improving broadcasters' ability to evangelize and were not partisan. But, because the government controlled television regulation, these efforts were necessarily political and these early efforts started evangelicals on a path towards engagement with the government and with policy.

The consequence of this early television period would not be known for decades. At the time, conservative Christians were advocating for their right to share their message of faith, for access to the airways to fulfill what they saw as the great commandment to evangelize. This disadvantaged start would spur them to create networks amongst themselves and inroads into government that would later be transformed into overtly political machines rather than simple media advocacy. In the meantime, it was the 1960s that would see a transformation that moved conservatives out of the fringes and onto the air.

Chapter 2:

From Fringe Hours to Prime Time: Evangelicals on the Rise

1960 was a significant year for the nation, and for television, and for religious broadcasters in particular. September 1960 saw the first televised presidential debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, Kennedy was elected the first Catholic President of the United States, and the FCC issued a landmark decision that would change the course of conservative broadcasting on television. Meanwhile, in southern Virginia, a then-unknown Pat Robertson bought a defunct UHF station that would become the first Christian television station in the nation, Christian Broadcast Network (CBN).

This chapter follows three major players in this period's evangelical broadcasting landscape: the U.S. government, the NRB, and CBN. Major shifts in government regulation during the 1960s created opportunities that allowed evangelicals to reposition themselves in the evolving media landscape, influencing religious broadcasting for decades to come. Advocacy around these regulations led to changes in religious broadcasting's major organizing body, the National Religious Broadcasters. While the impact of the NRB was limited during this period, the professionalization and reorganizing during this period laid the groundwork for the future work of the NRB. Importantly, it was the leadership of Ben Armstrong within the NRB that helped to transform the organization. His work, including his coining of the term 'the electric church' to refer to evangelical broadcasting, helped to unite broadcasters behind a shared vision. Finally, CBN was not only the first Christian network, but it also pioneered the new frontier of evangelical broadcasting through innovations in program format, the

introduction of major television personalities, and as an incubator of rhetoric that would contribute to the politicization of evangelical messaging in decades to come. During this period evangelicals travelled further down the political path, but were not yet partisan in their actions.

2.1 Government Regulation of Television in the Sixties

As we have already seen, the FCC is uniquely important to the discussion of media and politics in America. Each ruling the commission makes has the potential to fundamentally alter the cultural landscape, often in unpredictable ways. In this section we will examine several decisions by the FCC and one act of Congress from the sixties that transformed religious broadcasting in the seventies, setting the stage for its meteoric ascent in the eighties.

2.1.1 The 1960 FCC Decision and its Three Implications

The first important FCC decision of this period came in right at the start of the decade. A 1960 FCC decision had three important implications for evangelicals: public service obligations of stations could be satisfied with paid time; there could be no program-length fundraising; and religious broadcasting was exempt from the Fairness Doctrine.⁷⁵

In part, this decision was the result of the pressure that conservative Christians had been applying to the FCC since the creation of the National Religious Broadcasters association in 1944. But, the final straw that pushed the FCC to make the ruling came

⁷⁵ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*; Parsons, *Blue Skies*; “26th Annual Report to Congress,” Annual Reports to Congress (Federal Communications Commission, December 31, 1960), FCC.gov.

from a surprising place, the liberal National Council of Churches (NCC), formerly the Federal Council of Churches. As discussed in the previous chapter, the NCC and Federal Communications Commission had long worked together to create rules that had always tended to favor liberal mainline denominations. But, by 1960, stations had increasingly relegated their public service religious programming to ‘fringe hours,’ either very early in the morning or very late at night. The NCC made the argument that by placing these sustaining programs at these hours, the stations were not really fulfilling their obligation to offer programming in the public interest.⁷⁶

The unforeseen effect of the NCC complaint was that the FCC reconsidered its position on sustaining time more broadly. In June 1960, the FCC decided that stations’ obligation to provide some educational time to the public could be satisfied either with the freely-given sustaining/educational time, as it had been doing, or with paid time. As a result, the liberal mainstream churches’ stranglehold over religious television time was largely broken. The liberal churches had long made the argument that religious television should not be bought and that only ‘established’ churches, i.e. NCC members, should be given that time.

Conservative broadcasters had been blocked from free time, but had been attempting to buy time on stations, even though it did not count towards that station’s educational television quota. Conservatives found it difficult to find stations willing to broadcast conservatives’ financially precarious programs, when stations could instead broadcast entertainment programming that would garner ad revenue for the station and pull in large audiences. With the FCC decision, stations were given the chance to get paid

⁷⁶ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

and satisfy their obligation to provide public service programming. In the business of television, getting paid quickly outweighed any personal affinity for one particular religious broadcast over another. Conservatives had their in. Following the 1960 decision the proportion of religious programming that was comprised of freely provided sustaining time programming dropped from 47% in 1959 to only 8% in 1977.⁷⁷ In its place rose paid religious programming, resulting in an overall net gain for religious time on television during the same period.⁷⁸

With the FCC decision, evangelicals theoretically now had access to airtime, but coming up with the funds to pay for it was still not easy. In the same ruling that had created the opening for conservatives to buy airtime, the FCC expanded its ban against full half-hour commercials to indicate that there could not be any program-length fundraising, though the language didn't ban on-air fundraising outright.⁷⁹ This left the door open for creative financial pleas, such as prayer lines that also accepted donations. This full program-length ban stood until the mid-1980s.

These fundraising restrictions are important, because in the 1960s, television was an expensive endeavor. Putting aside any cost that might go into adding entertainment value to a show, such as a visually interesting set, fancy clothing, or music, the baseline cost of producing a person simply speaking to a camera was high, requiring expensive

⁷⁷ Kimberly Neuendorf, "The Public Trust versus the Almighty Dollar," in *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions* (Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990), 77–78.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*, 10–11.

equipment in order to be taped and ready for broadcast. Further, additional money was required to buy airtime so programs would actually make it into viewers' homes.⁸⁰

Especially in these still-early days of television, many ministers hoping to get on the air leveraged the financial means of their home congregations. Church donations continued funding the needs of the physical church, but would also go into funding the televised services. When this model was in use, it was most often the case that the television programming was a broadcast of the Sunday sermons. These endeavors were intended to spread the message of the church to more people and grow their spiritual, if not physical, congregation. But the hope was also that the physical church itself would benefit and grow in the end.⁸¹

Of course, the reach of the television broadcast was generally larger than the physical congregation. And once all of the cost of a broadcast had been put in, it was only natural to try to leverage that audience to help pay the cost for future productions, the rules against commercializing the broadcasts be damned. So ministers found creative ways around explicitly asking for funds, many of techniques of which continued to be used even after the ban was lifted in the 1980s. For example, ministers' telephone numbers and addresses would be put up on the screen during the broadcast, or be mentioned at regular intervals throughout the show.⁸² Back to the days of Percy Crawford, ministers relied on their charismatic appeal to the audience, reaching the

⁸⁰ Parsons, *Blue Skies*; Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*; Gomery, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*; Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*.

⁸¹ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*; Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

⁸² Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902–1960)*; Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*; Thomas Gerard Straub, *Salvation for Sale* (Prometheus Books, 1988).

viewer and making them feel like part of the show.⁸³ Even without express requests for audience members to send in donations, the cost of airtime and show production would be mentioned on the broadcast and audiences took the hint and responded with their financial support.⁸⁴ Ministers also began to create alternative forms of revenue to support their program. Both Jerry Falwell and Rex Humbard, for instance, dabbled in selling securities and bonds to support the broader work of their ministries. To be fair, in the end, both men faced investigations by the SEC for this conduct.⁸⁵ But evangelicals, limited by regulation of on-air fundraising, began a creative journey to build alternative sources of income that would grow and become more sophisticated in the following decades.⁸⁶

The third and final significant part of the 1960 FCC ruling involved the Fairness Doctrine, and this helped reshape what kind of messages were allowed to be delivered via religious programming. In the 1960 ruling there was no language that explicitly defined what a minister could or could not talk about. But there remained the specter of the Fairness Doctrine, which demanded that networks present controversial topics that were important to the public, but also that networks show opposing viewpoints on these issues.⁸⁷ Television networks were not eager to become embroiled in religious controversy, and did not want to be obligated to provide contrasting viewpoints to a given

⁸³ Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)*.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Megan Rosenfeld, "Appeal of the Televangelists: Firm Answers to Life's Questions," *The Washington Post*, May 3, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Televangelist Rex Humbard, Known for His Cathedral of Tomorrow, Dies at 88"; Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921-1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

⁸⁶ Robert Abelman and Stewart Hoover, eds., *Religious Television* (Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990); Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921-1991: The Programs and Personalities*; Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)*.

⁸⁷ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921-1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

controversial religious view. Therefore, religious programming needed to steer clear of controversy, however loosely that was defined.⁸⁸

The FCC had generally taken the advice of the NCC, which had developed a position that religious broadcasting was in its very nature not controversial. But in another rare example of agreement between the liberal NCC and conservative NRB, both organizations wanted this assumption to be made more explicit, and advocated for specific religious exemption from the Fairness Doctrine. This exemption was granted as part of the 1960 ruling, and helped to further loosen the subjects that evangelicals could cover in their broadcasts.⁸⁹

Still, the exemption did not end the issue. The ruling's language was vague about what constituted controversial subject matter: was it only political statements? What about doctrinal specifics? What about statements about the end times? Disagreements around what constituted controversy continued for decades, but the first prominent example came only four years after the FCC ruling. In 1964, Billy James Hargis, a conservative evangelical broadcaster, lambasted journalist Fred J. Cook and his anti-Barry Goldwater writings.⁹⁰ Cook argued that the station that Hargis broadcasted on, WGCB out of Red Lion, Pennsylvania, had to give him free airtime to counter Hargis' on-air claims that Cook was an atheistic Communist sympathizer. The station replied that Cook would be required to buy the time.

⁸⁸ Ibid.; Robert Abelman and Hoover Stewart, eds., *Religious Television Controversies and Conclusions* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990).

⁸⁹ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*; Abelman and Stewart, *Religious Television Controversies and Conclusions*.

⁹⁰ Ralph Engelman, *Friendlyvision: Fred Friendly and the Rise and Fall of Television Journalism* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

The FCC stepped in and applied the Fairness Doctrine, requiring the station to give Cook the time free of charge. The FCC decision was later upheld by the Supreme Court in *Red Lion Broadcasting v. FCC*.⁹¹ While the FCC largely steered clear of religious issues in this era, the fact that there was a religious element to this case caused concern for religious broadcasters, and fostered a lingering fear that the FCC might again demand application of the Fairness Doctrine to their programming. The fear fed into religious broadcaster's identity as persecuted victims; even as they were gaining access to more airtime than ever before, the threat of government restriction still loomed.

The three implications of this ruling, the allowance of paid time, the ban on program-length fundraising, and the Fairness Doctrine exemption, all had far-reaching effects on broadcasting. On balance, the 1960 decision had been a mixed bag for conservative broadcasters. The opening up of sustaining time to paid religious programming was a huge win, and one that evangelicals capitalized on in the decades to come. The language around the Fairness Doctrine had both positive and negative implications. On the one hand conservative broadcasters had language from the FCC that their broadcasts were not subject to the Fairness Doctrine. But, on the other hand, the language was vague and they had already seen a moment when the Fairness Doctrine had been applied. The continued ban on program-length fundraising was only negative for broadcasters in the short-term, as they attempted to get and stay on the air, but in the long-term this ban led them to create creative forms of fundraising, and to build an interconnected web of projects that could produce revenue to keep their programs on the air. It took time for broadcasters to fully capitalize on the new opportunities, but the door had been opened.

⁹¹ *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, 395 US 367 (Supreme Court 2).

Note also that despite some points of agreement, this marked a new era in the conflict between the NCC and the NRB. Even after the 1960 decision, the NCC had wanted to restrict fundraising entirely, whereas many of the NRB's broadcasters relied on it to stay on the air. The NCC's restrictive view centered on the concerns that member churches had about evangelicalism generally, that their faith was unseemly and would harm religion more broadly. These concerns increased in light of the ruling's Fairness Doctrine exemption. The NCC felt that conservatives tended toward editorializing, something that had led their predecessor the Federal Council of Churches, to lobby the Federal Communications Commission to limit religious broadcasts to single-speaker formats in the hopes of keeping programming centered on preaching rather than doctrinal or editorial controversies. The full implications of these decisions took time to develop as conservatives, liberals and television stations grappled with how these rules played out in practice.

2.1.2 The 1961 All Channels Receiver Act

While the FCC ruling in 1960 opened up greater possibility for conservatives to get on the air, technology still lagged behind. Broadcasters still faced the fact that television sets were not all equipped to receive all of the UHF and VHF frequencies that evangelicals were broadcasting on. The lack of reception meant that even if broadcasters could get on the air, many people did not have a television set that could actually receive their signal. In practical terms, the smaller audience meant less money and fewer evangelicals who could afford airtime. Then, in 1961, the United States Congress passed a law that opened the floodgates for access; the All Channels Receiver Act required that

all televisions be manufactured with the capability to receive both UHF and VHF frequencies.⁹² This removed the often-costly hurdle for consumers to purchase their own antennae to receive all stations. While the transition was not immediate (only new television sets came fully equipped) the fact that station reception was standardized meant that broadcasters could count on a larger viewer base and an economic critical mass was achieved. The larger audience meant more donations, and more donations meant that more ministers could get, and stay, on the air. The continued growth of television's reach meant more opportunities for evangelicals to expand their outreach.

2.1.3 The 1967 Production Cost Decision

The final pivotal FCC decision of the sixties came in 1967, and again concerned the rules that regulated sustaining time. The 1960 decision had split sustaining time into two columns: paid and free. The 1967 ruling stipulated that networks now had to pay the production costs of any sustaining time programming that aired for free.⁹³ The liberal NCC had long maintained that religious programming time should not be bought and had relied exclusively on free airtime. Obviously, networks were not especially interested in spending any more money than they had to on these productions, especially since they were already giving away the airtime for free. Thus networks shifted even further towards the paid model of sustaining time. As the networks shifted away from the now even more expensive free airtime, NCC broadcasts were cut, as networks came to satisfy their public service sustaining time obligation with other programming, including conservative paid

⁹² Lawrence Longley, "The FCC and the All-Channel Receiver Bill of 1962," *Journal of Broadcasting*, Summer 1969.

⁹³ Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

time broadcasts. The NCC had long relied on the institutional support of the networks. They had not built up fundraising networks, nor had they incorporated fundraising into their broadcasts, so they were not in a position to adapt to the loss of network support and soon they simply lost out on airtime all together.

In contrast to the liberals, conservatives had been shut out from the free sustaining time since the beginning of television. Conservative broadcasters had spent decades building up their own network of institutional knowledge and fundraising strategies. As a result, conservatives were able to capitalize on the regulation change and increase their share of religious broadcasting. Networks still had the same amount of sustaining time hours to fill, and conservatives were ready to seize that now available time.

The consequences of the FCC decisions and the All Channel Receivers Act would not be fully realized until well into the 1970s, as individuals like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Jim Bakker built their empires, and the National Religious Broadcasters came into their own. But the changed regulations of the 1960s came at crucial moment where television as a medium was growing, and as evangelicals were engaging more and more with the public.

2.2 Pat Robertson and CBN

“I’m Pat Robertson...God has sent me here to buy your television station.”⁹⁴
-Pat Robertson, 1960

Marion Gordon “Pat” Robertson followed God’s directions to the crossroads of Southern Virginia and started a television revolution. The Christian Broadcast Network

⁹⁴ Pat Robertson and Jamie Buckingham, *Shout It from the Houseltops* (Bridge Logos Foundation, 1972), 146.

was the first successful Christian television station, and its approach became a blueprint that many later stations would follow. Similarly, in its founder, Pat Robertson, we can find an archetypical story of an everyday man who became a self-proclaimed savior of souls.

Pat Robertson tells the creation story of CBN as a tale of seventy dollars and divine inspiration. His autobiography *Shout it from the Housetops*, co-written with Jamie Buckingham, is the story of Robertson's conversion from sinner to saint to media mogul. Robertson describes being driven by faith that he could not fail, and tells a story marked by divine interventions and success against all odds.⁹⁵

The book begins with Robertson's reminiscing about his pre-saved life and the day when he came home to his wife Dede who relayed to Robertson that they had a visit from their local minister. Robertson explains his cringing reaction to the minister's presence in their home as he "glanced up at the print of the huge nude by Modigliani hanging over the sofa and remembered how funny it had seemed when we sat around drinking and laughing and Dede's father had quipped, 'If you kids ever get hungry, you can live off that hunk of beef for a month.'"⁹⁶ From there, Robertson describes the couple's jet-set tastes, drinking-centered lifestyle and casual relationship with Christianity. The second chapter of the book titled "From Swinger to Saint," describes Robertson's quick and complete transformation to a true, born again Christian. Robertson describes his determination and commitment as he tells Dede that he is 'saved,' contrasting his own demeanor with his wife's hysterical reaction as Robertson pours their

⁹⁵ Robertson and Buckingham, *Shout It from the Housetops*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

liquor collection down the drain.⁹⁷ From there, Robertson, with Dede by his side, describes his triumphant rise to television mogul.

While the book seems conveniently remembered, gracefully hitting all the right beats, that fact in itself offers a telling insight into how Robertson views his own story, and how he has been deeply involved in his own personal mythmaking. It is not without a sinner's start that the conversion of faith truly resonates. But within that sinner's heart Robertson insists that there was always a place for god; what he was lacking was a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Robertson crafts his story in a way that lets him have it both ways: to show that he was once in need of salvation, but that he was never less than pure. Robertson's personal telling of his life's story contrasts significantly with details that came out when he ran for President in 1988, which makes Robertson's retelling all the more revealing.⁹⁸

While extraordinary in scale, Robertson's story is a pattern familiar to the conversion narrative common for evangelicals: a sinner finds Jesus and with Him finds great success. Further, the story of CBN itself is common in evangelical media ministries: starting with nothing and counting on the Lord to provide financially for the endeavor. Throughout religious broadcasting there is a familiar pattern to stories that differ only in their details: financial success demonstrates providence.⁹⁹ Often it is the story of starting with nothing, and making it. Or, having nothing and taking a leap of faith, like Robertson who signed a forty thousand dollar contract which he could not pay for, but nevertheless

⁹⁷ Robertson and Buckingham, *Shout It from the Housetops*.

⁹⁸ "Former Marines' Testimony Backs Congressmen In Pat Robertson Suit," *The Associated Press*, June 12, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁹⁹ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*, 59.

believed that his audience would sustain him.¹⁰⁰ It is common for evangelical broadcasters to tell the story of their lives in this mold, and to suggest that their gospel of wealth can be the viewers' too.

Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcast Network (CBN) was the first *successful* Christian station but it was not the first Christian television station attempted. Months before his death, the always-groundbreaking Percy Crawford purchased WPCA in Philadelphia.¹⁰¹ However, the station could not survive without Crawford's charisma and innovative spirit and folded soon after his death in 1960. Thus, when Robertson went on the air in 1961, he was in truly uncharted waters. CBN began with limited broadcast reach, and only ran from 7pm to 10pm every night. The station did not have any advertisements and created its own programming, along with occasionally airing free travel films when they didn't have enough of their own material. This model limped along for the first few years until CBN conducted its first telethon in 1963 in order to raise money for the next year's budget. Stations were allowed to a limited number of fundraisers a year and only a portion of any fundraising program could be exclusively about raising funds. Thus, entertainment, sermons and prayers were a part of all on-air fundraising. Robertson asked for 700 loyal viewers to become regular contributors of just \$10 a month to keep the station to stay on the air. The telethon was successful and the impact of that group of 700 donors would live on as *The 700 Club*, the flagship program of the network, still airing daily to this day.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Robertson and Buckingham, *Shout It from the Housetops*.

¹⁰¹ Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)*; "Papers of Percy Bartimus Crawford and Ruth Crawford Porter - Collection 357."

¹⁰² Robertson and Buckingham, *Shout It from the Housetops*; David John Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007).

While enough funds were raised to keep CBN going into 1964, the station was still burdened by growing expenses. The success of the initial telethon soon inspired a recurring telethon program every day on the network.¹⁰³ The story of how *The 700 Club* went from a one-time fundraiser to the mainstay of the network is contested. Both Pat Robertson and Jim Bakker take credit. What is clear is that the initial telethon with the original 700 viewers that saved the station took place in 1963 before Bakker had joined CBN. However, the show was not immediately turned into a nightly program; it wasn't until Bakker arrived at the station in 1965 that the transformation of the show took place.¹⁰⁴

Jim Bakker served as the original host of the nightly program. His charismatic and improvisational style created an engaging if unpredictable show every night. Bakker's greatest innovation was his ability to co-opt secular culture, first with the puppet show *Come on Over* that had brought Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker to CBN in the first place, and again later when *The 700 Club* adopted a late-night talk show format.¹⁰⁵ This approach, of using popular, secular formats to deliver a religious message, is commonplace now. But it was revolutionary at the time and was an important milestone in religious television.

2.2.1 Jim Bakker the Charismatic

The story of CBN and the trajectory of religious broadcasting cannot be told without understanding the personality and plight of Jim Bakker. Bakker was the itinerant

¹⁰³ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*, 106.

¹⁰⁴ Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*; Robertson and Buckingham, *Shout It from the Housetops*; John Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁰⁵ Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*.

trailblazer of religious television. Bakker was born in Muskegon, Michigan. He trained at North Central University, a Bible college affiliated with the Assemblies of God, where he met his future wife Tammy Faye.¹⁰⁶ Bakker came to religious television through different means than many broadcasters who worked their way to the air after ministering at a physical church. Rather, Bakker got his start with a religious puppet show that he would perform with his wife Tammy Faye. Bakker caught the eye of Robertson and began performing the show five days a week on CBN starting in 1965. *Come on Over* was a great success and eventually renamed *The Jim and Tammy Show*.¹⁰⁷

Bakker combined star power with financial success while at CBN, leading to a financially stable model of growth that would expand the network, and eventually support Robertson's broader endeavors. The synergy created by Robertson and Bakker was unparalleled in religious broadcasting; their successes were only equaled by their controversies. The Bakkers had received favorable contract terms from Robertson, giving them a housing allowance and clothing, among other perks. Meanwhile, the Bakkers were also selling records, books, and Suzie Moppet dolls based on their successful children's show.¹⁰⁸ They shared none of their merchandizing profits with the CBN network that had brought them their fame. By the end of the sixties the Bakkers were making more money than Robertson himself. Clashes ensued between Robertson and Bakker over the flashy lifestyle the Bakkers were now living. Furthermore, others at the network were jealous of the favoritism they felt the Bakkers received.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

¹⁰⁷ Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

¹⁰⁸ Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

¹⁰⁹ Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*; Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*.

2.2.2 An Era of Bad Blood

The Bakkers eventually left CBN in 1972 on poor terms. Both Bakker and Robertson have remained reticent to talk about the specifics of their parting. Bakker offered an account of divine inspiration leading him elsewhere, and Robertson declined to address the situation publicly. However, their professional split was not the end of the controversy between the two.¹¹⁰ After leaving CBN, the Bakkers went west to California and linked up with religious television producer Paul Crouch, helping him launch Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) and its signature program “Praise The Lord (PTL),” which more fully realized Bakker’s dream of a religious talk show.¹¹¹ PTL was too close to *The 700 Club* format for Robertson’s liking, however, creating a further rift between the two men.

Further conflict arose when the new and struggling TBN began airing old episodes of *The Jim and Tammy Show*, which had been shot by CBN and smuggled out by CBN employees sympathetic to the Bakkers.¹¹² This infuriated Robertson, who stopped re-airing the program on CBN in an effort to cut all connections between his network and the Bakkers.¹¹³ Robertson did not want to keep promoting a man that he disapproved of. Since Bakker’s career had taken off as a result of his time at CBN, Robertson was concerned that the way Bakker continued to handle himself would reflect

¹¹⁰ Art Harris and Michael Isikoff, “Robertson’s Bakker Connection,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 1988, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1988/02/06/robotsons-bakker-connection/f558f67c-c4f5-489c-b733-e768d1daacdc/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.325c9e799f00.

¹¹¹ Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s Evangelical Empire*; Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*.

¹¹² Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*.

¹¹³ Ibid.

back on Robertson. Further, Robertson resented Bakker for taking credit for successes that Robertson felt he was responsible for.

However, soon enough, the Bakkers were forced out of TBN due to conflicts with Crouch over their vision for the show and, once again, their extravagant lifestyle reflecting poorly on the organization and creating animosity with colleagues. Taking the PTL moniker with them, they rebranded the program to stand for “People That Love,” in order to differentiate itself from the PTL program that continued to air on TBN. The new PTL Club was a thinly disguised combination of their two previous programs *The 700 Club* and *Praise The Lord*. The new *PTL* more fully realized Bakker’s hope of a religious Hollywood-style variety talk show that featured Tammy Faye alternately breaking into song and into tears. The Bakkers’ conflicts with Robertson and Crouch, their lavish spending, and the loyalty they inspired in viewers all foreshadowed their eventual rise and demise in the eighties.

The relationship between Bakker and Robertson, while unique in many ways, provides insight into the tension within evangelical broadcasters’ relationships. While all religious broadcasters nominally share the goal of bringing souls to Christ, they are competing for limited viewers and viewers’ limited dollars. Especially in the early days of religious television, broadcasters relied on one another in order to get enough programming to fill out their airtime schedules. However, competition and revenues always created an inherent tension within these relationships. The fracturing of these relationships would come into the greatest relief in the late 1980s when financial scandals rocked the broader conservative broadcasting community. Ministers turned on ministers and stories of open conflict and hostile takeovers made front-page news.

This is not the end of the story of CBN, but we will set it aside for now with the lesson that its rise was self-funded, populist and influenced the creation of other networks. Throughout the 1960s, Robertson built up the CBN broadcast range and introduced a simulcast that could be heard on the radio. CBN bought out 5 radio stations throughout the country and began to grow internationally with a radio station in Colombia. But as we will discuss later, it was in the late 1970s that Robertson and CBN would begin to fully realize the extent of their power.

2.3 The NRB in the Armstrong Era

By 1960, the NRB had enough influence in Washington that members of congress would attend NRB functions, and its members had communication with top officials at the White House.¹¹⁴ But while it had made progress, the organization still hadn't found its professional footing, and was struggling to get to the next level of professionalization and influence. The NRB still looked to the National Association of Evangelicals on key decisions, its magazine still amounted to little more than a seasonal newsletter, and its yearly convention program was a simple folded and stapled paper pamphlet. The executive committee was still struggling to define exactly who they were as an organization, what their role was, and who their members were. Further, the organization had never been on especially stable financial footing.¹¹⁵ The development of the NRB into a more powerful and professional organization is important to understanding the developing network that supported the expansion of religious broadcasting. Further, their development as an advocacy organization created connections within the government and

¹¹⁴ "Record of Discussion: Executive Committee of National Religious Broadcasters," January 19, 1960, 209 NRB Correspondence, Minutes, Convention notes, 1960, Billy Graham Center Archives.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

built up their institutional knowledge, which was then mobilized as religious broadcasters and evangelicals became more overtly political.

2.3.1 A Lack of Vision

The 1960 executive board meetings found the NRB grappling with its financial sustainability, as well as questions about who could join the organization and what the role of the organization should be in advocating for broadcasters. Their financial report showed that they had \$646 on hand, \$600 from convention registrations and \$46.66 from regular funds.¹¹⁶ Overcoming the current fiscal hardships and creating a sustainable model for the organization was a topic of discussion at each of the meetings that year. But each approach was piecemeal, without a holistic, systematic way forward. Each decision was taken one at a time, with larger questions resulting in the formation of a committee to explore it further.

This lack of vision was evident in the organization's approach to fundraising. Rather than considering additional revenue streams or strategies, discussions were restricted to ways that revenue from membership dues could be increased. The organization was still trying to grow its membership numbers, so that it had the standing to call itself the leader of religious broadcasters, but the NRB also needed as much money as possible in order to actually advocate on behalf of those members. The agreement in 1960 was that smaller broadcasters could continue their membership fee of only \$25 a year, but larger organizations should be encouraged to contribute \$250, which some had already been doing voluntarily, while \$100 might be a suitable amount for others.¹¹⁷ In

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

part the cordial tone of asking larger members to volunteer to pay more money was an outgrowth of their Christian purpose and background. The idea of giving for the greater cause was a recognizable approach to raising funds; just as churches asked for donations, so would the NRB.

Of course, the NRB was not actually a church. In fact, by 1960 the NRB was still not sure exactly who they were representing or what entities could be members. Did radio stations qualify? Owners? Operators? What about foreign missions?¹¹⁸ The NRB did not just accept any application to join as a member of the association. For instance the NRB was not sure how to handle an application from the Voice of Prophecy, a long-running Seventh-day Adventist radio broadcast. Conservative evangelicals had long-held concerns about whether Adventists could be accepted into their evangelical fold and therefore the application was brought before the executive committee for review due to potential issues with their membership.

This brings us to another problem facing the NRB: its lack of independence from the National Association of Evangelicals. It was decided that the NRB needed to take the question of Voice of Prophecy's membership to the NAE for consultation. While a separate organization, the NRB still conceived of itself as serving the needs of the NAE and therefore they did not want to admit a new member that might not be acceptable to the NAE.¹¹⁹

The relationship between the National Association of Evangelicals and the NRB was complicated and adapted as each organization grew and faced challenges. The NRB was a direct outshoot from the NAE; National Religious Broadcasters' members also

¹¹⁸ "Record of Discussion: Executive Committee of National Religious Broadcasters," April 26, 1960, 209 NRB Correspondence, Minutes, Convention notes, 1960, Billy Graham Center Archives.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

worked with the NAE, and in the end both groups' mission was to spread the gospel. While the support from the National Association of Evangelicals was crucial, at times it also held the NRB back from defining itself in its own terms as they depended on the NAE to set their membership requirements and agenda. The NRB was interested in making sure that they were still serving the larger purpose of the NAE and in 1960 proposed a joint committee with three representatives from each in order to discuss plans and programs for the upcoming year.¹²⁰

The question of what the NRB should do as an organization was also unresolved. The NRB advocated with the FCC on behalf of members trying to gain station licenses, but when and how the NRB should get involved in other matters was unclear. For instance, should they intervene when a member was involved in a legal dispute?¹²¹ The NRB had offices in Washington, D.C. from the start, but beyond fostering general relationships with the FCC and politicians, the board had not set a clear guide for what actions the group should take beyond that.

At the 1960 meeting the board debated how active the NRB should be with respect to exerting influence, "It was pointed out that NRB is not a pressure group, but that it is dedicated to the cause of advancing the welfare of religious radio and television broadcasting."¹²² The main resolution at the time was that the organization itself and its members should make a more concerted effort to connect with Congress, and encouraged their members to do the same. For instance, they asked their broadcasters to invite members of Congress to the Congressional Breakfast where politicians and broadcasters

¹²⁰ "Record of Discussion: Executive Committee of National Religious Broadcasters," January 19, 1960.

¹²¹ "Record of Discussion: Executive Committee of National Religious Broadcasters," April 26, 1960.

¹²² "Record of Discussion: Executive Committee of National Religious Broadcasters," January 19, 1960.

could mingle.¹²³ The NRB itself also presented written citations to both President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon thanking them for their work and bestowing prayers upon them.¹²⁴ This period involved activities in the political realm, but the NRB did not yet see itself as political. Even still, this was a period where the NRB established relationships with politicians and built its institutional knowledge about how things worked in Washington. While the NRB was still trying to define itself during this period, the knowledge and relationships it was forming would prove foundational as the organization took on a more public role in the following decades.

2.3.2 An Unmet Need for Professionalism

One action had been clear from the start, and came into relief through the battles religious broadcasters faced with the FCC: religious broadcasters needed to professionalize. In order to promote religious television, both with the public and with government officials, the standards of religious broadcasting had to keep pace with secular television. Network television, thanks to the resources afforded by advertising revenue, had become polished and entertaining. Audiences were quickly becoming more sophisticated in their consumption. The stark contrast between prime-time television and religious paid programming was jarring, and the viewers were turning the channel.

Especially in the early years, the NRB focused on improving the technical execution of religious programming. The ongoing attacks from the liberal National Council of Churches focused on subpar broadcasts produced by the conservatives: it was the feeling of the NRB that if any of their member broadcasts were substandard, it could

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

hold back the progress of all broadcasters. This push for technical improvements was a centerpiece for the NRB both in its code of ethics, but also in respect to the kinds of training and materials the group would focus on producing. It is this early effort to develop their own means of quality productions that helps to set the stage for evangelical Christians, rather than liberal Christians, to capitalize on the expansion of television broadcasting.

2.3.3 A Change in Leadership

The President of the NRB, Eugene R. Bertermann, had been involved in the group since the beginning, and was one of the central voices that advocated for the creation of the media-specific task group at the 1944 NAE convention. He had been Walter Maier's business manager and involved in the production of *The Lutheran Hour* before he served as President of the NRB from 1957 to 1975, after which he stayed on as the secretary of the Board until his death in 1983.¹²⁵ While Bertermann had the best interests of the organization at heart, the manner in which he was running the organization in the early sixties was out of step with the growth of television, and broader changes in society and technology. The organization was slow to react to changes, still deferred to the NAE, and was struggling to remain financially solvent. The NRB did not come into its own until 1966 when Ben Armstrong became the NRB's chief executive.¹²⁶

Ben Armstrong, like many key figures in religious broadcasting, came out of radio, having worked at Trans World Radio in Chatham, New Jersey and Monte Carlo,

¹²⁵ "Collection 209 Papers of Eugene R. Bertermann, 1955-1981 | Billy Graham Center Archives," accessed March 13, 2019, <https://archon.wheaton.edu/?p=collections/controlcard&id=1352>.

¹²⁶ Ben Armstrong, "Ben Armstrong Biography," News from NRB (National Religious Broadcasters, n.d.), 309 Dr. Armstrong's Bio, Billy Graham Center Archives.

Monaco.¹²⁷ And like many of the ministers who went on to broadcast ministries, Armstrong served as a pastor of churches in the New York Metropolitan area.¹²⁸ Born in 1933, Armstrong graduated from Stony Brook School, and then studied at Houghton and Nyack College, a Christian School in New York. He studied theology at Princeton and Union Seminaries and was ordained in the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. He also earned a PhD from New York University in mass communications.¹²⁹ Armstrong brought his training and experience in communications and theology to bear at the NRB. He began professionalizing and expanding the organization and, crucially, continued to build relationships with individuals involved in education and broadcasting across the country.

Armstrong brought much-needed vision to the NRB, and moved quickly to address its financial and professional shortcomings. Under his leadership, the convention was expanded to include several smaller regional conventions each year. The organization's magazine, *Religious Broadcasting*, was transformed into a glossy seasonal, and then monthly, publication. Under his leadership, the political advocacy of the NRB became much more central to the organization's vision.

One of the most important innovations that Ben Armstrong brought to the NRB was the expansion of the education programs available to broadcasters. There had previously been workshops at NRB conventions, but fostering the next generation of broadcasters was not identified as an explicit goal. In 1969, Armstrong began working with alma mater Nyack College and developed a two-week summer course. Armstrong would run the course, which consisted of his lectures and guest lectures from notable

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

figures in broadcasting. The course was described in a letter to Harold Boon, President of Nyack College as:

An intensive course on religious broadcasting by radio and television in the space age. Lectures on communication theory and practice will be delivered in the morning by Dr. Armstrong and visiting instructors. In the afternoon laboratory sessions will demonstrate techniques of production. Visits to stations, network production and transmission centers in the greater New York area will be afforded.¹³⁰

As with so many endeavors in religious broadcasting's story, Armstrong had an idea, but not the money to bring it to fruition. So when rounding up support and lecturers for his summer course, Armstrong asked participants to take a leap of faith. In a letter asking evangelist Phill Butler to lecture for the course, Armstrong stated that they did not have any funds to pay him with upfront, and could not even pay for his flight. But Armstrong had faith that enrollment would provide the funds for them to cover his travel, "Are you ready for this 'leap of faith'? I admit that the leap is fairly extensive since it covers the entire width of our country. However I have never known you to back away from a challenge and especially a 'first' in the field of gospel broadcasting."¹³¹ Butler leapt, and the course was successful.

Eventually this two-week summer course model would be borrowed from, expanded, and turned into individual workshops given at other institutions. While Armstrong's idea of a specific course in broadcasting was innovative, it was in line with the impulse towards education and infrastructure-building that ran throughout the evangelical community. Oral Roberts University had been established in 1965, Fuller Theological Seminary, which had been founded in 1947 was expanding rapidly, and

¹³⁰ Ben Armstrong, "To Harold Boon, President of Nyack College Re: Communication Workshop," September 25, 1969, Billy Graham Center Archives.

¹³¹ Ben Armstrong, "To Phill Butler Re: Communication Workshop," January 8, 1970, Billy Graham Center Archives.

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary formed in 1969 through a merger of two institutions. Armstrong envisioned training not only students, but practicing broadcasters and ministers, giving them practical education that could be put to use right away.

In his first few years at the NRB, Armstrong had more than doubled the member organizations, taking them from 109 organizations in 1967 to 260 members in 1969.¹³² The 26th Annual convention had 500 delegates, and featured workshops and seminars for program producers, religious stations and missionary broadcasters “led by distinguished leaders in the field of religious broadcasting from all over the world.”¹³³ There was a featured FCC panel that included members from different divisions of the FCC who were available to answer questions.¹³⁴ Other events associated with the Convention were a Congressional Breakfast with members from the House and Senate in attendance, a White House reception, and a Tea at the Senate for ladies and wives to attend. This shift towards engagement with government officials on questions strictly related to broadcasting laid the groundwork that evangelicals would build upon as their political interests broadened beyond media.

2.3.4 Showing Value to Members

The NRB advocated for broadcasters in Washington, but equally important was advocating to its own members about the difference the NRB was making on their behalf. This became crucial as the financial pressures on the organization grew. Showing that they were influencers on things that mattered to members was important to ensuring the

¹³² “Convention,” *National Religious Broadcasters*, n.d., Billy Graham Center Archives; “The Editor’s Word,” *Religious Broadcasting*, June 1969.

¹³³ “Convention.”

¹³⁴ Ibid.

financial stability going forward.¹³⁵ Since the NRB magazine, *Religious Broadcasting*, only came out seasonally at the time, the organization issued a monthly newsletter called *Hotline*, which was edited and often written by Armstrong, in order to update members on the NRB's latest accomplishments.

Rulings by the FCC were the most tangible way for the NRB to tout their influence, and the FCC's rulings around the growing technology of cable (formerly called CATV) outlined the central battleground of the late seventies. The new technology was being defined by the FCC, and the rules it was creating could drastically affect the fortunes of conservative broadcasting. A major point of contention was the definition of 'specialty stations.' At the time, cable providers had a quota of how many specialty stations could be included in a cable package for a given area. Therefore, being designated as a specialty station put you in direct competition with other specialty stations for the limited number of spots available in cable packages. In February 1976, the FCC defined specialty stations as "a commercial television broadcast station that generally carries foreign language, religious and/or automated programming in one-third of weekly prime time hours."¹³⁶ Once religion was categorized in the specialty category, the NRB used the rhetorical position that religious broadcasters were victims, once again held back and restricted in their access to the airways. Broadcasters, and evangelicals more broadly, were under attack again, and in response to the 1976 FCC ruling the NRB stated:

Both NRB and CBN fought back with briefs answering the basic objections of NAB, NCTA and others. The opposition attacked various parts of Section 76.5

¹³⁵ Ben Armstrong, "Hotline" (National Religious Broadcasters, August 1976), Billy Graham Center Archives.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

(kk). Zeroing in on the basic but unspoken problem – the reluctance of cable systems to add specialty stations as part of their quota of independent signals.¹³⁷

Through their advocacy, the NRB and CBN convinced the FCC to eliminate the quota limit on how many specialty stations a cable system could carry, thereby removing a major hurdle that kept religious stations out of cable packages. Using the victory as an example of their success, the NRB wanted to highlight the influence they had on the decision, but also wanted to applaud the FCC and position themselves as allies in the hopes that the FCC would continue to rule in their favor:

The FCC has again acted in favor of a rule which opens new opportunities for religious programming and stations to be carried on cable TV. The latest FCC opinion and order (July 21, 1976) clearly champions the cause of religious broadcasting.¹³⁸

Armstrong cited that in just the few months between the initial decision in February and the July decision, “several new religious specialty stations have come on the air across the country.”¹³⁹ Armstrong let NRB members know how each decision was connected to religious broadcasting’s overarching mission to spread the Gospel, how this decision effected that mission:

The FCC decision covering CATV carriage of specialty stations has important ramifications for everyone interested in religious programming...not just broadcasters, but audiences and church groups, too...because the ruling opens a new avenue for communicating the gospel through the local CATV system. In the past, when CATV operators were allowed to carry only a limited number of distant signals (of all types), they tended to overlook religious broadcasters, choosing instead popular out-of-town entertainment type stations. Now, under the new rules, the CATV operator can carry BOTH the independent stations which will attract mass audiences and the specialty stations which will attract specific audiences.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

This FCC decision was also important because it implied that religious broadcasters would benefit not only from a removal of limits on the types of specialty stations, but they also would benefit from being included in cable bundles with large audiences that were drawn in by the entertainment stations.

A central tactic employed by Armstrong was that every piece of news or ruling by the FCC was paired with a plea for action:

This change gives religious TV stations an unprecedented opportunity to be on CATV systems outside their local areas, reaching new viewers in cities across the country. However, it's still imperative to sell CATV operators on the benefits of religious programming...since the ruling does not obligate them to add religious stations, but only makes it possible for them to carry specialty stations without penalizing their other offerings. As a Christian TV broadcaster, it's up to you to prove to the CATV operator that your specialty station can bring more subscribers, or can make current subscribers happier with their service. Christian audiences and local church groups can also help by asking their local systems to provide more selection of religious programs. CATV managers, like other broadcasters, are responsive to audience suggestions...and impressed by viewing statistics from other markets.¹⁴¹

Not unlike the television ministers he was working on behalf of, Armstrong was looking to connect with his audience, show them why his work mattered, and to make it their work too. He wanted to turn the actions of the NRB into the actions of many individuals. This kind of encouragement of grassroots action became a mainstay of the evangelicals, and eventually the New Right, which we will discuss in coming chapters.

An essential piece of Armstrong's efforts was to build the prestige of the organization. Seeking to become the standard in religious broadcasting, NRB encouraged members to

Identify your organization as one that is pledged to maintaining the highest standards in religious broadcasting. Show your membership in NRB by including the NRB logo in your letterhead, publications, and other printed materials. The

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

new NRB logo sheet presents over 50 designs in a range of sizes, all ready for camera.¹⁴²

In this way the NRB sought to raise its own profile and establish itself as a seal of approval. If they created cross-brand recognition, they could raise the profile of evangelicalism in general. Through improving its own organization and raising its profile, the NRB began to center itself within religious broadcasting, a role that would only increase in the coming years.

2.3.5 Adaptation and Professionalization

A central piece of Armstrong's modernization efforts at the NRB was to take a more systematic approach to addressing issues faced by the organization. He sought to improve the products created by the NRB while at the same time increasing the company's revenues, even in the face of the economic crises of the seventies. This would involve an overhauling of the organization's publications, and seeking financial partnerships with various organizations for NRB projects.

Starting in January 1976, the NRB's *Religious Broadcasting* magazine transformed from a more basic newsletter to a quality publication that had relevant information for its readers, but also appealed to advertisers,

The two basic innovations were the use of coated paper and modern journalistic techniques. We had a three year plan in mind: First year – Upgrade the editorial quality of the magazine. Second Year – Improve advertising revenues cut cover out-of-pocket costs and prepare for conversion to a monthly schedule. Third Year – Introduce monthly publication schedule and increase advertising revenues to cover all costs.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Audrey Langdon, "A Proposal for Family Foundation To Underwrite the Expansion of Christian Publication," April 8, 1977, 309 Magazine Expansion Proposal, Billy Graham Center Archives.

The NRB sought financial partnership with the religious advocacy group the Family Foundation to help them to execute these changes to the magazine. In their negotiations they proposed that:

We've reached the point where we are ready to expand the magazine to a monthly schedule and to put it on a self-sustaining basis. From the editorial point of view, a monthly (issued 10 times a year – skipping July and August) will strengthen the magazine as an authoritative voice in religious communications. It will also open the way for regular columns on books, broadcasting equipment, and letters to the editor. The first two will help attract more advertisers in two lucrative markets, which we have scarcely touched. Also, greater frequency will help attract new advertisers and will produce more business from current advertisers.¹⁴⁴

While the production schedule, journalism and physical appearance of the magazine were already planned prior to the partnership, the NRB was not opposed to more fundamental changes in the magazine if the proposed merger went through. They proposed two options:

First, an expansion of Religious Broadcasting to serve a broader segment of Christian leaders. This would be an important contribution to the evangelical community. The second would be a magazine which would address the consumers rather than the creators of Christian media and would serve the needs of the evangelical community at large.¹⁴⁵

The NRB's willingness to take the magazine in two very different directions shows how the organization was ready to adapt to the new financial and social realities of the seventies. They were looking to survive and serve, but how and with whom was open for negotiation. This flexibility marked a stark contrast from the organization's previous era.

The modernization of 1976 also included a set of goals and objectives to reorient the organization in light of financial realities and a growing awareness of evangelicalism. This included detailing exactly what the organization's objectives were in terms of two goals: "I. Striving for excellence in religious broadcasting. II. Full access to the media for

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

gospel broadcasting.”¹⁴⁶ This leadership also involved clearly detailing what fulfilling these objectives looked like, something that had been lack in the sixties:

To preserve and protect the right of religious broadcasters by: (a) securing for its members, and for other persons and organizations engaged in broadcasting such programs, adequate, fair and regular access to the radio and television listening public through the use of existing and future broadcasting stations, including satellites, networks, cable systems, both aural and visual; (b) protecting its members and other such persons and organizations from being barred from such access and from being unjustly and unreasonably subjected to injury, obstacle, restriction or discrimination in obtaining and continuing to have such access; and (c) promoting or opposing in every lawful and proper manner, governmental laws and regulations and business customs and practices according to whether or not they further or hinder the accomplishment of these objectives.¹⁴⁷

With objectives clearly identified, the organization did not shy away from employing the broader rhetorical position of evangelicals under attack and in so doing, placed the NRB as the noble defenders of faith in broadcasting:

In broader terms NRB cultivates good relationships with FCC and National Association Broadcasters. NRB is alert to the ever-present threats and the constant need to defend our right to access. Thus gospel broadcasting is promoting in emergency situations on a continuing basis. The national office should provide leadership in advancing the cause and the good name of gospel broadcasting.¹⁴⁸

Slowly but surely Armstrong was modernizing the NRB. He was building its ranks, professionalizing the organization, and turning the organization’s mission into action. These actions would become increasingly consequential as evangelicals began to advocate around issues beyond broadcasting. The NRB’s work helped to raise the visibility of the broadcasters who would become the voice and leaders of this more political evangelicalism.

¹⁴⁶ “Goals and Objectives” (National Religious Broadcasters, 1976), 309 Goals and Objectives 1976, Billy Graham Center Archives.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

2.3.6 The Electric Church

One of Armstrong's greatest contributions was coining the term 'the electric church,' publishing a book by that title in 1979. He defined the concept as:

Christian Broadcasters who are involved in the media, in other words either radio or television or cable or satellite broadcasting, some form of media where we had the great commission in the Bible which our Lord gave to us and before he was sent into Heaven he said 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel' and we have Christian people who in these last days have caught the vision of reaching the world for the Lord Jesus Christ imploring what I call the total miracles of the twentieth century in radio and television.¹⁴⁹

By the end of the seventies, Armstrong estimated that approximately one hundred and thirty million people were weekly congregants in the electric church, and believed that through the power of technology religious broadcasters had the ability to reach everyone in the world.¹⁵⁰ While it was a new concept, its lineage went all the way back to the early church, with worship taking place in homes just as those in the New Testament had.¹⁵¹

The electric church was identified specifically as a born again movement, so while liberal Christians, Catholics and Jews might have televised services they were not a part of Armstrong's mission. This was a new ministry for a new time, and the expanding world demanded a new mode for declaring the Gospel according to Armstrong:

I believe that the electric church is the methodology which God has is using today to reach the greatest number of people in the shortest space of time with the greatest message we possibly can [have.] It doesn't mean that the other methods need to be second rate or in a second class—it just means that God in these last days has somehow smiled on gospel broadcasting—because we realize that today many people can hear the gospel that never heard it before.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Don Robertson, "'Interview of Dr. Ben Armstrong by Don Robertson of InterAction, on the Electric Church and the Great Commission.'" n.d., 2, 309 Box 51, Billy Graham Center Archives.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹⁵¹ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*. 9.

¹⁵² Robertson, "'Interview of Dr. Ben Armstrong by Don Robertson of InterAction, on the Electric Church and the Great Commission.'" 17.

While the business of broadcasting was expensive, Armstrong felt that it was the most cost-effective way to reach people, because you could reach so many, making it the greatest investment in the world of the Christian dollar.¹⁵³ And giving was central to the electric church, “As a part of the Electric Church concept, the listener is conditioned to give and by giving becomes a part of the Electric Church.”¹⁵⁴ It is statements such as this - that directly tie the electric church to raising money - that caused some of the greatest backlash that religious broadcasters would see.

Criticism of the electric church was not limited to one topic and did not emanate from a single group. Armstrong categorized critics into three types: the liberal church (often associated with religious scholar Martin Marty), the conservative church, and non-believers. Their criticisms were also broken down into three categories: money, motives and effectiveness.¹⁵⁵ Armstrong believed that non-believers could never understand the motives of the born again preacher, and were most likely to question the money that broadcasters made, as well as their motives.¹⁵⁶ Conservative churches also had concerns over money, and believed that the electric church was stealing congregants from its pews and money from its coffers, a critique shared by liberal churches. Everett C. Park of United Church of Christ’s office of communication was interviewed in an article about the success of born again broadcasters:

While most of the paid broadcasting is to spread the doctrines of Christian fundamentalist and evangelicals, he complains, ‘a lot of the money in their mail comes out of the pulpits of liberal churches.’ He says this happens because liberal

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Jim Montgomery, “The Electric Church: Religious Broadcasting Becomes Big Business, Spreading Across U.S. Born-Again Christians Foot Most of Bills for Shows: Success of Jerry Falwell. Aim: Hearts and Pocketbooks,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 1978, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

¹⁵⁵ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*. 14-16.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 16.

churches ‘tell you the path isn’t clear or easy,’ but their members ‘want simple answers’ and that’s what the fundamentalist broadcasts seem to provide.’¹⁵⁷

Interestingly, on this critique from liberals, Armstrong would likely have agreed, arguing that liberal churches were not providing people with what they needed. The electric church was preaching the true gospel and providing answers.

For his fellow conservative broadcasters, Armstrong argued that concern over stealing congregants had existed since religion had taken to the radio, and there was now an anxiety within the religious community that television would somehow replace the physical church.¹⁵⁸ A common fear was that churches would lose congregants and money, and thereby not only would these churches fold, but so would their community connections and outreach. Armstrong addressed this concern head-on, arguing that as had been the case with radio, the introduction of television was simply another tool for the lord, one to be added to the arsenal of faith, not to replace the physical church. In addition, the increased accessibility for those who had not yet found a church, or were unable to attend church for whatever reason, could now be included in the congregation.¹⁵⁹

Furthermore, when asked about losing the interpersonal fellowship of a physical church because of the electric church, Armstrong was optimistic that the relationship between the local church and the electric church could be mutually beneficial. He saw the electric church as a ‘recruiting agency’ for the local church.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, he argued

¹⁵⁷ Montgomery, “The Electric Church: Religious Broadcasting Becomes Big Business, Spreading Across U.S. Born-Again Christians Foot Most of Bills for Shows: Success of Jerry Falwell. Aim: Hearts and Pocketbooks.”

¹⁵⁸ Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America*.

¹⁵⁹ Robertson, “Interview of Dr. Ben Armstrong by Don Robertson of InterAction, on the Electric Church and the Great Commission.”, 3.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

that the electric church was the only way for someone who was homebound to find Jesus.¹⁶¹ In fact, Armstrong believed that

the primary goal of the electric church is to make sure that people hear the gospel clearly and the gospel is made...attractive by means of the right technology and so ...in religious broadcasting ... that people find the way...into the fellowship of believers the coin we call it the group of people who basically then are concerned about nurture and building up the Christian faith by means of Bible study and prayer and preaching and the kind of world experiences which we know to be absolutely essential in the local church.¹⁶²

He conceived of his work and the NRB as essential in aiding the work of the electric church, as such he was its strongest advocate.

Armstrong was not afraid to take credit for his successes and when recounting the work of the NRB he was not afraid to highlight his own role. He touted his success in convincing media expert and author Marshall McLuhan to speak at the 1970 NRB convention without his honorarium, acknowledged his foresight in anticipating the turn to media before anyone else, and noted his own ability to anticipate both the upsides and drawbacks of the media message.¹⁶³

Armstrong's personal facility with biblical language comes through in his work and allows him to rally the support of his broadcasters. Further, he uses biblical passages to justify the role of the electric church, and also to address its critics.¹⁶⁴ Self-confidence and biblical familiarity were crucial for anyone attempting to lead a religious organization, especially one that was filled with charismatic superstar personalities. Armstrong would need all of his abilities as the seventies came to a close; the NRB faced

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*. 11-16.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 15.

more financial trouble and religious broadcasting soared to its greatest successes, but also faced its most public failures.

The development of the National Religious Broadcasters, the start of Christian Broadcast Network, and the changing regulations of television were consequential enough within their time. But, crucially, this period illustrates the early engagement and development of the structures and advocacy that led to the explosion of religious broadcasting. The advocacy around government regulation developed the networks and relationships that evangelicals built upon as their focus moved from media access to social and cultural concerns. Further, the creation of a solid foundation of media access allowed individual broadcasters to grow their own programs and networks, which would disseminate evangelical messaging on a range of topics far beyond faith in the coming decades.

Chapter 3: Great American Underdogs: Evangelicals in the 1970s

For decades, evangelicals had been outsiders, fighting for a seat at the American table. But the sixties and seventies brought change. At the same time evangelicals became more assertive in their efforts to affect culture, world events shifted in ways that made the nation more receptive to their influence. By the end of the decade, evangelicals had laid claim to a notion of true American values, and had achieved a foothold that would help them propel them all the way to the White House.

This chapter primarily focuses on the integration of evangelical and American values in the seventies, as spurred by landmark court cases, anti-communist sentiment, and the looming threat of thermonuclear apocalypse. These shifts in culture are discussed primarily to set the scene for tectonic changes in evangelical broadcasting in the 1980s, which will be discussed in the following chapter. But in the meantime, this chapter closes with two important subjects from the world of television in the 1970s: the broadening moral role of religious broadcasters, and the continuation of the NRB's strategy of playing the victim card.

3.1 Cultural Landscapes and the Courts

The sixties had seen the rise of the New Left, comprised of women's rights, gay rights, and the civil rights movements. In response legal, economic and religious

conservatives began to coalesce into their own New Right coalition.¹⁶⁵ In particular, evangelicals became more assertive in their efforts to affect politics and culture, informing and informed by the coalescing conservative coalition. 1976 was the “Year of the Evangelical;” *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, and the analytical company Gallup all made this same declaration, marking a moment when many non-evangelicals began to recognize the rapidly growing group of believers.¹⁶⁶ This visibility was not lost on evangelicals who sought to capitalize on their moment and began to turn the corner into the American mainstream.

Somewhat ironically, evangelicals’ rise in political power and cultural exposure coincided with the rise in language around evangelicals as victims. The idea of evangelicals as victims was inherent to fundamentalism from the start, was seared further into evangelicals’ minds in the aftermath of the Scopes Trial, and grafted onto broader evangelicalism in the 1970s. And despite their cultural gains, conservative Christians’ fear hit a fever pitch in the 1970s. The sexual revolution and the Civil Rights movement were transforming American society, and the rise of the women’s movement and gay rights represented direct threats to evangelicals’ beliefs about how the world should be ordered. The legalization of abortion, in particular, became a critical moment that mobilized many to action, and has remained the most potent motivational issue for the right ever since.

In response to these cultural changes, the rise of the New Left and a series of

¹⁶⁵ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton University Press, 2001); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (Macmillan, 2012).

¹⁶⁶ Jon Meacham On 11/12/06 at 7:00 PM EST, “The Editor’s Desk,” *Newsweek*, November 12, 2006, <https://www.newsweek.com/editors-desk-106637>; Steven Patrick Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America’s Born-Again Years* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

court cases, conservative Christians began to mobilize. Frustration had been building in response to a series of legal decisions since the 1960s. The first was the 1962 Supreme Court case, *Engel v. Vitale*, which removed prayer from the public schools.¹⁶⁷ It was followed by the 1963 *Abington School District v. Schempp* decision that declared school-sponsored reading of the Bible unconstitutional.¹⁶⁸ Then came the *Green v. Kennedy* decision in 1970, which stripped the tax-exempt status of segregated private Christian academies that had been set up in response to the desegregation ushered in by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.¹⁶⁹ In the minds of evangelicals, the *Green* decision was further evidence that the government was going to interfere with the practicing of their faith and the educating of their children; it motivated evangelicals to mobilize and reinforced their identity as victims.¹⁷⁰ While the role of race in the formation of evangelical identity and mobilization is beyond the scope of this study it is nevertheless an important factor. For readers interested in this history Randall Balmer's "The Real Origins of the Religious Right" is a good place to start.¹⁷¹

The principal inspiration and longest-lasting motivation for evangelical political engagement was the legalization of abortion in 1973. *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal during the first trimester of pregnancy. For evangelicals, the decision placed their politics in the starkest life and death terms and for many, including Jerry Falwell, *Roe* was cited

¹⁶⁷ *Engel v. Vitale*, No. 370 U.S. 421 (Supreme Court of the United States 1962).

¹⁶⁸ *Abington School District v. Schempp*, No. 374 U.S. 203 (Supreme Court of the United States 1963).

¹⁶⁹ William H. Green et al., Plaintiffs, v. David M. Kennedy, Secretary of the Treasury of the United States of America, and Randolph W. Thrower, Commissioner of Internal Revenue, Defendants., No. 309 F.Supp. 1127 (United States District Court, District of Columbia January 12, 1970).

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*; Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁷¹ Randall Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right," *POLITICO Magazine*, May 27, 2014, <https://politi.co/2Qa1pUg>; Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

as the moment they awoke from their political slumber.¹⁷² Their commitment to anti-abortion positions led evangelicals to reach across long-dividing lines of faith, and work with Catholics, Jews and other Christians as they united around an agenda that was anti-abortion and centered on their vision of the traditional family.

In the seventies evangelicals' agenda increasingly shifted focus from simply spreading faith, and grew to include a broader conservative agenda. The work of Daniel Williams in *God's Own Party* argues that the creation of the Christian Right (politically active socially conservative Christians) in the seventies was a response to the cultural and social changes of the sixties, and a broadly held belief that America had "lost its Christian identity and that the family was under attack."¹⁷³ Historian Robert Self also argues that the post-1960 political realignment centered around the family, the definition of which had been challenged, broadened, and diversified by the women's and gay rights revolutions of the sixties. Self argues that the organization around the right to defend the family was crucial to the coalescing of the New Right coalition.¹⁷⁴

What both of these works elide is the crucial role played by religious broadcasters. During this period, broadcasters themselves were moving towards the political, and due to their role as increasingly-prominent public evangelical representatives, the politicization of their message amounted to a politicization of the evangelical message more broadly. Conservative broadcasters' facility with language allowed them to fuse broader conservative language with biblical principles, and to deliver them to an audience that could then be mobilized.

¹⁷² James Rudin, *The Baptizing of America* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 207.

¹⁷³ Williams, *God's Own Party*, 5.

¹⁷⁴ Self, *All in the Family*.

And that audience was growing. Ben Armstrong estimated that between 1973 and 1978 the industry had grown five-fold in five years, bringing in new viewers and amounting to an approximately \$500 million dollar a year industry.¹⁷⁵ Evangelical broadcasting, once a scrappy, self-funded movement, was quickly becoming part of the fabric of American life. Evangelical broadcasters, leaders, and organizations were part of the culture of the seventies, influencing it and influenced *by* it.

3.2 Evangelicals Warm Up With the Cold War

At the same time that the cultural and political landscape was shifting, the environment of the Cold War helped to normalize evangelical apocalypticism and allowed evangelicals to become accepted as truly American. This section addresses first what evangelicals' beliefs about the end times are. Then it addresses how the rhetoric and realities of the Cold War helped evangelicalism feel less foreign and allowed them to become a part of the American mainstream

3.2.1 The Complete End Times, Abridged

Before we go any further, a brief summary of premillennial dispensationalism is in order. This is a complex eschatology, or system of doctrines about the end times, has been pulled together out of disparate sections of the Bible, particularly the *Book of Revelation*, and developed by the community into a language rich with implicit meaning and association. Even when not directly referenced by broadcasters, the end times are a

¹⁷⁵ Montgomery, "The Electric Church: Religious Broadcasting Becomes Big Business, Spreading Across U.S. Born-Again Christians Foot Most of Bills for Shows: Success of Jerry Falwell. Aim: Hearts and Pocketbooks."

consistent component of their faith, underlie their rhetoric, and motivate their evangelizing.

The *rapture* is the instantaneous removal of all true believing Christians from earth, and is the central concept in the premillennial dispensationalist eschatology. The name *premillennial dispensationalism* describes when the rapture will take place, and the understanding of history by the adherents. *Premillennial* refers to the timing of the rapture: it will take place before the millennial reign of Christ. The rapture also precedes the period of Tribulation, a time that will be defined by pain and suffering, thus the doctrine spares true believing Christians from these horrors. *Dispensational* is a reference to the division of history into seven periods, each defined by the relationship between God and humankind, and each representing a different path to salvation. The timing of this end times schema is entirely in God's hands; humans cannot do anything to make it come earlier or later. However, adherents believe that there are many signs that indicate that the end is near, and could happen at any moment. In the meantime, believers are compelled to evangelize and convert nonbelievers.

The rest of their faith follows a literal reading of the *Book of Revelation*. In short, following the rapture there will be the period of Tribulation and the rise of the Anti-Christ. The end of this period is marked by the Second Coming of Christ and an epic battle, which will end with the millennial reign of Christ over the Earth for one thousand years. After this time, there will be one more battle with evil before it is cast out for good. Finally, the story ends with the world we live in now completely destroyed, replaced by a New Heaven and a New Earth.

Premillennial dispensational eschatology can be confusing for those not indoctrinated, and this abridged version does not begin to attend to the multitude of details that comprise believers' rich apocalypticism. The eschatology is pulled from various sections of the Bible, and while evangelicals believe in a literal interpretation, many rely on annotated bibles like the Scofield Bible or Ryrie Study Bible, which point to the specific passages that relate to the end times and translate exactly what each passage means. For example, the word 'rapture' never actually appears in the Bible. The concept of the rapture is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." The concept comes from the Greek word 'harpazo,' which was translated as 'caught up' and taken to indicate the rapture.¹⁷⁶ Within the community annotated bibles are commonplace; these bibles place the end times interpretation along side the biblical passage detailing for readers exactly what pieces of the text comprise the eschatology. And, starting with Hal Lindsey's 1970 best-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, novelizations and guidebooks that detail end times beliefs became part of Christian culture.¹⁷⁷ Increasingly, Christians created movies and companion books that narratively played out the end times, making the story's details even more accessible to modern evangelicals.¹⁷⁸ The 1970s movie series *Thief in the Night* was the first successful film in the genre, and later Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' best selling novel series *Left Behind* and films enraptured evangelical audiences.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Tim LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled* (Zondervan, 2010); Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2011).

¹⁷⁷ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Zondervan, 1970).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.; LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled*; LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*

¹⁷⁹ LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled*; Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1995).

For conservative broadcasters, a belief in the end times had been a consistent part of their faith, but a problematic part of their broadcasting. In the early days of television, belief in a literal return of Jesus and the events described in Revelation was alienating to mainline churches, which tended toward a less literal interpretation. This eschatology was one reason that the National Council of Churches so ardently opposed evangelical broadcasting. But for evangelicals who believed that they were already living in the last days, this eschatology took on a greater urgency in the Cold War environment.

3.2.2 The Normalization of Apocalypticism

For people outside of evangelical circles the details of evangelical apocalypticism were difficult to grasp, but these apocalyptic ideas started to feel less metaphorical, as the Cold War made the instant and dramatic end of the world a practical possibility. Angela Lahr 's *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism* shows how evangelical eschatological hopes, the Cold War, and secular apocalypticism influenced the development of conservative politics and the creation of an evangelical identity and culture.¹⁸⁰ Lahr argues that the fusing of end times beliefs in the early Cold War created a powerful foundation for the fusing of religion and politics in the seventies and eighties. Further, the shared enemy of communism allowed evangelicals to ingratiate themselves with American goals, helping them to create a patriotic evangelicalism.¹⁸¹

Cold War language and the threat posed by nuclear weapons helped to normalize evangelical eschatology. The idea of a rapture where there was an instantaneous,

¹⁸⁰ Angela Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares : The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

cataclysmic event did not seem that far off from the instant annihilation of a nuclear bomb. The fear of a final battle between the forces of good and evil had a very real analog in the form of the United States and the USSR. This shared language allowed religious ideas to be grafted onto secular issues, signaling apocalypticism to evangelicals but signaling nonreligious concerns to other non-evangelical conservatives. Once these ideas were fused, any Cold War talk on the nightly news now reinforced faith and, the apocalypticism on evangelical broadcasts sounded less foreign. Due to the highly political nature of the Cold War, this was another step towards the political for evangelicals, and one more step in their journey towards the fusing of faith and politics.

End times beliefs were a powerful motivator for conversions, donations and political action. The backdrop of the Cold War was a very clear embodiment of these biblical ideas and with the rise of television ministries, the connections between real world events and prophecy were spelled out for believers in their daily television programming. The events of the day were interpreted through the lens of prophecy fused directly with their usual sermon.

The ‘us versus them’ mentality of the Cold War also allowed an opening for evangelicals to join the broader ‘us’ of America. By mobilizing rhetoric that was cohesively both evangelical *and* American, they were able to position themselves as defenders of traditional values that were more widely held throughout the country. Before long, evangelicals had coopted broadly conservative ideas such as small government, free trade, and family values, and cast themselves as the natural inheritors of the spirit of the founding fathers.

3.3 Evangelicals and the Founding Fathers

By the 1970s, the evangelical transformation from shunned outsiders to true Americans had begun in earnest. But, ever the victim, evangelicals saw themselves as not just any Americans, but as members of a besieged class of *true* Americans, increasingly marginalized in the world that women's and gay rights revolutions had wrought.

To fight back against this perceived cultural assault, NRB set out to champion true American values, and in the process helped to sear evangelical Christianity to the heart of the New Right. The NRB undertook a specific project called 'Operation 76' that seized on growing awareness of evangelicals and capitalized on the national excitement around the celebration of the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁸²

Operation 76 was a religious civics lesson of sorts, with the stated rationale for the project being:

For decades we have failed to teach our children in schools, colleges, homes and churches, to honor the heritage of beliefs, principles, and virtues, which add up to the essence of traditional America, and we have lost our consciousness of that transgression. We have deprived our children of training for personal integrity. We have not let them know what made America great. We have not shown what is happening to the foundations of that greatness, nor what can be done constructively to offer a remedy for the situation. Unhappily, we see that the distinctive characteristic of our system of government is changing from that of a limited constitutional Republic to a great controlled bureaucracy, and that a corresponding fundamental change, even more important, is taking place within ourselves. As a result we are losing our love of liberty, our pride of independence, our self-reliance, our self-respect, even our willingness to govern ourselves through the processes of constitutional limited government, and we are becoming more concerned to get immediate advantages through bureaucratic processes than

¹⁸² Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines) Johnson, United States. President (1963-1969 : Johnson), and United States. Office of the Federal Register, *Lyndon B. Johnson [Electronic Resource] : 1966 (in Two Books) : Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President* (Washington : Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration : For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1967), <http://archive.org/details/4731549.1966.001.umich.edu>; Tom Mathews, "The Bicentennial Summer," *Newsweek*, July 14, 1975; Lynn Darling, "Bicentennial Wins Plaudits For Legacies to the Nation; Bicentennial Hailed for Its Legacies," *The Washington Post*, January 1, 1977, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

to be worthy citizens of a great republic, determined at whatever cost to preserve it.¹⁸³

According to evangelicals, the sixties had set the nation adrift and they were the only ones who could get it back on track. Due to financial constraints, most of the produced media that came out of Operation 76 was on the radio, but the broader project shows the emerging relationship that would become a mainstay on television and in the New Right in the years to come. In short, America was a Christian nation and evangelicals were unique preservers of that legacy. The principles of Operation 76 were stated in NRB planning materials as:

Purpose – The purpose of the Christian Citizenship Radio Spots Operation 76 is to interpret significant historical events in the nation’s history in light of political, economic, and religious principles that characterized the founding fathers of the United States.

Political Presuppositions – America’s freedom was established and principles recognizing the right of private choice in selecting alternatives for governmental leaders; right of private choice in contributing to the needs of others; right of private choice in the exercise of religion.

Economic Bases- America’s economic wealth has been due to the right of the individual to have some control over the work of his hands or mind; the right to have some security to use the fruit of one’s labor; the right to choose goals toward which one’s income can be directed; the right to share for the needs of others.

Religious Philosophy- America’s religious freedom has been rooted in the moral and religious principles of the Judeo-Christian heritage, and its place in the formation of American political, economic, and social thought; in the conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith are relevant to the needs of all men in the world; in awareness that non-Christian peoples have limited revelation in their appreciation of good and evil, prayer, and attitudes toward God, and that the supreme revelation is through Jesus Christ.

Historical Philosophy – The OPERATION 76 Christian Radio Spots will interpret historical events during the bicentennial period in terms of personal freedom and responsibility. They will attempt to relate the spirit of individualism and freedom that characterized the founding fathers to the desirability of respect by the individual for his freedom today.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ “Operation 76: A Presentation Through National Religious Broadcasters of the Values of Operative in Our National Beginnings and in Our Rise to Eminence” (National Religious Broadcasters, n.d.), 309 Operation America 1975-1976 92 17, Billy Graham Center Archives.

¹⁸⁴ “Principles in the Christian Citizenship Radio Spots Operation 76,” n.d., 309 Operation America 1975-1976 92 17, Billy Graham Center Archives.

The importance of the Operation 76 initiative can also be seen in the additional American values that it championed. The cited political principles were the decentralization of governmental power, the economic principles of a free market, and economic self-determination were all linked with the fundamentals of liberty.¹⁸⁵ These concepts connected directly back into the sense that American freedom was what allowed the dissemination of the gospel around the world.¹⁸⁶ Further, the inclusion of these ideas in a major NRB project demonstrates that concepts that would become central to the New Right coalition were already becoming a part of a purely evangelical effort.

Evangelicals were able to draw on similar arguments being developed by other conservative thinkers and institutions like the Heritage Foundation. Conservative broadcasters felt that they had faced discrimination by the government, but argued that government should not interfere in their broadcasting at all. They often drew comparisons between the general success of broadcasting in the United States versus places like the United Kingdom, where the government interfered with the airways.¹⁸⁷ The concepts behind small government and fiscal conservatism applied directly to their ability to broadcast.

As the seventies progressed, evangelicals' burgeoning interest in abortion, education, and social morality naturally dovetailed into politically conservative groups' likeminded views on the subjects. This was especially important because of the specific strategy being employed by conservatives at the time. In his book, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement*, Steve Teles argues that by 1970 conservatives had set

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*.

¹⁸⁷ Kimberly Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009).

their eyes on the American legal system.¹⁸⁸ Teles offers that conservatives felt that political victories were not sufficient to create the lasting change they were looking for, and details their successes and failures as they set out to transform America by changing its laws. In the end, the strategy was a long game that depended on network building and the development of a conservative intellectual movement. This kind of strategic thinking was increasingly employed by evangelicals, and before long they began to apply this kind of single-minded focus to social legislation. As the New Right coalition was evolving, evangelicals were already incorporating the concepts that were central to fiscal conservatives and the conservative legal movement. The joining of New Right interests and evangelical ideology and action would be fully realized in the coming decades with evangelical political organizations like the Moral Majority and, later, the Christian Coalition.

In general, evangelicals looked to continually present themselves as the natural inheritors of the true American legacy. In his 1976 address to the NRB Convention, Ben Armstrong praised President Ford and again connected their Christian mission with the American mission, “Appropriately, on the 200th anniversary of our nation, President Ford asked us to look back at the faith of our founders... He reminded us how the nation’s first President turned to the Lord for strength and guidance...throughout his life.”¹⁸⁹ Armstrong also underscored the way in which others also felt that this duty fell on the shoulders of Christian broadcasters:

Congressman John Conlan asked us to look ahead, challenging us as the people of God, to take an active role in directing the nation’s course...Senator Hatfield,

¹⁸⁸ Steve Teles, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁸⁹ Ben Armstrong, “1976 Convention Speech,” n.d., 309 Dr. Armstrong’s Speech 1976 57 3, Billy Graham Center Archives.

Charles Colson, David McKenna, George Sweeting and many others have reminded us of the tremendous responsibility we have as broadcasters and Church leaders to bring our nation to repentance and renewal.¹⁹⁰

The more that America was viewed as a Christian nation and evangelicals were the defenders of that nation, the more the imperative grew for evangelicals to take action in culture and politics.

3.4 Morality and the Not-So Swinging Sixties and Seventies

The cultural shifts of the seventies had allowed evangelicals to more readily be accepted into the mainstream, but evangelical broadcasters also shifted the scope of their concern in a very specific way that moved them further into the political realm. An essential tie between conservative broadcasters and the development of the New Right was a shared concern around questions of morality and the family. Before the Moral Majority, which would become the first nationally influential political conservative Christian organization, there were groups like the Morality in Media, which was founded in 1962 in order to combat pornography. Morality in Media was originally started as an interfaith group including Catholics, Jews, and Protestants, headed by Morton Hill S.J. It is notable that Hill was a Jesuit priest, and this inter-faith cooperation is demonstrative of the changing battle lines, as the agenda of the New Right brought conservatives from different backgrounds together.

The NRB began working closely with Morality in Media, as the group shared their purpose, even if not each aspect of their faith. Notably, much of this cooperation happened after the *Roe* decision, which had served to unite Catholics and evangelicals

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

around an anti-abortion agenda. In 1975 Morton Hill asked the NRB for help producing and distributing Morality in Media's materials. In one case, the NRB helped to produce tapes about morality that were then distributed to member stations along with an explanation from Hill:

Do your listeners know how to fight pornography? You will be receiving, at a later date, a series of 5 five minute segments, 'What can I do?', in which Denny Milgate and I discuss the grave problem of pornography: What it is, where it is, why it is, and what the individual can do about it. They are accompanied by 30 and 60 second spots.¹⁹¹

Armstrong offered Hill the use of NRB materials and expertise at a cost of \$2.20 per tape, including mailing it to NRB members who would have interest in the material.¹⁹²

Among the moral subjects of the time, pornography was clearly of unique interest to the NRB, and religious broadcasting more broadly. With pornography increasingly shown on cable television, their medium was the battleground on which this moral issue was being fought. The NRB took this a step further, and argued that religious broadcasters were not just bulwarks against obscene programming, but should take an active role in combatting its spread. Citing that obscenity laws were based on community standards, it was the duty of religious broadcasters to educate their community and stop the spread of pornography.¹⁹³ Armstrong received Morality in Media's newsletters, which included updates on morality laws, updates on how pornography is marketing itself, and advice about how morality supporters should focus their energy. For example in the May 1975 newsletter:

¹⁹¹ Morton Hill, "Do Your Listeners Know How to Fight Pornography?," 1975; Ben Armstrong, "To Rev. Morton A. Hill Morality in Media," October 17, 1975.

¹⁹² Hill, "Do Your Listeners Know How to Fight Pornography?"; Armstrong, "To Rev. Morton A. Hill Morality in Media."

¹⁹³ Hill, "Do Your Listeners Know How to Fight Pornography?"

Public concern about sex-violence TV programming is reaching a throbbing crescendo. The networks have refused to listen to the chorus of public opinion. Apparently not worried that the FCC might hold public hearings that would air their irresponsibility openly, they threw the viewing nation a bone: two hours of ‘family time’ when the airwaves would be purified. Every parent knows that this is not the answer. The problem is quality, not time periods. The answer lies in public expression channeled to the right people. Part of your answer is your local station...Money is the name of the game in commercial TV...You, with the tube turned on, are the ultimate source of that money. If a local affiliate refuses to run a program, sponsors may pull out their advertising.¹⁹⁴

The call to action by Morality in Media is significant, as it illustrates the type of grassroots organizing that was going on more broadly for religious groups, and for evangelical groups in particular. Much like Armstrong’s pleas for action, Morality in Media placed the onus on everyday Americans to make a difference.

The cooperation between Morality in Media and the NRB is indicative of the political alliances that were leading to the formation of the New Right. Armstrong went so far as to write to President Ford asking him to urge the Justice Department to continue funding the National Legal Data Center on the Law of Obscenity, and further urging that Morality in Media should take the lead.¹⁹⁵ As evangelicals prioritized moral issues, doctrinal differences with their allies mattered less. After all, in the end they had faith that their truths would be realized.

3.5 Noble Victims of a Modern World

From the beginning the NRB was forged through confrontation and controversy. They were embattled victims representing the “majority minority” fighting for Christ. As we’ve discussed, this directly comes out of the humiliation of the Scopes Trial. The

¹⁹⁴ Armstrong, “To Rev. Morton A. Hill Morality in Media.”

¹⁹⁵ Ben Armstrong, “President Ford,” October 21, 1975, 309 Decency in Media 91 6, Billy Graham Center Archives.

experience of victimization during the trial and its aftermath was forever seared onto the evangelical identity.¹⁹⁶ Specifically, conservative broadcasters had felt attacked by mainstream broadcasters and their efforts to keep them off of television. Then, with the advent of the sexual revolution that flouted their mores and the rise the women's movement and gay rights movement, evangelicals felt continually under attack, embattled victims in the modern world.

A critical moment in the reaffirmation of their role as victims came in December 1974. Jeremy D. Lansman and Lorenzo W. Milam, two broadcast consultants from California, filed a petition with the FCC to halt the issuance of any new licenses for noncommercial, educational broadcast stations, including religious stations.¹⁹⁷ The FCC denied the petition August 1, 1975. However, well through 1976 and beyond, rumors swirled that the FCC was considering banning all religious broadcasting. In what remains the largest amount of letters that the FCC has received on a single issue, totaling over 3.7 million, conservatives rallied in response.¹⁹⁸ The NRB continued to talk about the specific threat of Lansman-Milam in their 1976 objectives, despite the case having been long decided. The rumor continues to come up even today to the extent that in 2019 the FCC website still states:

The rumor that the FCC has before it a proposal to not issue licenses to religious broadcasters still continues to circulate, more than 40 years after the Commission denied that request. The FCC's policy toward religious broadcasters remains

¹⁹⁶ Ward Sr., *Air of Salvation*.

¹⁹⁷ Janis Johnson, "Mail Protests Alleged Religious Broadcasts Ban," *The Washington Post*, February 17, 1977, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Ward Sr., *Air of Salvation*.

¹⁹⁸ Louise Sweeney Staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor, "Religious Broadcasting Upheld: FCC Flooded with Mail over False Rumor That a Ban of Such Programs Was Likely First Amendment Cited Breakdown of Letters," *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current File)*; Boston, Mass., July 1, 1976; "Goals and Objectives"; Johnson, "Mail Protests Alleged Religious Broadcasts Ban."

unchanged in that no special provisions or restrictions are applied to religious stations or licensees, nor are any changes to that policy contemplated.¹⁹⁹

Even with the lack of an explicit threat from the FCC, Armstrong continued to argue that Christians were denied access to network airtime through the end of the seventies. He argued that networks still discriminated against Christian broadcasters, and that, if not for a select group of ally affiliates that defied a network rule against Christian broadcasting, conservative Christians wouldn't be on TV at all. Armstrong commended this sidestepping of this nonexistent policy, and encouraged other broadcasters to reach out personally to try it for themselves, especially in major markets.²⁰⁰

Thus, while Armstrong was driven by the evangelical spirit to bring people to Christ, he conceived of the world, and the mission of religious broadcasters, in oppositional terms. Throughout *The Electric Church* in particular he would point to the 'secular mind' as being unable to conceive of the faith, motivation or mission of the religious broadcasters.²⁰¹ And other Christians agreed. In a letter to Ben Armstrong, an NRB member expressed a desire to be more actively involved to combat opposing forces, and to fight against the "Current attack on Christian broadcasting." He wrote to request specific action steps and information from the NRB about how he could do his part.²⁰²

As this role of victim linked with the growing sense that conservative Christians were the true defenders of American freedom, a powerful synergy formed to that moved evangelicals towards the coalition of the New Right.

¹⁹⁹ "Untrue: Religious Broadcaster Ban Rumor," Federal Communications Commission, November 4, 2015, <https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/religious-broadcast-ban-rumor>.

²⁰⁰ Robertson, "'Interview of Dr. Ben Armstrong by Don Robertson of InterAction, on the Electric Church and the Great Commission.'," 16.

²⁰¹ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*, 45.

²⁰² David Conner, "Letter to Ben Armstrong," July 23, 1975, Decency in Media 91 6, Billy Graham Center Archives.

3.6 Evangelical Horizons

As the seventies progressed, more religious broadcasters were on the air with more diverse types of programming. Some even considered the act of creating the content to be shown as a religiously rewarding act as one broadcaster stated:

Even while the show is being filmed in the studio, people who are helping in the filming have accepted Jesus as Savior. In 1974, two men received Jesus...so the program and its 'nicest bunch of Christians' reaches and touches the hearts of kids and grown-ups both. That's pretty good for a program geared just for children.²⁰³

As conservatives in general started to coalesce around family values, evangelical broadcasters showed an increased interest in religious programming directed at children. Jim Bakker's Christian puppet show *Come on Over* in the sixties proved that children were a demographic that Christians could address with great success. Ministers were looking to convert all ages, and parents were interested in finding something safe for kids on TV. In 1973 the headquarters of the Treehouse Club program received 50,000 letters, "Many were from boys and girls who had just accepted Christ or wanted to."²⁰⁴

Meanwhile, technology was increasing the quality and quantity of available airtime. For example, 1977 would see both Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson move to satellite broadcasting, followed quickly by Jim Bakker.²⁰⁵ Meanwhile evangelical personalities moved into the education space, which served to increase broadcaster's public footprint, provided additional revenue streams, and served to train up the next generation of evangelicals. Pat Robertson founded CBN University (later Regent University) in 1977. Jerry Falwell continued to expand his work at Liberty University,

²⁰³ Grace Fox, "The Treehouse Club," *Counselor*, December 28, 1975, Feature Ideas --12/16/1975, Billy Graham Center Archives.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*.

which he had founded in 1971. The next chapter will follow the expansive work of these men starting at the end of the 1970s.

The cultural shifts of the sixties had sparked the organizing and institution-building of the seventies, which all served to instigate and support a growing political effort. Religious broadcasting had helped to make evangelicalism a normal part of the American religious landscape. Now evangelicals were increasingly making the rhetorical shift that not only was evangelicalism a part of America, but it was the true American faith. Evangelicals increasingly applied their faith to questions of morality and the family, slowly erasing the lines between faith and politics. By the end of the seventies, America would see the removal of an avowed, if liberal, evangelical from the White House. In his place, delivered by the work of evangelicals, was a divorced movie star. The eighties would usher in an era of unprecedented success for religious broadcasting, but it would also give way to scandals that threatened to bring the entire empire down.

Chapter 4:

A Season of Harvest

By the late seventies, evangelicalism was a well-known part of the American landscape. Evangelicals were on TV, and off TV they were beginning to organize and take action, integrating themselves into the fabric of American culture. Over the next decade, conservative Christians would help elect a President, expand their presence on television, and create a full-blown evangelical culture of their own, complete with books, movies, amusement parks, and a comprehensive worldview that advised on all aspects of daily life. The decade would see evangelicals casting off the last vestiges of their apolitical stances and embracing overt campaigning, all culminating in a run for the White House. During this decade, they capitalized on their direct mailing lists and television outreach to create organizations with overtly political goals. And they became more aggressive and effective in their efforts to affect the laws of the land, supporting policies that would lead them to their greatest successes, and also their greatest failures.

This chapter shows the growth and maturation of religious broadcasting, and how a more organized and influential evangelicalism sought to extend its influence beyond the religious realm. As evangelicals turned towards the political they became a crucial part of a growing conservative coalition. The cultural controversies of the seventies spurred the creation of multiple political action groups devoted to forwarding conservative evangelical politics (See Figure 1). Through the success of televangelism, these organizations gained significant sway on the political scene leading televangelists specifically, and evangelicals more broadly, to influence legislation and elections.

Organization	Founded	Founders
Focus on the Family	1977	James Dobson
American Family Association	1977	Donald Wildmon
Concerned Women for America	1979	Beverly LaHaye (wife of Tim LaHaye)
Moral Majority	1979	Jerry Falwell and Paul Weyrich
Family Research Council	1983	James Dobson
Traditional Values Coalition	1984	Louis P. Sheldon
Christian Coalition	1989	Pat Robertson

Figure 1: Major Christian Religious Organizations 1977-1990

4.1 Evangelical Television in the Eighties

By the eighties, it was difficult to argue that conservative Christians were underdogs in the television world. The rise of cable and satellite television removed many of the obstacles to acquiring airtime, and evangelicals proved themselves as adept as ever at taking advantage of the opportunities this new world afforded. This was an era of ambition, in which broadcasters went from unknowns scrapping to stay in business, to successful cultural stars whose influence extended far beyond matters of faith.

4.1.1 The NRB in the Eighties: Sustainability and Growth

In 1980, the NRB had much to be heartened about. Its magazine, *Religious Broadcasting*, had grown beyond its origins as a specialty newsletter to become a more broadly legitimate publication, one that was quoted by other publications and was increasingly attracting the attention of secular advertisers.²⁰⁶ But the process of overhauling the magazine to make it a more sophisticated, self-sustaining publication was still ongoing. The one major criticism was that the magazine was only published six times a year, which broadcasters and advertisers alike had issues with; advertisers wanted

²⁰⁶ “A Proposal to Make ‘Religious Broadcasting’ Financially Self Sustaining,” n.d., 309 Magazine Expansion Proposal 92 4, Billy Graham Center Archives.

more issues to advertise in and broadcasters wanted information more regularly. A plan to publish ten times a year was established to provide more frequent and more in-depth coverage for members, but also to attract advertisers who indicated that they would bring more business if there were more issues of the publication.²⁰⁷ Additionally, there was a plan to increase the rates for subscriptions, with the goal of making the magazine self-sustaining by 1981. This did not happen.

The leadership team of *Religious Broadcasting* assessed their budget and their place in the industry (See Figure 2). These numbers were showing improvement in circulation, but looking towards the new year and the new plan to keep *Religious Broadcasting* sustainable, the budget projections for the upcoming year still placed the magazine at a \$7,400 deficit. This shortfall did not even include any additional costs for an office or financial staff, which the magazine depended on the NRB to provide.²⁰⁸

Magazine	Ad Revenue Market Share	Circulation Market Share	Ad Page Increase (since 1980)	Ave. Circulation Increase (since 1980)
<i>Religious Broadcasting</i>	2.3%	0.4%	34.7%	119%
<i>Christianity Today</i>	16.7%	7.3%	9.4%	0%
<i>Moody Monthly</i>	15.9%	10.9%	3.4%	3.9%
<i>Charisma Magazine</i>	6.2%	2.9%	14.8%	24.6%

Figure 2: Christian Magazine Market Research 1981²⁰⁹

By 1983 it was clear that incremental improvements were not sufficient, and more drastic measures were needed to transform the magazine. Since its first issue the magazine had offered complimentary copies to some members, but by the 1980s that

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ “Christian Magazines: The State of the Industry,” May 1982, Religious Broadcasting, Billy Graham Center Archives.

funding was desperately needed, and the committee looked to transition everyone to a paid subscription model. Additionally, the NRB was still looking to boost subscriptions with advertisements of its own.²¹⁰ Perhaps most importantly, the NRB recognized effective strategic improvements could only be made based on good information about their audience. A survey of the magazine's recipients was commissioned, asking questions ranging from the types of broadcasting the organization/individual participated in (AM, FM, broadcast television, cable television), what other media they consumed, conferences attended, and crucially for individuals, what their ad budget might be and how much authority they had to make a decision.

The survey found that while television was the future, more than half of *Religious Broadcasting* readers were still primarily in radio. Readers were actively engaging with the magazine, with 61% reading every issue. Just under half of its readers spent more than an hour with each issue and just over half spent somewhere between thirty and sixty minutes reading it.²¹¹ Impact is always difficult to gauge, but self-reporting influence in the survey showed that 15% of readers said that the magazine made a 'considerable' impact on the operation of their ministry, and 71% reported that it had 'some' impact.²¹² The most impact that the magazine had on readers was in respect to equipment purchasing, which put it two-to-one over *Broadcast Management and Engineering* and *Broadcasting*, two leading secular magazines of the broadcast industry.²¹³ Readers also

²¹⁰ "Magazine Report May 1983" (National Religious Broadcasters, n.d.), 309 Publications 1982-1983 82 2, Billy Graham Center Archives.

²¹¹ "Magazine Research Survey," 1983, 309 Publications 1982-1983 82 2, Billy Graham Center Archives.

²¹² "A Proposal to Make 'Religious Broadcasting' Financially Self Sustaining."

²¹³ "Magazine Research Survey."

found *Religious Broadcasting* to be the ‘only’ influential magazine on purchasing airtime, and outpaced others for development and fundraising projects.²¹⁴

While the survey did not solve the economic woes of the magazine, it pointed the NRB towards specific types of advertisers to pursue, and topics to focus their features on. The NRB also provided opportunities for individual broadcasters to purchase equipment directly through them. The NRB placed bulk orders for equipment and materials, such as videotape or lights, then individual broadcasters would purchase the smaller amounts they needed and could afford from the NRB. The arrangement increased the buying power of smaller broadcasters by allowing them to pay the discounted bulk rate even though they were only buying a small amount.²¹⁵ This served the dual purpose of providing a service for their members, but also kept the NRB at the center of the broadcasters’ business. In general, any contact with members served to increase the NRB’s role as leaders in the industry. The NRB had positioned itself at the center of religious broadcasting; they were the nexus between broadcasters and regulators and were the only organization with standing to speak on behalf of the whole religious broadcasting community. As evangelicals became more political, the NRB did too. Religious broadcasters became the voice of the New Right, and the NRB was a united voice for broadcasters.

4.1.2 Religious Broadcasting in the Eighties: A Fast-Growing Cooperative Network

By 1979, religious television broadcasting had gained a legitimate foothold in the cultural landscape. CBN owned one of the first 10 transponders for RCA’s Satcom One

²¹⁴ “A Proposal to Make ‘Religious Broadcasting’ Financially Self Sustaining.”

²¹⁵ W.B. Trosclair, “NRB Southwest Service Organization Confidential Price List,” n.d., 309 Folder Southwestern Chapter, Billy Graham Center Archives.

satellite and thereby reached 85% of homes in America, with broadcasts in 22 foreign countries to boot.²¹⁶ The NRB had grown tremendously, touting more than 850 broadcast members. Even with these successes, the quality of religious broadcasting in general was still a concern. Dr. David Clark, Dean of the School of Communications at CBN University, assessed the state of religious broadcasting as,

at the same juncture as secular programming was in the 1950's when television was just getting started. Christian television has done a good job at persuading and informing but a very poor job of entertaining. Today's viewing audience wants to be entertained and good entertainment can be both informative and persuasive.²¹⁷

Clark was a prominent voice in religious broadcasting circles, and was soon put in charge of a newly-formed NRB television committee. The purpose of the committee was to “help foster the interchange of creative programming concepts as well as help seek a framework of distribution of programs by numerous independent television producers.”²¹⁸ While there were a few major players in the religious broadcasting scene, most of the material that made it to the airwaves came from small broadcasters with small budgets. In some cases, this was just a single minister, delivering a bare-bones televised version of normal sermons. The goal was to help these independent ministers develop their programming and create a cache of shared material. The NRB, and others involved in religious broadcasting more broadly, were invested in improving the quality of religious broadcasts so that the genre in general would garner respect.

Clark and the committee first identified issues with broadcasts, and then sought to resolve them. One of the major flaws in religious programming that Clark identified was

²¹⁶ “CBN Center: Profile in Prophecy” (Christian Broadcasting Network Inc, 1979), Billy Graham Center Archives; Terry Heaton, *The Gospel of the Self: How Jesus Joined the GOP* (OR Books, 2017).

²¹⁷ “Creativity, Innovative Concepts Lacking in Christian Television” (Christian Broadcasting Network Inc, March 30, 1979), NRB Television Committee 1979 309 91 11, Billy Graham Center Archives.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

the presumption of a passive audience, and the assumption that just being on television meant that people would watch, and the message would get through.²¹⁹ Rather, he argued,

Research has shown that the audience is not passive at all...Rather, it uses television for its own gratification. We are not manipulating the audience, they are manipulating the programmers. For instance, one may watch for company, one for entertainment, another for information, Demographic and lifestyle variables also affect the way people use television. The elderly use television as a source of company, the mothers of young children as a babysitter, etc.²²⁰

But how could attention-grabbing, specialized programming be generated by small stations who could barely afford to get on the air at all? Clark offered suggestions for improving religious programming, including,

special encouragement for television writers, the exchange of programming material between local Christian stations, cooperative efforts between television and film producers for production of films suitable for television, and support of independent program producers who can market their material.²²¹

The underlying theme is one of collaboration: by finding ways for broadcasters and producers to work together, the growth of the industry could be a force multiplier in achieving their shared goals.

And the industry was growing fast, with an average of one new religious station appearing each month.²²² To some extent, Christian broadcasting became a network of small and large stations producing and sharing programming across channels. Some were started by established denomination-specific organizations such as American Christian Television System, founded by the Southern Baptist convention. Others came from more

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

humble beginnings, such as the Victory Television network, which was the creation of a single couple, Happy and Jeanne Caldwell, out of Arkansas.²²³

And it wasn't just that the numbers were growing. The biggest players like Jim Bakker, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell continued to expand their massive individual influence. By 1978 Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church had 3,200 parishioners attending on any given Sunday, and the church was decked out with four television cameras and a control room directly over the sanctuary. Worship services were taped and then broadcast as *The Old-Time Gospel Hour* to 327 stations across the country.²²⁴ Funds supporting the show were sorted through by dozens of employees; a single day could mean 10,000 envelopes, each containing an average of \$23.²²⁵

Despite some misguided attempts at entertainment programming (see the following section), CBN was at the top of their game, touting their role as the vanguard of technology and format. *The 700 Club* now regularly featured guest appearances and interviews with "well-known politicians, entertainers, authors, and sports figures... all with a positive point of view on today's issues."²²⁶ Further, it was able to boast that it was the first Christian program to have a daily broadcast in Israel, which in light of evangelical eschatological hopes in the Middle East, was a huge coup for the network. By the 1980s, Robertson's personal relationship with Israeli leaders had grown; he had

²²³ Happy Caldwell, *Heart of a Pastor: Understanding and Pastoring Supernaturally* (Harrison House, 2015).

²²⁴ Montgomery, "The Electric Church: Religious Broadcasting Becomes Big Business, Spreading Across U.S. Born-Again Christians Foot Most of Bills for Shows: Success of Jerry Falwell. Aim: Hearts and Pocketbooks."

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ "CBN Center: Profile in Prophecy."

interviewed top Israeli leaders such as Abba Eban, Menachem Begin, and Yitzhak Rabin.²²⁷

By 1984, Ben Armstrong was particularly optimistic about the possibilities for religious programming on cable, citing the “Basic Cable Programming Status Report” that showed that the top 27 rated channels on TV included six religiously-oriented networks, and that the religious networks had grown in viewership by 187 percent in one year.²²⁸ Specifically he pointed out that CBN ranked third, and PTL Club 19th, with Trinity Broadcast Network close behind in 23rd place.²²⁹ By 1986, estimates placed the electric church at about 20 million, and Jerry Falwell claimed that 1 in 5 Americans watched his program at one time or another.²³⁰

4.1.3 Fragmentation and Specialization in Television Media

While religious broadcasting was undeniably on the rise, the eighties also saw shifts in the television landscape that proved challenging for evangelicals to adapt to. In particular, they found themselves facing reduced access to the major networks, increased competition for viewers’ attention, and the rise of provocative material that they perceived as antithetical to their Christian values.

After decades of effort, conservative broadcasters had forged one reliable avenue for reaching their audience: the *sustaining time* that networks were obligated to provide. But in the early 1980s the major three networks slowly dropped their Sunday morning

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ben Armstrong, “The Time Is Prime for Religious Cable,” *Religious Broadcasting*, May 1984, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary Libraries.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ “Prime Time Preachers,” *New Internationalist*, January 5, 1986, <https://newint.org/features/1986/01/05/prime>.

religious programs altogether. They moved to instead fulfill their ‘sustaining’ requirement through the production of news programming. Network airtime was still profoundly expensive and the same FCC rules that limited advertisements within a broadcast were still in place. Conservatives’ hard-fought advantages in getting on major networks were starting to slip away.

Fortunately for them, the major networks’ importance was diminishing. The broadcast landscape was expanding, with ever more ways to get one’s programming into Americans’ homes. Cable and satellite television, in particular, were becoming more widespread and affordable to the average American, and by the eighties, several Christian-specific networks had sprung up on both platforms. These stations filled airtime through a combination of producing their own programming, buying syndicated programming from fellow religious broadcasters, and finding publicly available material that did not violate their station’s sentiments.

But this shift presented its own challenges. Increasingly, there was more television available than a person could conceivably consume; soon the limiting factor was not airtime, but viewers’ attention. In the sea of choices suddenly available to viewers, how would a station or a show set itself apart? As audiences became more sophisticated and wanted programs with more entertainment value, stations like CBN experimented with their format. But the transition to more overtly entertainment-focused programming was tricky.

For example, CBN attempted to coopt the soap opera format with a show called *Another Life*, which ran for three years in the early eighties. The show featured characters who faced difficulties that were solved through their faith, but also ventured into topics

like miracles and faith healing.²³¹ But it turned out that most of the material that kept audiences interested in soap operas was not family-friendly. The CBN scripts were either boring, or risked alienating Christian audiences by engaging with standard melodramatic soap opera plot points, like adultery. The challenge of creating exciting programming that's true to the stations' underlying Christian values is something broadcasters struggle with to this day.

Of course, it wasn't only Christian broadcasters who were adapting to this splintering of the broadcast world. Stations emerged catering to a variety of specialized needs. This era saw the birth of stations focused on children's programming, music, and sports, as well as the 24-hour news station (see Figure 3). And because non-network television was exempt from network television rules, new and more provocative content began to test the boundaries of good taste. The creation of the Playboy channel in 1982 seemed like the harbinger of moral collapse, as sexually explicit material became accessible at the press of a button.²³²

²³¹ "1982 CBN Another Life Promo," *Another Life* (Christian Broadcasting Network, 1982), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v4squ_Cobs; Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities*.

²³² Sandra Salmans, "Playboy's Hopes in Cable TV," *The New York Times*, March 15, 1983, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; James Mann, "What Is TV Doing To America?," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 2, 1982, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

Network	On the Air
Nickelodeon	1977
Disney Channel	1983
MTV	1981
BET	1979
CNN	1980
ESPN	1979
Playboy Channel	1982
PTL	1977
CBN	1961
CBN 24 hour schedule	1977
TBN	1973
TBN 24 hour schedule	1978

Figure 3: Specialty Channels Go On the Air

This expansion of broadcast avenues thereby presented evangelicals with a problem and an opportunity, both.

On one hand, this was a new front of immorality that Christians needed to combat. Conservatives had long advocated against what they saw as immoral media. Campaigns against pornography and in favor of limiting the language that could be used on television had been going on for decades. As cable grew, so did the threat of immorality, and evangelicals adapted tactics to fight the problem at its root by focusing on its sponsors. From as far back as 1985, NRB executive director Ben Armstrong sent a letter to 388 corporate sponsors asking them to explain their rationale for backing programs that in the view of many evangelicals promoted sex and violence. By June 1985 100 corporate sponsors had responded.²³³ Armstrong argued that the “showcase for pornographic and violent shows” had moved from downtown to downstairs.²³⁴ Avoiding immoral places in the world was no longer enough; Christians were faced with it invading their homes.

²³³ “NRB Questions Network Sponsors on TV Morality,” *Religious Broadcasting*, June 1985.

²³⁴ Ibid.

On the other hand, this rising threat also gave Christians an issue to rally around. The growing threat of immorality on television and the fear, real and manufactured, that it produced, helped to create the niche for Christian television. As the conservative Christian position coalesced around family values, the need grew for ‘family friendly’ programming. Americans were watching more television than ever, and as the cultural divide between secular and Christian people grew, the demand for Christian-specific entertainment grew along with it. The earlier period where ministers would broadcast their Sunday sermon, or a specifically made for television equivalent of a worship service, was no longer enough to meet modern Christians’ needs.

Stations like CBN and Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) were family-friendly. Their programming was life-affirming and, crucially, it was opinion-affirming as well. As has become a mainstay of modern television, in particular when it comes to television news, viewers tuned into channels that affirmed the worldview that they already held. Televangelists were not so much converting as they were affirming the beliefs their viewers already held, and they were pairing these beliefs with action.

The fragmentation of media in this era portends a corresponding fragmentation in culture. No longer would every American necessarily tune into the same networks to watch the same shows. Rather, they would tune into the programming that resonated with their beliefs, and would in turn have those beliefs shaped and deepened by that programming. Each person is, of course, composed of a multitude of beliefs, but increasingly evangelical vs. non-evangelical was emerging as an essential battle line. Obviously, Christian broadcasting was a powerful force in shaping its “side” in this

burgeoning cultural divide, though exactly how large its side was, and how much sway broadcasters held over it, was the subject of some debate.

4.1.4 The Viewership Numbers Game

In the eighties, it was undeniable that evangelicals' presence on television was growing, but exactly how many people were actually watching? Some began to wonder how strong this rising cultural force actually was,

The media's discovery of a potentially large voting bloc which religious broadcasters were attempting to mobilize naturally aroused questions about the size of their viewing audiences. Presumably, the larger televangelists' audiences were, the greater the potential political influence they had.²³⁵

Estimates varied greatly, but the numbers were generally impressive. In his 1979 book, *The Electric Church*, Ben Armstrong estimated that the religious broadcasters had an unduplicated viewership of 14 million watchers weekly. Four Gallup polls conducted between 1980 and 1984 placed the adult viewership between 40 and 70 million in the average month. In November 1980 Arbitron rated the top 10 religious programs at 13.8 and the Nielsen ratings put it closer to 20.5.²³⁶ These ratings were drawn from sample data each company pulled from a set of representative households and these numbers are the percent of those households that tuned into a given program. While the companies attempted to select a diverse set of households so that they could extrapolate national data out of their smaller sample sizes, when it came to religious television the numbers did not always scale accurately. CBN, for one, felt that their audience was much larger than the ratings were showing and commissioned a study by Nielsen. The study focused on

²³⁵ Jeffrey Hadden, "The Great Audience Size Debate," *Religious Broadcasting*, January 1986, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary Libraries.

²³⁶ Ibid.

religious broadcasting specifically, rather than religious broadcasting as simply one of many types of programming. Sure enough, the Nielsen study found that *The 700 Club* and *PTL* had a much larger audience than the average quarter-hour figures currently available from Arbitron and Nielsen.²³⁷

Sociologist Jeffrey Hadden decided to delve into the debate about audience size because he thought that there were exaggerated claims on each side, even citing one unnamed broadcaster who had claimed an audience of 17 million when in reality their audience was more like 2 million.²³⁸ The truth was, most broadcasters did not have access to audience size data and guessed based on viewer mail and interaction.²³⁹ Given how difficult these numbers were to verify, it was a tempting opportunity to present whatever numbers suited one's narrative.

It is unsurprising then that critics of growing evangelical influence also got involved in the audience size guessing game. Some, like William Fore of the NCC, were invested in diminishing viewership numbers. While Hadden did not reach a clear answer on why the NCC was downplaying the size of the conservative broadcasters' audiences, he offered that it was perhaps due to the NCC's desire to regain television market share through free sustaining time. The NCC wanted to imply that there was an underserved audience that their members could reach but conservatives could not, therefore NCC members should be given sustaining time again. By this time liberal churches controlled very little television time, and had no real strategy to gain more airtime, so they created

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

this myth that no one was watching conservatives in an attempt to gain any access.²⁴⁰ The strategy did not lead to more airtime for liberal churches.

Interestingly, some critics of conservative broadcasting sought to inflate the evangelicals' numbers rather than reduce them. Hadden argued that liberals like Norman Lear and the People for the American Way wanted to people to think that religious broadcasters had a huge audience so that the threat from conservative Christians would seem more significant and dangerous.²⁴¹

It is notoriously hard to track reception of religion, and pinning down the scope of television-based outreach is no exception. But, in a way, the actual number of people being reached didn't matter. The primary effect of larger viewership numbers is, of course, a larger body of people who will hear your chosen message. But there is a secondary outcome to having a large audience: you suddenly become much more interesting to those who would like to reach that audience, or who might be threatened by it. This secondary effect relies less on actual viewership than it does on the *perception* of that viewership, and evangelicals were largely winning that perception war. By establishing itself as a conduit to tens of millions of people, conservative broadcasting established itself as a fundamental influencer of American culture, and the world was starting to take notice.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.; Michael Doan, "The "Electronic Church" Spreads the Word," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 23, 1984, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

²⁴¹ Hadden, "The Great Audience Size Debate"; Howard Kurtz, "Norman Lear's Crusade Widens; Fight Over Religious Liberty Challenges Falwell's Fundamentalism," *The Washington Post*, February 3, 1986, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

4.1.5 A New Era at the FCC

By the mid-seventies, religious broadcasters still felt that they were restricted by FCC regulations. But fortunately, they now held more sway in Washington, and they were often consulted about FCC decisions. By now, members of Congress were reaching out to the NRB, asking for recommendations about legislation.

Congressman Lionel Van Deerlin, a Democrat from California, wanted the NRB to provide their thoughts on the proposed revision of the 1934 Communication Act. It had been almost fifty years since legislation of such significance to conservative broadcasters had come before the FCC. The new legislation was going to redefine the terms of regulation, and Armstrong wanted to be sure all avenues of broadcasting remained open to religious broadcasters. At the same time, the NRB was also working with Republican members of congress to try to get their language into that version of the bill as well.²⁴²

In particular, the NRB was concerned about initiatives from the liberal churches that might block religious exemptions to oversight. Armstrong felt any outside oversight of broadcasters would be a threat to their religious freedom, and if religious broadcasters were burdened with financial oversight it could threaten their ability to raise enough funds to stay on the air. Armstrong had already secured Senator Hollings to come and speak at the FCC Luncheon at the upcoming NRB convention. This was a big coup, as Hollings was “the most important person in the field of communications in the U.S.A. since he serves as chairman of the communications commission of the Senate, under

²⁴² “Congressional Letters,” 1983, 309 Congressional Letters 30 8, Billy Graham Center Archives.

which the FCC operates together with the House sub-committee on communications.”²⁴³

The language that the NRB proposed for the bill was:

Notwithstanding any other provisions of the Act, no station which is licensed to a religious organization or institution shall be considered to be a public broadcast station and no station licensed to such an organization or institution shall be subject to the provisions of Sections 484-486. Religious organizations and institutions which are organized primarily for educational or cultural purposes, including teaching or instruction of a religious nature, shall be eligible for any broadcast frequency which was reserved by the Federal Communications Commission for use by non-commercial educational broadcast stations...²⁴⁴

Different rules applied to stations that were deemed noncommercial versus commercial stations. As television took off in the late seventies, gaining access to any station was at a premium. The high price of air time led noncommercial stations to increase the amount of fundraising they aired, making them look increasingly like commercial stations. The FCC decided to reevaluate their rules about noncommercial stations to try to differentiate them once again from commercial stations. Crucially, the NRB wanted it both ways: to ensure that religious broadcasters could gain access to noncommercial stations, but also have access to commercial stations. The needs of the successful broadcasters who wanted their programming to air on far reaching commercial stations that had high production values and large audiences, had to be balanced with the needs of smaller upstart ministers who were still fighting for airtime anywhere they could find it even if it was on a noncommercial station with a limited audience.

Of particular concern to Christian broadcasters was a movement within the FCC to look more expressly at fundraising on educational stations. The FCC proposed a variety of provisions, some of which very pointedly undercut the loopholes that religious

²⁴³ Ben Armstrong, “Letter to NRB Executive Committee: The Revision of the Communications Act of 1934” (National Religious Broadcasters, July 6, 1979), FCC Eligibility 1978-1979, Billy Graham Center Archives.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

broadcasters had been using to extract money from ostensibly non-commercial programming. In particular, there were proposals:

- limiting announcements of events (pointedly including “church bazaars”) or the offering of goods or services related to the program.
- prohibiting mentioning locations that watchers should visit
- decreeing that all shows shorter than twelve minutes could have no more than one minute of sponsorship or underwriting. Programs lasting longer than an hour and fifteen minutes were limited to announcements at the beginning and end of the show and “as close to the hour as feasible”
- limiting acknowledgement of ‘in kind’ support to only those who made ‘substantial’ donations
- limiting over-the-air auctions “to 10 days in a calendar year with no more than 50 percent of any one day’s programming devoted to auction activity.”
- restricting any information related to courses related to the program.²⁴⁵

The FCC explained that it was investigating and limiting these practices because noncommercial stations were looking more and more like the commercial television stations. This issue would in part lead to the televangelist scandals of the late eighties. For the time being, religious broadcasters hoped to use the non-profit status of their broadcasts to exempt them from the rules regardless of what type of station they broadcast on.

After the election of Reagan, religious broadcasters believed that their stations would be improved or at least protected. And candidate Reagan had given them reason to be hopeful. As he had said on the campaign trail, “The Federal Communications Commission has shown greater interest in limiting the independence of religious broadcasting than it ever did in limiting the drug propaganda poorly concealed in the

²⁴⁵ FCC, “FCC NEWS: FCC Proposes Rule Changes to Maintain Noncommercial Nature of Public Radio and Television and Other Noncommercial Educational Stations,” June 9, 1978, FCC Eligibility 1978-1979, Billy Graham Center Archives.

lyrics of some recorded songs.”²⁴⁶ He was with them on their moral stances about media, but also about the impositions of the FCC.

Once Reagan was elected, the FCC made a number of decisions that impacted religious broadcasters specifically, and transformed television more broadly. In 1981 the FCC extended the duration of television licenses by two more years, to a total of five. In 1985 it raised the limit on television stations that any single entity could own from seven to twelve. This was a distinct departure from the sixties, where major networks were barred from purchasing one another, and broadcasters could only own one station in markets where there were fewer than eight.²⁴⁷

However, the most crucial decision that impacted religious broadcasters was a 1985 decision that removed guidelines for the amount of non-entertainment programming that a station could carry, in addition to removing all limits on how many commercials could be run in an hour.²⁴⁸ What this meant for conservatives was that every show could now be an overt telethon. There was no longer a need to avoid asking directly for funding from viewers, or limiting how many times they asked. Televangelists were free to raise as much money as they wanted, though this blessing would become a curse, as success turned to scandal by the end of the decade.

The rise of cable had generally presented issues that the FCC failed to deal with adequately. The growth of cable television led to issues surrounding whether basic networks would continue to be carried. An initial FCC ruling in 1965 had required cable

²⁴⁶ “Ronald Reagan - Campaign Speech on Religious Liberty at the National Affairs Briefing,” accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganreligiousliberty.htm>.

²⁴⁷ Parsons, *Blue Skies*.

²⁴⁸ “NOW with Bill Moyers. Politics & Economy. Big Media - Regulations Timeline | PBS,” accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/now/politics/mediatimeline.html>.

systems to carry certain local broadcast stations. But by the 1980s cable had exploded, and the question of ‘must-carry’ rules was challenged.

By this time, the evangelical broadcasters were both on basic and cable networks and wanted to ensure that their message was available to all wherever they were airing it. If ‘must-carry’ went away, stations would not have to include local stations in their channel line-ups and many local stations aired religious broadcasting to help pay their bills. For the most part there was not a financial incentive for these local stations to all be included in television packages, so if the requirement went away so would the stations and along with them, religious broadcasts. Therefore religious broadcasters supported the ‘must-carry’ rules.²⁴⁹ In the end, the ‘must-carry’ rule was upheld, but the anxiety created around the issue continued to feed into the evangelical mindset that they, and their endeavors, were constantly under attack. This persecution complex was further fueled by renewed rumors that the FCC was moving to ban religious broadcasting or stop considering new applications for religious stations. Similarly to the Lansman-Milam incident we discussed in the seventies, the furor over a possible ban became so rampant that the FCC was forced to respond publicly in November 1986 and clarify that they were *not* considering any such thing.²⁵⁰

This paranoia notwithstanding, this was a remarkably successful era for evangelicals when it came to regulation. Their ambitions with the NRB had borne fruit beyond their wildest dreams, and they were successfully dictating terms that allowed them to broaden their reach and line their pockets in the process.

²⁴⁹ Richard Wiley, “Must-Carry Unresolved,” *Religious Broadcasting*, January 1986, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

²⁵⁰ “FCC Reiterates It Will Not Ban Religious Programs,” *Religious Broadcasting*, January 1986.

4.1.6 Worldview

Evangelicals' successes in the 1980s can largely be seen as a payoff of their earlier work: the decades spent building organizational structures and networks that expanded and sustained the movement. But organizational networks and viewership numbers are only the beginning; a movement's real power lies in how loyal and motivated its followers are. To maximize their control over their audience (and their respective pocketbooks and votes) religious broadcasters had to truly connect with the people who tuned in to their programs. In order to understand the nature of this relationship between broadcaster and audience, we need to look at the creation of the evangelical worldview, a system of interconnected and overlapping beliefs that were constantly reaffirming and reinforcing one another. In many ways, it was the role of the conservative media to both create and confirm this worldview, which led to the seamless fusion of religious and political positions.

As the threat from secular culture seemed to grow throughout the seventies and eighties, evangelicals increasingly built their own alternative Christian culture. Religious broadcasters were creating family-friendly programming on television, and Ken Anderson was producing and distributing family-friendly films.²⁵¹ Writers like Hal Lindsay, Jeanette Oke and Frank E. Peretti were finding success, often initially through word of mouth, eventually selling millions of books. Christian television served a central role in this all-encompassing Christian world that many evangelicals worked to create. There was now Christian news programming and entertainment in addition to worship, and it was now available 24 hours a day.

²⁵¹ "Ken Anderson Film Projects," n.d., Billy Graham Center Archives.

The desire to create a separate Christian culture was in some ways born from the sentiment that Christians should be in the world but not ‘of’ the world.²⁵² The corrupting influences of the world could never be truly defeated, only hidden from and kept at bay. And with the impending return of Jesus and the events of the end times, all things of the world would be destroyed. To different extents this belief extends throughout the evangelical community, with fundamentalists providing the most extreme example.

By the eighties, even fundamentalists were far more engaged in the world outside the church, even if they remained theologically separated from it. The theological lines between fundamentalists and other sects never fully dissolved, but there are countless ways that these groups can be looked at together. Evangelicals, fundamentalist or otherwise, kept much more local autonomy than their mainline counterparts. Many churches were entirely nondenominational, only networking with other churches on a more informal basis, or through membership in larger organizations, like the National Association of Evangelicals. With the expansion of Christian television, the consumption of a shared culture grew and reaffirmed a shared conservative worldview. Shared culture and a shared worldview soon united conservative evangelicals, and the finer points of their theological differences soon faded into the background.

The life of evangelicals is one of interconnection between faith and everything they do. If one cannot be ‘of’ the world, then one needs acceptable alternatives: *Christian* music, *Christian* television, *Christian* books, and *Christian* movies. Christian music, television, publishing and films then all serve to reinforce each adherent’s worldview as Christians and build a wider community of Christians of which they are a part. And as

²⁵² Nancy Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

demand grew, Christian culture grew; soon it was big business.²⁵³ In 1978 it was approximated that every month there was another new religious radio station that went on the air.²⁵⁴ By now television was king, but the continued presence of evangelical programming on the radio helped to undergird the growing influence of evangelicals more broadly and reaffirm the message. Even when evangelicals weren't home watching TV, they could tune in via the radios on in the car or at the office.

4.2 Putting Politics First

As we discussed in the previous chapter, the year 1976 was the bicentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, as well as the year of the evangelical, and conservative broadcasters ran with this double mantle. In both the *Time* and *Newsweek* articles on 'The Year of the Evangelical,' President Jimmy Carter was a significant reason the moniker for the year was earned. But while Carter had helped to make 'evangelical' a mainstream word, conservative evangelicals were disillusioned with his politics. Evangelicals had helped to elect Jimmy Carter in 1976, but as loosely like-minded voters, rather than as an organized voting bloc. It soon became clear to conservatives that Carter wasn't their kind of evangelical: most pointedly, he supported the Equal Rights Amendment and was not pro-life.

This was an era where evangelicals started to engage with politics much more overtly and aggressively. During the eighties, specific differences in denomination were

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Montgomery, "The Electric Church: Religious Broadcasting Becomes Big Business, Spreading Across U.S. Born-Again Christians Foot Most of Bills for Shows: Success of Jerry Falwell. Aim: Hearts and Pocketbooks."

increasingly set aside, and a powerful conservative Christian political coalition began to emerge.

4.2.1 The Moral Majority: A Formative Christian Political Coalition

In 1964, Jerry Falwell gave a sermon, “Ministers and Marches,” that specifically denounced ministers who were called to preach the gospel and instead got involved in politics, specifically with the Civil Rights movement. This speech was born from Falwell’s segregationist sympathies, but was interpreted to speak more broadly about political involvement. However, by 1976 Falwell felt the creeping threats of the rights-based revolutions – Civil Rights, Women’s Rights, Gay Rights - and judicial decisions on abortion and school prayer, that he felt compelled to take action.²⁵⁵

Falwell embarked on an overtly political series of rallies in the “I Love America” tour in 1976.²⁵⁶ The tour was conceived, in part, to finish paying off the debt he had accrued in the creation of Liberty University. But the espoused purpose was to reject the liberal culture and the policies of President Carter, whom he saw as an illegitimate Baptist. Falwell deftly combined his faith with politics as he attacked what he saw as the major threats to the country: the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), women’s liberation, pornography, and homosexuality.²⁵⁷ Eventually these rallies drew the attention of Republican political operatives, who saw Falwell’s message as something to be

²⁵⁵ Self, *All in the Family*; Williams, *God’s Own Party*; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal*.

²⁵⁶ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁵⁷ “God In America - Jerry Falwell,” FRONTLINE, accessed April 16, 2019, <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/people/jerry-falwell.html>.

weaponized for conservative gains. The result was the 1979 founding of a political organization known as the Moral Majority.²⁵⁸

Enter Paul Weyrich, the Moral Majority's co-founder. Weyrich was a conservative mover and shaker who helped to fuse the objectives of the political right with conservative faith-based positions. After finding Nixon too liberal, in 1973 he founded the Heritage Foundation, a neoconservative, pro-business and anti-communist think-tank. Weyrich was raised a Roman Catholic, however he left the church after the Second Vatican Council finding that the church was now too liberal. The astute reader will notice a pattern here. He went on to join the more conservative Melkite Greek Catholic Council and was ordained a deacon in 1990.²⁵⁹

The most important detail to note about the Moral Majority is that it was a group founded on Christian beliefs, but it was also a group with an overtly political agenda that spanned disparate Christian denominations. Jerry Falwell and Paul Weyrich came from different theological backgrounds, but they found common ground in a desire to fight an onrushing threat of liberal politics. The role of women, the centrality of the family, heteronormative culture, and a patriotic capitalism were applied across denominational lines. Both men came from an anti-communist background, fused their faith with the growing legal, fiscal and cultural right throughout the 1970s, and saw their power grow. Now was the time for the seeds they had sowed to be harvested.

Both men believed in Reagan. But both men had also counseled him against choosing George H.W. Bush as his vice presidential running mate. They wanted a more outspoken conservative like Jesse Helms. But when Reagan chose Bush, Falwell set to

²⁵⁸ Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*; Williams, *God's Own Party*; Self, *All in the Family*.

²⁵⁹ "Paul M. Weyrich Scrapbooks, 1942-2009," n.d., Box 20, Library of Congress.

work ensuring he still got a candidate with the beliefs he demanded. He met with Bush to push him on his position on abortion, asking if Bush could fully support the Republican Platform, which included an anti-abortion plank. When Bush acquiesced, Falwell got back to work to elect the ticket.²⁶⁰

The early Moral Majority was focused and effective, identifying voter registration as a primary goal. Falwell wanted to harness Christian voters across denominations to elect President Reagan in 1980, as well as other officials who would help to enact Christian policies. The organization grew quickly, and state chapters sprouted up across the country. This expansion was supported in part by Falwell's mailing list from his *Old-Time Gospel Hour* radio and television program, as well as the commandeering of the show's subscriber newsletter, *Journal Champion*, which was renamed *Moral Majority Report* in 1980.²⁶¹ This was a strategy used more broadly as evangelicals became political: taking direct mail lists that had been built for other purposes and putting them to use in a political context.

But the rapid growth and single-minded focus on the election meant that little energy was put into sustainability and oversight. Once the election was over there was no organizational structure or unifying message to unite the organization. As a result, individual chapters began taking on a variety of issues, from anatomically correct gingerbread men being sold at bakeries, to a proposed death penalty for homosexuality. Falwell had lost control.²⁶²

²⁶⁰ Williams, *God's Own Party*; Neil Young, "How George H.W. Bush Enabled the Rise of the Religious Right," *Washington Post Blogs*, December 5, 2018, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

²⁶¹ Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal*.

²⁶² Williams, *God's Own Party*.

Despite its eventual fracturing, the rise of the Moral Majority is a watershed moment in Christian culture. While evangelical faith and politics had been intertwined for decades, this was an example where theological details were largely set-aside in favor of political goals, to great success. This represents a complementary point to our observation about divides that television was helping to deepen: here is a case where, having established a divide between religious and secular, moral and amoral, a weaponized coalition was formed on one side. A conservative Christian organization had started truly throwing its weight around, and demonstrated how the battle of us-vs-them could be won when you broadened your standard of who ‘us’ was to include Catholics and other conservatives who were not evangelical. Further, the Moral Majority is the first example of an overtly partisan political effort by evangelicals with a televangelist at the helm. Evangelicals were not just organizing around an idea, they were actively promoting a specific political agenda and supporting specific candidates. However, the Moral Majority only went so far, and not all evangelicals were convinced that political coalitions were the solution. The formation of a true Christian Right coalition required the influence of a man who bought a television station and turned it into an empire—Pat Robertson.

4.2.2 We Are the Chosen People and Pat Robertson is the Most Chosen-est of All

Conservatives legitimized their hold on the American legacy and the concept that America was a Christian nation by emphasizing their connection to the Bible, the founding era of America, and the first colonial landing in Virginia. The Pilgrims in Massachusetts were also often a common rhetorical image, but due in large part to Pat

Robertson's emphasis on Virginia over Massachusetts, it is the Virginia landing that was privileged.

Evangelicals' biblically-based identity was logical. For literalists like the Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, the Bible was the source of all rhetorical positions. Sociologist Jeffrey Hadden offered that the social movement led by evangelical broadcasters came out of 19th century revivals, and was grounded in an understanding of America as the new Israel. Hadden argued that the creation myth from Genesis is "the central motif in the New Christian Right's image of contemporary America. At the heart of its proponents' anguish is the belief that America, this special place in God's divine plan, has stumbled again."²⁶³ Indeed, the centrality of America in God's plan was ever-present in the rhetoric of televangelists. Crucially, it also endowed evangelicals and America with the legacy of *dominion*. This dominion gave them the moral authority to shape the world in their image. They could cast out Communists and craft American law to their beliefs. Dominionism also held consequences for environmental policy, as religion and business interests fused powerfully in the New Right coalition.²⁶⁴

Evangelicals' role as the inheritors of the Founding Fathers, the defenders of liberty in God's new chosen land, found its footing in the bicentennial. As the New Right Coalition came together and the ideas of biblical literalism were extended to literal, 'originalist' interpretations of the Constitution, the era of the Founding Fathers became a crucial source of modern evangelicalism's authority. Owning this legacy was essential in order to justify their modern political positions. Finally, evangelicals traced themselves back to the landing of the first permanent settlement of Europeans in Virginia in 1607.

²⁶³ Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Religious Broadcasting and the Mobilization of the New Christian Right," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26, no. 1 (1987): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1385838>.

²⁶⁴ Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right* (Black Rose Books Ltd, 1990).

Connection to this moment broadly served to connect evangelicals to the very beginning of the American story, and was specifically Pat Robertson's claim to special authority.²⁶⁵

At the same time that Falwell was working on his 'I Love America' campaign, Pat Robertson was invested in his own bicentennially-inspired project. Robertson found special importance between the location of the first founding of the Jamestown settlement in 1607 and the home of CBN stating, "It was not by coincidence that God moved men's hearts to the very locale where this first claim of divine sovereignty was made nearly four centuries ago."²⁶⁶ On January 1, 1976 Robertson hosted a reenactment of the settlers' first worship service at the CBN Center, which was located 12 miles from Cape Henry, the landing site of the first colonists for the Jamestown Settlement.²⁶⁷ To ensure the connection was made even more strongly, Robertson had Reverend Robert Hunt, a descendant of the Reverend Robert Hunt who gave the original service in 1607, preside over CBN's service. CBN's history, but also Robertson's personal history in Virginia was pointed to as evidence of God's providence for America and for Robertson. A promotional pamphlet produced for Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network Center, highlighted the connection between the nation's history and Robertson's successes:

Perhaps the most remarkable testimony to God's plan for The Christian Broadcasting Network was His leading of Marion Gordon (Pat) Robertson to the Tidewater area of Virginia in 1959 to purchase a run-down television station. Pat's roots run deep in his native Virginia. He is a descendant of Dr. John Woodson, who arrived in Jamestown in 1619. His father was the late senator A. Willis Robertson. Pat had served his country as a Marine combat officer in Korea and he graduated from Yale School of Law. He was a businessman with a major New York firm. Yet, God's plan for Pat Robertson was not in the secular business world but in the ministry...It was with great faith and hope that Pat and Dede,

²⁶⁵ "CBN Center: Profile in Prophecy"; Williams, *God's Own Party*.

²⁶⁶ "CBN Center: Profile in Prophecy."

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

along with their children, Anne, Gordon, Elizabeth and Tim, came to Tidewater. They had only \$70 and were seeking to buy a television station for God.²⁶⁸

The role of providence in the CBN story had been an essential part of Robertson's personal mythmaking. The work of CBN was also cast as a prophecy fulfilled. In 1979 CBN produced a fundraising pamphlet called "CBN CENTER: Profile in Prophecy." The promotional material emphasized repeatedly the role of Providence in each of CBN's endeavors, from the organization's meager start to its rousing success. The providential language mirrored language Robertson used in appearances on *The 700 Club*, in his autobiography and in his fundraising:

Pat Robertson was the man who preached the Gospel from that crude wooden television pulpit during CBN's first broadcast in 1961. It was the same tall man who delivered those prophetic words at the bonfire 15 years later. The beginnings were humble but Pat held fast to the vision of something greater for God. And the years that followed were a time of phenomenal blessings for CBN.²⁶⁹

Robertson's belief in Providence was intrinsically tied to his belief in the gospel. The prosperity gospel is essentially a Christian theology that teaches that success and prosperity in life – good health, and financial wealth – are all directly the result of the will of God.²⁷⁰ Thereby if one is successful and prosperous, it is because of God's providence. The implications of the prosperity gospel will be discussed later in this chapter. What is important here is that at each stage of CBN's growth, Robertson was successful, and thereby affirmed by God.²⁷¹

As Robertson tells it, it was not just that God's will influenced his life in everyday ways, but that Robertson attempted impossible things, and by God's unwavering will he

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, 562; Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁷¹ Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*; Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*; Pat Robertson, *The Secret Kingdom* (Word Publications, 1992).

succeeded beyond measure. For instance, as CBN grew throughout the 1970s, Robertson embarked on a quest for more land, and a consolidated center to bring together CBN's offices scattered around Virginia. CBN promotional material retells the story:

God's will for CBN became startlingly apparent in a most unlikely place. At the Disneyland Grand Hotel in Anaheim, California, Pat bowed his head to give thanks at lunch, and these words rang through his spirit: 'Don't buy just five acres. Buy all the land and build an international communications center and school to take the message of Jesus Christ to the world.'

Pat returned to Virginia Beach. Negotiations were unusually swift and smooth; financial needs were met miraculously. On December 31, 1975, CBN had acquired 142 acres of beautifully wooded property on an interstate highway.²⁷²

Robertson, guided by God, would plan to build a massive center, it went on,

God's faithfulness and favor toward CBN was demonstrated over the following 28 months. The dedication of CBN Center on October 6th 1979 was an event of worldwide significance. The vision is fulfilled, yet it is just beginning. That of carrying the Gospel to the world as 'a light to the nations.'²⁷³

Robertson acquired and prayed over the land where the CBN Center would be built in January 1976, holding the opening dedication on October 6th, 1979.²⁷⁴ Every stage of conception, construction and decoration was hailed as brilliant, cost-effective and forward thinking. And everything from the furniture, décor to landscaping was built to send a message,

In the executive conference room, chairs are decorated with delicate needlepoint seat covers, created by artisans from the local community. The designs are Christian symbols, including the Lilly of the Valley, Jerusalem Cross, Crown of Thorns, Crown of Heaven, Lion and Lamb, Dove, Flame and Burning Bush.²⁷⁵

CBN organized its own construction company to "save money and ensure high quality workmanship."²⁷⁶ When the project went smoothly it was emphasized as evidence of

²⁷² "CBN Center: Profile in Prophecy."

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

God's favor, quoting from the general foreman Ray Keel, "Everybody knows this is a building for the Lord and they respect that. It's been much better than most jobs. Things seemed to go a lot smoother."²⁷⁷

The Center was large in scale, decked out with modern technology, and built in a colonial style, which connected it to the landscape of historic Virginia and the legacies of founding generation. The compound included an educational center, convention center, and, before long, a graduate school. Once the CBN center was built, the television network was capable of broadcasting 24 hours a day. The CBN center housed a chapel and four television studios, two of which had seating for 382 spectators, and two smaller studios. "Studio 7" is the dedicated studio for *The 700 Club*.²⁷⁸ Robertson was hailed for his forethought to include satellite technology and create a space that could serve all aspects of Christian culture: entertainment, education, and organizing. Immediately following completion of the CBN center, Robertson began building CBN University (later Regent University). The success of the Center was understood to be a sign of God's Providence but also specifically as a reflection of Robertson's character. Robertson's gumption to build on such a massive scale was a credit to his faith.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

4.2.3 Weaponizing the Prosperity Gospel

The binding of holiness with success wasn't just part of Pat Robertson's personal mythmaking, it was utilized as a powerful psychological tool to encourage donations and other behavior from his followers.²⁷⁹

As we've discussed, the prosperity gospel preached by many televangelists is the idea that one's success in life is linked to the will of God. If you please God, God will reward you. The dark flipside of this theology is that if you struggle and get sick, or experience financial hardship that is also the will of God and the result of some action you took to deserve it. The meeting of trickle-down economics and the prosperity gospel made for an interesting synergy in the financial climate of the 1980s.

The real potency of this idea came when evangelical prosperity ministries introduced a wrinkle, one that helped them attract the attention of those dissatisfied with their lot in life. In some cases, they argued, your lack of prosperity did not necessarily mean that you were a sinner, but could be because somebody *else* was taking the prosperity that should be yours. By this logic, you were a good person deserving of good things, but the government was stealing your money in taxes, immigrants were taking your job, and forces external to you that were atheistic and humanistic were taking the prosperity that was rightly yours.²⁸⁰

The solutions offered by evangelists like Pat Robertson, were either to mobilize to change those forces, or most often, to get people to donate money to their ministry. As *The 700 Club* developed into a well-oiled machine throughout the 1980s, the show combined the presentation of a news magazine with the results of a telethon. The news

²⁷⁹ Robertson and Buckingham, *Shout It from the Housetops*; Heaton, *The Gospel of the Self: How Jesus Joined the GOP*; Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*.

²⁸⁰ Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*; Robertson, *The Secret Kingdom*.

segments would feature fear-inducing stories about the state of the world – the Soviet threat, rising crime, abortion, homosexuality. This grim scene would be paired with the commentary from Pat Robertson, who would give his personal interpretation through his prosperity gospel lens, and offer that viewers could be part of the solution by praying, voting, and donating.²⁸¹ Each episode featured segments with individuals who had faced a difficult time in their life, but whose fortunes were turned around after they donated to the program. Now, they were healthy and prosperous, and you could be too!

In his 2017 book *The Gospel of Self: How Jesus Joined the GOP* former *700 Club* producer Terry Heaton speaks to the techniques used to by Pat Robertson to move Christians, and Republicans, further to the right.²⁸² Heaton wrote the book to apologize for the modern world he helped to create, and to shed light on the tactics and motivations that politically mobilized evangelicals. As a producer for the *700 Club* he helped to develop the strategies for soliciting donations, the major development being the implication that giving to CBN would lead directly to personal prosperity,

We chose these stories of prosperity for the ministry only of people who met our criteria. They were young. They were good looking. Their testimony provided a witness that others would wish to emulate. They always ended up on top. They were always prospering after giving to CBN. In this way, we presented the tilted view that those who gave money to CBN—the greater the donation, the bigger the blessing—were always blessed by God. We didn't dare go near anyone who could claim the opposite, regardless of the reason.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Heaton, *The Gospel of the Self: How Jesus Joined the GOP*; Robertson, *The Secret Kingdom*.

²⁸² Heaton, *The Gospel of the Self: How Jesus Joined the GOP*.

²⁸³ Ibid.

The charisma of Pat Robertson and Jim Bakker led their ministries of prosperity to great success.²⁸⁴ Once paired with Reaganomics and deregulation, it was broadcasters' prosperity before the fall.

4.2.4 The Political Evolution of Pat Robertson

In spite of embracing Ronald Reagan, being overtly political was still not something that many evangelicals embraced in 1980, and Pat Robertson was no exception. Yet, in the coming years he would undergo a personal transformation that would lead him to not just become involved in politics, but to run for President himself in 1988. This change was partially motivated by a mobilization around cultural issues throughout the 1970s, and the growing movement to undo all the harm that previous administrations had done. Abortion, school integration, school prayer, the ERA; all were seen as threats against the protection of the family that evangelicals had been organizing around.

Again, the personal transformation of Pat Robertson tells the story of the movement well beyond himself. By the mid-1980s the NRB had also become more overtly political at its conventions. No longer were they simply talking with politicians in order to get or stay on the air, now they were pushing for political agendas far outside the scope of broadcast regulations.²⁸⁵ Jerry Falwell had embraced politics full bore with the creation of his Moral Majority at the end of the 1970s, but at that time, Robertson eschewed the political. Even when organizing a rally in the nation's capital called "Washington for Jesus", Robertson still scoffed at the idea that it was a political act.

²⁸⁴ *PTL CLUB*, PTL Club, 1981, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLbXIWpuVsk>; "PTL Commercial" (PTL), accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sn7E7OdRnUA>.

²⁸⁵ "Prime Time Preachers."

Despite refusing to embrace the mantle, Robertson continued to advocate and speak on some of the most hot-button political issues of the day. Throughout the next decade, Robertson would be born again, all over again, and baptized into the political. He came from a political aristocratic Virginia family that traced its roots, as Robertson regularly pointed out, back to the earliest settlers of the country.²⁸⁶ His father was a longtime senator and his upbringing and education were deeply privileged. He was able to make leaps of faith only the way that a man with a safety net of white privilege and connections can, fully, blindly and trusting that even if he failed his family wouldn't starve, and his connections could always find him another job. That said, he threw himself fully into his ventures and approached CBN with the vision of a man that was building an empire. For Robertson his vision was always expansive: don't buy an acre, buy hundreds; don't build a building, build a center; don't build a television show, build an empire.²⁸⁷

Robertson's political conversion mattered far beyond his personal narrative. Despite its denominationally inclusive ambitions, Falwell's Moral Majority was not enough to bring many evangelicals into the fold of the Christian Right. In particular, many northern evangelicals, Southern Baptists and Pentecostals were not convinced by the Moral Majority's pitch. Daniel Williams argues that it was Pat Robertson who finally brought these groups into the Republican fold. Williams argues further that the Southern Baptist Convention had not become a force in the Republican Party until the 1980s. By the end of the eighties, the Christian Right coalition had come together, and many of the

²⁸⁶ Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*.

²⁸⁷ Robertson and Buckingham, *Shout It from the Housetops*; Robertson, *The Secret Kingdom*; Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*; "CBN Center: Profile in Prophecy."

fractures and divisions between fundamentalists and evangelicals had fully disappeared.²⁸⁸

By then, evangelicals had more broadly embraced not just taking political positions, but running for political offices. Pat Robertson's run for President will be covered in the next chapter, but the groundwork for how that was even possible was laid long before. Due to the rhetorical positioning of evangelicals as the rightful inheritors of the founding fathers, it eventually followed that they too should be the national leaders. Stuart Epperson, a board member of the NRB, wrote a guest Op-Ed in 1986, which he announced his intention to seek public office, but more broadly made a case for evangelicals to be involved in politics. With the oft-used refrain that the country was drifting from its Judeo-Christian heritage, he urged Christians to be involved in politics, otherwise the morality of the country would be lost.²⁸⁹ In 1986 Tim LaHaye was the chairman of the American Coalition for Traditional Values. This group charged conservative evangelicals directly into the political when it sponsored the October 15-17 conference on 'how to win an election' at which Jack Kemp, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were speakers. This notion of evangelicals in politics and in office grew and became more overt.²⁹⁰ Eventually the organizing and mobilization in the eighties led to the Republican Revolution of 1994.

Evangelicals had become political in the seventies, began to own their politics by the eighties, and would find themselves in office and making policy in the nineties and beyond. Throughout this transition, televangelists were crucial in forming and

²⁸⁸ Williams, *God's Own Party*.

²⁸⁹ Stuart Epperson, "Why a Christian Broadcaster Should Be Involved in American Politics," *Religious Broadcasting*, January 1986.

²⁹⁰ Williams, *God's Own Party*.

disseminating the religio-political message. First their politics were about access and their messages about faith. Then throughout the 1970s, they started to apply their faith to questions of morality, increasingly applying those messages to political issues. Their politics started from a place of protecting their rights - school prayer, abortion, the traditional family - and transformed into a focus on more overtly shaping the rights of others. By the 1980s televangelists had normalized their role in public life, and their messaging was applied more broadly to politics. Relying on the rhetorical positions they had created, such as the idea that Christians were victims under attack and that America was a Christian nation, their messaging was imbued with implicit meaning; faith and politics were now joined. Evangelicals were political and increasingly partisan.

4.2.5 Washington For Jesus

In 1980, a daylong rally called “Washington for Jesus” was organized to take place on the National Mall in Washington D.C. The gathering was the work of Pat Robertson, Bill Bright (founder of Campus Crusade) and Charismatic Catholic Renewal national committeeman, Rev. John Randall.²⁹¹ With Robertson as one of the organizers, the date of April 29th was chosen to commemorate the anniversary of the 1607 planting of a cross at Cape Henry Virginia, by the Jamestown settlers.²⁹²

The rally garnered criticism from a group of twenty religious organizations, including the National Council of Churches, who argued that evangelists were trying to ‘Christianize the government’ and that “It is arrogant to assert that one’s position on a

²⁹¹ George Cornell, “No Headline In Original,” *The Associated Press*, April 25, 1980, sec. Domestic News, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

²⁹² H. Josef Hebert, “More Than 125,000 At Rally,” *The Associated Press*, April 29, 1980, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

political issue is Christian and that all others are un-Christian...immoral or sinful. There is no 'Christian' vote or legislation."²⁹³ The official line held by many of the organizers was that this was not a political affair. But, cofounder Rev. John Gimenez, a Charismatic pastor from Virginia Beach, Virginia, acknowledged at the time that "Many of the rally planners have strong views against abortion, in favor of allowing prayer in schools, opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and against homosexual conduct."²⁹⁴

In the end, more than 175,000 people gathered on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. including 75 uniformed "Cops for Christ" who came down from New York City to protect marchers. The event involved prayers, marches and speeches. Jim Bakker directly called out politicians and stuck his finger in the eye of those who would criticize Christian politics by saying: "We have a message for all the members of Congress and the Senate and the White House: There's a group of people in America that loves their God and we are praying for the president and all the leaders of the United States of America."²⁹⁵

While the turnout was less than expected, at least partially due to the rainy weather, the country and politicians took notice. Evangelicals were identifying and organizing as a group to be reckoned with.

4.2.6 You're Nobody 'til Somebody Loves You: Reagan Courts the Evangelical Vote

With the growing number of religious political action groups, the National Religious Broadcasters ventured into more political territory in the 1980 presidential election. They landed interviews with two out of the three candidates, Congressman John

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 1.

Anderson and Governor Ronald Reagan. The purpose of the interviews was to ask, “their views on the role of government in religious broadcasting, morality in government and the issue of prayer in public schools.”²⁹⁶ Anderson was interviewed at a hotel in Washington DC on September 29th 1980 by 36 members of the religious press and 40 members of the secular press.

In Armstrong’s edit of the interview with Anderson, Anderson’s response to the relationship between church and state was:

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute... I reject the concept of a moral majority as it applies to American politics. No, the political marriage of the so-called moral majority and the new right is not one ordained in heaven... It is an alliance that seeks to purge from the political process ideas and ideals and those hapless souls who hold them dear, which may be at odds with the convictions of some people... In the long run, religion can retain its spiritual authority only if it keeps its distance from partisan politics.²⁹⁷

At the event, Anderson talked about his personal relationship with Christ, but that it was separate from his politics and stated that he did not believe that there should be school prayer. When asked about government funded abortions Anderson stated “No, I don’t think that I look at it as the state sanctioning killing... rather, the state not interfering, not interposing its judgment for the moral judgment that simply ought to be made by the individual.”²⁹⁸ Anderson’s statement was representative of where politicians believed much of America was on the issue, but that was not where evangelicals were.

Ronald Reagan had a very different approach to evangelicals, starting with the location of his event. Reagan went to Falwell’s Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia on Friday October 3rd, 1980 and spoke before an audience of 10,000 people.

²⁹⁶ Ben Armstrong, “Religious Broadcasters News Conference with Two Presidential Candidates (Draft),” n.d., 309 82 13, Billy Graham Center Archives.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

Reagan gave a statement and then answered only eight questions, all from members of the religious media.²⁹⁹

Reagan mimicked the language of Anderson that he believed in the separation of church and state, but then continued on to say “Your responsibility begins with the peace the world cannot give—the peace of the spirit that comes only through religious values - - the bedrock of true peace.”³⁰⁰ Reagan went on, “Government alone cannot make peace in the world. It takes every American family in the daily duties we’re called upon to perform...to do the work of peace.”³⁰¹ Politicians had spoken to religious audiences and visited churches, but the election of 1980 found Reagan charting new territory when it came to overtly courting the evangelical vote. He was a major presidential candidate, holding an event at Liberty University, and overtly tailoring his language to resonate with his evangelical audience.

In the same interview, which mostly featured softball questions, Reagan repeatedly hit it out of the park as far as evangelicals were concerned. When asked about morality and the presidency, Reagan responded that the President sets the standard and has the power of ‘moral suasion.’ Asked more directly about the role that faith would play in his decision-making, Reagan quoted Lincoln to say

I would be the greatest fool on this footstool if I thought that for one day I could carry out the duties that have come to me since I came to this place without the help of One who is stronger and wiser than all others.³⁰²

Reagan wanted to court not just evangelicals but evangelical influencers, so when asked about deregulation, Reagan answered “I would like nothing better...than to eliminate

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

thousands of those regulations by executive order... and take government off the backs of our society and our people.”³⁰³ With that he was able to place himself clearly on the side of the broadcaster and the businessman.

Even when asked about the tricky and loaded matter of school prayer, Reagan walked the line and stated, “I would be absolutely opposed to a state-mandated prayer. On the other hand, I have always believed that a voluntary, non-sectarian prayer in our schools was perfectly proper, and I don’t think we ever should have expelled God from the classroom.”³⁰⁴ He was able to maintain a position to appeal to more centrist voters, but still signal his sympathies to evangelicals. Finally, when asked about the family Reagan stated,

I believe government has contributed to the erosion of the family...--through regulation and government intervening in places where it has no business intervening...by way of education...through social welfare reforms that come between the child and parent. I think government should get out of the family. It can’t be a parent.³⁰⁵

And with that Reagan had affirmed his place at the center of the pro-family New Right. The 1980 election was a process of evangelicals finding their voice in organized politics and organized politics finding evangelicals. In Reagan, evangelicals found a candidate that spoke to them, and Reagan found a group of voters who were organized and ready to unite behind a message.

The Liberty University event was just one of many ways in which Reagan courted the conservative Christian vote. Reagan looked to seize upon the support he was receiving from evangelicals, and hired Robert Billings, executive director of Moral

³⁰³ Armstrong, “To Harold Boon, President of Nyack College Re: Communication Workshop.”

³⁰⁴ Armstrong, “Religious Broadcasters News Conference with Two Presidential Candidates (Draft).”

³⁰⁵ Armstrong, “To Harold Boon, President of Nyack College Re: Communication Workshop.”

Majority, as his religious liaison.³⁰⁶ In August 1980 Reagan went to Dallas, Texas to address religious leaders at the Roundtable National Affairs Briefing and proceeded to affirm their existing worldview, and to align himself fully with their moral, family-focused positions stating,

Since the start of my presidential campaign, I—and many others—have felt a new vitality in American politics. A fresh sense of purpose, a deeper feeling of commitment is giving new energy and new direction to our public life. You are a major part of the reason. Religious America is awakening, perhaps just in time for our country's sake.³⁰⁷

Reagan paired his compliments with a further call to action:

If we believe God has blessed America with liberty, then we have not just a right to vote, but a duty to vote. We have not just the freedom to work in campaigns and run for office and comment on public affairs. We have a responsibility to do so.

That is the only way to preserve our blessings, extend them to others and hand them down to our children.

If you do not speak your mind and cast your ballots, then who will speak and work for the ideals we cherish? Who will vote to protect the American family and respect its interests in the formation of public policy?

Who, if not you and millions more like you, will vote to defend the defenseless and the weak, the very young and the very poor and very old.

When you stand up for your values when you assert your civil rights to vote and participate fully in government, you are defending our true heritage of religious liberty.³⁰⁸

Reagan's call to action mirrored the language that evangelicals used when talking about their own identity as defenders of liberty.

The beginning and the ending of his speech that day lay bare Reagan's desire to get the votes of the religious influencers present, and the votes of all the evangelicals that they ministered to. He started out by stating, "Now, I know this is a non-partisan gathering, and so I know that you can't endorse me, but I only brought that up because I

³⁰⁶ Williams, *God's Own Party*; Armstrong, "Religious Broadcasters News Conference with Two Presidential Candidates (Draft)."

³⁰⁷ "Ronald Reagan - Campaign Speech on Religious Liberty at the National Affairs Briefing."

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

want you to know that I endorse you and what you're doing."³⁰⁹ In his language he was able to both compliment his audience but also gain their implied endorsement. He then finished the event overtly appealing to his audience, Reagan recounted to the audience:

May I close on a personal note. I was asked once in a press interview what book I would choose if I were shipwrecked on an island and could have only one book for the rest of my life. I replied that I knew of only one book that could be read and re-read and continue to be a challenge: the Bible – the Old and New Testaments. I can only add to that, my friends, that I continue to look to the Scriptures today for fulfillment and guidance.³¹⁰

If it was not clear up until that point, Reagan was there to be their candidate. His overtures would pay off. In the end not only did evangelicals support him at the ballot box but they remained his staunchest bloc of support once in office. The election of Ronald Reagan was heralded as the true arrival of the conservative Christian machine. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority received much of the credit, and conservative broadcasters generally felt that it was a clear victory for their movement. They had a Presidential candidate that courted their support, and had received his assurances that he would enact the policies they wanted in return for that support.³¹¹

4.2.7 Reagan in Office

Once in office, Reagan continued to rely upon evangelical support, and looked to broadcasters to use their pulpits to shape opinions in his favor.³¹² In 1983 Reagan played to his evangelical base by proposing a school prayer amendment.³¹³ Despite the fact that

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ H.W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (Anchor Books, 2016); David Byrne, *Ronald Reagan: An Intellectual Biography* (University of Nebraska Press, 2018); Bob Spitz, *Reagan: An American Journey* (Penguin, 2018).

³¹² "Ronald Reagan Interview by Pat Robertson," *The 700 Club* (Christian Broadcasting Network, September 1985), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoVDr6136fc>.

³¹³ "Reagan Proposes School Prayer Amendment," accessed April 21, 2019, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

the issue was not remotely related to broadcasting, Ben Armstrong of the NRB contacted members of congress in support of President Reagan's school prayer initiative and received responses from a number of Senators who recognized Armstrong's work as a leading voice for his community.³¹⁴ Evangelicals supported Reagan behind the scenes, but also very publicly. On issues where Reagan needed public support, he would expressly reach out to evangelical leaders for help. An article in *Religious Broadcasting* covered the importance of the issue but also highlighted the connection that evangelicals maintained with the White House. The article explained,

For the second time in two months, President Reagan turned to religious broadcasters for support of his tax restructuring and fairness plan, which most say would have significant positive impact on American families. James Dobson, of Focus on the Family, committed an hour of airtime on September 26 and 27 to an exclusive Oval Office interview with Reagan, who said, 'As the family goes, so goes the nation.'³¹⁵

During Dobson's airtime he "urged listeners to write Congress and support an increase in the individual deduction allowed."³¹⁶ The support for tax policy was covered in *Religious Broadcasting* magazine as a sign of the growing influence and power of religious broadcasters. That the President required their help on a central issue demonstrated that they were players on the national scene. Further, the coverage within the magazine showed the ways in which the NRB itself was more overtly political, covering the issue in a clearly partisan manner.

Religious broadcasters were committed to Reagan and to his policies, even when those policies were otherwise unpopular. A particular area of synergy was anticommunism. The long held anti-communist streak within evangelicalism found a

³¹⁴ "Congressional Letters."

³¹⁵ "Reagan Seeks Support for Pro-Family Tax Fairness Proposals," *Religious Broadcasting*, January 1986.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

leader in Reagan. He had spoken about anticommunism and morality when he campaigned at Liberty University.³¹⁷ Once in office he continued to lean into rhetorical positions that fit with the anticommunist, apocalyptic worldview of evangelicals. When Reagan looked to build up the nuclear arsenal, he was rebuffed by much of the political establishment that supported a nuclear freeze. But, evangelicals were staunchly on Reagan's side. Jerry Falwell began an 'anti-freeze' campaign in order to rally support. Pat Robertson aired a documentary called *Afghanistan: Under the Iron Claw* on CBN that told the behind-the-scenes story of the Soviet invasion. Robertson, Falwell and other evangelicals believed that communists had renewed ambitions of world domination, and that Reagan's aggressive posture was their only hope.³¹⁸ Some Catholics and the National Council of Churches denounced Reagan's subsequent "Star Wars" nuclear defense policy. But again, evangelicals, including the National Association of Evangelicals and the Moral Majority, stood by him, cementing their place as his most loyal supporters.³¹⁹

It's worth noting that while Reagan supported many of the conservative Christians' ideas, their agenda was not fully realized. Abortion was still legal, school prayer was never made an amendment, and religious broadcasters still faced scrutiny from the government about their finances.

Still, by 1986 evangelicals had the ear of the President that they had elected and re-elected. They had control of multiple television networks and they had a huge victory with the FCC that allowed them to fundraise unabated. Evangelicals' cultural and political influence seemed only to be growing and televangelists were leading the charge.

³¹⁷ Armstrong, "To Harold Boon, President of Nyack College Re: Communication Workshop."

³¹⁸ Williams, *God's Own Party*; "Secret Films Have Been Smuggled out of Afghanistan" (Christian Broadcasting Network Inc, April 20, 1982), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00148R000100100003-2.pdf>.

³¹⁹ Williams, *God's Own Party*.

Their early forays into politics had turned into overtly partisan efforts. But what happened next threatened to destroy everything they had built.

Chapter 5: The Trials of Evangelical Power

By the mid-1980s, religious broadcasters had become household names, and Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker and Jerry Falwell were now national celebrities. But the end of the decade would bring the veneer of charismatic morality crashing down, as scandals embroiled countless religious broadcasters. With the scandals came the loss of millions of dollars, as well as the threat of government intervention and oversight in religious broadcasting. At the same time, Pat Robertson would make a failed bid for the presidency and out of the ashes of his campaign would rise the most powerful fusion of religion and politics to date: the Christian Coalition. Robertson's shift from nonpolitical citizen to candidate for President is demonstrative of evangelicals' larger shift during this period. Before long, his media organization donor lists became campaign mailing lists. And later, the remains of his campaign became the basis of a political action group. These transformations are examples of the fluid relationship between religious broadcasting infrastructures and overt political action groups that came to define the movement, and became the basis for conservative evangelicals' sustained success.

The first section of this chapter will focus on the interconnected scandals of the late eighties. In part, the scandals were the culmination of the successes that broadcasters had been advocating for, like access to airtime and unabated fundraising. But the very events that threatened to take down broadcasting instead became a moment of reckoning for the movement. The growth of televangelism had been unchecked and the threat of government intervention as a result of the scandals forced evangelicals to reorganize. It was only through this reorganization that evangelicals cleaned up their image and

reasserted their role in conservative politics, taking on a more overt and influential posture within conservatism. The second section of this chapter will focus on this political story, first by exploring Pat Robertson's presidential run in 1988, and then the subsequent creation of the Christian Coalition. By the early nineties the now reformed evangelical movement exerted its influence in politics and helped to create the Republican Revolution of 1994.

5.1 An Era of Scandal

By the time the eighties were in full swing, it was clear that those who lobbied in favor of religious organizations had done their job. Evangelical television was no longer a runt grasping for free airtime, but an empire in its own right. And thanks to their tax-exempt status and the elimination of fundraising constraints, oversight was non-existent and profits were enormous. It was an environment ripe for excess and corruption, and it soon became clear that some evangelical leaders had gone too far.

5.1.1 The World of Jim Bakker

Jim Bakker was at the top of his game in 1986 with a large and loyal television following and every luxury money could buy. Perhaps the grandest symbol of his success was the Christian theme park he created, Heritage USA.

By the mid-eighties, Heritage USA was an unqualified success, attracting five million visitors a year.³²⁰ It was third behind only Disney World and Disneyland in terms

³²⁰ Megan Rosenfeld, "Heritage USA & the Heavenly Vacation; South Carolina Theme Park Caters to Born-Again Christians," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 1986, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

of annual attendance.³²¹ Located in Charlotte, North Carolina, the 2,200-acre resort was featured tennis courts, campgrounds, a luxury hotel, horseback riding, and a water park. The park, whose “birthday” was declared to be July 4th, was a mash-up of biblical, American, and modern evangelical history.³²² There is a replica of the last supper, Billy Graham’s actual childhood home that had been reassembled on site, and recreations of both biblical Jerusalem and a nineteenth century American settlement.³²³ The park hosted baptisms in the hotel swimming pool every Tuesday, held a night owl wafers and grape juice communion every morning at 2am, and held a daily high-tech Passion play in the amphitheater.³²⁴ The park had a shopping area called “Main St.” that was fashioned to look like a small town and sold all aspects of Christian culture, including Tammy Faye’s records, the Bakkers Anniversary book, and even diet books like *The Exodus Diet Plan*.³²⁵ The Bakkers sold lifetime partnerships to the park on PTL and through mailers. For \$1,000 you and your family were entitled to spend three nights in the Heritage hotel and four days in the park every year until you died.³²⁶

³²¹ History com Editors, “Jim Bakker Is Indicted on Federal Charges,” HISTORY, accessed May 8, 2019, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/jim-bakker-is-indicted-on-federal-charges>; Lloyd Grove, “Scandal Shakes Bakkers’ Empire; Followers Fear Widespread Impact on Evangelicals,” *The Washington Post*, March 21, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Jan Tuckwood, “Heritage USA A Sweet Spiritual Alternative To Disney,” *Palm Beach Post*, October 16, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Kenneth Woodward and Anne Underwood, “Heritage USA: A ‘Disneyland’ for Devout,” *The Toronto Star*, October 11, 1986, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³²² Susan Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America* (Princeton University Press, 2011); Tuckwood, “Heritage USA A Sweet Spiritual Alternative To Disney”; Woodward and Underwood, “Heritage USA: A ‘Disneyland’ for Devout.”

³²³ Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*; Tuckwood, “Heritage USA A Sweet Spiritual Alternative To Disney”; Woodward and Underwood, “Heritage USA: A ‘Disneyland’ for Devout.”

³²⁴ Woodward and Underwood, “Heritage USA: A ‘Disneyland’ for Devout.”

³²⁵ Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*; Tuckwood, “Heritage USA A Sweet Spiritual Alternative To Disney”; Woodward and Underwood, “Heritage USA: A ‘Disneyland’ for Devout.”

³²⁶ Woodward and Underwood, “Heritage USA: A ‘Disneyland’ for Devout”; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s Evangelical Empire*.

While the park seemed to be doing exceedingly well, and Jim and Tammy Faye were singing, crying, and healing every night on television, problems were looming. The Bakkers had long been plagued by questions about their finances and had faced questions from the FCC over questionable broadcast practices.³²⁷ Then, in March 1987, Jim Bakker's world came crashing down, unleashing a series of events that would become an existential threat to religious broadcasting itself.

The Jim Bakker Scandals

In the beginning of March 1987, the Bakkers revealed that Tammy Faye had been battling a drug addiction for more than a decade and was now receiving treatment. The month would only get worst from there.

On March 17th Jerry Falwell met with Jim Bakker and confronted him with information about Jessica Hahn, a church secretary with whom Bakker had a sexual encounter seven years before. What we know for sure is that Bakker admitted to the encounter, and the two men decided that Falwell would take over PTL. What is less clear is why this agreement was reached, as the two men's stories quickly veered in completely different directions.³²⁸ Bakker had been concerned that fellow televangelist Jimmy Swaggart was planning a hostile takeover of the PTL, and he originally stated that he gave the ministry over to Falwell to prevent this. Swaggart and Falwell denied that this

³²⁷ "PTL President Says Luxuries Not From PTL Funds," *The Associated Press*, October 5, 1984, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Norman Black, "FCC Says It Will Take Evangelist to Court," *The Associated Press*, February 6, 1980, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "PTL Withholds Comment on FCC Report of Donations Misuse - Correction Appended," *United Press International*, February 4, 1986, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³²⁸ Grove, "Scandal Shakes Bakkers' Empire; Followers Fear Widespread Impact on Evangelicals"; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

takeover effort ever existed.³²⁹ Throughout the scandal, Falwell maintained that he had no motivation to steal PTL, but rather that he was asked to intervene in an immoral situation and sought to rescue a ministry that could still do good.³³⁰

The next day, March 18th, Bakker was removed as the head of PTL, the PTL board resigned, and a new board was appointed by Falwell.³³¹ Soon Jim Bakker was on the offensive with a new story, talking to the press about how he had been the victim of a blackmail scheme over a one-time sexual encounter, which he thought was also a setup. By the end of the month, Bakker and his loyalists had accused multiple ministers of attempted coups, an idea rejected by Falwell and Bakker's own denominational directors at the Assemblies of God.³³²

April did not go better for Bakker. Soon it was publicly revealed that PTL had been involved in making hush payments to Hahn in exchange for her silence on her affair with Bakker. Further, while it had been known that the Bakkers lived an extravagant lifestyle, the extent of their extravagance on expenditures for interior decorating, vacations, and air conditioned dog houses came to light. There were also questions about the source of the money they were spending, which turned out to be a combination of

³²⁹ Marjorie Hyer, "Bakker's TV Flock Ponders Scandal; Fallout From Sexual Revelations Could Affect Other Evangelists," *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

³³⁰ Russell Watson et al., "Heaven Can Wait," *Newsweek*, June 8, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Michael Isikoff and Art Harris, "Falwell Hits Back; Bakkers Respond as 'Holy War' Intensifies," *The Washington Post*, May 28, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

³³¹ Jeanne Pugh, "After the PTL Explosion, a Time for Reflection," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 20, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³³² *Ibid.*; "No Headline In Original," *United Press International*, May 27, 1987, Wednesday, BC cycle edition, sec. Domestic News, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Bill Lohmann, "PTL Scandal Taking Its Toll," *United Press International*, May 2, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

PTL funds, their own money, and some personal gifts they had received.³³³ As if that wasn't enough, Falwell and fellow broadcaster John Ankerberg accused Bakker of a series of indiscretions, including visiting prostitutes and engaging in homosexual encounters. In keeping with the closely held evangelical idea of repentance, Falwell backed Bakker into a corner in the same moment that he gave him an out: Bakker would need to apologize to Jessica Hahn, return the money to PTL that he had spent extravagantly on himself, and admit that he had indeed engaged in homosexual activity.³³⁴ Bakker was trapped. Even if he could meet the first two requirements, to admit that he had engaged in homosexuality would be the most morally damaging aspect of the scandal, and something he thought he could never recover from in the eyes of the community.³³⁵ Bakker denied the sexual accusations beyond the single encounter with Hahn. Falwell and the Assemblies of God felt that Bakker was not sincerely contrite and that his actions did not meet their moral standards. By May, the Assemblies of God defrocked Bakker and Falwell was in full control of PTL.

In the span of two months, the Bakkers had lost everything. They'd given up control of PTL, they were publicly discredited, and they did not have anything to offer Falwell in exchange for severance pay or a return to PTL. Still, ever the optimists, the Bakkers presented a plea to Falwell with a series of demands including a lifetime salary

³³³ Art Harris and Michael Isikoff, "The Good Life at PTL: A Litany of Excess," *The Washington Post*, May 22, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

³³⁴ Watson et al., "Heaven Can Wait."

³³⁵ Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*; Leslie Camhi, "Screen: At 10 She Found God. At 16 She Found Make-up. And the Two Have Never Left Her: Televangelist Tammy Faye Messner Danced, Sang and Made Fudge for Jesus on US TV. And Now, Reveals Leslie Camhi, the Ex-Wife of Jim Bakker Is Being Reborn as a Gay Icon," *The Guardian*, August 4, 2000, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

of \$400,000, two cars, a house, and the rights to their books and records.³³⁶ The request was odd in light of the situation that they had created, yet the Bakkers were convinced that they were owed something from the ministry and thought that they could recover. The request primarily served to demonstrate just how out of touch they were with the reality of their situation. The Bakkers did not understand that not only were their reputations tarnished, but that PTL itself was in danger of collapse as a result of the scandals. Falwell rejected the request out of hand. Falwell then went on to expose the financial realities of PTL to the public, held an auction of PTL luxury items, and called for an emergency campaign to raise \$7 million in two weeks, claiming that otherwise PTL would have to shut down.³³⁷

On May 17th Bakker approached Falwell one final time asking to return to PTL and regain control of the ministry. Falwell told Bakker once again that he could never return. Recognizing that relying on Jerry Falwell's mercy was no longer an option, Bakker went on *Nightline* on May 26th in an attempt to clear his name and regain his ministry. He told the audience that he was a victim and accused Falwell of conspiring to steal his ministry. Falwell maintained that he had been asked to come in and rescue the troubled institution.³³⁸

³³⁶ Watson et al., "Heaven Can Wait"; Camhi, "Screen: At 10 She Found God. At 16 She Found Make-up. And the Two Have Never Left Her: Televangelist Tammy Faye Messner Danced, Sang and Made Fudge for Jesus on US TV. And Now, Reveals Leslie Camhi, the Ex-Wife of Jim Bakker Is Being Reborn as a Gay Icon," 10; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

³³⁷ Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*; Camhi, "Screen: At 10 She Found God. At 16 She Found Make-up. And the Two Have Never Left Her: Televangelist Tammy Faye Messner Danced, Sang and Made Fudge for Jesus on US TV. And Now, Reveals Leslie Camhi, the Ex-Wife of Jim Bakker Is Being Reborn as a Gay Icon."

³³⁸ Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*; Camhi, "Screen: At 10 She Found God. At 16 She Found Make-up. And the Two Have Never Left Her: Televangelist Tammy Faye Messner Danced, Sang and Made Fudge for Jesus on US TV. And Now, Reveals Leslie Camhi, the Ex-Wife of Jim Bakker Is Being Reborn as a Gay Icon"; Watson et al., "Heaven Can Wait"; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

In the end PTL limped along until September 1989 when it was purchased out of bankruptcy by Morris Cerullo and rebranded. Heritage USA shut its doors the same year.³³⁹ Bakker was tried and convicted on fraud and conspiracy charges, and sentenced to 45 years in prison and fined \$500,000. His sentence was later reduced twice, first to 18 years then to eight years. In the end Bakker only served five.³⁴⁰ He and Tammy Faye divorced while he was in jail.

The details of the Bakker scandal are less important than the events that the scandal triggered. Infighting among religious broadcasters, revelations about other scandals that plagued the community, loss of public trust, and the threat of government intervention and oversight were all to come. Ironically, while broad public trust of televangelists was shaken, longtime viewers remained Bakker's most ardent supporters until the end, protesting on his behalf throughout his trial and continuing to visit Heritage USA until it closed its doors.³⁴¹ Even after the scandal broke Jessica Hahn maintained that she did not want Bakker to leave PTL.³⁴²

Theological differences

As implausible as it might seem, this sex and financial scandal served to highlight one of the major theological divides in religious broadcasting: the place of the 'gifts of

³³⁹ Tuckwood, "Heritage USA A Sweet Spiritual Alternative To Disney"; Paul Nowell, "Jim Bakker to Take Stand in His Fraud-Conspiracy Trial," *The Associated Press*, September 28, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁴⁰ Art Harris, "Jim Bakker Gets 45-Year Sentence; Televangelist Fined \$ 500,000; Eligible for Parole in 10 Years," *The Washington Post*, October 25, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Repentant Jim Bakker Leaving Jail TV Preacher Served 5 Years," *Philadelphia Daily News*, November 29, 1994, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Bakker Convicted On Fraud Charges," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 6, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁴¹ Harris, "Jim Bakker Gets 45-Year Sentence; Televangelist Fined \$ 500,000; Eligible for Parole in 10 Years"; Hyer, "Bakker's TV Flock Ponders Scandal; Fallout From Sexual Revelations Could Affect Other Evangelists"; Tuckwood, "Heritage USA A Sweet Spiritual Alternative To Disney."

³⁴² Grove, "Scandal Shakes Bakkers' Empire; Followers Fear Widespread Impact on Evangelicals."

the Spirit' in modern Christianity. We have been talking about evangelicals as a group based on a number of broadly shared beliefs, conservative positions, and the way in which evangelicals themselves identified and organized. However, there are denominational differences in the way subgroups within evangelicalism operate.

An important distinction that came into play in the Bakker scandal was between Fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Charismatics like Jim Bakker. Fundamentalists and Charismatics align on many topics, such as biblical inerrancy, literal interpretation of scripture, and the physical resurrection of Christ. But, the two groups part ways in respect to faith healing and glossolalia, also known as speaking in tongues. Both of these 'gifts of the spirit' are described in the Book of Acts and the Epistles of Paul. Fundamentalists usually consider those gifts to have been reserved for the time of the Apostles, and therefore no longer a part of their modern practice. In contrast Charismatics, such as the Assemblies of God to which Bakker belonged, believed that these were ongoing revelations available to all.³⁴³ Furthermore, speaking in tongues and healing through faith were signs of the presence of the divine, and therefore encouraged.³⁴⁴

Jerry Falwell was not only a fundamentalist, but also a separatist, eschewing most connections to outside organizations and denominations. He maintained only a loose connection to the Baptist Bible Fellowship, which was an affiliation of independent Baptists.³⁴⁵ Thus, for many, the choice of Falwell to take over PTL was baffling.³⁴⁶ Falwell had been openly critical in the past of faith healing and speaking in tongues, both

³⁴³ Pugh, "After the PTL Explosion, a Time for Reflection."

³⁴⁴ Karla Poewe, *Charismatic Christianity as Global Culture* (University of South Carolina Press, 1994); Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

³⁴⁵ Pugh, "After the PTL Explosion, a Time for Reflection"; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*.

³⁴⁶ Pugh, "After the PTL Explosion, a Time for Reflection."

activities that were mainstays of Jim Bakker's ministry.³⁴⁷ Jim Bakker was among the most charismatic of the Charismatics, so when Falwell stepped in to take charge of his ministry, it was an odd fit.³⁴⁸ Even the three Charismatics on the PTL board appointed under Falwell soon jumped ship: Rex Humbard left after the second meeting, Richard Dortch worked closely with Bakker but had to leave after he was implicated in the scandal, and James Watt, former Secretary of the Interior under Reagan, resigned in May.³⁴⁹

While the theological divide made the fit seem odd, PTL was a huge organization in the religious broadcasting world, and controlling it helped Falwell consolidate his power in that world. It could have served him well if it had continued, and once it turned out that it was a financial nightmare, it at least eliminated his competition. Jim Bakker's selection of Falwell makes sense in light of his fears over his rival Jimmy Swaggart taking over. And, Bakker believed he was going to return to the helm of PTL in no time, so Falwell would be a safe hand to steer the ship in his absence. In some sense the theological difference between the men was an advantage: Bakker reasoned that Falwell's very different ministerial style meant that there needn't be any direct competition between them. As we now know, his belief that Falwell wasn't a threat was deeply misguided, and the mistake cost him his empire.

³⁴⁷ Bruce Buursma, "Church Hears Bakker Accusations," *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 1987, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1987-03-26-8701230580-story.html>; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*.

³⁴⁸ Pugh, "After the PTL Explosion, a Time for Reflection"; Poewe, *Charismatic Christianity as Global Culture*; Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction*.

³⁴⁹ Pugh, "After the PTL Explosion, a Time for Reflection."

5.1.2 Infighting and the Swaggart Scandal

Jim Bakker's scandal played out like a soap opera: sexual encounters, hush money payments, lavish spending, and accusations of hostile takeovers. Part of what escalated the initially-contained scandal to a full-blown plague on all of televangelism was infighting among fellow televangelists. The downfall of Bakker had first gone public in part due to accusations from fellow Assemblies of God minister Jimmy Swaggart and Southern Baptist John Ankerberg, and before long counterattacks and revenge sent the televangelism world into a self-destructive spiral.³⁵⁰

The animus between the broadcasters connects back to a much longer story in religious broadcasting: the competing needs for limited resources and programming. PTL had aired both Ankerberg and Swaggart programming in the past, but had dropped the two from the network in 1986.³⁵¹ As a result, the two men lost their regular access to millions of PTL viewers. PTL stated that Ankerberg's program had been dropped because it did not fit into the 'inspirational' mission of the network. They went on to say that Ankerberg's ministry at times focused less on inspiration and more on attacking other ministers and other religious groups like Mormons, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses.³⁵² While Ankerberg had been on television for years, he was not well known beyond evangelical circles and not a major player. Thus being cut from the network was a threat to his ministry and pocketbook.³⁵³

Swaggart's parting of ways with PTL was the result of a spat about timeslots. Swaggart was moved from his morning timeslot on the network and replaced with a PTL-

³⁵⁰ Ann Rowe Seaman, *Swaggart: The Unauthorized Biography of an American Evangelist* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001).

³⁵¹ Lohmann, "PTL Scandal Taking Its Toll."

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

produced program. When he was offered a different time, Swaggart gave an ultimatum that he would either stay at his same timeslot or leave all together.³⁵⁴ The network didn't blink; Swaggart was off PTL.

While both were members of the Assemblies of God, Swaggart and Bakker's styles were always very different. Bakker's broadcasts were charismatic, focused on faith healing, singing, crying, and glossolalia. In contrast Swaggart had a more stern and straightforward delivery. In part because of this stylistic rift, and in part due to Swaggart's penchant for accusing other people of a lack of moral integrity, he teamed up with Ankerberg to bring Bakker down, surfacing the allegations against him. But within a year Swaggart would be handling a scandal all his own, and with his 1988 "I have sinned" speech he would deliver one of the most infamous religious broadcasting moments in television history.³⁵⁵

Much like the scandal he helped whip up against Bakker, Swaggart's scandal was one borne of loose moral choices, blackmail, and revenge. The scandal began in the mid-eighties with Marvin Gorman, another fellow Assemblies of God minister that Swaggart had accused of having multiple affairs. Gorman was a small fish compared to Swaggart, and the accusation destroyed him, leading to the end of Gorman's ministry and his ousting from the denomination. In retaliation, Gorman hired his son Randy and his son-in-law Garland Bilbo to find dirt on Swaggart. The two men staked out a motel they believed that Swaggart frequented with a prostitute. Swaggart arrived. The two men took

³⁵⁴ Lohmann, "PTL Scandal Taking Its Toll."

³⁵⁵ Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*; Seaman, *Swaggart: The Unauthorized Biography of an American Evangelist*.

pictures of Swaggart entering the room, let the air out of his car tires and called Marvin Gorman to come over so he could confront Swaggart in person.³⁵⁶

Initially Gorman offered to keep the incident private as long as Swaggart would publicly withdraw the accusations he had made against Gorman and help him to be reinstated with the Assemblies of God. After one year went by with no action, Gorman lost patience. He contacted Swaggart, telling him that his time was up to take action. Gorman reached out to the Assemblies leadership and presented photographic evidence that Swaggart was one of many ‘Johns’ who had visited a prostitute named Debra Murphree. Initially Swaggart was suspended by the denomination for only 3 months. However, feeling that Swaggart was not truly contrite, the Assemblies of God defrocked him. Swaggart became an independent Pentecostal and started Jimmy Swaggart Ministries.³⁵⁷ Gorman sued Swaggart and won an initial \$10 million dollar judgment for defamation, eventually receiving \$1.85 million when the two sides settled.³⁵⁸

For his part following the 1988 incident, Swaggart appealed to his audience, sobbing and begging for forgiveness of unspecified sins. For his audience, and his fellow broadcasters, it seemed to work. Pat Robertson was running for President at the time (more on that later in this chapter) and had been trying to distance himself from the televangelist scandals, but even he stood by Swaggart.

³⁵⁶ Seaman, *Swaggart: The Unauthorized Biography of an American Evangelist*; Art Harris, “Jimmy Swaggart And the Snare of Sin; A Saga of Obsession and Anguish, Played Out on a Bayou Highway,” *The Washington Post*, February 25, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁵⁷ Harris, “Jimmy Swaggart And the Snare of Sin; A Saga of Obsession and Anguish, Played Out on a Bayou Highway”; Art Harris, “Jimmy Swaggart’s Secret Life In the World of No-Tell Motels ‘shouting, Weeping’ Preacher Was Just Another Man on Prowl,” *The Toronto Star*, February 26, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁵⁸ Kevin McGill, “Settlement Money Paid In Bitter Fight Between Evangelists,” *The Associated Press*, April 29, 1994, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

Despite his pleas for forgiveness, Swaggart didn't altogether change his ways. In 1991 Swaggart was found with another prostitute during a traffic stop for driving on the wrong side of the road. This time he didn't even bother to make a public plea for forgiveness, instead he brushed off the incident, saying it was no one's business. He briefly stepped down from the ministry, but soon returned.³⁵⁹

Jimmy Swaggart's story had followed that of many of the major televangelists, though he had always been just a step behind their success. He went on the air in the 1970s, had a syndicated daily program *A Study in the Word*, and by the early 1980s he was a household name. He started his own bible college, the Jimmy Swaggart Bible College, which still exists today. Swaggart eventually went on to launch a 24-hour television network but that was not until 2010, by which time digital television and hundreds of channels had completely changed the game. His college was not accredited, and following the 1991 prostitution scandal, drastically downsized its programs. Swaggart had his own magazine, *The Evangelist*, and also sold a range of products like leather-bound bibles and picture bibles for children.³⁶⁰

Swaggart ran his multimillion-dollar organization as if it was a small family business. Family members all served in central positions, with four controlling the seven-person board.³⁶¹ In 1986 alone, Swaggart's ministry took in \$141 million.³⁶² The ministry operated a 257-acre complex with religious and educational facilities, employed 1,200

³⁵⁹ "Rentz Gives Last Sermon to Swaggart Congregation," *The Associated Press*, October 27, 1991, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Jimmy Swaggart's Fall From Grace and Redemption," *CNN Impact* (CNN, September 28, 1997), LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁶⁰ Peter Applebome, "Scandal Spurs Interest In Swaggart Finances - Correction Appended," *The New York Times*, February 29, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid.

people and had an annual payroll of \$11.5 million.³⁶³ Swaggart and his wife Frances lived in a \$1.5 million dollar home on a compound shared by son Donny's \$726,000 home. They owned a condominium near Palm Springs that Swaggart said was donated to them. They also owned their own Gulfstream jet.³⁶⁴ As with Jim Bakker, this excess drew attention, and Swaggart's sexual scandals were soon followed by financial scandals.³⁶⁵ Televangelists across the country were facing more scrutiny, and many dominoes were left to fall.

5.1.3 Government Intervention

The Bakker scandal prompted a one-day congressional hearing and IRS oversight of the couple's finances.³⁶⁶ More broadly, the scandals surrounding religious broadcasters had undermined the public's trust, and soon congress was pushing for more oversight of religious broadcasters' organizations.³⁶⁷ For their part, religious broadcasters felt that they were being victimized, and that their fears of big government interference were being realized. Further, their claim to influence and respect within the political realm had been based on a perceived moral authority, but the immorality amongst their brethren threatened to undermine that position.

The scandals drew attention to just how little regulation there was over the millions of dollars raised by religious broadcasters. All of the television ministries in question were tax exempt because they were considered churches. The most obvious

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Seaman, *Swaggart: The Unauthorized Biography of an American Evangelist*.

³⁶⁶ Howard LaFranchi, "Swaggart Scandal Casts Another Dark Shadow on TV Ministries," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 26, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

offshoot of this is that they were exempt from paying taxes to the government. But more insidiously, churches in the United States were not even required to file tax documents or otherwise provide any information to the IRS about their finances. While Jerry Falwell and others offered that many organizations voluntarily filed ‘informational’ tax returns with the IRS, religious broadcasters vowed to fight any attempt to make these disclosures mandatory.³⁶⁸

When the scandals brought the lack of oversight to the attention of the public, the media began investigations of their own. A writer for the Associated Press reached out to the IRS in order to try to understand exactly how the tax status of religious broadcasters worked. An IRS spokesman, Wilson Fadley, responded and explained that any church, or integrated auxiliary of a church, such as a television ministry, had zero tax requirements. In fact, while many applied for an official tax-exempt status, there was no requirement to even take this step. The IRS would only investigate if it learned of a possible violation through the public or the media and there was “sufficient evidence to warrant it.”³⁶⁹ However, because there were no returns filed for most ministries, even if a violation was reported, the IRS had little initial information to work with. Additional obstacles to transparency included specific rules regulating an investigation of any religious institution. As Wilson Fadley, the IRS spokesman, explained:

Under a 1984 law, IRS can begin an investigation of a church's taxes only if the regional commissioner or higher IRS authority reasonably believes the church may not qualify for tax exemption or may be carrying on an unrelated business. Information used as a basis for beginning an investigation must have been lawfully obtained and not from informants known to be unreliable, the law states. Before beginning the inquiry, the IRS must notify the church in writing and

³⁶⁸ Michael Isikoff, “Evangelists Defend Funding Tactics; Decry House Hearings as Dangerous Precedent,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁶⁹ Donna Cassata, “Televangelists: The Government Isn’t Watching,” *The Associated Press*, April 3, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

explain why. And before actually starting an examination of a church's books, the IRS must give at least 15 days notice. That notice must include a description of the documents to be examined. At any time before the examination, the church may demand a meeting with IRS to discuss problems and try to resolve them without an audit. The only time a church is required to file a tax return is for unrelated business income, such as the profits from an amusement park. However, copies of those returns are not available under the Freedom of Information Act.³⁷⁰

In short, opening an investigation required outside instigation, could only be carried out in the context of investigating non-tax-exempt status, and required giving the suspected organization numerous defensive advantages. Churches were nearly completely above the law, and it was becoming clear that that freedom was breeding corruption.

The recent scandals demanded investigation, and US Representative J.J. Pickle of Texas wrote to eleven prominent religious broadcasters and asked them to appear at a congressional hearing. This hearing sought to investigate how to balance the constitutional rights of churches and federal tax laws. Pickle wrote, "It would be also helpful if we could discuss your ministry's overall qualifications for tax-exempt status, your public disclosure and accountability efforts and views, your policies for protecting against private inurement of ministry funds, and the overall income-producing activities of your ministry."³⁷¹ Religious broadcasters appeared before the committee in 1987 and their reaction to any governmental oversight was swift and united as Michael Isikoff reported in *The Washington Post*,

"For the first time in the history of this nation, we're finding the Congress of the United States investigating churches," complained the Rev. D. James Kennedy, head of the \$ 15-million-a-year Florida-based Coral Ridge Ministries, before the House Ways and Means subcommittee on oversight. "I think this is an extremely dangerous precedent. I'm fearful of the camel's nose in the tent."³⁷²

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Andrew Mangan, "House Panel To Probe Tax Status Of Television Evangelists," *The Associated Press*, July 17, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁷² Isikoff, "Evangelists Defend Funding Tactics; Decry House Hearings as Dangerous Precedent."

NRB executive director Ben Armstrong took action rallying troops and raising funds. He sent a four-page letter to NRB members calling the hearings an “insidious” attack by “the liberal element in our society.”³⁷³ He went on to call this the beginning of an inquisition that will torture all religious broadcasters in the same way that Oliver North has faced unwarranted nonstop scrutiny.³⁷⁴ Armstrong called for the creation of an NRB defense fund that would defend the rights of religious broadcasters. In exchange for each \$25 contribution, members would receive an audiocassette with speeches by Vice President George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Swaggart.³⁷⁵

Representative Pickle was furious at Armstrong’s reaction, citing that in their personal conversations and in Armstrong’s testimony before the committee, none of these concerns were expressed. He argued that this was a fear tactic stating, “They’re using an official congressional letter to arouse fear and distrust among their subscribers -- and I resent that...It seems to be an improper way to raise money.”³⁷⁶

The fear articulated by Armstrong was once again the mobilization of the rhetorical pattern of victimization evangelicals had been using for decades; now they had a specific and very public example to point to. Broadcasters decried that the sins of a few were being visited upon the many, and resented the idea that any oversight was necessary. Jerry Falwell stated that,

National credibility for the cause of Christ is at an all-time low. I don't ever remember a time when people driving trucks, talking on CBs, sitting in restaurants were having such a heyday ridiculing all that is Christian. I would predict that in the next couple of months there won't be a ministry in America that's not kicked, stomped, strangled and all the rest.³⁷⁷

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Lohmann, “PTL Scandal Taking Its Toll.”

Pat Robertson cast the fault on the media,

If the press had focused on Ivan Boesky the way it focused on Jim Bakker, the Dow Jones would be at 735 instead of 2300... The United States Senate had a couple of rather bad incidents with its members and the Senate continues strong. The religious broadcasters have had two or three people against whom there have been charges and allegations and the religious broadcasters, made up of thousands of people, will continue strong as well.³⁷⁸

Still Robertson was not against oversight itself, just *outside* oversight. Prior to the recent scandals he had given the NRB \$50,000 to set up a study to see about necessary reforms, reforms that would now be hastened due to recent events.³⁷⁹ Jerry Falwell for his part strongly resisted the idea of outside oversight and instead put forward that all ministries should voluntarily offer an independent audit of their finances.³⁸⁰

5.1.4 Oversight Over Our Own

Financial scandals were not new to the religious broadcasting community and neither were attempts at oversight. In 1979 Billy Graham had founded the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA), after his organization the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association had faced questions about its finances.³⁸¹ However, the ECFA never gained traction with any of the big broadcasters beyond Graham. Instead it served as an organization comprised mostly of smaller broadcasters eager for outside affirmation to appear more legitimate.³⁸² The EFCA wielded little power to enforce responsibility even among churches that had joined. Members were supposed to turn over their

³⁷⁸ Jacqueline Trescott, "The Televangelists, Putting Their House in Order; Broadcasters Address Credibility at Annual Meeting," *The Washington Post*, February 1, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Megan Rosenfeld, "Falwell's Affirmation; Evangelist Tells Press Club He'll Leave PTL," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁸¹ Pugh, "After the PTL Explosion, a Time for Reflection"; "No Headline In Original," *The Associated Press*, July 27, 1979, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁸² Pugh, "After the PTL Explosion, a Time for Reflection"; "No Headline In Original," July 27, 1979.

financial reports if the organization asked them to, but there was no requirement of organizations to volunteer financial information.

The ECFA's credibility was further undermined when Jerry Falwell left the organization in 1983 and Jim Bakker pulled PTL out in 1986.³⁸³ In 1987 the president of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability estimated that the IRS only audited about 20 of the 350,000 churches nationwide each year.³⁸⁴ This number was confirmed during the October 1987 congressional hearings when IRS Commissioner Lawrence B. Gibbs testified that the IRS had 25 ongoing audits of evangelical organizations.³⁸⁵

As we've discussed, the IRS had very limited investigatory powers when it came to churches. Other governmental organizations like the FCC and Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) faced fewer restrictions, but their investigations generally still failed to draw blood. In the early seventies, the SEC investigated Falwell over church bonds he issued that were not secured, but the investigation was dropped after Falwell agreed to alter his methods and agreed to a period of oversight by an independent committee.³⁸⁶ The FCC had investigated the Bakkers for misuse of funds that were intended for a foreign mission but instead went towards paying local bills. That investigation was dropped after Bakker sold the radio station removing himself from the FCC's jurisdiction over the matter and then the Justice Department declined to prosecute.³⁸⁷

³⁸³ Cassata, "Televangelists: The Government Isn't Watching"; David Anderson, "The National Religious Broadcasters, Acting in the Wake Of..." UPI, February 3, 1988, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1988/02/03/The-National-Religious-Broadcasters-acting-in-the-wake-of/1386570862800/>.

³⁸⁴ Cassata, "Televangelists: The Government Isn't Watching."

³⁸⁵ Isikoff, "Evangelists Defend Funding Tactics; Decry House Hearings as Dangerous Precedent."

³⁸⁶ Rosenfeld, "Appeal of the Televangelists: Firm Answers to Life's Questions."

³⁸⁷ Ibid.; Seaman, *Swaggart: The Unauthorized Biography of an American Evangelist*; Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

Of all of the major players Billy Graham had been the only one who seemed beyond reproach. Sociologist William Martin explained in a *Washington Post* article in 1987 that, “Graham has always had a friend who travels with him, who goes into every hotel room first to make sure there is no one there to trap him...He has a board of businessmen who make the financial decisions. He submits his 990 forms to the IRS, and he makes his audit forms available. He is still the model.”³⁸⁸ While Graham would later have to face revelations about his conversations with Nixon, he remained unscathed in the financial and sexual scandals of the 1980s.

For broadcasters in the climate of the late eighties, the specter of government oversight was looming, and their rhetorical position as victims seemed to be becoming reality. With zero oversight no longer an option, evangelicals opted for oversight from their own. The NRB was still the only organization of its kind, and given its connections to broadcasters and politicians, it was already poised to step in. In 1988 it created the Ethics and Financial Integrity Commission (EFICOM), which would operate under the umbrella of the NRB.³⁸⁹ The commission was intended to remove the need for government intervention, restore viewer confidence in broadcasters, and (positively for the NRB) put the organization at the center of the broadcasting world once again.³⁹⁰

All television ministries had seen a drop in contributions following the scandals, so Ben Armstrong wanted to create a seal of approval that would indicate to viewers who

³⁸⁸ Rosenfeld, “Appeal of the Televangelists: Firm Answers to Life’s Questions.”

³⁸⁹ Anderson, “The National Religious Broadcasters, Acting in the Wake Of...”

³⁹⁰ Nicole Brodeur, “Religious Broadcasters’ New Monitor,” *The Orange County Register*, February 8, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

the ‘good’ ministries were so they would start sending their money in again.³⁹¹ Pat

Robertson endorsed the involvement of the NRB stating,

There is no other organization in America as qualified to police integrity than the National Religious Broadcasters ... I believe the public today demands accountability and I believe that all religious broadcasters want to give the type of audited statements and complete openness that is necessary, that is required by the society we live in today. I think that will go a long way to rebuilding the public confidence and trust that is a requisite to operate in the public arena.³⁹²

EFICOM was voted in with a margin of 324-6, with the six voting against stating they thought the financial burden of meeting the requirements would be too high.³⁹³ At the time of the vote the NRB had about 1,350 members who produced about three-quarters of all religious programming, across both radio and television, in the United States.³⁹⁴

While the EFICOM standards had been adopted in the fall of 1987, they were initially only suggestions. But as the scandals grew, the NRB moved to make the standards mandatory for all members.³⁹⁵ EFICOM set out different tiered compliance requirements based on how large the ministry was. Ministries who took in less than \$500,000 would only need to submit an unaudited financial statement.³⁹⁶ For larger ministries, requirements included submitting to yearly independent audits, disclosing the source of all income and spending, and making information available to the public. In addition, ministries of a certain size would be required to have a board with at least five directors, the majority of whom were not related to the ministry executive, and not on the ministry staff. Finally, NRB members would be required to keep all fundraising materials

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Trescott, “The Televangelists, Putting Their House in Order; Broadcasters Address Credibility at Annual Meeting.”

³⁹³ Deborah Mesce, “Religious Broadcasters Set Mandatory Ethical, Reporting Requirements,” *The Associated Press*, February 4, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; “Religious Broadcasters Adopt Stiffer Ethics Code,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

³⁹⁴ Mesce, “Religious Broadcasters Set Mandatory Ethical, Reporting Requirements.”

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ “Religious Broadcasters Adopt Stiffer Ethics Code.”

for one year and submit samples to EFICOM upon request.³⁹⁷ Along with these requirements, EFICOM also issued guidelines to members with suggestions about reasonable salary amounts for staff and broadcasters, and recommendations for how to remain ethical.³⁹⁸

Even though EFICOM was set up in the late eighties, it took a while for the NRB to bring any real consequences to bear. In the short term, the creation of the commission had served its purpose: quelling the calls for government oversight. At its 1989 meeting the NRB had announced that it would rescind membership for members who did not comply with the EFICOM standards by May, but that threat was not followed through on.³⁹⁹ Since membership in the NRB was not mandatory, many ministries just dropped out of the organization rather than trying to meet the new standards; there was little evidence that viewers and listeners actually cared about the NRB seal of approval anyway.

But by 1992, time was up, and the NRB was ready to make good on its promise to revoke memberships for those not in compliance with EFICOM. David Clark, who was now president of the NRB, announced at the yearly conference that it was set to expel 162 members for failing to meet the standards of financial accountability. Those members would be given one last chance, but then their membership would be revoked. The names were kept private, but Clark announced that they were mostly small ministries that had failed to provide financial statements on income and spending.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁷ "Religious Broadcasters Plan New Code of Ethics," *The Toronto Star*, February 13, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Brodeur, "Religious Broadcasters' New Monitor."

³⁹⁸ Mesce, "Religious Broadcasters Set Mandatory Ethical, Reporting Requirements."

³⁹⁹ Trescott, "The Televangelists, Putting Their House in Order; Broadcasters Address Credibility at Annual Meeting."

⁴⁰⁰ William Bole, "Religion Broadcasters Are Prepared to Expel Members," *St. Petersburg Times*, February 1, 1992, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

After those members were expelled, the NRB was left with 565 members in good standing.⁴⁰¹ While sheer numbers had meant power for the organization previously, this shift is indicative of the transformation religious broadcasters more broadly were undergoing. Unbridled, bloated organizations were pared down, and had to be smarter. What was left was a set of ministries that could go the distance, survive the time of scandal, and would continue to exert their influence well into the next century.⁴⁰²

5.1.5 Trinity and the Family

An issue that came up as a result of the scandals and ensuing oversight was the unique role that family played in television ministries. The role of the family was a time-honored tradition for religious broadcasters, going back to Percy Crawford who had his whole family singing on his broadcast.⁴⁰³ The Bakkers were best known as a husband and wife team; Tammy Faye was a regular feature that brought songs and tears to every episode. When she cried the viewers cried right along with her, and got out their checkbooks.⁴⁰⁴ Pat Robertson's wife Dede was not always on the show, but she was often referred to in stories, and their son Gordon eventually joined CBN, which he now runs. Jimmy Swaggart's son Donny was a regular feature who took over his ministry briefly following the 1991 scandal. The representation of the broadcasters as the ideal family was a part of the image. It helped believers with families relate to the broadcasters, and gave everyone else an image to idealize and aspire to.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² "Religious Broadcasters Plan New Code of Ethics."

⁴⁰³ Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: The Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)*.

⁴⁰⁴ Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*, 123.

The family-run style of ministries was brought to the forefront when EFICOM sought to shine daylight into the boardrooms of religious broadcasting, and stipulated that a majority of a ministry's board could not be related. Of particular interest on this subject was the west coast ministry of Paul and Jan Crouch and the Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN). The Crouches had been building up TBN since the early seventies by slowly buying up local stations, ultimately creating one of the largest evangelical networks. As discussed in Chapter 2, Jim and Tammy Faye joined the Crouches' ministry following their falling out with Robertson, giving TBN the spark that it needed to find its audience.⁴⁰⁵

Together the two couples created the first iteration of the PTL show, *Praise the Lord*. After the Bakkers left TBN, the Crouches continued to host *PTL* on TBN. Confusingly, the Bakkers went on to found a network also called PTL and started a new show with the same *PTL* name, but the Bakkers said that their PTL now stood for *People that Love*.⁴⁰⁶ While the Crouches had dismissed the Bakkers for unseemly behavior, as it turned out the Crouches had employed ruthless tactics as they built up their empire. As the NRB amped up oversight of its members following the scandals of the eighties, TBN found itself under scrutiny, and in 1990 TBN resigned from the National Religious Broadcasters three weeks before it would have had to prove its financial accountability.⁴⁰⁷

Crouch burned a lot of bridges on his way out of the NRB, writing in the Trinity newsletter that they were withdrawing from the "man-made organizations" because it

⁴⁰⁵ Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.; "40 Years of Raising A Mighty Voice; How TBN Became a Broadcast, Cable Titan of Christian Content," *Broadcasting and Cable*, May 6, 2013, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁰⁷ Mary Owen, "TBN Quits National Broadcast Group; Organization Says Tustin-Based Trinity Is Fleeing Complaints over Finances, Ethics," *The Orange County Register*, January 6, 1990, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

was spreading lies and creating trumped up charges that “were aimed at the very heart of your TBN.”⁴⁰⁸ He told his readers that; “It was not a very good year to be a TV evangelist...In 1989, Satan ranted, raged and roared against TBN, as well as Jan and me personally.”⁴⁰⁹ This type of language was not new for Crouch, who had acknowledged that he had prayed that “God would kill anyone or anything attempting to destroy my ministry.”⁴¹⁰

The split brought to light a number of scandals that had been merely rumors before the Crouches pulled out of the NRB. As it turned out, the NRB had been looking into Trinity since complaints were made in 1988 that Trinity had engaged in hostile takeovers of several stations and had mistreated employees. The original probe was dropped because there was never sufficient evidence to verify the accusations.⁴¹¹ But in complaints filed with the NRB, it was alleged that Crouch got his start by sabotaging a competitor in the area. It was alleged that while working for Faith Broadcasting Network (FBN), Crouch built up TBN by selling air-time at a rate he knew that FBN could not afford, then he later raised the prices back to market rate. Once Crouch left FBN, they discovered that a corporate mailing list had disappeared, and under threat of court action

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Tracy Weber, “OC’s Trinity Broadcasting Network Is under Fire; Lawsuits, Complaints Allege Improprieties; Jan Crouch Warns of ‘fault-Finding Demons’ (AM HEAD VARIES),” *Orange County Register*, October 22, 1990, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴¹¹ Owen, “TBN Quits National Broadcast Group; Organization Says Tustin-Based Trinity Is Fleeing Complaints over Finances, Ethics”; Nicole Brodeur, “Christian Broadcasters Recommend Arbitration to TBN Founder Crouch,” *The Orange County Register*, May 20, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Nicole Brodeur, “Religious Broadcasters Group Investigating OC Evangelist,” *The Orange County Register*, February 8, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

Crouch admitted that it had accidentally ended up in his briefcase. Crouch had then later sent mailings to many on the list on stationary very similar to FBN's.⁴¹²

Soon an investigation from the NRB was the least of Crouch's worries, as lawsuits began to form against him personally and against TBN. According to an article in the *Orange County Register* Crouch was accused of:

taking money from donations intended for other preachers on TBN, of ruthlessly seizing control of competing Christian stations, dodging the payment of employee-withholding taxes, ordaining non-Christian employees as ministers for a tax break in lieu of giving them raises, and emotionally intimidating anyone who dares stand in the way of "God's anointed," as employees say Crouch calls himself.⁴¹³

A former employee who had supervised the payroll at TBN sued Crouch because she said she, her husband, and son were all fired after she "objected to an alleged TBN scheme to disguise more than 50 regular, full-time employees as outside contractors."⁴¹⁴ As outside contractors, TBN would avoid payroll and social security taxes.⁴¹⁵ The lawsuit was eventually dismissed, but it wouldn't be the end of the accusations.⁴¹⁶ Paul Crouch passed away in 2014 under the continued cloud of allegations about sexual and financial misconduct.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹² Weber, "OC's Trinity Broadcasting Network Is under Fire; Lawsuits, Complaints Allege Improprieties; Jan Crouch Warns of 'fault-Finding Demons' (AM HEAD VARIES)"; Kenneth Woodward and Lynda Wright, "The T Stands for Troubled," *Newsweek*, March 30, 1992, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴¹³ Weber, "OC's Trinity Broadcasting Network Is under Fire; Lawsuits, Complaints Allege Improprieties; Jan Crouch Warns of 'fault-Finding Demons' (AM HEAD VARIES)."

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.; "Ex-Workers' Suit against TBN, Crouch Is Dismissed," *Orange County Register*, May 13, 1992, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴¹⁶ "Ex-Workers' Suit against TBN, Crouch Is Dismissed"; Tracy Weber, "Employees Skimmed Donations, Suit Alleges; Family Says Network Stole from Preachers," *Orange County Register*, September 27, 1990, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴¹⁷ Teri Sforza, "TBN Lawsuit Delves into Crimes, Sex and Scandal," *Orange County Register*, February 26, 2012, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Obituary for Benjamin L. Armstrong at Anders-Detweiler Funeral Home & Crematory," December 12, 2010, http://www.meaningfulfunerals.net/home/index.cfm/public:obituaries/view/fh_id/10217/id/770243/lud/E1A3BF2C4B6CB74B6AC6FA85FC0B4477; "Paul Crouch - Obituary; Paul Crouch Was an American Televangelist Who Made a Fortune but Had to Battle Claims of Sexual and Financial Misconduct," *The*

5.1.6 Scandals Large and Small

Bakker, Swaggart, and Crouch were some of the most prominent figures in religious television, and their downfall sent shockwaves throughout American culture. Because they were so well-known, their scandals threatened to tar not only religious broadcasting but also to undermine the broader efforts of evangelicalism. The celebrity scandals also led to skepticism and investigations of other, smaller ministries. In the growing cloud of rumor and wrongdoing, these ministries also faced public scandal, which we will briefly survey to illustrate how widespread and varied the corruption during this era was.

One of the more sensational examples comes from Oral Roberts, who publicly announced that God would kill him if he didn't raise \$8 million for his medical center. In the end Roberts insisted that he was spared because he had raised the funds he needed, but the high drama and lack of accountability contributed to raising concerns about the industry more broadly.⁴¹⁸

While financial accountability led to the shedding of many less than scrupulous broadcasters from the NRB, it did not stop them from broadcasting. Nor did it limit the public's thirst for information. In 1992, ABC's *PrimeTime* aired an investigation of three ministers' methods: W.V. Grant, the "Miracle Preacher," Rev. Larry Lea and Rev. Robert Tilton.⁴¹⁹

Telegraph, January 10, 2014, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Self, *All in the Family*; Weber, "Employees Skimmed Donations, Suit Alleges; Family Says Network Stole from Preachers."

⁴¹⁸ Deborah Mesce, "Religious Broadcasters Eye Disclosure Code," *The Associated Press*, January 30, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴¹⁹ "It's Up To You; Spirit of Destruction; The Apple of God's Eye; The Apple of God's Eye: Follow-Up," *ABC News Primetime Live*, July 9, 1992, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

W.V. Grant, the “Miracle Preacher,” who claimed to heal through faith, was revealed to use visual tricks to create the appearance of miracles. Further damaging was reporting by Diane Sawyer, who spoke with the doctors in Haiti where Grant purported to send the donations. They stated that neither Grant nor the money ever made it to them.⁴²⁰

Reverend Larry Lea had become well known after claiming that he had lost everything to a devastating fire, and for reports that the funds he raised to build a church in Poland were spent elsewhere. Lea had been a prominent broadcaster in evangelical circles, even giving the keynote at the NRB 1990 convention. In his interview with Diane Sawyer, Lea stated he had received NRB’s EFICOM seal of approval. Since Lea had clearly mishandled funds, this statement on national television created a huge issue for the NRB. They had hoped that their seal would be unassailable in the eyes of the government and public alike. Once the show aired, the NRB announced that Lea was in fact not in compliance with their standards. It became clear that Lea had only sent a small fraction of funds to his overseas mission, and that while he had indeed lost a home in Tulsa to a fire, it was fully insured and he had been trying to sell it for years. In fact, he had another 5.1-acre property in Dallas where he lived comfortably.⁴²¹

The Robert Tilton Ministry had grown quickly in the wake of other big broadcasters’ losses, reportedly making at least \$80 million, tax-free. Tilton had developed a new tactic that went beyond viewers’ pledges of financial support, and involved physical correspondence with people all over the world. The ministry would send out letters and items like “prayer clothes” and then ask the viewer to pray with the item and then send the materials back. When they sent the cloth back, they would include

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

donations. Tilton created an organizational system that tracked which methods brought in the biggest donations. Then he built profiles of donors and poured the money that was raised into promotional materials that would tout charitable work that the organization was involved in, but not entirely responsible for.⁴²²

Following the interview Tilton claimed that he was victimized by shoddy journalism and had actually had his own health scares as a result of his deep commitment to his work. Tilton claimed that he held and laid down upon the volumes of prayers sent to him and that the ink from all the letters had entered his bloodstream and caused strokes. He also said it was this ink poisoning that forced him to get plastic surgery.⁴²³

The repeated public scandals, with all their salacious and memorable details, threatened to undermine evangelicalism's claim to moral authority. Their inroads into public and political life could be undone as evangelicals found themselves under the microscope of public scrutiny the likes of which they had not experienced since the Scopes Trial.

5.1.7 Fallout

Reactions to all of these scandals were mixed. In response to the Bakker scandal, pollster George Gallup said that Bakker posed "a serious risk that could offend giving even on the local level."⁴²⁴ He said that the scandal threatened "to undermine the traditions of American society" of voluntary contributions to a wide range of causes

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Hyer, "Bakker's TV Flock Ponders Scandal; Fallout From Sexual Revelations Could Affect Other Evangelists."

“because religious institutions are the greatest beneficiaries of philanthropy.”⁴²⁵ Historian Martin E. Marty stated that the scandals reinforced the old Elmer Gantry stereotypes.⁴²⁶ Gantry was the title character of book by Sinclair Lewis that was adapted into a popular film in 1960. The character was a conning hypocrite who feigned faith to earn money and love.⁴²⁷ Still, Marty said

‘I don't believe the true believers will drop off... The true believer has a fiscal investment’ as well as an emotional one. ‘They can rationalize the problems [of the evangelists] as just one more example of the devil at work.’ The obligation to forgive is a basic tenet of Christianity, one that Bakker knows how to employ.⁴²⁸

Historian George Marsden offered that “one of the things religious groups thrive on is being persecuted. That's the kind of thing that builds support from the faithful.”⁴²⁹

In the wake of scandal, competition rose as broadcasters sought to maintain their audiences and save their ministries. Most of the ministries had high overheads and had been built to rely on a constant influx of donations. So, if donations disappeared, the ministry could soon follow. A 1989 article in *The Washington Post* described the effects of the scandals of the late eighties:

Because religious broadcasting is big business, the attention to ethics also carries with it a strong survival factor. In the year beginning November 1987, Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" went from 156 to 125 stations and donations dropped from \$ 50 million to \$ 40 million; Roberts' show went from 176 to 123 stations; Robertson's "The 700 Club" went from 87 to 57 stations and "The PTL Club" went from 67 stations to 32, according to Electronic Media, a trade journal. At the same time, according to the NRB, both television and radio programs of religious content are increasing.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Jeffrey Hadden and Anson Shupe, “Elmer Gantry: Exemplar of American Televangelism,” in *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions* (Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990).

⁴²⁸ Hyer, “Bakker’s TV Flock Ponders Scandal; Fallout From Sexual Revelations Could Affect Other Evangelists.”

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Trescott, “The Televangelists, Putting Their House in Order; Broadcasters Address Credibility at Annual Meeting.”

The eighties were a breaking point for religious broadcasting. For decades the world of television was a land grab, a rush to acquire and consolidate viewers, money and power. In a nation overflowing with believers, and the technology to reach all of them, a clever few found a way to exploit this situation to its fullest. Hearts, minds, and pocketbooks were won by the millions.

It's perhaps only natural, when oversight was so scant and opportunities were so lucrative, that a certain degree of ruthlessness was required to rise to the top. And it's therefore none too surprising that when the land was all taken, and the winners began eyeing each other, that there was enough corruption and bad blood to ensure things didn't end well.

Of course, religious broadcasting didn't end with the eighties. It spread out, diversified, and thrives to this day. But the era of scandal marks an inflection point, where the limit had been found, and religious television became an everyday part of American life, rather than an explosively transformative one. Through self-imposed oversight, or at least the outward appearance of oversight, broadcasters who avoided scandal fought to reclaim their moral authority in the eyes of the public. By proving their worth at the ballot box, evangelicals worked to reassert their power and influence in politics. Thus we end this chapter by switching from our focus back to politics, where a similarly explosive, audacious power grab is attempted, with similarly dramatic results.

Section 5.2 From Presidential Campaigns to Voter Guides: Evangelicals in Politics

In 1988, in the midst of the televangelist scandals, Pat Robertson ran for President; he was not elected. But, out of the ashes of that campaign rose a new model of evangelical politics that exerted influence on a national level and forced the Republican Party further right. This section explains how the electoral failure of an unorthodox candidate led to the transformation of conservatism and the Republican Revolution of 1994.

5.2.1 Pat Robertson for President

The transformation of Pat Robertson took him from a position where he was against being overtly political in the 1970s, to a full blown political candidate who touted his political heritage in 1988. In 1984 when asked if he would consider a run for the presidency Robertson stated "I have much more important work right now where I am, and I'm able to make statements every day on television that are more powerful than ones at some Republican Conventions."⁴³¹ Until the mid-eighties Robertson continued to state publicly that he could make more of an impact with his editorials on *The 700 Club* and using that platform for what he called "advocacy journalism," than he could in any political office.⁴³² Still Robertson had been priming the pump for a long time, slowly moving from his avowed nonpolitical stance towards statements that bridged the gap between the political and the religious. Leading into the 1986 midterms he stated that there was no conflict between being an ordained minister and running for political

⁴³¹ Bill Lohmann, "Profile of Minister Pat Robertson;UPI NewsFeature;Pat Robertson: The Political Power of Prayer," *United Press International*, January 12, 1986, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴³² Ibid.

office.⁴³³ Then, as a hurricane threatened to make landfall on the east coast, Robertson found the inspiration he needed to make the leap.

In 1985 Hurricane Gloria was making its way towards the Virginia coastline and directly towards the CBN broadcast facilities. Robertson went on the air on *The 700 Club* and implored all who were watching to pray that the storm would go back out to sea.⁴³⁴ Robertson himself rebuked the storm and cast it back to where it came from.⁴³⁵ The storm did not head back out to sea but instead made its way towards Long Island where it caused death and destruction. While the storm had not spared the east coast as Robertson had asked, the fact that it had missed Virginia Beach was enough of a sign to Robertson that maybe he should run for President, “I felt, interestingly enough, that if I couldn’t move a hurricane, I could hardly move a nation.”⁴³⁶ But he had moved the hurricane, and next he planned to move a nation.

Robertson’s comments on Gloria were a continuation of his providential thinking, on how he and CBN had always been shown to have divine favor. He said that he really started to consider running for the presidency “after being urged by several friends, including an unnamed former president and three senators, concerned over who will continue the conservative agenda of Ronald Reagan.”⁴³⁷

Robertson tested the political waters for more than a year before he officially jumped into the race. His efforts began as a sort of announcement that he would need to be recruited by supporters, and that God would need to give the final go ahead. Before he

⁴³³ “Robertson Will Decide on Presidential Run After 1986 Elections,” *Religious Broadcasting*, January 1986.

⁴³⁴ “The 700 Club,” *The 700 Club* (Christian Broadcasting Network, September 26, 1985).

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Jon Connell, “White House Hopeful Awaits God’s Sign / Profile of Possible US Presidential Candidate, the Rev Pat Robertson,” *The Sunday Times*, September 21, 1986, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴³⁷ Lohmann, “Profile of Minister Pat Robertson;UPI NewsFeature;Pat Robertson: The Political Power of Prayer.”

was even in the race Robertson claimed to have received over three million signatures supporting his run, and nearly \$10 million in political contributions, which was \$1 million more than Vice President George Bush had raised.⁴³⁸ Robertson declared that “The people...are urging me to run.”⁴³⁹ For Robertson a surprise win in the Iowa straw poll, before he had even officially announced he was running was even more evidence that Providence was with him.⁴⁴⁰ Still, even with these successes, Robertson said that “the Almighty has already sent him a strong sign,” but he was still awaiting the final Word before he officially went ahead.⁴⁴¹

Word came. Pat Robertson announced his presidential run on October 1st 1987.⁴⁴² Once officially in the race, he had to negotiate the expectations set not only by his personal past, but by the image of religious broadcasters more generally, an image that was recently tarred by very public scandals.

He built a campaign that touted his business acumen to show his ability to serve as a chief executive. He pointed out his international television following and the fact that his 800 number “was said to be the most-called number in the world.”⁴⁴³ CBN had reportedly received 1.3 million calls in 1985 alone, with his broadcasts reaching 30 million homes.⁴⁴⁴ *The 700 Club* and Robertson had transformed over the years, focusing more on world and political events. Robertson interviewed international leaders and

⁴³⁸ “California Quake; Battling over Bork; On the Edge; Pat Robertson Interview,” *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* (PBS, October 1, 1987), LexisNexis Nexis Uni; “Pat Robertson’s Week,” *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴³⁹ “Pat Robertson’s Week.”

⁴⁴⁰ “California Quake; Battling over Bork; On the Edge; Pat Robertson Interview.”

⁴⁴¹ Connell, “White House Hopeful Awaits God’s Sign / Profile of Possible US Presidential Candidate, the Rev Pat Robertson.”

⁴⁴² “California Quake; Battling over Bork; On the Edge; Pat Robertson Interview.”

⁴⁴³ “Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid.” accessed May 6, 2019, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

began publishing a newsletter that supplemented the opinions he shared on television.⁴⁴⁵ He had also set up 'Freedom Councils' that were purportedly not political at their start, according to CBN, but focused on grassroots issues such as school curriculums.⁴⁴⁶ These Councils became an organizational base from which Robertson built an official political structure for his run, and then eventually formed the basis of the Christian Coalition after the campaign ended.⁴⁴⁷

While he would have to overcome the skepticism about his religious connections, Robertson's empire gave enormous advantages in terms of infrastructure and fiscal support. CBN was taking in \$230 million annually in combined donations and advertising. Further, the Nielson company reported that *The 700 Club*, which offered increasingly more political opinion and news delivered by Robertson himself, had a monthly audience of 29 million people, and growing by 30,000 per month.⁴⁴⁸ As an official political candidate, Robertson had to sever connections to CBN: that money was not his to spend and he could no longer appear on the air. However, he hoped that the base of support would follow him into the political arena.

Once his candidacy for the presidency was official, Robertson also stepped away from his ministry.⁴⁴⁹ He stated that:

in this country, and in my own life, there are two feelings about an ordained clergyman. Number one, we want our holy men to be just that. We don't want them to be into the muck and mire of politics. The second thing is we don't

⁴⁴⁵ "The 700 Club," *The 700 Club* (Christian Broadcasting Network, March 28, 1980), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDT3krve9iE>.

⁴⁴⁶ Thomas Edsall, "Onward, GOP Christians, Marching to '88; Are Evangelicals Amassing As Much Clout With Republicans As the AFL-CIO Has With Democrats?," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 1985, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid."

⁴⁴⁷ "Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid."

⁴⁴⁸ Lohmann, "Profile of Minister Pat Robertson; UPI NewsFeature; Pat Robertson: The Political Power of Prayer."

⁴⁴⁹ "California Quake; Battling over Bork; On the Edge; Pat Robertson Interview."

particularly want an ordained Catholic priest or protestant minister, a Jewish rabbi in a major position in our government, because we don't feel we should prefer one sect over another. And I knew that as an ordained Baptist minister, that I would bring about those problems in people's lives and I would have in my own life. And so I said if I'm going to go out into this arena, I've got to go out essentially as a layman, as a Mr. instead of a reverend, because I believe in absolute religious freedom for all people in this country. And my act was to underscore that fact.⁴⁵⁰

Still, for a man whose name and face were synonymous with the network, the continued connection would be a blessing and a curse. The continued presence of CBN in the lives of viewers, now voters, made sure that he stayed at the forefront of their thoughts. But the connection made it difficult for Robertson to distance himself from the scandals of religious broadcasters. The terminology in much of the coverage of the recent scandals had utilized the terms 'televangelist' or 'television evangelist' so Robertson set about branding himself as a 'religious *broadcaster*' and aligning himself more publicly with other broadcasters not marred by scandals, saying:

I'm a religious broadcaster, and actually -- a broadcaster. Broadcasting Magazine listed me as one of the top 50 most influential broadcasters of the decade from 1970 to 1980. Along with that was Leonard Goldenson of ABC, and Phil Donahue and people like that. So I was put into the Hall of Fame of the National Religious Broadcasters as a broadcaster. My first job was being a television station manager. I've been a film buyer, a program director, camera man, a few things like that.⁴⁵¹

The controversy over what to call Robertson became a talking point that tapped into the rhetorical position of Christians under attack. As one article put it,

For nearly a month Pat Robertson has been demanding that the media stop calling him 'a former television evangelist.' Robertson, who began the crusade in an interview with NBC's Tom Brokaw, said the label was pejorative, that its use was an attack. 'It's like calling a black man a nasty word that begins with N,' he later complained to Newsweek.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² "Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid."

This underdog stance proved to be more broadly useful. The fact that Robertson was in a position where he was under scrutiny from the mainstream press allowed him to mobilize the rhetoric that had become increasingly central to the ideology of evangelicals and the right.⁴⁵³ His campaign made hay over the coverage from any question that the mainstream press asked about religion. As reported in one article,

The rough and tumble of the campaign has led Robertson to take the offensive, charging that Brokaw and anyone else who asks religion-oriented questions are bigoted. 'Being under the microscope is an adjustment for anybody,' said Theresa George, Robertson's deputy press secretary. 'Pat Robertson has a lot of knowledge. Sometimes he can't quote a source, but that doesn't mean what he says is wrong.'⁴⁵⁴

In an effort to break out of the mold of television minister, Robertson also began playing up his connections to American history. He publicly touted that his heritage included two Presidents, Benjamin Harrison and William Henry Harrison. He also frequently stated that his first words were "Mommy, Daddy and constituent, in that order."⁴⁵⁵ The man who had wanted to stay out of politics now advertised that politics had always been in his blood.

Still, Robertson had work to do to explain why he was running. When asked by Judy Woodruff whether he was running because "America needs to get back to God" as one of his supporters put it, he answered:

Well, that's part of it. There are symptoms all over of a crack in the greatness of this nation. We've got a problem with teenage pregnancy, we've got a terrible literacy problem in the country. We have an enormous foreign trade deficit. We have a huge budget deficit. These are things that need to be restored, and my theme essentially is to restore the greatness of America through moral strength.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.; Lohmann, "Profile of Minister Pat Robertson;UPI NewsFeature;Pat Robertson: The Political Power of Prayer."

And I believe people who are concerned about family values and what are known as traditional values, are going to be supporting my candidacy.⁴⁵⁶

He formed a platform that focused on the pillars of the New Right, playing up moral issues but also fiscal policies, which as a successful businessman he argued he was equipped to fix. He attempted to frame all issues around morality, even the federal deficit.⁴⁵⁷ He advocated for killing Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi, phasing out Social Security, and ending urban aid programs.⁴⁵⁸ He touted the work of the international relief program he had started, Operation Blessing, and argued that the US government should aid the Nicaraguan contra rebels as his organization had been doing for years.⁴⁵⁹ The centerpieces of his campaign were the issues he had long advocated, such as a constitutional amendment to ban abortion.⁴⁶⁰ He decried the ‘moral decay’ of homosexuality and the immoral behavior that was spreading the AIDS virus.⁴⁶¹

As Robertson built his political platform it soon became clear that he was anything but a traditional candidate. While his positions on ending Social Security and ending urban aid were familiar talking points in the Republican Party, Robertson’s animated delivery and tendency towards exaggeration was a stark contrast with the mild-mannered persona of George H.W. Bush. Further, when Robertson advocated for an assassination and claimed that his organization had already meddled in foreign affairs, he was perceived as nontraditional by some and a dangerous wildcard by many others.

⁴⁵⁶ “California Quake; Battling over Bork; On the Edge; Pat Robertson Interview.”

⁴⁵⁷ Lohmann, “Profile of Minister Pat Robertson; UPI News Feature; Pat Robertson: The Political Power of Prayer.”

⁴⁵⁸ “Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid.”

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Jill Lawrence, “Groups List Possible Presidential Candidates on Abortion,” *The Associated Press*, May 28, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Marshall Ingwerson, “Pat Robertson,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 26, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁶¹ “Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid.”

5.2.2 Scandals All His Own

The scandals of Bakker and Swaggart were a drag on Robertson's campaign, but it was his own penchant for outrageous and unfounded statements that created his biggest problems.⁴⁶² On the campaign trail Robertson engaged in what the press called the 'Big Lie technique where he would make outrageous claims followed by denials and controversy.⁴⁶³

Some of the lies were relatable, some were shocking, all were a part of the pattern of Robertson's relationship with 'precision' as he preferred to describe his problematic statements. The truth was reserved for faith. *The Wall Street* journal broke the news that Robertson had been lying about his wedding date stating that it was in August rather than March in an effort to conceal the fact that his son was conceived out of wedlock. Robertson admitted the reality, but not without reminding people that the conception came before he had been born again.⁴⁶⁴

A bigger issue arose when Robertson touted his military record and claimed that he had been a military combatant in Korea. Robertson denied the allegations that he had used his father's influence to avoid combat, going so far as to file a lawsuit against Representative Paul N. "Pete" McCloskey Jr. who made the accusation. Unfortunately for Robertson, the lawsuit led to depositions from marines that had served with him. The marines confirmed that not only had Robertson talked about his desire to stay away from the fighting, but he also bragged that his father's influence could keep him out of it. The depositions brought even more damning behavior to light, including allegations that

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ "Pat Robertson Keeps Stealing the Show," accessed May 7, 2019, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁶⁴ "The Ministers Stumble; Pat Robertson vs. the Facts," *The New York Times*, October 10, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid."

Robertson had slept with prostitutes.⁴⁶⁵ After sixteen months, Robertson eventually called off the lawsuit the day before Super Tuesday voting. He maintained his position and denied all the other allegations, and in any case, again, all that was before he was born again.⁴⁶⁶

Robertson's lack of precision and off the cuff statements extended far beyond his comments about his past. In an effort to play up his anticommunism, he accused Cuba of harboring nuclear weapons during a Republican debate. It was a statement that Robertson never withdrew, but simply argued that no one could never really know.⁴⁶⁷ He also claimed that the State Department ignored intelligence gathered by CBN about hostages in Beirut, which the former CBN chief himself said he had no knowledge of. Robertson eventually admitted that CBN did not know specifically where the hostages were, just that they were somewhere in Beirut.⁴⁶⁸

His comments about domestic issues were also posed to grab attention. Robertson claimed that,

Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, was an advocate of what was called eugenics. She and her disciples wanted to sterilize blacks, Jews, mental defectives and fundamentalist Christians. I don't really favor getting myself sterilized. And I certainly don't favor the programs of the Nazis...But some of her literature undergirded the genetic experiments of Adolf Hitler. The long-range

⁴⁶⁵ "Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid."; Laura King, "Barracks Mate Paints Unflattering Portrait of Pat Robertson," *The Associated Press*, December 3, 1987, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Former Marines' Testimony Backs Congressmen In Pat Robertson Suit."

⁴⁶⁶ "Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid."; "Former Marines' Testimony Backs Congressmen In Pat Robertson Suit"; Donald Rothberg, "Robertson Denies Using Father's Influence to Avoid Combat in Korea," *The Associated Press*, September 19, 1986, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; D.W. Page, "Pat Robertson Gives Up The Fight For GOP Nomination," *The Associated Press*, May 16, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁶⁷ "Robertson Backpedals On Cuban Missile Assertion, Saying No One Really Knows," *The Associated Press*, February 16, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Pat Robertson; Whatever His Credibility Problems, His Base of True Believers Is Solid."; Page, "Pat Robertson Gives Up The Fight For GOP Nomination"; "Pat Robertson Keeps Stealing the Show."

⁴⁶⁸ Page, "Pat Robertson Gives Up The Fight For GOP Nomination"; "World News Tonight," *World News Tonight* (ABC, February 25, 1988), LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Pat Robertson Keeps Stealing the Show."

goal of Planned Parenthood ... in my estimation, is to provide a master race.⁴⁶⁹ Scholars and Planned Parenthood officials said there was no basis for this accusation.⁴⁷⁰ While recent scholarship continues to explore Sanger's complicated relationship with the eugenics movement, Robertson's comparison to the Nazis was of his own creation and intended to draw attention.⁴⁷¹ Robertson also stated that AIDS could be spread through casual contact, in direct contradiction of medical experts.⁴⁷²

None of the backlash to his statements seemed to faze Robertson. While he was sometimes forced to admit that he had misspoken or that he did not have the evidence to support his claims, he continued to speak with a moral authority on all subjects. And for a politician coming from a media background, to some extent the old adage "no publicity is bad publicity," seemed true. It was more often his outrageous statements, rather than his policy ideas, that kept him in the news. His tendency to make attention-grabbing statements led to more coverage from the media at his events.⁴⁷³

Finally, Robertson's scandal-making on the campaign trail intersected with the televangelist scandals, when he accused Vice President Bush's campaign of being behind the release of damaging information about Jimmy Swaggart. He charged that the timing of the revelations about Swaggart's sex life was suspect, since the information came out right before Super Tuesday voting.⁴⁷⁴ Robertson stated that the Bush campaign was trying

⁴⁶⁹ Michael Mokrzycki, "Pat Robertson Says Planned Parenthood Wants 'Master Race,'" *The Associated Press*, February 2, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁷⁰ Page, "Pat Robertson Gives Up The Fight For GOP Nomination."

⁴⁷¹ Daniel Okrent, *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America* (Simon and Schuster, 2019).

⁴⁷² Page, "Pat Robertson Gives Up The Fight For GOP Nomination."

⁴⁷³ "Pat Robertson Keeps Stealing the Show."

⁴⁷⁴ "Swaggart Scandal Timing No Accident: Robertson," *The Toronto Star*, February 23, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

to discredit him at the last minute because of his relationship with Swaggart.⁴⁷⁵ Publicly Robertson stood by Swaggart, calling him and visiting him personally, and publicly hoping for him to return to his pulpit.⁴⁷⁶

As much Robertson tried to distance himself from the label of televangelist, instead asking to be called a cable businessman or religious broadcaster, he nevertheless was a man of faith with a long history of public display.⁴⁷⁷ And while evangelicalism was more well-known to Americans than it had been decades before, some of Robertson's specific beliefs were still foreign: he was a faith healer, he believed he could influence natural disasters, and he spoke in tongues. To many Americans, that was disturbing and confusing behavior.⁴⁷⁸ In short, Robertson was a polarizing figure. Millions thought he was a fundamentalist menace.⁴⁷⁹ On the other hand, as reported by Jon Connell,

a huge and growing following believe that he is what he says he is: a 'prophet of God'. Surveys suggest that 31m Americans tune into Robertson's cable television network, and his followers claim that his televised prayers have healed bones, gum diseases and even cancer. His followers also claim that when he visited Shanghai and preached in English, the crowd heard him in Chinese, as foreshadowed in the New Testament account of Pentecost (Acts 2).⁴⁸⁰

Stories like this were familiar in evangelical circles, especially among charismatics. For the true believers, each moment of healing or word spoken in tongues only served to reaffirm the inherent righteousness of Robertson's campaign.

⁴⁷⁵ T.R. Reid, "Robertson Links Bush to Swaggart Scandal; Ex-Evangelist Claims Information Was Leaked to Discredit Him," *The Washington Post*, February 24, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁷⁶ Guy Coates, "Robertson Makes Stop To Support Swaggart," *The Associated Press*, February 27, 1988, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁷⁷ Page, "Pat Robertson Gives Up The Fight For GOP Nomination."

⁴⁷⁸ Lohmann, "Profile of Minister Pat Robertson; UPI NewsFeature; Pat Robertson: The Political Power of Prayer."

⁴⁷⁹ Connell, "White House Hopeful Awaits God's Sign / Profile of Possible US Presidential Candidate, the Rev Pat Robertson."

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

5.2.3 An Anticlimactic End to an Explosive Campaign

Republicans had welcomed the influence of evangelicals throughout the 1980s. They had been a consistent voting bloc and a motivated group of grassroots activists. But with Robertson's run, the party leaders faced a future where they were working for evangelicals, rather than having evangelicals work for them.⁴⁸¹ There was also a concern that if he were a candidate, Robertson would split the Republican Party or otherwise damage the eventual candidate. So when rumors started to swirl that Robertson was considering a run, at first there was a concern that he would run as an outside candidate. Robertson stated in 1986, "I am a team player...It's been said I would split the party. I'm just not that kind of person. I would do nothing to injure the Republican Party. I think too much of the great traditions of this country to try to play games that would fill my ego at the expense of somebody else."⁴⁸²

The way the campaign played out he was likely no more divisive than he would have been hurling commentary from the sidelines. Robertson came in second place, ahead of Bush, in the Iowa caucuses. But his success dropped off quickly as he came in fifth in New Hampshire.⁴⁸³ From there he came in first only in four caucus states and came in third in the primary in his home state of Virginia.⁴⁸⁴ Robertson pulled out of all primary states in mid-March and refocused on making an impact on the party platform at the convention, "I am the true conservative candidate and I will bring that voice to the

⁴⁸¹ Lohmann, "Profile of Minister Pat Robertson;UPI NewsFeature;Pat Robertson: The Political Power of Prayer."

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Page, "Pat Robertson Gives Up The Fight For GOP Nomination."

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

convention...I want a platform like the 1984 platform for school prayer, against abortion, for family values.”⁴⁸⁵

In the end Robertson spent \$22 million on the campaign and finished with only 46 delegates to the Republican Convention.⁴⁸⁶ As it turned out, Vice President Bush won the nomination and went on to win the general election in November. But Robertson’s impact on politics was not over, and the skeleton of his campaign would go on to help transform Republican politics, rehabilitate religious broadcasting and create a sustainable model that would shape national policies for decades.

5.2.4 A Politics Reborn: The Rise of the Christian Coalition

At the end of the 1980s, evangelicals were still mired in scandal and dealing with the moral and fiscal fallout. Following the 1988 election, Democrats controlled Congress and held more Governorships than Republicans. Republicans remained in control of the White House, but George H.W. Bush was not proving to be as conservative as folks like Robertson had hoped. With the exception of Mormons, white evangelical Protestants were among the most conservative of all voters. Forty-one percent of evangelicals identified with the GOP, which was a six-point increase from the 1987 poll.⁴⁸⁷ And in the 1992 presidential elections, white born again evangelical Protestants supported Bush and were his biggest voting bloc (even though he didn’t win the election).⁴⁸⁸

In 1989, after the ‘Robertson for America’ campaign folded, Robertson and campaign organizers still wanted to make difference in politics. The campaign had

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Mike Mokrzycki, “Study: White Evangelical Protestants Become Potent Political Force,” *The Associated Press*, June 25, 1996, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁸⁸ “Defining Evangelicals A Difficult Task,” *Charleston Gazette*, May 27, 1995, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

brought new voters into the electorate and the campaign had added even more names to their mailing list. Robertson wanted to mobilize these followers to make an impact. What resulted was the Christian Coalition.

While Pat Robertson was president of the Coalition, Ralph Reed, a conservative political activist from Portsmouth, Virginia, was brought in to run the day-to-day operations. In the beginning, the group lobbied around issues, not necessarily within the context of specific elections. One of the early causes was a campaign against the National Endowment for the Arts, (NEA) calling for a halt to taxpayer money supporting art that they deemed immoral. The coalition had inherited the donor list from Robertson's presidential campaign, but didn't have enough money to send their first newsletter. So Robertson loaned the Coalition \$20,000 to send out a letter decrying NEA funded projects like Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs and Andres Serrano's photo of a crucifix submerged in a jar of urine.⁴⁸⁹

By 1991, the Coalition upped its game and sent every member of Congress a copy of *Tongues Untied*, which was an experimental film that examined the life and experiences of gay black men. The film had received funding from the NEA, which the Coalition argued was a demonstration of the organization's moral failure, and they lobbied Congress to cut the NEA's funding.⁴⁹⁰ By 1992 their lobbying paid off when President Bush was pressured to ask for the NEA's president John Frohnmayer's

⁴⁸⁹ Joel Vaughan, *The Rise and Fall of the Christian Coalition: The Inside Story* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 15; Steve Gerstel, "Robertson Launches NEA Campaign," *United Press International*, June 20, 1990, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁹⁰ Vaughan, *The Rise and Fall of the Christian Coalition: The Inside Story*; Robert Andrews, "Christian Coalition Demands Ouster of Arts Agency Chief," *The Associated Press*, April 1, 1991, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Gerstel, "Robertson Launches NEA Campaign."

resignation.⁴⁹¹ The Coalition saw this as a major victory and continued to organize to rally support.⁴⁹² The fight over NEA and public broadcast funding would continue, but as the organization matured it shifted its focus to influencing elections. This transition was similar to evangelicals' transition into politics in the first place, first they focused on specific issues of morality where their religious authority and faith gave them standing. Then, having experienced success, they turned towards politics more broadly, ready to bring their new-found, or reasserted, influence to bear.

But that effort would be off to a rough start: the 1992 elections were a disaster for the GOP. Republicans lost the White House and remained in the minority in both the House and the Senate. Something had to be done. Some Republicans focused the blame on the evangelical contingent in the party, pointing out that they had played a major role in drafting the platform, were major players at the convention, and that the candidate had failed while pushing their agenda.

Ralph Reed and others argued that the loss was not a rejection of their message. Instead, they doubled down on efforts to remain at the center of the GOP. The party had been struggling with the rise of such a forceful minority within its ranks. The exclusivity of the conservative evangelical messaging, while uniting many, still rejected conservatives that did not adhere to their faith. One article at the time described conservatives' reactions:

Gov. Kirk Fordice of Mississippi remarked there that the United States was a Christian nation where Christian principles must be emphasized lest we 'fall into the abyss of poor character and chaos.' By way of correction, Gov. Carroll A. Campbell Jr. of South Carolina interjected 'Judeo-Christian' into Fordice's

⁴⁹¹ Vaughan, *The Rise and Fall of the Christian Coalition: The Inside Story*, 15; Gerstel, "Robertson Launches NEA Campaign."

⁴⁹² Henry David Rosso, "Embattled NEA Head Announces Resignation," *United Press International*, February 21, 1992, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

comments, thereby expanding the Republican tent a tiny bit. Fordice responded bluntly, 'If I wanted to do that, I would have done it.' Their exchange summed up the debate of the last four years, with Fordice as the Christian hard-liner and Campbell the accommodationist trying to soften the message without offending the shovelers in the boiler room.⁴⁹³

The 'shovelers in the boiler room' were evangelicals. This lack of compromise was similar to the theological intransigence that had flared up throughout evangelical history; now that evangelicals were involved in politics, it only naturally followed. It was also sign that the Republican Party was digging in and moving further right.

Sometimes it is in political failures that the impact of evangelical Christians in politics can best be witnessed. For example, following the failed reelection campaign by President Bush, the Christian Coalition found that he only consistently carried two groups of people: those who made more than \$200,000 and evangelical Christians.⁴⁹⁴ In 1992 more than half of the 24 million evangelical voters, cast a ballot for Bush.⁴⁹⁵ Candidates backed by the religious conservatives won forty percent of the 500 races that were monitored by the liberal group, People for the American Way.⁴⁹⁶ This trend continued in the 1994 elections where evangelicals comprised one third of all voters. Evangelicals supported the Republican candidate at a rate of 69 percent in House races, 68 percent in Senate races and 71 percent governor's races.⁴⁹⁷ The fact that evangelicals were staunch, reliable supporters of the GOP still gave them significant power within the party.

⁴⁹³ Gerry Braun, "Evangelical Christians Hellbent on Staying among GOP Leadership," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 29, 1992, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.; Williams, *God's Own Party*.

⁴⁹⁵ Braun, "Evangelical Christians Hellbent on Staying among GOP Leadership."

⁴⁹⁶ Norma Greenaway, "United States; Creationism vs. Darwinism; California Town New Battlefield as Religious Right Takes over School Board," *The Ottawa Citizen*, May 22, 1993, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁹⁷ "Defining Evangelicals A Difficult Task."

The Republicans would dominate the 1994-midterm elections, winning majorities in both the House and Senate for the first time in forty years.⁴⁹⁸ Thanks in large part to the ‘Contract with America’ this was the first truly nationalized midterm election, and a lack of enthusiasm from Democratic voters, paired with a motivated conservative constituency, led to the electoral victory of conservatives across the country.⁴⁹⁹ Crucial to the conservative constituency was the growing block of evangelicals, who were now being motivated and rallied by groups like the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family, James Dobson’s organization.⁵⁰⁰ And of course, they were also having these views affirmed daily by various religious broadcasters. While there is evidence that voters turned out for a host of reasons on Election Day 1994, evangelical voters that turned out were reliably conservative, with six out of ten voting for Republicans for the House.⁵⁰¹ Exit polls consistently found that ten to fifteen percent of voters identified as evangelicals, with 60 percent of that group voting for GOP candidates.⁵⁰²

The attempts to Christianize politics had been underway for a long time, but a strategy was emerging that focused on electing national and state officials, but also on local races.⁵⁰³ Evangelicals sought to get their candidates on school boards, library boards, and city councils. This approach led to success for conservatives in Vista,

⁴⁹⁸ “Republicans Win Control of U.S. House and Senate; Dominate Congress for First Time in 40 Years ;Voters Rebuff Democrats, Clinton” (Facts on File World News Digest, November 10, 1994), LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁴⁹⁹ Stanley Greenberg, “After The Republican Surge,” *The American Prospect*, Fall 1995, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵⁰⁰ Williams, *God’s Own Party*.

⁵⁰¹ Richard Berke, “The 1994 Elections: Voters the Outcome; Asked to Place Blame, Americans in Surveys Chose: All of the Above,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1994, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵⁰² “Republicans Win Control of U.S. House and Senate; Dominate Congress for First Time in 40 Years ;Voters Rebuff Democrats, Clinton”; Ronald Brownstein, “GOP Leaders Embrace Christian Coalition Plan : Congress: Conservative Group’s 10-Point Agenda Includes Abortion Restrictions, Elimination of Education Department.,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 1995, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-05-18/news/mn-3259_1_christian-coalition.

⁵⁰³ Greenaway, “United States; Creationism vs. Darwinism; California Town New Battlefield as Religious Right Takes over School Board.”

California, a community north of San Diego, where in 1992, conservative Christians ended up with a 3-2 majority on the Vista Unified School Board. The win shocked locals who had been unaware of the highly conservative influence in the county. Once in office, the officials raised issues like creationism and sex education, which in the end led to a backlash election in 1994 by more moderate and liberal voters.⁵⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the targeting of specific races aimed at winning majorities in local government had been successful.⁵⁰⁵ From 1994 onward, this approach began to spread throughout the country.

5.2.5 Full Force in '94

Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition focused a great deal of money and messaging on the 1994 midterms. The Coalition was a tax-exempt organization, or at least had submitted their application to the IRS to be declared as such, so they could not directly endorse specific candidates without fear of losing their tax status. Instead they sent out mailers and pushed their agenda in ways that were identifiable with a candidate, but stopped short from calling them out by name.⁵⁰⁶ The voter guide, for example, listed both candidates, along with their positions on issues like school prayer, abortion and gay rights.⁵⁰⁷ The Coalition focused in on races where they thought divisive moral issues would make a difference in the election results. Then when their voter guides were paired with the "advocacy journalism" that Pat Robertson was sharing every night, viewers

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Ernesto Portillo, "Vista Conservatives Vow to Regroup," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 11, 1994, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵⁰⁶ John King, "Christian Coalition Targeting 1994 Elections," *The Associated Press*, April 26, 1994, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.; John King, "Christian Coalition Guide For Voters Hit," *South Bend Tribune*, November 3, 1994, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Williams, *God's Own Party*.

knew who to cast their vote for. The constant reaffirmation of messaging made possible by daily broadcasts became an undeniable force in peoples' lives.

The Coalition had quickly transformed into one of the most political of the Christian action groups. They were not just interested in supporting Republican politicians, but in moving the party further to the right by electing *their* kind of Republican politicians. They started “primarying” Republicans who were not conservative enough for them, finding and supporting candidates who could challenge an incumbent politician during the primary election, thus their more conservative candidate would be the Republican option in the general election.⁵⁰⁸ Long-serving but moderate Republicans soon found themselves fighting for the endorsement of their party. This approach had the effect of moving conservatives further to the right. Even if a particular race wasn't a target of the Coalition, the threat was present and the caucus makeup was changing.

Ralph Reed, the executive director and chief political strategist for the Christian Coalition, looked beyond the congressional election and took aim at governors' races and other races down ballot. Even in races they didn't win, they forced the other side into spending money on campaigns that would have otherwise been foregone conclusions. Along the way, they also forced candidates to either adjust their positions, or risk alienating their evangelical constituents.⁵⁰⁹ Minnesota became a battleground for the Christian Coalition when, at their urging, the Minnesota Republican Party backed the

⁵⁰⁸ King, “Christian Coalition Targeting 1994 Elections”; King, “Christian Coalition Guide For Voters Hit”; “Think Tank With Host: Ben Wattenberg Guests: Norman Ornstein, American Enterprise Institute, Eddie Williams, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Larry Sabato, University of Virginia, Catherine Rudder, American Political Science Association” (Federal News Service, September 23, 1994), LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵⁰⁹ Williams, *God's Own Party*.

more conservative legislator Allen Quist against incumbent Arne Carlson. Carlson managed to win the election, but what should have been an easy election became a knock-down, drag-out affair, and the state Republican organization had been pulled to the right.⁵¹⁰

While the Coalition did focus a modest amount of energy on Democratic competitions, most of their focus was on ensuring that their more conservative candidates won the primaries, so that they could fully support the candidate in the general election. This work included mailers and phone calls about the candidates, but also involved recruiting and registering conservatives to serve as delegates to the nominating conventions.⁵¹¹ These conventions, due to their size and predictable pattern of events, were much easier to sway than general elections. So the Coalition attempted to use its influence to affect both.⁵¹²

The Coalition used the traditional networks of evangelical churches to put forward their message, but also looked to expand into other organizations. And while some still demanded theological consistency, they were willing to accept fellow conservatives as long as they voted to support their conservative agenda. For instance, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia requested 300,000 Coalition voter guides, which the Christian Coalition gladly provided. The Coalition also continued to make use of their direct mailing lists, now among the largest of any political organization.⁵¹³

⁵¹⁰ King, "Christian Coalition Targeting 1994 Elections"; David Beiler, "Onward, Quistian Soldiers;How Candidate Allen Quist Rose From the Political Dead and Seized the Minnesota GOP" (Campaigns & Elections, September 1994), LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵¹¹ King, "Christian Coalition Targeting 1994 Elections."

⁵¹² Williams, *God's Own Party*.

⁵¹³ Emma Green, "White Evangelicals Believe They Face More Discrimination Than Muslims," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/perceptions-discrimination-muslims-christians/519135/>; King, "Christian Coalition Targeting 1994 Elections."

The Coalition planned to spend between three and five million dollars on elections in 1994, which was a far cry from borrowing money to send out mailers in 1990.⁵¹⁴ This was in addition to their policy debate budget, an effort specifically advocating for school prayer, and their one million dollar campaign against President Clinton's health care plan.⁵¹⁵ They also created a neon postcard to that was sent to hundreds of thousands of homes the weekend before the election, which stated "You can help protect your family values and Christian Heritage by voting."⁵¹⁶ Then, as their tactics were described in a 1994 article,

To back up the postcards, the churches aligned with the coalition will distribute its voting guides. And throughout the weekend, the Christian Coalition will use the phone bank at its Virginia headquarters to remind its 58,000 members in Ohio to vote. 'We can make 150,000 phone calls a weekend out of here,' Reed said. 'We'll go right up until 3 p.m. on the day of the election if it's really tight.'⁵¹⁷

When the returns came in on election night it was clear that their strategy had worked. The Christian Coalition laid claim to their role in the 1994 'Republican Revolution' saying that 33 percent of the national vote came from religious conservatives.⁵¹⁸ A *Washington Post* exit poll showed that one in four voters identified themselves as born again or evangelical Christians, and that group voted Republican.⁵¹⁹ Ralph Reed, who had fought for continued influence in the GOP after the 1992 election, said that the election "lays to rest once and for all the myth that we are a liability rather than an asset in the Republican Party."⁵²⁰ Arthur Kropp, the president of People for the American Way, said the influence of evangelicals was particularly felt in close races like Rod

⁵¹⁴ King, "Christian Coalition Targeting 1994 Elections."

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.; King, "Christian Coalition Guide For Voters Hit."

⁵¹⁶ King, "Christian Coalition Targeting 1994 Elections."

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Sharon Schmickle, "Conservative Activists Savor Role in Victories," *Star Tribune*, November 10, 1994, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

Grams' senatorial run in Minnesota where "Grams wouldn't have won if he didn't have the support of their groups and their shoe leather."⁵²¹ Going on, Kropp said "They've established themselves clearly as the nuts and bolts of the Republican party... There isn't a more loyal constituency within the party, there isn't a more active constituency, there isn't a more hard-working constituency."⁵²²

Evangelicals looked to cash in on their influence. Immediately following the election the soon-to-be speaker of the House Newt Gingrich was already discussing legislation that would bring back school prayer, cut funding to the arts, and limit gay rights.⁵²³ Evangelicals had proved their worth and they were not afraid to throw their weight around. The coalition built between evangelicals and the GOP in the 1994 election led directly to Republican support for evangelicals' own contract, the Contract with the Family.⁵²⁴

5.2.6 Shifting Votes Reflected Shifting Views

More significant than even the specific electoral victories was the development of an approach that would move the party further to the right over time, and generally increase the number of evangelical Christians who voted. In 1996, the Pew Research Center placed the number of white evangelical Protestants at 25 percent of registered voters, which was up from 19 percent in 1987.⁵²⁵

The broader impact of religious broadcasters was that they normalized the fusing of religion and politics. They categorized issues that were deeply political in the realm of

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Brownstein, "GOP Leaders Embrace Christian Coalition Plan."

⁵²⁵ Mokrzycki, "Study: White Evangelical Protestants Become Potent Political Force."

the moral and then proceeded to speak strongly about what position a viewer should hold. Broadcasters had also helped to normalize the role of ministers in public life. In response to a poll question “is it ever right for clergymen to discuss political candidates or issues from the pulpit” there was a four percent drop in the number of people who answered ‘no’ in 1996 compared to 1965. More interestingly there was a five percent increase in the number of people who said clergy should discuss politics from the pulpit, a nearly 10-point shift. Also telling was the number of people who didn’t know or refused to answer was reduced by half, from ten to five percent.⁵²⁶ While these shifts were not yet huge, they indicated an increased openness to the mixing of politics and religion, and, notably, showed that people were more willing to weigh in on the topic. That same study showed that “Among people who say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month, one in five said the clergy at their place of worship speaks out on candidates and elections, and 78 percent of those said that's a good thing.”⁵²⁷ By 1996 evangelical broadcasters had also helped to transform the climate on questions of church and state, with 54 percent of people polled now answering that they believed that churches should express their political opinions, with only 43 percent preferring nonpolitical churches. This was a complete inversion from 1965 when the same question was asked.⁵²⁸ Conservatives had been laying the groundwork for decades, creating a politically infused religious message and building an infrastructure to deliver it to the public. The work was starting to pay off.

The election of 1994 also served to re-legitimize evangelical Christians in the wake of the scandals. They were now a serious constituency and not just religious

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

fanatics, hucksters, and hypocrites. In elections to come they would not be fighting for attention from politicians, they would be courted, their issues spoken to, and their views taken seriously. Religious broadcasters and religious viewers had matured. Evangelicals had been tried in the fire and what resulted was a movement that was influential, organized and effective.

Conclusion

Over the course of fifty years religious broadcasters took evangelicalism from a fringe religion, to a mainstay of American faith and politics. They created structures that first brought them success in the media, and that were later transformed and utilized in their broader, now politicized, evangelical messaging. When religious broadcasters first tried to get on television, evangelicalism was an immature movement opposed by liberal and mainline denominations, and unknown by much of America. Getting on the air was therefore an uphill battle, but these early challenges were formative for the modern evangelical movement. Initial efforts spurred evangelicals to organize, leading to the formation of the NRB and expanded evangelical networks. Because early evangelical broadcasters faced barriers from the government and television stations when they tried to get their programming on the air, advocacy work and lobbying were a part of their makeup from the beginning. Their initial goal - simply getting on the air - led evangelicals to their first forays into politics, creating the early structures and networks that over time led the movement to become more overtly political.

As evangelicals won battles with the FCC and began building up their congregations and parachurch infrastructure, evangelicalism was introduced to the public at large and normalized as a part of the broader American landscape. Through the rhetoric of religious broadcasters, evangelicalism became not just an accepted faith among many, but the truly American faith. As a result of the cultural shifts of the sixties and seventies, and in response to court decisions on issues like school prayer and abortion, the political structures that had helped to grow evangelical access to media were expanded, mobilized, and transformed into pointed political messaging.

As evangelicals became more political and joined the New Right coalition, their base in broadcasting positioned them to speak for evangelicals, but also to develop the rhetorical positions of the right more broadly. Their growing political power in the eighties, paired with decreased regulation, led to an explosion in religious broadcasting, celebrity televangelists, and increased visibility of evangelical issues. Before long, that onrush of power led to corruption and controversy.

The scandals of the eighties threatened evangelicals' role within the conservative coalition and eroded their claim to moral leadership. In the end, however, the scandals provided evangelicals with the opportunity to clean house in a very public and visible way, and then reorganize. This led to the creation of a sustainable model that reformulated with politics at the core of its religious message. Religious broadcasters claimed they had taken accountability for the corrupt actions of the few and sought to present a new, respectable model to the public. They had normalized faith as the basis for political action and created organizations like the Christian Coalition, which turned political positions into policies and votes. By the 1994 election, evangelicals had secured a strategic partnership with the GOP leadership. Going forward religion in politics was not just acceptable; it was the expectation. Politicians now had to speak to their personal faith and the faith of their audience. In the following decades evangelicals would experience political successes and setbacks, but they remain major players in the political conversation to this day.

6.1 What Ever Happened To...

Pat Robertson

After his presidential campaign, Robertson returned to the helm at CBN and hosted *The 700 Club*. Despite the setback, his confidence remained intact; he continued to comment on the paths of hurricanes and make proclamations about the moral failings that caused them.⁵²⁹ He was an outspoken opponent of the Clinton administration, promulgating rumors about the Whitewater investigation, and fostering conspiracy theories that Deputy White House Counsel Vince Foster did not commit suicide, but had been murdered.⁵³⁰ Beyond his television show, Robertson also continued to expand Regent University, adding public policy programs and eventually opening up a law school.⁵³¹ He remains on television to this day and has not lost his penchant for making attention-grabbing statements.⁵³²

⁵²⁹ “Pat Robertson’s Remarks on Hugo Chavez; Bill Clinton in Africa; Olivia Newton John’s Boyfriend Still Missing; Bush Reiterates Stance on Iraq; Birth Trauma; Dream Composition,” *Anderson Cooper 360*, August 23, 2005; “Pat Robertson Warns of Hurricane for Gay Days,” *The Associated Press*, June 9, 1998, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Matthew Knott, “US Pro-Lifers Push for a Showdown on Abortion - but They May Regret It,” *Brisbane Times*, May 18, 2019, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵³⁰ Erik Eckholm, “From Right, a Rain of Anti-Clinton Salvos,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1994, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵³¹ “Pulitzer Prize-Winning Reporter for The Boston Globe Charlie Savage on Pat Robertson’s Regent University and Its Current Propensity for Placing Graduates in the Justice Department,” *Fresh Air* (NPR, May 16, 2007).

⁵³² Robert Marquand, “Pat Robertson Haiti Comments: French View Theory with Disbelief; Pat Robertson Said the Haiti Earthquake Was God’s Punishment for Haitian Slaves’ ‘pact with the Devil’ to Win Freedom from France. But Many French Noted That Haiti’s Revolution Was Inspired by France’s and Considered an Early Exercise in Self-Determination,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 14, 2010, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Andrew Buncombe, “Stephen Paddock Sent \$100,000 to Philippines Days before Las Vegas Shooting; Police Hope to Find Clues in the Shooter’s Financial History,” *The Independent*, October 3, 2017, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

Christian Coalition

By the end of the nineties, the Christian Coalition faced its own challenges. Robertson had stepped down as president of the Coalition in 1997. By 1999, the IRS finally declined the Coalition's ten-year-old application for tax-exempt status, citing the group's overtly political activities. This created a ripple effect: affiliated ministers became hesitant to distribute Coalition materials out of fear that they too could lose their tax-exempt status.⁵³³ The organization's solution was to divide itself in two. One side became Christian Coalition International, reorganizing as overtly for-profit and political. The other reorganized through a friendly takeover of the Texas state chapter, which had previously been granted tax-exempt status. The latter renamed itself the Christian Coalition of America and continued to distribute voter guides and train grassroots activists until 2006, when it faced massive debts and further restriction by the IRS.⁵³⁴

Jerry Falwell

Jerry Falwell disbanded the Moral Majority in 1989 claiming "mission accomplished," and that "the religious right is solidly in place...the religious conservatives in America are now in for the duration."⁵³⁵ The work, Falwell offered, would be continued by the organizations that had followed the example of the Moral Majority, such as the American Coalition for Traditional Values, Concerned Women for

⁵³³ Thomas Edsall and Hanna Rosin, "Christian Coalition, Denied Tax-Exempt Status, Will Reorganize," *The Washington Post*, n.d., LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.; "Christian Coalition Reorganizes into One For-Profit and One Tax-Exempt Organization to Address Dispute with IRS and Push Its Political Agendas," *All Things Considered* (NPR, June 10, 1999), LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Alan Cooperman and Thomas Edsall, "Christian Coalition Shrinks as Debt Grows," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2006; Vaughan, *The Rise and Fall of the Christian Coalition: The Inside Story*.

⁵³⁵ David Briggs, "Falwell Announces Disbanding of Moral Majority; Says Mission Accomplished," *The Associated Press*, June 12, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Falwell Disbanding Moral Majority," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 12, 1989, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

America, the American Family Association, and the Freedom Council.⁵³⁶ However, Falwell's personal involvement in politics did not end with the Moral Majority. He continued to host *The Old Time Gospel Hour* and became a vocal opponent of the Clinton Administration, going so far as to "give away" an anti-Clinton videotape on his show in exchange for a donation of "at least \$40 plus \$3 for shipping."⁵³⁷ Falwell remained controversial until his death in 2007.⁵³⁸ Liberty University, which Falwell had founded as Lynchburg Baptist College in 1971, continued to grow and expand. The Law School became fully accredited in 2010, and in 2018 it ranked number seven in America for Bar Passage rates.⁵³⁹

Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart

Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart would both end up back on television following their respective scandals. But, with the growth of the internet and digital television, their voices were now merely one among thousands, and they never again garnered the kind of status and celebrity that had enabled their scandals to tar an entire movement.

⁵³⁶ Briggs, "Falwell Announces Disbanding of Moral Majority; Says Mission Accomplished"; "Falwell Disbanding Moral Majority."

⁵³⁷ Eckholm, "From Right, a Rain of Anti-Clinton Salvos."

⁵³⁸ Peter Applebome, "Jerry Falwell, 73, Founder of the Moral Majority; Fundamentalist Shaped U.S. Politics; OBITUARY," *The International Herald Tribune*, May 17, 2007, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Reverend Jerry Falwell Discusses Teletubbies and His Belief That Tinky Winky Is Gay," *TODAY* (NBC, February 11, 1999), LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵³⁹ "Liberty University School of Law Ranks No. 7 in America for Bar Passage Rates; Founded in 2004, Liberty's Program Lands in the Top 10 alongside Ivy League Law Schools According to the ABA," *PR Newswire*, April 22, 2019, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Liberty Law School Fully Accredited," *The Associated Press State & Local Wire*, August 7, 2010, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Liberty University Law Graduates Achieve Highest Bar Exam Pass Rate in School History; Liberty University School of Law 2018 Graduates Posted the Highest Bar Exam Passage Rate among First Time Test Takers in School History.," *PR Newswire*, November 21, 2018, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

Jim Bakker and his new wife Lori now host television program that focuses on prophecy and the end times. They also sell a wide collection of disaster preparation items and religious paraphernalia.

Jimmy Swaggart started a television network called Sonlife Broadcasting Network in 2010. The network airs new material from Swaggart, his son, and other ministers, as well a rotation of classic Swaggart crusades.

Ben Armstrong and the National Religious Broadcasters

The National Religious Broadcasters overcame financial struggles and the scandals of their most well known broadcasters. The NRB, which now includes international members, continues to operate with the same mission and function. Members must sign a statement of faith and adhere to the NRB code of ethics. The organization still holds a yearly convention and maintains close political ties on Capitol Hill and with the FCC.

Ben Armstrong retired from the NRB in 1989 and has remained a revered member of the organization's history. He was inducted into the NRB Hall of Fame in 1998, and after his death in 2010, the NRB renamed their Washington D.C. office the Ben Armstrong Center for Media Freedom.⁵⁴⁰

⁵⁴⁰ National Religious Broadcasters, "NRB Hosts Reception for Pro-Life Leaders, Members Following March for Life," National Religious Broadcasters, accessed May 31, 2019, <http://nrb.org/news-room/articles/nrb-hosts-reception-for-pro-life-leaders-members-following-march>; Laurel A. MacLeod Today NRB, "Remembering NRB's Dr. Ben Armstrong," Charisma Magazine, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/570-news/featured-news/12368-remembering-a-man-of-vision>; National Religious Broadcasters, "NRB HALL OF FAME," National Religious Broadcasters, accessed May 31, 2019, http://nrb.org/membership/media-awards/nrb_hall_of_fame.

6.2 Evangelicals in the New Millennium

An Evangelical in the White House

The election of George W. Bush in 2000 seemed to be the culmination of all that the evangelical right had worked for. A born again Christian was back in the White House, but this time he was *their* kind of evangelical. Indeed, one of Bush's first acts as President was to establish the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) just nine days after being sworn into office.⁵⁴¹

While Bush was hailed as the Christian conservative political savior and a potential champion of social values, he failed to deliver significant legislation on most evangelical issues during his first term: the Partial Birth Abortion Ban in 2003 was the only exception.⁵⁴² Nonetheless, his successful reelection campaign again played to the religious vote; this time his administration used targeted conferences offered by the Faith-Based Initiative Office.

David Kuo was second in command at the OFBCI and had previously served as a speechwriter for Ralph Reed, Pat Robertson, and Bob Dole.⁵⁴³ Kuo had come to his religion by a quick conversion that soon brought him into the fold of evangelical politics in the nineties. As he put it, "I made a seamless transition to embrace all of these positions. It was the same direction I was already moving...By and large it all felt very

⁵⁴¹ David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction* (Simon and Schuster, 2006).

⁵⁴² Terence Hunt, "Bush Signs Partial-Birth Abortion Ban," *Associated Press Online*, November 5, 2003, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Peter Boyer, "Party Faithful; Can the Democrats Get a Foothold on the Religious Vote?," *New Yorker*, September 8, 2008, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

⁵⁴³ Peter Steinfels, "The Disillusionment of a Young White House Evangelical," *New York Times*, October 28, 2006, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

natural—just an extension of my theology.”⁵⁴⁴ With the ascendance of George W. Bush, Kuo felt that their moment had finally come.⁵⁴⁵ But once he was inside the political machine, Kuo came to see that politicians catered to evangelicals publicly, but derided them behind their backs. The administration offered just enough progress to keep their support, and otherwise focused their time and energy on issues that were the most politically advantageous to them.⁵⁴⁶

Kuo came to see the fusion of religion and politics as detrimental to faith. Hoping to redirect the movement, he wrote his 2006 book *Tempting Faith*, which was part memoir, part expose, and part a warning to fellow evangelicals about the corrupt relationship that had developed between politics and faith. He detailed his work in the OFBCI, creating conferences that were supposed to offer information about how to navigate the faith-based system and receive funding. But, Kuo acknowledged, the majority of people who attended the conferences received little or no money for their group. He claimed the conferences were largely a dog and pony show, meant to give the appearance that the White House cared about the invitees’ interests.⁵⁴⁷

The conferences nonetheless proved a powerful ploy for election results. According Kuo, “More than a dozen conferences with more than 20,000 faith and community leaders were held in 2003 and 2004 in every significant battleground state, including two in Florida, one in Miami ten days before the 2004 election. Their political power was incalculable.”⁵⁴⁸ Crucially, the votes were cast and the reelection of Bush was cemented before anyone who attended the conferences realized that they were not going

⁵⁴⁴ Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction*, 32.

⁵⁴⁵ Steinfels, “The Disillusionment of a Young White House Evangelical.”

⁵⁴⁶ Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction*.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 212.

to receive the money promised. Eventually it also came to light that the creation of the office had been based on a falsehood. The impetus for the office was to overcome discrimination against faith-based groups trying to gain government support, but an investigation by the OFBCI found no evidence of past discrimination. Once again, perception of discrimination trumped reality and the ongoing existence of the office placated the religious voters that had demanded its creation. The program itself remained in place under President Barack Obama, though it was refocused and renamed the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.⁵⁴⁹

The Age of the Internet and Social Media

The triumphs and failures of the twenty-first century evangelical movement are beyond the scope of this project, and are well worthy of their own studies. For now it is sufficient to note that the religious broadcasters that first normalized the evangelical faith, and worked to get its message on the air, were essential enablers of the modern movement's power and influence.

The old guard of evangelicalism created institutions spanning education, politics, and the media, and this work provides essential support to the modern evangelical movement. The current generation has trained at evangelical universities, which now include programs in business, law, psychology and communications. These modern conservative evangelicals exist in a political climate that has already calculated their importance as a constituency, and speaks to their agenda. They operate in a media landscape where their messages are broadcast nationwide, unabated by regulation of access based on faith, and without limit to their financial potential. The movement has

⁵⁴⁹ "Faith-Based Initiatives under Obama," *Talk of the Nation*, February 11, 2009.

inherited a rhetorical position that endows them with power while maintaining their status as righteous victims. Whether their candidates are in office or not, they are a constituency that must be addressed.

And of course, the age of the internet has fundamentally transformed the media landscape. While conservatives realized its potential early, with websites like the Drudge Report, the old guard of religious broadcasters was slow to adapt.⁵⁵⁰ This delay might be attributed to the fact that, while evangelicals were not strictly hierarchical, they tended towards one-way communication with their followers. The top-down leadership of a Robertson or a Falwell was not made for the kind of two-way interactions that are common on the modern, participatory “Web 2.0” internet.⁵⁵¹ When the old guard did engage online, it was in the form of largely one-way communication that characterized the first generation of the internet: they made non-participatory websites that distributed their materials and articles. Of course, they made the same exception to participation they always had: there was usually a button to click to make a donation.

Evangelicals who had not started in television media adapted more quickly to using the internet as a tool of evangelization. But the key was the arrival of a generation of evangelicals who had grown up with the internet. When this generation embraced Instagram, podcasts, and a more casual approach to worship, evangelical ministers were

⁵⁵⁰ “Drudge Report Logs on to AOL,” *Daily Variety*, July 16, 1997, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; “Pat Robertson’s Son to Launch Internet Service Provider” (The Associated Press & Local Wire, July 20, 1999); HEIDI A. CAMPBELL, “Evangelicals and the Internet,” in *Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture: Pop Goes the Gospel, Volume I* (ABC-CLIO, 2013).

⁵⁵¹ Alice Marwick, “A Cultural History of Web 2.0,” in *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (Yale University Press, 2013).

spurred to truly embrace newer technologies as a ministry medium. Franchised churches like Vous Church, Hillsong, C3, and Zoe exemplify this new age of evangelicalism.⁵⁵²

While the modern evangelical conservative movement remains outspoken and political, the new class of celebrity preachers downplays the political component of their message. When pressed, these ministers remain committed to the same staunchly conservative positions on questions of abortion, marriage, gender and sexuality, but it is now in the background of their ministry rather than the most visible component.⁵⁵³

This new generation focuses outwardly on faith as their political agendas continue to be advanced by the institutions the old guard built. The new generation instead wields the soft power of influence as they raise the visibility of faith on social media and rub shoulders with celebrities. Their uniting message? Faith is *cool*.

Conservative evangelicals' core values, while still emphasizing issues of morality, have increasingly come to apply to the regulation of others rather than a requirement of the individual politicians they support. Their core commitments are to a heteronormative definition of marriage, a rejection of legal protections based on sexuality and gender, and a strict anti-abortion agenda. Over time their political support has been earned based on a politician's stated commitments to these core political values, and less and less based on a candidate's personal conduct. As Jerry Falwell Jr. put it in 2016, "We're not electing a

⁵⁵² "How C3 Church Uses Instagram to Convert Millennials | Topic," accessed May 31, 2019, <https://www.topic.com/the-brand-is-belief>; "Faith Matters; Celebrity Pastor," *Nightline* (ABC, November 26, 2015); Nola Ojomu, "Megachurch Where Is Justin Bieber's Hillsong Church, Who Is Pastor Carl Lentz and Which Celebrities Have Attended Services?; We Take a Look at the Megachurch Loved by Young Hollywood but Is Also Shrouded in Controversy," *The Sun*, July 31, 2017, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Martha Ross, "Is Chris Pratt's Evangelical Church Really Welcoming to LGBTQ People?," *The East Bay Times*, February 12, 2019, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; "Why Hollywood Megachurches like Hillsong Hide Their True Teachings," *The Times & Transcript*, February 23, 2019.

⁵⁵³ Ojomu, "Megachurch Where Is Justin Bieber's Hillsong Church, Who Is Pastor Carl Lentz and Which Celebrities Have Attended Services?; We Take a Look at the Megachurch Loved by Young Hollywood but Is Also Shrouded in Controversy"; Ross, "Is Chris Pratt's Evangelical Church Really Welcoming to LGBTQ People?"

pastor. We're electing a president."⁵⁵⁴ Their strategies utilize the work of the conservative think tanks, legal action groups, and lobbies that came out of the political mobilization led by the generation of religious broadcasters in our story. Whether the new media that has built on this history translates to a continued political allegiance going forward remains a topic for a future historian.

⁵⁵⁴ Kristin Salaky, "Jerry Falwell Jr. Plans To Vote Trump Even If Sexual Assault Stories Are True" (Talking Points Memo), accessed June 18, 2019, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Maeve Reston, "Jerry Falwell Jr. Cites His Father in Trump Endorsement," *CNN.Com*, January 30, 2016, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Clare Foran, "Jerry Falwell Boosts Trump, Sidelines Religion," *Atlantic Online*, January 26, 2016, LexisNexis Nexis Uni; Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "The Trump Effect? Evangelicals Have Become Much More Accepting of Politicians' 'immoral' Acts.; In 2011, Just 30 Percent of White Evangelicals Said This.," *Washington Post Blogs*, October 19, 2016, LexisNexis Nexis Uni.

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