

Reagan's Rhetoric of Racial Prejudice:  
How White Supremacy Fueled Evangelical Christians' Political and Cultural  
Motivations and Mobilizations

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## Introduction

On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States of America overturned the decisions of both the 1973 case *Roe v. Wade*<sup>1</sup> and the 1992 case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*<sup>2</sup> with the decision of *Dobbs v. Jackson's Women's Health Organization*.<sup>3</sup> *Dobbs* ruled that the Constitution does not “confer a right to abortion”<sup>4</sup> and handed the legality and logistics of abortion rights to state legislatures. The effects of this ruling are playing out in all branches of different state governments across the United States of America. The push to overturn *Planned Parenthood* and *Roe* was led by Protestant and Catholic Christian members of the Republican political party; a large majority of these individuals leading the charge were Protestant evangelical Christians who believed that abortion should be illegal. This group is sometimes referred to as the “Religious” or “Christian Right.”<sup>5</sup> The Christian Right is a group that combines socially conservative Christian and politically conservative Republican values, and it plays an active role in modern American politics. While not all of the Christian Right is evangelical and not all individual evangelicals’ personal beliefs line up with the Christian Right’s, a large majority of the Christian Right’s beliefs and values originate in Protestant evangelicalism.<sup>6</sup>

Evangelicals, as a group, believe that religion is very important in a person’s life.<sup>7</sup> The majority of evangelicals, across identities, pray at least once a day, read biblical scripture at least once a week, and believe in “God” with absolute certainty.<sup>8</sup> They believe, overall, in Heaven and Hell and they look to their religion to understand is what right and wrong.<sup>9</sup> Most believe

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<sup>1</sup> *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 112, (Jan. 22, 1973). Accessed April 29, 2024. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/410/113/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, [Page #] (June 27, 1992). Accessed April 29, 2024. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/505/833/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 579 U.S. (June 24, 2021). Accessed April 29, 2024. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/579/19-1392/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 579 U.S. (June 24, 2021). Accessed April 29, 2024. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/579/19-1392/>.

<sup>5</sup> Melissa M. Deckman, *School Board Battles : the Christian Right in Local Politics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> John Fea, *Believe Me : the Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, paperback edition ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> “Racial and ethnic composition among Evangelical Protestants,” *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/racial-and-ethnic-composition/#demographic-information>.

<sup>8</sup> “Racial and ethnic.”

<sup>9</sup> “Racial and ethnic.”

homosexuality should be discouraged and are strongly opposed to same-sex marriage.<sup>10</sup> They believe, on average, that humans have always existed in their present form and that scripture should be interpreted literally.<sup>11</sup> They are, additionally, fervently opposed to abortion.<sup>12</sup>

However, when trying to understand how American evangelicals view the role of government in their lives, the answer divides racial lines.<sup>13</sup> Less than half of the evangelical individuals who self-identify as one of the following: Black, Asian, Latino, or Other/Mixed race, belong to the Republican party and less than half of those same individuals identify as conservative.<sup>14</sup>

However, 88% of white evangelical Americans associate themselves with the Republican party and over half of white American evangelicals identify as conservative.<sup>15</sup> 72% of white evangelicals would rather have a smaller government with fewer governmental services which is a 16–42-point difference compared to non-white evangelicals.<sup>16</sup> 61% believe government aid programs to the poor do more harm than good which is an 18–30-point difference compared to non-white evangelicals.<sup>17</sup> In the twenty-first century, white evangelicals have consistently voted for the Republican party and have been some of the loudest voices in conservative American politics, but this wasn't always the case.

The connection between white evangelicals and the Republican party is often connected to Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign and The Supreme Court's decision in *Roe*.

Given that evangelicals turned out large numbers to vote for Republican Ronald Reagan, and that

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<sup>10</sup> "Racial and ethnic."

<sup>11</sup> "Racial and ethnic."

<sup>12</sup> "Racial and ethnic."

<sup>13</sup> This paper will have the racial identities "white" and "black" in lowercase letters; the only times they will appear in uppercase letters is a direct quote or if that is how they are presented in a survey and its findings. Maintaining the letter case in a direct quote honors the author's choice and his/her intended meaning of the word. If a question in a survey had the first letter in uppercase or lowercase lettering, that could have impacted how the respondent interpreted and answered the question. So, when this paper uses data about race from a survey, the case of the first letter of the word will be in the same case as the case of the letter in the cited survey. Whether or not the first letter of "white" and "black" should be capitalized in reference to racial identity is an ongoing debate in America; the article "Recognizing Race in Language: Why We Capitalize 'Black' and 'White'" from the Center for the Study of Social Policy explains the different dynamics associated with and the cultural politics surrounding the debate. However, this paper keeping the first letter of each word in the lowercase is not intended to be a resolution to the debate or represent a firmly committed opinion. The 17<sup>th</sup> edition of the Chicago Manual of Style recommends keeping in line with individual preference, but the preferences of the individuals mentioned in this paper are not available. Additionally, because many aspects of the identities of the people from the continent of Africa who were forced into slavery were lost, stripped away, or changed as a result of slavery and because the scope of this paper's research does not include the relationship those individuals had to their self-identity, this paper cannot claim to know the preferences those individuals would have.

<sup>14</sup> "Party affiliation among Evangelical Protestants," *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/party-affiliation/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Party affiliation."

<sup>16</sup> "Party affiliation."

<sup>17</sup> "Party affiliation."

opposition to abortion is still one of evangelicals' and the Christian Right's most prominent and well-known positions, the connection between Reagan, *Roe*, and evangelicals seems plausible. Examining the rhetoric of Reagan's speeches and the language he relied on when speaking to evangelicals helps to show how Reagan proved himself to his evangelical audience. In his speeches, Reagan established common ground between himself and evangelicals by validating both them and their beliefs. He also capitalized upon and reinforced evangelicals' fears of government corruption and outside encroachment on individuals' lives. Reagan recognized that evangelicals felt that their American livelihoods and ways of life were under attack, and he corroborated that they would be persecuted and should be afraid. Reagan pointed to secularism as the biggest danger to evangelicals' future, with the Carter administration and communism embodying those threats, and he framed abortion as a consequence of a secularist culture. While Reagan was not an evangelical Christian, he showed evangelicals that he saw truth in their fears and concerns, and, because of that, he could help them. Reagan proposed to evangelicals a symbiotic relationship and offered to be the person who would fight for and achieve their goals in government. However, the root cause of evangelicals' concerns in the mid-to-late twentieth century was not any of the issues Reagan described. Evangelical political motivations and mobilizations had a much older and darker origin: a defense of white supremacy.

To fully understand how Reagan's rhetoric connected to mid-to-late-twentieth century evangelicals, it is important to understand that evangelicals' political organization, at the crucial moment of Reagan's presidential candidacy, and their main source of political motivation, stemmed from their declining ability to maintain racial segregation. Reagan entered into the presidential running in a world shaped by the 1954 Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of*

*Education*. The ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*<sup>18</sup> declared segregation unconstitutional. A subsequent Supreme Court case: *Green v. Connally*<sup>19</sup> in 1971 resulted in the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) revoking the tax-exempt status of private educational institutions that had racially discriminatory policies; several Christian universities shut down after losing their tax-exempt status. Evangelicals, concerned about the government infringing upon their ability continue racial segregation, understood the IRS's actions as the government violating their First Amendment rights. Republican politicians, looking to gain new voters, saw an opportunity to make evangelicals reliable Republican supporters. Republican politicians and evangelical leaders worked together to bring evangelicals into the Republican camp by turning opposition to desegregation into religious liberty concerns, while concurrently drumming up opposition to abortion. The issue of abortion was an easier political argument to sustain; however, the root cause of white evangelical involvement was opposing desegregation. Reagan's 1980 election campaign, built upon evangelicals' racist inclinations, used racial prejudice as a foundation to connect to evangelicals, and, through the use of a particular narrative of religious embattlement, Reagan was able to verbalize and give political legitimacy to their underlying racial prejudice.

Mid-twentieth-century evangelicals' racial prejudice has a much longer history than just the lead-up to the 1980 election. White evangelicals and white supremacy have been deeply entangled throughout American history. White southern evangelicals' interactions with white supremacy have deeply embedded white supremacy within the very religion itself. White southern evangelical Christian churches have played a huge role in the support and preservation of white supremacy. Southern evangelicals used biblical scripture and stories, like Genesis 9:18-27, as divine justification for subjecting other people to slavery. The Bible was used to prove

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<sup>18</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483, (May 17, 1954). Accessed April 16, 2024. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Green v. Connally*, 330 F. Supp. 1150, (D.C. Cir. June 30, 1971). Accessed April 16, 2024. <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/330/1150/2126265/>.

white southern evangelicals' own virtue and the supremacy of their own whiteness. Evangelical religious leaders' influence helped push into fruition the formation of the Confederacy. The separation between northern and southern evangelical denominations was centered on disagreements over slavery. White southerners rewrote the narrative of the Civil War to distance themselves from slavery, and white evangelicals not only allowed but encouraged it. This rewritten history was sanctified by white southern evangelicals, and it presented the white South as righteous victims. All the while, white southern evangelicals fought to maintain a degree of racial separation between themselves and non-white Americans, and as racial equality advanced, evangelicals turned inward and guarded their white communities.

In the twentieth century, the United States was undergoing momentous changes that significantly impacted all Americans' lives. Yet for evangelicals, the most pivotal changes came through decisions from the various court systems in the United States. Evangelicals wanted, consistently through American history, to maintain their white racially segregated communities, and four court cases in the twentieth century shaped their motivations and abilities to segregate: *State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* (1925),<sup>20</sup> *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948),<sup>21</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954),<sup>22</sup> and *Green v. Connally* (1971).<sup>23</sup> In the lead up to the 1980 election, evangelicals felt forced to act; they felt that their very livelihoods were endangered and that they had no other choice. Reagan arrived at just the right moment, with just the right words, and just the right story.

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<sup>20</sup> "Scopes Trial," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 18, 2024, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Scopes-Trial>.

<sup>21</sup> *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1, (May 3, 1948). Accessed April 16, 2024. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/334/1/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483, (May 17, 1954).

<sup>23</sup> *Green v. Connally*, 330 F. Supp. 1150, (D.C. Cir. June 30, 1971)..

## Section I: Reagan Courting Evangelicals

Ronald Reagan was not the typical model of evangelicalism's beliefs or practices: He was a divorced Hollywood movie star turned California governor who, in 1967, signed into law the country's most liberal abortion bill.<sup>24</sup> He was rumored to have had an affair, and he is also one of only two presidents to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. While he did make some claims about, and allusions to, his own religious beliefs, Reagan never openly committed himself to evangelicalism, and his track record of actions was also not representative of evangelical values. Yet, in his presidential campaigns and throughout his time in office, Reagan gained an unprecedented level of support from evangelical voters. The 1980 election saw evangelical Christians overwhelmingly voting for Republican candidate Ronald Reagan over the Democratic presidential incumbent Jimmy Carter – who was, himself, a born-again Christian. Jimmy Carter would have won the presidency by a margin of one point if not for the Religious Right's support for Reagan.<sup>25</sup> Reagan won the 1980 as well as the 1984 election with evangelical voters staunchly in his camp. Reagan's connection to the evangelical community was critical to his political platform. However, evangelical Christians in the early to mid-twentieth century were not interested in politics, and most were strongly opposed to engaging in the political sphere. Yet, evangelical Christians became and remained committed to Ronald Reagan, and his election forged a lasting connection between the Republican party and evangelical voters that extends into today's political world.

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<sup>24</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Randall Herbert Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 64.

Examining the rhetorical themes in Reagan's first<sup>26</sup> and second<sup>27</sup> presidential campaign announcements, his July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1980 speech accepting the Republican party's presidential nomination,<sup>28</sup> his August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1980 speech at the Dallas Reunion Area,<sup>29</sup> and his March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1983 "Evil Empire"<sup>30</sup> speech shows that Reagan's real connection with evangelicals lay in the fact that he was able to understand their concerns surrounding declining morality in America, and was able to demonstrate that he believed evangelicals to be the true safekeepers of morality. Reagan proposed a symbiotic relationship between himself and evangelicals by positioning himself as evangelicals' ally, dedicated to bringing their interests into government, in exchange for their support.

Reagan's first presidential bid was in 1976, challenging the Republican incumbent Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination. Reagan announced his bid on November 20, 1975, in a brief and to-the-point speech.<sup>31</sup> His speech was highly critical of the United States and focused on the difficulties the country was facing. The United States government's ineptitude was the "root"<sup>32</sup> of all those problems. Asserting that the U.S. government had become "intrusive, more coercive, more meddlesome and less effective" and that it needed to "change" "if America is to survive,"<sup>33</sup> Reagan painted a bleak picture of both the state of America and its government. While Reagan emphasized that the United States had problems, he did not depict these problems as particularly threatening. In this early speech, Reagan depicted America as stagnant: it would stay the way it was unless work was done, and that work had to come from the American people. Reagan's role

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<sup>26</sup> Reagan, Ronald "Ronald Reagan Announcement for Presidential Candidacy." Speech, November 20, 1975. Ronald Reagan President Library & Museum. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/ronald-reagan-announcement-presidential-candidacy>.

<sup>27</sup> Reagan, Ronald. "Ronald Reagan's Announcement for Presidential Candidacy." Speech, November 13, 1979. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/ronald-reagans-announcement-presidential-candidacy-1979>.

<sup>28</sup> Reagan, Ronald. "Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech." Speech presented in Detroit, MI, July 17, 1980. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/republican-national-convention-acceptance-speech-1980>.

<sup>29</sup> Reagan, Ronald. "National Affairs Campaign Address on Religious Liberty." Speech presented in Dallas, TX, August 22, 1980. Video. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganreligiousliberty.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Evil Empire Speech," speech presented at National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, FL, March 8, 1983, Voices of Democracy, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/>.

<sup>31</sup> Reagan, Ronald "Ronald Reagan Announcement for Presidential Candidacy." Speech, November 20, 1975. Ronald Reagan President Library & Museum. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/ronald-reagan-announcement-presidential-candidacy>.

<sup>32</sup> Reagan, "Ronald Reagan," speech, Ronald Reagan President Library & Museum.

<sup>33</sup> Reagan, "Ronald Reagan," speech, Ronald Reagan President Library & Museum.



and significance in creating this change were not clear. He implied that, if he was not elected, the only consequence to the American people would be life continuing as is. At no point in his speech did Reagan mention God or religion, and he made no obvious attempts to connect with evangelical Christian listeners. Reagan did not win the Republican nomination for president, let alone the presidency, in his first attempt. However, he seemed to have learned a lesson from this experience: the language in his second presidential bid and his speeches in the years following took on a markedly different tone.

In the time between Reagan's first and second presidential bids, figures like Republican politician Paul Weyrich and televangelist Jerry Falwell had been making concerted efforts to mobilize evangelicals in the southern half of the United States. The Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which ruled that abortion is a Constitutional right, resulted in some Catholics mobilizing and voting for anti-abortion politicians. Evangelicals were not particularly politically active, but Weyrich saw the potential power of their vote after seeing the Catholic mobilization.<sup>34</sup> In 1979, Falwell and Weyrich co-founded the Moral Majority to mobilize Christians politically in America and imbue Christian morals into politics by combatting social and civil rights movements, opposing the teaching of evolution in schools, and blocking communism-friendly foreign policy. Its major activities included lobbying, helping in voter registration, and fundraising. Leading up to the 1980 election, evangelicals had grown concerned about politics in America and the lack of specifically Christian morals in the political sphere, and Weyrich, aware of the mobilizing, saw the potential of this.<sup>35</sup> The efforts of people like Weyrich and Falwell aided in the formation of the Christian Right.

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<sup>34</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 52-53.

<sup>35</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 63.

These developments are reflected in the shift in Reagan's language between his first and second presidential bid. In Reagan's second presidential bid, he not only attempted to make himself relatable to everyday Americans but also used Christianity as the reference point for proving his relatability. On November 13, 1979, Reagan announced his second attempt at running for president.<sup>36</sup> He opened his announcement by discussing his childhood as well as his varied life and job experiences. By doing so, he presented himself as the kind of person who can relate to all Americans. Reagan placed himself as equal to his audience and as if he was "one of them." In framing America positively as "never mean" and "always impatient to provide a better life for its people,"<sup>37</sup> Reagan patriotically showed his dedication to his country, which allowed his audience to infer that he was not running for president to sabotage the country. He discussed the importance of American citizens; America was great because of its people, so the problems in the country could not be caused by the people. By shifting the blame for any problem in the country away from the individual, Reagan again showed his audience that he was on their side.

Reagan closed his second presidential campaign announcement by referring to America as the "city upon a hill,"<sup>38</sup> which was a reference to the Gospel of Matthew 5:14 and also to Massachusetts Bay Colony's first governor John Winthrop's iconic 1630 speech. In *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon*, Daniel Rodgers explains the history of Winthrop's speech within American politics and culture as well as how the speech became a staple of American political rhetoric. Winthrop's speech, popularized by Reagan, has been used in American politics as evidence of American exceptionalism and to demonstrate a speaker's patriotism.<sup>39</sup> Presenting America as the "city on a hill," Reagan implied that America was

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<sup>36</sup> Reagan, Ronald. "Ronald Reagan's announcement for Presidential Candidacy." Speech, November 13, 1979. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/ronald-reagans-announcement-presidential-candidacy-1979>.

<sup>37</sup> Reagan, "Ronald Reagans," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>38</sup> Reagan, "Ronald Reagans," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill* (n.p.: Princeton University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc778b0>.

supposed to be a beacon to the rest of the world, but, because Reagan “believe[d]”<sup>40</sup> that only “with God’s help”<sup>41</sup> could he and turn America into the “city on a hill,” Reagan additionally utilized Robert Bellah’s idea of American civil religion.

Robert Bellah’s 1967 article “Civil Religion in America” has been especially influential in scholars’ understanding of America and its political discourses.<sup>42</sup> The concept of a civil religion has its origins in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*.<sup>43</sup> A civil religion is generally understood as but not limited to a collection of beliefs, practices, and or ideas among a civic group of people that have a “religious dimension.”<sup>44</sup> Bellah argues that American civil religion is “not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality”<sup>45</sup> and that it has distinctly biblical undertones.<sup>46</sup> American civil religion unites American citizens under the belief that America is a uniquely righteous place in the world and has been throughout history. Additionally, Bellah argues that the God of the American civil religion is an active participant and a determining factor in the fate of America.<sup>47</sup> By making religious language a focal point in his speeches, Reagan provided preliminary proof to his audience that he recognized God as well as connected to the underlying Protestant Christian religious logic of American history. Prior presidents had used a Christian rhetoric when talking about America, both its history and future, but Reagan capitalized upon this idea and popularized the practice.<sup>48</sup>

By the summer of 1980, nine months into his second presidential campaign, Reagan had fully committed to courting evangelicals and linking himself to biblical themes. In Reagan’s

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<sup>40</sup> Reagan, “Ronald Reagans,” speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>41</sup> Reagan, “Ronald Reagans,” speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>42</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): JSTOR.

<sup>43</sup> L. Swaine, “civil religion,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, [Page #], last modified May 11, 2016, accessed April 27, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-religion>.

<sup>44</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1, JSTOR.

<sup>45</sup> Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 18.

<sup>46</sup> Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 18.

<sup>47</sup> Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ceri Hughes, “Thou Art in a Deal: The Evolution of Religious Language in the Public Communications of Donald Trump,” *International Journal of Communication (Online)*, September 2020, 4832, Gale Academic OneFile.

Dallas speech, delivered to a crowd of roughly 15,000 evangelicals,<sup>49</sup> he confessed that if he could read one book for the rest of his life, it would be the Bible because he found “fulfillment and guidance”<sup>50</sup> in it, and he believed all the questions in the world “have their answers”<sup>51</sup> in it. This confession implied that Reagan recognized the authority of the Bible just as evangelicals do, even though he, once again, refrained from confirming that he personally embraced the evangelical brand of Christianity. Reagan’s implied sincerity served as further proof to evangelicals that Reagan was their ally.

This type of Bible-friendly language would continue long into his presidency. In Reagan’s March 8, 1983, speech, often referred to as the “Evil Empire” speech, he thanked his audience for their “prayers” and stated that, because he “believe[s] in intercessory prayer,” “[he has] felt their presence many times in many ways” and they have “made all the difference.”<sup>52</sup> Here, Reagan overtly declared his connection to evangelicals’ God and, by implication, his connection to evangelicals. Acknowledging that evangelicals can make a “difference,”<sup>53</sup> Reagan verified to his audience that he believed in their importance to not only the world but also to himself personally. Reagan connected himself to general biblical ideas, like prayer and a God, through his words; however, he did not, at any point, back up his words with any claim to personal religious action. He did not say that he attended church or that he prayed, just that he believed in God and God’s help. Nonetheless, Reagan’s remarks supporting Christianity created a foundation of common ground between himself and evangelicals without ever locating him specifically within their community.

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<sup>49</sup> Reagan, Ronald. "National Affairs Campaign Address on Religious Liberty." Speech presented in Dallas, TX, August 22, 1980. Video. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganreligiousliberty.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>51</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>52</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Evil Empire Speech," speech presented at National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, FL, March 8, 1983, Voices of Democracy, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/>.

<sup>53</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

The language Reagan used in his speeches, like his August 22<sup>nd</sup> speech at the Dallas Reunion Area, validated to evangelicals that, although Reagan might not have practiced his implied religion in the same way his audience did, they could support Reagan because recognized the importance of involving God in politics just as evangelicals did. He wrapped up this speech by telling the story of a man walking with God along a beach.<sup>54</sup> The man asked God why it was that, in hard times, he did not feel God with him. God replied that, in hard times, God was the one who carried the man forward. This story allowed Reagan to help establish common ground with evangelicals through his recognition of God's power and authority. Reagan continued to recognize God's divine sovereignty over America in his "Evil Empire" speech. In this speech, also given to a crowd of evangelicals, he shared that he thought Americans need to believe in and be thankful to God because "the basis of... freedom and personal liberty... is grounded in the much deeper realization that freedom prospers only where the blessings of God are avidly sought and humbly accepted."<sup>55</sup> This story, combined with his story of the man and God on the beach, showed evangelicals that Reagan understood, just as they did, that America was facing hard times, but also showed them that Reagan believed that God was carrying America, and its people, through the troubles. Because of these efforts, evangelicals were able to gather that Reagan believed God not only had a space in politics but believed, just like evangelicals believed, that it was necessary to involve God in politics.

The foundation of Reagan's connection to evangelicals, built on veiled references to evangelicals' struggles and compliments to evangelicals themselves, was additionally bolstered through repeated references to and validation of their struggles. One of the early ways in which he hinted at the political struggles of Christians was by his reference to the 1954 Johnson

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<sup>54</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>55</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

Amendment, a tax code that prohibits non-profit organizations from endorsing or opposing political candidates. In his 1980 Dallas Reunion Arena speech, he alluded to the prohibition on church endorsements of political candidates by saying “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 want you to know that I endorse you and what you’re doing.”<sup>56</sup> In doing so, Reagan confirmed to evangelicals that they were, in fact, being oppressed and prevented from speaking their minds in the political sphere. Reagan suggested that his audience, i.e., “religious America,”<sup>57</sup> were saviors because they were “the reason” American politics had “new energy” and that their “awakening” was “just in time for America’s sake.”<sup>58</sup> This implied that his own personal opinion on how America should be behaving was that America should be acting more in line with “religious America.”

Looking forward in time, through Reagan’s presidency, Reagan continued to flatter and encourage his evangelical audience. Reagan closed his “Evil Empire” speech by appearing to speak candidly from the heart. He told his audience of evangelicals that he thought they were the ones who had the “greatness of America in [them]” because they had “respect for the rule of law under God.”<sup>59</sup> This rhetoric corroborated to evangelicals that they were the ones who upheld American morality, and showed evangelicals that Reagan not only had respect for the Bible and a generalized Christian morality, but also for evangelicals themselves. Evangelicals ascertained from Reagan’s language that he believed that evangelicals’ fight to make their voices heard and fight to enact their will in politics was a good thing. This bolstering of his audience, and his indication that he was glad “religious America” was participating in politics, showed that Reagan recognized the value of not just having religion, but specifically having evangelicals in the

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<sup>56</sup> Reagan, “National Affairs.”

<sup>57</sup> Reagan, “National Affairs.”

<sup>58</sup> Reagan, “National Affairs.”

<sup>59</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

political sphere. In framing their entrance into and action within politics as a fight to protect America and morality, Reagan validated his evangelical audience because he demonstrated to them that he understood and recognized both them and their struggles.

Even though evangelicals were facing opposition, Reagan believed that America depended on God, so evangelicals must be in the political sphere because they were the only ones fighting for God. Reagan's reference to John Winthrop in his first candidacy speech is a particularly good example of this: quoting Winthrop, he asserted that, "if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken [in creating America] and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world."<sup>60</sup> This reference implied that Reagan believed the reason evangelicals' involvement was essential in politics was because he believed America's future was dependent on God's help. Ignoring or "deal[ing] falsely with...God" was dangerous and posed a threat to the American existence because it would result in America being a disgraceful "story" of infamy. "[R]eligious America," i.e., evangelicals, were the only ones who could save America, and Reagan attested that evangelicals had to save America for the sake of America's own future wellbeing.

However, Daniel T. Rodgers argues that Reagan coopted and changed the meaning of Winthrop's speech.<sup>61</sup> Rodgers explains that Winthrop's original reason for giving the speech was based on a fear that "the Puritans might not show that they could live up to the tasks of faith, love, and discipline that their covenant demanded," whereas Reagan "urged Americans to *make* a choice, and having made it, stand as a beacon for the world to see."<sup>62</sup> Winthrop's audience had already made a choice; he was urging them to be strong and hold onto their tenets of faith and

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<sup>60</sup> Reagan, "Ronald Reagans," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>61</sup> Rodgers, *As a City*.

<sup>62</sup> Rodgers, *As a City*, 242.

love.<sup>63</sup> Reagan’s audience had yet to make a choice, and his language subtly intimidates them into deciding to prevent a dangerous future.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, Rodgers concludes by stating that “[w]hat joined Reagan’s and Winthrop’s cities on a hill across this chasm of difference was their sense of embattlement— their sense of a people living under probation at a profoundly urgent moment in history.”<sup>65</sup> Using Winthrop’s speech, Reagan was able to frame evangelicals as both key figures in the fight to save America as well as persecuted victims.

Throughout his presidential run, Reagan continued to emphasize that evangelicals’ efforts were crucial to saving America. In his Republican presidential candidacy acceptance speech later in 1980, Reagan stated that “only a divine providence placed this land, this isle of freedom, here a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe free”<sup>66</sup> and indicated that he too, like evangelicals, wanted to be able to live freely out from underneath those who persecuted religious belief.<sup>67</sup> Reagan stressed that America was a place for those “who yearn to breathe free” only because of the “providence” of the “divine,”<sup>68</sup> which proved to evangelicals that they were correct to be fighting for God’s space in politics because America cannot exist without God or God’s help. Reagan credited Christian Americans with “uphold[ing] the principles of self-reliance, self-discipline, morality, and above all responsible liberty,”<sup>69</sup> and, because they possessed these qualities, Reagan singled them out as the vehicles for making America into “that shining city on a hill” referenced by Winthrop. Here, Reagan was not just citing a Christian figure whom evangelicals admire, and he was not just mentioning God; he was portraying modern evangelicals as saviors who had been silenced – to the detriment of the country. In

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<sup>63</sup> Rodgers, *As a City*, 242.

<sup>64</sup> Rodgers, *As a City*, 242.

<sup>65</sup> Rodgers, *As a City*, 242.

<sup>66</sup> Reagan, Ronald. "Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech." Speech presented in Detroit, MI, July 17, 1980. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/republican-national-convention-acceptance-speech-1980>.

<sup>67</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>68</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>69</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.



Reagan's Dallas Reunion Area speech, he invoked the story of the Israelites entering the Promised Land from the Bible and dubbed the audience, evangelicals, "the ancient People of the Promised."<sup>70</sup> By calling on them "to make our laws and government not only a model to mankind, but a testament to the wisdom and mercy of God,"<sup>71</sup> Reagan exalted his audience and placed the responsibility of change onto them. This move was critical to Reagan's relationship with evangelicals because it formed the roles that he and his listeners would have in their relationship: evangelicals would defend morality and Reagan would bring their political agenda to fruition. Reagan presented evangelicals as holding the power to determine what was moral, and Reagan was offering himself as the figure who would remove the obstacles evangelicals believed they faced.

Reagan emphasized that evangelicals were fighting persecution and that Christianity as a whole was oppressed. In his Republican presidential candidacy acceptance speech in 1980, Reagan closed by departing from his prepared speech: he noted that he was "worried"<sup>72</sup> about whether or not he should say what was on his mind, which revealed to evangelicals that Reagan too faced opposition in his own life. As he put it, "I have thought of something that is not a part of my speech and I'm worried over whether I should do it...I'll confess that I've been a little afraid to suggest what I'm going to suggest. I'm more afraid not to. Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer?"<sup>73</sup> Here, Reagan further demonstrated to evangelicals that not only did he also face opponents, but his opponents were the same as evangelicals' opponents. Implying that his anxiety arose from his fears that he could be punished for his words by those in America trying to subjugate religion, Reagan validated evangelical

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<sup>70</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>71</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>72</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>73</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

concerns and feelings of persecution. Reagan could relate to evangelicals because there was anti-religious – specifically, anti-Christian – bias in politics which was hindering Reagan and evangelicals’ ability to live and speak freely. Reagan recognized that evangelicals were embattled and faced active opposition, and, because there was anti-religion bias in politics, Reagan was also able to understand evangelicals’ persecution, because he himself was facing the same.

This persecutory language was especially pronounced in his Dallas Reunion Area speech: here, Reagan definitively confirmed that evangelicals were persecuted in his discussion of the challenges “Judeo-Christian” and “traditional values” were facing in America.<sup>74</sup> Equating “Judeo-Christian” and “traditional” values and then stating his unhappiness that “traditional values” have left politics and “traditional moral teachings”<sup>75</sup> have been discredited, Reagan expressed that he was actually dissatisfied that “Judeo-Christian” values and moral teachings were not present in “public policy debate[s].”<sup>76</sup>

Reagan’s language implying that Christian values are moral values embodies a development that Noah Feldman describes as the “rise of values evangelicalism.”<sup>77</sup> In *Divided By God*, Feldman traces the development of fundamentalist evangelicalism into values evangelicalism.<sup>78</sup> This development was shaped in part by the translation of conservative Christian values, through groups like the Moral Majority, into general secularized moral values that had “majoritarian appeal.”<sup>79</sup> Anti-abortion and pro-school-prayer positions were divorced from their religious underpinnings and instead became positions centered around morality.<sup>80</sup> Evangelicals’ religious beliefs were no longer just religious beliefs; they transcended religion

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<sup>74</sup> Reagan, “National Affairs.”

<sup>75</sup> Reagan, “National Affairs.”

<sup>76</sup> Reagan, “National Affairs.”

<sup>77</sup> Noah Feldman, *Divided by God: America's Church-state Problem-- and What We Should Do about It* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

<sup>78</sup> Feldman, *Divided by God*

<sup>79</sup> Feldman, *Divided by God*, 192.

<sup>80</sup> Feldman, *Divided by God*.

and, from the evangelical perspective, were moral values applicable to all of humanity and with which all people should agree. Evangelicals came to view themselves as upholders of morality, and the aspects of American culture and government with which evangelicals did not agree became evidence of America's lacking morality. Additionally, the United States government's position of neutrality towards religion became seen as and understood to be government discrimination against religion.<sup>81</sup> Reagan demonstrated this shift by claiming that the current government and contemporary politicians believed that "any public policy approach incorporating traditional values is out of bounds."<sup>82</sup> Because religion, from the perspective of the budding Christian Right, was the source of moral values, the government actively not accommodating religious "rights" or religiously based opinions on morality was understood as the government lacking morality and persecuting religion.

However, the heart of Reagan's connection with evangelicals did not come from his emphasis on the value he saw in evangelical beliefs, evangelicals themselves, or evangelicals' role in politics; instead, it was grounded upon fears of secularism and the symbiotic relationship that he explained he and evangelicals could have. His references to secularism as a threat began as early as 1980, but they were particularly pronounced in his 1983 "Evil Empire" speech. Reagan plainly aligned himself with evangelicals when he claimed that "modern-day secularism" was "in opposition to...us."<sup>83</sup> Reagan placed secularism staunchly in opposition to himself, his audience, and the whole of America because secularism "discard[ed] the tried and time-tested values upon which our very civilization [was] based."<sup>84</sup> Reagan's framing secularism as incompatible with the "values... [on which] our...civilization [was] based"<sup>85</sup> made secularism

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<sup>81</sup> Feldman, *Divided by God*, 192.

<sup>82</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>83</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, *Voices of Democracy*.

<sup>84</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, *Voices of Democracy*.

<sup>85</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, *Voices of Democracy*.

incompatible with America on a fundamental level. Reagan argued that, despite secularists' claiming that "they're freeing [Americans] from superstitions of the past,"<sup>86</sup> in reality, "they've taken upon themselves the job of superintending [Americans] by government rule and regulation"<sup>87</sup> and have fallen to corruption and authoritarianism; this presented secularists as overbearing and wanting complete government control over the people. Reagan implied that, under a secularist government, the people don't have a voice and the government doesn't listen to the people. American evangelicals knew that a government that doesn't listen to the voice of the people was blatantly un-American.

However, Reagan did not completely vilify American secularists. He acknowledged that they were not a "majority"<sup>88</sup> of Americans, and conceded that, though they may be "well-intentioned, their value system is radically different from that of most Americans,"<sup>89</sup> which, as a result, depicted American secularists as more misguided than evil. Nonetheless, American secularist individuals' misperception did not take away from the danger of secularism's tyranny within a government or society. Reagan portrayed secularism as biased against religion and the traditional values that built America, which placed secularism in opposition to not only America but also evangelicals.

Beginning around the start of Reagan's first presidency and growing throughout his time in office, abortion began to rise in evangelicals' cultural awareness.<sup>90</sup> Reagan, in turn, used the issue of abortion as an example of both the dangers that secularism poses to American society and the mistakes to which secularism leads. In his 1983 "Evil Empire" speech, he emphasized the good intentions of the people who created abortion clinics but highlighted that, currently,

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<sup>86</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, *Voices of Democracy*.

<sup>87</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, *Voices of Democracy*.

<sup>88</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, *Voices of Democracy*.

<sup>89</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, *Voices of Democracy*.

<sup>90</sup> Andrew R. Lewis, *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics: How Abortion Transformed the Culture Wars* (n.p.: Cambridge UP, 9302)

these clinics were bowing to the pressures of secularism. Reagan asserted that these clinics were ignoring the role “morality [plays]...in the subject of sex<sup>91</sup>” and promoting birth control drugs and devices without parental knowledge, which was allowing sex to become too normalized. Reagan believed that parents had a right to counsel their children on morality and that parents should be allowed to control the happenings of their children’s lives without obstruction from external sources like the government. Reagan understood “freedom,”<sup>92</sup> a commonly touted American value, as prospering “when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged.”<sup>93</sup> Reagan presented intrusions on family and parental rights as an attempt to coerce young people into becoming secular and to steer the American people away from “traditional values and even abrogate the original terms of American democracy,”<sup>94</sup> which thus presented secularism as anti-American. Reagan showed evangelicals that secularism aimed to destroy “traditional” and religious values in culture, and a secularist government threatened the fundamental values that had built America and the American way of life.

Almost as soon as he won the nomination as the Republican presidential candidate, Reagan worked to fit the Democratic Party into this narrative that secularism threatened America. Reagan emboldened his audience to fight back and oppose the “Democratic party leadership” because they had failed in their “political, personal, and moral responsibilities” to the American people and had thus created “grave threats to [the American] existence.”<sup>95</sup> He explained that Americans could not simply hope the Carter administration would do what was best for them because the Carter administration was a “trust me”<sup>96</sup> government. A “trust me” government means that the authoritative power rests solely with the president, but the president

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<sup>91</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>92</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>93</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>94</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>95</sup> Reagan, “Republican National,” speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>96</sup> Reagan, “Republican National,” speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

doesn't listen to any opinions other than his own. Reagan essentially implied the Carter administration was an authoritarian regime. Carter and his administration violated the fundamental principles of the United States because Carter had not upheld his "responsibilities"<sup>97</sup> to act in the best interests of the people. The Carter administration had put the American people in danger because it restricted how the American people were able to "order their lives,"<sup>98</sup> which also implied that the Carter administration had a specific agenda for how the American people should be living their lives. Reagan proposed that, instead of trusting in one tangible position of power or person, Americans should trust in "those values that transcend persons and parties."<sup>99</sup> This would then give the power of judgment back to the people, and force political leaders to the subordinate rank as they attempted to live up to and uphold "those values" for the people. For Reagan's audience, this meant giving back power to evangelicals because they were the only ones who were able to make morally correct judgments. Reagan wanted to "make a commitment...to teach our children the values and virtues handed down to us by our families,"<sup>100</sup> and explained that, under a Reagan administration, the survival of the American way of life would be preserved. By describing "values and virtues" as "handed down," Reagan drew a connection to "traditional values" which, beginning in his 1980 Dallas Reunion Area speech, he used interchangeably with religious values.

Remarkably, by characterizing secularism as the antithesis of America and tying secularism to the Carter Administration, Reagan was able to portray the evangelical Jimmy Carter as the real threat to religion and religious values in America. Claiming that the First Amendment was intended "not to protect the people and their laws from religious values, but to

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<sup>97</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>98</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>99</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>100</sup> Reagan, "Republican National," speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

protect those values from government tyranny,”<sup>101</sup> Reagan imparted onto his audience two ideas: first, that religious values had a place in politics and, second, that government, specifically the current Carter administration, was a threat to religious values. In multiple speeches during the 1980 presidential run, he implied that the government, i.e., the Carter administration, had a tyrannical vendetta against religion and that the government believed values that stem from religion had no place in society. However, Reagan avowed that the government’s vendetta was wrong because Carter fundamentally misunderstood the purpose of the First Amendment: society did not need to be protected from religion, instead, religion needed to be protected from the government. The government not taking deliberate steps to protect religion was ipso facto the government being prejudicial against religion. Because evangelicals believed themselves to be the sole authority on morality and Christianity to be the foundation of morality, the Carter administration, by attempting to minimize the influence of religious values on laws, was thus reducing the presence of morality in law. In his “Evil Empire” speech, Reagan posed a question to the “parents of young America.”<sup>102</sup> He asked how many of their parental “prerogatives”<sup>103</sup> were they willing to give away to a secularist government. This question focused the scope of the dangerous influence a secularist government has not only on the audience but also on any children of the audience members. Through this question, Reagan also showed that a secularist government would actively try to take away evangelicals’ rights, which established to evangelicals that a secularist government was dangerous for the country because it suppressed and persecuted religion and religious individuals. By doing so, Reagan proved to evangelicals that he, unlike the Democratic party, understood these dangers and, as president, he would allow for religion to survive free from government intrusion.

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<sup>101</sup> Reagan, “Republican National,” speech, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>102</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>103</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

While Reagan positioned some American secularists as harmful but well-intentioned, he did not extend any of that courtesy to communism, which he framed as the overtly malicious and harmful embodiment of secularism. By the time Reagan gave the “Evil Empire” speech in March of 1983, he had pinpointed communism as the greatest danger to American life because it epitomized secularism. Reagan spent much of the beginning sections of his “Evil Empire” speech equating religion with morality and affirming religion as the sole authority on morality. This enabled him, as he began talking about communism, to show that because communism was against all religious morals, communism thus had no morals. Communism in America was dangerous because America already struggled with incorporating morals into government, but if America were to become communist, any hope for America’s well-being, which was so deeply dependent on morality and religion, would be eliminated. Reagan closed his “Evil Empire” speech with a story about a father who would rather his daughters die young believing in God instead of dying old in a communist world where they would not be able to believe in God.<sup>104</sup> This black-and-white view of the relationship between communism and religion showed Reagan’s audience that a secularist government, e.g., a communist one, was the ultimate danger to their free lives and if communism came to America, no one, especially Christians, would be safe. Under communism, parents would have no rights, children would have no rights, and religion would be persecuted. Reagan urged his audience to be vigilant against “quiet men”<sup>105</sup> who might talk about freedom but don’t really protect it, meaning secularists and communists. For Reagan, the struggle against communism was a moral one and because communism was devoid of morals, he implied that it would be immoral for Americans to not denounce and oppose communism.

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<sup>104</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>105</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.



Reagan recognized the importance of fighting for morality but believed the onus was on his audience to uphold it. Reagan pointed to America's history as a prime example of its "capacity for transcending the moral evils" given the fact that the strides America had made for "equal rights" was a point of "pride for all Americans"<sup>106</sup> even if, during those strides, there was "disunity."<sup>107</sup> Reagan here endorsed those in his audience who were fighting for anti-abortion and pro-family rights. Additionally, he affirmed that his audience was not only on the correct side of history but also integral to keeping America on its proper course. Even though other Americans oppose them now, evangelicals needed to keep fighting for their beliefs because they alone could protect and guide America's future. In doing that, Reagan positioned his audience as his helpers and the ones who must bear the burden of upholding morality.

Evangelicals had the responsibility of saving and propagating morality in American society, and Reagan offered himself to them as the politician who would protect their interests in government. Reagan believed that God had blessed America, and so the people must therefore vote to protect the "blessings" of God "for our children."<sup>108</sup> He stressed the importance of his evangelical audience because only they could "protect the American family and respect its interest in...public policy."<sup>109</sup> If evangelicals did not for someone who would protect their values, there would be no one in government to "defend the defenseless and the weak, the very young, the poor, and the very old."<sup>110</sup> Reagan did not try to convince evangelicals that he was "one of them;" instead, he placed evangelicals simultaneously as his, as well as America's, "moral compass."<sup>111</sup> Reagan would give evangelicals' beliefs, values, and goals a role in public policy and politics. Once he was in government, Reagan would aid evangelicals in defending

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<sup>106</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>107</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>108</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>109</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>110</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

<sup>111</sup> Reagan, "National Affairs."

morality against the threats that secularism, embodied by the Democratic party and communism, posed to morality in America. However, Reagan needed evangelicals' help to do so. Reagan needed to become president, and evangelicals needed to vote for him. So, Reagan proposed himself to evangelicals as their government insider, but by not claiming outright any shared evangelical belief. Reagan kept himself separate enough from evangelicals so that he did not additionally have any responsibility to uphold evangelical morality himself. Reagan's being held to a different standard of morality also excused evangelicals from having to justify, religiously or morally, any of Reagan's actions. Even though Reagan was not an evangelical, he promised, through his rhetoric, that he would fight for them.

Reagan solidified the difference in roles he and evangelicals would play in politics by emphasizing evangelicals' own virtue. The "Evil Empire" speech opened with a joke about a politician and a holy man entering heaven.<sup>112</sup> They were brought to separate places: the holy man to a single sparse room and the politician to a large mansion. The politician asked, "But wait, how—there's something wrong—how do I get this mansion while that good and holy man only gets a single room?" And St. Peter said, "You have to understand how things are up here. We've got thousands and thousands of clergy. You're the first politician who ever made it."<sup>113</sup> In telling this joke, Reagan acknowledged the common anti-government sentiment among evangelicals, and by acknowledging the overall negative connotations of politicians, he was admitting his own potential depravity. This underlined to evangelicals the difference between Reagan and themselves and denoted each party's subsequent roles. Reagan further showed this by emphasizing that evangelicals were the "good and holy"<sup>114</sup> people, and they kept "America

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<sup>112</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>113</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>114</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

great” because they kept America “good.”<sup>115</sup> He explained that evangelicals could protect American morality by keeping politicians “mindful of the ideas and the principles that brought [America] into the public arena in the first place.”<sup>116</sup> Reagan was not an evangelical, but he was self-aware and convinced of evangelicals’ importance to America, which indicated to evangelicals that they could trust him. He was able to joke about the corruption of politicians because he could see politicians clearly and had not been indoctrinated by secularism. The “ideas and principles” to which he referred were the “traditional values” he had previously established as religious values. Because only the audience’s “work and prayers” will allow America to “survive this perilous century and keep alive this experiment in liberty, this last, best hope of man,”<sup>117</sup> Reagan put the burden of morality onto evangelicals, not himself. Evangelicals could and thus must save America and American values from secular attacks. Reagan could help them from within the government; he could be their point person as president. Reagan claimed that if evangelicals did not protect America against secularism, no one else would, and if America lost the fight against secularism, all “hope” was lost for the future of all humans. Reagan believed that America was worth fighting for, and so, if evangelicals supported Reagan for president, he, in turn, would support their fight and efforts.

Evangelicals upheld their side of the relationship and maintained their support for Reagan throughout his presidential career, and Reagan, in turn, worked to do his part. Reagan’s “Evil Empire” speech was given several years after he won the 1980 election, and in it, he explained how he had honored his commitments to the relationship he and evangelicals had. Evangelicals held that the government’s banning prayer in school, was representative of the government

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<sup>115</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>116</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>117</sup> Reagan, “Evil Empire,” speech, Voices of Democracy.

discriminating against “religious speech,”<sup>118</sup> and giving into the influence of secularism. Because Reagan claimed that he “sent the Congress a constitutional amendment to restore prayer to public schools... to let [America’s] children pray,”<sup>119</sup> he showed that he was following through on getting and supporting solutions to evangelicals’ concerns. Evangelicals believed in the importance of prayer in school because keeping prayer in school keeps America moral, and Reagan, regardless of his own personal opinions, had attempted to bring their will to reality.

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<sup>118</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

<sup>119</sup> Reagan, "Evil Empire," speech, Voices of Democracy.

## Section II: Historical Connection Between Evangelicalism and Race

Reagan setting up evangelicals as the embattled saviors of morality in America lines up with a broader context of rising discontent with politics and American culture among conservative Christians. In the 1925 court case, *State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, southern evangelicals led the charge against John T. Scopes for violating a law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools. The case was highly publicized and, even though John T. Scopes lost in court, evangelicals lost in the court of public opinion. They were ridiculed by the American public and depicted as stupid extremists who were living in the dark age.<sup>120</sup> In *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right*, Randall Balmer notes that evangelicals during the 1920s felt that the “larger American culture had turned against them and their values”<sup>121</sup> especially because American culture in the 1920s was filled with influences evangelicals didn’t approve of like jazz, speakeasies, flapper women, and short skirts.<sup>122</sup> As Balmer explains, “The Scopes “monkey” trial, as it came to be known, represented the culmination of evangelical uneasiness with the broader society.”<sup>123</sup>

After the Scopes trial, evangelicals rejected the broader American culture and focused on their internal community.<sup>124</sup> Evangelicals hunkered down and created their own isolated “subculture”<sup>125</sup> to protect themselves and their beliefs from dangerous “secular”<sup>126</sup> outside influence. This endeavor to create white evangelical subcultures included efforts to control the structure and contents of schools. *Brown v. Board of Education* held that “separate but equal”<sup>127</sup> public facilities based on race were not equal, thus violating the Equal Protection Clause of the

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<sup>120</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 17.

<sup>121</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 17.

<sup>122</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 17.

<sup>123</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 17.

<sup>124</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 17.

<sup>125</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 18.

<sup>126</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 18.

<sup>127</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483, (May 17, 1954). Accessed April 16, 2024. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/>.

Fourteenth Amendment. In the wake of *Brown*, white evangelicals began creating and enrolling their children in private Christian schools, dubbed “segregation academies”<sup>128</sup> in Anthea Butler’s *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*. These schools were private institutions, which allowed them to choose whom they admitted and, as a result, many of these schools were either all-white or majority-white in their student bodies.

Recent scholarship from historians such as Randall Balmer and Anthea Butler has shed light on the pivotal role race and prejudice have had in driving Southern evangelicals’ reentry into American politics beginning in the 1970s. A key catalyst to their political re-entry was the 1971 District Court case, *Green v. Connally*, which ruled that any school that wanted to be granted a tax-exempt status could not have racially discriminatory practices. The IRS, as a result, created a new policy to enforce *Green*. This policy was the reason many of evangelicals’ “segregation academies,” like Bob Jones University, lost their tax-exempt status. This resulted in some schools shutting down, which hindered southern evangelicals’ ability to maintain a subculture of racial segregation. Butler explains that evangelicals, intransigently “holding on to racist ideologies, including prohibitions against race mixing, dating, and marriage,”<sup>129</sup> became fiercely motivated to maintain their racial divide and began “fighting against the gains of the civil rights movement”<sup>130</sup> in the legal and political spheres.<sup>131</sup> Government interference in the efforts to resist desegregation was white southern evangelicals’ biggest concern, but in order for white evangelicals “to hold political power and sway,” Butler explains that evangelicals would have to put “a coat of fresh paint on the old racist structures of evangelical life and belief.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Anthea D. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* 45.

<sup>129</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 58.

<sup>130</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 58.

<sup>131</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 58.

<sup>132</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 55.

Paul Weyrich, a conservative politician from Wisconsin, perceived the possibility of galvanizing conservative evangelicals who were unhappy with government incursions into the realm of segregated schools. Weyrich wanted to make evangelicals, as a group, a reliable voter base for the Republican party.<sup>133</sup> However, the mechanism that Weyrich used to activate this religious community was not segregation but something very different: abortion. Abortion was not a central issue for evangelicals; up until the late 1970s abortion was considered to be a “Catholic issue.”<sup>134</sup> Most evangelical leaders prior to and soon after *Roe* either did not see abortion as morally wrong or did not care.<sup>135</sup> Even if a leader recognized the potential for abortion to have moral consequences, issues like family planning and a pregnant person’s health were often of a higher moral priority.<sup>136</sup> The *Southern Baptist Newspaper* even said, following the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, that “religious liberty, human equality, and justice are advanced by the Supreme Court abortion decision.” Balmer describes Weyrich’s challenge:

Evangelicals in the late 1960s and throughout most of the 1970s by and large refused to see abortion as a defining issue, much less a matter that would summon them to the front lines of political activism. Abortion simply failed to gain [negative] traction among evangelicals... The overwhelming response to *Roe v. Wade* on the part of evangelicals was silence, and the voices that spoke on the matter were ambivalent.<sup>137</sup>

Weyrich and other Republican politicians thus had significant work to do to translate abortion into an “evangelical” issue. For nearly two decades in the run-up to the 1980 election, Weyrich, by his own account, had “utterly failed”<sup>138</sup> in getting evangelicals interested in politics. He had tried to get them to care about a variety of issues like pornography, prayer in schools, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, and abortion.<sup>139</sup> Weyrich had even gone around to churches and showed the extremely anti-abortion films made by pastor Francis Shaeffer, who some

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<sup>133</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 40.

<sup>134</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 33.

<sup>135</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 36.

<sup>136</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 36.

<sup>137</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 33-35.

<sup>138</sup> Weyrich quoted in *With God on Our Side* 1996 from Balmer 35.

<sup>139</sup> Weyrich quoted in *With God on Our Side* 1996 from Balmer 35.

consider the “intellectual godfather to the Religious Right,”<sup>140</sup> in efforts to engage with evangelicals, but no topic was enticing enough to provoke evangelicals.

In the long run, these films, along with Weyrich’s and the Moral Majority’s efforts did help in the efforts to galvanize evangelicals against abortion.<sup>141</sup> Throughout the later 1970s and into the 1980s, evangelical publications became more sympathetic to anti-abortion sentiments;<sup>142</sup> however, only after 1980, did abortion become of genuine concern to evangelicals and a “crucial focal point”<sup>143</sup> for Christian activists. However, evangelicals’ shift towards abortion does not change the root motivation for their political concern was based on an opposition to racial integration. Ed Dobson, Jerry Falwell’s former assistant at the Moral Majority, stated in 1990 that “the Religious New Right did not start because of a concern about abortion,”<sup>144</sup> and Grover Norquist, a conservative activist, confirmed that the Religious Right “started in ’77 or ’78 with the Carter administration’s attack on Christian schools.”<sup>145</sup> Carter’s “attack on Christian schools” is in reference to the IRS’s policy, based on *Green*’s decision, that does not allow a racially discriminatory institution to receive a tax-exempt status.

Despite the fact that both *Green* and the IRS policy came during Nixon’s administration, it was Carter who was spurned by evangelicals. A key factor in that spurring was the case of Bob Jones University, one of the most prominent and influential evangelical academies in America. On January 19, 1976, the IRS, after years of warning, rescinded Bob Jones University’s tax-exempt status,<sup>146</sup> but this event did not happen under Carter: it was during Ford’s administration an entire year and one day before Carter was even inaugurated on January 20, 1977. Unease had

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<sup>140</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 55.

<sup>141</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 96.

<sup>142</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 52.

<sup>143</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 27.

<sup>144</sup> Dobson quoted from conversation with Balmer in 1990. Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 45-46.

<sup>145</sup> Dan Gilgoff, “Exclusive: Grover Norquist Gives Religious Conservatives Tough Love,” *God & Country: On Faith, Politics, and Culture*, June 11, 2009, [www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country](http://www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country). Norquist quoted from Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 46.

<sup>146</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 45.



been growing among evangelical leaders since *Green*,<sup>147</sup> they saw the threat that *Green* posed to their ability to protect racial segregation in their private schools. The IRS's action towards the Bob Jones University was understood as a potential "bellwether,"<sup>148</sup> but evangelicals were not yet sure how the government would act under Carter. They were answered in August 1978; two years into Carter's presidency, the IRS formally announced that it would revoke the tax-exempt status of all schools that did not meet their criteria for integration. White evangelicals were enraged, and they faulted Carter and his administration. Balmer notes that, while Weyrich understood evangelicals' feelings, he was also "savvy enough"<sup>149</sup> to realize that he and the leaders of the Religious Right needed an issue besides opposition to segregation that they could use to publicly encourage white southern evangelicals to vote for the Republican party.<sup>150</sup> In the end, Weyrich and the Religious Right's leaders were successful. As Balmer puts it:

Although Bob Jones Jr., [Bob Jones University's founder], argued that racial segregation was mandated by the Bible, Weyrich and Falwell quickly sought to shift the grounds of the debate, framing their opposition in terms of religious freedom rather than in defense of racial segregation...Weyrich's sleight of hand brilliantly shifted perceptions of the movement away from racism towards a more high-minded defense of religious freedom.<sup>151</sup>

This shift in discourse dovetailed with the language of embattlement used by Reagan during his presidential campaign; both narratives gave voice to a sense that evangelicals should enter politics as a defense against an oppressive outside force seeking to infringe upon their religious liberties.

In the wake of the 1980 presidential election, Weyrich and Religious Right leaders' prior efforts to mobilize evangelicals against abortion paid off because they were able to align Reagan's embattled savior rhetoric with important, emerging legal ideas about religious freedom.

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<sup>147</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 45.

<sup>148</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 45.

<sup>149</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 48-50.

<sup>150</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 48-50.

<sup>151</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 42-43.

In *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics*, Andrew Lewis explains how the language of “rights” emerging around this time strengthened conservative Christians’ sense that they were becoming a minority population within American society and were thus entitled to greater constitutional protections.<sup>152</sup> A right is a “constitutional guarantee” and is thus protected by the government.<sup>153</sup> However, as Lewis explains, a moral “wrong”<sup>154</sup> does not have legal “precedence,”<sup>155</sup> over “rights and justice”<sup>156</sup> meaning that if something is understood as only immoral and not connected to a constitutional right, the government cannot protect it over something that is connected to a constitutional right. The growing Christian Right used “rights” language to connect the anti-abortion moral argument to the “right-to-life”<sup>157</sup> argument. In doing so, “rights-talk” framed abortion as a conflict between two rights: a fetus’s “inalienable right to life”<sup>158</sup> versus a woman’s “right to choose.”<sup>159</sup>

Basing the anti-abortion claims on rights, crucially, provided the Christian Right a rights claim to counter the pro-abortion rights claim. Abortion has been “the most stable issue”<sup>160</sup> to maintain in evangelical political history because evangelicals have a counter right with which they can oppose the pro-abortion argument. When a constitutional right has a constitutional counter-right in opposition to it, there is no clear-cut answer on how the government can and should protect each right. The ongoing legal battles over abortion and the lack of any resolutions in the various branches of the United States government serve as prime examples of how complicated and powerful rights and counter-rights arguments are in the legal and political spheres. In comparison, gay marriage, to which the Christian Right is also opposed,<sup>161</sup> lacks a

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<sup>152</sup> Andrew R. Lewis, *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics: How Abortion Transformed the Culture Wars* (n.p.: Cambridge UP, 9302).

<sup>153</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 1.

<sup>154</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 26.

<sup>155</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 26.

<sup>156</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 26.

<sup>157</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 25.

<sup>158</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 25.

<sup>159</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 27.

<sup>160</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*, 23.

<sup>161</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 63.

constitutional counter-rights claim, so opposition to gay marriage does not have the same legal teeth or staying power.<sup>162</sup> While a right in opposition to another right provides the most saliently powerful argument, attaching any type of belief to a right gives that belief the capability to influence politics. Desegregation was the root of evangelicals' political frustrations in the mid-twentieth century, but it lacked a direct counter-rights claim that evangelicals could use.

However, because there was a steady "stream of rights-talk" within the evangelical anti-abortion movement from its conception in the lead-up to the 1980 election, Weyrich was able to connect their opposition to desegregation to the First Amendment and religious freedom. Though the Christian Right struggled to legally oppose government actions with religiously grounded moral arguments, by deploying the language of liberalism and rights, evangelicals turned their religious beliefs into political beliefs thus allowing for their arguments to gain constitutional legitimacy.

Reagan's campaign rhetoric used this rights language when discussing evangelical political frustrations over desegregation, which consequentially showed evangelicals that Reagan sincerely and deeply understood them. Reagan gave white southern evangelicals' concerns national political legitimacy by openly discussing and thereby validating their rights-based claims. As a byproduct, Reagan also masked the racial prejudice that motivated evangelicals to re-enter politics because he reiterated that evangelicals were reacting, not to desegregation, but to the government's violating their First Amendment constitutional rights. For example, Reagan never explicitly said the word "desegregation" in his speeches. Instead, by focusing on things like government overreach and secularist infringements upon religious freedom, Reagan articulated evangelicals' concern and unhappiness about segregation in connection to a constitutional right which served as a cover-up for evangelicals' true racial motivations. In his

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<sup>162</sup> Lewis, *The Rights*.

Dallas Convention Center speech, Reagan shamed the IRS for its “unconstitutional regulatory agenda...against independent schools” and reframed the IRS’s actions as infringements upon evangelicals’ constitutional First Amendment rights. Reagan was able to sidestep the discriminatory nature of segregation academies and portray the IRS as hindering religious individuals’ ability to exercise their religion, which was unconstitutional. Reagan relied on rights language to articulate that the government restricting what private institution gets a tax-exempt status and many Christian schools losing their status, was actually the government hindering evangelicals’ ability to practice their religion. Reagan’s language vitally frames evangelicals’ concerns within the context of the Constitution and rights which gives evangelicals’ concerns political legitimacy. Reagan additionally demonstrated to evangelicals that he, too, was concerned with the government’s, i.e., the Carter administration’s, apparent authoritarian tendencies. In promising to uphold evangelicals’ legal and political interests, he implicitly confirmed his support for their efforts to maintain segregation.

Because of white southern evangelicals’ underlying racial political motivations, Reagan’s past racially prejudicial actions, like his opposition to civil rights and open support of apartheid in South Africa, also helped him to connect to evangelicals.<sup>163</sup> Reagan used several racially coded phrases, like “law and order”<sup>164</sup> and “welfare queen,”<sup>165</sup> which signaled to white evangelicals that he held similar opinions about race and white supremacy. Balmer explains that “law and order” is “generally construed as code language for keeping blacks in their place,”<sup>166</sup> and “welfare queen” is a “vile caricature of... mythical people of color who allegedly wallow in riches by bilking public assistance programs.”<sup>167</sup> Reagan praised Bob Jones University and, in

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<sup>163</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 70-73.

<sup>164</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 70.

<sup>165</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 71.

<sup>166</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 70.

<sup>167</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 71.

his time as governor of California, appointed several anti-civil-rights anti-women's rights, and anti-gay-rights officials. Perhaps most blatantly, Reagan opened his presidential campaign to a crowd of twenty thousand white people, many of whom were waving Confederate flags, at the Neshoba County Fair, only miles from where the Ku Klux Klan buried three civil rights workers they had murdered in 1964.<sup>168</sup> In that speech, he emphasized the importance of states' rights, which, Butler explains, is a "dog whistle for the GOP's 'Southern Strategy.'"<sup>169</sup> Southern Strategy refers to the political strategy used by Republicans in the mid-twentieth century to gain white voters' support in the South by covertly supporting racially prejudicial beliefs about non-white people and denouncing government programs aiding racial equality.<sup>170</sup> Lee Atwater, a political strategist who worked with Reagan, bluntly described it as a political philosophy designed to mask racist language and sentiments:

You start out in 1954 by saying, [racist slur] By 1968 you can't say [that slur]— [saying it] hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites... 'We want to cut this,' is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than [racist slur].<sup>171</sup>

"States' rights" in particular has historically been used throughout the South as a cover-up to defend white supremacy, so Reagan's reference to "states' rights" and the other dog whistles he used connects him to that long and deeply racist history. White evangelicals understood the implications of Reagan's rhetoric which aided him in connecting to evangelicals, whose main priority was protecting racial segregation and white supremacy. As a politician, Reagan had legitimate political authority, so his verbalizing their concerns gave their concerns political validity. Though the basis of evangelicals' political motivation and mobilization lay in protecting

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<sup>168</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 70.

<sup>169</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 73.

<sup>170</sup> Sue L. Baugh, "Southern strategy," in *Britannica*, last modified February 16, 2024, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Southern-strategy>.

<sup>171</sup> Lee Atwater, interview by Alexander Lamis, audio, 41:58, Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy, November 13, 2012, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/>. Atwater quoted from Butler, *White Evangelical*, 74.

segregation and upholding white supremacy, Reagan was able to do the critical work of verbally broadening evangelicals' fight against the government away from desegregation to protecting religious rights, which showed evangelicals that he was a politician they could support. White supremacy played a pivotal role in the 1980 election, but the connection between evangelicals and upholding white supremacy did not start in 1971 or after President Carter's "attack" on Christian schools. Historians point out that the connection between evangelicals and white supremacy has evolved throughout the country's history and that southern evangelicals have protected white supremacy, at varying intensities, throughout evangelicals' history in America.

Evangelicalism dates back to early eighteenth-century religious revivals happening in Europe with the "Pietist movement,"<sup>172</sup> in Great Britain with the "Methodist revival,"<sup>173</sup> and in North America with the "Great Awakening,"<sup>174</sup> beginning in 1739. Evangelicalism has been in America since the country's conception;<sup>175</sup> in *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right*, Randall Balmer claims that the Second Great Awakening, in the early seventeenth century, "utterly reshaped religion in America"<sup>176</sup> and that, "aside from the Civil War"<sup>177</sup> it was "the most consequential event in American history."<sup>178</sup> This series of Protestant revivals, which took place in the wake of the American Revolution across the New England, Cumberland Valley, and upstate New York regions, created a huge diversity of thought amongst revivalist thinkers. Many revivalist evangelicals, as Balmer explains, believed that they "bore a responsibility for the improvement of society," so they paid special attention to the "interests of those most vulnerable,"<sup>179</sup> with many focusing passionate efforts on social reforms because they wanted to

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<sup>172</sup> Gordon J. Melton, "Evangelical church," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified February 20, 2024, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Evangelical-church-Protestantism>.

<sup>173</sup> Melton, "Evangelical church."

<sup>174</sup> Melton, "Evangelical church."

<sup>175</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 3.

<sup>176</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 3.

<sup>177</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 4.

<sup>178</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 3.

<sup>179</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 6.

create God’s perfect kingdom on Earth. Some evangelicals rallied for prison and education reform, advocated for the poor and the rights of women, opposed violence and war, and supported gun control. Some were opposed to alcohol because they saw alcohol’s connection to spousal as well as child abuse. Additionally, some focused their efforts on increasing access to public schools regardless of economic status.<sup>180</sup> Many northern evangelicals were even opposed to slavery. Before the Civil War, evangelicals largely believed in postmillennialism, which is the belief that Jesus will return to Earth after the “thousand-year period of peace and righteousness predicted in the book of Revelation.”<sup>181</sup> Christians have a duty to “pave the way for...Jesus”<sup>182</sup> to return by creating that “thousand-year period of peace and righteousness”<sup>183</sup> on Earth. Wanting to purge the world of evil, early American evangelicals were deeply concerned with social justice, and many tried to create structures that would have buffered against systematic forms of oppression.

Both northern and southern evangelicals wanted to purify the world; however, northern evangelicals saw slavery as a component of evil while southern evangelicals did not. Northern evangelicals were largely anti-slavery in the antebellum period, but southern evangelicals were largely pro-slavery and even saw slavery as righteous; this difference strained the relationship between the two groups. In *White Too Long*, Robert P. Jones gives both personal and historical accounts to show how white supremacy has become embedded into the fabric of American evangelicalism.<sup>184</sup> In the opening pages of his book, Jones reveals that at one point in early American history, American Baptists, a major evangelical Protestant denomination, were united. The accepted body of authority was the managing board of the Triennial Convention, which was

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<sup>180</sup> “Thoughts on the Importance and Improvement of Common Schools,” *Christian Spector*, n.s., 1 (February 1827): 85. Quoted from Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 7.

<sup>181</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 9.

<sup>182</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 9.

<sup>183</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 9.

<sup>184</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon et Schuster Paperbacks, 2021).

tasked with substantiating Baptist goals and values. The Triennial Convention was held every three years, in which “Baptists gathered to coordinate their church and missions work in the early eighteen hundreds.”<sup>185</sup> However, after “decades of tension,”<sup>186</sup> this union collapsed. The central reason was that Baptists in the North and Baptists in the South disagreed about “the compatibility”<sup>187</sup> of slaveholding and their religion.

Reverend Dr. Basil Manly Sr. was a hugely influential and prominent southern Baptist. On November 25, 1844, Manly and a group of other Baptist leaders sent a letter to the managing board of the Triennial Convention. They demanded “the distinct, explicit avowal that slaveholders are eligible, and entitled, equally with nonslaveholders [*sic*], to all the privileges and immunities of their several unions.”<sup>188</sup> The Convention rejected this demand, declaring that “One thing is certain: we can never be a party to any arrangement that would imply approbation of slavery.”<sup>189</sup>

The leadership’s open claim that a pro-slavery evangelical could never gain authority within the Triennial Convention denomination meant that any pro-slavery southern evangelical would never be able to gain recognition on a national level. Southern evangelicals believed that their religion endorsed slavery and that it was morally righteous, so the Triennial Convention leaders’ relegation of southern evangelicals to a permanent subordinate rank in the entire American Baptist denomination was understood as an attack on southern evangelicals simply because of southern evangelicals’ beliefs.<sup>190</sup> Six months later, Baptist leaders across the South, including “chief architect”<sup>191</sup> Reverend Dr. Basil Manly Sr., formed the Southern Baptist

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<sup>185</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 1.

<sup>186</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 1.

<sup>187</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 1.

<sup>188</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 1. [*sic*] included in original text.

<sup>189</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 2.

<sup>190</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 2.

<sup>191</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 34.



Convention (SBC).<sup>192</sup> Because northern evangelical abolitionists threatened southern evangelicals who wanted to maintain racial purity, southern evangelicals disaffiliated from the Triennial Convention and formed their group under their own authority. After helping to create the SBC, Manly also helped create an “alternate”<sup>193</sup> ministerial education for evangelicals in the South. Jones claims that this was because northern education was “perceived to be increasingly under the influence of abolitionists”<sup>194</sup> and not as pro-slavery as Manly would have liked. The contrast between the northern Baptists’ aversion to and the southern Baptists’ support for slavery drove the split between American Baptists, which shows the integral role that the institution of slavery had in shaping evangelicals’ thoughts on their religion.

In addition to fostering purifying impulses, the ideas of the Second Great Awakening also influenced how white evangelicals approached biblical scripture. Anthea Butler, in *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*, in addition to tracking the consequences of specifically southern evangelicalism becoming intertwined with white supremacy, she also explains how that connection happened and that pro-slavery white southern evangelicals using literal interpretations of the Bible was foundational to evangelicalism’s connection to white supremacy.<sup>195</sup> Interpreting the Bible literally was fueled by the Second Great Awakening. One of the ideas of the Second Great Awakening was to denounce “enlightenment rationalism,” which is the belief that knowledge comes from experience and logic, in favor of “orthodox Christianity.”<sup>196</sup> Discouraging “enlightenment rationalism,” which some revivalist evangelical leaders did,<sup>197</sup> helped to solidify literal interpretations of scripture as the dominant understanding of the Bible in white southern evangelical culture.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 2.

<sup>193</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 34.

<sup>194</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 34.

<sup>195</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 17.

<sup>196</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 4.

<sup>197</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 4.

<sup>198</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 16.

White southern evangelicals used literal interpretations of the bible to confirm the supremacy of white people and justify their efforts in subjugating African people to slavery.<sup>199</sup> The two most often cited scriptures by white evangelical Christians in the antebellum South were Genesis 9:18-27 and Ephesians 6:5-7,<sup>200</sup> along with the story of Cain and Abel.<sup>201</sup> Genesis 9:18-27 is a story about Noah in which Noah curses his son Ham, the father of Canaan. Ham sees his father naked after Noah falls asleep drunk, and, when Noah wakes up and realizes this, Noah states, “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.”<sup>202</sup> Butler argues that “this scripture became the foundation of biblical justification for slavery”<sup>203</sup> because nineteenth-century “expositors”<sup>204</sup> understood Canaan as Africa and Ham as black people.<sup>205</sup> Jones adds that white Christians also believed black people were the “descendants of Cain.”<sup>206</sup> White Christians understood darker skin as the same physical mark God put on Cain after Cain killed Abel.<sup>207</sup> Meaning, as Jones notes, that “in this narrative, the original black ancestor was a criminal.”<sup>208</sup> Jones explains that this understanding implied to white evangelical Protestants that black people “likely inherited not only their ancestor’s physical distinctiveness but also his inferior moral character.”<sup>209</sup> This particular understanding presents white supremacy as not merely a passive phenomenon; it actively finds faults in and demonizes slaves. Because white southern evangelicals interpreted scripture literally, verses in Ephesians 6:5-7, which openly reference slavery, validated the institution of slavery. Butler highlights that this verse was used to show

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<sup>199</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 17.

<sup>200</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 17.

<sup>201</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 17.

<sup>202</sup> Genesis 9:25 (King James Version). Butler, *White Evangelical*, 17.

<sup>203</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 17-18.

<sup>204</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 17-18.

<sup>205</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 17-18.

<sup>206</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 17.

<sup>207</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 17.

<sup>208</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 17.

<sup>209</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 17.

“that slaves should remain docile and obey their masters”<sup>210</sup> because it was “God’s will that they were slaves.”<sup>211</sup> These cherry-picked biblical passages gave evangelicals the foundational religious evidence to justify a white supremacist ideology which subsequently influenced how evangelicals understood both themselves and black slaves.

White southern evangelicals using biblical scripture to substantiate the supremacy of white people additionally molded the institute of slavery itself. The Bible has passages that both accept as well as condemn slavery,<sup>212</sup> but white Christians actively discounted the anti-slavery rhetoric. White evangelical Christian missionaries brought “slave bibles” to the Caribbean which excluded about “90 percent of the Old Testament and about half of the New Testament.”<sup>213</sup> Jones affirms that these Bibles emphasize “passages demanding obedience to masters and... exclude passages suggesting equality or liberation.”<sup>214</sup> Black slaves in America were prohibited from reading, so white slaveholders would bring black slaves to church so they would be forced to hear the Bible’s scriptural justification rationalizing their subjugation.<sup>215</sup> Southern evangelicals, understanding non-white people as impure even tainted, felt that whiteness had to be protected against racial contamination. For example, slaves and slaveholders could not share the same drink during church services.<sup>216</sup> Sharing a “common cup”<sup>217</sup> was supposed to represent and reinforce “Christian fellowship,”<sup>218</sup> yet the cup, in slaveholding churches, instead only emphasized racial difference. Black slaves also could not sit in the same area as white people, so they would sit behind white slaveholders or in “specially constructed galleries above.”<sup>219</sup> Jones pointedly explains slaves’ influence on evangelical Church gatherings and evangelicalism itself:

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<sup>210</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 18.

<sup>211</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 18.

<sup>212</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 101-102.

<sup>213</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 18.

<sup>214</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 77.

<sup>215</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 18.

<sup>216</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 23.

<sup>217</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 23.

<sup>218</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 23.

<sup>219</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 22.

White Christians received instruction in the faith from white ministers with a “dark, abiding, signing African presence” literally seated behind their backs or above their heads. While not in white congregants’ field of vision during the service, this looming presence shaped what could be practiced... and preached... and how white Christians came to embody and understand their faith, generation after generation.

The effect of the enslaved African American presence on early white American Christianity, and the white supremacist beliefs this unholy arrangement conjured, was, of course, not defined to the sanctuary. Like a distant planet whose presence is detected by its effect on the objects around it, this unacknowledged black presence exerted a strong gravitational pull on the development of white Christianity.<sup>220</sup>

The presence of black slaves during church service fundamentally affected how white religious leaders conducted church and, in turn, influenced how white evangelicals understood their religion as well as themselves. These actions from southern Christian religious authorities to prove the supremacy of white people and justify slavery consequently unconsciously embedded the ideology within white evangelical Christianity itself.

White supremacy’s implantation into evangelicalism and the minds of southern evangelicals would not have been successful if southern evangelical Christian religious leaders did not hold authority within their communities, but they did, and the ideas they proselytized were deeply influential over southern evangelical congregations. Take, for example, Reverend Dr. Basil Manly Sr. who, along with other evangelical leaders, believed that God’s perfect society was a white patriarchal hierarchy and slavery was simply a natural part of that good system.<sup>221</sup> Some white southerners argued that slavery was a “pragmatic” issue, but Manly, according to Jones, argued that slavery was a component “of the divinely ordained hierarchical order of Christian society.”<sup>222</sup> White southern evangelicals who agreed with Manly believed that Africans were supposed to be enslaved and that slaves should be grateful they were enslaved by a Christian. Christianity supposedly “moderated the cruelty of the institution”<sup>223</sup> of slavery, and

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<sup>220</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 23.

<sup>221</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 82.

<sup>222</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 34.

<sup>223</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 89.

so, any Christian slaveholder abusing slaves was an individual problem and a result of that slaveholder misunderstanding his role, not a reflection of Christianity itself. Jones summarizes this theological approach to slavery:

[White slaveholding evangelicals believed] that at all times, in all countries, whites have been *naturally* in a state of dominance fulfilling their God-given role to direct the labor of others. As the superior human species, whites are protecting blacks from likely worse fates by enslaving them in a benevolent environment... But Manly had admonishments for his fellow white Christians as well. Within this hierarchical worldview, those at the top have their own duties and responsibilities. Just as fathers had a duty to govern their families with benevolence, masters had a similar duty towards their slaves... While Manley admitted that current slave owners did not meet this ideal, he was convinced that Christianity and the Christian churches were the key to achieving it.<sup>224</sup>

White southern evangelicals believed that the Bible proved white people superior to everyone else, so slavery, especially slavery under a white Christian, was a good thing. Slavery was “benign and protective”<sup>225</sup> under Christianity, and these arguments supporting slavery and white supremacy were not unique to Southern Baptists: Jones notes that Manly had “counterparts”<sup>226</sup> in other major Protestant denominations who defended slavery as well.

However, the claim that slavery was a gentle force is contrasted by actual accounts of slavery from enslaved people. In Frederick Douglass’ first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, he recognized the undisputable relationship between white Christianity and slavery by exposing that Christianity was not a limiting agent against cruelty, but instead an enabling one. Douglass’ and many other slaves’ accounts illuminated that, in reality, white Christian slaveholders were not more gentle or benevolent compared to non-Christian slaveholders. Douglass unambiguously recognized the relationship between white Christianity and the inhumane actions of white southern Christian slaveholders by recounting:

Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other...The dealers in the bodies and souls of men

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<sup>224</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 83-84.

<sup>225</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 20.

<sup>226</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 84.

erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in the angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.<sup>227</sup>

Douglass described Christian slaveholders as “the worst”<sup>228</sup> and far more “cruel and cowardly”<sup>229</sup> than other slaveholders. Douglass understood that Christianity was not the “benign and protective” force against cruelty that evangelicals pretended it to be. Christianity was the source and merchant of the cruelty.

The disparity between white southern slaveholding Christians' rhetoric and the accounts from slaves shows that the work white southern Christian religious leaders did to biblically justify and legitimize slavery blinded southern evangelicals to white supremacy's festering within their religion. Because evangelicals understood slavery as permissible within Christianity, and Christian churches even encouraged slavery, the social status of being a slaveholder was elevated within the evangelical Christian community.<sup>230</sup> Additionally, white southern evangelicals believed that a black person being enslaved by a white Christian was inherently better for that black person than if that person was free.<sup>231</sup> This belief thus gave white evangelical slaveholders “religious sanction”<sup>232</sup> to act however brutally they wanted towards slaves. Jones explains that these two things subsequently “lobotomized white Christian consciousness, severing what natural moral impulses there may have been limiting violence and cruelty,”<sup>233</sup> resulting in white Christian slaveholders not having nor feeling any pressure to limit the brutality of their actions. Christianity gave white slaveholders an excuse for violence and was used by white Christians to justify slavery.

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<sup>227</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 86.

<sup>228</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014). Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 88.

<sup>229</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 88.

<sup>230</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 88.

<sup>231</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 88.

<sup>232</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 88.

<sup>233</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 88.

Yet, it is important to note that slaves did not blindly accept evangelicals' white supremacist propaganda. As Butler puts it, "[t]he enslaved knew that the Christianity taught to them was not the only version."<sup>234</sup> Most slaves in America could not read, and biblical instruction came only from white religious leaders in churches, but, Butler contends that, "[n]o matter what was preached to them, slaves' religion was about freedom,"<sup>235</sup> and slaves would turn the "meaning of scripture into cloaked messages of hope."<sup>236</sup> Slavery and white supremacy were precariously maintained by southern evangelicals through Christianity, but slaves saw through Christian slaveholders' veneer of morality and clearly recognized the connection between white Christianity and oppression.

Before the Civil War, many southern evangelical religious leaders deliberately participated in government. They brought religion into government and tried to maintain white supremacy in the South. Reverend Dr. Basil Manly Sr., not only helped to give religious legitimacy to slavery and white supremacy, but he also helped give religious support to and for the Confederacy. At the 1860 Alabama Baptist Convention, Manly declared that "before mankind and before our God... we hold ourselves subject to the call to proper authority in defense of the sovereignty and independence of the state of Alabama, and her sacred right as a sovereignty to withdraw from this union."<sup>237</sup> Nineteenth-century historian Benjamin F. Riley argues that such words did "more to precipitate the secession of Alabama than any other one cause."<sup>238</sup> Manly's calling for a "defense of sovereignty"<sup>239</sup> implied that the North was attacking Baptists and their freedom so they needed to liberate themselves from the North. The reason Manly thought Alabama needed independence was because he felt that Alabama Baptists could

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<sup>234</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 21.

<sup>235</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 21.

<sup>236</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 21.

<sup>237</sup> A. James Fuller, *Chaplain to the Confederacy: Basil Manly and Baptist Life in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 291. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 36.

<sup>238</sup> Benjamin F. Riley, *History of the Baptists of Alabama* (Birmingham: Roberts and Son, 1896), 278-80. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 36.

<sup>239</sup> Fuller, *Chaplain to the Confederacy*, 291. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 36.

“no longer hope for justice, protection, or safety” of their “peculiar property.”<sup>240</sup> The “peculiar property” meant slaves.

Manly believed that slavery was protected by the Constitution,<sup>241</sup> so, by not condemning the abolition movement, the United States government was no longer respecting the Constitution which meant that Alabama Baptists were not safe. If the federal government had rebuked abolitionist ideas, the pro-slavery position would have been given political validity allowing evangelicals to uphold white supremacy more easily. Manly proposing that Alabama separate from the United States opened the possibility for evangelicals to maintain a racial separation between themselves and non-white others. This instinct to separate calls back to the formation of the SBC and this theme would continue to influence evangelical behavior into the twentieth century.

Framing evangelicals’ upset as a result of the United States government’s unjust actions, Manly, remarkably, was able to change the root of evangelical concern to a patriotic defense of liberty instead of a defense of racial prejudice. Though Manly and other evangelicals did not explicitly deny their racial prejudice, by framing the origin of evangelicals’ unrest as a result of the United States government violating a right, Manly broadened the potential danger to non-evangelicals as well as evangelicals and prefigured the rights language used by evangelicals and Reagan in the twentieth century. The threatened rights included their constitutional right to own their “peculiar property,” but also their ability to freely practice their religious beliefs, so Manly urged Alabama to protect itself and separate. Additionally, Manly depicted evangelicals and all of the South as victims of a tyrannical, authoritarian government which is another theme Reagan used. Manly implied that because the United States was not encouraging white supremacy, it was

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<sup>240</sup> Fuller, *Chaplain to the Confederacy*, 291. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 36.

<sup>241</sup> Fuller, *Chaplain to the Confederacy*, 291. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 36.



ipso facto endangering southerners' constitutional rights. By doing so, Manly established that the United States federal government was at fault, and Alabama evangelicals, as well as their beliefs, were innocent and persecuted.

Manly was elected to serve as chaplain to the Alabama Secession Convention, and, when Alabama voted to secede from the United States, he helped draft Alabama's state constitution. Manly was widely known across the Confederate States, and he gave the opening prayer at the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States. During this Congress, in addition to taking credit for the Confederate Constitution, Manly invoked "the favor of the Almighty"<sup>242</sup> and asked God to protect the Confederacy so that it would last "as long as the sun and the moon."<sup>243</sup> Manly gave the inaugural address at Jefferson Davis' Confederate presidential induction and notably rode with Davis and the Vice President to the address.<sup>244</sup> Manly became the official chaplain to the Confederacy and remained chaplain throughout the Civil War. Jones describes him as "a steadfast and sought-after religious voice justifying slavery and white supremacy."<sup>245</sup> Manly's influence on the Confederacy cannot be overstated; every step of the way, he was there providing divine justification for everything for which the Confederacy stood further entangling evangelicalism and white supremacy in the process.

Although Manly's "success and influence were perhaps unmatched,"<sup>246</sup> Jones explains that "the broad influence he had as a religious leader was not unique."<sup>247</sup> Evangelical leaders had great sway over their denominations, and many used that influence to espouse the Confederacy. For example, the SBC, in its initial "Address to the Public," claimed that its one and only

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<sup>242</sup> Fuller, *Chaplain to the Confederacy*, 294. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 37.

<sup>243</sup> Fuller, *Chaplain to the Confederacy*, 293. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 37.

<sup>244</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 37.

<sup>245</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 38.

<sup>246</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 38.

<sup>247</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 38.

“sacred”<sup>248</sup> mission was the “propagation of the gospel.”<sup>249</sup> However by April 1861, one month after Confederate soldiers attacked Fort Sumter, the SBC contradicted its initial claim and broadened its interests to supporting the Confederacy.<sup>250</sup> By defending the “right of Southern secession”<sup>251</sup> and replacing all references to the United States with the words “the Southern States of North America”<sup>252</sup> in its Constitution, the SBC, its religious authorities and participants, implanted itself in the world of American politics to defend white supremacy. Manly’s actions were deeply influential in shaping the Confederacy and evangelicalism, and while he may have been the most prominent, other evangelical religious leaders were in similar positions within their communities and similarly upholding slavery and white supremacy. For evangelicals, the Civil War came to be seen as a blatant continuation of the corrupt attacks on southern evangelicals’ beliefs. The Confederate states lost the Civil War, and, with the addition of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the South’s pro-slavery fight was, apparently, ended.

The Civil War forced many southern white evangelicals to reevaluate their fundamental understanding of the world. They had believed the Confederacy was God’s will and thus divinely protected,<sup>253</sup> but their defeat in the Civil War challenged this belief. White southerners began grappling with the question: If they were righteous and their lifestyle was God’s preferred, why did they lose the war?

White southern evangelicals fashioned a few different answers to this question. Jones explains that some white southerners “accepted that they had not lived up to their duties as benevolent slave owners and that defeat was a punishment for this shortcoming.”<sup>254</sup> This calls

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<sup>248</sup> *Original Constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention*. Augusta, GA, 1845. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 2.

<sup>249</sup> *Original Constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention*. Augusta, GA, 1845. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 2.

<sup>250</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 2.

<sup>251</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 2.

<sup>252</sup> *Original Constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention*. Augusta, GA, 1845. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 2.

<sup>253</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 89.

<sup>254</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 90.

back to Manly's ideology; it still presents slavery as a morally acceptable practice but blames the unrighteous individuals engaging in inappropriate cruelty towards slaves. Nevertheless, it still implies that the South was unrighteous and at fault for God seemingly abandoning them.

However, many other white southerners did not want to accept that the South was unrighteous and, Jones explains that those white southerners began attempting to "disconnect the outcome of the war from divine judgment."<sup>255</sup>

At the same time that southern evangelicals were tackling these questions, the idea of "premillennialism" rose in popularity in many evangelical circles. Premillennialism, originally articulated in the early nineteenth century by British thinker John Nelson Darby,<sup>256</sup> contrasted in important ways with postmillennialism. Darby thought that American evangelical postmillennialists were incorrect for thinking that Jesus would only return after one thousand years of prosperity. Instead, with premillennialism, he proposed that, because humanity is so "sinful,"<sup>257</sup> when Jesus returns, he will destroy the Earth completely and catastrophically, so he can create new prosperity.<sup>258</sup> This means that, at any moment, the world could end, and humans would be raptured to Heaven,<sup>259</sup> but until then, humanity will just continue to decline.<sup>260</sup> After the Civil War, premillennialism took hold of evangelicals and became the dominant interpretation of the Book of Revelation and the Last Judgment.<sup>261</sup> Postmillennialist evangelicals had previously thought they could create a harmonious Christian paradise on Earth; however, given both the carnage during and the outcome of the Civil War, believing that the world was evil and not worth their efforts became easy for evangelicals to accept.<sup>262</sup> Because the

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<sup>255</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 90.

<sup>256</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 11.

<sup>257</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 93.

<sup>258</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 93.

<sup>259</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 11.

<sup>260</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 93.

<sup>261</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 10.

<sup>262</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 93.

premillennialist world is filled with dangerous evils, any injustice found on Earth was normal and not a “call for action”<sup>263</sup> or evangelicals’ responsibility to fix. This theological reorientation would have significant political implications in the post-Civil War period, and it would eventually provide fertile soil for their political reawakening in the 1980s.

Premillennialism absolves evangelicals of any responsibilities they may have to the broader community. If salvation depends on the individual alone, the only actions an individual has to do for the community are actions that benefit the individual. This was an important factor in evangelicals becoming less inclined to care about social issues or reforms because, as Jones explains, they shifted their “attention from the collective ills of society to the salvation of individuals.”<sup>264</sup> Evangelicals began to believe that one must protect one’s own self from evil and corruption. While the outside world cannot stay pure, an individual can, as long as one prevents the evils of the world from seeping into the individual. This individualistic mindset is reflected in what sociologist Ann Swindler has called evangelicals’ “cultural tool kit.”<sup>265</sup> She explains that a cultural tool kit is “a repertoire of shared ideas and behaviors that allow [a group] to organize and interpret reality.”<sup>266</sup> For white evangelicals, the three main tools they have are: “freewill individualism, relationalism, and anti-structuralism.”<sup>267</sup> As Jones explains,

Freewill individualism means that, for white evangelicals, “individuals exist independent of structures and institutions, have free will, and are individually accountable for their own actions.” Relationalism means that white evangelicals tend to see the root of all problems in poor relationships between individuals rather than in unfair laws or institutional behavior. Finally, anti-structuralism denotes the deep suspicion with which white evangelicals view institutional explanations for social problems, principally because they believe invoking social structures shifts blame from where it belongs: with sinful individuals.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 94.

<sup>264</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 94.

<sup>265</sup> Ann Swindler, “Culture in Action,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 273-86. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 97.

<sup>266</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 97.

<sup>267</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 97.

<sup>268</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 97-98.

Because “white evangelicals’ cultural tool kit consists of tools that restric[t] their moral vision to the person and interpersonal realms... [they screen] out institutional or structural issues,”<sup>269</sup> meaning evangelicals broadly believe that blame rests solely on an individual for any issue one may be facing in one’s own life. Premillennialism frames the individual – what one does, says, and believes – as the crux of moral consequence. After the Civil War, white southern evangelicals were grappling for an explanation for their loss and a way to understand their world moving forward, and premillennialism gave them an enduring tool to do so. A study in the early 2000s by Michael Emerson and Christian Smith found that this tool kit has endured into the twenty-first century. Looking forward from the Civil War into the twentieth century, white, especially southern, evangelicals showed that they carried aspects of premillennialism over the decades through their consistent rejection of social movements and their consistent disapproval of government assistance programs. The derogatory phrase “welfare queen” refers to a person, typically a woman, who does not work but lives lavishly because that person uses government assistance programs. This phrase simultaneously paints government assistance programs as useless and wasting taxpayers’ money as well as maligns those who use these programs, many of whom are non-white.

Moreover, in the later nineteenth century, many evangelicals leaning into premillennialism began to also embrace a hope that, even though they lost the Civil War, their cultural values could still endure. In the late 1860s, a man named Edward Pollard published two books titled *The Lost Cause* and *The Lost Cause Regained*. The first book argued that the Civil War was fought over slavery.<sup>270</sup> It argued that the North and the South had opposite views on where slavery fit into the structure of society, and the South believed that slavery was a key

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<sup>269</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 97.

<sup>270</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 90.

feature of proper southern culture. The second book shifted dramatically and argued that the Confederate states had rebelled to protect state sovereignty.<sup>271</sup> His second book called for a “war of ideas”<sup>272</sup> to preserve southern culture and inspired a movement and civil religion that has been widely recognized by scholars as the “Religion of the Lost Cause.”<sup>273</sup> The Religion of the Lost Cause merged Christian theology with American history which created the civil religion of the Lost Cause.

Because of the Lost Cause’s blending of evangelicalism with American culture, white American evangelicals were given an avenue to maintain white supremacy within their culture and faith as well as change the broader story of American history. Charles Reagan Wilson’s article “Religion of the Lost Cause” expands on Bellah’s article about American civil religion and argues that the Lost Cause is a specifically southern American civil religion. An important claim Bellah makes in his article is that different moments of American history are connected to “archetypes”<sup>274</sup> in the Bible, which gives American history a prophetic and mythologic nature. For example, the Revolution connects to an Exodus of Chosen People and Lincoln’s assassination connects to Martyrdom and Sacrifice. Wilson asserts that southerners did the same with the Civil War. He explains that the South, reeling from the loss in the Civil War, wanted to find a way to redeem themselves and their history; the verbal and physical work white southerners did to reframe how the Civil War is remembered infused the memory of the Civil War with a religious character and created a civil religion.<sup>275</sup> As Wilson summarizes:

The religion of the Lost Cause was a cult of the dead, which dealt with essential religious concerns. Having lost what they considered to be a holy war, southerners had to face suffering, doubt, guilt, a recognition of what seemed to be evil triumphant, and above all death. Through the ritualistic and organizational activities of their civil religion

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<sup>271</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 90.

<sup>272</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 90.

<sup>273</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 23.

<sup>274</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion," 18.

<sup>275</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920," *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 2 (1980): 238, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2208359>.

southerners tried to overcome their existential worries and to live with their tragic sense of life.<sup>276</sup>

The Religion of the Lost Cause hallowed the South's fight in the Civil War, and white southern evangelical Christians were the crucial key in legitimizing the civil religious quality of the Lost Cause.

The Lost Cause ideology asserts that the Civil War was not fought over slavery but rather to defend the South and its culture, and also suggests a future in which the South will emerge victorious. Believing that the Civil War was a fight against the authoritarian North, a fight to preserve a culture, a fight to protect their rights as states, and not a fight about slavery, presents the North as the aggressive persecuting force against the benign innocent South. Butler clarifies that specifically for white southern evangelicals, the Lost Cause gave them a way to defend their "traditions"<sup>277</sup> as well as the "superiority of the southern way of life as a moral exemplar against the North."<sup>278</sup> Believing the Civil War was a war over culture, not slavery, morally vindicated the South because it changed the cause of the war away from white supremacy to a more "high-minded" defense of states' rights. The Lost Cause masked slavery and white supremacy's pernicious stain on the South's history, so, by adopting the Lost Cause, white southern Christians gained new ways to acknowledge their military defeat while still defending the South and their culture. This meant that evangelicals could also still protect the core components of white supremacy in their culture and maintain their assumed religious righteousness. Losing the Civil War was no longer a problem for white southern evangelicals because the Lost Cause allowed them to be righteous victims.<sup>279</sup> This acceptance of the Lost Cause's reinterpretation reveals evangelicals' receptiveness towards potential narratives that disconnect white supremacy from

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<sup>276</sup> Wilson, "The Religion," 238.

<sup>277</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 24.

<sup>278</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 24.

<sup>279</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 90.

conservative values and depict those values as the ones needing protection from oppression. The Civil War ended over one hundred years before Reagan ran for president, but the seeds of the themes he used were already being planted in the nineteenth century.

Within the Confederacy, evangelicals, like Reverend Dr. Basil Manly Sr., were heavily influential in politics. However, after the fall of the Confederacy, evangelicalism lost its privileged position within a government and evangelicals' influence in American culture became more subtle.<sup>280</sup> The Religion of the Lost Cause was particularly helpful in maintaining both white supremacy and evangelicalism within American culture because the Lost Cause “blended”<sup>281</sup> Christianity and white supremacist values.<sup>282</sup> The Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War did not change white southern Christian ministers' belief that the racial values of the Confederacy were “key”<sup>283</sup> to a Christian world.<sup>284</sup> White southern Christian religious leaders used the Lost Cause to push back against Reconstruction and protect, as Butler describes, “the religious and cultural values of the slaveholding South during the Reconstruction period.”<sup>285</sup> White southern ministers obscured the “suffering”<sup>286</sup> black people endured as a result of white supremacy and slavery by propagandizing the “chivalry”<sup>287</sup> of southern life. White southern evangelical leaders were essential in changing the narrative of southern history and shifting the South's reputation away from being “violent secessionists”<sup>288</sup> to being “noble”<sup>289</sup> freedom fighters.

One of the ways that white southern Christian religious leaders were able to transform the South's reputation as well as imbue the South's history with civil religious qualities was by

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<sup>280</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 14.

<sup>281</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 23.

<sup>282</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 23.

<sup>283</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 23.

<sup>284</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 25.

<sup>285</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 23-24.

<sup>286</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 24.

<sup>287</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 24.

<sup>288</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 24.

<sup>289</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 24.



verbally connecting stories, images, and themes in the Bible to Civil War stories and figures. The biblical theme of renewal and rebirth was especially vital in bolstering the idea that the South would one day be venerated. Confederate soldiers and generals who died in the Civil War became martyrs, and the people of the South became the people of Israel.<sup>290</sup> White evangelical religious leaders even linked the plight of the South to Jesus' death and resurrection to show that the "noble ideals of the Confederacy"<sup>291</sup> would "rise again."<sup>292</sup> This verbal connection, like American civil religion, helped to give southern history and Civil War history a religious quality that both bolstered the Religion of the Lost Cause as well as morally redeemed white southern evangelicals. Using the Bible as proof of evangelicals' own merit and using biblical stories as evidence for evangelicals' claims ties back to evangelical slaveholders using the Bible to espouse the supremacy of white people and slavery.

Similar to how black slaves influenced the physical aspects of white evangelicals' religious experience, the Lost Cause was embedded into the physical structures that southern evangelicals occupied. Churches across the South depicted Confederate soldiers in stained glass in the image of, or even right alongside, biblical figures. Physically approximating notable Confederate soldiers and biblical characters further tied evangelical Christianity and the Confederacy to one another.<sup>293</sup> The physical parallels created between persecuted heroes corroborated white southern evangelicals' belief that they were victims. For example, Jones explains that Rachel is a figure often used to represent deep agony after a tragedy, but is also a figure that represents a hopeful future and a return to glory.<sup>294</sup> So, Rachel depicted in stained glass weeping over a grave of Confederate soldiers simultaneously shows the grief and sense of

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<sup>290</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 127.

<sup>291</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 91.

<sup>292</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 91.

<sup>293</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 126-130.

<sup>294</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 127.

injustice many southerners felt about the outcome of the Civil War while additionally showing one of the core beliefs of the Religion of the Lost Cause: the South can and will return to glory. The St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond more explicitly depicts these themes and parallels: in this church, Robert E. Lee is shown in stained glass as both a young Moses turning away from Pharaoh and an old Moses kneeling with a halo over his head. Despite the "mind-bending irony," Jones explains that:

The analogy is clear: just as Moses refused service to Pharaoh in order to lead his people out of slavery and into freedom in the promised land, so Lee refused service to the Union army in order to lead his people in the South to uphold their freedom to hold slaves and preserve their way of life. And, like Moses, Lee didn't live to see the promised land; but the ultimate end of the story is that God's chosen people—the children of Israel and the whites of the South—would.<sup>295</sup>

The Religion of the Lost Cause gave white southern evangelicals everything they were looking for: a way to redeem, protect, and disseminate their culture.

Along with religious leaders, white southerners commemorated and furthered the Religion of the Lost Cause through groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). These groups "seamlessly"<sup>296</sup> wove together ideals of the Lost Cause and Christianity further cementing the validity of the Lost Cause's invented history. The UDC, a lineage-based group of white southern Christian women, wanted to "defend and promote Confederate culture."<sup>297</sup> They erected monuments for Confederate soldiers which helped to immortalize and deify these figures in the history of the South and southern culture. Jones emphasizes that their establishment was "no innocent movement to memorialize the dead; it was primarily a twentieth-century declaration of Lost Cause values designed to vindicate white supremacy and bolster white power against black claims to equality and justice."<sup>298</sup> The majority of monuments erected by the UDC

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<sup>295</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 128.

<sup>296</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 125.

<sup>297</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 112.

<sup>298</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 120.

were put up after the end of the Civil War, and these monuments essentially served as holy sites for the Religion of the Lost Cause.<sup>299</sup> White southern evangelicals in the wake of the Civil War sacralized their history; they emancipated both themselves and their fight from divine and earthly condemnation.

But white southern evangelicals had a larger goal than just influencing their own community; they wanted to defend both the Confederacy and themselves “nationally.”<sup>300</sup> The Religion of the Lost Cause gave white southern evangelical Christians a way to infuse white supremacy into the rest of American culture. Northern white evangelical abolitionists may have opposed chattel slavery, but many were not opposed to other manifestations of white supremacy. Jones explains that many northern white evangelicals, like leading revivalist Charles Finney, who had been abolitionists before the civil war, supported segregation and other race-based prejudices after the Civil War ended.<sup>301</sup> Divorcing the Civil War from its origins in slavery allowed many northern abolitionists to support the Lost Cause’s rewritten history and helped to mask the deeply racially prejudicial aspect of southern culture. White southerners’ work to legitimate the Lost Cause was so successful that, as historian Melvin Urofsky has noted, “nearly all northern historians adopted the southern view on [white supremacy] in general and the inferiority of African Americans in particular”<sup>302</sup> by the end of the nineteenth century. The Lost Cause gave white formerly abolitionist Americans across the country a new southern history that they could support without compromising their views on slavery, while still maintaining, even if subliminally, white supremacy. White southern evangelicals did win the fight to preserve their

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<sup>299</sup> Wilson, “The Religion,” 228.

<sup>300</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 112.

<sup>301</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 91.

<sup>302</sup> Melvin I. Urofsky, *The Virginia Historical Society : the First 175 Years, 1831-2006* (Richmond, Va.: Virginia Historical Society, 2006), 83. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 115.

racially prejudicial institutions after the Civil War by establishing the Lost Cause ideology as legitimate, and as a result, they were also able to establish themselves as righteous victims.

Even though white evangelical Christians may have felt that they and their culture were persecuted victims, there is a macabre irony in how evangelicals actively partook in extremely brutal acts of violence against black Americans. During Reconstruction, “lynching became the ultimate murderous tool used to support white supremacy”<sup>303</sup> in the South, and evangelical Christians and Churches actively took part in them. Samuel Thomas Wilkes, sometimes referred to as Same Hose, was viciously murdered in Newnan, Georgia in 1899, and, as Jones describes, his death is “one of the most chilling demonstrations of the compatibility of white Protestant Christianity with racial violence.”<sup>304</sup> The events were sensationalized by white newspapers, and white southerners’ interest was piqued so much so that train stations in neighboring towns put together special train trips to see Wilkes’ lynching after church services. The *Atlanta Journal’s* recount of the event said that there was a procession behind Wilkes as he was walked to the jail, and described this procession “as church people...leaving their churches.”<sup>305</sup> The mob seized Wilke before he was put in a cell, and then dragged him through the town. The mob was confronted by former governor William Yates Atkinson. According to Jones, Atkinson “pleaded with the crowd not to... tak[e] the law into their own hands,”<sup>306</sup> but Atkinson’s plea did not dissuade them. Jones points out the irony of Atkinson’s role and plea:

Given that these events occurred on a Sunday just as worshippers were leaving church, it is striking to note the conspicuous absence of religious opposition to the mob violence... [Atkinson] would undoubtedly have reached for the most powerful rhetorical weapon at his disposal. But just moments after a significant portion of the crowd had shared pews, observed communion, read the Bible, sang hymns, and listened to sermons, Atkinson appealed not to Christian principles and morality but rather to the rule of law as his best strategy for dispersing the crowd. The ex-governor must have instinctively understood

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<sup>303</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 29.

<sup>304</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 28-32.

<sup>305</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 29-30.

<sup>306</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 30.

that white Christianity... was perfectly compatible with the mob lynching of a black man.<sup>307</sup>

The mob, comprised of white Christians, tortured Wilkes before he died, and Jones explains that the “intensity of the violence and suffering [of Wilkes] ...inspired expressions of religious ecstasy reminiscent of revival meetings”<sup>308</sup> among members of the crowd. White evangelical Christians were not passive in the inhumane violence committed against black Americans; white supremacy had been built into the fabric of the faith so much so that evangelicals’ active participation in the violence was not a point of conflict.

Throughout the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras leading into the twentieth century, conservative evangelicals were still focused on attempting to maintain some connection to broader American culture and politics. For example, UDC rallied to secure public holidays honoring Confederate soldiers and generals. In the early twentieth century, a large number of southern Christian clergymen and leaders were also associated with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in what historians call the era of the “Second Ku Klux Klan.”<sup>309</sup> This KKK was an exclusively white Protestant organization and based its understandings of morality on specifically evangelical Protestant understandings.<sup>310</sup> While the KKK was not openly evangelical Christian and members avoided associating with one particular denomination,<sup>311</sup> evangelical churches in the South were some of the most prolific recruiters for the organization.<sup>312</sup> The KKK likewise would match religious leaders who were “sympathetic”<sup>313</sup> to the KKK’s cause with churches that would employ them, which helped to preserve white supremacist ideologies within southern

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<sup>307</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 30-31.

<sup>308</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 31.

<sup>309</sup> Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming : Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 227.

<sup>310</sup> Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 37.

<sup>311</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 227.

<sup>312</sup> Craig Fox, "Community, Church, and Klan: The Civic Lives of Ordinary Klansfolk and the Social Functions of KKK Pageantry," in *Everyday Klansfolk: White Protestant Life and the KKK in 1920s Michigan* (n.p.: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 162, JSTOR.

<sup>313</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 227.

churches.<sup>314</sup> Progressive southern evangelical religious leaders, like Leslie Gwaltney, defended and praised the KKK.<sup>315</sup> One Baptist pastor justified joining the KKK by claiming that every religious person “of importance is a Klan member.”<sup>316</sup> Aiming to preserve white racial purity, The KKK waged crusades against those who were not southern, white, and Protestant. This makes its goals the same as those of white evangelicals who believed that God created different races on purpose and that mixing races violated God’s authority and Christianity as a whole.<sup>317</sup> Many southern white evangelicals in the early twentieth century understood the KKK as defenders of traditional southern values, a rhetoric that was later picked up by the Moral Majority and Reagan, and believed the KKK’s actions were ordained by God.<sup>318</sup>

Historians have widely noted that in the mid-to-late 1920s, the Second Ku Klux Klan collapsed, and its political influence faded<sup>319</sup> which is around the same time that evangelicals famously began to reject the “dangerous”<sup>320</sup> secular mainstream American culture and politics as a result of the *Scopes* court case.<sup>321</sup> The theme of victimhood had been actively cultivated within southern evangelicals’ culture since the formation of the SBC as a response to strides toward racial equity. While the *Scopes* trial was not overtly racialized, the ridicule evangelicals faced from non-evangelicals bonded the victimhood narrative to the evangelicals of the early twentieth century and was sustained through narratives such as the Lost Cause, through the development of educational subcultures,<sup>322</sup> and through demographic shifts that brought many white Americans out of urban areas and into more dispersed suburbs.

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<sup>314</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 227.

<sup>315</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 228.

<sup>316</sup> *Baptist News*, 1 August 1949. Quoted from Feldman, *Politics, Society*, 40.

<sup>317</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 229.

<sup>318</sup> Glenn Feldman, *Politics and Religion in the White South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 77-78.

<sup>319</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 228, Feldman, *Politics and Religion*, 81, Feldman, *Politics, Society*, 116.

<sup>320</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 18.

<sup>321</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 17.

<sup>322</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 18.

After World War II, as suburban neighborhoods grew in popularity, some non-white Americans also moved from urban areas to white suburban neighborhoods. The 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* Supreme Court case decision ruled that state governments could not enforce racial covenants in private sales. This meant that if a house was sold to a non-white person, the government could not force that person out of the neighborhood even if the house was in a neighborhood that had a racially restrictive covenant with the state. However, this did not create racially diverse neighborhoods. As non-white people moved into predominantly white areas, the white people in those neighborhoods would leave. In his 1957 article, “Metropolitan Segregation,” Morton Grodzins coined the phrase “tipping point”<sup>323</sup> to describe this phenomenon. This means that, while white people can tolerate a certain number of non-white people as neighbors, once that tolerance threshold is exceeded, the “tipping point” is reached, and white people move out of a neighborhood. This phenomenon happens across America and includes evangelicals. *Shelley* did not prevent evangelicals from keeping their racial subculture intact, but it posed one of the first challenges to their separation evangelicals would face in the following decades.

While the physical space in which white evangelicals lived became more scattered, the web of power evangelicals had built across the South between white churches, culture, and politics – or, more specifically, between white pastors, civic leaders, and elected officials was not erased.<sup>324</sup> Media played a huge role in helping evangelicals maintain that web and proselytize a white supremacist subculture. The Hederman family was an evangelical family from Jackson, Mississippi who belonged to the First Baptist Church (FBC). The FBC was the “most powerful [and largest] religious institution in the state” and was aptly nicknamed “Tammany Hall,”<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Morton Grodzins, “Metropolitan Segregation,” *Scientific American* 197, no. 4 (1957): 34, JSTOR.

<sup>324</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 38.

<sup>325</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 38.

which Jones explains is a “reference to the political machine that infamously controlled New York politics in the late nineteenth century.”<sup>326</sup> Multiple generations of Hedermans served as deacons of the church; they were generous financial donors; and they were incredibly influential in shaping the FBC’s stance on racial issues.<sup>327</sup> This is, in part, because the Hederman family ran prominent news outlets throughout the South. They controlled Jackson’s *Clarion-Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News*, the largest newspapers in the state, as well as Mississippi’s *Hattiesburg America*.<sup>328</sup> They later took over the Jackson television station WJTV.<sup>329</sup>

In the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, Thomas and Robert Hederman’s media slandered anything that aided racial equality or opposed white supremacy. Hodding Carter III, managing editor at *Delta Democrat-Times* said,

The Hedermans were to segregation what Joseph Goebbels was to Hitler. They were cheerleaders and chief propagandists, dishonest and racist. That helped shape as well as reflect a philosophy, which was, at its core, as undemocratic and immoral as any extent. They weren't hypocrites. They believed it. They believed blacks were the son of Ham. The Hedermans were bone-deep racists whose religion 120 years ago decided that question.<sup>330</sup>

The evangelical religious leaders of the twentieth century kept in line with prior evangelical religious leaders and continued to spread white supremacist values to their own congregations and beyond. Reverend Hudgins was Mississippi’s most prominent pastor in the civil rights era and was at the FBC from 1946-1969.<sup>331</sup> Jones describes his sermons as “a weekly dose of theology carefully curated to leave white supremacy undisturbed,”<sup>332</sup> which were “not only heard by the influential citizens sitting in the pews [of the FBC] but also recorded and syndicated

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<sup>326</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 38.

<sup>327</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 39.

<sup>328</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 39.

<sup>329</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 39.

<sup>330</sup> Kathy Lally, “A journey from racism to reason Newspaper: The Clarion-Ledger of Jackson, Miss., was once the most racist paper in the United States, until an offspring of the publishing family decided to make the paper — and his family name — respectable.” *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), January 5, 1997, [Page #], accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/1997/01/05/a-journey-from-racism-to-reason-newspaper-the-clarion-ledger-of-jackson-miss-was-once-the-most-racist-paper-in-the-united-states-until-an-offspring-of-the-publishing-family-decided-to-make-the-paper-a/>. Quoted from Jones, *White Too Long*, 40.

<sup>331</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 41.

<sup>332</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 41.



around the state via local radio.”<sup>333</sup> When the Southern Baptist Convention leadership surprisingly supported the decision in the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled that racially segregated laws were unconstitutional, Hudgins, along with many other local Christian religious leaders, publicly voiced his opposition to both the Court’s decision and the SBC’s position. The SBC leadership stated that The Court’s decision was “not only... a pragmatic matter of legal concession but... consistent with Christian principles,”<sup>334</sup> so the Hedermans’ media began a smear campaign against the SBC leadership and their statements. The *Jackson Daily News* published extensive writings about how the SBC leaders’ support of *Brown* was “deplorable.”<sup>335</sup> The paper used quotes from several deacons of the FBC, including Hudgins, that libeled both *Brown* and the SBC. Jones explains that this helped to “reassure its readers that Jackson’s Baptist clergy and lay leaders were aligned in opposition to *Brown*.”<sup>336</sup> The First Baptist Church remained segregationist for almost twenty years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and only reversed its policy in 1973. However, neither the power of the FBC nor their segregationist practices and beliefs were unique to Jackson Mississippi.<sup>337</sup> In the wake of *Brown*, Christian churches across the country fought to maintain segregation.<sup>338</sup> Whether they actively blocked black worshippers from entering churches or diverted funds to predominantly white churches in the suburbs, white Christian churches, and their practitioners were powerful hubs for and vehicles of white supremacy.

Radio was another crucial media space that evangelicals turned to in order to maintain their subculture. Given that radio stations in this era were largely community-run, and that communities were still deeply racially divided, white evangelical Christian preachers who used

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<sup>333</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 41.

<sup>334</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 41.

<sup>335</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 41.

<sup>336</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 42.

<sup>337</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 43.

<sup>338</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 43.

radio stations usually reached local, primarily white, listeners.<sup>339</sup> In 1973, this changed when Bob Jones University alum Stuart Epperson and brother-in-law Edward Atsinger founded an FM radio station. In *Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right*<sup>340</sup>, which outlines the history of Christian media and the power of its influence, Anne Nelson explains that Epperson and Atsinger built a vast network of radio channels across America that preached conservative social values to its evangelical listeners. While many evangelicals may not have been directly involved in politics after the “Scopes Monkey” trial, through such media outlets as radio and newspapers, their white supremacist values flourished internally, and throughout the years following *Scopes*, permeated the broader political world and American culture.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, while white southern evangelicals were focusing on creating their subculture, the general South was having a political identity crisis. Since the Civil War, the South had primarily voted for the Democratic party because of the Republican party’s association with Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was the first Republican president and led the United States in fighting against the Confederacy. White southerners’ support for the Democratic party was initially troubled by Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “New Deal.”<sup>341</sup> Though the New Deal’s economic programs favored white Americans, it did help in lifting black Americans’ economic status, particularly in the North.<sup>342</sup> Black Americans migrated to northern states, and many switched their political support from the Republican party to the Democratic party. Congruently, northern Democrats began caring about garnering “the black vote,”<sup>343</sup> so they started focusing on and advancing black American voters’ interests.<sup>344</sup> This

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<sup>339</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 38.

<sup>340</sup> Anne Nelson, *Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019),

<sup>341</sup> E. J. Dionne, *Why the Right Went Wrong: Conservatism--from Goldwater to the Tea Party and beyond* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 44.

<sup>342</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 40.

<sup>343</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 45.

<sup>344</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 45.

caused a rift between northern and southern Democrats.<sup>345</sup> In 1947, George Charles Wallace, a southern segregationist lawyer, published *Whither Solid South? A Study of Politics and Race Relation*. In it, by claiming that, in the South, “the doctrine of white supremacy is akin to religious belief”<sup>346</sup> and that white supremacy is “rooted in the very fiber of the southern soul,”<sup>347</sup> Wallace recognized the foundational role and unique power white supremacy has in southern culture. Calling racism a “religious belief” alludes to Wilson’s discussion of the Religion of the Lost Cause as well as Bellah’s ideas on civil religion. Wallace himself was troubled by the growing civil rights movement and recognized early on how the New Deal posed dangers to segregationist white southern Democrats’ ideology.<sup>348</sup> He proposed that southern states come together with nationwide conservative Republicans under the banner of “personal freedom, local self-government, and support for private enterprise”<sup>349</sup> which would later become the basis for the “States’ Rights Democratic Party.”<sup>350</sup> Balmer notes that “states’ rights” became a “battle cry”<sup>351</sup> for white segregationists because of Wallace, but was also used by the Lost Cause, and Confederate evangelicals as the reason why the Confederacy formed. Reagan’s use of this phrase connects to his twentieth-century evangelical audience’s desire to remain racially segregated as well as the racially segregationist motive that runs through evangelicals’ entire history.

The decades leading up to the 1980 election saw the Democratic and Republican parties splinter as a result of the growing civil rights movement. Southern white segregationists were deeply unhappy with the northern Democrats’ affinity for black Americans’ equality and the Republican party, as a whole, was losing portions of its voting base. One of the first politicians to

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<sup>345</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 45.

<sup>346</sup> Charles Wallace Collins, *Whither Solid South? A Study of Politics and Race Relations* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1947). Quoted from Dionne, *Why the Right*, 46.

<sup>347</sup> Collins, *Whither Solid*. Quoted from Dionne, *Why the Right*, 46.

<sup>348</sup> Collins, *Whither Solid*. Quoted from Dionne, *Why the Right*, 46.

<sup>349</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 47.

<sup>350</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 47.

<sup>351</sup> Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 71.

nationally capitalize on “the interplay between morality, race, and crime”<sup>352</sup> in politics was Republican Barry Goldwater. Goldwater was staunchly against *Brown* and did not believe that the federal government should be allowed to enforce integration. In his 1960 book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, Goldwater’s rhetoric strongly echoed that of the Confederacy’s as well as the Lost Cause’s ideology. He called on states to reclaim their “lost...power”<sup>353</sup> and on the federal government to “withdraw promptly and totally from every jurisdiction which the Constitution reserves to the states.”<sup>354</sup> This resonated with white southerners who opposed *Brown* and other federal government programs, like welfare and Medicare, that aided strides towards racial equality. Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign bears a striking resemblance to the later campaigns of both Nixon and Reagan: Goldwater talked about America’s moral decay, called the Democratic party dangerous atheistic socialists, condemned the Supreme Court for banning prayer in school, and called on the federal government to embrace God.<sup>355</sup> Though Goldwater lost his 1964 presidential campaign to Lyndon B. Johnson, winning only 52 electoral votes to Johnson’s 486,<sup>356</sup> his rhetoric and ideas showed promise in the South; Goldwater won six states: Arizona, his home state, as well as Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.<sup>357</sup>

Goldwater planted the seeds that bloomed into the “Southern Strategy[’s]”<sup>358</sup> ideology which was later capitalized upon by Nixon and Reagan. Nixon in particular saw that white southern votes were “up for grabs”<sup>359</sup> and “intended to make those votes his.”<sup>360</sup> Throughout Nixon’s campaigns and presidencies from 1969-1974, he used phrases like “law and order,”

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<sup>352</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 56.

<sup>353</sup> Barry M. Goldwater et al., *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). Quoted from Dionne, *White the Right*, 53.

<sup>354</sup> Goldwater et al., *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Quoted from Dionne, *White the Right*, 53.

<sup>355</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 57.

<sup>356</sup> 1964," The American Presidency Project, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.presidency.ucs.edu/statistics/elections/1964>.

<sup>357</sup> "1964," The American Presidency Project.

<sup>358</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 20.

<sup>359</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 65.

<sup>360</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 65.

“silent majority,” and “states’ rights” all of which were dog-whistles directed at racially prejudicial white southerners.<sup>361</sup> Nixon succeeded where Goldwater had not: Nixon won both presidential campaigns of 1968 and 1972, while also connecting to the “silent majority,” i.e., white southern racists. While Nixon’s policies did not generally reflect southern conservative values— for example, he supported the integration of schools— Nixon’s success showed Republican party members, like Weyrich, the power of aligning political campaigns with a defense of racist values, which Reagan crucially used in attracting evangelical voters.<sup>362</sup> The silent majority or the “New Right”<sup>363</sup> grew in the 1970s; the relationship between the Republican party and white conservatives strengthened despite Nixon’s “Watergate” scandal.<sup>364</sup> The New Right’s growth was particularly bolstered because of the growing unrest in white southern conservative Christian, especially evangelical, circles.

One of the most prominent and influential evangelical preachers during this time was Billy Graham, who did crucial work in the mid-twentieth century to energize evangelicals as well as begin closing the distance between evangelicals and politics. Graham studied for a brief period at Bob Jones University but graduated from Wheaton College, often called the “evangelical Harvard.”<sup>365</sup> Graham’s preaching garnered mainstream success after he began working for the Youth for Christ, an evangelical organization, in 1945. The YFC was designed to bring and convert the youth of America to evangelicalism.<sup>366</sup> From the beginning of Graham’s career, he did not shy away from politics and continuously connected the fate of America to evangelicalism.<sup>367</sup> Graham’s prominence on the national stage grew at the same time as the

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<sup>361</sup> Baugh, “Southern strategy.”

<sup>362</sup> Antti Lepistö, *The Rise of Common-sense Conservatism : the American Right and the Reinvention of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 51.

<sup>363</sup> Joseph A. Aistrup, *The Southern Strategy Revisited* (n.p.: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 40, JSTOR.

<sup>364</sup> Dionne, *Why the Right*, 75.

<sup>365</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 38.

<sup>366</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 39.

<sup>367</sup> Feldman, *Politics and Religion*, 170

Republican and Democratic political parties were fragmenting. Graham was a close friend of Lyndon B. Johnson, a Democrat, and advised Johnson through his candidacy and into his presidency.<sup>368</sup> Yet, by the 1968 election, Graham had switched his political party registration from the Democratic party to the Republican party, reflecting the increasing shift in political allegiances among white southern evangelicals at that time. Graham's public support for Nixon helped push moderate-to-conservative-leaning white southern evangelicals to reexamine their support for the Democratic party as well as aided in creating the relationship between evangelicals and the Republican party.<sup>369</sup> Graham's preaching, in addition to expressing evangelical religiosity, brought politics and policy to the forefront of evangelicals' minds and encouraged their burgeoning re-entry into politics.

Prefiguring Reagan in the following decades, Graham's preaching was superficially focused on the role that Christianity and evangelicals played in defending America against dangers, but its core strength came from evangelicals' sense of embattlement as a result of racial equity. Butler explains that by framing communism, "not simply [as] a social movement, but an atheist movement that, with almost religious fervor, sought to destroy Christianity,"<sup>370</sup> Graham was able to tap into evangelical wariness of collective action while additionally positioning communism as an active threat to his audience. Many evangelicals, with their long orientation toward premillennialism, saw collective action as unnecessary, dangerous, and not in line with Christianity,<sup>371</sup> so the growing popularity of collective movements like socialism, the various rights movements, and even communism all posed dangers to America in the eyes of evangelicals. This danger appeared to come to a head in the "Red Summer of 1919"<sup>372</sup> when race

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<sup>368</sup> Feldman, *Politics and Religion*, 172-173

<sup>369</sup> Feldman, *Politics and Religion*, 177-179

<sup>370</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 40.

<sup>371</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 42.

<sup>372</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 40.

riots of “horrible proportion”<sup>373</sup> broke out in the Chicago area and resulted in J. Edgar Hoover placing black activists under government surveillance.<sup>374</sup> The riots started after a young black man drowned in Lake Michigan after he had wandered into the white section of a swimming area and was pelted with rocks.<sup>375</sup> The young man’s death prompted some white Americans across the country to engage in brutal acts of violence against black Americans. When black Americans “fought back,”<sup>376</sup> Hoover, and other white Americans, came to see this resistance as evidence that black American activists and general social movements were dangerous.<sup>377</sup> While these ideas started in the early twentieth century, Butler explains that they continued to stigmatize black Americans and calls for equality in the following decades:

Hoover's unproven theories lingered into the 1950s as the Red Scare gained momentum. Many black activists working for civil rights were called communists. Martin Luther King Jr. was called a communist. So when Graham preached about the “communist threat” in the 1950s, he amplified a phrase that resonated forcefully with evangelicals and southern-based Christians, given not only their fear of the Soviets but also their fiery concern about the Black civil rights activists who were, to their way of thinking, promoting communist ideas and socialism.<sup>378</sup>

Black Americans’ activism during the “Red Summer” tinged, in the eyes of white southern evangelicals, the activism and social movements of the later twentieth century with a racial hue. The underlying connection to race then easily allowed evangelical religious leaders to frame desegregation and communism as anti-God movements under the same umbrella. For example, Mississippi College was a firm segregationist Baptist institution located in Clinton just a few miles away from Jackson. Its president, D.M. Nelson, claimed that integration was based on “Karl Marx’s doctrine of internationalism,”<sup>379</sup> and that integration and communism have the same end goal: “the obliteration of all national and racial distinctions and the final amalgamation

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<sup>373</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 40.

<sup>374</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 40.

<sup>375</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 40.

<sup>376</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 40.

<sup>377</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 41.

<sup>378</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 41.

<sup>379</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana [u.a.]: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995). Quoted from Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 231.

of all races.”<sup>380</sup> For evangelicals, who believed that God did not want races to mix, the “final amalgamation of all races” was deeply disturbing. So, as desegregation, communism, and civil rights rose to the forefront of evangelicals’ minds, religious leaders equating communism to desegregation and atheism cemented to evangelicals that communism was not only a religious threat but a racial one as well.

Graham’s blending of race, religion, and politics took on new strength after the *Brown v. Board of Education*. The disdain for collective action and the burgeoning concern about racial integration were reflected in Graham’s 1956 pamphlet, titled *Americanism*. In it, Graham proclaimed that “[t]his nation has the greatest responsibility, obligation and opportunity in the history of the world”<sup>381</sup> exposing to his listeners his seemingly deeply-felt patriotism for America. By claiming that “[America is] in danger of losing our world-wide prestige unless we can turn to God,”<sup>382</sup> Graham directly linked evangelicalism to American patriotism and highlighted the growing evangelical belief that America was losing its morality because Americans were turning away from God. This is additionally related to Bellah’s discussion on the connection between Christianity and the American civil religion. Graham’s approximation of Christianity to American patriotism fits in line with the biblical nature of American civil religion and reinforces the notion that America’s importance in the world is incomparable to any other nation.

Graham declared that, once Americans start believing in evangelicals’ God, “our divorce rate will decline, our race problem can be solved, and our crime statistics can be improved.”<sup>383</sup> Graham alluded to the idea, later expanded upon by Reagan, that evangelicalism is not merely

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<sup>380</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People*. Quoted from Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 231.

<sup>381</sup> Quoted from Butler, *White Evangelical*, 43.

<sup>382</sup> Quoted from Butler, *White Evangelical*, 43.

<sup>383</sup> Quoted from Butler, *White Evangelical*, 43.



the best but actually the only source of good moral values. He also implied that Americans who don't believe in God don't truly care about America. He emphasized that America can only be a righteous nation when Americans turn to evangelicalism. Billy Graham's rhetoric, built on racism, presented evangelicals as the moral saviors of America, fighting against evil. This line of thinking would continue to grow in evangelical culture and Billy Graham demonstrated how a figure can use rhetoric both to help evangelicals in and to exonerate them for reentering the dirty and immoral world of politics.

While *Shelley v. Kraemer* was the first Supreme Court case to trouble evangelicals' ability to maintain racial separation, it was only a setback and not enough to warrant evangelicals' return to politics. *Brown v. Board of Education* and the rise of civil rights activism were perceived as the greater challenge to their pure white community, but they found a solution: white evangelicals put their children in private segregated schools. Then came *Green v. Connally*. The final blow to evangelicals' racial boundary came when the IRS revoked the status of several evangelical schools. Here, white southern evangelical Christians hit their breaking point. They felt that the government was targeting them and their culture. The various court cases and federal legislation of the twentieth century corroborated evangelicals' sense of persecution. *State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, *Shelley v. Kraemer*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Green v. Connally*, and the IRS's actions compounded together as evidence that evangelicals and their beliefs were not valued by the American government and the broader American culture. They viewed the government as a wicked, immoral, and contentious force. It did not matter that these court cases and laws were steps in favor of a more pluralistic and fair society, evangelicals saw these actions as steps against white American evangelical Christians. Evangelicals reeling from the events of the twentieth century, felt that they had no choice but to

step into the mid-1970s political realm. All they needed was a politician to support. They were looking for a politician who would not mistreat them, who would not shame them, and who would defend them, and Reagan showed evangelicals that he met their criteria.

## Conclusion

Understanding the historical connection between white supremacy and evangelicalism helps to illuminate the crucial role racial prejudice played in evangelicals' political involvement throughout evangelicals' history in America, culminating in their dramatic reentry into U.S. political life in the Reagan era. Specifically, white southern evangelical Christianity and white supremacy have grown alongside and seeped into one another. This has had lasting implications into the twenty-first century. In addition to walking through the unexplored history of the dominant role that white Christians have played in maintaining white supremacy in America, Robert P. Jones' *White Too Long* also shows how this history impacts white Christian Americans' contemporary thoughts on race and racism.<sup>384</sup> He utilizes two studies to demonstrate this: one by the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and the other by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). The CCES found that southern white people living in areas with historically high levels of slavery had significantly different attitudes compared to white people living in areas with historically lower levels of slavery. White people in areas with higher historical levels of slavery were more politically conservative and leaned Republican, showed higher levels of racial resentment, and were more likely to oppose affirmative action. Jones theorizes that this means "the deep racial prejudice that was created by a slaveholding society is still measurably present in the contemporary South, and that this relationship is not just correlational but *causal*."<sup>385</sup> He concludes that racism and the efforts of southern Christian Americans to maintain white supremacy still linger throughout the South today.

Yet, the efforts of southern white Christians influenced more than the South. Northern former abolitionists were able to, and did, support the Lost Cause ideology; segregation and Jim

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<sup>384</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*.

<sup>385</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 157.

Crow laws existed in the North; northern Christian churches also fought to maintain their racial divide. White supremacy has influenced white Christianity across America and throughout its history. Moreover, contemporary research on Christianity in America reveals that white supremacy is not unique to white evangelicals nor the South. Comparing white Christians to non-religious white people and African American Protestants across America, shows “starkly divergent opinions and behaviors in political space.”<sup>386</sup> The 2018 PRRI “American Values Survey” sought to gauge the racial attitudes of white Christians in America. Researching people’s racist or prejudicial views is challenging because, as Jones puts it, one “obviously cannot get accurate results from asking respondents outright whether they are white supremacists or racists [because] many may be reluctant to reveal their true views. Or they may privately hold...views that they themselves would not identify with those labels.”<sup>387</sup> This is evident given the fact that when asked about their general feelings towards African Americans, white Christians’ feelings were on par with the general population. But, when asked further about things like systematic inequality, symbols of white supremacy, or the criminal justice system, white Christians deviate strongly from their white religiously unaffiliated and black Protestant American counterparts.<sup>388</sup>

The PRRI found that “83 percent of white evangelicals, 75 percent of white Catholics, and 71 percent of white mainline Protestants... believe that racial minorities use racism as an excuse for economic inequalities more than they should.”<sup>389</sup> This is in comparison to the “52 percent of religiously unaffiliated whites”<sup>390</sup> and “30 percent of black Protestants”<sup>391</sup> who agree. Though white evangelicals had the highest percentage of agreement to that question, other white

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<sup>386</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 158.

<sup>387</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 158.

<sup>388</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 159.

<sup>389</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 162.

<sup>390</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 161.

<sup>391</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 161.

Christians were not far behind. This suggests that evangelicals' racial prejudice is not unique to them and that white supremacy is laced through all of white American Christianity. Additionally, a majority of white Christians, strikingly, disagree with the statement that “[g]enerations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.”<sup>392</sup> White evangelicals' long orientation towards an individualistic mindset and their underlying segregationist tendencies can help clarify why they, in particular, believe the consequences of one's own life are a direct result of one's own actions, but this does not help to explain why all white Christians answer questions about race, immigrants, and cultural change in more prejudicial ways than other Americans.<sup>393</sup> Throughout American history, white supremacy and racism have festered within white evangelicalism, influencing their understandings of the world, their communities, and themselves, but this study broadens white supremacy's contamination out from only white American evangelicals to potentially all white American Christians.

Jones then poses the question: Is being racist an essential component of being a white Christian? To answer this question Jones developed the “Racism Index,” which investigates whether or not racist attitudes are directly related to the white Christian identity or if they are independent of each other. Essentially the Racism Index examines “whether holding racist attitudes makes one more likely to identify as a white Christian and, conversely, whether identifying as a white Christian in itself makes one more likely to hold racist attitudes.”<sup>394</sup> In short, the answer is yes to both questions. People identifying as white Christians are more likely to hold racist attitudes and a person holding racist attitudes is more likely to be a white

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<sup>392</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 162.

<sup>393</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 162-163. This PRRI found that white Christians are generally more likely compared to nonreligious whites to hold racially prejudicial attitudes when asked questions about foreign influence threatening the “American way of life,” immigration, and foreign influence, and to “perceive demographic and cultural changes as negative or to support policies designed to protect the country from such perceived external threats.”

<sup>394</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 172.

Christian.<sup>395</sup> Additionally, Jones found that the more often a white Christian, especially a white evangelical, went to church the more likely they were to have racist opinions.<sup>396</sup> Inversely, attending church less frequently did not indicate that white Christians would be less likely to hold racist opinions; in other words, this means that a person can still be racist even if that person doesn't go to church or isn't Christian.<sup>397</sup> The data from Jones and the PRRI shows the troubling pattern that this is not just a southern phenomenon, nor is it just a white evangelical phenomenon; this applies to all white Christians in America. Jones puts these findings more bluntly: "If you were recruiting for a white supremacist cause on a Sunday morning, you'd likely have more success hanging out in the parking lot of an average white Christian church...than approaching whites sitting out services at the local coffee shop."<sup>398</sup> Black slaves, like Frederick Douglass, spotted two hundred years ago what this data and history shows: racism and white Christianity not only influence each other but feed off of one another; they support and sustain each other. In 1964, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spotted the connection between white supremacy and Christianity: "Everyone knows that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in American life,"<sup>399</sup> and compared American Christian churches to Nazi Germany.<sup>400</sup> He recognized that racial bias "imperils the soul of the church itself"<sup>401</sup> and urged white American Christians to make a change. Yet, the white evangelicals of Frederick Douglass' time did not make a change; they worked to protect their whiteness through the Confederacy. The white evangelicals of MLK's time did not make a change; they worked to protect their whiteness by supporting Reagan. Contemporary research, such as that from the PRRI, potentially

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<sup>395</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 184.

<sup>396</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 184.

<sup>397</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 184.

<sup>398</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 185.

<sup>399</sup> "11 A. M. Sunday Is Our Most Segregated Hour"; In the light of the racial crisis, a Christian leader assays 'the structure and spirit' of the nation's churches, and asks some probing questions., *New York Times* (New York), August 2, 1964, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/08/02/archives/11-a-m-sunday-is-our-most-segregated-hour-in-the-light-of-the.html>.

<sup>400</sup> "11 A. M. Sunday,"

<sup>401</sup> "11 A. M. Sunday,"

indicates that the white evangelicals and, more generally, white Christians of today are still not making any change to their beliefs.

This contemporary research helps to explain why Reagan, rather than the liberal Jimmy Carter, ended up bringing evangelicals into political activism in the late twentieth century. And, this research is key to explaining contemporary evangelical support for a figure who mirrors Reagan in many ways: Donald Trump. While Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, he did not lose the strong evangelical support that had helped him beat Hillary Clinton in 2016. A Pew research study found that, even though church attendance is decreasing, white Americans who did not identify as evangelical and viewed Trump favorably in 2016 were more likely to begin self-identifying as evangelical in 2020, compared to white non-evangelical Americans who did not view Trump favorably in 2016.<sup>402</sup> They also found that Trump had more evangelical supporters in 2020 than in 2016. Trump is not, and has never been, an evangelical religious leader, nor has he even claimed any type of religious allegiance to the evangelical faith. Trump has been through divorces and has had affair rumors, and he joins Reagan as the only other president to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Yet, both Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan have gained enduring support from evangelical voters.

The scholarship of Balmer, Butler, and Jones helps show that Trump's similarities to Reagan are much more than surface level: Trump, like Reagan, builds upon evangelicalism's racist, white supremacist foundation to secure his connection to evangelicals. The recent scholarship on Trump's evolving rhetoric on race and religion sheds light on how he is able to tap into this white supremacist dynamic within evangelicalism to connect with evangelicals. In

*Thou Art in a Deal: The Evolution of Religious Language in the Public Communications of*

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<sup>402</sup> Gregory A. Smith, "More White Americans adopted than shed evangelical label during Trump presidency, especially his supporters," Pew Research Center, last modified September 15, 2021, accessed May 9, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/15/more-white-americans-adopted-than-shed-evangelical-label-during-trump-presidency-especially-his-supporters/>.

*Donald Trump*, Ceri Hughes asserts that Trump uses more religious language than any president within the last hundred years. Hughes' study looks at Trump's speeches as well as tweets and found that he progressively increased his religious language usage throughout his candidacy into his presidency. He especially increased his use of "religious terms,"<sup>403</sup> meaning "broad-based, Judeo-Christian terminology, including value-laden terms, religious personalities, and theological constructs,"<sup>404</sup> after he was elected president. Much like Reagan, he repeatedly equates religiousness with Americanness which, as a result, implies the connection between the two.<sup>405</sup> For example, in a campaign speech in 2016, given to a predominantly white crowd, Trump said that he was "going to fight to bring us all together as Americans[. I]magine what our country could accomplish if we started working together as one people under one God saluting one American flag."<sup>406</sup> Hughes explains that Trump "places the in-group of 'Americans,' 'our country,' and 'one people' under the 'one God,'"<sup>407</sup> thereby linking America to Christianity and "the God of the Christian Bible."<sup>408</sup> This rhetorical strategy, similar to Reagan's, frames Trump's audience as "true" Americans; they are his "in-group." By firmly establishing that his audience is the "in-group," Trump places those who aren't his audience in the "out-group." Trump's audience is primarily white evangelical Christians. Trump is simultaneously able to show white evangelical Christians that he recognizes their importance to America because he knows they are the ones who uphold and embody American values, while it also validates white evangelical prejudices against those not within their community. By demonstrating to evangelicals that Trump believes in their value and their fight, as well as affirming that he will fight for them, Trump has brought Reagan's tactics into the twenty-first century.

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<sup>403</sup> Hughes, "Thou Art in a Deal," 4826.

<sup>404</sup> Hughes, "Thou Art in a Deal," 4830.

<sup>405</sup> Hughes, "Thou Art in a Deal," 4828.

<sup>406</sup> Hughes, "Thou Art in a Deal," 4833.

<sup>407</sup> Hughes, "Thou Art in a Deal," 4837.

<sup>408</sup> Hughes, "Thou Art in a Deal," 4837.



Most importantly, and also very much like Reagan, Trump is able to legitimize evangelicals' opposition to non-evangelical values and beliefs not as prejudice, but as an attempt to protect American values which, in turn, helps to obscure the underlying prejudice. Trump frames everything besides white evangelical influences as dangerous, corrupting, and antithetical to America in a manner that allows white evangelicals to connect with the rhetoric without having to confront their underlying prejudice. In "Donald J. Trump and the Rhetoric of White Ambivalence,"<sup>409</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly explains how Trump's use of both "overt and color-blind"<sup>410</sup> racist language resonates with white Americans who have anxieties about the merging non-white American majority because it allows them to maintain their white privilege by believing race isn't an influence on an individual's life. For example, at a Michigan campaign rally in 2016,<sup>411</sup> Trump asked black American voters what they "have to lose"<sup>412</sup> if they vote for him. This question encapsulates what scholars call "colorblind racism." Colorblind racism sustains white supremacy and white privilege within American culture because it either ignores or denies the existence of systematic racism.

At best, [Trump's] rhetorical question urges African American audiences to wager their future on a neoliberal economy that is so frequently cited by conservatives as the colorblind solution to inequalities yet, in practice, tends to undermine governmental programs meant to address structural poverty. At worst, the suggestion that African Americans have "nothing to lose" announces that the centuries-long dispossession of African Americans is now complete and that progress ought to be measured by the pace at which they adopt white behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. This concept speaks to the past-ness of black identity and the postracial imperative that people of color abandon any remainder of difference to attune themselves to the realities of the market.<sup>413</sup>

The colorblind racism that assumes that any struggle an individual faces is due to the actions of the individual, denies the existence of structural racism. While Trump's question doesn't deny

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<sup>409</sup> Ryan Casey Kelly, "Donald J. Trump and the Rhetoric of White Ambivalence," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>410</sup> Kelly, "Donald J. Trump," 197.

<sup>411</sup> C-SPAN, "Donald Trump Campaign Rally in Dimondale, Michigan," video, 44:12, Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, August 19, 2016, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?414147-1/donald-trump-campaign-rally-dimondale-michigan>

<sup>412</sup> Quoted from Kelly, "Donald J. Trump," 196.

<sup>413</sup> Kelly, "Donald J. Trump," 196.

structural racism, his rhetoric still leans into colorblind racism because, as Kelly notes, it “speaks to Eric King Watts’s position that postracial rhetoric seeks not the eradication of racism but instead the source of white racial anxiety: blackness.”<sup>414</sup> Trump’s question puts the onus on black communities to solve their problems themselves; they have to be the ones to take control of their own future. This colorblind racism allows for “white ambivalence,”<sup>415</sup> which lets white people disregard the need to give reparations or take actions to fix systemic racism. Kelly explains that Trump’s appeal “to African Americans”<sup>416</sup> ironically resonated more with his white audience than it did with non-white voters. Implying that black Americans have nothing to lose by voting for him, Trump posits that systemic racism isn’t white people’s problem to fix, so his white audience’s inaction isn’t wrong.

In *White Evangelical Racism*, Butler explains that this practice of colorblind racism has existed within evangelical circles since their mid-twentieth-century political mobilization.<sup>417</sup> Evangelicals used the “color-blind gospel”<sup>418</sup> as a way “to affirm that everyone, no matter what race, is equal,”<sup>419</sup> which, more importantly, emphasizes “that race does not matter.”<sup>420</sup> In reality though, Butler notes that this effort “was more about making Black and other ethnic evangelicals conform to whiteness and accept white leadership as the norm both religiously and socially.”<sup>421</sup> Evangelicalism played a crucial role in legitimizing and maintaining white supremacy throughout American history, but adopting color-blind mentalities, on top of the inventions of the Lost Cause, allows white evangelical Americans to ignore the foundational role of racism with their culture. This further allows white evangelicals to believe they bear no personal

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<sup>414</sup> Kelly, "Donald J. Trump," 196

<sup>415</sup> Kelly, "Donald J. Trump,"

<sup>416</sup> Kelly, "Donald J. Trump," 197

<sup>417</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 58.

<sup>418</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 58.

<sup>419</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 58.

<sup>420</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 58.

<sup>421</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical*, 58.

responsibility to aid non-white Americans' strides toward equality. Reagan's rhetoric focusing on evangelicals' embattlement and value within politics was an important vehicle in bringing this colorblind racism into politics as well as general American culture and Trump's language is a continuation of Reagan's work.

Examining the history of evangelicals' close relationship to white supremacy helps to confirm that not only Reagan's but also Trump's connection to evangelicals is built on racial prejudice. White supremacy has become intertwined with white evangelical Christianity and white evangelicals have worked to maintain it throughout American history. Racial prejudice was the foundation of evangelical political motivations and mobilizations leading up to the 1980 election, underwriting Reagan's relationship with evangelicals, and it has continued to shape modern evangelicals' culture around and opinions on race. Additionally, understanding the foundational roles that race and racial prejudice have played in white evangelical Christianity's cultural and political history helps to illuminate evangelicals' connection to Reagan and evangelicals continued connection to the Republican party. Reagan connected to white evangelicals, at least in part, by actively courting them through his racially coded rhetoric. Trump and Reagan's similarities aren't just their shared biographical traits; Trump, like Reagan, actively appeals to the white supremacist dynamics and inclinations within evangelicalism. Trump often parallels or builds on Reagan's language and strategies from decades prior. Given Reagan's success in forging a connection with evangelicals, analyzing Reagan's rhetoric is crucial in any attempt to understand Trump's continuing connection to evangelicals.

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