
TELEVANGELISM

POWER AND POLITICS

ON GOD'S FRONTIER

Jeffrey K. Hadden
Anson Shupe



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Contents

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full-time specialists in his parachurch organization. One economics professor of the era claimed that Sunday's organization was one of the five most efficient businesses in the United States. When Sunday died, he was enormously wealthy. He may have been uncouth, but Billy Sunday added the roles of entertainer and celebrity—he liked to hobnob with leading businessmen and politicians—to the urban evangelists' repertoire. From Billy Graham to Pat Robertson, the latter-day televangelists were to follow in his footsteps.

In sum, with the advent of electronic technology, evangelistic preachers already had an organizational form and strategy for ministry to follow. Without the developments in staging revivals and building parachurch networks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, religious broadcasters would not wield the influence in American life that they do today. And the prospects for preachers launching national moral-political crusades, perhaps even a presidential campaign, would have been extremely remote.

The marriage of this particular organizational form to the emerging technology was possible because of another unique feature of broadcasting in the United States—its emphasis on free enterprise, which has shaped radio and television broadcasting more decisively in this country than in any other nation. Broadcasting is regulated, but the Federal Communications Commission gives networks and local stations a great deal of liberty in setting their own policies and procedures.

It is assumed, first of all, that broadcasters have a right to pursue profit. As long as they devote some small proportion of their broadcasting to the "public interest," and their programming is not judged grossly offensive, stations and networks can more or less broadcast whatever they wish.

Almost from the inception of regularly scheduled broadcasting in the 1920s, religious programming has been considered to be "in the public interest." Most stations and networks offered religious groups some airtime on a sustaining (i.e., free) basis. From the beginning, the demand for free airtime exceeded the supply, so broadcasters had to develop policies governing access.¹²

The first national radio network was the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), formed in 1926. From the outset, NBC offered no commercial time for religious broadcasting and allocated what free time

it chose to offer through the Federal Council of Churches (later the National Council of Churches).¹³

The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), formed in 1927, did offer commercial time out of financial necessity, but it switched to gratis time in 1931 as a way to get rid of the demagogic Catholic priest Father Charles E. Coughlin.¹⁴ Thereafter, CBS used a combination of an in-house advisory board and the Federal Council to select persons to appear on the CBS "Church of the Air." By 1934, the Federal Council of Churches' Department of National Religious Radio, with twenty-four cooperating denominations, had some oversight over six regularly scheduled network programs.¹⁵

The Mutual Broadcasting System was the only network to offer commercial time without restriction from 1935 to 1944.¹⁶ Two of its more notable programs were Charles E. Fuller's "Old-Fashioned Revival Hour" and "The Lutheran Hour," featuring Walter A. Maier and sponsored by the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church.

In 1944, the *Christian Century*, the leading liberal Protestant periodical, published an attack on "religious racketeers" for allegedly using radio as a medium for exploitation. The author accused Mutual of tolerating programs such as "The Lutheran Hour" because they were financially lucrative and called for the termination of all paid religious broadcasting, or, failing this, a "ruling from the Federal Communications Commission against the sale of time for religious broadcasting."¹⁷

At the same time, James DeForest Murch, a towering figure of evangelical Protestantism, accused Frank R. Goodman, chairman of the Department of National Religious Radio of the Federal Council of Churches, of leading a campaign to squeeze evangelicals off the air. Goodman, he claimed, had "signed up fifty or more radio stations 'with ironclad contracts obliging them to use the Federal Council-approved programs and no other.'"¹⁸

Officials of the Federal Council of Churches have always denied that they pressured networks to develop programming under their aegis to the exclusion of evangelicals. But the evidence is clear that evangelical Protestants did not share in the free airtime granted by the networks and, further, that there existed a campaign to pressure Mutual into a "no commercial time" policy.

In March 1944, Mutual announced changes in their paid-time broadcasting that severely curtailed access. Among the restrictions adopted were: (1) a limit of broadcasts to thirty minutes, (2) a prohibition against the use of airtime to solicit funds to pay for the broadcasts, and (3) broadcasting on Sunday mornings only. The reason for this policy change? Ralph Jennings, in the most comprehensive study of radio religious broadcasting, concludes: "Strong criticism from mainstream Protestantism as cases of alleged abuses mounted."¹⁹

Evangelicals understood what was happening and had been mobilizing to fight back. The first major step toward developing cooperation among evangelicals had been taken two years earlier, at the National Conference for United Action among Evangelicals, which in turn spawned the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Evangelical broadcasters took a prominent role in the meeting,²⁰ whose keynote speaker was Harold Ockenga, pastor of the Park Street Church in Boston. Setting the mood for the formation of NAE, Ockenga's heart-stirring address returned several times to the theme of discrimination in access to the airwaves. Referring to a meeting he had had with the president of NBC, he concluded that in the absence of a united evangelical organization, there was "absolutely no opportunity of sharing equally in the broadcasting facilities of that great company."²¹ "We are discriminated against," Ockenga asserted, "because of the folly of our divided condition."²²

In April 1944, just a month after Mutual announced its policy changes, 150 evangelical broadcasters met in Columbus, Ohio, and formed the National Religious Broadcasters.²³ Their first official act was to retain a Washington-based communications attorney to provide "counsel in the preparation of a Constitution and Bylaws and a general policy and program."²⁴ They met again in Chicago in September for a constitutional convention.

With the creation of the National Religious Broadcasters, the tide began to turn for evangelicals. NRB launched an aggressive public relations program and adopted a Code of Ethics, which they considered a "veritable Declaration of Independence from radio racketeers." They called on the Federal Communications Commission to help ameliorate the unequal distribution of airtime. They also petitioned the networks to reconsider their policies.

At least some results were achieved in short order. That same year,

Mutual allocated six-and-a-half hours of free time to NAE.²⁵ NBC's Blue Network, which would become the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), also offered time to NAE on a restricted basis.

After an early burst of success, NRB lost some of its thrust and vitality, a typical pattern for social-movement organizations. Perceiving extensive victory in a few visible successes, participants lose their zeal, lower their financial contributions, and ignore appeals to redouble their efforts. As a result, a movement organization becomes vulnerable at the very moment its supporters appear to have won, or are about to win.

Liberal Protestants, now reorganized as the National Council of Churches, did not fail to note this vulnerability. As television expanded rapidly in the early 1950s, the NCC pursued an initiative to ensure their exclusive representation with the networks. CBS, leery of earlier conflict with evangelicals, added the Southern Baptists to its consortium of liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, a conciliatory gesture not particularly appreciated by the NRB, since the Southern Baptists were not members. The other networks also developed interfaith programming, but evangelical Christians were basically excluded.

An exception was Billy Graham, whose phenomenal popularity enabled him to cut through the liberal church monopoly and acquire network time, both gratis and purchased. But the rank-and-file NRB evangelicals were effectively locked out, a situation unchanged even today; rather than deal with the networks, evangelical broadcasters must contract with individual stations.

Meanwhile, new opposition to paid religious broadcasting developed at the state level, a campaign endorsed by the Broadcasting and Film Commission of the National Council of Churches.²⁶ These renewed hostilities with the liberal Protestants and the failure to break into network television reinvigorated the National Religious Broadcasters. Beginning in 1956, under the leadership of James Murch, NRB took new organizational initiatives. The most important step was bringing their annual meetings to Washington, D.C. Murch explained the rationale:

I felt that our position would be immensely strengthened if we could take our national convention to the Nation's Capital. This was the seat of the Federal Communications Commission and the

lawmakers who could assure our constitutional rights to freedom of religion and freedom of speech on the airwaves. It was also the seat of the industry's National Association of Broadcasters and the leading trade journal of the industry, *Broadcasting* magazine.²⁷

Being in Washington paid such high dividends that the NRB has never since met elsewhere. The organization has established lobbying and liaison relationships with all the groups Murch hoped to contact, and more. There is an annual Congressional Breakfast that, with more conservatives in Congress, has been increasingly well attended. The group enjoys good relations with the Federal Communications Commission and holds an annual luncheon in its honor. The counsel who represents the NRB before the FCC is Richard Wiley, former chairman of the FCC. The presidents of the National Association of Broadcasters and each of the networks have accepted invitations to speak. And in recent years, the convention has benefited from the appearance of Ronald Reagan. In a word, the NRB has learned its way around Washington.

An important benefit of being in Washington came early, during the battle with the National Council of Churches. James Murch called on Sol Taishoff, editor and publisher of *Broadcasting* magazine, to plead NRB's case for the purchase of airtime.

"Why can't you Protestants settle your disagreements amicably and make some sort of compromise on broadcasting policies?" fired Taishoff.

"Well, you see," said Murch, "there are several kinds of Protestants and we are unwilling to give up our differing convictions for the sake of unity. May I illustrate? There are several kinds of Jews—Orthodox, Reformed and Conservative. . . ."

"With a hearty laugh," reports Murch, "Sol threw up his hands and immediately retorted, 'You don't need to argue your case any further. I know what you are talking about. You certainly have equal rights before the law and the sale of time is the easiest way to guarantee those rights.'"²⁸

Broadcasting became a champion of NRB's campaign to purchase airtime.

The success of the National Religious Broadcasters and its constituent members has been a gradual process. But if there was a single

turning point, it was a 1960 FCC policy directive that ruled that no important public interest is served by differentiating between gratis airtime and commercially sponsored programming.

To grasp the significance of this ruling, one needs to look back to the Communications Act of 1934, which authorized the FCC to grant broadcasting licenses. A license is, in effect, a monopoly to use a scarce commodity—namely, a specific airwave. Simply put, it has always been presumed that stations "owe" some proportion of their broadcast time to the "public interest" in exchange for this monopoly. From the beginning, religious broadcasting was designated as one way of fulfilling that obligation.

The implication of the 1960 ruling was that local stations could sell airtime for religious programs and still get "public interest credit" in the eyes of the FCC. Two important developments followed. First, the ruling buoyed the commitment of evangelical broadcasters to buy commercial time, and fierce competition ensued. Second, this competition enhanced the value of the time slots, with the result that many local stations, which previously had adhered to network policy not to sell airtime for religious broadcasting, decided to cash in on the new demand.

While evangelicals were buying their way onto the air in unprecedented numbers, a technological innovation expanded the number of stations on which they could appear—the invention of videotape. Because film was expensive, filmed programs were shown on one station, then mailed to another, and so on, around the country. Program content had to be planned carefully to keep it from appearing badly out of date. Videotapes could be mass produced and aired during the same week all across the country. Programming could now be scheduled to correspond to the calendar; Easter services could be broadcast on Easter, Christmas services on Christmas, and so on, thus greatly enhancing a program's appeal.

The FCC policy directive was devastating for programs that had been carried on a sustaining basis. Why should local stations give free airtime to religious programs when syndicated broadcasters were bidding against each other to buy time? As a business proposition, it made no sense. Station managers dropped sustaining-time programs produced both by their own network and by individual denominations.

The collective impact of these market decisions shows up dramat-

ically in a 1979 report by the Communications Committee of the U.S. Catholic Conference.²⁹ In 1959, just before the FCC ruling, 53 percent of all religious broadcasting in America was paid-time programming. By 1977, that proportion had increased to 92 percent.

As a result, religious broadcasting since the mid-1970s has been firmly in the hands of evangelicals and fundamentalists who manage parachurch organizations. It is they, more than the mainline denominations, who can afford to commit huge percentages of their annual revenues to purchasing airtime and the hardware necessary to produce programs. Unhampered by denominational bureaucracies or any other "normal" church apparatus, the parachurch televangelists have drawn their sustenance from the mass audience, and, in turn, have been able to cater almost exclusively to it.

That some televangelists would one day utilize the airwaves to communicate a political message should not have come as a surprise. Indeed, from the earliest days of broadcasting, politics has never been very far removed from the agenda of some religious broadcasters. Late in his career, for example, Billy Sunday had become political. Father Charles E. Coughlin, probably the most successful broadcaster of the 1930s, and certainly one of the most controversial, was overtly political. In the early postwar era, the most visible were right-wing fundamentalists Carl McIntire and Billy James Hargis. In 1955, Carl McIntire claimed to be broadcasting on 600 radio stations.³⁰ In 1961, Tulsa-based Hargis claimed to be on over 200 radio stations in forty-six states and a dozen television stations.³¹

The strident messages and flamboyant personalities of these men contributed to the stereotyping of all religious broadcasters. In comparison with their predecessors, today's politicized televangelists are distinct moderates. But part of the legacy they have inherited is the popular conviction that they are all political radicals or right-wing fanatics—a conviction held by many Americans who have never seen or heard an evangelist of either era. The Elmer Gantry stereotype made an easy transition from canvas tent and sawdust floor to radio and television studios.

But if modern religious broadcasters appear more polished and seem more moderate than some of their predecessors, collectively they have become a potent force in molding conservative Christians into a social movement. The primary reason is that their programming, mostly or

entirely undiluted by secular commercial interruptions, can create a religious context into which all their messages, as well as viewers' interests and concerns, can be packaged.

In other words, all topics—not just sin and salvation—can be brought under a religious umbrella. A host of social problems—from abortion to the problems of the Social Security Administration to 250 U.S. Marines dead in Beirut—can be interpreted in biblical terms of cause and effect. However simplistic the resulting perspective may seem to nonviewers or nonbelievers, supporters of such electronic ministries receive a coherent social ideology.

And what critics of televangelism demean as the "continual begging" for money does more than simply raise the revenues needed to continue broadcasting. Contributions go to a cause, and the contributors are bearing witness to that cause every time they give.

In order to appreciate the importance for a conservative social movement of the worldview imparted by televangelists, one needs to look at the consequences of the lack of any such context in secular television.

The electronic communications revolution has created a marvelous paradox. Via television, radio, computers, and satellites, messages can be transmitted instantaneously and simultaneously to any number of points on earth; yet the speed of transmission has decontextualized the content of any single message. The flood of information in the mass media tends either to go unnoticed or to overwhelm us if we try to consume it.

One thing is clear. The greater the attention the media devote to a topic, the greater are the chances that public sentiments will crystallize around it. This occurs because the normal flood of competing topics is temporarily reduced to a trickle; information becomes manageable. And it is then that television becomes a powerful communications tool.

The usual breakneck pace of news in the electronic media is one important reason that conservative Christians in this country have had to wait until recently to be mobilized for social and political change. Television, in particular, has dealt with many moral and political topics, but without much context and certainly not from an explicitly Christian perspective. This has worked against the consolidation of evangelical sentiment and opinion regarding national and international issues.

the older networks of Bible schools, missions, conferences, and publications (such as newsletters and magazines). Fundamentalists also created new interdenominational groups that would proselytize with only the conservative message they wanted.

These parachurch organizations generally were run by moderates who did not espouse the strict negativism of the separatists. They were willing to stay in this world, with all its flaws, and use its own tools for evangelism. Ironically, these fundamentalist groups prospered in terms of membership and financial support during the 1930s and 1940s at the same time that the mainline denominations began gradually to decline.

Historian Joel Carpenter, in an important series of articles, has explored this little-known history.¹⁶ He notes that *The Sunday School Times* (a fundamentalist magazine) listed more than fifty Bible colleges and schools, mostly in major U.S. cities, in 1930. Another thirty-five schools were started up in the next ten years, and in the following decade (1940–50), sixty additional schools were begun.

The Moody Bible Institute, the “great-granddaddy” of them all, became the model: It trained pastors, evangelists, and Sunday school superintendents, and published a wide assortment of literature (from magazines and books to tracts). Subscriptions to its flagship publication, *The Moody Monthly*, increased by 13,000 during the 1930s to more than 40,000 in 1940. By its fortieth anniversary in 1934, the Moody Press had published more than 57 million items.

The institute had its own radio station and taped programs for other stations. The Moody Bible Institute Extension Department held week-end Bible conferences in 500 nearby churches during 1936. The institute had over 15,000 contributors in 1937 and an equal number enrolled in its correspondence school.

Soon conservative Christians had a wide variety of regular publications tailored just for them. Various Bible schools and institutes published their own magazines, such as the Philadelphia School of the Bible’s *Serving and Waiting*, the Denver Bible Institute’s *Grace and Truth*, and the Northwestern (Minneapolis) Bible and Missionary Training School’s *The Pilot*.

In general, evangelical colleges and Bible institutes prospered enormously during the 1930s. For example, Wheaton College saw its enrollment climb from 400 students in 1926 to 1,100 students in 1940.

A host of summer Bible conferences held at lakes, resorts, and camps mixed the rustic camp-meeting atmosphere with Chautauqua-style lectures and preaching for youth, businessmen, ministers, housewives, and Sunday school teachers. *The Moody Monthly* published lists of upcoming conferences. In reviewing back issues, Carpenter found that the lists grew from twenty-seven different sites and eighty-eight conference sessions in 1930 to more than 200 sessions at fifty sites in 1941.

The fundamentalists could also stage huge rallies, and not in remote cornfields. Evangelists could fill stadiums and large auditoriums in urban centers. In 1935, evangelist Elwin Wright held a “Bible Demonstration Day” rally in Boston Garden, and 16,000 enthusiastic believers attended. In 1936 the Moody Bible Institute celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with “Moody Day,” an event attended by members of more than 500 churches. Representatives of more than 800 congregations showed up during 1937 for the centenary of Dwight L. Moody’s birth, with more than 400,000 attending courses in Bible teaching and evangelism. The institute decided to stage a second “Moody Day” that year, pulling in 2,300 participating churches and winding up festivities with a crowd of 15,000 at a Chicago Coliseum rally.

Fundamentalists were repeatedly encouraged by their ability to produce impressive audiences at public rallies and revivals. Charles E. Fuller, the radio evangelist of the Mutual Network’s “The Old-Fashioned Revival Hour” (Jerry Falwell named his own television program “The Old Time Gospel Hour,” he claimed, because he was converted by listening to one of Fuller’s broadcasts), regularly drew crowds in tens of thousands throughout the late 1930s. For example, in 1938 at Chicago’s Soldier Field, 40,000 believers showed up for Fuller’s Easter service. In 1939 he completely filled New York City’s Carnegie Hall.

Fundamentalists used the newest medium, radio, with great success. More than 400 religious programs on eighty radio stations in 1932 were endorsed by *The Sunday School Times* as “sound and scriptural.” Charles Fuller’s weekly program was broadcast on 152 stations in 1939 but on 456 by 1942, making it the largest radio broadcast in the nation.

Such exposure had tremendous importance, not just for demonstrating that conservative Christianity had not withered up and blown

away, but also for giving legitimacy to the evangelistic "style." Putting it on radio and sending it into people's homes made the message part of mainstream culture. Says Joel Carpenter, "It appears that no other religious movement went to the airwaves as extensively nor was able to fully integrate radio broadcasting into its institutional framework as did fundamentalism."¹⁷

There were numerous other areas, such as missionary work, in which Bible schools cooperated with independent agencies and simply bypassed the larger denominations. And, as Richard G. Hutcheson has documented in his book *Mainline Churches and the Evangelicals*, many fundamentalists remained within these denominations, sometimes in an uneasy state of détente, but redirected their support to missions that preached a more acceptable message. The Fundamentalist Fellowship of the [mainline] Northern Baptist Convention was one such example of "loyal opposition." As a group-within-a-group, it arranged for full autonomy in supporting its own missions, preferring to work with more conservative agencies.¹⁸

Other looser coalitions of independent fundamentalist congregations formed, such as the American Conference of Undenominational Churches and the Eastern Conference of Fundamentalists and Undenominational Churches. These worked closely with Bible schools in recruiting pastors, supporting missions, and obtaining instructional materials.

So the post-Scopes 1930s was not entirely an era of stagnation, retreat, or decline.

To be sure, the separatists were still bitter and outspoken. Many were appalled at the evangelism outreach, the radio ministers, and the mass rallies. It was as if a "sour grapes" anger consumed their sermons and writings, poisoning their capacity for cooperation, fellowship, or even civility in respect to any person or group that did not uphold their negativism.

They were quick to point fingers and throw out labels of "sellout" and "accommodationist." They were the world-rejecting fundamentalists whom liberal critics mistook for all conservative Christians. They were an embarrassment to those more interested in getting on with evangelizing the world. In their own culture-denying way, however, they inspired others to rediscover and resurrect the covenant theme.

Encouraged by the growth of parachurch activities and by their

successes in turning out large crowds for rallies and conferences, some fundamentalist leaders began to sense the opportunity for a large-scale revival in America. During the war years of the 1940s, in particular, a sense of mission and solidarity spread throughout the nation. The urgency of the crisis served as a powerful stimulant to the reawakening of the nationalistic and patriotic aspects of covenant and dominion.

Men such as Carl F. H. Henry and Harold J. Ockenga felt that conservative Christianity—what they deliberately called *evangelicalism* to distance it from fundamentalism—could deal with modern biblical scholarship and criticism, but only if it jettisoned the primitive know-nothingism of the separatists. Regretfully, wrote Carl Henry in 1947, "Modern prejudice, justly or unjustly, has come to identify Fundamentalism largely in terms of an anti-ecumenical spirit of independent isolationism. . . ."¹⁹

These evangelicals also sought cooperation, not division, among conservative groups, for the sake of the hoped-for revival. In 1942, J. Elwin Wright, Robert T. Davis, Torrey Johnson, Carl Henry, Harold Ockenga, and others brought together all shades of fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, holiness groups, and charismatics, including representatives of some mainline denominations in the Federal Council of Churches, for a National Conference for United Action among Evangelicals. Out of that fateful meeting sprang the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE).

The separatists declined to join. Carl McIntire, who regarded many of these "moderates" as apostate—forever barring common fellowship—founded his own American Council of Christian Churches in September 1941. McIntire was a thorn in the NAE's side, but to these new "postfundamentalist" evangelicals, the enmity of fundamentalists like him was a price worth paying.

The NAE succeeded as a conservative ecumenical effort. At the end of its first four years, its membership included twenty-two denominations and hundreds of single congregations, twenty-two regional offices, numerous regional and local chapters, and approximately a million souls. The NAE also spun off the National Religious Broadcasters, the National Sunday School Association, the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (with forty-three missionary boards), the Commission for War Relief, and the Commission for Army and Navy Chaplaincies.

Meanwhile, evangelicals and some moderate fundamentalists labored on other parachurch fronts. The year 1944 saw Christ for America rallies held in several major cities, as well as the founding of Youth for Christ (YFC). In 1945, 70,000 evangelicals gathered at Soldier Field for a memorial/rededication service sponsored by YFC. By 1946, an estimated one million young people were YFC members. By 1948, YFC had spread to forty-six countries and held its first postwar evangelistic missions conference in Beatenberg, Switzerland.

Evangelicals underwent a transformation of self-image. They no longer considered themselves outsiders, a new reaction reinforced by the comments of various national leaders. Joel Carpenter recounts in a *Christianity Today* retrospective:

The day after he heard Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech in 1946, President Truman told a group of churchmen that without "a moral and spiritual awakening," America would be lost. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower echoed him, suggesting that there was no hope of avoiding disaster "except through moral regeneration." Likewise Gen. Douglas MacArthur, invoking the theme of Americans' divinely ordained duty, invited Youth for Christ and other missionaries to Japan to "provide the surest foundation for the firm establishment of democracy."²⁰

The end of World War II brought the covenant/dominion theme full circle. With a reawakened sense of national mission couched in distinctly spiritual terms, with a Billy Graham to assume the mantle of the greatest movement leaders of the past, with new and larger parachurch organizations, and with faith in themselves, the evangelicals were on a roll.

It should now be obvious that if the mass media, academics, or other observers thought the evangelicals came out of nowhere during the late 1970s, they had prevailing liberal "group think" to thank. The fundamentalist stereotypes held by mainline America were glaringly misleading. This branch of Christianity regained the momentum it had lost shortly after World War I and was merely returning to "normal."

The turbulent decade of the 1960s helped obscure matters, particularly in the area of evangelicals' social concerns. Mass media paraded

a constant stream of protest, or countercultural, images: antiwar, women's liberation, civil rights, gay pride, environmentalists, even exotic religious cults and gurus of every conceivable stripe. Even the "Jesus movement"—which involved the start-up or expansion of evangelical ministries to ex-hippies and former drug culture "freaks" as well as college and high school youth—was lumped indiscriminately into the pot. Liberals ignored the fact that evangelicals had been calling for increased social action since the 1940s.

In 1947, for example, Carl Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* laid out an activist manifesto: "A Christianity without a passion to turn the world upside down is not reflective or apostolic Christianity."²¹ Henry's call was answered in the ferment of the 1960s, as young evangelicals such as Jim Wallis of the People's Christian Coalition in Washington, D.C., Fred and John F. Alexander, founder-editors of Philadelphia's *The Other Side*, and the various countercultural-style members of the Berkeley Christian Coalition, took on the contradictions and injustices of American capitalism ignored by an earlier generation of fundamentalists. Richard Quebeaux called them "the worldly evangelicals":

... a new generation of evangelical Christians who repudiate and disown the social and political conservatism and culture rejection of traditional evangelicalism without giving up the basic tenets and faith of Christian orthodoxy.²²

Most important, evangelicals may have been fairly low-key during the 1960s (they rarely burned draft cards or American flags), but they learned a critical lesson. The righteous crusades of that era, in sociologist Robert C. Liebman's words, "blurred the distinction between private morality and public institutions." Liebman argues that the trauma of Watergate and its regular media exposure altered conservative Christians' thinking about supposedly impersonal events. As both Watergate and the abortion controversy were driven home to many previously apolitical evangelicals, "morality came increasingly to be viewed as a public issue, rather than a matter of private concern."²³

Thus, despite the presumed dispersion of fundamentalists and evangelicals to America's cultural hinterlands, they never left its heartland.

Their history from the Scopes trial to the present reveals a remarkable continuity of energy and only a relatively brief interruption from addressing social concerns. One evangelical writer concluded, "In the two decades between 1930 and 1950, evangelicals laid the foundations for the renovation of the gospel witness that caught national attention in the 1970s."²⁴

Likewise, the sudden attention paid to the New Christian Right is more a product of selective perception by liberals than it is an accurate reading of religious change in this country. The fact is that years of grass-roots networking, settling in-house squabbles, and accumulating political savvy is finally paying off. The evangelicals are returning to cultural center stage.

7

In My Father's House . . .

The overall media ministry of Christ in America has not been as open and as accountable as we should be. We are getting our hands smacked and we deserve it. . . . [W]e have had a little sense of arrogance out there in the church that it is none of your business or anybody else's what we do or how we do it . . . [but] that sense of arrogance is over. . . . [W]e are coming to the painful conclusion that if we are public figures leading Christian ministries, using public monies, contributions, then we are publicly responsible.

—Jerry Falwell,
Press Conference, April 28, 1987

Revivalism never disappeared from American culture, but after the glory days of Billy Sunday and the disaster of the Scopes trial, it subsided temporarily. Billy Graham was well on his way to creating an effective evangelistic organization when he received an unexpected boost in 1949 from newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. Hearst's celebrated two-word editorial directive, "puff Graham," triggered a flurry of media attention that hoisted the young evangelist into the national limelight.

The following year, Billy Graham decided to do a weekly radio program, "Hour of Decision," a move that firmly linked nineteenth-century urban revivalism to modern religious broadcasting. Indeed, Graham's decision to go on radio was even more momentous to his career and the future of religious broadcasting than the great boost he got from Hearst's patronage. Almost immediately, he was preaching to the largest audience ever to hear a religious program. Within five

years, his program aired on a thousand stations with an estimated audience of 15 million.¹

In 1951, Graham made another decision of paramount importance. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association began packaging his crusades for the powerful new medium of television. This gave Graham even greater visibility and success and transformed evangelical religion into a mainstream phenomenon.

Like Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday before him, Graham relished rubbing shoulders with the rich and powerful. He particularly liked U.S. presidents (until he became soiled by the carnage of Watergate). His role as the "preacher of presidents" lent legitimacy to the political status quo, whatever its sins, and he eventually came to realize it.

Graham's sermons have always had a ring of patriotism, although never the bellicose "100 percent Americanism" of Billy Sunday in his later days. Still, while Graham eventually would repudiate his own involvement in politics, he set the stage for others to become even more deeply involved. Indeed, Pat Robertson has gone Graham's presidential hobnobbing one better in becoming a candidate himself. But it was not until much later that the latent and overt political messages of modern urban revivalists were to become a significant feature of religious broadcasting.

At about the same time that Billy Graham decided to go on television, two itinerant evangelists from Oklahoma and Arkansas also recognized the medium's potential for saving souls. Oral Roberts brought television cameras into his Pentecostal revival tent. Rex Humbard sold his tent and built a cathedral especially equipped for broadcasting. A new era was born.

These three men played roles in the development of the electric church that parallel those of Finney, Moody, and Sunday in the development of urban evangelism. Building on the organizational principles that resulted in the institutionalization of urban revivalism, Graham, Roberts, and Humbard created yet another institution—the electric church.

The pastors of this electric parachurch found that their predecessors' legacy—the publicity, the organization, the fanfare of urban revivalism—was important not only in attracting souls to the Lord. It also brought in funds, enabling them to raise the millions of dollars needed to purchase and operate the new electric technology.

Essentially, technology circled back on strategy. Soon these preachers and those who followed them found that their enormous broadcasting costs dictated that they run continuous fund-raising campaigns. The "saved" and "born again" had to be continually offered new incentives to give to these ministries. Using computers, word processors, and toll-free telephone numbers, the electric ministers developed sophisticated ways of creating a sense of personal relationship between viewer and evangelist, between donor and parachurch. But, as we shall see, the medium began to affect the message.

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association modeled its crusades after the techniques of Finney, Moody, and Sunday: the engagement of local pastors and churches before the decision to conduct a crusade, advance-planning activities to arouse interest, topflight entertainment (albeit in a much more subdued form than Sunday's vaudeville antics), celebrity guest appearances, appeals to the emotions, emphasis on the urgency of making a Decision for Christ, and follow-up contacts. The Hearst boost gave Graham a competitive edge in access to evening prime-time television. Roberts and Humbard were never able to overcome that momentum, nor the reluctance of network executives to open their doors and airwaves to evangelical preachers. As a result, they were forced to become innovators in the structure of programming and in the development of feedback with their audiences.

In spite of his reputation as the biggest and the grandest, Billy Graham has never been particularly innovative. His worldwide crusades are taped, and then edited for television. Whereas Roberts has been through five major format overhauls, Graham's programs have changed very little in thirty-five years. Because Graham has always drawn large audiences, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has never gone through the agonies of the boom-and-bust cycles experienced by all the other television ministries.

Of the other two evangelists, Oral Roberts has been the more innovative. He hired topflight secular entertainers to appear on his programs as a way of hooking audiences. He gauged audience size and aggressively bought the best time slots. He learned early that people get more excited about brick-and-mortar projects than they do about paying the bills for airtime. Special projects can elicit donations far in excess of what is needed; the surplus can pay the bills for airtime

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