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God's Own Party

*The Making of the  
Christian Right*

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

CONTENTS

*Introduction* 1

ONE From Isolation to Influence 11

TWO The Emergence of a Fundamentalist Right 33

THREE God and Country during the Kennedy  
Presidency 49

FOUR The Christian Silent Majority 69

FIVE Nixon's Evangelical Strategy 89

SIX The Grassroots Campaign to Save the Family 105

SEVEN Culture Wars in the Carter Years 133

EIGHT Moral Majority 159

NINE Reagan 187

TEN Crashing the Party 213

ELEVEN Capturing the White House 245

*Notes* 277

*Index* 343

*Photos follow page 132*

## Introduction

THE REPUBLICANS WHO GATHERED IN July 1980 to nominate Ronald Reagan as the party's standard-bearer included many of the nation's prominent senators, congressional representatives, and governors. But the real power broker at the convention was neither a delegate nor a politician; he was a Baptist pastor from Lynchburg, Virginia. Jerry Falwell had launched the Moral Majority only the previous year, but the organization's rapid growth and political influence had already made him a household name. Falwell met with Reagan and the platform committee during the convention, and ensured that the platform included endorsements of constitutional amendments to restore prayer in schools and prohibit abortion, as well as a denunciation of the Equal Rights Amendment, which the GOP had officially supported for forty years. Journalists were astounded. "The political commandments endorsed by the Republican Party here this week may not be chiseled in stone," the *Washington Post* observed, "but, as one preppy-looking California Christian put it, 'they ought to be. It's right down the line an evangelical platform.'"<sup>1</sup>

As pundits struggled to explain what had happened, they arrived at a narrative that eventually became conventional wisdom. Evangelicals, they said, had long been Democrats, or had opted out of politics altogether. In the early twentieth century, conservative Protestants had made a brief bid for political influence with their antievolution campaign, but the Scopes trial had put an end to that. As historian William Leuchtenburg said, the fundamentalist political activities of the 1920s were the "last stand in a lost cause." After that, they had retreated to their churches, and did not emerge again as

a political force until liberal Supreme Court decisions on school prayer, pornography, and abortion induced them to reenter the public square in the 1970s. A few historians complicated this narrative by suggesting that evangelicals had mobilized not in response to *Roe v. Wade*, but as a reaction to a 1978 IRS ruling that penalized Christian schools for not complying with civil rights policy. But whether they emphasized race or abortion as a catalyst for the Christian Right, most historians believed that its origins could be found in the events of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

The reality is otherwise. Conservative Christians had been politically active since the early twentieth century, and they never retreated from the public square. Their commitment to political activism and conservatism was much deeper and more long-standing than most analysts realized. What was new in 1980 was not evangelicals' interest in politics but, rather, their level of partisan commitment. Evangelicals gained prominence during Ronald Reagan's campaign not because they were speaking out on political issues—they had been doing this for decades—but because they were taking over the Republican Party. It was an event more than fifty years in the making.

The journalists who were surprised at the influence of evangelicals on the 1980 Republican convention could have found a parallel in the 1920s, when conservative Protestants attempted unsuccessfully to mobilize the Democratic Party in defense of Prohibition, and when three-time Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan led a national campaign against evolution. The fundamentalist movement, which emerged in opposition to theological liberalism, attempted to use politics to restore the nation's Christian identity. The fundamentalists claimed to be concerned primarily with defending the “fundamentals” of the faith, such as biblical inerrancy and the Virgin Birth, against the onslaughts of modern biblical scholarship, but they quickly began to combat cultural liberalism as well. Alarmed at the widespread teaching of human evolution in the nation's high schools, the growth of Catholic political influence, and the changes in public attitudes toward sexuality and gender roles, fundamentalists attempted to reclaim the nation's public institutions, including schools and government, and make them a force for Protestantism and public morality. Fundamentalists came from various denominational traditions, but they were united by a common belief that America was rapidly losing its Christian moorings and needed to repent. In short, they were committed to the idea of a Christian nation with a Protestant-based moral code—and they turned to politics in order to realize that vision.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their fervor, fundamentalists had only limited success in their political campaigns, mainly because neither of the nation's major political

parties was receptive to their demands. The Democrats repudiated fundamentalist politics by nominating a Catholic, Al Smith, as their presidential candidate in 1928, and the Republicans showed little interest in the culture wars. In the 1930s, fundamentalists lost their campaign to maintain Prohibition. Though they did not abandon their interest in politics, they began to feel alienated from the nation's political institutions. While mainline Protestants and Catholics had representatives in Washington, fundamentalists did not. Instead, they turned to prophetic speculation, viewing the political developments of the 1930s as portents of an imminent divine judgment.

Yet fundamentalists never lost sight of the political vision that they had formed in the 1920s—the vision of reclaiming America's Christian identity through politics. In the early 1940s, they returned to the political sphere by creating a lobbying organization in Washington. This time, they met with more success. The fundamentalist campaigns of the 1920s had failed partly because fundamentalists had not secured control over a political party. Only when conservative Protestants united in support of a comprehensive program that included not only moral legislation, but also economic and foreign policy, could they create the partisan alliance that would give their movement national influence. And conservative Protestants began doing that in the 1940s.

Their alliance with the Republican Party developed in two stages. During the first stage, which lasted from the 1940s through the 1960s, conservative Protestants began to identify the GOP as the party of anticommunism and a Protestant-based moral order. They cultivated close relationships with Republican leaders, especially President Dwight Eisenhower and Vice President Richard Nixon. But they did not exercise a controlling influence in the GOP. Their power was limited by their lack of political skills and by religious divisions within their own movement.

During the second stage, which began in the late 1960s, conservative Protestants succeeded not only in making alliances with Republican politicians, but in changing the agenda of the party. This time, they focused more on the culture wars than the Cold War. Conservative Protestants who mobilized against feminism, abortion, pornography, and gay rights acquired control of the Republican Party, partly because of their long-standing alliances with Republican politicians, but perhaps more important because of the united front that they presented, and because of demographic and political shifts that favored evangelicals. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Christian Right was the most powerful interest group in the GOP.

Cold War conservative Protestant political mobilization began with the formation of the fundamentalist movement's first Washington lobbyist

group, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), in 1942. After a string of fundamentalist political failures, conservative Protestants realized that they needed a voice in Washington at a time of rapid government expansion. The NAE initially held great promise. Northern and southern Protestants came together to lobby the federal government for Christian-based moral legislation, including protection of evangelical broadcasting rights, restrictions on liquor advertising, and limits on Catholic political influence. They abandoned the pejorative name “fundamentalist” in favor of the more optimistic-sounding “evangelical.” Like the fundamentalists of the 1920s, the “new evangelicals” of the 1940s believed in the “fundamentals” of the faith and the necessity of reclaiming the nation’s Christian heritage, but they were willing to make more broadly based religious and political alliances than the fundamentalists had, and were thus more politically influential. Because the NAE made fighting communism a priority from its inception, the Cold War enhanced the organization’s political power.<sup>4</sup> By the early 1950s, evangelicals began to identify the GOP as the party most likely to take the strongest stance against communism and to offer public support for religion, so they created alliances with Republican politicians. Billy Graham became a regular visitor at the Eisenhower White House. Though evangelicals continued to worry about juvenile delinquency, alcohol use, and sexual promiscuity, they were confident that the nation’s political leaders supported their causes, and they took heart whenever Congress passed anti-vice legislation. Fundamentalists of the 1920s had been politically marginalized, but the evangelicals of the postwar era sensed that they had power in Washington. By the late 1950s, many evangelicals were convinced that the Christian nation that they had long dreamed of creating was finally within reach.

But their political gains were short-lived. Fissures within conservative Protestantism weakened their political coalition. In the late 1950s, self-identified fundamentalists—a group that included Bob Jones, Jr., Jerry Falwell, and several prominent southern radio evangelists—broke with Billy Graham and the NAE and forged their own political alliances. Officially, fundamentalists repudiated Graham because he was willing to cooperate with mainline Protestants who did not accept the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. But the two groups also differed in their politics, especially in regard to civil rights. While evangelicals such as Graham took a moderate position on issues of race, giving cautious support to civil rights legislation, southern fundamentalists lambasted the civil rights movement as a communist plot. While evangelicals were forging alliances with centrist Republicans such as Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, fundamentalists supported more conservative figures, such as Strom Thurmond and Barry Goldwater. Fundamentalists’

opposition to civil rights alienated them from centrist politicians and prevented them from attaining political influence. It also fragmented the fledgling evangelical political coalition. Northern evangelicals, along with leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, were embarrassed by the overt defenses of segregation that came from their southern fundamentalist counterparts. In 1964, conservative Protestants split their vote, with southern fundamentalists strongly supporting Barry Goldwater and moderate evangelicals backing Lyndon Johnson.

But by that point, evangelical political influence had already been severely curtailed by John F. Kennedy's election. In 1960, Southern Baptists, northern evangelicals, and independent fundamentalists had come together in a rare moment of unity to try to stop a Catholic from being elected president and thereby to preserve Protestant influence in Washington. When they failed, they lost their connection to the White House, and they spent the rest of the decade as political outsiders. Conservative Protestants were alarmed by Kennedy's election, but shortly thereafter, they decided that secularism, rather than Catholicism, posed a greater threat to the country. By redefining their vision of a Christian nation as antiseccular, rather than explicitly Protestant, they launched their second phase of political mobilization, one based on the culture wars. In the early 1960s, Supreme Court rulings against school prayer and Bible reading alarmed many conservative Protestants who began to see the secularization of the country—an idea that had been unimaginable in the 1950s—as a distinct possibility. Evangelicals and fundamentalists were unsure at first how to respond to these rulings, because many of them feared that a campaign for school prayer, which Catholic clergy supported, would further Catholics' political causes. But by the end of the 1960s, their fear of cooperating with Catholics had dissipated in the midst of their concerns over secularism and moral decline. The sexual revolution, sex education, race riots, the counterculture, increases in drug use, and the beginning of the feminist movement convinced them that the nation had lost its Christian identity and that the family was under attack. At such a time, evangelicals—and eventually many fundamentalists, as well—decided that it was imperative to unite with socially conservative allies, even if they happened to be Catholic.<sup>5</sup>

The creation of the “New Christian Right,” which emerged at the end of the 1970s, was not an instantaneous process, because it required the political mobilization of disparate factions of conservative Protestantism that had not often cooperated. Mainstream evangelicals, associated with Billy Graham, began leaning toward the Republican Party in the early years of the Cold War, but fundamentalists pursued a different political course until the end of

the 1960s. Even in the late 1970s, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, which appealed predominantly to fundamentalist Baptists, had limited appeal to many northern evangelicals and Southern Baptists. Many Pentecostals and charismatics—evangelicals who believed in modern-day miracles and who “spoke in tongues”—did not become politically mobilized until Pat Robertson brought them into the Republican Party. Ultimately, the success of the Christian Right depended on the political mobilization of the nation's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, which did not become a force in Republican politics until the 1980s. But by the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the Christian Right had become a united coalition that would remain a powerful political juggernaut for the next two decades. The divisions between southerners and northerners, and between fundamentalists and evangelicals, which had long impeded conservative Protestants' political influence, had disappeared. The culture wars had trumped denominational differences.

The end of the civil rights movement facilitated the formation of a new Christian political coalition, because it enabled fundamentalists and evangelicals who had disagreed over racial integration to come together. After the passage of federal civil rights legislation and the end of nationally publicized civil rights marches, fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell accepted the reality of racial integration and began forging political alliances with mainstream Republicans who would have been embarrassed by their segregationist rhetoric only a few years earlier. At the same time, moderate evangelicals who had once cautiously supported the civil rights movement reacted in horror to the race riots and began taking more conservative stances on civil rights. Both fundamentalists and evangelicals embraced Richard Nixon's call for “law and order.”<sup>6</sup>

Changing demographics also favored the creation of a politically influential Christian Right. For most of the twentieth century, evangelicals lagged behind mainline Protestants in wealth and education, but in the early 1970s, they began to close the gap. They created their own educational institutions, launched nationally syndicated television shows, and wrote best-selling books. By the beginning of the 1970s, mainline Protestant churches had begun to decline in membership, while evangelical congregations enjoyed rapid growth. The nation's most successful televangelists operated multimillion-dollar budgets and attracted millions of viewers. By the end of the decade, evangelicals realized that they had the voting power and financial resources to change national politics.

The growth of the Sunbelt enhanced evangelicals' influence. While evangelical churches exist in every part of the country, the movement has been



disproportionately strong in the Bible Belt for more than a century. Today, for instance, 52 percent of American evangelicals live in the South, even though this region accounts for only 31 percent of the national population.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when southern states entered a period of rapid population growth in the 1970s, replacing the declining northern “Rust Belt” as a center of economic and political influence, southern evangelicals were poised to become political power brokers. For nearly a century, the South had been a reliable Democratic stronghold, but in the 1970s, a robust two-party system developed in the region, prompting both parties to vie for southern votes in presidential elections. Republicans quickly realized that they could win evangelical votes—and thus win the South—by adopting culture war rhetoric. Politicians of the 1960s had won white votes in the segregated South by opposing racial integration, but in the aftermath of the civil rights movement they had to find other issues that would appeal to culturally conservative voters, and they looked to evangelical leaders to tell them what those issues were.

Though the Christian Right was the creation of conservative Protestant grassroots activists, not Republican politicians, national Republican leaders did play a role in encouraging it. Had they not been receptive to the Christian Right’s demands, the movement would probably not have gained national influence as quickly as it did. The GOP was a minority party in the 1970s. In order to win, Republicans had to siphon votes from the Democrats, and the Republicans’ political strategists believed that a shift to the right on social issues would be the easiest way to do that. The Democrats at the time were becoming a more secular party by embracing culturally liberal stances on abortion, feminism, and gay rights, which alienated some of the conservative Catholics and southern evangelicals who had once been loyal members of the New Deal coalition.<sup>8</sup> In response, Republican leaders of the 1970s decided that adopting more conservative positions on abortion and other cultural issues would be a wise strategic move. Such a move seemed to make sense for a party that had already succeeded in attracting social conservatives through the public support of religion in the 1950s and an endorsement of a school prayer amendment in the 1960s. But what began as a temporary political ploy quickly became irreversible, and the party found itself increasingly controlled by the Christian Right.<sup>9</sup>

The election of Ronald Reagan, who allied himself with the Christian Right, gave conservative evangelicals the political influence that they needed to increase their control over the Republican Party, especially in the South. By the mid-1990s, the Christian Right exercised a dominating influence in one-third of the nation’s state Republican parties, and it used its position to elect socially conservative congressional representatives in the Sunbelt and

Midwest, pulling the party further to the right. The GOP became increasingly dependent on its evangelical constituency. At the time that George W. Bush took office, evangelicals accounted for one-third of the Republican vote in presidential elections, but that figure increased to nearly 40 percent by the end of his term. It became impossible for any Republican presidential candidate to ignore the Christian Right's demands on abortion, gay rights, and other social issues.

But the Christian Right's political power did not produce the substantive legislative gains that evangelicals had expected. At the end of Bush's presidency, abortion was still legal and school prayer was not. Same-sex marriage and civil unions were legal in a few states, and Americans were more supportive than ever of gay rights. The majority of Americans did not want to turn back the clock to a prefeminist era when abortions were illegal, gays were closeted, and premarital sex was taboo. Conservative evangelicals found that they could win elections, but not change the culture. They had captured a party, but failed to reclaim a nation.

After observing the failures of the Christian Right and the collapse of several of its leading organizations, pundits in the last two years of the Bush administration proclaimed the movement dead. Evangelicals were becoming more moderate in their politics, they claimed. Their vote was up for grabs. The culture wars were reaching a truce. It was true that one-quarter of white evangelicals were Democrats—as had been the case for years—and some of them began attracting increasing media attention. But the convictions of the majority of white evangelicals—the ones who had been culture warriors for decades—were unchanged. Pundits who had expected the collapse of the Christian Right were unable to explain why Republican presidential candidate John McCain felt obliged to choose a strongly conservative evangelical as his running mate, or why evangelicals accounted for an even higher percentage of the Republican vote in 2008 than they had four years earlier.<sup>10</sup>

Evangelicals voted Republican in 2008 because they had nowhere else to go. They had linked their political fortunes to the Republican Party. They still believed in the possibility of restoring the nation's Christian identity through politics, and the GOP offered them the only hope of doing that. Even if it had been a largely futile quest so far, they still had faith that they could prevail. Christian Right leaders could rise and fall, but the core ideas of the movement remained. The fear of secularism that had produced the fundamentalist political movement of the 1920s continued to mobilize conservative evangelicals in the twenty-first century.

This book presents a chronological history of the Christian Right. An accurate understanding of this history is critical for understanding America itself. Its influence spanned nearly the entire twentieth century and affected every Republican president from the early postwar era to the present. The movement transformed the Republican Party, the national political agenda, and evangelical Christianity. Its history has been intertwined with the civil rights movement, the rise of the Sunbelt, southern political realignment, and American foreign policy. And it continues to affect American politics today. Millions of Americans still believe in the fundamentalist dream of restoring America's Christian identity. To make sense of their political influence, we have to understand the development of their religious vision and the reasons for its enduring power.

As this book goes to press, news reports are once again filled with discussions of populist anger on the right, much of it centered on cultural issues. A Democratic Congress complied with the demands of Christian lobbyists by agreeing to include a prohibition on federal funding of abortion in its health care bill. Voters in Maine surprised the pundits by banning same-sex marriage. Those who believe in blending faith with conservative politics have pushed recent books by Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin to the top of the best-seller lists. Even with the White House and Congress under Democratic control, the Christian Right has been remarkably resilient.

For those who are aware of the Christian Right's history, these news reports have a familiar ring. The Christian Right of the late twentieth century was not a passing fad. Nor is evangelicals' commitment to the Republican Party a recent development that can easily be reversed. Conservative Protestants have been campaigning since the 1920s for changes in moral legislation. And since the mid-twentieth century, they have identified those campaigns with the Republican Party. They cannot turn back from either their Republican partisanship or their political campaigns. To give up would mean acquiescing to the forces that they believe are destroying American families and American society.

Evangelical leaders and their political organizations will come and go, and their political styles will change, but the underlying rationale for their political campaigns is not likely to go away. And just as conservative evangelicals have been frustrated in their past efforts, they are likely to once again find it impossible to reverse the country's cultural direction through politics. Though they have largely succeeded in turning the GOP into "God's Own Party," they have not yet been able to make America God's own nation. Their ninety-year quest continues.

THE CULTURE WARS AT THE 1924 Democratic National Convention were the opening salvo in fundamentalists' attempt to reclaim the nation through politics. As conservative Protestants clashed with Catholics over Prohibition, moral legislation, and the nation's religious identity, the convention appeared on the verge of fracturing. Believing that the future direction of their party and nation was at stake, fundamentalists came in force to the New York convention hall. Bob Jones, Sr., a southern evangelist who would later found the South Carolina fundamentalist college that bears his name, showed up to cheer on the delegates who supported Prohibition and opposed the "wet" Catholic governor of New York, Al Smith. Some of Smith's supporters, who were mostly northerners and Catholics, booed the fundamentalist speakers and suggested that the party moderate its stance on the liquor question.

At the center of the religious polarization was three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, who was arguably both the nation's most famous Democrat and the fundamentalists' most talented orator. Bryan came to New York prepared to lead "the defenders of the home" in "resistance" against Smith. The stakes in the contest were nothing less than the preservation of the family and the maintenance of the nation's moral order, he argued. "Does Governor Smith expect the fathers and mothers to be inactive while those who make money out of the manufacture and sale of alcoholic drinks conspire against the strength of the boys and the virtues of the girls?" Bryan asked. "He cannot lead the nation back to wallow in the mire."<sup>1</sup>

Despite Bryan's efforts, fundamentalists lost the culture wars of the 1920s, and they were unable to secure control of the Democratic Party. Al Smith won the Democratic nomination in 1928, and a few years later, a Democratic administration repealed Prohibition. It would be several decades before fundamentalists returned to a political convention. They had failed in their campaign to reclaim the nation's government for Protestant Christianity.

But fundamentalists were undaunted. In 1942, they returned to the political arena by creating the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), which established a permanent lobbying office in Washington to campaign for morally conservative legislation. "Millions of evangelical Christians, if they had a common voice and a common meeting place, would exercise under God an influence that would save American democracy," New York pastor William Ward Ayer declared.<sup>2</sup>

This time, conservative Protestants partly succeeded in their effort to Christianize the nation through politics. The Cold War, with its civil religious rhetoric and its identification of anticommunism with the purposes of God, made politicians more receptive to conservative Protestant demands than they had been a generation earlier. Conservative Protestants began exchanging their political isolation for political influence. And they discovered that the Republican Party of Dwight Eisenhower, rather than the Democratic Party that had scorned William Jennings Bryan, offered them their greatest chance of political victory.

### *The Ineffectiveness of Fundamentalist Politics in the 1920s and 1930s*

The Christian Right's political ethos originated in the fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century. Fundamentalism was a defensive movement intent on reclaiming a dominant societal influence for conservative Protestantism. For most of the nineteenth century, evangelical Protestants—that is, those who believed in personal salvation through a Christian conversion experience and who accepted the Bible as their supreme authority—had enjoyed a strong influence in religion, politics, and society. Eighty-five percent of American congregations were evangelical in 1860.<sup>3</sup> The Bible was a touchstone of American culture. But evangelicals began losing their cultural influence in the late nineteenth century. The arrival of millions of Catholic and Jewish immigrants in northern cities, the growth of a liberal Protestantism that rejected a literal faith in the Bible, and the challenge of science to

traditional evangelical beliefs weakened conservative Protestant influence. In the early twentieth century, changes in sexual mores presented yet another challenge to evangelicalism.

Conservative Protestants decided to fight back. In 1919, they formed the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, choosing the name “fundamentalist” to signify their adherence to “fundamental” doctrines such as the Virgin Birth and biblical inerrancy. A literal adherence to the Bible, they believed, was the answer to the liberalism that threatened both church and society. In addition to fighting against theological liberalism in their own denominations, they campaigned against movies, drinking, and Darwinism in society, and they were not afraid to use state power to attack secular practices they opposed. Although most of their political battles were aimed at specific vices or educational practices, fundamentalists had a larger goal: the preservation of a Christian moral order in American society.

Fundamentalists of the early 1920s found many signs that America was losing its Christian identity. For the first time in the nation's history, more Americans lived in urban than in rural areas. Many young people who moved from the farm to the city embraced the hedonism of the era. They danced the Charleston, frequented the movie theater, and abandoned their “Victorian” sexual mores. Public profanity was no longer taboo. Traditional notions of femininity were under attack. Women cut their hair into chic bobs, exchanged their long skirts for short dresses, and started smoking cigarettes. College graduates—a group that was rapidly growing—began justifying the new morality with appeals to Sigmund Freud or evolutionary biology. Some exchanged the “old-time religion” for liberal Protestantism. A few quit going to church altogether. For many Americans who moved to the cities, these changes were a sign of the nation's degeneracy. The most politically active fundamentalist pastors of the 1920s were men who had moved to the nation's largest cities from rural areas in the South and Midwest. The cities in which they lived were full of sin, and they intended to clean them up through politics.<sup>4</sup>

Fundamentalists also sensed a growing secularization of the educational system. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of the nation's colleges abandoned their traditional emphasis on theology and moral education. Public school districts in California discontinued their traditional practice of devotional Bible reading in the early 1920s. Fundamentalists reacted with a campaign to restore Christian teaching to public schools and restrict the teaching of evolution. “Drive God and his Christ from the educational program of our children and you have made complete the wrecking of the greatest Republic on the earth,” Los Angeles Methodist pastor Robert Shuler stated in 1923.<sup>5</sup>

Like Shuler, most fundamentalists viewed their political campaigns as a way to save their erstwhile “Christian nation” from divine destruction. They were obsessed with the image of a decadent nation aping the vices of ancient pagan empires. Fundamentalist pastor Joseph Larsen wrote in the *Moody Monthly* in July 1929, “The gravest danger is that America shall go *the same route that the ancient nations of Babylon, Greece, and Rome went*—into sinful pleasures, unchristian philosophy, heathen practices and pagan art, which will bring sudden destruction from a living God of justice.”<sup>6</sup> To preserve the nation’s conservative Protestant identity, fundamentalists tried to maintain Prohibition and the Volstead Act, regulate dancing, and, in 1928, prevent Al Smith, a Catholic presidential candidate, from winning the White House.

The family was the key to saving the republic. Movies and dancing, fundamentalists believed, were an attack on sexual morals, the foundation of the Christian home. Changes in women’s fashion symbolized a new female liberation that they viewed as an assault on patriarchal marriage. Evolution threatened to corrupt their teenage children and destroy their faith in God.<sup>7</sup>

Even at the height of their political activities in the 1920s, fundamentalists never identified their causes with a particular political party. Some Midwestern fundamentalists, such as Billy Sunday, were conservative, pro-business Republicans, but many others, like William Jennings Bryan, were Democrats who staked out positions on the political left on matters of economic policy. As Bryan once told a reporter, he was both “a progressive in politics and a Fundamentalist in religion.” He urged his fellow Democrats to wage a “progressive fight” to maintain Prohibition while simultaneously attacking the moneyed interests that had “enriched the few and made homeless the many.” He conducted his political warfare with a “double-barreled shotgun,” he explained, with one barrel aimed “at the elephant as he tries to enter the treasury and the other at Darwinism—the monkey—as he tries to enter the schoolroom.”<sup>8</sup> But Bryan’s economic views never became a part of the fundamentalist political program, and his cultural conservatism never had much influence on the Democratic Party. The Republican Party was similarly unresponsive to fundamentalist demands. As long as fundamentalists remained politically divided, unable to agree on an economic program or a partisan commitment, their influence in Washington was limited.

The movement’s partisan divisions continued through the 1930s, when Southern Baptist papers supported the New Deal, while northern fundamentalist magazines condemned Roosevelt’s programs as dangerous arrogations of state power. John R. Rice, a Baptist pastor in Fort Worth, Texas, whose *Sword of the Lord* later became the most widely circulated fundamentalist

paper in the South, urged his congregants to vote against the Democratic Party because of Roosevelt's legalization of alcohol. Yet most Southern Baptist ministers could not bring themselves to vote against a man who had provided so many economic benefits for their impoverished flocks.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps partly due to their partisan divisions, the fundamentalists of the 1920s experienced only limited success in their political campaigns. They convinced a few southern states to prohibit the teaching of evolution in their public schools, but in the process, their movement became a laughingstock in the North. They temporarily succeeded in maintaining Prohibition, and they rejoiced at Al Smith's landslide defeat. But when President Franklin Roosevelt repealed Prohibition in 1933, and when Catholic politicians gained an increased influence in Washington in the 1930s, fundamentalists worried that there was nothing more they could do to save the country from divine judgment.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, they turned to prophetic speculation, convinced that the imminent return of Jesus would deliver them from the nation's "impending doom." Most northern fundamentalists, as well as an increasing number of those in the South, had adopted a strain of end-time belief called "premillennial dispensationalism," which taught that the world would become increasingly corrupt until Jesus returned for his thousand-year reign. The nation's economic perils, along with the rise of fascist dictatorships in Europe, convinced many fundamentalists that the cataclysmic events of the "last days" were about to occur, so they were more likely to interpret news headlines as portents of the end of the world than to debate how policy-makers should respond.<sup>11</sup>

### *The National Association of Evangelicals*

The Second World War made fundamentalist political alienation seem like a relic of a bygone era, a notion as out of date as the isolationism that American politicians abandoned after Pearl Harbor. After America entered the war, Americans could no longer avoid the federal government's influence. Fifteen million of the nation's young men, and an additional 1 million young women, served in the military, while most of the rest of the country's 131 million citizens fought for America's cause on the home front by recycling tin, planting "victory gardens," and following the government's mandate to forgo basic staples such as nylon stockings and new tires. The federal government expanded enormously in this era, and few Americans seemed to object. Even fiscal conservatives who had once expressed reservations about the \$3 billion



national deficits of the New Deal era unhesitatingly endorsed the government's new \$50 billion deficits as a wartime necessity. When the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) began withholding income taxes from Americans' paychecks and extending the tax to cover wage earners to whom it had never before been applied, hardly anyone complained. A movement of political and religious separatism seemed out of step with the rest of the country at a time of national unity and governmental expansion.<sup>12</sup>

In such a milieu, fundamentalists decided that the federal government, which they had traditionally viewed as hostile to their interests, might be the key to defending themselves against mainline Protestants. The battle was over broadcasting. Nearly every major fundamentalist leader of the late 1920s and 1930s had a local radio program, and a few were able to purchase airtime on multiple stations, so it was vital to their movement's success to maintain access to the nation's airwaves. Charles Fuller's *Old-Fashioned Revival Hour* was on 456 stations in the early 1940s, reaching an estimated 20 million listeners a week. A host of lesser-known radio evangelists were popular in regional markets. But fundamentalist radio preaching aroused the opposition of the Federal Council of Churches, which considered it religious grandstanding and hate-filled rhetoric. In 1928, this ecumenical organization, which included representatives from Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and other mainline Protestant denominations, convinced the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) to eliminate paid religious shows and instead work with the Federal Council to allocate slots for free public service programming. If fundamentalists could not purchase airtime, they were likely to have to stay off the air. In 1931, CBS followed suit. By the early 1940s, Mutual Broadcasting Corporation remained the only network willing to sell airtime to fundamentalist preachers, and the Federal Council began pressuring them to put an end to paid religious programming.<sup>13</sup> If the Federal Council succeeded, Fuller's program, which was Mutual's most popular show, would have to leave the network. Fundamentalists believed that if they lobbied the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), they might be able to prevent this. To do that, they would need a national lobbying association to counter the influence that the Federal Council already had in Washington.

The conservative Protestants who gathered in St. Louis to create the NAE thought they had lost influence after the 1920s by retreating too quickly from the political sphere. At a time when George Cardinal Mundelein, Rabbi Stephen Wise, and representatives of the Federal Council of Churches were enjoying White House visits, fundamentalists lacked a representative in Washington. As a result, the nation now faced "a tidal wave of drunkenness, immorality, corruption, dishonesty, and utter

atheism.” The NAE’s first president, Harold J. Ockenga, told the assembled ministers in St. Louis, “It is up to us to make sure that the Christian church will return to a new leadership, producing new statesmen for our government circles, influencing education, and rebuilding the foundations of society.”<sup>14</sup>

Abandoning the traditional term “fundamentalist” in favor of the more optimistic-sounding “evangelical,” the ministers who created the NAE looked forward to a time of ecumenical cooperation across regional and denominational boundaries. Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Pentecostal ministers were there, as were a few theologically conservative ministers who still remained in liberal mainline denominations, such as the Congregational Church. The organization included a few southerners, but most of its members, including seven of the nine initial board members, were residents of the North. The cities of the Northeast and Midwest—where large Catholic populations and a proliferation of bars and dance halls provided conservative Protestant ministers with clear evidence that they had lost the early rounds of the culture war—provided the ideal recruiting grounds for an organization that promised to reclaim the culture for conservative Protestantism.<sup>15</sup>

One of the NAE’s first acts was to create a subsidiary, the National Religious Broadcasters Association, to secure federal protection for evangelical radio preachers’ broadcasting rights. It took evangelicals eighteen years to get the FCC to declare that radio and television stations could count paid religious broadcasts as public service time, but it was worth the wait. The FCC’s declaration resulted in the gradual demise of the mainline Protestant radio and television broadcasts that the National Council of Churches endorsed, and a sudden surge in the number of paid broadcasts from fundamentalist and evangelical preachers, paving the way for the evangelical media empires of the late twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

The NAE also launched campaigns to restrict liquor advertising, Sunday commerce, and sexually provocative literature. Evangelicals argued that the Constitution was inherently “benevolent toward religion,” rather than religiously neutral, and they engaged in efforts to make that alleged benevolence even more pronounced. In the late 1940s, the organization supported a campaign for a “Christian amendment” to recognize Jesus as Lord in the American Constitution, an idea that Congress had rejected in the late nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Despite their confidence that the federal government could help them achieve their goals, evangelicals also feared that secularists in Washington were trying to erode the nation’s religious heritage. In 1945, when Congress debated two bills that would have provided federal aid to education, the

NAE spoke out against the proposal. The “professional educators” who supported federal funding wanted to “centralize control in Washington, capture our educational processes and proceed to educate the rising generations along ‘liberal’ lines,” the NAE warned. “They know that decentralization of authority leaves the schools in the hands of local citizens who still believe in the Constitution and the Holy Scriptures and who know how to deal with subversive propaganda when it rears its head in the classroom.”<sup>18</sup>

The issue arose again in 1948, when the Supreme Court ruled in *McCollum v. Board of Education* that the Champaign, Illinois, school district’s policy of giving public school students “released time” during the school day to attend religious classes taught by clergy violated the First Amendment’s prohibition of the “establishment” of religion. Using arguments that foreshadowed those that they would employ after the school prayer and Bible reading court cases fifteen years later, the NAE said that nonbelievers had the right to exempt their children from religious classes, but that it was unfair for a minority of atheists to prevent religious parents from providing Christian instruction for their children during the school day.<sup>19</sup>

In all of these campaigns, evangelicals were fighting defensive battles against government interests that they perceived as hostile. But another evangelical cause—anticommunism—brought them into closer alliance with the government.

### *The Christian Campaign against Communism*

Conservative Protestants, especially those in northern cities, had always viewed communism as an implacable enemy. The nation’s first fundamentalist conference met in 1919, the same year as the Palmer Raids, against the background of fears of communist infiltration. Even in the early 1930s, when most Americans considered the nation’s economic downturn a more urgent political crisis than communism, fundamentalists continued to proclaim their anticommunist message. “Atheists, modernists and communists have formed a deadly alliance against God, Christ, the Church, and the Bible,” a Minneapolis pastor wrote in 1933. When the Roosevelt administration extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union and then treated the country as an ally in the Second World War, some fundamentalists warned that the United States had compromised with evil. Looking to the Bible for prophetic guidance on current events, they declared that the Soviet Union was the sinful nation of “Gog” that the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel had predicted was doomed for destruction.<sup>20</sup> With Americans worried about

other matters, such messages reinforced fundamentalists' sense of political alienation.

Fundamentalists' political fortunes changed as soon as the Cold War began, because they suddenly found that their opposition to communism brought them into closer alliance with the federal government and the prevailing national mood. In the 1940s and 1950s, fundamentalists and evangelicals largely abandoned their prophetic speculation of a coming judgment on the nation, and adopted a new patriotism that manifested itself in "Americanism" conferences and political endorsements. They eagerly followed politicians' attacks on alleged communist subversives, and even launched a few investigations of their own. In the early 1940s, the Church League of America, a politically conservative organization founded by Presbyterian businessmen in Wheaton, Illinois, in 1937 (the same year that the House Committee on Un-American Activities—HUAC—was created), began collecting files on suspected communists in the United States, which it offered to sell to investigators and employers for a nominal fee.<sup>21</sup>

The NAE's influence on the federal government was bolstered by its claim that it had been in the vanguard of the anticommunist movement at a time when few religious organizations considered anticommunism a priority. In 1943, only a year after its formation, the NAE declared that its nemesis, the Federal Council of Churches, was "blind to the menace which the infiltration of Russian Communism presents to our liberties at the present time." In 1950, the NAE accused the United Nations of being soft on communism, and passed a resolution condemning the UN as an organization that could usher in an age of "world socialism and dictatorship." During the 1950s, the NAE advocated governmental "investigations of subversive activities" and the "enactment of legislation protecting the nation and its citizens from the menace of Communism." The NAE's president in the early 1950s, Frederick Fowler, simultaneously served as vice chairman of the All-American Conference to Combat Communism, and warned that there were more than twice as many communists in the United States as there had been in Russia at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>22</sup>

The NAE found a receptive audience for its views in Washington partly because some of the nation's representatives and senators shared their faith. A 1951 *Christian Life* survey found that more than one hundred members of the Eighty-second Congress were "born-again Christians." Many of them taught Bible classes and attended weekly prayer groups. Several congressmen began attending private prayer sessions that Abraham Vereide, a Methodist minister from Seattle, organized for government leaders through his International Christian Leadership. In the early 1950s, the vice president of his organization

was the conservative Democratic congressman A. Willis Robertson (D-VA), whose son Pat later became one of the principal leaders of the Christian Right. The Republican leader in the Senate, Frank Carlson (R-KS), a devout Baptist, also developed a close relationship with Vereide and assisted him in convening the first annual National Prayer Breakfast in 1953. Representative Walter Judd (R-MN) maintained a close association with evangelical leaders, who shared his view that Christian devotion and Christian mission work could be key weapons in the struggle against communism. Senator Edward Martin (R-PA) may have expressed the sentiment best: “America must move forward with the atomic bomb in one hand and the cross in the other.”<sup>23</sup>

Initially, Christian anticommunism was bipartisan. Although some leaders of the NAE began moving toward the GOP at an early date, many evangelicals, especially Southern Baptists, continued to vote for Democrats. In 1948, only 38 percent of evangelical voters supported Republican presidential candidate Thomas Dewey in his contest against President Harry Truman. Not only did the Democratic Party offer social welfare and pro-labor legislation that many working-class evangelicals favored, but it could also plausibly claim to be just as hawkish and anticommunist as the GOP. Martin Dies, the first chair of HUAC, was an aggressively anticommunist Democratic congressman from Texas who outdid most Republicans in denouncing alleged internal communist subversives. Truman promised American support for “free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation” and created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to bolster Western Europe’s defenses against the threat of Soviet expansion. He doubled the percentage of federal revenues allocated to defense spending, authorized the development of the hydrogen bomb, and sent American troops to the Korean peninsula to prevent the communist North Korean government from taking over the noncommunist South. “Our allies are the millions who hunger and thirst after righteousness,” Truman said in his inaugural address, adding that “with God’s help,” the United States could help assure a world of “justice, harmony, and peace” by opposing the communist threat.<sup>24</sup>

But some conservative Protestants decided that Truman’s anticommunist measures were insufficient. When Truman objected to General Douglas MacArthur’s attempt to take the Korean War into China, and then relieved the general of his command, many evangelicals were outraged at the president’s unwillingness to confront the largest communist country in the world. The NAE passed a resolution that offered a “stinging rebuke of the Truman Administration.” The NAE president Frederick Fowler called upon Dean Acheson, whom conservatives from both parties blamed for “losing China” to communists in 1949, to “reverse his mistaken policy and support our friend

Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist government of China.” For evangelicals, the “loss” of China to atheistic communists was particularly galling because the country had long been a center of American mission work. Some of the leading voices in the evangelical movement had done mission work in China, and they bitterly resented the expulsion of Western Protestants after Mao Zedong’s takeover. They also worried about the fate of the Chinese Christians that they had been forced to leave behind.<sup>25</sup> Such concerns made them more sympathetic to the claims of Republican anticommunist politicians such as Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy, who blamed the loss of China and the advance of international communism on Democratic subversives in the State Department.

By the early 1950s, the NAE had so closely aligned its anticommunist campaign with the GOP that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between the statements of evangelical ministers and those of the Republican politicians that they supported. “We have had New Dealism and its neo-socialism which permitted Communists to move into the highest echelons of government,” one article in the NAE’s newsletter complained in 1953, a line that closely echoed Republican congressman Karl Mundt’s earlier denunciation of “New Dealers, Fair Dealers, Misdealers, and Hiss Dealers” who had “shuttled back and forth between Freedom and Red Fascism like a pendulum on a kukoo clock.”<sup>26</sup> But it was not only the NAE that sounded like an arm of the Republican Party. In fact, the most politically prominent, anticommunist, evangelical minister of the era was not a leader of the NAE, but was instead a young Baptist evangelist who had already landed several invitations to the White House.

### *Billy Graham’s Christian Americanism*

Communism, Billy Graham told the sixty-five hundred people who had come to his “Canvas Cathedral” in Los Angeles one night in 1949, was “a religion that is inspired, directed and motivated by the Devil himself.” At a time when Americans were still adjusting to the uncertainties of the Cold War and the atomic age, the thirty-one-year-old evangelist provided his listeners with the assurance that they could gain the victory over communism through faith in Christ because God was on America’s side. The message struck a chord. Graham began the Los Angeles crusade as a fundamentalist with a reputation confined only to his own religious circles, but he ended the campaign as an emerging national celebrity—a young, dynamic speaker who could draw crowds by offering the spiritual antidote to communism. Graham continued

to preach a staunchly anticommunist message throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and he quickly became the best-known evangelical in America, as well as the leading proponent of a politicized religion that linked the gospel with the purposes of the state.<sup>27</sup>

Graham was raised in a devout Southern Presbyterian family focused on cultivating piety rather than promoting political change. He had grown up attending church and revival meetings, and like most southern conservative Protestants, he was “born again” in a teenage conversion experience. When he felt the call to preach, he enrolled at Bob Jones College, one of the leading fundamentalist schools in the South, at a time when its founder, Bob Jones, Sr., was preaching against becoming too entangled in politics. Graham did not object to Jones’s political abstention, but he did chafe under the college’s strict rules regulating student conduct, so after a semester at BJC he transferred to the Florida Bible Institute in Tampa, where he exchanged his Southern Presbyterianism for a Southern Baptist faith. From there, he moved to Wheaton College on the outskirts of Chicago, the center of a new evangelical movement.

In Chicago, Graham discovered that northern Protestants were beginning to shed their traditional separatism and adopt a new engagement with the world. His experiences transformed him from a southern fundamentalist into a “new evangelical.” When he came to Wheaton, the school was already advertising itself as a center of anticommunism, while the surrounding town had become the headquarters of the politically conservative Church League of America. Graham was at Wheaton when the NAE held its first annual meeting in downtown Chicago, only twenty-five miles away from the campus, and though he probably did not attend that session at which Harold Ockenga gave a speech in favor of Christian participation in politics, he quickly came to share the NAE president’s vision of cultural and political engagement with the world. Shortly after his graduation, Graham became one of the leading speakers in a new organization called Youth for Christ, one of the most innovative and successful northern evangelical ministries of the 1940s. Youth for Christ evangelists tried to distance themselves from fundamentalist stereotypes by presenting the gospel message to teenagers through contemporary slang, lively swing music, and flashy dress, all of which suited Graham’s style. His youthful visage, combined with his rapid-fire delivery and dynamic presence, helped him draw crowds. He quickly expanded his ministry beyond high school students and began holding large urban revivals in stadiums and open squares.<sup>28</sup>

In 1949, Graham received his lucky break or, as he viewed it, his blessing from God. After William Randolph Hearst, America’s leading newspaper

magnate, heard about Graham's stirring condemnations of communism at the Los Angeles crusade, he recognized the potential of the young evangelist's message to foster the socially conservative values and staunch anticommunism that the publisher favored. "Puff Graham," he told his reporters, and they did. Graham became a national celebrity overnight. Harold Ockenga noticed the young evangelist's success and arranged for him to hold his second major crusade on the Boston Commons, outside the former NAE president's church. From that point on, Graham became closely identified with the brand of evangelicalism that Ockenga and the NAE were trying to promote, but his fame—and ambition—extended far beyond evangelical circles. He pressed for, and received, an invitation to meet with President Harry Truman at the White House. During the next decade, Graham attracted international press coverage as he preached in the great cities of the world, drawing thousands of respondents wherever he traveled. His "My Answer" column appeared in papers throughout the United States, and his radio program reached far and wide.

Graham's message was simple: he asked people to commit their lives to Christ and become "born again." Revivalists had preached this theme for decades. Yet Graham's interpretation of the traditional evangelical call provided a new twist on old revival themes. He came to call not merely sinners, but an entire nation, to repentance. America, Graham believed, was a chosen nation that had experienced a moral lapse. The nation needed a spiritual revival in order to become a beacon of light and a leader in the fight against communism.

Graham's crusade in Los Angeles came less than two months after a shocked nation had learned of the Soviet Union's possession of the atomic bomb, so when the evangelist warned of the "judgment hand of God over Los Angeles," his audience had little difficulty conjuring up images of their city being vaporized. Graham tapped into these fears. The City of Angels had become a "city of wickedness and sin" not only because of its drunkenness, materialism, and sexual immorality, but also because of the city's communist subversives. "Communists," the evangelist claimed, "are more rampant in Los Angeles than in any other city in America."<sup>29</sup>

Graham infused America's anticommunist struggle with an underpinning of evangelical theology. Fighting communism was a religious duty, and the American government was engaged in the work of the Lord when it opposed the Soviet Union. The "American way of life" was therefore the Christian way of life, and a threat to one was a threat to the other. By turning to God, Americans could avert an imminent Soviet attack. "Soviet Russia may well be the instrument in the hands of God to bring America to her knees in



judgment,” Graham told an audience in South Carolina in 1950. “God may well do it today unless America repents of her sins of immorality, drunkenness, and rebellion against God.”<sup>30</sup>

In listing the sins that would make America vulnerable to a communist attack, Graham placed a special emphasis on threats to the home, especially those involving illicit sex. In each case, Graham condemned such behavior not only as an attack on the family or a violation of God’s moral law, but also as an attack on the nation. “Communism works from without; delinquency bores from within,” he said. Divorce “could ultimately lead to the destruction of our nation,” he stated in another sermon. “The home,” he declared, using the words of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, “is the citadel of American life. If the home is lost, all is lost.”<sup>31</sup>

But even as Graham issued such dire warnings, he remained confident that Americans would answer his call to repentance and that God would in turn give the nation ultimate victory over the communists. Many politicians shared this view, so they publicly supported Graham’s ministry and passed legislation restricting pornography. A Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency held hearings to determine ways to discourage teenage vice and curb the distribution of pornographic books and photographs. For one month in the fall of 1958, the government attempted to prohibit *Playboy* magazine from being sent through the U.S. mail. Such measures bolstered Graham’s optimistic assessment of the nation’s spiritual health. As he looked out on the tens of thousands of people who came to hear him preach each night of his crusades, he was confident that a spiritual revival was occurring that would ward off the threat of communism. “A lot of people say, ‘Do you think communism is going to win the world?’” Graham told a North Carolina audience in 1958. “They might win it temporarily, but it will only be temporarily. Because the Bible says that Jesus Christ is going to establish His kingdom, and the church will some day triumph.”<sup>32</sup> Despite their sins, Americans were still people of faith who were ultimately on the Lord’s side.

Graham’s identification of Christianity with American ideals earned him widespread acclaim. Senators and governors sought out prominent seats at Graham’s crusades whenever the evangelist came to their states. In 1958, Graham placed fourth in a national poll to determine “America’s most admired man.”<sup>33</sup> Mainstream newspapers that had ignored or lampooned fundamentalists a few decades earlier lauded Graham’s efforts and portrayed evangelicals as quintessential American patriots. For Americans eager to find a religious justification for their struggle against the “atheistic” Soviet Union, Graham offered an inspiring message.

Graham tried to position himself as a representative of a broad religious and political consensus, and thus attempted to remain (or at least appear) above partisan politicking. In 1954, he declared himself “completely neutral in politics.” That may have been his public stance, but unbeknownst to most of his admirers, Graham was intensely political in private, and developed a close relationship with Republican leaders in Washington. Graham was a registered Democrat, as were most Southern Baptists from North Carolina, but during Truman’s second term in office, he, like many other Americans, lost patience with the president. In 1951, after he had publicly criticized Truman’s handling of the Korean War and complained about the “staggering national debt,” he decided that only General Dwight Eisenhower could provide the leadership necessary to reassert the nation’s dominance in the Cold War. The evangelist wrote to the general in late 1951, urging him to run for president. “Upon this decision could well rest the destiny of the Western World,” Graham told Eisenhower. The general was not persuaded. He insisted that he was going to stay out of politics. Graham held out hope that Eisenhower might change his mind, but he also began signaling that evangelical voters would be open to overtures from the GOP in 1952—if the Republicans agreed to back their views on foreign policy and moral legislation. “The Christian people of America are going to vote as a bloc for the man with the strongest moral and spiritual platform, regardless of his views on other matters,” Graham said in October 1951. “I believe we can hold the balance of power.”<sup>34</sup>

When Eisenhower finally entered the race, Graham was elated. The popular five-star general projected the image of a strong leader who would stand up against international communism, which would have been enough to endear him to Graham. But when the evangelist learned that Eisenhower’s Democratic opponent, Adlai Stevenson, was a divorced Unitarian, he had even more reason to promote Eisenhower’s candidacy. He used the Republican campaign slogan, “Clean up the mess in Washington,” in a few of his sermons in 1952, and he spoke of the need for a “new foreign policy” issued by a “strong spiritual leader.” He also met with Eisenhower on several occasions before and after the election, and developed a lasting friendship with the former general and his stridently anticommunist running mate, Richard Nixon. He viewed Nixon as “most sincere” and a “splendid churchman,” while Eisenhower was a “man who believes in prayer.”<sup>35</sup>

At a time when American religiosity was at an all-time high, Eisenhower recognized the importance of having a spiritual adviser of Graham’s stature.

Although the general had grown up in a devout family—he had been named after the late-nineteenth-century evangelist Dwight L. Moody—he had strayed somewhat from his childhood faith and had not lived a particularly pious life. At the time of his election to the presidency he did not belong to a church. Eisenhower’s campaign staff urged him to find a church to attend, but he rebuffed their entreaties, saying that to begin going to church in the middle of a campaign would be hypocritical. Yet as soon as Eisenhower won the election, Graham persuaded the new president to begin attending a Presbyterian church in Washington, a practice that soon became a weekly habit for him. Less than two weeks after the inauguration, Graham baptized the new president in a private White House service.<sup>36</sup>

Realizing the power of religious devotion to unify the nation in the Cold War, Eisenhower stepped eagerly into his new, unofficial role as high priest of America’s anticommunist civil religion. The Cold War, he told the press a few days before his inauguration in January 1953, was a “war of light against darkness, freedom against slavery, Godliness against Atheism.” As the nation’s new leader of the fight against “atheistic” communism, Eisenhower took the unprecedented step of personally leading a prayer at his own inauguration—rather than asking a member of the clergy to do it—and at the suggestion of his Mormon secretary of agriculture, he began every Cabinet meeting by invoking the favor of the Almighty. In 1953, he inaugurated a new tradition by becoming the first president to attend the National Prayer Breakfast. When he met with NAE president Frederick Fowler and other members of the organization at the White House, Eisenhower used the occasion to call for “national reaffirmation of faith in God, the Author of man’s freedom, repentance from sin and a new dedication of the task of bringing freedom to the world.”<sup>37</sup>

Eisenhower’s legislative actions gave credence to his claim that he was, as he told Graham, leading “America in a religious revival.” When the pastor of the Presbyterian church that Eisenhower attended suggested that Congress needed to add the words “under God” to the pledge of allegiance in order to differentiate American schoolchildren from “little Muscovites,” Eisenhower immediately embraced the idea, and members of Congress from both parties quickly passed a bill in time for Eisenhower to sign it on Flag Day in 1954. “This modification of the pledge is important,” Homer Ferguson (R-MI), the bill’s sponsor in the Senate, told his colleagues, in language that expressed a widespread view in Washington, “because it highlights one of the real fundamental differences between the free world and the Communist world.” Using similar reasoning, Congress passed—and Eisenhower signed—legislation in 1955 requiring the words “In God We Trust” to appear on all of the nation’s

coinage and printed currency. The following year, they made the phrase a national motto.<sup>38</sup>

At a time of unprecedented cooperation between the federal government and the nation's religious leaders, Graham believed that the Eisenhower administration offered evangelicals a chance to effect a moral and religious revival in the nation through the office of the president. On several occasions Graham discussed with Eisenhower the chief executive's duty to "contribute to a national spiritual awakening." After one such meeting in 1954, Graham could hardly contain his joy. "Millions of Americans thank God for your spiritual leadership," he told Eisenhower. Near the end of Eisenhower's second term in office, Graham compared the president to Lincoln, saying that he would "go down in history as one of our greatest presidents," because he had "put a spiritual emphasis in the White House."<sup>39</sup>

Eisenhower was never a full-fledged evangelical, despite his association with Graham. He believed in religious devotion as a foundation of American freedom, but he conceived of religion in far more ecumenical terms than evangelicals did. As the first American president to participate in a ceremony dedicating a Muslim mosque, and as a proponent of "Judeo-Christian civilization" at Jewish cultural events, Eisenhower had no interest in endorsing evangelicals' belief that Jesus was the only way to salvation. He considered all religions equally valid, as long as they supported American democracy and anticommunism. "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith," Eisenhower said on several occasions, "and I don't care what it is." Eisenhower's generic endorsement of faith was hardly a controversial statement, of course. But that did not mean that it was meaningless. Eisenhower, as a Cold War president, spoke about the link between religion and democracy on so many occasions that it seems clear that he viewed himself as a national pastor in a troubled time—a person who, if he did not lead a spiritual revival in the way that Graham expected, at least tried to bolster the nation's spiritual life in order to promote national unity.<sup>40</sup>

Although the president was wary of becoming too closely associated with Graham's particular religious views, he recognized that the evangelist could be politically useful for his reelection campaign. When Graham sent Eisenhower a letter shortly after the 1956 Republican convention, offering to "do all in my power during the coming campaign to gain friends and supporters for your cause," the president forwarded it to the chair of the Republican Party. "It occurs to me that some time during this campaign we might want to call on him for a little help," Eisenhower noted.<sup>41</sup>

Evangelicals gave Eisenhower strong support in 1956, just as they had four years earlier. At least 60 percent of evangelical voters supported

Eisenhower in each campaign. *Christianity Today*, which Billy Graham founded in 1956 and which quickly became the nation's leading evangelical magazine, found that 85 percent of Protestant ministers supported the president's reelection, while only 11 percent intended to vote for Stevenson. A 1960 *Christianity Today* survey showed that of the subscribers who provided their political affiliation, 1,977 were Republicans and 658 were independents, while only 482 were Democrats. Evangelicals—at least those in the North—were feeling very comfortable in the Republican Party.<sup>42</sup>

At times, Graham thought that he should not only campaign for the president, but also play a role in shaping his policies, particularly urging him to take an even more aggressive stance against international communism. “I have been praying a great deal for you in the last few days as you wrestle with the Indo-China problem,” Graham wrote to Eisenhower in May 1954, when the president deliberated over America's role in Vietnam. “Whatever your ultimate decision, I shall do my best through radio and television to make my contribution in selling the American public. My private opinion is that Indo-China must be held at any cost.”<sup>43</sup>

Eisenhower may not have given much credence to Graham's unsolicited advice on foreign affairs, but members of his administration recognized the value of Graham's services as an international diplomat. Vice President Nixon arranged meetings between Graham and various world leaders. One reporter asked Eisenhower in 1957 if he was spending time with Graham because he wanted to use his services in “mobilizing the religious countries of the world against communism.”<sup>44</sup> Eisenhower brushed off the reporter's question, but he could not easily dismiss the idea behind it—that Graham had come to symbolize, in the minds of many Americans, the religious battle against communism.

## GRAHAM AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Graham's centrist position on civil rights also positioned him for influence in the Eisenhower administration. Like the president, Graham endorsed a cautious strategy of gradual racial integration that he hoped would result in substantive gains for African Americans without antagonizing southern whites. Beginning in 1953, he insisted that seating at all of his crusades be racially integrated, even in the South. When the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that “separate but equal” schooling was unconstitutional, Graham lauded the decision and praised African Americans who were involved in the struggle to integrate public schools. “The Bible speaks strongly against race discrimination,” he said in October 1956.

He invited Martin Luther King, Jr., to lead a prayer at his New York crusade. When King led the mostly white, evangelical audience of nearly one hundred thousand people in a prayer for “a brotherhood that transcends color,” it sent a message to the world that Graham endorsed a change in race relations.<sup>45</sup>

In the midst of the Eisenhower administration’s greatest test on civil rights, Graham gave the administration a strong show of support. In September 1957, after Arkansas governor Orval Faubus defied the president by refusing to follow a federal court order to admit African American students to Little Rock’s Central High School, Eisenhower became the first president since Reconstruction to send federal troops to the South to enforce the civil rights of African Americans. Graham tried to defuse the tension by appealing to white southerners to comply with federal policy. He was confident that “all thinking southerners” opposed the violent reaction against integration in Little Rock, and he hoped that the violence would soon end. That same month, he sent a letter of encouragement to Dorothy Counts, an African American high school student in his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina, who had braved the threat of physical danger and harassment by enrolling in a previously all-white high school. “This is your one great chance to prove to Russia that democracy still prevails,” Graham wrote.<sup>46</sup>

As his letter indicated, Graham thought of the civil rights movement primarily in terms of the Cold War. Like many politicians in both parties, he was embarrassed by the Soviet Union’s exploitation of America’s racial problem in its propaganda, and thought that the promotion of civil rights would improve the nation’s image abroad. He genuinely desired advances for African Americans, but because his view of civil rights was so closely linked to his perception of the government’s interests, he could not countenance King’s strategy of civil disobedience. “We have the responsibility to obey law no matter what the law may be,” Graham said in 1960.<sup>47</sup>

Despite his support for civil rights legislation, Graham worried that the Supreme Court could provoke a white backlash in the South if it pressed too forcefully on integration. He thought that gradual, rather than immediate, desegregation provided the best hope for a “sensible program for better race relations.” “If the Supreme Court will go slowly and the extremists on both sides will quiet down, we can have a peaceful social readjustment over the next ten-year period,” he told President Eisenhower in 1956.<sup>48</sup> He was worried that his endorsement of civil rights might lead him into too close an association with “socialists,” as other southerners and fundamentalists labeled the liberal politicians who favored civil rights for African Americans. Even though Graham prayed with King, he never marched with him, and he

continued to insist that individual conversions, rather than political activism, offered the best hope of improving American race relations.

Eisenhower recognized that Graham had earned the respect of many Protestants across the political spectrum and was thus ideally situated to defuse racial turmoil in the South. In March 1956, as the president prepared for his reelection campaign, he urged Graham to meet privately with religious leaders to persuade them to temper the pulpit rhetoric on both sides of the school segregation issue. Graham happily complied with this request. “I had several private meetings with outstanding religious leaders of both races, encouraging them to take a stronger stand in calling for desegregation and yet demonstrating charity and, above all, patience,” Graham reported to Eisenhower in June 1956. “I met with excellent and overwhelming response.”<sup>49</sup>

Although Graham was willing to talk with Christian pastors about civil rights, he cautioned the president against saying or doing much on the issue until after the elections, because he worried that any forceful action would have dire consequences for fledgling southern Republican parties. “I am somewhat disturbed by rumors that Republican strategy will be to go all out in winning the Negro vote in the North regardless of the South’s feelings,” Graham told Eisenhower. “Again I would like to caution you about getting involved in this particular problem. At the moment, to an amazing degree, you have the confidence of white and Negro leaders. I would hate to see it jeopardized.”<sup>50</sup>

Graham had reason to worry. Although the leadership of the South’s two major regional denominations, the Presbyterian Church (US) and the Southern Baptist Convention, endorsed the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board*, several influential pastors in those denominations dissented. Graham’s father-in-law, L. Nelson Bell, a North Carolina pastor, responded to the *Brown* decision with an article titled “Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced,” a phrase that summarized the sentiments of most racial conservatives. W. A. Criswell, the pastor of the twelve-thousand-member First Baptist Church in Dallas, where Graham had placed his membership, likewise opposed the Supreme Court’s decision in spite of his own denomination’s endorsement of the ruling.<sup>51</sup>

But Graham distanced himself from the views of southern conservative pastors and instead allied with northern evangelicals. Although some leaders in the NAE dissented, the organization as a whole endorsed civil rights, at least in the abstract. In 1951, the NAE adopted a resolution advocating “equal opportunities” for all races in housing, education, wages, and commerce—and singling out “the American negro,” in particular, as deserving of

these rights. *Christianity Today* endorsed civil rights, but also published pieces suggesting that Christians did not have an obligation to support racial integration. Most northern evangelicals favored gradual integration as long as it was not socially disruptive, a stance that accorded well with the Eisenhower administration's position.<sup>52</sup> As if to signify that he did not intend for his view on civil rights to challenge the Eisenhower administration, Graham arranged for Vice President Nixon to speak at his New York crusade only two days after Martin Luther King prayed at the event.

As the vice president looked out on the crowd of one hundred thousand people who had filled every seat in Yankee Stadium and spilled out into the outfield, he marveled at the preacher's ability to draw such a crowd—the largest in the stadium's history. Nixon agreed with Graham that something greater than mere talent had drawn these people together and that not only this crusade but the success of the nation itself was dependent on Americans' "deep and abiding faith in God." "We as a people," Nixon told the crowd, "can be only as great as the faith we have in God."<sup>53</sup>

Nixon's appearance at Graham's crusade was a sign that evangelicals had succeeded in making their personal faith a political religion for the nation. Only two decades before, conservative Protestants had been politically isolated, waiting for divine deliverance from a morally corrupt nation that they believed they had little ability to influence. But now, thanks to the Cold War, they had become full participants in the political system, linking their gospel preaching to the aims of the state and finding a welcome reception in the White House. Their moderate position on civil rights facilitated their alliance with the Eisenhower administration, but above all, their opposition to communism made it possible for them to view the president as a spiritual leader. Never before had conservative Protestants become so closely allied with a presidential administration. The formation of the New Christian Right was still two decades away, but by the end of the 1950s, evangelicals had already begun to think of the United States as a Christian nation and the Republican White House as an ally in a righteous cause.