

**The House that Jerry Built:  
An Analysis of the Rhetorical Conceptualization of Religious Identity in the Political  
Sphere by the Reverend Jerry Falwell, Sr.**

MA Capstone in Religion, Politics, and Conflict  
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## Introduction

There is an archetypal story which exists across faith traditions—a chosen people, lost to darkness, finds salvation in a blessing from their divine Lord. Many faith traditions explain this by identifying the world's origins, often at the hands of a divine creator, and then detailing how this creator's creation became so corrupted by human sin. Subsequently, many faith traditions outline how the world was saved—by God, by whatever name he is known, coming to Earth as both mortal and miracle. In many cases, this form of the highest holy leader finds joy and sorrow on Earth. They perform miracles and demonstrate their extra-human origins, and also experience a grueling, torturous, distinctly mortal death. Oftentimes, they conquer the worldly difficulties they encounter with strength, all the way up to their final demise—overcoming the ultimate end: death itself. In traditional Islamic faith, the leader is the prophet Muhammad, who spread the word of one true God, and additionally ascended into heaven. The Egyptian deity Osiris rose from the dead, and through his teachings made it so that followers can inherit eternal life. In Christianity, the true savior, son of God, who died and was resurrected, and through whom all followers can find eternal salvation, is called Jesus Christ.

There is another story, far more modern, and far less divine, that takes place primarily on debate stages, in campaign war rooms, and throughout individual voting booths in American political election cycles. Jesus Christ has found his way into the center of politics for many voters, politicians, and pundits alike. Despite his divine origins, however, Jesus seems to have become an ever-present partisan, and many of his staunchest followers, specifically those who identify themselves as evangelical Christians, see him as intrinsically a member of the right-wing conservative political group. This is summed up in a clip from the American sitcom “30 Rock.” When discussing an upcoming Presidential election, the innocent, deeply faithful, Christian

character Kenneth, a product of deep country Georgia, finds himself questioned by his boss as to who he is going to vote for. “Oh, no, I don’t vote Republican or Democrat,” Kenneth replies, “Choosing is a sin, so I always just write in the Lord’s name!” Jack Donaghy, the capitalist, conservative CEO, replies with a smirk: “That’s Republican. We count those.”<sup>1</sup>

The question of how a strong belief in a certain kind of Christianity came to be tied so deeply to the Republican party is complicated, and involves consideration of historical factors dating back to the country’s founding. The interaction between the Christian value-based faith tradition and the American political system can and has covered hundreds of pages of academic texts. Even specifically looking at the rise of the so-called Religious Right, or how one political and religious activist, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, Sr., came to such prominence, could take years of dedicated academic study, especially in consideration of the importance of modern media technology to evangelical Christian popularity, the demographic and rhetorical changes of the American political stage over time, and, especially, the difficult task of conceptualizing what it means to be an evangelical Christian, a term claimed by various groups across the American political spectrum, outside of American electoral consideration, and physically spanning the nation and the globe.

Given these complications, this essay will focus specifically on analysis of Falwell’s theopolitical rhetoric, with additional notation of how his rhetoric is understood within his followership and through some of his specific religious and political endeavors. One small part of the greater question can, in part, be explained by evaluating Falwell’s writing and speeches in the context of his rise as a prominent leader within religion and political activism, specifically as Falwell founded and led one of the most effective political activist groups behind the rise of the

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<sup>1</sup> *IMDB*.

religious right-wing in his 1970s and 80s coalition, the Moral Majority. Additionally, Falwell, Sr. was the main founder of Liberty University, an evangelical Christian University dedicated to promoting the values of Falwell's religious faith tradition in the secular, academic world, as he did with his political activism in the Moral Majority. There are many reasons why he was successful, and there are countless more intricacies explaining the greater evangelical Christian activist movement's intertwining with the Republican party as a whole. However, this essay will focus specifically on the ways in which Falwell's political rhetoric pulled aspects of his follower's interpretation of the evangelical faith, particularly their understanding of value-based language regarding divinity and active faith expression, into secular, political practice. This subsequently constructed the movement as essentially powerful and internally binding, while creating deep divisions between the evangelical expression of faith in the political sphere and the greater understanding of sociopolitical engagement among the broader population and the majority of practitioners of mainline Christian belief.

### *Falwell's Evangelicalism*

In order to understand why Falwell, Sr.'s specific amalgamation of the religious and the political was so deeply motivating, one must first consider the specific aspects of evangelicalism that define it as an organizational belief system for followers both inside and outside of their traditional explicit faith expression. These trends include a deep understanding of faith as needing to be expressed passionately and externally in the secular and sociopolitical world, additionally paired with a deep-set doubt of traditional religious expression as inauthentic due to its more rigid conventions, a focus on the transformational power of Christian faith through rebirth, faith development, and recurring faith crises, and the internal tethering of evangelical

beliefs to self-identity and self-understanding alongside a literal interpretation of the Christian relationship with Jesus Christ.

These broad markers of the evangelical Christian faith tradition are interpreted in a specific way by Jerry Falwell, Sr. and subsequently in the faith conceptualization of his followers. The evangelical faith tradition is a wide umbrella, containing many different Christian faith practices which vary in such a way as to reject academic discussion of “evangelicals” as a homogenous group. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, where I will discuss the hallmarks of a narrower group of practitioners of evangelical Christianity, I will use the term “Falwell evangelical,” or “Falwellian,” in order to denote the difference and avoid overgeneralization of the faith practice.

“Evangelical” itself is a difficult term to define, and is claimed by many religious traditions, but the specific vein of the evangelical faith practiced by Jerry Falwell, Sr., the majority of his congregation, and his powerful theopolitical following is restricted by certain demographic factors. The Falwell-evangelical group is overwhelmingly white and resides primarily in the American South. Falwell, Sr. is not the sole reason for the formation of this religious and political grouping, and Falwell evangelicals would likely be additionally interested in and influenced by similar leaders such as Francis Schaeffer, James Dobson, and Billy Graham. Although Falwell-evangelicals span the socioeconomic sector, because of the ways in which their faith is understood by the guidance of Falwell and his contemporaries, Falwell evangelicals are politically conservative, with the understanding of conservative rooted in a “traditional” or “old-fashioned” understanding of America as patriarchal, federal, heteronormative, and morally traditional. Additionally, because of the phenomena discussed below, Falwell evangelicals are deeply interlinked with the Republican party, and provide

political mobilization and support for American right-wing politicians. The evangelical faith tradition is by its very essence difficult to define given its specific rejection of denominations and detailed dogma, and the term “evangelical” encompasses multiple sects of Christianity across various geographic areas and racial lines, with many within America rejecting an intrinsic association between evangelical Christianity and the Republican party, or a political mandate at all. However, for the sake of clarity and comprehension, analysis will be limited to the specific brand of evangelicalism practiced by the group defined above, and these terms may be used interchangeably. Additionally, unless specified otherwise, “Falwell” will refer to the Rev. Jerry Falwell, Sr..

I will begin this essay with a brief introduction to the evangelical faith tradition, as well as hallmarks of evangelicalism generally that are interpreted specifically by Falwell evangelicals. Subsequently, I will introduce Jerry Falwell, Sr. as a historical figure, and show how his interpretation of evangelical value-based systems are constructed and employed Falwell’s rhetoric and conduct, specifically through his use of various key value-based terms in various designations for advantageously applicable purposes. Finally, I will conclude with a brief discussion of how Falwell evangelicalism in practice has manifested on the campus of Liberty University, and what this may mean for the greater intersection of religion, politics, and conflict moving forward.

### *Background on Evangelicalism*

Some of the reasons for the strong association between evangelical identity and political partisanship lies in identifiable tenets of the evangelical faith tradition as practiced by members of the Falwell evangelical strain of the faith. The practice of evangelical Christianity, especially in Falwell evangelicalism, mandates that the religious identity take center stage in all aspects of

the practitioner's life. Part of the practice of the evangelical faith tradition generally is the need to express the faith in every aspect of daily life, with subsequent vigor and consistent signaling.

The term "evangelical" itself comes from the Greek "euangelion," which translates to "gospel" or "good news."<sup>2</sup> An evangelical Christian is, in many ways, seen to be a Christian with a focus on spreading the faith by "evangelizing"- seeking to preach the Gospel to others and convert them to Christianity. In practice, the faith tradition covers a large part of various Protestant denominations of Christianity, including many Baptist, Pentecostal, Reformed, and Charismatic churches, and is often defined as anyone who has been "born again." The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the major representative organization in the United States, defines this group as Christians who "take the Bible seriously and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord," noting that evangelicals are defined by four primary characteristics: "conversionism," the "the belief that lives need to be transformed through a "born-again" experience and a life-long process of following Jesus;" "activism," the "expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts;" "Biblicism," the "high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority;" and "Crucicentrism," a "stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity."<sup>3</sup>

Still, defining the term "evangelical" is a tricky task for most people, academics and religious leaders alike. Indeed, scholars such as historian Mark Noll have noted that, despite the group demonstrating several clear markers of a definable faith tradition, including "conversionism, biblicism, activism, and focus on the cross," evangelical Christianity has still been far from other "easily definable, well-coordinated, or clearly demarcated groups of

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<sup>2</sup> Melton, *Britannica*.

<sup>3</sup> *National Association of Evangelicals*.

Christians.”<sup>4</sup> The group’s history throughout the United States represents a whirlwind of activity inside and outside of traditional church settings. The origins of what is now commonly known as “evangelical Christianity” stem from Protestant traditions in Germany/England, specifically in a multitude of Christian traditions after the Protestant Reformation.<sup>5</sup> Since its origins, evangelicalism has been defined in many ways by what it is not—by their counter-cultural defiance of majority religious norms in order to connect with their faith in the most fulfilling manner. Faith traditions which contributed to the formation of evangelical thought include 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglican voluntarism, marked by the same kind of formation of religious societies and associations outside of traditional churches for deeper faith expression, which are hallmarks of evangelicalism today.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, there is a clear connection to the practices of leaders in European pietism, who led religious groups who expressed their faith in ways marked by a search for the most real, legitimate understanding of Christianity.

Johann Arndt’s “True Christianity,” published in 1610, is an example of the language common in the evangelical faith tradition, discussing the search for and need for “real” faith as opposed to the “formal” traditional religious expression. Arndt highlights an underlying understanding of the evangelical practice when he differentiates the “true” faith from formal traditional practice, which he deems “artificial.”<sup>7</sup> This language underlines the thread running through to modern evangelical practice, which views the truest form of faith expression as those born anew in passion and fervor, a belief system which is set aside from the “artificial” dogmatic Christianity in the ways in which it ignites the “whole believer.” Given this understanding of faith, it is clear how such passionate belief would naturally be channeled into practice outside of

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<sup>4</sup> Hall, *OAH Magazine of History*.

<sup>5</sup> Melton, *Britannica*.

<sup>6</sup> Henry, “Evangelicalism.”

<sup>7</sup> Henry, “Evangelicalism.”



the mind, heart, and body—and, subsequently, outside of the church itself and into the secular world, as believers seek to help as many others as possible join their flock.

Historian Randall Balmer characterizes this trend across “Continental Pietism, New England Puritanism, and the Great Awakening.” The Great Awakening represents the next step in evangelical history: a series of religious revivals that swept the nation in the 1730s and 1740s with a passion never seen before, described as “testify[ing] to a thirst for authentic religious experience.”<sup>8</sup> Evangelical Protestant belief systems further emphasize the physical and tangible reality of their faith in their everyday life, understood through the narrative of re-birth (hence “born-again” Christians) in the context of having their hearts and minds literally transformed by God, primarily in the form of Jesus Christ. The practice of the Falwell evangelicalism faith involves conversion narratives, whereby believers experience a deeply emotional and psychological connection with God in a “faith crisis” whereby they come to the light. Most followers experience multiple conversions, and the “crises” are seen as fundamental changes in the believer both mentally and as a human and believer. Richard Cizek of the NAE clarifies this understanding of a literal Jesus by explaining the realities of the rebirth narrative, and stating that, to the evangelical believer, “you have to have your heart changed by him, by Jesus... hearts ‘have been warmed,’ as John Wesley said, by Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns over matters public and private.”<sup>9</sup> These principles are interpreted in a specifically powerful, yet advantageously malleable way in Falwell evangelicalism.

In reality, the term “evangelical” has changed its meaning over time given its context in the social and political arenas. One religious historian once defined the term in the mid-1900s as “anyone who likes Billy Graham,” alluding to the popular evangelical preacher who himself said

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<sup>8</sup> Hollinger, *The Annual Society of Christian Ethics*.

<sup>9</sup> Cizek, *PBS*.

that he'd "like to ask somebody [what an evangelical is], too."<sup>10</sup> The term within Falwell evangelicalism has currently taken on the definition of a socially conservative voting block for pollsters and a synonym for white Christian Republicans to politicians, despite still retaining its value to religious leaders as a denominational, theological, or spiritual term, potentially referring to the over 40 denominations under the umbrella of the National Association of Evangelicals. After George Gallup conducted a poll in the late 1960s defining the term very simply as anyone who was "born again," he estimated that a third of the nation's eligible voters fell into the category.<sup>11</sup>

The Falwell evangelical identity intrinsically mandates that evangelicals understand every part of their life through the lens of their faith. Essentially, it is not that Falwell evangelicals tend to apply their faith to other sectors of their life—for example, politics—it is that being a Falwell evangelical in and of itself means understanding the need for and consistently utilizing this application. Falwell evangelicalism specifically conceptualizes the world in such a way as to be particularly useful for political mobilization given that integral to the identity itself is the idea that it be a person's primary identity, and thus drive every action—including voting. The evangelical faith tradition, as practiced by Jerry Falwell, Sr. as well as his general followers, additionally understands God as a personal friend existing in every part of a person's world, with important opinions on every subject which should influence Falwell evangelicals' every decision.

### *Falwell as a Historical Figure*

Jerry Falwell, Sr.'s time as a religious and sociopolitical leader cemented him as one of the most important historical figures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, his influence, though

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<sup>10</sup> Merritt, *The Atlantic*.

<sup>11</sup> Merritt, *The Atlantic*.

immense, relied on a core foundation within a specific segment of the theopolitical world, primarily among the brand of evangelical Christians who followed his religious teaching into more secular politics, and additionally among the members of the politically conservative, religious right-wing class which developed and became a dominant force in national and global government today. Although Falwell, Sr. does not exist as the kind of political historical figure who may be known by name by today's youth, this is because his work was not centered on promoting his personal benefit—Falwell instead took actions to gain power and influence in pursuit of the divine mandate he felt to serve his Lord by saving his country from the politically and religiously corruptive forces which he saw in left-wing, liberal politics and the side of religion farther from fundamentalism.

Jerry Falwell, Sr. was an incredibly significant figure, both as a Christian evangelical pastor and a religious, cultural, and political leader. His work within the church garnered a significant following, both within his community in Virginia and across the country and the globe. Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour," which began as a radio show, eventually transitioned into a popular television program, broadcasting sermons, Bible readings, and gospel music for 50 years<sup>12</sup> across nearly 300 broadcasting stations as of 1980.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Road Baptist Church, founded by Falwell, has grown into a massive cultural force, reaching megachurch status with over 22,000 members.<sup>14</sup> Liberty University, the other Falwell-founded bastion of Lynchburg, Virginia, is one of the largest nonprofit universities in the United States, claiming a total

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<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

<sup>13</sup> Horsfield, *Religion Online*.

<sup>14</sup> Applebome, *The New York Times*.

enrollment exceeding 100,000 students<sup>15</sup> as well as the title of “the largest Christian school on the planet.”<sup>16</sup>

Falwell’s legacy is marked by both compassion and controversy, and any understanding of his place in American history is very dependent on one’s source material. Described as a “pioneer among televangelists,” Falwell was beloved in his community, known by his followers as a “capable defender of decency and of godly values.”<sup>17</sup> Often credited as the “chief spokesman”<sup>18</sup> and father of the religious right, Falwell used his public power to promote his spiritual goals, using his private jet and “sprawling media empire”<sup>19</sup> to canvas the country on his self-described journey as a “Champion for Christ.” Repeatedly noted as one of the most influential people in America, Falwell’s death in 2007 was met a funeral attended by roughly 7,000 mourners and eulogies describing him as “a giant of faith and a visionary leader,”<sup>20</sup> a “courageous spokesman” and “prophet of our generation,”<sup>21</sup> and a man “who built and led a movement based on strong principles and strong faith” who “will be greatly missed.”<sup>22</sup> The president at the time of his death, Republican George W. Bush, was “deeply saddened by Falwell’s death” and described him as “a man who cherished faith, family, and freedom.”<sup>23</sup>

Other recollections of Falwell remember his controversies around historical milestones in global politics and popular culture, leading to often negative publicity which he inevitably turned back into opportunities to promote his cause. These instances include his public legal fights and subsequent friendship with pornographer Larry Flynt and “Hustler” magazine over a 1983 ad

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<sup>15</sup> “Liberty University Quick Facts.” *Liberty University*.

<sup>16</sup> “Liberty University.” *Forbes*.

<sup>17</sup> Molpus, *NPR*.

<sup>18</sup> Molpus, *NPR*.

<sup>19</sup> “People & Ideas.” *PBS*.

<sup>20</sup> “Falwell Remembered for Impact on Conservative Movement.” *Fox News*.

<sup>21</sup> Vegh, *The Virginian-Pilot*.

<sup>22</sup> “Jerry Falwell death: Reaction in quotes.” *Politico*.

<sup>23</sup> Grudgings, *Reuters*.

which promoted a fake story of Falwell losing his virginity to his own mother in an outhouse,<sup>24</sup> his promotion of several pseudo-documentaries alleging vast, murderous conspiracies surrounding the Clinton family,<sup>25</sup> and his 1999 attack on the children's television show "The Teletubbies" when Falwell claimed that the show promoted a homosexual agenda "damaging to the moral lives of children" because one character, Tinky-Winky, was "purple- the gay pride color," his "antenna is shaped like a triangle- the gay-pride symbol," and the anthropomorphic fantasy character had a habit of carrying a "magic bag that Falwell's editors thought looked suspiciously like a purse."<sup>26</sup> One of his most public controversies surrounded his statements following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when Falwell was quoted blaming liberal and progressive groups for the horrific attacks, comments for which he later partially apologized:

"The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked...I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American way, I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"<sup>27</sup>

- Jerry Falwell on The 700 Club, September 13, 2001

Less noted in mainstream popular culture, however, are Falwell's deep connections to intensely powerful American leaders and the vast the size of his influential network. Falwell often found himself in the close company of billionaires, celebrities, and political legends, including Presidents Gerald Ford, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush. Falwell was also among the most important allies and advisors to President Ronald Reagan throughout his campaign and presidency, and is often cited as a primary force in the broader evangelical

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<sup>24</sup> Winters, "God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right," 253.

<sup>25</sup> Winters, 365.

<sup>26</sup> Winters, 375.

<sup>27</sup> Goodstein, *The New York Times*.

Christian acceptance of Reagan over the more outwardly and nominally evangelical Jimmy Carter, a Baptist deacon. Falwell's prescient understanding of the ways in which he could spread his message using media, including the postal system, radio, and later television, allowed him to establish a subscription base across the country and innovate on the cutting edge of media influence. Falwell's organizations are recorded as sending out over a million pieces of mail material in 1988, including the beginnings of what would become Liberty University's powerful presence as a remote educational opportunity.<sup>28</sup> His relentless pursuit of publicity in order to spread his message led to his frequent participation in not only television programs and magazines, but additionally high-profile diplomatic trips abroad, key religious leadership conferences, the boards of powerful religious and politically conservative fundraising ministries, and the halls of government.

Perhaps the most relevant of Falwell's creations in regards to his faith-based approach to American politics is the Moral Majority, a political activist group co-founded by Falwell which included a political action committee. The Moral Majority was founded ostensibly as a non-partisan, secular organization, described by Falwell as "a political organization...not based on theological considerations" and "committed to the separation of Church and State," additionally "committed to principles and issues, not candidates and parties."<sup>29</sup> However, the Moral Majority was guided by Falwell and his co-founders' understanding of the governmental leadership needs of the country based on their religiously-minded understanding of the current political situation and the nation's history, and the Moral Majority is widely understood to have been conservative, Christian, and heavily associated with the right-wing Republican party, described by various

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<sup>28</sup> "Fact Sheet for the Chairman, Subcommittee on Postal Operations and Services, Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives," *United States General Accounting Office*.

<sup>29</sup> Falwell, Sr.. "The Fundamentalist Phenomenon." 190-191.

outlets as “a conservative Christian movement,”<sup>30</sup> a “conservative Christian political lobbying group” and “patriarchal protest movement,”<sup>31</sup> a “grass-roots evangelical Christian lobbying and political action movement” which left a “powerful legacy” in “encourag[ing] a formerly apolitical group to become politically engaged,”<sup>32</sup> and “a force to be reckoned with in the Republican Party.”<sup>33</sup>

*Falwell Evangelical Religious Identity in Public and Politics*

In their study of evangelical political engagement, Andrew Lewis and Dana Huyser de Bernardo emphasize why the evangelical identity, especially as in Falwell evangelicalism, is particularly salient in a partisan political setting given the ways in which evangelical theopolitics steers adherents in the conceptualization of their self-identity. Lewis and Bernardo note scholar Nancy Ammerman’s description of religious identities as “constructed and reinforced as individuals engage both secular and religious narratives about that identity.” They further note that scholars studying the social dynamics of political parties have argued that “partisanship is a social-psychological attachment similar to religious identification...religious identity is often established early in life and, once salient, may serve as a mechanism to shape religious beliefs.”<sup>34</sup> This salience is particularly powerful among evangelicals who interact with the American political party system such as those following Jerry Falwell, Sr. because of the demonstrated impact of self-identification and tradition on political decisions.

In statistical analysis of evangelical self-identification and political engagement, Lewis and Bernardo found that evangelical self-identification was significant and important in analysis

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<sup>30</sup> “Falwell Remembered for Impact on Conservative Movement.” *Fox News*.

<sup>31</sup> Flory, *The Conversation*.

<sup>32</sup> Rosentiel, *Pew Research Center*.

<sup>33</sup> Winters, 297.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

of religious affiliation on political preferences, specifically due to their noted understanding of the act of identifying as evangelical as a way to express that identity itself, stating that self-identification is “an especially valuable measure of ‘evangelicalness.’”<sup>35</sup> Notably, although Lewis and Bernardo acknowledge a spectrum of evangelicalism, they note that specifically evangelical Protestant ideas of belonging go “beyond religious tradition or denominational affiliation.”<sup>36</sup> Given that a core characteristic of evangelicalism is the deliberate shedding of denominational categorization, Lewis and Bernardo note that identifying as an evangelical can have a great influence outside of the broader identification as a Protestant Christian, with conceptual and practical outcomes, notably that “being an evangelical may be a foundational social-psychological identity that...influences them beyond their denominational affiliation” and “may [be] utilize[d] as a filter when making political decisions.”<sup>37</sup>

#### *Evangelical Identity in Political Mobilization*

Several key components of the evangelical faith as practiced by Falwell evangelicals make it not only a structure by which its followers understand the world, but additionally a ripe arena for divinely motivated political passion. Studies on the moral formation of the evangelical voter highlight how their faith narratives within the context of their personal identity leads to greater acceptance of an argument for engagement in politics through a religious lens.

A primary reason for the observed phenomenon of Falwell evangelical engagement in politics is due to the innate idea of the evangelical faith as necessarily practiced and expressed in every facet of the believer’s life. This traces back to the fiery revivals of the foundations of evangelical Christianity in American history. The need for religious authenticity in the formation

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<sup>35</sup> Lewis, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.



of what became the modern conservative evangelical movement resulted in a permeation of the faith's structures into a believer's every decision, be it religious or secular, monumental or trivial. This is demonstrated in analysis of evangelical responses to questions regarding formation of political party identification and voting. Research from David P. Gushee and Justin Phillips in 2006 indicates that, compared to other religious traditions within broader Christianity, evangelical voters were more likely to engage American politics from a specifically religious point of view. This study demonstrated that 87% of evangelicals agreed that the President of the United States should have "strong religious beliefs," demonstrating that evangelical voters, a group defined in the study by hallmarks similar to Falwell evangelicals, clearly wanted "a candidate who could articulate his (Christian) faith comfortably and who seemed to integrate it into his life and work in significant and visible ways."<sup>38</sup> Notably, Gushee and Phillips state that this is likely due to "how evangelicals make decisions in everyday life, not just political decisions."<sup>39</sup> Thus, given the power of the Falwell-evangelical identity specifically to believers in every aspect of their lives, the incorporation of secular political ideals into their religious framework can result in a particularly passionate and deeply motivated party.

#### *Evangelical Self-Identity and Understanding of Jesus Christ*

A key aspect of the Falwell evangelical religious tradition which helps to explain the reasoning for expedient evangelical political mobilization is the evangelical Christian understanding of self-identity and the physical and personal relationship which followers understand themselves to have with Jesus Christ. Identifying specifically as a Falwell evangelical is in some ways based on quasi-circular reasoning: intrinsic in being an evangelical is adopting that identity personally and publically. In other words, proclaiming your evangelical faith and

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<sup>38</sup> Gushee, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

<sup>39</sup> Gushee, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

demonstrating its effect on your life is understood to make you more of a Falwell evangelical. Part of this understanding comes from this sector of evangelicalism's understanding of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Evangelical theological tradition emphasizes the importance of intense and physical manifestations of religiosity, in many ways demonstrating the physical power of God, but additionally reaching into an understanding of Jesus Christ as not just the savior of the world, but as each believer's personal friend. This understanding exists in part between the lines of the faith tradition's focus on evangelizing, the physical act of proclaiming the gospel and going out into the world to help as many people as possible hear and share in the good news which has saved the believer's life. This also helps to explain Falwell evangelical understanding of politics, which can be assumed to be seen as yet another stage upon which evangelical Christians can demonstrate, and thus deepen, their faith. Notably, this is not shared by all evangelical Christians, with some, like noted thinker David P. Gushee arguing against the interpretation of political acts as religious in an essay which foreshadows his eventual exit from the evangelical church: "right-center-left language is political, borrowed from the world. We need a Biblically grounded rethinking of our entire engagement in American culture."<sup>40</sup> This distinction, however, is what sets believers such as Gushee apart from the conservative evangelicals whose beliefs were and are heavily influenced by those like Jerry Falwell, Sr..

### *The Re-Birth Narrative*

The conversion or "re-birth" narrative is vital to evangelical self-expression and self-identity generally, and specifically in Falwell evangelicalism in the context of their religious identification and formation of value-based approaches to secular and worldly questions. This narrative is important in the political sense in that it allows for theopolitical leaders to re-frame

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<sup>40</sup> Gushee, *Journal of Law and Religion*.

various moral, ethical, and political questions based around various faith crises. Foundational to the idea of “re-birth” is a fundamental change- you are not the same person as you were before you were saved, and are born anew with a fresh heart and mind. This is important in demonstrating the power of God as understood by the Falwell evangelical faith tradition, and further allows for specific political goals given how the re-birth narrative can eliminate past issues by incorporating them into a body and personhood which is shed in rebirth, and thus no longer of consideration. In practice, this understanding can actually render bad actions in a believer’s past not only not disqualifying, but in fact important and validating of leadership through the ways in which an intensely sinful past demonstrates the power of conversion by Jesus Christ to overcome even the greatest of obstacles.

#### *Lack of Denominations/Categorization*

The Falwell evangelical rejection of denominational categorization is particularly powerful when used in the context of mobilization. The emphasis on feeling the religious experience, as opposed to learning it from dogmatic study of scripture or regimented catechism, allows for a wide variety of religious interpretations which can be considered equally valid within various evangelical contexts. This is the heart of the idea of Falwell’s use of terms which I dub “selectively malleable” later in this essay. Evangelicalism itself was born of fundamentalist revivals based on a rejection of the intense categorization of traditional churches, and many Falwell evangelical Christians reject the idea of categorization via traditional denominational distinctions, choosing to instead focus on the ideas of re-birth experiences, the inerrancy of the Bible, and the need to spread the word of God through evangelizing as markers of who can call themselves a member of the evangelical faith. In discussion of what it means to be evangelical, historian Mark Noll describes this understanding of the evangelical faith tradition by noting that

evangelical is a word that “can be used to transcend denomination...the word is plastic. The concept is not precise.”<sup>41</sup> Noll further describes the permeability of the barrier separating evangelical Christians such as Falwell evangelicals from the greater body of Christians by emphasizing that the term “does designate a limited range of beliefs and practices,” but is different from recognized denominational terms like “Presbyterian or Roman Catholic, because its designation is for a certain characteristic way of being religious.”<sup>42</sup>

This conception of Falwell evangelical self-identity is echoed in discussions of certain political leaders as legitimately or illegitimately evangelical. President George W. Bush, a conservative Republican who garnered significant evangelical support, was certainly religious, and is often identified as one of the most openly religious presidents in the country’s history.<sup>43</sup> However, he notably was raised in the Episcopal Church, and later in life became a member of the United Methodist Church—two denominations occasionally, but not consistently, associated with the idea of being an evangelical Christian. However, Falwell evangelicals who supported Bush understood him to be one of their own, as noted by evangelical editor Steve Waldman: “If you look at the definition, the characteristics of an evangelical, he pretty much fits it. He talks about having a personal relationship with God. He talks about having had a transformational experience. He talks about the centrality of the Bible in his life.”<sup>44</sup>

#### *Focus on Charismatic Leadership*

The Falwell evangelical approach to scripture and tradition, specifically the focus on expression of religion other than through actual study of scriptural texts, in part explains the

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<sup>41</sup> Noll, *PBS*.

<sup>42</sup> Noll, *PBS*.

<sup>43</sup> “People & Ideas.” *PBS*.

<sup>44</sup> Waldman, *PBS*.

emphasis within the Falwell evangelical faith tradition on following specific leaders within the movement and subscribing wholeheartedly to their interpretations of various aspects of Christianity. The ways in which this leadership, as well as other aspects of the ways in which Falwell evangelical Christians self-identify within sociopolitical dynamics, explains why they engage in politics with particular energy, as is exemplified by Gushee and Phillips in their discussion of evangelical voters after the 2004 Presidential election. Gushee and Phillips establish that conservative evangelical political activists have been “highly active and visible,” characterizing evangelical Christian political groups as interconnected parachurch organizations which are large, powerful, and garner significant consideration at the highest levels of US politics.<sup>45</sup> These groups are nominally religiously based and gain membership through church-based activism, but have a considerable portion of their mission dedicated to “advocat[ing] for religious values in the political process.”<sup>46</sup> Specifically, Gushee and Phillips note the importance of concentrated leadership within the groups, stating that the groups are “customarily built around charismatic founder-leaders who become inextricably identified with the structures that they create...they play a hugely influential role in [Falwell] evangelical life and are often looked to as both convictional gate-keepers and authoritative emissaries of the community to the outside world.”<sup>47</sup> Gushee and Phillips characterize these leaders as rising to prominence due to a combination of various abilities, including media exposure, organizational ability, and perceived expertise, and subsequently list among the most influential of these leaders the founder of the Moral Majority—Jerry Falwell, Sr.

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<sup>45</sup> Gushee, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

<sup>46</sup> Gushee, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

<sup>47</sup> Gushee, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

## Jerry Falwell, Sr.'s Rhetoric and Belief Interpretation

### *Background on Jerry Falwell, Sr.*

Jerry Falwell, Sr., was far from the only important evangelical leader of the last 100 years. However, his specific engagement in public politics, as well as the distinct ways in which his rhetoric re-interpreted evangelical narratives within a political sphere, solidifies him as a keystone leader in the movement and an extremely consequential voice in the solidification of white evangelical Americans as conservative, and especially Republican, voters.

Key to understanding Falwell's undertakings is a review of his background and the core religious beliefs from which his entire political and social persona grew. Falwell was born into a religiously divided household in 1933 to Carey Falwell, his agnostic, alcoholic father, the successful one-time bootlegger son of Falwell's strictly atheist paternal grandfather.<sup>48</sup> Falwell's mother, Helen, was a fundamentalist Christian who gave up church attendance in favor of tuning in to religious radio shows on Sundays while her children slept or listened at her feet. A firm, religious mother, Helen reportedly prayed daily for her husband and son's conversions to her faith, hoping (with good cause) Jerry's exposure to the "Old-Fashioned Revival Hour" would stick. Carey, on the other hand, looked down on religion, as his family had since their wealth and stature rose in Lynchburg from first a stagecoach business to bootleg alcohol distribution during Prohibition. Some of this cynicism may be linked to Carey Falwell's alcohol dependency following difficult family circumstances, having murdered his own brother during a drunken fight two years before Jerry's birth. Although he was acquitted based on self-defense, his family reported a deep disturbance in the Falwell patriarch that left him forever changed. In fact, Falwell alludes to his father's family's distrust of religion due to personal tragedy in Jerry's

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<sup>48</sup> Beveridge, *Associated Press*.

grandfather's life, as he watched his wife, Carey's mother, lose a slow and painful battle with cancer despite countless prayers. Jerry Sr.'s grandfather lost faith in God after that.<sup>49</sup>

Although Falwell, Sr. did not inherit his religion from his father, Jerry Sr. inherited his father's savvy business acumen and caustic sense of humor. An avid prankster, Carey Falwell was famous among Jerry's friends for his pranks, which sometimes went over the line, including sending soup to an employee which he had made out of the employee's own cat, and additionally firing his ever-present pistol near the feet of one of Jerry's friends (ostensibly to kill a fly) to give the boy a scare as he entered the Falwell home. Jerry Falwell paid homage to his father in his affinity for pranks as well, starting with letting a snake loose in his fifth-grade classroom<sup>50</sup> and, later, famously noted by Liberty University students as having an extra-loud horn in his SUV to surprise students, as well as carrying firecrackers in the pockets of his ever-recognizable black suit.<sup>51</sup> Falwell had a history of hot-wiring associate's cars and driving them a few blocks away to confuse his friends, and even surprised his friend Bob Jones, founder of Bob Jones University, with a stink bomb under his chair at a pastor's conference.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, Falwell saw firsthand the opportunities brought to the small town (and his father's business and sociopolitical interests) from the inclusion of celebrities and popular culture—the Liberty founder saw his father turn his sixth-grade education into huge success by promoting popular bands while running a variety of businesses. These ventures which included everything from dance halls and cockfighting to a service station and bus line, and promotional efforts included bringing famous escape artists Harry Houdini down to small-town Lynchburg, Virginia. His father's legacy of both alcohol issues and a generous hand for charity left Falwell, Sr. with a special place in his heart for those

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<sup>49</sup> Beveridge, *Associated Press*.

<sup>50</sup> Winters, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Roose, *Mental Floss*.

<sup>52</sup> Roose, *Mental Floss*.

suffering from alcohol addiction, founding the Elim Home for recovering alcoholics in 1959 just miles from Liberty's campus.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, Falwell also likely learned much of his distaste for so-called "elites" from a father who resented the Lynchburg social scene, which refused the family high status due to the semi-illegal nature of some of their businesses. Falwell's family was a firm example of "old-fashioned" rural values—Falwell describes his father as "an atheist, a racist, and an Anti-Semite" whose refusal to believe in hospitals and Western medicine led to the death of Falwell's sister in 1931 from complications of her easily preventable appendicitis.<sup>54</sup> Notably, however, after his own conversion, Falwell describes his father's personal failings and problems as a tragic missed opportunity for evangelizing, stating that "I am convinced that my father would have accepted God's forgiveness gladly during those long miserable years of his unforgiven guilt, but nobody stopped him long enough to make him listen."<sup>55</sup>

Jerry Falwell, Sr. grew into a hard-working, successful young adult, earning straight A's and athletic prowess as a skilled baseball and football player. Jerry's incredible memory led him away from the farm work, which he left to his twin brother, and more into his books and sports. The dogged work ethic and obsession with success which defined his later activities began at a young age. When Falwell lost the state spelling bee in high school due to an unfamiliar word, instead of settling for his second-place finish, Falwell reportedly hunted down a college dictionary and read the whole book.<sup>56</sup> Outside of the classroom and sports fields, however, Falwell was mischievous and sometimes dangerous, putting reptiles and rats into disliked teacher's desks and classrooms, tying up his gym teacher with the help of his friends and abandoning him in the basement of the school, and getting into fistfights with boys from other

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<sup>53</sup> Roose, *Mental Floss*.

<sup>54</sup> Beveridge, *Associated Press*.

<sup>55</sup> Falwell, Sr. "Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography," 121.

<sup>56</sup> FitzGerald, *The New Yorker*.



towns trying to take his female classmates on dates, as well as spending days away from home in what he later characterized from the pulpit as “places it’s not necessary to talk about, doing things it’s not necessary to talk about.”<sup>57</sup> A natural leader, Falwell was the captain of his high school football team his senior year, although his penchant for stealing lunch tickets from the cafeteria and handing them to his teammates under the table eventually prevented him from giving the speech he would have given at graduation as the school’s valedictorian.

However, all of this changed in Jerry’s second year in engineering at Lynchburg College, when a trip with friends to the Park Avenue Baptist Church, ostensibly to try to meet girls, led Falwell to come across both the woman who would eventually become his wife and the vocation which would eventually become his profession. After the service, Falwell and some of his friends found themselves “called to the altar,” and, according to Falwell, found and accepted Christ. Falwell describes getting his “salvation established” from January to March of 1950 under the guidance of a youth pastor, and, after reading some of the Bible, attending services, and engaging in church activities from March to July, Falwell completed “the process...that would lead to spiritual growth and full-time Christian discipleship.”<sup>58</sup>

Falwell’s experience at Park Avenue Baptist Church, however, was a conversion with a uniquely Falwell twist on it. Although he cites this moment as his conversion in later telling of his exodus out of sin and entrance into faith, Falwell reportedly had been to other, non-Evangelical churches before Park Avenue Baptist, and said that, in addition to looking for cute girls, he partially attended services the night of his “conversion” given his own interest in starting a church himself. Falwell further characterized his own change within the church as without “moral or spiritual turmoil,” but, in fact, a career decision, finding his first actual faith

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<sup>57</sup> FitzGerald, *The New Yorker*.

<sup>58</sup> Falwell, Sr. “Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography,” 115.

crisis when his attempts to begin a Sunday-school class at Baptist Bible College, where he transferred, initially failed, with barely one student attending.<sup>59</sup> After praying and “crying out to God,” Falwell turned the class into a success, due to, in his own telling, divine aid, but additionally due to his decision to spend Saturdays at local parks and playgrounds looking for 11-year-olds to join his class.<sup>60</sup> His chance encounter with Macel Pate, the future Mrs. Jerry Falwell, was also more complicated than the divine meet-cute described in biographies and stories since. When Falwell transferred to Baptist Bible College, Macel, the lovely church organist at Park Avenue Baptist Church, was engaged to another man— Falwell’s roommate. Determined to “get the other ring off her finger,”<sup>61</sup> Falwell offered to deliver his roommate’s love letters to Macel to the post office— and instead tore them up and delivered them to the trash.<sup>62</sup>

It is impossible to guess what devotion to God or politics Jerry Falwell, Sr. carried in his heart of hearts. Although most of his life’s work points to a genuine belief in the evangelical faith tradition and a desire to bring his interpretation of God’s love into the lives of as many people as possible, his work, consciously or by chance, specifically fit into the unique grooves of the evangelical faith tradition in such a way as to produce directable, passionate political mobilization rooted in evangelical self-identity. One historian of Falwell’s fundamentalist rhetoric characterized Falwell’s place in the politics by stating that Falwell is best understood as “a man distinctly protected and blessed, because he invariably gets away with things he ought not and gets what he wants at the expense of others.”<sup>63</sup> A primary example of this is the ways in

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<sup>59</sup> FitzGerald, *The New Yorker*.

<sup>60</sup> FitzGerald, *The New Yorker*.

<sup>61</sup> Fitzgerald, *The New Yorker*.

<sup>62</sup> Roose, *Mental Floss*.

<sup>63</sup> Winters, “God’s Right Hand.”

which Falwell's sinful past, instead of disqualifying him, was made to serve as a valuable narrative tool which legitimized his conversion and furthered his establishment within the evangelical community. Falwell recounts his past, as well as the story of his conversion, in a way that appeals to the Falwell evangelical understanding of God as all-powerful, personal, and individually motivating, beginning the underlying work of Falwell's teaching which points listeners towards engaging with their religious views in the secular world.

### *Analyzing Falwell's Rhetoric*

Semantic range analysis, which consists of analysis of the number of meanings assigned by listeners to various value terms in value-based traditions,<sup>64</sup> provides a framework primarily designed to understand group dynamics for public policy and peace-building, such as religious faith traditions. However, this approach to rhetorical evaluation can help provide a framework by which Jerry Falwell, Sr.'s writing, speeches, and interpretation can be understood as particularly poignant both internally and externally to the evangelical listener. Falwell utilizes many of the same "value terms" over his career, and understands them to have a relatively low semantic range, essentially portioning under the assumption that his verbiage adheres to the very specific understanding of the moral and ethical world his evangelical followers' theological conceptualization. However, the power of Falwell's utilization comes in terms which I have come to categorize as "selectively malleable," phrases which evoke a strong response based on Falwell's emphasis on their importance to evangelical self-identity, but with a more vague or veiled direct interpretation based on what is socially and politically expedient to the group or Falwell in context. In other words, these phrases are denoted as having very low semantic range values, and are meant to be strictly interpreted and understood as part of a greater powerful

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<sup>64</sup> Ochs, "Religion Without Violence.

evangelical mandate. However, what they actually mean can be shifted over time based on Falwell's use of them in context. It is understood that they are powerful and evoke a response, but they are not actually defined specifically, which allows for this response to be pointed in whatever direction is most advantageous for Falwell at the time.

Falwell's rhetoric and historical influence within his followers' understanding of their faith, politics, and the interaction of these two spheres led to the formation of Falwell evangelicals as a powerful voting block and force in American political discourse. Some examples illustrated below include his interpretation of evangelical hallmarks, specifically the re-birth and faith crisis narratives in Falwell's definition of his positions over time, his separation and re-incorporation of "moral" and "political" issues, his conceptualization of Falwell evangelical understanding of America and God's chosen American people, and his savvy use of the media and the groups he founded as forms of "evangelizing" as influenced by his incorporation of more nominally secular business acumen. Analysis of Falwell's rhetoric regarding multiple salient topics over his career as a public figure demonstrates how his integration of political activism and the Falwell evangelical religious belief system—specifically, his use of certain terms within Falwell evangelical faith narratives as selectively malleable within a broader sociopolitical context—allowed for Falwell to reach great heights in both the religious and political worlds, especially where they overlap. Falwell framed his interpretation of hot-button political topics as a community leader, including such issues as race and activism, the American political system, and involvement in political activism in general, by using specific portions of Falwell evangelical faith narratives. These structures include traditions mentioned above such as the re-birth narrative, the trust in charismatic leadership, and the nebulous nature

of “evangelical” as a sub-group, further designating key value ideas within those narratives as selectively malleable based on Fawell’s particular goals and motives over time.

### *On Racial Justice*

Falwell’s explanation of various sociopolitical decisions through the lens of a rebirth or faith crisis narrative demonstrates the power of his leadership through these stories in intertwining his political ambitions with religious motivation. The actual morality of this framing cannot be deduced given how personal the experience of rebirth and faith crisis is to believers as it is a direct and intimate change caused by God himself. However, regardless of the motivation for this framing, this narrative construction allowed for Falwell to build an identity around his political beliefs interpreted within the hermeneutic structure of evangelical understanding, which allows for forgiveness and complete transformation in the presence of the call from God.

One example of Falwell’s framing of sociopolitical ideological change through the rebirth narrative is his approach to ideas of segregation and racial justice. Falwell’s espoused beliefs in the earlier part of his career were definitively pro-segregation. Part of this is likely due to his upbringing in a southern state and within a deeply segregated community, with specific and documented racist ideology coming frequently from his father.<sup>65</sup> Although Falwell was clear in his understanding of the equality of Black Americans in God’s eyes as souls, he was equally staunch in his understanding of the division between the races as divinely mandated: “the soul of the negro is just as valuable in the sight of God as the soul of the white man...[but] when God has drawn a line of distinction, we should not attempt to cross that line.”<sup>66</sup> Falwell was opposed to the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, stating in a sermon that integration was immoral based on his evangelical tradition’s

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<sup>65</sup> Legg, *Liberty University*.

<sup>66</sup> Legg, *Liberty University*.

understanding of both sociopolitical and theological issues. Falwell opposed integration based on an argument that fused opposition to communism and the Hamitic curse, a theological narrative which argues in favor of racial segregation based on the biblical curse by Noah of his son Ham in the book of Genesis. Specifically, Falwell used scriptural analysis which he argued “proved the God-ordained segregation of races,”<sup>67</sup> stating that God would punish anyone who “persist[ed] in tearing down God’s barriers.”<sup>68</sup> Importantly, Falwell argued that the decision in *Brown* was indicative of a failure to properly include religious consideration and guidance in every decision by the Supreme Court: “We have left God out of decisions altogether. If Chief Justice Warren and his associates had known God’s Word and had desired to do the Lord’s will, I am quite confident that the 1954 decision would never have been made.”<sup>69</sup>

In his discussion of integration, Falwell’s rhetoric demonstrates his use of selectively malleable terms designed to elicit a specific reaction from the evangelical listener:

The theory of communism is social equality—but there is no such thing. Souls are of equal value and importance, but that is as far as we can go. The true negro does not want integration. He realizes his potential is far better among his own race. Souls are of equal value and importance, but that is as far as we can go. Who then is propagating this terrible thing? ... Finally, we see the Devil himself behind it. What will integration of the races do to us? It will destroy our race eventually.

-Jerry Falwell, Sr.

In this text, Falwell uses several terms which are designed to evoke a specific reaction among his listeners. The clear reference to communism and “social equality,” and the immediate subsequent denial of their legitimate existence, is a way in which Falwell tees up two terms

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<sup>67</sup> Legg, *Liberty University*.

<sup>68</sup> Legg, *Liberty University*.

<sup>69</sup> Legg, *Liberty University*.

understood to represent fundamentally un-American and satanic values. Falwell ties these ideas to integration and subsequently denigrates them as untenable, especially by bringing in an allusion to “souls” in explaining why integration could exist in the physical world but is not any indication of divine discrimination. Importantly, Falwell formulates an allusion to the idea of “our race” in direct juxtaposition with the propagation of the integrationists as agents of the Devil. In this way, Falwell makes it so that segregation is in fact in accordance with God’s divine mandate, and, following that logic, those who argue for integration are operating under a form of demonic possession. In the use of “the races” as opposed to “our races,” Falwell continues this narrative by drawing upon the background evangelical principle of inclusion as selectively permeable— “our race” is conceptualized to be understood as the specific evangelicals who subscribe to Falwell’s interpretation of the faith, thus those chosen by God and given divine blessings and holy directives. By contrast, “the races” suggests other groups which are intrinsically not God’s people, thus fundamentally different, worse, and guided by the Devil. Although Falwell does not specify who “our race” is, and declines to use any terminology related to physical appearance, belief systems, or citizenship, his narrative constructs integration as a threat which is religiously evil and fundamentally in opposition to God’s will, as well as the safety and sanctity of his people. The lack of clarification, however, is what makes the term selectively malleable—it allows for Falwell to interpret the categorization, and thus utilize the intensity it evokes, based on the sociopolitical context in which it is framed.

Falwell additionally utilized faith crisis framing evocative of the re-birth narrative to explain his eventual change towards the idea of racial integration as he neared the 1980s. Falwell eventually nominally revised his opinion about segregation, claiming that he encountered a black man who, while shining Falwell’s shoes, asked when his family would be able to attend

Falwell's church. According to Falwell, this was an evangelical rebirth experience where Falwell felt the presence of God's spirit speaking to him and instructing him to change his ways and beliefs regarding segregation.<sup>70</sup> A thesis project out of Liberty University demonstrates the evangelical understanding of how Falwell's policy shifts came to be constructed and interpreted using the narratives surrounding God's ability to miraculously change the hearts and minds of true believers. In recounting the story of the shoe shine, an "older black man named Lewis," Falwell is struck by Lewis's request that he be allowed to attend Thomas Road Baptist Church, with various recounting of the story describing Falwell as moved to tears or "speechless for the first time in his life."<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, according to this narrative, a great change overcame Falwell as "the Lord continued to impress upon Jerry that right is right and wrong is wrong."<sup>72</sup> Although this story could be interpreted in many ways as portraying a specifically harmful, demeaning understanding of the Black man, as Lewis is described as crying and essentially begging Falwell to allow him to attend while in the physical posture of a servant, the rebirth narrative interprets the interaction as with Lewis functioning as an agent of the Lord, one of the "friendships and the many other experiences—internationally—the Lord used in the shaping of the man, Jerry Falwell."<sup>73</sup>

This narrative, while nominally innocuous, is another example of Falwell's potentially insidious use of religious framing to justify convenient shifts in his sociopolitical beliefs. Falwell's "crisis" around segregation came at a time when it was generally becoming less socially acceptable to be a segregationist. It is possible that Falwell really did experience a divinely ordained shift in his mindset, and a miraculous action flipped his beliefs upside down.

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<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *Liberty University*.

<sup>71</sup> Johnson, *Liberty University*.

<sup>72</sup> Johnson, *Liberty University*.

<sup>73</sup> Johnson, *Liberty University*.



However, it is equally plausible that, as the segregationist mindset no longer served Falwell politically to help him gain power, he chose to abandon it. Using the language of the evangelical faith crisis renders his positions unimpeachable, both before and after his change. Criticizing his prior beliefs is a moot argument given that, by Falwell's logic of his religious transformation, he is now a fundamentally different person, reborn in a completely new light. Further, to question his new beliefs is to question God himself, given that Falwell attributes this change primarily to divine intervention, instead of, perhaps, convincing arguments by progressive activists or the passing of time, or a more blatant admission that he had to abandon segregation due to changing social rhetoric.

This language also allows for passive support of integration while maintaining the option to support conservative political standpoints unrelated to closing racial achievement gaps or ending racial bias. Falwell's phraseology centers the church, casting racial animus as a "sin" and thereby creating a situation where the only solution is the church itself— Falwell's church, specifically. In this way, Falwell has changed a situation which could have chipped away at his legitimacy by casting him as a "flip-flopping" politician into an opportunity to further his own goals and grow his church, and, consequently, his personal social and political influence. This language additionally casts racism as an issue of individual hearts and minds, allowing for simultaneous support of anti-segregation alongside condemnation of wider social policy which, logistically, would actually help to improve the day to day lives of marginalized communities. This is echoed in a 1982 interview where, alluding to the issue of his past segregationist beliefs and the racism in his broader community, Falwell reiterated that "Racism is a matter of sin, not skin...only a personal encounter [with God] can save you."<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, narratives

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<sup>74</sup> "Jerry Falwell Talks About Racism." *Tony Brown's Journal*.

surrounding Falwell's history with racial bias and segregation varies based on different sources and likely due to his theopolitical framing. Works out of Liberty University paint him as an anti-racist at heart who was uncomfortable with the racism around him, while those opposed to him, such as alumni of the University of Lynchburg seeking to have his name removed from a building, view him as a promoter of rhetoric representing "racism, bigotry, placism and sexism until the last day."<sup>75</sup>

### *On Entering Politics*

Another important example of Falwell's framing of drastic changes in sociopolitical ideology has to do with his engagement in electoral politics altogether. This narrative revolves around his quasi-rebirth in the context of his faith crisis regarding another one of his selectively malleable terms, which concerns the calling of evangelical leaders to be "soul-winners," particularly within his greater narrative surrounding his otherwise controversial entrance into politics. Falwell additionally utilized the terms "spiritual" and "moral" as selectively malleable within a greater framework alluding to the Falwell evangelical emphasis on the infallibility of the Bible compared to human interpretation, and subsequently in justifying his inconsistent political engagement (with respect to engaging only with particular issues) based on this conceptualization of the correct interpretation of God's will and word. Over time, Falwell used this rhetorical architecture to reframe his "switch" from a separatist view of pastoral political engagement to a complete embedding of his religious beliefs into a greater theopolitical landscape in a more socially, politically, and theologically advantageous format.

His famous 1965 speech, "Ministers and Marches," saw Falwell responding to the civil rights demonstrations led by those such as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Falwell reacted

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<sup>75</sup> "U of Lynchburg Alumni: Remove Name of Jerry Falwell Sr. From Building." *Diverse Education*.

by stating that “Preachers are not called to be politicians, but to be soul winners,” and “[w]hen the 2,000 members of Thomas Road Baptist Church attend our service, they do not hear sermons on communism, civil rights, or any other subject except the gospel of Christ.”<sup>76</sup> This sentiment was echoed in a 1978 statement in an interview where Falwell claimed that he “stay[ed] totally on spiritual issues...I don’t talk politics.”<sup>77</sup> This designation of concerning himself with “spiritual” issues—ostensibly, those affecting morality, and, by extension, the soul—in fact allowed for Falwell to transition into the political landscape with a poignantly directed passion, his language obscuring any potential hypocrisy behind a greater pursuit of championing spiritual morality, no matter the platform. In “Ministers and Marches,” Falwell referred to the Gospel of Matthew’s story of Jesus imparting the “Great Commission” on his disciples: to “make disciples, or, as Falwell puts it, ‘win souls’; baptize; and ‘teach them the Christ-life.’”<sup>78</sup>

Falwell’s use of these terms, specifically of his rhetoric around “soul winning,” changed after Falwell took up his political mantle, a shift most commonly identified with his early-1970s entrance into the discourse surrounding *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>79</sup> The decade from 1970-1980 marked a clear change in Falwell’s trajectory, with the beginning of his forays into the political arena, such as his “I Love America” rallies, and, in 1979, the founding of the Moral Majority, a political organization often described as “a conservative political lobbying group.”<sup>80</sup> Falwell spoke of this shift in an interview in 1982, characterizing his previous animosity towards political engagement of pastors as a misinterpretation of the God’s word in the bible, while still rooting his explanation in his Falwell evangelical understanding of the inerrancy of scripture: “The Bible is

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<sup>76</sup> Winters, 63.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, “God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right,” 173.

<sup>78</sup> Winters, 63.

<sup>79</sup> “People & Ideas.” *PBS*.

<sup>80</sup> Flory, *The Conversation*.

infallible, but we can interpret it wrong.”<sup>81</sup> With this characterization, Falwell once again gives a nod to a nominal form of responsibility for his past actions, but simultaneously re-emphasizes and appeals to the Falwell evangelical understanding of faith crisis and the power of God compared to the fragility morals who make mistakes. Here, Falwell specifically appeals to the idea of consistent demonstrations of man’s ability to misinterpret God’s word, as well as the potency of God’s grace and the intrinsic change in one’s innate being after exposure to the “real,” true content of God’s will. In this sentence, Falwell alludes to the fact that his prior understandings were incorrect, but maintains that there is still only one correct interpretation, and that he has now found it. This broader characterization of text as selectively malleable once again imbibes Falwell’s rhetoric with legitimacy, by implying that his beliefs are divinely mandated, but still leaves the option for these beliefs to change over time depending on variant chronological or cultural contexts.

After his shift into more secular politics, Falwell’s continued in his rhetoric and writing to use selectively malleable language, such as “soul winning,” but re-interpreted the terms based on his newfound understanding of the place of the pastor inside politics. Later in his life, as Falwell entered the partisan sphere, his use of the term “soul winning” came to be an interpretation of the divine mandate to not stay neutral in politics, but instead take the fight for God directly into the political arena. Falwell characterizes his entrance into politics and the founding of his political coalition as fulfilling “the need to have a coalition of God-fearing, moral Americans to represent our convictions to our government.”<sup>82</sup> Later, in a Bible study of various characters in the Bible who were “Champions for God,” Falwell describes the biblical character Joshua as a “champion” who “sought greatness for his country, not for himself” in his faith

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<sup>81</sup> “Jerry Falwell Talks About Racism.” *Tony Brown’s Journal*.

<sup>82</sup> Falwell, Sr.. “Listen, America!” 255.

during battle and trust in God. Falwell further describes the work of the prophet Elisha as a prime example for our “blessed...nation whose God is the Lord” to “win [the poor around the world] to Christ,” and recounts the evangelization and prayer of Paul in the Bible as rendering Paul a “great champion,” as well as “an outstanding evangelist and soul-winner” who “suffered cheerfully” within his attempts to change his own political system.<sup>83</sup>

In “Ministers and Marches,” Falwell uses the term “soul winners” as a deliberate foil to the Christian leadership in the movement for civil rights, outlining his interpretation of “soul winning” as divinely-mandated evangelizing within a church setting. This is understood by Falwell’s listeners as directly opposed to the conceptualization of Christian ideology as demonstrated by those such as Martin Luther King, Jr., who stated that his advocacy was inspired by a Christian mandate to “Preach the Gospel, stand up for truth, [and] stand up for righteousness.”<sup>84</sup> Protesting, demonstrating, and other forms physical advocacy are taken to be explicitly outside of Falwell’s 1965 conceptualization of “soul winning,” with Falwell stating that “we need to get off the streets and back into the pulpits and into the prayer rooms.”<sup>85</sup> Although many who encountered Falwell after his entrance into the political arena saw this speech as a misstep to be explained, Falwell’s language, deliberate or otherwise, in fact proved unquestionably advantageous in the creation of his political ministry. His use of the language of “soul winning” in different settings before and after he became politically active demonstrates the advantages of using this as a selectively malleable term. The term “soul winning” evokes both a religiosity and a militancy in listeners, alluding to the deep, spiritual, and delicate soul of a believer, as well as the powerful rebirth experience by which God’s love triumphed over any sin

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<sup>83</sup> Falwell, “Champions for God,” 132.

<sup>84</sup> Carson, et. al. “The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.”

<sup>85</sup> Winters, 63.

in their hearts. However, this “soul winning” can be tangibly interpreted in a number of ways in wider cultural context, while still remaining a powerful term evoking poignant emotion ripe for direction.

Notably, Falwell framed his evolution into a political as well as a religious activist in such a way as to excuse himself in terminology unavailable to politicians outside of Falwell evangelicalism, utilizing the idea of rebirth which Falwell notes as a powerful force which, in his original conversion, saw him “changing sides...deserting the Enemy and signing up to fight on God’s side.”<sup>86</sup> From Positioning his switch as a faith crisis, a religious experience echoing the Falwell evangelical understanding of the powerful rebirth narrative, allowed Falwell to both inspire and appeal to the greater Falwell evangelical community’s understanding of the power of God’s interference in the human heart and mind, while simultaneously re-directing this passionate response in a direction away from his own credibility. It also allowed Falwell to skirt questions of racial animus once again, justifying criticism of the civil rights demonstrations led by Black Americans as incorrect interpretation of the Gospel, but positioning his own physical rallies as valid expressions of religiosity.

#### *On “Moral” and “Political” Issues*

This strategy is further echoed in Falwell’s interpretation of his various excursions into politics and publicity more broadly as a confrontation of “moral” or “spiritual” issues over the purely “political.” The use of these terms harkens back to the previously-established Falwell evangelical traditions regarding the potency of God’s will and the intense, divine mandate which accompanies God’s designation of something as an issue threatening the core spirit of humanity. Through this framework, Falwell and his followers are not only not hypocritical in their forays

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<sup>86</sup> Falwell, Sr. “Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography,” 130.

outside of the pulpit, but are divinely justified, and, in fact, compelled through a most powerful higher calling to address these issues relentlessly. While the designation of topics as “political” evokes an idea of mortal squabbles far from those of concern to the divine, any topic which is “spiritual” or “moral” (terms which, in Falwell’s selectively malleable utilization, can be used almost interchangeably) directly concerns the will of God and demands action. In this understanding, Falwell is able to engage his listeners with issues that may seem, from the outside, to be almost completely secular or political, such as voting, donating to campaigns and political action committees, boycotting stores, pushing for or opposing various non-religious policies and legislation (such as the SALT II treaty), or supporting non-religious non-profits abroad. Falwell evangelicals will also engage with these topics backed by the force of their divine calling to the arena itself and without any attempt to understand the positions of alternate or opposing groups. Through this understanding, those promoting alternative policy exist outside of the true interpretation of God’s will, and are thus sinful and subsequently inherently illegitimate and not worthy of consideration.

This understanding of “moral” issues and the power behind them is particularly poignant when juxtaposed with issues sorted into a quasi-opposing category, usually referred to by Falwell as “political.” These categories are used multiples times over Falwell’s career as designations used to delineate between issues which demand the church’s support—and thereby mandate focused efforts motivated by spiritual belief—and which issues are outside of the scope of the Falwell evangelical mandate and thus purely unimportant. Those questions existing in the “political” world are addressed within the same framework as the Falwell evangelical understanding of Christian scripture, wherein believers must delineate between “heavenly” and “worldly” obligations. “Political,” “wordly” issues, to Falwell, cannot be allowed to occupy any

space or energy in the face of the urgency of addressing “moral” issues, with “moral” used interchangeably with “spiritual” in such a way as to allow for Falwell to selectively draw certain problems out of the mainstream, “worldly” arena and into the Falwell evangelical sphere. This framework is cited by Falwell in his description of his conversion into evangelical Christianity itself, noting that the pastors who brought him to his faith characterized the world as falling into two “different and competing” overlapping “worlds:” the world of man, “run by the Enemy, Satan,” and “God’s world,” which was “spiritual.” This framework renders the language of “moral” and “spiritual,” as opposed to “political,” like that of “soul winning,” is present repeatedly in Falwell’s discussion of his entrance into politics despite his previous criticism of religious leaders taking up the political mantle, such as in a justification of his “I Love America” rallies, where Falwell noted that the rallies were gravely important given the need to address spiritual issues causing American decay: “I see the church getting very involved in moral issues in the next few years.”<sup>87</sup>

This framing is advantageous given the freedom it allows Falwell and his followers to not only imbibe their actions within mainstream politics with the purity of purpose and intense importance of solving threats to their moral souls, but further pick and choose which issues to which this framework is applied in such a way as to close off critics and avoid complications. This construction allowed Falwell to remark that, in regards to his 1978 book, “How You Can Help Clean Up America,” he intended to “state totally on spiritual issues” such as abortion and individual sexuality, but avoid “New Right” causes which were purely secular and “political,” such as the Panama Canal.<sup>88</sup> When crediting a fellow religious political activist Francis Schaeffer with convincing him to “put on the gloves” and enter politics, Falwell alludes to Schaeffer

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<sup>87</sup> Williams, 172.

<sup>88</sup> Williams, 173



appealing to the greater spiritual goals and the need to “win[] the fight against immorality” which outweighed any hesitation about crossing doctrinal or traditional lines.<sup>89</sup> In appealing to his followers across the political and religious spectrum in justifying his political fight, Falwell noted that “the problem of the nation, the real problem, is a moral one...the economic problems, the energy crisis, our international embarrassments are all simply symptoms of the fact that God is angry with us as a nation,” further stating that he had “a divine mandate to go right into the halls of Congress and fight for laws that will save America.”<sup>90</sup>

Falwell’s conceptualization of various political issues as intrinsically spiritual, especially with deliberate equivocation of scriptural stories with more secular political anecdotes, may additionally explain his changing use of quoted scripture in approaching moral issues in the political sphere. Falwell’s framework for his interpretation of various Bible characters as Falwell evangelical “Champions for God,” which allowed Falwell to draw parallels between modern political leaders (and, on occasion, himself) and heroic Biblical figures, was further used to draw parallels between legendary Biblical sin and current “moral” issues. In 1978, Falwell undertook a pro-life campaign which included a book, a nationally televised sermon, and a fund-raising letter all focused on addressing abortion as a moral and spiritual sin. During a May 1978 broadcast of “Old Time Gospel Hour,” Falwell stated that “Abortion is a weapon that has annihilated more children than Pharaoh murdered in Egypt, than Herod murdered when seeking the Christ child, than the Nazis slaughtered of the Jews in World War II.”<sup>91</sup> This deliberate allusion to famous Biblical slaughter draws an image in the mind of Falwell’s listeners equating abortion and the systemic, historical genocide of God’s chosen people, in many cases in a context resulting from

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<sup>89</sup> Williams, 173.

<sup>90</sup> Williams, 176-177.

<sup>91</sup> Williams, 156.

prophecy or related to Christ himself. In a more realist framework, this comparison is tenuous at best, especially with the equally valid and more widely legitimate understanding of abortion as a rare, personal, healthcare decision, and a term which, in its actual, medical meaning, refers to any loss of a pregnancy “from the uterus due to any cause.”<sup>92</sup> This framing served in direct opposition to Falwell’s allusions to scripture in regards to issues promoted by Falwell evangelical political activism, such as in Falwell’s call for an increase in national defense spending: “We must continue to insist that our new government officials provide a strong national defense for our people. Certainly, I believe that God can sovereignly overrule the weapons of human warfare...[but] Jesus told us not to ‘tempt’ God by placing ourselves recklessly in a position of jeopardy and expecting God to bail us out (Matt. 4:6-7).”<sup>93</sup> Falwell further objected to those who disagreed with him using scripture to defend their positions, framing any interpretation of the Bible to support politically liberal causes as obnoxious misinterpretation, such as rejecting Bill Clinton’s popular appeal to voters using Bible quotations as “Misquoting and manipulating the Holy Scripture for political purposes” in a move that “should be offensive to millions of Americans who read and believe the Bible, whether they be Democratic, Republican, or Independent.”<sup>94</sup> This sentiment is echoed in Falwell’s “Future-word” epilogue in “The Fundamentalist Phenomenon,” wherein Falwell describes a bright future for Falwell evangelicals, “true Fundamentalists” who “[refuse] to conform to the standards of a sinful society.”<sup>95</sup> However, this autonomy can hardly be understood to legitimately constitute independence from the traditional two-party American political system, as Falwell immediately goes on to say that Falwell evangelical freedom from the bonds of traditional political structure

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<sup>92</sup> Marks, *MedicineNet*.

<sup>93</sup> Falwell, Sr.. “The Fundamentalist Phenomenon,” 213.

<sup>94</sup> Winters, 357.

<sup>95</sup> Falwell, Sr.. “The Fundamentalist Phenomenon,” 220.

is evidence that “We do our own thinking, and we do not care what liberals think about anything,” thereby implying that any correct interpretation of the political sphere through a religious lens would subsequently intrinsically mandate membership in the right wing.<sup>96</sup>

In justifying the lack of scripture in Moral Majority literature, Falwell stated that he would not quote scripture to the enemy, arguing that “The Bible says don’t cast pearls before swine. Scripture is wasted on gainsayers, so I argue in secular terms entirely. But I use my scriptural understanding to form my opinions on issues.”<sup>97</sup> However, when it was beneficial for Falwell to acknowledge the possibility of using scripture in a malleable way, such as framing his work before he entered the political sphere as a mistaken interpretation of God’s mandate, he fully outlined the potential for hypocrisy, stating “You know, one can make the Bible say almost anything you want to make it say.”<sup>98</sup>

Falwell’s further enforcement of a selective delineation between “moral” and “political” issues allowed him to maintain the sense of urgency which motivated his followers and fundraising base, pick and choose the issues to which he would assign that urgency, justify any religious or secular action in pursuit of those goals, and, importantly, create a space outside of this urgency to house issues which may divide his base, cause him personal difficulty, or require knowledge of complex geopolitical forces. This phenomenon was addressed by one newspaper, the *Christian Century* Editorial, who highlighted their discomfort with Falwell’s strategy in the 1970s and 1980s: “So Falwell has it both ways. He can tell cynical journalists that he has political reasons for some of the things he says and theological reasons for others, including the ‘moral’ issues of abortion and porn. At the same time, his fund-raising letters will brush aside

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<sup>96</sup> Falwell, Sr.. “The Fundamentalist Phenomenon,” 220.

<sup>97</sup> Winters, 138.

<sup>98</sup> “Jerry Falwell Talks About Racism.” *Tony Brown’s Journal*.

that linguistic nuance and continue asking for money to defend the world against immorality and communism.”<sup>99</sup>

### *Use of Homosexuality in Fundraising*

Falwell frequently appealed to the rebirth narrative in discussing sociopolitical issues at the intersection of morality, politics, and religious identity. Similar to his appeal to racism as an issue of “sin, not skin,” Falwell characterized homosexual members of the population using a variety of descriptions over time, consistently condemning homosexuality while maintaining the possibility of a “becoming saved” narrative. In a 1978 broadcast of “Old-Time Gospel Hour” covering “the worst symptoms of [America’s] inner moral decay,” Falwell lambasted pornography, abortion, and homosexuality. The ways in which he framed homosexuality were specifically advantageous to both an internal theopolitical setting, a fund-raising campaign, and his status as a public figure. Within his sermons on “Old-Time Gospel Hour,” Falwell described homosexuality with similar language as that used to describe internal, intrinsic sins of the mind, such as jealousy or greed, condemned in Christian scripture as actions which are sinful against the spirit of Christ. In contrast, when discussing the issue in a fundraising document, Falwell instead characterized “homosexuals” almost as a complete and separate race or species—not potential converts, but instead as a conscious other which threatened the Christian community and thus required donations: “Homosexuals have invaded the classrooms, and the pulpits of our churches...smut peddlers sell their pornographic books- under the protection of the US Constitution!”<sup>100</sup> Analysis during the Clinton administration indicates that use of the narrative regarding “[Clinton’s] efforts to put gays in the military” led the Christian right to a “fund-

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<sup>99</sup> Winters, 295.

<sup>100</sup> Williams, 175.

raising bonanza.”<sup>101</sup> Finally, in the public eye, Falwell appealed to the citizen inside each person practicing homosexuality, stating later that, although he had campaigned in 1978 to “remove all known practicing homosexuals from teaching positions in public schools,” he later “disavowed such views, saying ‘we can certainly be for the civil rights of homosexuals without condoning their lifestyle...I have no objection to a homosexual teaching in the public classroom as long as that homosexual is not flaunting his lifestyle or soliciting students,’” a move described by some Falwell evangelical scholars as “tempering his rhetoric in order to appear more mainstream than he actually was.”<sup>102</sup> In this way, Falwell was able to reframe “homosexuals” as constituting a threat, but a threat which must be addressed through the avenues indicated at Falwell’s chosen time and in his chosen way, and once again preserving his capabilities within the more mainstream political arena.

*On America as a Chosen, Christian Nation*

Falwell’s political rhetoric was especially powerful in how he conceptualized the nation of the United States of America as a chosen space and place for the evangelical Christian God. This narrative once again imbued his political message with a special power and influence to Falwell evangelical leaders and voters, and additionally further helps to explain his particular use of religious language in discussion of nominally secular political questions. Falwell was careful to clarify that the United States of America was not the chosen land described as the Holy Land in scripture, reserving that right for the nation of Israel incorporated into Falwell evangelical conceptions of the Jewish people and the Israeli state. However, Falwell’s conceptualization of American history through the lens of parables of American historical figures, particularly paired with his previous establishment of equivocation between Falwell evangelical understanding of

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<sup>101</sup> Williams, 240.

<sup>102</sup> Williams, 179.

“spiritual” or “moral” issues and the general idea of “good” as diametrically opposed to those which are “corrupting” or “evil,” formed a Falwell evangelical understanding of the United States as a physical and structural extension of the church itself, thus worthy of particular rigorous internal protection and international defense.

Although Falwell was careful to never specify America as a divine space given to the children of God like the physical land of Israel, over his years of preaching and advocacy Falwell repeatedly alluded to the United States as a Christian nation, founded on, sustained by, and at the mercy of a Christian, Falwell evangelical God. In this way, Falwell evangelical understanding perceives the United States as an embodiment of the church itself, thus with the same lines drawn indicating valid, chosen members of the church subsequently drawn to indicate valid, acceptable understandings of the American nation, its contents, its history, and its future.

Key to the Falwell evangelical listener’s understanding of Falwell’s narrative is the subconscious formation of what constitutes an “American.” If the mandate is from God to protect the American country, listeners are subsequently motivated against those who threaten the “American” in-group, begging the question of who makes up the in-group itself. Obviously, Falwell evangelical listeners would conceptualize themselves as the main part of the in-group, especially given the narrative formation above of the United States itself as a representation and manifestation of God’s chosen land. In his 1980 manifesto, “Listen, America!,” Falwell outlines his understanding of the nation’s founding:

I believe America has reached the pinnacle of greatness unlike any nation in human history because our Founding Fathers established America’s laws and precepts on the principals recorded in the laws of God, including the Ten Commandments. God has blessed this nation because in its early days she sought to honor God and the Bible, the inerrant Word of the living God. Any diligent student of American history finds that our great nation was founded by godly men upon

godly principles to be a Christian nation...God is the Author of our liberty, and we will remain free only as long as we remember this and seek to live by God's laws.<sup>103</sup>

*-Jerry Falwell, Sr.*

This quote is but one of many which highlight Falwell's rhetorical pattern further establishing a divide between the valid, moral, American "us," and the sinful, illegitimate "them." Importantly, Falwell emphasizes that a grave divide exists between these two groups, but once again deliberately does not define what entails membership in one group or the other, thus leaving interpretation open to later selectively malleable use. For Falwell, "the United States is now God's chosen nation in *nearly* the same way that Israelites were favored by God in the Old Testament," with his framework building Falwell evangelical Christianity into the bedrock of America's societal foundation.<sup>104</sup> Falwell deepened this conceptualization as it could apply to action within the political sphere as he further established this understanding by melding this sentiment to general patriotism and nationalism, especially with consistent emphasis on the literal and tangible allusions to Christianity in American history. The "Freedom's Heritage" chapter of "Listen, America!" serves as a nearly exhaustive list of every instance of religious or Christian motifs in American infrastructure, from the mention of the Christian religion in the official documents establishing the settlement of Jamestown to a bust of Moses near the entrance to the House of Representatives. This construction allowed for Falwell to once again frame issues ostensibly outside of the religious sphere as intrinsically spiritual given that they constituted a threat to God's "Christian nation." This subsequently once again imbibed Falwell's rhetoric regarding political activism with a divine mandate, especially in mischaracterizing American history as fundamentally centered around Falwell evangelical values, and additionally

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<sup>103</sup> Falwell, Sr.. "Listen, America!" 1-47.

<sup>104</sup> Kim, *The History Teacher*.

positioning government logistical policy as part of the ancient fight between good and evil, given that, in this framework, “American ideals...not only stand over and against evil, but also must be defended when ‘evil’ seeks to spread in the United States and throughout the world.”<sup>105</sup>

Falwell consistently justified his actions in the political arena as a divinely mandated protection of the fundamentally Christian nation which it was his duty to preserve, as understood in his logical process. Falwell’s thinking views specific aspects of American political life as particularly extensions of his religious mandate due to his additional conceptualization of political liberalism as fundamentally divinely evil. He responded to accusations of his work as an improper politicization of the ministry by characterizing politics itself as demanding the intrusion of religious authority, arguing that the government’s “liberal” policies “had compelled him to become politically active. ‘It is not the religious conservatives in this country who have politicized the gospel,’ he said, ‘it is the liberals in the church and in the government, who have turned the basic moral values that were the foundation of this country into political issues.’” By this logic, “with the country’s moral foundations allegedly under ‘liberal’ attack, Falwell had no choice but to defend the nation.”<sup>106</sup>

As Falwell’s political engagement became more central to his public advocacy, he began to form the idea of engagement within the American electoral system itself as an opportunity for religious growth and actualization. Subsequently, Falwell’s rhetoric began to incorporate the act of registering to vote, thereby indicating potential to participate in the American political system, into the Falwell evangelical religious rites, stating in one sermon that “if there is one person in this room not registered [to vote], repent of it, it’s a sin,” and beginning

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<sup>105</sup> Kim, *The History Teacher*.

<sup>106</sup> Williams, 176.



widespread use of the catchphrase “Get them saved, get them baptized, get them registered.”<sup>107</sup> By establishing that engaging in the American political system as a religious expression of the understanding that the country, as inhabited by Falwell evangelicals, was a chosen and sacred space, a legitimate believer would subsequently feel that they must consider their political options and act on them by voting. Conveniently, any questions regarding how to vote (or who to vote for) were answered in the more directly logistical political rhetoric Falwell espoused and encouraged, with Falwell arguing post-“Ministers and Marches” that a pastor’s mission required that they “endorse candidates, right there in church on Sunday morning.”<sup>108</sup>

Falwell’s defense took form in many avenues of his advocacy, notably his numerous and significant movements of rallies and fundraisers at different times throughout his theopolitical career. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Falwell staged a series of “I Love America” rallies across the entire country, a continuation of his previous “Clean Up America” campaign with patriotic, nationalist themes intermixed with religious hymns and sermons, all with an overarching theme appealing to the country to turn back to the Falwell evangelical God to save itself. The rallies were described as “a program...in an effort to revive the spirit of America under God and promote a moral rebirth at the seats of government in each state”<sup>109</sup> as well as a potent mix of religion and patriotism that attacked what he believed were evils threatening to bring down the country: “the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexuality, pornography and women's liberation.”<sup>110</sup> These descriptions, when juxtaposed, emphasize the variety of interpretations available to listeners of Falwell’s rallying cries. Although Falwell evangelicals, and those sympathetic to Falwell’s cause, would understand the rallies to be a natural and much-

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<sup>107</sup> Williams, 174.

<sup>108</sup> Williams, 175.

<sup>109</sup> Foley, *Florida Memory*.

<sup>110</sup> PBS.

needed exaltation of America's heart and tradition and simultaneous expression of the political and religious revival needed to save her, other listeners may have been struck by the mix of specific evangelical religious terms and political hot topics. One thing is clear in both reports, however—anyone viewing the rallies would notice the poignancy of gathering and its contents, regardless of whether or not any one listener agreed on the meaning of the subject material.

The language used by Falwell at his "I Love America" rallies was an amalgamation of selectively malleable terms, political buzzwords, and provocative exclamations, expertly woven together to blanket Falwell's delivery in a comfortable theopolitical interpretation of Falwell evangelicalism. Constructing this narrative provided multiple positives for Falwell's advocacy. Presenting America as a Christian nation further embedded the idea that Falwell evangelicals were divinely mandated to protect the United States, and thus, by extension, its government and political systems, from the sinful threats, with the same passion and purity of spirit used in sanctifying their spirits and churches. This designation renders the United States a quasi-sacred space, which, paired with the conceptualization of Falwell evangelicals as a group of God's chosen people, allows for the promotion of an understanding of sinful people outside of Falwell evangelicals (or those they perceived to be or designated as acceptable as allowed by the permeability of the group itself) to be fundamentally different citizens—not "real" Americans. This interpretation specifically allows for approaching political issues with a certain passion and clarity—political fights are not merely earthly squabbles among men, but instead battles in the greater divine war between God and evil. Further, this renders the marginalization and demonization of other political groups not only acceptable, but righteous, and without civil qualms about restricting citizen's rights given that those outside of the Falwell evangelical theopolitical sphere do not truly constitute Americans. The construction of this sentiment crops

up across countless Falwell speeches, as Falwell denounces opposing political points of view as “the product of the Devil himself,” and further characterizes the right to seek an abortion as illegitimate given that any woman who sought an abortion must be “pregnant because of sin.”<sup>111</sup>

The name of Falwell’s rallies, the “I Love America” tour, provides a poignant example of the effects of the Falwell evangelical conceptualization of America as a fundamentally Christian (and, by extension, fundamentally Falwell evangelical Christian) nation, as Falwell led these popular, rousing, and fund-raising events under a banner slogan with a nominally purely patriotic message to the outside viewer. Historian Daniel K. Williams highlights the difference in potential expectations and reality for a random attendee of the “I Love America” rallies, stating that “to a casual observer, Falwell’s rallies may have seemed no more partisan than a Fourth of July concert, but at each rally the preacher offered a hint of a political agenda when he told audiences that God was calling America to collective repentance in order to receive the blessings of forgiveness.”<sup>112</sup> Although this passage from Williams suggests a potentially deliberate effort by Falwell and his leadership to disguise the rallies or entice unwitting participants with their plain but powerful name, deeper understanding of the Falwell evangelical practice of American patriotism reveals that this slogan was a perfect descriptor of the event’s intended material. “I Love America” would indicate to the Falwell follower a celebration of the great nation, under God, founded on an evangelical understanding of freedom and morality, and in need of divine protection as a blessed, sacred space. The “I Love America” rallies additionally served as deliberate fundraising and awareness campaigns for Falwell’s political movement, the Moral Majority. Although the majority of the tour’s expenses were covered by tax-exempt donations to Liberty University and “Old-Time Gospel Hour,” the Moral Majority covered the cost of

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<sup>111</sup> Williams, 155.

<sup>112</sup> Williams, 171.

luncheons following the rallies for Falwell and pastors attending the rallies, where Falwell would “explain[] the rationale and strategy of the Moral Majority...[and] urge[] them to establish local chapters and to use their churches as a base for registering people to vote and providing them with basic information on such issues as abortion, pornography, homosexuality, and the ERA.”<sup>113</sup> In this way, Falwell’s rallies epitomized the power of the Falwell evangelical construction of America as a chosen, Christian, and, by extension, Falwell evangelical nation, especially when combined with the potency of a selectively malleable understanding of a religious mandate to save the nation within the realm of politics.

### *America and Freedom*

Another example of the power created by Falwell’s deliberate use of the semipermeable relationship between religious and political understanding in his evangelical practice is through his approach to the idea of American values, particularly in regards to one of the key selectively malleable term used in Falwell evangelical expression surrounding God’s America: “freedom.” This term was used by Falwell to evoke patriotic, theopolitical, sacred and spiritual, and diplomatically strategic themes across his rhetoric. In his 1985 discussion of South African human rights issues regarding apartheid and the church’s involvement<sup>114</sup>, Falwell referred to the greater threats to human rights in discussion of apartheid and communist influence, implying that the racial tension, an issue Falwell had previously indicated as a spiritual issue of the soul, was not the key problem in the sociopolitical landscape complicating South Africa. Instead, Falwell’s interpretation of the situation in South Africa posited that the true threat was from the anti-America, immoral influence of socialist leadership, urging “millions of Christians to buy

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<sup>113</sup> Martin, “With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America,” 203.

<sup>114</sup> Cowell, *The New York Times*.

Kugerrands” : “it is not a black and white issue, it is a red and white issue, communism vs. freedom.”<sup>115</sup>

In his 2004 essay, “God is Pro-War,” Falwell alludes to the idea of freedom within his greater construction of the American religious tradition, arguing in support of President George W. Bush’s “war in Iraq to defend innocent people” as a justified pursuit given that “our God-authored freedoms must be defended.”<sup>116</sup> In a “Listen, America!” chapter discussing “A Look at Our Government Today,” Falwell discusses the benefits of the economic theory of open-market capitalism as an extension of the foundational freedoms built into America’s divine founding, stating that “free enterprise in a capitalistic society, where free men trade with other free men without the interference of [the government], works...free enterprise is consistent with freedom.”<sup>117</sup> In this way, Falwell is able to selectively designate the meaning of “freedom” as both a secular descriptor of a tangible economic system as well as a category of intrinsic American values requiring defense and divine reverence. Additionally, Falwell alludes to freedom in a discussion of abortion in an immoral, modernized America, arguing that many feminists “had been caught up in the ERA movement and want to terminate their pregnancy because it limits their freedom and job opportunities... Some members of the ‘jet set’ do not mind a poodle dog around the apartment, but a baby would cramp their style.”<sup>118</sup> The rhetorical use of “freedom” in the quote above belies the selective malleability assigned to the term at Falwell’s discretion. “Freedoms” of the “God-authored” kind, ostensibly the freedom to promote Falwell evangelical moral sociopolitical agenda and protect American values, are sacred enough to justify war, and demand safeguarding at all costs. Additionally, the true expression of the

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<sup>115</sup> Winters, 249.

<sup>116</sup> Kim, *The History Teacher*.

<sup>117</sup> Falwell, Sr.. “Listen, America!” 73.

<sup>118</sup> Williams, 155.

freedom instilled in the country by God at its founding is directly related to the adoption of a specific form of economic and family structure, a structure which happens to align with modern political ideology of small government and “traditional” conservative values. On the other hand, in yet another context, the freedom sought by feminists in maintaining choices over their own bodies is the antithesis of legitimate freedom, with the term here injected with a sinister intent as it suggests that the “jet set” are attempting to play God in their own lives. Journalist and religious scholar Michael Sean Winters alludes to the term’s adaptability in “God’s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right,” stating that “freedom” was “one value...central and ambiguous in Falwell’s lexicon. The Freedom of the children of God was never exactly the same thing as the freedom guaranteed by the Constitution or the freedom unleashed by capitalism.”<sup>119</sup>

#### Looking Forward: Falwell’s Impact Today

Much of Falwell’s success is hard to assess given his focus on influencing hearts and minds and the fact that analyzing personal feelings is notoriously difficult. Additionally, it appears that, on numerous occasions, Falwell and his contemporaries used instances of public assessment as opportunities to overstate his influence and attract attention, a deliberate and often beneficial step in his attempts to open doors into more powerful circles, but actions which have resulted in disputed records and understandings of the figures defining Falwell’s career. The Moral Majority was painted as a “juggernaut that represented a substantial portion of the American citizenry” following the 1980 election, despite the fact that Jerry Falwell was found in opinion polls to be “one of the most unpopular men in America” and the primarily-white movement had the support of only 10-15% of white Americans and extremely low support

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<sup>119</sup> Winters, 249.

outside of the white racial category.<sup>120</sup> Regardless, the influence of the Christian Right overall, within which the Moral Majority and Falwell evangelical political action are squarely set, has led to its place as a key voting bloc and lobbying group from small towns to the White House. This success has come despite the group's actual numerical size and the relative unpopularity of many of the group's key beliefs. A study assessing knowledge of and opinion on the Moral Majority during the height of its influence, the early 1980s, found that awareness of the group was only roughly 50% of the population, and, in regard to the popularity of the Moral Majority, "unfavorable attitudes outweighed favorable views by about a two-to-one ratio."<sup>121</sup> However, the vigor of Falwell evangelical political activism resulted in intense, focused influence, with the Moral Majority "widely credited with delivering the White House to Ronald Reagan,"<sup>122</sup> white evangelicals making up "by far the single most potent religious-based voting bloc" in the 2004 election, and the Christian Right frequently considered as a powerful force in elections up to the current day.<sup>123</sup> This success has also come through periods of conflicting narratives which have simultaneously called the overall movement invigorated and on its last legs. This phenomenon is due to the difficulty of understanding political influence of a movement based on the personal and amorphous idea of "values," resulting in "cloudy" predictability as described by political scholar Clyde Wilcox: "Obituaries of the Christian Right have always proved to be premature, but so have predictions of its inevitable triumph."<sup>124</sup>

One way to understand Falwell, Sr.'s legacy is through the current status of the school he founded. Falwell's formation of evangelicalism as a lens through which his listeners approach

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<sup>120</sup> Wilcox, "Onward Christian Soldiers?" 7.

<sup>121</sup> Tamney, *Sociological Forum*.

<sup>122</sup> "People & Ideas," *PBS*.

<sup>123</sup> Rosentiel, *Pew Research Center*.

<sup>124</sup> Wilcox, 180.

the world is theoretically woven through the patterns of his rhetoric, and formed physically in the realization of his idea of “Champions for Christ” at Liberty University. Although Liberty has come a long way since its founding, when it was described as “a private school for white students,”<sup>125</sup> the Falwell evangelical understanding of engagement with evangelizing outside of the church has resulted in a perception of Liberty within its community as a training ground, established to equip evangelical soldiers with degrees able to open doors.

This driving factor has been accomplished in many ways given the school’s current enrollment and rising status. However, this success in certain aspects of the school’s development has also come at significant cost, both to the academic reputation of the school and its contemporaries and in regards to the lack of equality for minority students, both upon Liberty’s accreditation and today. Liberty’s race for recognition as a legitimate university has also included an intense, concentrated effort to build up the school’s sports teams to compete with other well-known universities athletically, if not academically. This has come at the repeated cost of the well-being of their athletes, especially the many Black athletes recruited on athletic scholarships. Reporting from 1981 notes a Black student attending Liberty on a sports scholarship revealing the ways in which he was recruited but “not told about the rules,” rules which included monitored entry and exit of campus, the rejection of evolution in favor of creationist theory, and the threat of suspension for “going to a disco” or “being caught with a copy of Playboy magazine.”<sup>126</sup> White students were allowed to go on dates, with written permission from a dean, but the 10% of Liberty students who were Black were forbidden from interracial dating unless they obtained written permission from both party’s parents (a notable 14

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<sup>125</sup> Wilson, *RVA Magazine*.

<sup>126</sup> Fiske, *The New York Times*.



years after *Loving v. Virginia* struck down bans on interracial marriage). As the school entered the 1990s and 2000s, the intense focus on developing the school's "dream of athletic domination" brought more diversity to the campus, but further subjected Black athletes to an environment where they felt uncomfortable and like they "don't really fit in."<sup>127</sup> Multiple highly recruited Black athletes transferring out of the school due to "cultural [incompetency] within multiple levels of leadership" and "highly questionable," "uncomfortable" treatment that caused athletes to wonder if the administration was "against people of color."<sup>128</sup> Minority leadership within the school and alumni have further highlighted this issue, penning an open letter noting that this situation has rendered them unable to "in good faith encourage students to attend our alma mater," a sentiment echoed by one prominent football player who noted in regards to recruiting that "the football program, it's great. It's on the come up. But outside of the football facilities, you will have some problems."<sup>129</sup> Treatment of minority students in this way, which arguably should delegitimize or at least call the status of the university into question, was justified for Liberty based on the school's desire to save students from "falling into sin" and prevent anything from happening on campus which may be "contrary to parents' philosophy of life," explanations echoing the Falwell evangelical understanding of modern life and respect for divine authority (in this case, through parents).<sup>130</sup>

The broader evangelical understanding of practicing their religious faith, when put through the lens of evangelicalism as demonstrated by Falwell, Sr.'s rhetoric and leadership, is realized at Liberty university with not only intense and public demonstration of faith devotion, but additionally an understanding of the faith community as inherently tied to certain

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<sup>127</sup> Anderson, *Slate*.

<sup>128</sup> Anderson, *Slate*.

<sup>129</sup> Anderson, *Slate*.

<sup>130</sup> Fiske, *The New York Times*.

understandings of American politics and inherently incompatible with others. This is due to the conceptualization of Liberty as a Falwell evangelical space, thus mandating demonstration of faith through support for conservative, Republican political leaders, and exclusion of those with more moderate or Democratic political or moral intentions.

This partisanship has become further instilled in Liberty's culture in the time since Jerry Falwell, Sr. passed away in his office in 2007, and was most notably escalated during the 2007-2020 tenure of Falwell, Sr.'s eldest son, Jerry Lamon Falwell, Jr., as Liberty's president.

Liberty's chapter of College Democrats was "derecognized" and banned in 2009, with leadership stating that the club was "contrary to the mission of Liberty University and to Christian doctrine," and imploring students to "find a pro-life family organization so they can be endorsed by Liberty again."<sup>131</sup> Falwell, Jr. stated in an op-ed after the fact that this did not indicate that the school was straying from its history of "stand[ing] for certain core values; not for a political party," but that the group's derecognition was due to the fact that Liberty could never "lend its name or financial support to any student group that advances causes contrary to its mission."<sup>132</sup>

Leading up to the 2016 American presidential election, Falwell, Jr. further ramped up dissemination of a notably partisan message, inviting such a slew of conservative Republican speakers to the school's thrice-weekly, mandatory "Convocations" that one student described the meetings as "like 'a pro-Trump rally.'"<sup>133</sup> This series of speakers led to students "wish[ing] we were less political," arguing that "you can't link politics with salvation, and responding to the idea that their community has become increasingly more tied to this political understanding of

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<sup>131</sup> Shibley, *FIRE*.

<sup>132</sup> Falwell, Jr. *Liberty University*.

<sup>133</sup> Greene, *The Atlantic*.

their theological mandate by noting that “Liberty University students want to be Christians—not Republicans.”<sup>134</sup>

The Falwell evangelical understanding of leadership as divinely given is realized at Liberty in the school’s relationship with its various leaders through conflicting and complicated moral and ethical situations. This lack of strict understanding of what it means to be an evangelical explains how Falwell evangelical voters embraced Bush, and later Donald Trump, but rejected Jimmy Carter, the only President who was openly practicing evangelical and had even served as a Southern Baptist deacon and Sunday School teacher. This deference by a private, Christian school, nominally committed to the Biblical commandment to “have no other gods before [the Christian God],”<sup>135</sup> is justified by Liberty community members both implicitly and explicitly. Internally, this ideology has been constructed in instances such as the school’s mandate that students show “respect for authority.” Explicitly, this sentiment has been expressed with students under Falwell, Jr. echoing a religious justification for deference to political figures one might have imagined coming from Falwell, Sr., with one senior remarking in 2016 that supporting Trump was mandated by his faith and his status as a Liberty student because “Biblically, authority figures are placed over us by Christ...God gives them that authority.”<sup>136</sup> Another student justified their support for Trump, a non-religious, political candidate, by comparing him to flawed Biblical character Nebuchadnezzar. Although the first student did remark that “a lot of people misunderstand respect for agreement,” this reasoning demonstrates the University’s devotion to intertwining the evangelical faith with conservative and specifically Republican politics.<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, Jimmy Carter, who was an “actual” evangelical in

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<sup>134</sup> Green, *The Atlantic*.

<sup>135</sup> “The Holy Bible,” New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>136</sup> Green, *The Atlantic*.

<sup>137</sup> Green, *The Atlantic*.

terms of his personal devotion to the tenets of the fundamentalist Christian faith, was rejected by Falwell evangelicals, as well as the broader Religious Right, for his inability to conform to the idea of what it means to be an evangelical Christian in politics. This ideology was constructed by leadership including Jerry Falwell, Sr. which redefined Falwell evangelical self-identity as divinely mandating a hyper-masculine, intense, and deeply ideologically conservative political approach. Jerry Falwell, Jr served as the head of the school up until a scandal surrounding an extra-marital affair, misuse of school funds for personal and political use, and an authoritarian leadership style resulted in his exit in August of 2020. His tenure as president at Liberty was marked with controversy as Falwell, Jr. ascended to replace his father “as the namesake” who “has never had his position seriously challenged,” despite the fact that his leadership led to school officials describing the environment as one of “a real estate hedge fund,” a Republican lobbying and fundraising center, and “a dictatorship” run by a leader who uses “fear [as] his most powerful weapon.”<sup>138</sup>

Jerry Falwell, Sr., however, still remains a beloved figure at Liberty, and further an almost mythical creature seen as both hero and hypocrite across mainstream America and the sociopolitical spectrum. There is no denying that Falwell, Sr. had massive influence over those who subscribed to his ideology, and the current theopolitical landscape is forever marked by the actions and positions which he established over his lifetime. Falwell developed an empire of influence, gaining social, political, and religious power through his astute interpretation of specific tenets of evangelical Christianity, his deliberate transmission of these conceptualizations using selectively malleable phrases, and the subsequent integration of the Falwell evangelical understanding into American electoral politics. Falwell’s leadership inspired intensity driven by

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<sup>138</sup> Ambrosino, *Politico*.

faith, and his theopolitical rhetoric demonstrates how he was able to direct this powerful energy in deliberate sociopolitical situations. Because of this framework, it is unsurprising that whether he is seen as making a positive mark on the intersection of politics and religion, and the country in general, largely depends on which audience is judging him. What is clear across any interpretation however, is that he was truly a man of immense faith dedicated to bringing others to his God, and the empire he built was in many ways a sacred space, built for his understanding of the proper ways to worship, and laid upon a solid foundation. The question moving forward is for those who come after him—who will inhabit the temple he built, and what understanding of their God they will choose to serve.

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