

THE CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANT PERSECUTION COMPLEX:  
FEAR AND REALIGNMENT WITHIN AMERICAN  
FUNDAMENTALISM AND EVANGELICALISM

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Standing before delegates at the Baltimore Convention Center on June 5, 1980, President Jimmy Carter opened the White House Conference on Families (WHCF) by asking participants at this first of three regional meetings to help his administration identify ways to strengthen family life in the United States. Carter had in mind policies such as increasing government expenditures for day care and reforming tax laws that seemingly targeted married couples to pay higher rates than single people.<sup>1</sup> He did not expect a conference focused on improving the lives of parents and children to cause strife between his White House and Christian conservatives, but that was the most significant development to come out of the WHCF meetings.

Trouble for Carter actually started months before the regional conferences took place as fundamentalist and evangelical leaders began raising objections to what they considered the insidious nature of the White House's agenda. They specifically accused the Carter administration of stacking the conference with liberals who would never consider endorsing anti-abortion legislation or supporting school prayer, policies Christian conservatives believed would bolster family values. They also claimed that Carter was trying to normalize single parent and same sex couple homes, thereby redefining the family from a traditional model composed of a married heterosexual couple with children. While the restructuring of the family unit was not on the WHCF agenda, the mere fact that organizers publicly acknowledged the changing nature of

1. Rich, "Carter Opens Conference on Families."

American families was clear evidence to Carter's fundamentalist and evangelical critics that they and their faith were being attacked by hostile forces. Convinced that they represented true American values, Christian conservatives decided to hold their own family conference in June 1980. They also increased their efforts to work toward Carter's defeat in the 1980 presidential election.<sup>2</sup>

Among those joined in opposition to Carter were fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell and Tim LaHaye and evangelicals such as James Dobson and Charles Stanley. Only a quarter of a century earlier, self-identified fundamentalists and evangelicals were more likely to highlight their differences than they were to work together for a mutual cause. While they had much in common, including a high view of Scripture, a concern about modernism's influence on church and society, and a commitment to winning lost souls for Jesus, central differences began to define the relationship between fundamentalists and evangelicals in post-Second World War America. Since fundamentalists put a greater emphasis than did evangelicals on separating from corrupting influences and on militantly protecting doctrinal purity, they began to suspect that evangelicals were too interested in blending into the broader culture to properly defend the faith. For their part, evangelicals viewed the fundamentalists' militant approach to disputes and separatism from individuals and groups not aligned with their movement as a route toward ineffectualness.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, for the better part of three decades the relationship between fundamentalists and evangelicals was primarily defined by a distrust fueled by disagreements over how to deal with cultural conflicts rather than by the biblicist faith they held in common.

Scholars have recognized that the late twentieth-century political coalition collectively known as the Religious Right eroded some of the distinguishing features between fundamentalists and

2. Rich, "Carter Opens Conference on Families"; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 130–33; and Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 100–1.

3. Bob Jones Sr. to John R. Rice, December 13, 1950, The Fundamentalism File, Bob Jones Univ. Archives, J. S. Mack Memorial Library, Bob Jones Univ., Greenville, South Carolina; hereafter designated as The Fundamentalism File. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, xviii–xix, 22–23, 60–69; and Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, 233.

evangelicals.<sup>4</sup> In a 2022 essay, historian George Marsden contended that “the old divide between fundamentalists and other conservative evangelicals has faded as many from various denominational and doctrinal traditions have become close allies in common political concerns.”<sup>5</sup> To be sure, not all fundamentalists and evangelicals fit this description. Some fundamentalist leaders such as the Bob Jones family persisted in their separation from Christians they deemed insufficiently militant.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, enough diversity existed within evangelicalism at the end of the twentieth century that resistance to the Religious Right’s positions and activities could be located within the subculture. Even so, the actions of most fundamentalists and evangelicals reveal that barriers previously separating the two subcultures began to come down as they joined forces to redeem America.

Pivotal to the Religious Right leaders’ ability to convince rank-and-file fundamentalists and evangelicals to form a united front in the culture wars was their continuous use of narratives of besiegement that defined the stakes of the fight. This approach spawned a persecution complex within American conservative Protestantism both in the sense that it resulted in fundamentalists and evangelicals fearing that they and their way of life were under constant attack and in the sense that this message was disseminated through a type of industry of popular media and written sources regularly consumed by conservative Protestants.<sup>7</sup> While fundamentalists and evangelicals shared various grievances about American life, more than anything else it was their belief that their nation had be-

4. Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, 233; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 18; and Gushee, *After Evangelicalism*, 24.

5. Marsden, “What Has Become of American Fundamentalism?”

6. Bates, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism*, 81–98.

7. My initial thoughts about the persecution complex of fundamentalists and evangelicals emerged from interactions with the writings, sermons, and media presentations of Religious Right figures. During my research for this essay, I discovered other scholars whose work examined conservative Christians’ persecution narratives. While my focus differs from theirs, I owe a debt of gratitude to them for helping me think through the material. See especially Stephens, *Family Matters*, 13–14; Smith, *Christian America?* 70–72; and Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 10, 14.

come hostile to people of faith and the family values they espoused that gave credence to their tales of woe. To explain the narratives that shaped conservative Protestants' perspectives of American life, this essay examines how their worldview was formed by insular interpretations of American history and by the certitude that preserving the traditional family was the key to maintaining a good and moral society. It then analyzes how real and perceived fears about cultural shifts drove fundamentalists and evangelicals to join together in common cause.

#### *Popular Christian Americanism*

Foundational to the conservative Protestants' mission to save the nation was their belief that they were the heirs of America's Christian heritage. For them, it was not enough to say that devout Christians helped shape the nation's history or to acknowledge that the US has always been a majority Christian state. The Christian Americanism they advanced taught that the US was founded upon a covenantal relationship with God, one in which God blessed the nation as long as its people lived in righteousness and followed in His ways. Markers of Christian faithfulness to God, they averred, include the Pilgrims and Puritans coming to the New World to establish Christian communities, colonial revolutionaries trusting God's providential hand to lead them to victory over the British, and the framers establishing constitutional law upon biblical principles.<sup>8</sup> While Christian Americanists acknowledged that their forebears did not perfectly follow God's ways, they described the course of American history as predominantly keeping to Christian precepts until the second half of the twentieth century.

As Religious Right leaders told the story, the 1960s marked the moment when the US plunged headlong into moral and spiritual declension.<sup>9</sup> The Supreme Court became a central villain in their story, especially as they charged justices with secularizing the

8. Noll, et al., *The Search for Christian America*, 15–16, 126; Stookey, "In God We Trust? Part 1," 41–69; and Stookey, "In God We Trust? Part 2," 5–37.

9. Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 10.

public square through decisions like *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), a case in which the Supreme Court ruled that school-sponsored prayer violated the Establishment Clause of the Constitution.<sup>10</sup> Changes in public morality standards, especially those associated with the sexual revolution, gay liberation, and rising divorce rates, also indicated degeneration to them.<sup>11</sup>

Christian Americanist perspectives shaped the way conservative Protestants responded to shifting social mores, mainly by convincing them that the blessings of a glorious past had been stolen from them. One of the first people to popularize the story of a lost Christian heritage was Francis Schaeffer, a public theologian and philosopher whose perspectives left an indelible mark on his fellow Christian conservatives.<sup>12</sup> A former fundamentalist who became a voice for progressive evangelical causes such as environmentalism before returning to the “fundamentalist task of militantly defending the faith against the modern world,” especially through anti-abortion crusades, Schaeffer embodied the mutual interests of post-Second World War fundamentalists and evangelicals.<sup>13</sup> As he attempted to convince his fellow Christians to reclaim their rightful place in American life, Schaeffer frequently used a select version of history to inspire them. The framers were the heroes in his telling of American history, especially because he believed they were devout men who codified biblical principles into American law. While he acknowledged that injustices had always existed in American life, Schaeffer contended that the nation thrived for most of its history because its laws and mores followed Christian teachings.<sup>14</sup> All of this was destroyed by secular humanists, he argued, because they promoted a belief in human sufficien-

10. Barton, *America*, viii; and Flowers, *That Godless Court?* 85–90.

11. Falwell, *Listen, America!* 181–86; and Dobson, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, 438.

12. Hamilton, “The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer,” 22.

13. Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, xiii.

14. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 17–30; and Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, 196–200.

cy that pushed Americans to reject biblical authority and the traditional values that had promoted the common good.<sup>15</sup>

While effective in persuading Christians to fight back, Schaeffer's version of American history was fraught with oversimplifications and exaggerations. But getting all the details correct was not the point; winning the argument and convincing his audience to act was. On this matter, historian Molly Worthen argues that Schaeffer "turned history into a weapon in the culture wars."<sup>16</sup> Schaeffer biographer Barry Hankins similarly contends that the "idea of writing history without a political agenda" made little sense to Schaeffer.<sup>17</sup>

Schaeffer's critics may not have approved of the way he manipulated evidence, but his readers were drawn to his activist approach to history. They seemed particularly moved by his tendency to turn historical accounts into cosmic struggles between good and evil. That he made secular humanists the villains in his historical stories made sense to fundamentalist and evangelical readers who believed they were in competition with malicious forces for America's soul. Conservative Protestant admirers of Schaeffer followed suit in their own works, turning secular humanists into fierce opponents bent upon destroying the Christian way of life. Of these writers, no one echoed Schaeffer's warnings more than Tim LaHaye, a fundamentalist Baptist pastor turned writer and activist who saw Schaeffer as "the West's leading Christian philosopher."<sup>18</sup> In his own Christian Americanist text titled *Faith of Our Founding Fathers* (1982), LaHaye claimed that "secular humanist educators" scrubbed religion from history textbooks to keep America's children ignorant of the nation's heritage of faith. The consequences of replacing moral lessons gleaned from history with "humanism's antimoral philosophy" have been dire, LaHaye averred. Being unaware that they have intrinsic value has driven America's youth to find meaning in unhealthy ways, LaHaye con-

15. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 29–30, 48–51; and Schaeffer and Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* 20–21, 24–26.

16. Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*, 216.

17. Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, 213.

18. LaHaye, *The Battle for the Family*, 34.

cluded, pointing to rising rates of sexually transmitted diseases, unwed pregnancy, and suicide as evidence.<sup>19</sup>

Christian conservatives were understandably alarmed by cultural trends like those LaHaye highlighted in *Faith of Our Founding Fathers*, especially because they believed such behaviors were destructive to individuals and society. Convinced that America's future was at stake, fundamentalists and evangelicals were eager to find more writers like Schaeffer and LaHaye who connected the past with present-day problems. A type of cottage industry of Christian Americanist literature arose during the 1980s and 1990s as preachers, Christian school teachers, and other amateur historians recognized that a conservative Protestant audience was eagerly seeking accounts of a glorious Christian past. The most prolific writer of this genre was David Barton, a former Christian school teacher who founded WallBuilders ministry to popularize Christian Americanist ideas and lobby politicians to support Religious Right causes. In many ways, Barton's account of American history followed the typical Christian Americanist script. What made him stand out was his focus on church-state issues, especially his claim that twentieth-century secularists both on and off the Supreme Court had violated American legal precedents. Calling the separation of church and state a "myth," Barton contended that a careful reading of debates about the Bill of Rights shows that the framers intended the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to be understood as meaning that Congress shall not establish "one Christian denomination as the national denomination."<sup>20</sup> As proof of this and his broader contention that the framers intended the US to be "governed and guided by Christian principles," Barton filled his books and public presentations with quotations containing expressions of faith that he attributed to pivotal figures such as George Washington and James Madison.<sup>21</sup> He also told inspirational stories about the founders declaring their dependence upon God so that when, for example, his readers learned from him

19. LaHaye, *Faith of Our Founding Fathers*, 3–4.

20. Barton, *The Myth of Separation*, 28.

21. Barton, *The Myth of Separation*, 82; and Stookey, "In God We Trust? Part 1," 47–48, 63–69.

that Benjamin Franklin called the Constitutional Convention to prayer so that delegates could find unity in God's guidance, they would understand how God's plan for America had come to fruition.<sup>22</sup>

Stories of the founders' piety became standard fare among fundamentalists and evangelicals as books such as Peter Marshall Jr. and David Manuel's *The Light and the Glory* (1977), John Eidsmoe's *Christianity and the Constitution* (1987), and D. James Kennedy's *Character & Destiny* (1994) seemingly provided corroboration for the conservative Protestants' belief that they were the remnant of a good and godly heritage.<sup>23</sup> While inspirational to their readers, the claims of popular Christian Americanists often fell apart in the same manner as Schaeffer's had when they faced scrutiny from historians. This was especially true of the quotes they cited, which often proved to be unsubstantiated or misappropriated and their stories about the founders' faith, which were typically the product of either popular mythologies or tales based upon unreliable sources.<sup>24</sup> As was the case with those who read Schaeffer, however, the draw of a mythical and triumphant past proved more appealing than did historical realities to fundamentalist and evangelical readers.

While popular Christian Americanist books reached laypersons and ministers alike within fundamentalist and evangelical communities, they were unable to penetrate the public schools with their version of American history. Christian Americanists eventually ramped up their efforts to lobby for revisions in the public schools' history curricula in the early twentieth-first century.<sup>25</sup> But in the last decades of the twentieth century they focused on students whose education came from conservative Protestant spaces. They did so because parents who were opting out of public education either by sending their children to Christian schools,

22. Barton, *America*, viii–xi.

23. Marshall and Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*; Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution*; and Kennedy, *Character & Destiny*.

24. Stookey, "In God We Trust? Part 2," 5–37.

25. Hagerty, "The Most Influential Evangelist You've Never Heard Of"; and "Rewriting History? Texas Tackles Textbook Debate."

which was the preferred approach in the 1970s and 1980s, or by embracing homeschooling, which grew in popularity in the 1990s, wanted classroom materials that reflected their worldview. Three publishers—Abeka, Bob Jones University Press, and Accelerated Christian Education (ACE)—emerged as the dominant forces within non-Catholic Christian education.<sup>26</sup> These presses were all fundamentalist institutions, which meant that their textbooks gave fundamentalists inroads into the broader evangelical world.

Regardless of a student's religious background, the history they learned from these textbooks was framed in highly providential terms, one that made God the primary actor in historical events and categorized humans as either those whose faith led them to advance God's plan or as those who sought to derail the goodness of God's world. Chief among those opposing God's ways were humanists, those who since the age of Ancient Greek philosophy have arrogantly glorified ways of thinking that run counter to the revealed truth of God.<sup>27</sup> Twentieth-century progressive political leaders were similarly depicted as villains in these texts for violating American ways. Common interpretations included indictments against Franklin Roosevelt for introducing socialism to the United States through New Deal programs and criticisms of Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter for extending anti-American policies such as welfare.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Ronald Reagan emerged as a heroic figure whose restoration of traditional American values and pro-capitalist policies made national renewal possible.<sup>29</sup> That Reagan was a model of Americanism in these texts is unsurprising, mainly because his brand of conservative politics aligned with those of the individuals who ran Abeka, Bob Jones University Press, and ACE. Confident that their ways aligned with God's, the publishers and writers of the fundamentalist textbooks left students no room to doubt that political and social conservatism was an essential part of God's plan for the nation.

26. Wellman, *Hijacking History*.

27. Wellman, *Hijacking History*, 55, 82.

28. Wellman, *Hijacking History*, 240, 252.

29. Laats, "The Right-Wing Textbooks"; and Wellman, *Hijacking History*, 269–70.

Whether the historical interpretations found in the Abeka, Bob Jones University Press, and ACE textbooks changed or simply confirmed the perspectives of evangelical students and their parents is unclear, especially since parents whose children attended associated schools or who used homeschool curriculums that relied on these texts likely held similar or identical social and political positions. And yet, even if they primarily confirmed presuppositions passed on to students by their families and churches, the fundamentalist textbooks still played an important role in perpetuating historical, social, and political perspectives that undergirded a worldview common among fundamentalists and evangelicals. To be sure, conservative Protestants who embraced the version of history perpetuated by fundamentalist textbooks and by popular Christian Americanist writers saw themselves as reviving the ways of their Christian ancestors when they defended the traditional institutions and values that they believed had established America as a good and godly place.

#### *Fighting for the Traditional Family*

Among the foundational beliefs shared by fundamentalists and evangelicals was the conviction that strong families were essential to America's survival. John R. Rice, the editor of the influential fundamentalist newspaper *The Sword of the Lord*, identified Christian homes where the Bible was taught and morality instilled as crucial to the staving off of wickedness in the public square.<sup>30</sup> Evangelist Billy Graham taught that the health of the country was contingent upon the health of families. "If there is one lesson which stands out in prominence on the pages of world history," Graham contended, "it is wherever the cancer of the broken home remains unchecked this malignant growth eats its way into the very vitals of national existence."<sup>31</sup>

When conservative Protestants spoke about the family, they had a particular image in mind. "The family," Jerry Falwell explained, "is the God-ordained institution of the marriage of one

30. Rice, *The Home*, ix–xi; and Rice, *God in Your Family*, 55–56.

31. Graham, "The Home is in Trouble."

man and one woman for a lifetime with their biological or adopted children.”<sup>32</sup> It was changes to this type of family unit brought on by rising divorce rates, increased cohabitation of unmarried couples, and the emergence of single parent and same sex homes that aroused fear and suspicion among fundamentalists and evangelicals in post-Second World War America. As members of communities that were certain that their ways represented America’s true history and heritage, fundamentalists and evangelicals felt these shifts deeply and personally. They were, after all, convinced that the destruction of the traditional family would lead to the destruction of the America they loved, and this worried and angered them. The intensity of their indignation, however, derived from more than their disdain for social changes. It was the product of popular preachers and teachers repeatedly telling them that they and their traditional ways were under constant attack.<sup>33</sup>

No one turned fighting for the family into the central identity of their life and ministry like James Dobson. A trained psychologist with a doctorate from the University of Southern California, Dobson formed the Focus on the Family ministry in 1977 to counter what he saw as the decay of public morality and the disintegration of the family. Reaching his fellow conservative Christians through books, public lectures, video series, and radio programs, Dobson did more to shape what American Christians thought about cultural issues related to the family than anyone else from the late-1970s until he stepped aside from Focus on the Family in 2009.<sup>34</sup>

Dobson centered much of his ministry upon his work as a public educator. In his books, he often mixed his professional knowledge with practical advice about matters such as child rearing, parenting adolescents, and resolving marital strife. His 1982 book, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, exemplifies this approach as it consists of over 500 pages of Dobson dispensing advice about a range of issues that concerned his followers. But Dobson hoped to do more with his ministry than provide counsel to struggling

32. Falwell, *Listen, America!* 121.

33. Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 13.

34. Stephens, *Family Matters*, 2–6, 194–95.

families. Believing that he was ultimately called by God to protect the family from “vicious attacks,” Dobson took on all manner of contentious issues.<sup>35</sup> He also challenged his fellow Christians to fight back. “The American family is experiencing an unprecedented period of disintegration which threatens the entire superstructure of our society,” Dobson declared, “and we simply *must* take whatever steps are necessary to insure its integrity.”<sup>36</sup>

Although raised in the evangelical Church of the Nazarene, Dobson’s dire warnings about social decay caused by those who promoted immoral lifestyles were akin to admonitions made by fundamentalists in the wake of the First World War.<sup>37</sup> This is not surprising, especially because fundamentalists and evangelicals maintained similar if not identical perspectives on family life and public morality even when they disagreed about other matters of theology and conduct. Among post-Second World War fundamentalists and evangelicals there was a consensus that two major trends—Americans were becoming more promiscuous and the innocence of American youth was in jeopardy—must be addressed. Determined to stem the tide of public immorality, conservative Protestants targeted the institutions and ideas they deemed responsible for leading young people astray.

Beginning in the late 1960s, conservative religious and political groups focused their attention on sex education curricula in the public schools, especially those either composed by or inspired by the work of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). For their part, the leaders of SIECUS believed they were helping to solve a public health crisis marked by rising rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases when they constructed scientifically based and morally neutral sex education curricula. They were confident that they could help students learn how to make responsible decisions about sex by promoting healthy attitudes about sexuality and by creating opportunities in the classroom for open discussions about sensitive sub-

35. Dobson and Bauer, *Children at Risk*, 23.

36. Dobson, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, 17.

37. Stephens, *Family Matters*, 22–23.

jects.<sup>38</sup> Conservative Protestant parents and ministers viewed the SIECUS material differently. In editorials, sermons, and public discussions, they criticized SIECUS for including explicit descriptions of sex acts in its curricula and for normalizing behavior such as masturbation and homosexuality.<sup>39</sup>

Hoping to force school boards to distance themselves from such sex education programs, conservative Protestant leaders called upon their fellow Christians to get involved in public resistance movements. Convincing rank-and-file fundamentalists and evangelicals to stand up against groups like SIECUS was a straightforward process, consisting primarily of stirring up anger among believers by depicting those who promoted new approaches to sex education as radicals determined to remove all Christian influence from American society. While Dobson was not involved in the earliest fights over sex education, from the 1980s forward he consistently weighed in on programs he deemed dangerous to children and adolescents. Whenever he spoke about these matters, Dobson embraced the approach of demonizing opponents. In *Children at Risk* (1990), Dobson and his co-author Gary Bauer, president of the conservative Family Research Council, blamed a familiar foe for the dismantling of public morality. Secular humanists, Dobson and Bauer claimed, chose “child and adolescent sexuality as the battleground on which to press their advantage” because they knew that convincing school-aged children to change their beliefs would lead to the undermining of the traditional family and the religions that promoted monogamy.<sup>40</sup> “There is only one way to accomplish a feat of that magnitude,” Dobson and Bauer concluded, “and that is to isolate kids from their parents and reprogram their values. Sex, therefore, is the hydrogen bomb that permits the destruction of things as they are and a simultaneous reconstruction of the new order.”<sup>41</sup>

38. Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 101–2; and Stephens, *Family Matters*, 84.

39. Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 103–9.

40. Dobson and Bauer, *Children at Risk*, 44–45.

41. Dobson and Bauer, *Children at Risk*, 46.

Alongside their fight against supposed immoral influences in the schools, fundamentalists and evangelicals readied themselves to protect the family on other fronts. Chief among these tasks was safeguarding the home from sexualized messages by popular media platforms. From the beginning of his public ministry, Dobson warned parents that it was dangerous to let kids consume unsupervised content from radio, movies, and television. In the earliest stages of his career, it was the normalization of violence on television that most concerned him. Over time, however, Dobson increasingly focused on what he deemed as the anti-traditionalist agenda of media corporations.<sup>42</sup> Concerned that some of his audience was not taking the threat of media manipulation seriously enough, Dobson warned that a cabal of executives, producers, and actors used their outsized influence to undercut the values and faith of “the unprotected majority.” Despite representing a large part of the American citizenry, Dobson and his co-author Bauer argued, no group faces a barrage of criticism and hate like Christians. “While we are constantly warned to be ‘sensitive’ in how we depict or talk about various ethnic and racial groups,” they complained, “apparently in Hollywood ‘Christian-bashing’ is acceptable entertainment.”<sup>43</sup>

While convinced that the slander of their opponents affected all Christians, Dobson and his conservative Protestant allies were particularly alarmed at the effects that media messaging had upon children. As they did in their fight against SIECUS, fundamentalists and evangelicals voiced their outrage over the promotion of degenerate sexuality to minors. Dobson was especially suspicious of television and music producers because he believed they were trying to shape the way an entire generation of young people thought.<sup>44</sup> For him, there was no better example of the assault on traditional moral values that parents tried to uphold than sitcoms, talk shows, and news programs going out of their way to convince

42. Dobson, *Dr. Dobson Answers Questions*, 458–61.

43. Dobson and Bauer, *Children at Risk*, 212.

44. Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys*, 203–4; and Dobson and Bauer, *Children at Risk*, 208–9.

Americans to accept homosexuality as a normal lifestyle.<sup>45</sup> Dobson's audience took his warnings to heart. Since conservative Protestants tended to view cultural influence as a zero-sum game, any gains made by those they deemed to be degenerates meant that their own cultural prominence would be diminished. Seeing the world this way meant that fundamentalists and evangelicals knew that they had a great deal to lose if they failed to respond.

As all types of conservative Protestants feared and were outraged by how cultural shifts affected the family, Dobson's messages reached beyond his evangelical subculture. Fundamentalists whose own preachers had been sounding the alarm about public immorality since the movement's inception were among those who believed Dobson's insights were essential for the family's survival. Dobson gained their trust, in part, because he sounded like fundamentalist preachers when he excoriated secular humanists and other supposed enemies of the Church. His acceptance was also advanced by the endorsement of key leaders like Jerry Falwell and Tim and Beverly LaHaye. They genuinely appreciated and respected Dobson's work, but their embrace of him was also intended to illustrate to fundamentalists that they had reliable allies in their fight for the family.

While Religious Right fundamentalists had an agenda for the United States that consisted of issues ranging from the need for a strong national defense to tax reform, they always kept issues related to the family at the center of their messaging.<sup>46</sup> Falwell did this because he worried that most Americans did not understand just how determined radicals were to destroy the traditional family.<sup>47</sup> Given the gravity of the situation, Falwell frequently and strongly denounced several groups that he deemed responsible for America's moral declension. Among those he depicted as detrimental to society were feminists who "live in disobedience to God's laws" by refusing to serve their families in their "God-given roles," homosexuals whose perversions made them a danger to

45. Dobson and Bauer, *Children at Risk*, 211.

46. Falwell, "An Agenda for the 1980s," 109–23.

47. Falwell, *Listen, America!* 122.

young people, and television producers who used their influence to turn public opinion toward liberal and ungodly positions.<sup>48</sup>

Tim and Beverly LaHaye similarly believed that American families were under attack, and they were eager to do their part to unite fundamentalists and evangelicals in common political cause. In *Against the Tide* (1993), they cited Dobson as a respected authority on the dangers facing America's children. They also echoed Dobson's rhetoric when they described sex education curricula in the public schools as chief promoters of immorality.<sup>49</sup> Both LaHayes were good at coalition building, but it was Beverly who became particularly adept at locating allies after she founded a legislative action group called Concerned Women for America in 1978. In July 1987, for example, she persuaded Pat Robertson, a Baptist with ties to the charismatic movement who was the founder of The Christian Broadcasting Network and a leading Religious Right figure, to give a keynote address at a Concerned Women for America meeting. Robertson's speech touched on all the hallmarks of fundamentalist and evangelical anxiety. After beginning with a call to "return America to its roots," Robertson sounded off on a greatest hits version of Religious Right concerns, blaming atheists, humanists, public school educators, abortionists, and television producers for causing America's moral downfall. He then got to the heart of his concerns by proclaiming that the enemies of America's Christian heritage targeted the destruction of the family because they wanted to establish a country without ties to traditional institutions and morality.<sup>50</sup>

No one listening to Robertson's speech that day was surprised by his descriptions of brutal hostility toward Christian families. By the late-1980s the reality of constant and dangerous attacks upon the traditional family and the Christians who were trying to preserve it was assumed in fundamentalist and evangelical circles. To be sure, there were real changes and challenges facing traditionalists. Cultural shifts such as the rise in divorce rates, single parent homes, and working mothers along with the slow but grad-

48. Falwell, *Listen, America!* 150, 182–84, 195.

49. LaHaye and LaHaye, *Against the Tide*, 36–38.

50. Robertson, "Concerned Citizens."

ual social acceptance of homosexuals signaled to conservative Protestants the fall of a moral society. Moreover, criticisms of conservative Christians from prominent public figures and in popular media occurred frequently enough for them to feel the sting of public rebuke. But evangelical and fundamentalist fears about assaults on the family arose from more than social trends and broadcasted slights. They emerged because conservative Protestant leaders assigned nefarious intentions to those they deemed as enemies, establishing in the process a prevailing tale about how their children and their nation were in mortal danger. This was a powerful narrative of conflict and loss, and it was one that drove fundamentalists and evangelicals closer together by uniting them in common concern and common cause.

#### *Trepidation and Realignment*

The first board of directors of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority was composed of well-known fundamentalist pastors such as Tim LaHaye and Greg Dixon working alongside ministers such as Presbyterian D. James Kennedy and Southern Baptist Charles Stanley who were more at home among evangelicals.<sup>51</sup> Only a generation earlier, pastors like these men and the denominations they represented had been at odds with one another. But the stakes had changed for conservative Protestants. As they faced real and perceived dangers, many fundamentalists and evangelicals established confederations that required them to put aside their differences and make adaptations. Aware that they needed to be able to effectively engage the broader culture if they were going to restore America's Christian heritage, fundamentalists associated with the Religious Right grew close to outsiders even as they moderated some of their distinctive behaviors. Meanwhile, evangelicals who worked closely with fundamentalists learned the value of becoming more militant and dogmatic in their public fights.<sup>52</sup>

51. Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 363.

52. Marsden, "What Has Become of American Fundamentalism?" 8–9; and Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 18.

Fundamentalists joining forces with outsiders was not typically practiced within the movement until well into the 1970s. Following their break from the National Association of Evangelicals in the 1950s, fundamentalists became primarily defined by a personal separatism that emphasized following a strict code of conduct and by an ecclesiastical separatism that required fundamentalists to avoid close fellowship with groups and individuals who either lacked faith or who embraced heterodoxy.<sup>53</sup> By the late 1960s, *Sword of the Lord* editor John R. Rice and younger ministers he mentored—most notably, Jerry Falwell and Tim LaHaye—began to move fundamentalists away from strict forms of separatism because they believed that it promoted isolationism and thus made it impossible for them to have a say in ecclesiastical and cultural matters.<sup>54</sup> Those who followed this path of fundamentalism were the ones who became a political force in the United States in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Even as they extended the reach of the fundamentalist subculture, Falwell and his allies faced constant criticism from fundamentalists who were more strident in their separatism. The chief claim made by fundamentalists like Bob Jones Jr., was that close association with outsiders would weaken the faith. Evangelicals were an especially dangerous group in the strident separatists' estimation due to their supposed tendency to compromise. To be sure, most of the strident separatists' concerns were over matters that those outside of the subculture viewed as insignificant or even silly, but all these issues were treated as paramount by fundamentalists. In *The Tragedy of Compromise* (1996), for example, fundamentalist pastor and educator Ernest Pickering claimed that fundamentalists who worked closely with evangelicals have abandoned essential faith practices. Particularly alarming to Pickering was the tendency of fundamentalists to soften their defense of the faith once they developed relationships with individuals whose theology was suspect. Pickering also claimed that fellowship with outsiders led to the embrace of contemporary music (both Christian and secular forms) and the condoning of sinful behaviors like

53. Bates, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism*, 63–64.

54. Bates, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism*, 81–162.

drinking and smoking. Worst of all, Pickering concluded, fundamentalists who embraced outsiders became so blind to their own drift from the true faith that they lost the ability to recognize how much they had changed.<sup>55</sup>

While it may be hard for nonfundamentalists to comprehend why Pickering took matters like the embrace of modern styles of music so seriously, those within the subculture understood that fundamentalists believed that all forms of compromise led to additional troubling behavior. From this perspective, when fundamentalists of the Falwell type worked closely with evangelicals and Catholics for political causes or adopted contemporary worship styles in their churches, strident separatists saw evidence of a backslidden faith. But adjusting in these areas did not lead to fundamentalists either forsaking foundational doctrines or losing their will to fight for the faith. Indeed, no one who witnessed Falwell's verbal sparring with liberals or secularists in the 1980s and 1990s would conclude that he had adopted a placid and conciliatory nature.

Perhaps the most interesting development to come out of the fundamentalist-evangelical alliance was the evangelicals' adoption of a more militant approach to cultural and ecclesiastical conflicts. As evangelicals fought alongside fundamentalists in the culture wars of the late twentieth century, they often did so by employing the same type of combative rhetoric and aggressive style that fundamentalists had used for decades. Just over a quarter of a century earlier as members of the two subcultures went their separate ways following the fundamentalist exodus from the National Association of Evangelicals, fundamentalists claimed that evangelicals were too eager to achieve respectability to put up a proper fight for theological truths and moral standards.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, by the late 1970s there was no question that evangelicals associated with the Religious Right would show up for combat. To be sure,

55. Pickering, *The Tragedy of Compromise*, 162–71.

56. Bob Jones Sr. to John R. Rice, December 13, 1950, The Fundamentalism File; Bob Jones Sr. to John R. Rice, April 3, 1951, The Fundamentalism File; Rice, "If We Compromise, What Happens?" 12; and John R. Rice to Bob Jones Jr., May 7, 1968, The Fundamentalism File.

it is unclear whether evangelical militarism developed primarily because of fundamentalist influence. Of course, embracing the same narrative of loss, reading the same books, listening to the same Christian radio programs, and working alongside one another to accomplish mutual goals undoubtedly led to shared perspectives and responses.<sup>57</sup> Even so, it is also conceivable that the increased militancy of evangelicals developed because believers who were certain they were under siege decided to respond in kind.

What is clear is that Religious Right evangelicals increasingly defined the public face of American evangelicalism, primarily due to the visibility of their political activities in the late twentieth century. Consequently, evangelicals who were more moderate in their political and social perspectives and more irenic in their approach to debates became less noticeable to the broader public. And since those more closely associated with fundamentalists were more apt to embrace theological positions like young-earth creationism and strict inerrancy, alignment between evangelicals and fundamentalists seemed to take place on multiple fronts.

### *Conclusion*

In 2000, sociologist Christian Smith published *Christian America?: What Evangelicals Really Want*, a book that used survey data gathered between 1995 and 1997 to evaluate American evangelicals' social and political orientations.<sup>58</sup> Almost none of those surveyed had faced intolerance, much less persecution. In fact, the overwhelming number of them characterized their interactions with non-Christian neighbors and co-workers as friendly and respectful. And yet, most of the evangelicals Smith's team surveyed were certain that American Christians faced prejudice. Moreover, more than ninety percent of the self-identified evangelicals who responded to Smith's telephone survey agreed that Christian values were under attack in the US.<sup>59</sup> The disconnect be-

57. Wellman, *Hijacking History*, 299.

58. Smith, *Christian America?* 1–2.

59. Smith, *Christian America?* 70.

tween what survey participants experienced in real life and what they were certain was happening across the country does not add up unless the continuous and widespread use of persecution narratives is included in the equation. That variable turned perception into reality for conservative Protestants.

Pointing out the ubiquitous nature of persecution narratives within fundamentalist and evangelical communities is not meant to suggest that these tales were fictitious. Post-Second World War American culture changed in dramatic ways, and many of the shifts, including alterations to the structure of American families and the increased public presence of lifestyles they considered sinful, were unsettling to conservative Protestants. Still, the intensity with which fundamentalists and evangelicals responded to these shifts arose from more than their distaste of cultural change. It was the product of fundamentalist and evangelical leaders framing public debates as a struggle against malevolent forces for the soul of America.

By the early twenty-first century, persecution narratives were so ingrained in conservative Christian life that they continued unabated even when political and cultural winds shifted in the direction of fundamentalists and evangelicals. Not surprisingly, during the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, when conservative Protestant fears about living in a culture hostile to their faith were seemingly confirmed by measures such as the establishment of a contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act and the legalization of same sex marriage in the Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) decision, narratives of besiegement were commonplace.<sup>60</sup> But even after Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016 with the help of eighty-one percent of white, self-identified evangelical voters and then proceeded to deliver to his conservative Protestant supporters legislation and a Supreme Court that was to their liking, warnings of persecution remained. Indeed, the Trump administration and its conservative Christian supporters consistently warned about nefarious forces composed of liberals and secularists determined to eradicate Christian influence in the

60. Stephens, *Family Matters*, 202; and Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 13.

United States even as they worked to gain support for policies that spread the Christian Americanist version of US history and established laws that reflect their views of the traditional family.<sup>61</sup>

Persecution narratives persisted in the age of Trump for the same reason they were popular among fundamentalists and evangelicals at the end of the twentieth century—namely, they are powerful tales about what has been lost and warnings about what could be lost. This message resonated with fundamentalists and evangelicals because they believed themselves to be the heirs of a godly heritage and guardians of morality both in the family and in broader society. Convinced that their perspectives were grounded in biblical teachings and historical realities, fundamentalists and evangelicals could not imagine a world where their ways did not lead to a good and just society for all. As such, they viewed challenges to their ideals and changes to traditional social behavior as assaults by enemies of truth and righteousness. If they were going to put a stop to the losses they featured in their tales of woe, fundamentalists and evangelicals needed allies. They found this in each other as they embraced common narratives of persecution and the common cause of social redemption.

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61. Sessions, “Attorney General Delivers Remarks at the Department of Justice’s Religious Liberty Summit”; “VP Pence Joining Franklin Graham to Stand for Persecuted Christians”; “Rewriting History? Texas Tackles Textbook Debate”; and Laats, “The Right-Wing Textbooks.”

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