A Nation of Outsiders

How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America

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Jerry Falwell and Fundamentalists as the Oppressed Majority

By 1976, the Jesus People movement was over. Jimmy Carter, a devout Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher and former Georgia governor, was running for president. When he casually told a reporter he was born again, two worlds collided once more, not this time the counterculture and evangelical Christianity but instead evangelical Christianity and the white middle-class suburban world where people attended mainline churches and did not talk about their faith at parties. Interest in the Jesus People had made a kind of conservative or "Bible-believing" Christianity into a mainstream media obsession for the first time since the Scopes Trial. But the Jesus People's hippie style made it easy for reporters looking for good copy to avoid any serious investigation into their faith. When the Democratic candidate for president announced he was a "born-again" Christian, someone had to provide an explanation for the many people not familiar with the phrase. The media tried. *Newsweek* led with a cover article called "Born Again." Gallup had polled Americans of voting age about their religious beliefs, *Newsweek* reported, and calculated that fifty million Americans—one half of all Protestants, one third of all Americans—"say that they have been 'born again.'" Almost half of all Protestants believed in biblical inerrancy, the idea that the text should "be taken literally, word for word." "A general turning inward to seek refuge from everyday pressures" and the "search for nonmaterial values in light of the fading American dream," Gallup suggested, were generating a national religious revival. The year 1976 just might be, *Newsweek* declared, the "year of the evangelical."[29]

By the mid-seventies, the meaning of evangelical Christianity had become broad enough to include fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and other Christians who put the Bible and a personal relationship with the supernatural Jesus at the center of their faith. These conservative Christians, however, were not necessarily Christian conservatives. They had mostly, in the separatist tradition of fundamentalism, stayed out of politics and away from public support for issues of social reform, however some of them might vote in the privacy of the polling booth. In their own version of the romance, outsiders, people who chose Jesus over the world, were more moral than insiders. "Men of God," Jerry Falwell preached in the late seventies, were "not interested in being the Jaycees' outstanding young man of the year in their hometown." They were "not interested in winning popularity polls." They were interested, Falwell argued, "in pleasing God, honoring Christ, and winning their cities at any price for the Lord." Citizenship, for conservative Christians, lay in heaven. Especially for fundamentalists, separateness from American intellectual and politic life and especially from popular culture had long been a measure of godliness. Distance from the modern world meant closeness to God.[30]

Like the African American Christians who had initiated the bus boycott in Alabama and the sit-in movement across the South, mostly white evangelicals began in the year of the nation's Bicentennial to describe themselves as the

outsiders who would save the nation. As Falwell preached in a sermon called "The Establishment," which he gave in several versions in the late seventies:

> We are in need of a spiritual revolution that will re-establish the establishment. The hippies and the yippies have had their day . . . This is the day of the fundamentalist. We need to re-establish our homes . . . We need to re-establish our churches . . . We need to re-establish this nation. We have been second-class citizens too long.

The liberals and the left—Falwell and other conservatives did not make any distinction—had had their political and cultural revolutions. They had made America a "cesspool." "I say that as Christians," Falwell argued, "we need to take a long, long look at the moral issues that affect the future of our nation. If God's people don't stand up on these issues, who will? Who should?" Christians, he began arguing in 1978, need to "come to action." Other outsiders—anti-war activists, abortion supporters, homosexuals, and feminists —were taking over the nation. It was time for the marginalized Christian majority to take their morality back into the world.[31]

William F. Buckley had crafted the image of the conservative as a rebel, a self-conscious outsider, working against the liberal establishment. His followers in YAF copied his style and saw their conservatism as a rebellion against their generation's embrace of the sixties social movements, liberal and left ideas, and the counterculture. The Jesus People normalized the idea that Jesus and his followers were outsiders, not in the old sense that fundamentalists were anti-modern, living outside time, but in the new sense that Christians were creating another counterculture. Jerry Falwell, in turn, founded the Moral Majority in 1979 and became one of the most widely known rebels on the right of the postwar era. He helped evangelicals and especially fundamentalists develop a narrative about their reentry into politics that both justified the abandonment of their old separatism and maintained their sense of difference in a fallen world. In Falwell's journey from separatist and conservative Christian to Christian conservative, older Protestant ideas about individual transformation and difference based on the interior self met the secular romance of the outsider.

In the seventies, Jerry Falwell often preached that, unlike some fundamentalist congregations, "his church welcomed all the long-haired kids in Lynchburg." "Let's get them saved first and shaved later," he often said. But Christian men looked like men. They had short hair. For Falwell and other fundamentalists, the Jesus People were not yet real Christians. "Bible-believing Christians"—a phrase fundamentalists frequently used to distinguish their Christianity from more liberal forms—needed to reach out to these "hippies" and everyone else in America who had not been saved and pull them in.[32]

No one would ever have confused Jerry Falwell, a man who regularly appeared in a three-piece suit, with one of the Jesus People. On January 20, 1952, though, he too had gone through the experience of becoming a new Christian, conversion. Cooking a big southern breakfast, his mother woke him up that day as she did every Sunday, with the smell of bacon and the sound of Charles Fuller's *Old Fashioned Revival Hour* turned up so loud that it echoed out of the kitchen and up the stairs. The odor of frying pork was hard to ignore, and the young Falwell loved the piano playing on the radio broadcast. So he pulled himself out of bed, went downstairs, and sat down at the kitchen table. He listened to Fuller preach as he finished his breakfast, he remembered later, to please his mother. But somehow he lost the words, overwhelmed by his emotions: a lump in his throat, a desire to cry, and a sense of great excitement, "like you feel before a storm strikes or that moment in the hospital just before your first child is born." "Are you born again?" Fuller finally asked his radio audience. Falwell did not, he later insisted, know then that what he felt was the Holy Spirit. "God was calling me, but I didn't recognize his voice."[33]

Being born again is not just a moment of radical transformation—it is also a story, and fundamentalist preachers like Falwell practice telling it daily, in more formal sermons and in the casual witnessing that infuses many fundamentalists' everyday speech. Fundamentalist sermons, in fact, are as cultural forms a lot like blues songs. Based in live performances and oral traditions, they are hard to pin down. Words do not stay fixed, and rhythms change. Phrases float, too, between texts, and similar anecdotes, jokes, and arguments pop up in different sermons just as similar lyrics and melodies appear in different songs. Both cultural forms developed in historical contexts in which their original makers had little economic and political power and focused instead on individual, interior change. As forms, both fundamentalist sermons and blues songs suggest the possibilities of individual transformation, in their words and in the way their makers are always modifying their forms.[34]

By the time Jerry Falwell described the day he got saved in his 1987 autobiography, *Strength for the Journey*, the minister and founder of Thomas Road Baptist Church, Liberty University, and the Moral Majority had polished the performance until it sparkled like the diamond ring he often wore. He knew what had actually happened to him that day, and he also knew the language and events that structured the experience of becoming born again. Filling the telling particularities into a frame helped Falwell, as it did other evangelicals,

to confirm both the intercession of the divine, an experience shared with other believers, and the individuality of the event that made clear his own personal transformation. If writers like Mailer and Kerouac reached through individual transformation for transcendence by turning their lives into art, believers like Falwell, people already transformed, sought transcendence by turning their lives into Bible stories. Accounts of becoming born again were by their nature stories of outsiders, of an individual's ending her separation from God and beginning instead a separation from the secular world.[35]

By Falwell's account, he spent much of that fateful day in a daze. He joined his friends—"the Wall Gang"—at a café in Lynchburg where they gathered almost daily to drink Cokes, eat hamburgers, and listen to songs like the Weavers' "Good Night, Irene" on the jukebox:

> I remember sitting alone on a stool. . . . The room was filled with noisy kids. But in and through the commotion, His Voice was speaking to me. I couldn't hear the words, but I knew something strange and wonderful was about to happen. I didn't know it then, but it was God's world breaking into my world. Why it happens when it happens is still a mystery to me.

After eating, Falwell and his gang ambled across Campbell Avenue as they always did to hang out by the wall. In the middle of a conversation, his own voice speaking shocked him out of his daze: "Does anybody know a church in Lynchburg that preaches what Dr. Fuller preaches on the radio?" Soon after, he and two friends set out for the Park Avenue Baptist Church, despite the fact that they were not "dressed for church." The crowd was singing "The windows of heaven are open and the blessings are flowing tonight" when they arrived, and the usher gave him a hymnal—*Gospel Songs from the Old Fashioned Revival Hour*. "There are no coincidences when God is at work," Falwell insisted as he told his story. An old man sitting in a nearby pew offered to go down to the altar at the end of the service with him. Together there, they knelt down and the old man said, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ." Then the man—Falwell later learned he was a deacon—repeated his words again. That night in a little "cement-block building" Falwell got down on his knees with the deacon, asked Jesus to forgive his sins, and "accepted the mystery of God's salvation." "Isn't that easy?" the old man asked. "Isn't that wonderful? 'For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"[36]

In his autobiography, Falwell moves directly from his own story to the Bible and to the moment of conversion in all "true" Christians' lives, the moment when each person has to decide whether to stay in the security and sin of the old life or to step away, outside of that life, take up Christ, and begin anew. He cites and paraphrases the relevant Bible verses, John 3:3–6:

> Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and *of* the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

"That," Falwell insists in his conversion story, is the moment of individual transformation, "the beginning of the Christian's new life. Everything else follows that act." He wishes that he had not waited until he was eighteen, and that he had listened to his mother and others who tried to save him earlier. But he has found the path at last. "'Well, Jerry,' the pastor said, putting his arm around my shoulder, 'this is the end of your old life and the beginning of your new.' . . . From that moment everything changed for me."[37]

Being born again is the sign and the event, the symbol and the story, that forms the heart of evangelical Christianity. Conversion—the asking for forgiveness and the acceptance of Christ that brings eternal salvation—is the historical moment when a believer's relationship with Christ begins. But it is also a ritualized story, a genre—the conversion narrative—that marks a passage, the believer's separation from the secular world. The transformation imagined is so radical that the world rejected includes even the convert's previous life. "Salvation is not progressive, it is not eventual, it is instantaneous," Falwell preached in 1978. "If you are a born-again Christian, you can remember a time and a place where the miracle happen[ed]." Believers' stories of becoming born again always describe the moment of receiving God as surrender, as a letting go of the world and giving in to the Spirit. As Falwell described the process, "If any may be in Christ, that moment he is a new creation, a new creature, old things are passed away and behold all things are become new." The conversion narrative works to give the agency to God in this moment of individual transformation. Believers see this act of radical transformation as the work of the Spirit. Becoming born again, stopping one life and starting another, is a divinely assisted rebellion against the very self. The believer, filled with God, becomes an outsider in her former life.[38]

Still, beyond the supernatural explanations, becoming born again, with its focus on personal, interior transformation, has a great deal in common with broader cultural trends in the second half of the twentieth century. Conversion, in this sense, is yet another way of rebelling against some definition of the center and of using the expression of this transformation as a way to create an alternative, adversarial community. An individual is not a self-determining person in a political or economic sense, not a person who can vote or a worker without a boss. In the Jesus People movement, the outsider as a model of identity literally passes from the counterculture to the Jesus culture and flourishes there, joining with and reinforcing a powerful Protestant tradition of focusing on the individual's inner life. But cultural change is not usually this explicit and easy to trace. The broad 1970s evangelical explosion, too, grows out of the coming together of a secular obsession with individual self-transformation and the deeply Protestant vision of individual, Jesus-generated, interior change. Both these trends, in turn, deepen and strengthen each other.

Preachers like Falwell always made their own conversion stories part of their ministries. But in 1976, an amazingly diverse group of Americans began to spread the stories of their conversions beyond their churches and Bible study groups. Jimmy Carter, running for president at the time, told the national press that he had felt despondent in 1967 after losing his first campaign for the Georgia governorship and "realized that my own relationship with God and Christ was a very superficial one." Mission work with poor Americans and talking with his evangelical sister led to his becoming "born again": "a very close, intimate, personal relationship with God, through Christ, that has give me a great deal of peace, equanimity, the ability to accept difficulties without unnecessarily being disturbed, and also an inclination on a continuing basis to ask God's guidance in my life." "The most important thing in my life," Carter told many audiences on the campaign trail that year, "is Jesus Christ." The former Nixon aide and Watergate felon Charles Colson described his own transformation in his best-selling 1976 memoir, *Born Again*. A friend suggested they pray together, and Colson numbly assented. "Something began to flow into me—a kind of energy. Then came a wave of emotion which nearly brought tears." Later, he sat alone in his car. "With my face cupped in my hands, my head leaning forward against the wheel, I forgot about machismo, about pretenses, about fears of being weak. And as I did, I began to experience a wonderful feeling of being released. Then came the strange sensation that water was not only running down my cheeks, but surging through my whole body as well, cleansing and cooling as it went . . . Something inside me was urging me to surrender . . .," Colson continued. "For the first time in my life I was not alone at all."[39]

Carolyn Torbert found God after a jealous woman shot her. The former stripper Candy Bar, left paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair, had little choice but to go where her mother pushed her. Inside the tent at a revival, the Holy Spirit simply took her. "I felt so clear and pure as though I were worth something. I'd found what I had been searching for all those years." Christ, she realized, loved her profoundly, and she would change her life. Torbert decided not to press charges against her attacker: "My life is fulfilled sitting here in this wheelchair." Eldridge Cleaver, the best-selling author of the decidedly secular 1968 memoir *Soul on Ice* and a former Black Panther, also became born again that year, while waiting for his trial on charges of assault. In *Soul on Ice*, he committed blasphemy, calling his San Quentin teacher "Christ" and arguing that "the language and symbols of religion were nothing but weapons of war." But by 1976, he had experienced, literally, a change of heart:

> I was looking up at the moon and I saw the man in the moon and it was my face . . . Then I saw the face was not mine but some of my old heroes. There was Fidel Castro, then there was Mao Tse-tung . . . While I watched, the face turned to Jesus Christ, and I was very much surprised . . . I don't know when I had last cried, but I began to cry and I didn't stop . . . It was like I could not stop crying unless I said the prayer and the Psalm and surrendered something . . . All I had to do was surrender and go to jail.

The moment of surrender and the interior transformation that leads to the creation of a new and different life—the "born again" story shaped the evangelical view of how change occurs in the world.[40]

Before Jerry Falwell went through another radical moment of transformation in the late seventies, most fundamentalists were taking their new selves and rapidly departing for a separate world—independent Baptist churches, unaccredited Bible colleges, far-flung missionary outposts, church-run camps, and, beginning particularly in the sixties in response to racial integration, church-run schools. Since the 1920s, fundamentalists had lived in a largely self-imposed exile, isolated from the major currents of American public life. An earlier movement to bring conservative Christians back into the world had created a series of institutions—Youth for Christ, the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Seminary, the revivals of Billy Graham, and the magazine *Christianity Today*—in the 1940s and 1950s and revived the term "evangelical" to replace the tainted label "fundamentalist." In the early fifties, these conservative Christians even began to question racial segregation. Graham refused to segregate his crusades after 1953, and in 1954 the Southern Baptist Convention

and the National Association of Evangelicals both endorsed the *Brown* decision. But many conservative Christians, especially in the South, maintained their militant separatism. Many, like Falwell until the early eighties, even rejected the term "evangelical."[41]

Falwell told the story of the origins and birth of his Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg almost as often as he told the story of his own rebirth in Jesus Christ. After his conversion in 1952, Falwell left home and his engineering studies at Lynchburg College to attend Baptist Bible College, an unaccredited religious school in Springfield, Illinois. By the summer of 1956, he was back in Lynchburg, founding a new church with thirty-five people from his former church, including his future wife, Macel Pate. That fall, he began a daily morning radio program on local Lynchburg AM station WBRG 1050. In November 1956, he began taping a sermon in a television studio for broadcast too. Before his new church even celebrated its first birthday, Falwell had added on to the old Donald Duck soft drink bottling plant that served as its home, doubling the size of the sanctuary space and greatly increasing the number of members. In 1964, the young minister preached at the opening of Thomas Road Baptist Church's new one-thousand-seat sanctuary, and new members soon filled all the services there too. In the sixties, he began broadcasting Sunday services as *The Old-Time Gospel Hour* directly from the church. He repeatedly preached a kind of action-oriented faith: "I do not believe God is in anything that is static or stagnant. If God is a part of something, it is on the move." In less than ten years, Falwell built a powerful ministry.[42]

Still, few people outside Lynchburg and the small world of fundamentalist Baptist colleges knew about Falwell until he preached and then widely distributed his 1965 sermon "Ministers and Marches." "Does the 'CHURCH' have any command from God," he asked, "to involve itself in marches, demonstrations, or any other actions, such as many ministers and church leaders are so doing today?" Falwell's answer was not really shocking. Fundamentalism had defined itself in the early twentieth century against the social gospel, a movement among liberal Protestants to take their beliefs out into the streets and actively work not just to save souls but to create the structural, political changes—like the abolition of child labor—necessary to relieve human suffering.

"As far as the relationship of the church to the world," Falwell argued, "it can be expressed as simply as the three words which Paul gave Timothy—'preach the Word.' We have a message of redeeming grace through a crucified and risen Lord. This message is designed to go right to the heart of man and there meet his deep spiritual need . . . Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals," Falwell continued. "We are not told to wage wars against

bootleggers, liquor stores, gamblers, murderers, prostitutes, racketeers, prejudiced persons or institutions, or any other existing evil as such." "Our ministry is not reformation but transformation," Falwell often insisted, repeating the old attack of the fundamentalists on social reform work. "The gospel does not clean up the outside but rather regenerate the inside." His congregation, he preached, was full of former sinners. "What changed them?" he asked. "Did we go to Richmond and try to get laws passed which would send these persons to jail? No! . . . When Christ came in, sin went out." Christians "have very few ties on this earth. We pay our taxes, cast our votes as a responsibility of citizenship, obey the laws of the land, and other things demanded of us by the society in which we live. But at the same time, we are cognizant that our only purpose on this earth is to know Christ and to make him known." While Falwell directly questioned "the sincerity and non-violent intentions" of Martin Luther King Jr., because of his "left-wing associations," he was also lashing out here at mainline Protestant ministers in the National Council of Churches and their broad support for the civil rights movement. "Preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners."[43]

Christians, Falwell argued, should worry about fixing the churches, "rather than trying to clean up state and national governments." Activist ministers, he suggested, were motivated by political expedience to support "this so-called freedom movement." Otherwise, they would be just as concerned about discrimination against "negroes" in the North and "American Indians." If church leaders believed Christians should work for social reforms, "then I am forced to ask why the church is not as concerned about the alcoholism problem in America. There are almost as many alcoholics as there are negroes." "Love cannot be legislated," Falwell ended his sermon. "It is found in a Person—and his name is Jesus Christ."[44]

Because an earlier sermon that survives—the 1958 "Segregation or Integration, Which?"—uses Noah's curse on Ham from Genesis to argue that the Bible supports segregation, a common fundamentalist interpretation, some scholars have seen Falwell's position on political activism as the result of his white supremacy. The evidence (and Falwell and his associates spent a great deal of time spinning it in early eighties when the Lynchburg pastor led the Moral Majority and became a nationally recognized religious leader) suggests that Falwell shared the racist beliefs of many white southerners. Falwell had segregationist governors George Wallace and Lester Maddox as guests on the *Old-Time Gospel Hour* in the 1960s and went to visit both of them in their statehouses. When CORE activists conducted a kneel-in at Thomas Road Baptist Church in 1964, ushers threw them out, a fact Falwell did not deny in his

1987 autobiography. Thomas Road's congregation accepted its first black member in 1968, according to Falwell, as a result of a bus ministry created to reach out to minority neighborhoods. The minister's defense of those bus ministries in the late 1970s, however, was not exactly an endorsement of equality: "There are churches that actually hate a bus ministry because of the dirty, barefooted urchins who are brought in on the buses." "We are trying to make everybody equal," he preached, but "God did not create us all equal. We are very unequal. God loves us equally, but every one of us is created unequal."[45]

Falwell founded his Lynchburg Christian Academy in 1967, the year Lynchburg public schools were finally integrated, although he denied any connection between the two events. The Lynchburg Ministerial Association, a local ministers' group, met that April to condemn the use of the word "Christian" for a school that planned to exclude people who were not white. Falwell was clearly a white supremacist. He told a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* that it was "probably 1963–1964 that I totally repudiated segregation. It was a carryover from my heritage. I would say that 99 percent of all [white Southerners] . . . were segregationists, and once we became Christians, many of us were still in that cultural society—an all-white church and pastors who preached it as the Gospel. I don't think they were guilty of racism." In his 1987 autobiography, Falwell claimed an African American shoeshine man named Lewis ministered to him every Saturday morning in 1963 as he cleaned Falwell's shoes. Lewis's probing question—"when am I going to be able to join that church of yours over on Thomas Road?"—made the young minister question segregation. Whatever was in Falwell's heart in the sixties, he supported the southern culture of segregation that economically and socially oppressed and politically disfranchised African Americans in the region. But he also shared the majority of southern fundamentalists' belief in a militant separation from the world. "Ministers and Marches" simply joined the two beliefs. White southern fundamentalists believed in separation—the segregation of whites and blacks and the segregation of true believers and the rest of humanity.[46]

Some time around 1976, Falwell changed his mind about "reforming the externals" and began to argue that fundamentalists' separation, their outsider status, was exactly why they had to act to save the country. Fundamentalists should take their born-again selves back into the world. "This idea of 'religion and politics don't mix,'" he preached in a 1976 sermon, "America Back to God," "was invented by the devil to keep Christians from running their own country." "I have heard for so long politics and religion don't mix,' he argued in another sermon that year, "Conditions Corrupting America." "Now if they

mean by that that Jerry Falwell shouldn't run for Congress, I agree with that. I have no time. I really don't. But if they mean that saved men, that if saved persons, ought to stay out of politics, I don't mean that for a minute. That's exactly what we have done too long. We've handed the reins over to the ungodly." Other conservative Christians began speaking out in favor of political action as well. A lobbyist for the political action group Christian Voice warned conservative Christians, "The ministers have been admonishing their people to stay out of politics because it's dirty. They're finally waking up to the fact that it's dirty because Christians haven't been involved." But Falwell's second "conversion" shook up the insular world of southern fundamentalists more than the actions of any other leader or group. Falwell was a southern minister in a kind of Christianity that granted these male leaders tremendous power and the founder of his own booming church; he claimed seventeen thousand members in the late seventies. He had, in effect, created a world in Lynchburg—church, secondary school, college, media empire (television, radio, and publishing), and counseling center—where Christians could spend much of their lives. Falwell used all this power to push fundamentalists into rebelling against their former separatism. Conservative Christians needed to express themselves in the larger culture. By the end of the seventies, many fundamentalists had accepted Falwell's and other religious leaders' calls to political action. The oppressed majority, tentatively at first and then more strongly, began speaking out on issues like school prayer, opposition to gay rights, and control over textbook selection in the public schools.[47]

In the story Falwell wrote years later, abortion was the abomination that drove him out of the pulpit and prayer room and into politics. Scholars and activists have questioned his account. In their arguments, they note the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court decisions outlawing school-sponsored prayer and Bible reading in the public schools, which upset and angered fundamentalists and indeed most conservative Christians. No longer would these groups be able to shape public schools, even in districts where they were the majority, in ways that supported their beliefs. The success of the civil rights movement in integrating southern school systems in the second half of the sixties and the early seventies extended their outrage and fueled the movement to build private academies like Lynchburg Christian Academy. But by the late seventies, these schools too seemed threatened. In 1970, 1975, and 1978, the IRS issued ever more stringent rulings denying racially segregated private schools, including religious schools, tax-exempt status. The 1978 IRS ruling required schools to have "significant" numbers of enrolled minority students, a figure set at 20 percent or more of the minority school-age population in the area

served by the school. Angry conservative Christians reacted by sending more than 120,000 letters to the IRS and about 40,000 more messages to Congress. They feared they would not be able to maintain the separate Christian schools that they believed nurtured and protected their children's faith. Paul Weyrich, a leading conservative strategist and one of the architects of the New Right's rise to power in the eighties, has argued that "what galvanized the [Protestant] Christian community was not abortion, school prayer or the ERA. I am a living witness to that I was trying to get those people interested in those issues and I utterly failed. What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter's intervention against the Christian schools." Although IRS efforts to withhold tax exemptions from segregated Christian schools began under Nixon, it was the 1978 ruling that generated mass protest. Other issues upset conservative Christians, in Weyrich's view, but they believed they could protect their own morality by simply not participating: avoiding abortions, creating their own schools, and maintaining traditional gender relations in their own families and institutions. "Suddenly, it dawned on them that they were not going to be able to be left alone to teach their children as they pleased. It was at that moment that conservatives made the linkage between their opposition to government interference and the interests of the evangelical movement." Conservative Christians' interest in protecting their separate world from the federal government made them potential allies for political conservatives working to forge a broad anti-government coalition.[48]

The IRS's nearly decade-long push to drop the tax-exempt status of segregated Christian schools scared fundamentalists because it occurred within a world they saw as deeply changed. The old threats—Prohibition-era popular culture, illegal drinking, the teaching of evolution, and the spread of liberal Protestantism—of earlier in the century looked pretty small by the seventies. In the fifties and early sixties, in Billy Graham's successful crusades, in the pages of *Christianity Today*, and in their sense that Eisenhower was a man of faith, some evangelicals began to feel that the country was turning back to God. In 1954, for example, Eisenhower signed the bill inserting "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance. "From this day forward," he proclaimed, "the millions of our schoolchildren will daily proclaim . . . the dedication of our Nation and our people to the Almighty." But the social movements of the sixties and the changes in American popular culture—rock music, the broad embrace of the counterculture, and the sexual revolution—reversed the gains some Christians believed they had made since World War II. The success of sixties political movements, however incomplete, formed the context within which fundamentalists understood the threat of federal intervention in their schools.[49]

Southern fundamentalists like Falwell saw the civil rights movement in the region as the first blow. In the South and elsewhere, many white fundamentalists believed as adamantly in the separation of white and black as they did in the separation of their own communities from the contaminated world. The stampede of white southern Christians into the new private schools, called by their critics "seg academies," occurred as much or more because the 1954 *Brown* decision had finally reached the rural deep South as because the Supreme Court had compounded that earlier error by banning prayer in the public schools. Many fundamentalists at the time fused the two issues. The government, they said, pushed God out of the schools and put African Americans in. With limited resources, a great deal of volunteer work, and church support, conservative Christians had responded by building an alternative network of educational institutions. In the seventies, the tax issue filled them with anger because it would make it even more difficult for white Christians to fund their own school system. The form of federal government intervention that pushed many fundamentalists into politics in the seventies was forced integration.[50]

More than a decade after "Ministers and Marches," Jerry Falwell was still preaching against the civil rights movement in a sermon called "America's Lawlessness." "Our churches need to teach their people to be soul winners and not social reformers," Falwell still claimed. "The best way to overcome racial hatred, prejudice, and lawlessness in a man is to win him to Christ. When he becomes a Christian, Christ, who is love, comes to dwell in his heart. He then finds himself not only loving God, but loving all men . . . Love cannot be legislated," the minister argued as if that were the point of the civil rights movement. "Nobody can make someone love someone else against his will." The "social gospel," Falwell asserted, and fundamentalists would have understood the term to refer to contemporary social movements, began with the false assumption that people were "basically good." In fact, though, "reformation can never be the answer. It must be transformation. Jesus said, 'ye must be born again.'" Still, Falwell insisted, "I don't blame the Blacks"—he was finally dropping his old term "negro"—"for our terrible plight today." They were being used "by wicked men with wicked motives," "communists." "Communist party officials and members," the minister even alleged, "were the instigating factors" in the recent race riots in Cleveland.[51]

But in the late 1970s, Falwell never directly condemned the civil rights fight against segregation in the South, at least in the sermons that survive. He did, however, broadly condemn the New Left. "Women's lib," he preached in 1975, was "antichrist and unscriptural." Claiming the sexes were equal was like

claiming people were equal to Jesus. Abortion supporters, Falwell argued in 1978 in the first sermon he devoted to the issue, were part of "the same crowd that is promoting ERA, women's liberation movement, gay liberation, the same people that are pushing towards a unisexual society, that knows no dos and don'ts and has no code of ethics." The supporters of "children's rights," he argued in a sermon televised on his *Old-Time Gospel Hour* in 1979 on which Phyllis Schlafly was a guest, were the same people again, "the anti-family people, those who promote the Equal Rights Amendment . . . the same ones [that were] in the vanguard of the pro–abortion rights efforts and are still there and they were in the anti–Viet Nam War marches and the anti–nuclear power people and you know what they're saying. We want to preserve human life." Then he attacked the New Left with its own weapon. "Gross hypocrisy," he accused. These people promoted "the murder of a million babies a year" while claiming, "We're for the protection of life." The broader cultural obsession with action finally reached the fundamentalists. "We've got to become activist witnesses, activist Christians, activist citizens."[52]

Conservative Christians angry about what they saw as potential government intervention in their schools lived in a world they saw as profoundly shaped by the New Left social movements they condemned. Elmer Towns, who moved to Lynchburg in 1971 to help Falwell build Lynchburg Baptist College into Liberty University, remembered that many fundamentalists felt under attack in the seventies: "We really had a fortress mentality: 'Let's hang on. We are losing ground every day to society, to the world, to bureaucracy, to the federal government.'" Ed Dobson, a close Falwell aide in the seventies, has argued, "I don't think people understand that the average fundamentalist felt alienated from the mainstream of American culture." As the scholar Martin Marty argued, "Fundamentalists have felt left out of everyone else's liberation." Falwell too preached in the late seventies on fundamentalists' sense of themselves as outsiders: "Did you know that the largest single minority bloc in the United States that has never been capitalized on by anybody is the fundamentalist movement?" Racial integration, the anti-war movement with its support for the North Vietnamese Communists, gay rights, feminism, and the ERA—all violated the boundaries of the fundamentalist vision of the world and their godly separatism. The fact that the protest letters that evangelicals wrote to the IRS and Congress made President Carter reverse the IRS's position, however, gave them a taste of what their political power might be. Distance had been created to promote godliness. Maybe distance would have to be violated to save it. As a direct mail letter from the Christian Voice Moral Government Fund put it in the early eighties, good people could not let "militant gays, ultra liberals, atheists, [and] porno

On May 6, 1980, the Rev. Jerry Falwell leads one of his series of "I Love America" rallies in Springfield, Illinois, with some help from Phyllis Schlafly. *Associated Press*.

pushers, pressure Congress into passing Satan's agenda instead of God's." Falwell argued, "If all the fundamentalists knew who to vote for and did it together, we could elect anybody . . . We could turn this nation upside down for God."[53]

Jerry Falwell was not the first conservative Christian to join his religious focus on the autonomy of patriarchal families and churches with a conservative political ideology that condemned (rhetorically, at least) government intervention in society and the economy. But because he was a southern fundamentalist with a large church and a popular television and radio ministry as well, his decision that social reform and not just individual religious transformation was the business of the church carried a great deal of force. As Falwell preached defensively in 1980, "I'm accused of being controversial and political. I'm not political. Moral issues that become political issues I still fight. It isn't my fault that they've made these moral issues political." In an interview in the mid-nineties, however, Falwell claimed he faced the issue directly. "When I got into politics personally, it was morally necessary for me to say out loud that 'I have misled you on the issue. I never thought the government would go so far afield, I never thought the politicians would become so untrustworthy, I never thought the courts would go nuts to the left, and I misjudged the quality of government we have. Our lack of involvement is probably one of the reasons why the country's in the mess it is in. We have defaulted by failing to show up for the fight.'" In Falwell's memory, it did not take long. Most of his congregation followed him right into politics.[54]

Falwell's surviving writings from the seventies and early eighties position abortion as only one among many moral threats. Sermons from 1975 and 1976 like "The Biblical Answer to Women's Lib," "America Must Come Back to God," and "Conditions Corrupting Politics" do not even mention abortion. In the 1979 sermon "Home: Ten Major Threats," abortion was number eight. Threat number one was divorce, followed by employed mothers and "the ERA delusion." Falwell did not actually preach a sermon on abortion until 1978, five years after *Roe v. Wade*. In "Abortion-on-Demand: Is It Murder," different versions of which were given at the Thomas Road evening service and at the morning service televised as *The Old-Time Gospel Hour* in February and April, Falwell answered the question yes but did not ask his congregation to enter politics as a way to stop "the killing of innocents." As late as 1980, the celebratory, photograph-filled book *Jerry Falwell: Man of Vision* presented abortion as "perhaps . . . the most distasteful legalized sin," one of the many causes of the "moral decay" killing America. Homosexuality was the first threat Falwell described in this book—he had supported Anita Bryant's campaign against gay rights in Miami in the late seventies and hosted her as a guest on *The Old-Time Gospel Hour* in February 1980. Next, the preacher denounced the soaring divorce rate, the fault, he argued, of the feminists and the ERA. In the 1980 version of his "America Back to God" sermon, abortion again followed homosexuality as the major threat to American morality.[55]

But Falwell eventually settled on abortion as the evil that set his personal transformation and the resulting radical reorganization of fundamentalism in motion, and many conservative Christians today narrate their own politicization in the same way. For the New Right, abortion worked like the civil rights movement did for the New Left. In the histories and memoirs—the born again into politics stories—abortion is often the engine of the moral outrage that generates a new activism, even if only in the histories and memoirs and not at the time. Falwell used his second conversion tale—almost identical accounts appear in his 1986 book *If I Should Die Before I Wake* and in his 1987 autobiography, *Strength for the Journey*—both to explain the gap between the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* and his founding of the Moral Majority in January 1979 and to narrate his second radical break with his past. This second conversion is, fittingly, in his telling, the work of a child. And the means are not political calculations or ambitions but the evangelical model of social change, the individual interior transformation, the change of heart.[56]

In his account, on January 23, 1973, Jerry Falwell glanced over his newspaper, the *Lynchburg News*, while eating a big southern breakfast with his family. Almost buried under the banner headline "Lyndon Johnson Dies" and related articles on the front page, he read "Supreme Court Legalizes Abortion." "In one terrible act they struck down all the state laws against abortion and legalized infanticide across the land," Falwell realized as his bacon turned cold. "I could not believe that seven justices on the nation's highest court could have so little regard for the value of human life." But immediately, the eighties present from which the ecumenical and politically active Falwell is writing seeps into this tale: "Already, leaders of the Catholic church had spoken courageously in opposition to the Court's decision; but the voices of my Protestant and Christian brothers and sisters, especially the voices of the evangelical and fundamentalist leaders, remained silent." In 1973, Falwell would have cared little what Catholics said about anything. He was not even interested in evangelicals—a term he still rejected then. Only fundamentalists mattered. At that time he understood his job as one of creating new believers by helping the Holy Spirit save souls.

Falwell's second conversion tale gets slippery then, and moments of epiphany and inner transformation become hard to locate on a timeline. Despite the fact that the conventions of the born-again genre work to make it read true, the date of *Roe v. Wade* is not actually the birth date of this new third Jerry Falwell, true Christian and political activist. The form of the born-again story is there, but the materials refuse to stay neatly in the structure. Falwell, for example, remembers that he had read the evangelical theologian Francis

Schaeffer. Schaeffer believed that abortion was both the sign of people's loss of respect for the sanctity of life and its cause. Legalized abortion, he and C. Everett Koop argued in their popular book and film *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, would lead to legalized euthanasia and infanticide. Yet Schaeffer and Koop did not publish this book and produce this film until 1977.

Clearly, Schaeffer's thinking influenced Falwell. The theologian's 1976 book and film *How Should We Then Live?* promised Christians that everything in the world was theirs, as the earliest Christians believed: "All truth is God's truth." He exhorted his readers, "Do not think Christianity is a small thing. Do not sell it short. Christianity is intellectually viable . . . The Bible is there and it covers the whole spectrum of life. God has given us a beautiful thing . . . Do not sell it short." Schaeffer taught that nothing needed to be separate for Christians. God wanted them to take their faith and their values out into the intellectual and cultural and political life of the world.[57]

In the second half of the seventies, Schaeffer called on all evangelicals to take up politics. Falwell, he urged, should build on the popularity of his *Old-Time Gospel Hour*, which was by then being broadcast on television stations nationwide. Falwell had an audience much larger than his Lynchburg church and college. If he spoke, fundamentalists across the country would listen.[58]

Falwell's own account of his conversion leaves out these details. He describes the SEC's 1973 investigation into his bond sales to fund Liberty Baptist College and *Old-Time Gospel Hour*. By early 1974, he remembers, he could turn his attention back to abortion. Like any good fundamentalist preacher upset about morality, he preached "regularly against abortion," "hoping that words would be enough." In fact, Falwell did not preach a sermon on abortion until 1978. But in his conversion-to-politics story, historical time falls away. Falwell begins to doubt that "preaching would be enough": "To stop the legalization of death by abortion, opponents of the *Roe v. Wade* decision were protesting in the streets. For the first time in my life I felt God was leading me to join them." In fact, anti-abortion activists did not take their politics into the street until Operation Rescue led the New York City protests in 1988.[59]

In every good born-again story, the person to be converted examines his doubts. How could Falwell turn against what his teachers had taught him and a half century of fundamentalist tradition? How could he act against even his own widely publicized position against ministers' involvement in political activism? "I sincerely believed that a Christian's best contribution to social change was his or her faithfulness to our primary goals: studying the word, preaching the Gospel, winning souls, building churches and Christian schools, and praying for the eventual healing of the nation." Falwell worried that he did not know anything about politics and that he did not have the time—with all of his commitments—to learn. Still, lack of expertise had not stopped him from founding a school, a college, and a radio, television, and publishing company.[60]

In Falwell's conversion story, what ultimately pushed him into politics, though, was the voice of a child, his child. The scene is the perfect image of the American family, father and mother and children sitting "in a little circle around the fireplace, reading the Bible and praying." Falwell was describing in detail "the meaning of abortion and its effects on the unborn and their mothers." He spoke of his fear that America would not survive "the judgment of God because of this 'national sin.'" His nine-year-old daughter, Jeannie, grew angry. His seven-year-old son, Jonathan, cried. Then Jonathan "got up off the floor, walked over to the fireplace, knelt before me, and placed his hands on my knees. For one moment he looked directly into my eyes without speaking." Then Jonathan, Falwell's own son, spoke the words that "helped change our lives forever": "Daddy, why don't you do something about it?" In his second conversion tale, Falwell again cuts directly to the words of Jesus: "A little child shall lead them."[61]

Falwell's new sense that Christians needed to act—most likely reached about 1978—was pushed back in his own account into the year or two after *Roe*. But it did not matter in the end that Falwell's chronology was way off. For believers, his second conversion story conveyed a spiritual truth. When God acts, a person is born again and history ceases to matter. And the sharper the break with the past and the more radical the rebellion appears, the more the conversion story offers proof of God's power.

Falwell had already learned during his 1976 series of "I Love America" rallies, staged in state capitals across the nation, that he could bring his television audience out into the streets. That campaign had used the nation's Bicentennial to stage fundamentalist revival meetings across the nation. And best of all, local media—television and newspapers—gave Falwell's rallies a great deal of coverage. Who would not want to see them? Young women wearing long red taffeta dresses, Farrah Fawcett hair, and perfect makeup danced and sang with clean-shaven, short-haired men in three-piece white suits, dark blue shirts, and red-striped ties. Uniformed kids from Christian academies, not a black face in sight, watched and prayed. Falwell preached. It was more interesting than the day's traffic accidents and robberies or yet another story about public school children painting their trash cans red, white, and blue. Too late for Nixon and even Falwell's friend Gerald Ford, Falwell's rallies turned out the "silent majority." Whether Falwell consciously adopted the strategy or not, it

was a conservative Christian version of the protest march. Falwell had to purchase the television and radio time on which he broadcast Thomas Road Baptist Church's services. In the late seventies, he figured out how to get all the exposure for free.

Falwell's series of rallies raised his profile outside fundamentalist circles. His and other religious broadcasters' success in getting their viewers to write and pressure the IRS into backing down from its 1978 decision to tax segregated Christian schools gave him a sense of his power. Other conservative Christian ministers and broadcasters, too, were beginning to talk about politics. Charles Stanley, the pastor at First Baptist Church in Atlanta, distributed thousands of videotapes of his sermon "Stand Up, America" urging Christians to become political activists. James Robison was fighting to get his nationally syndicated television program back on the Dallas ABC affiliate after the station pulled the show because of the minister's condemnation of gays. "Everybody else is coming out of the closet," Robison preached. "Let's come out from under the pew, stand up, and take this country back." Conservative strategist Paul Weyrich and others came to Lynchburg in May 1979 to court Falwell at the local Holiday Inn. Out of their meetings emerged a new organization, the Moral Majority, "pro-life, pro-family, pro-moral, and pro-American," that would make Falwell famous.[62]

Moral Majority's strategy, Falwell often joked to the press, was "get 'em saved, baptized, and registered." Twenty-five million Christians attended church at least twice a week, the Moral Majority estimated, and yet had not previously voted. "It's amazing what we've learned from feminists and the other side. Civil Rights people had the kind of backbone to stand up for their freedom, and Christians better have that kind of backbone too." In the early eighties, Falwell often compared the Christian Right to the civil rights movement: "Well, some ask, 'Don't you think it's imposing your morality on someone else to make it *legal for little children to be born and illegal to kill them*? Or to pass a human life amendment some day? We're imposing our *immorality* against the civil rights of the unborn who cannot speak for themselves!"[63]

In the end, the story (sometimes true, sometimes not) mattered as much as the particular histories of what actually caused individuals' own transformations. And the story, by the late 1980s, was that abortion, not integration, pushed Bible-believing Christians back into politics. Opposing abortion, trying to protect the weakest and most marginal of Americans, fetuses literally and legally on the border between life and non-life, made many conservative Christians into different kinds of outsiders. Southern fundamentalists were no longer Confederate-flag-waving supporters of segregation, people still, even a half century after Scopes, on the wrong side of history. And Catholic ethnics were no longer African-American-hating busing opponents. The fight against abortion gave all kinds of conservative Christians a way to see themselves on the right side of history, as civil rights supporters. It also validated their feelings, whatever their numbers, that they were outsiders too. Conservative Christians had discovered the most oppressed Americans of all, "people" with fewer rights than African Americans—"the unborn." "There is no more helpless form of life in the world," Falwell preached in 1978, "than an unborn child." And they brought their Bible-believing sense that everything was important and laden with symbolic meaning, that nothing in God's world was a coincidence, into politics. There, conservative Christians' emphasis on interior transformation and an individual, emotional relationship with Jesus linked up with the secular vision of the outsider as a real individual, worshipping self-expression and inner experience.[64]

The two conservative Christian oppositional cultures that emerged in the 1970s made profound use of the romance of the outsider. Most of the white young people who joined the Jesus People were refugees from the people of plenty, kids who had grown up in prosperous new suburbs and whose parents were educated and securely middle-class or upper-middle-class. Jesus freaks, like hippies and beatniks, formed in an anti-middle class. They romanticized outsiders because these figures seemed to model forms of behavior and ways of living that stood in stark opposition to white middle-class norms. Outsiders modeled freedom and offered a route to get there, identification. Rebellion might damage the class and race privileges of individual white middle-class men, and middle-class white women were particularly vulnerable to the additional loss of their gender privileges. Yet at the larger, collective level, the romance of the outsider worked to strengthen the white middle class symbolically in an era when its central myth—the individual's control over his or her fate—proved increasingly untenable in material terms. Jesus freaks violated the polite rules of mainline Protestant religious life at mid-century, but their rebellion worked at a deeper level to strengthen belief in the efficacy of the individual will and the truth of the inner self.[65]

For Falwell's fundamentalists, on the other hand, adopting the romance of the outsider worked to integrate them into the modern white middle class. It helped them expand their belief in the value of inner transformation and individual will, a key attribute of white middle-class subjectivity, beyond matters of religious faith. Most fundamentalists at the start of the seventies came from working-class or lower-middle-class families in the rural South, Midwest, and

West. As the Sun Belt economy boomed from California to the Deep South, many found their incomes rising. Their growing sense that their outsider status worked as an asset helped them to act in the larger world. However much fundamentalists valued their separation from modern America, however, in their faith in the value of individual inner transformation, inner truth, and the moral power of outsiders, they were much like other white middle-class Americans.