UNCHRISTIAN AMERICA

Living with faith in a nation that was never under God

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For my children, Wesley and Mary.

May you always seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The dead face stared back at me as I knew it would. I couldn't help taking a peek. I was a thirteen-year-old boy, after all, and it was an easy thing to turn around in the cab of the Toyota and peer down at the body wrapped up like a rug in the back of the truck.

It was night in Central Africa, and night in Africa is always dark. I turned back around to see the dirt road ahead of us and the occasional flash of animal eyes disappearing into the bush.

"Just wait until we get to the village," Bob told me. "You'll never see anything like it again. Funerals really bring out the heathen in them."

Bob was my dorm father at the boarding school. He was a seasoned missionary, but his comment puzzled me, since this man—this dead man we were transporting back to the village of his birth—had been a pastor.

I braced myself for what I could only imagine would be a chilling scene. What would death in an African village look like? I conjured up scenes of women wailing as they beat their breasts and threw themselves on the ground. I could already hear the hypnotic pounding of drums and see the eerie flickering of the fires.

I turned around to look one more time into the frozen, leathery face of a man in his forties. Why, I wondered, was Bob preparing me for what we'd see in the village? This man had been a Christian who worshiped

Jesus. He had turned his back on the gods of his ancestors, gods of stones and sticks.

"We're here," Bob said as the dirt road turned into a clearing of thatched-roof huts. There was a large fire burning, just as I'd expected. But as we came to a stop and got out of the truck, I heard singing. The villagers were singing hymns—in the rhythms and chanted intonations of tribal music. But they were Christian hymns nonetheless. Here in the "heart of darkness" (as Joseph Conrad called it) was the light of the gospel. This light, I came to learn, shines no matter how dark the culture may be. This light, the "light of the glorious gospel," as Paul called it (2 Corinthians 4:4, KJV), still shines brightly after two thousand years because it's not the product or exclusive monopoly of any culture, including my own.

This would become a benchmark experience for me, one I'd think back on years later when struggling over how to be a Christian in an increasingly secularized America. In particular, I remember that night in Africa whenever I hear someone say that Christianity is on the decline. As the millennium approached, American theologian and Jesus Seminar publicist Burton Mack declared, "It's over. We've had enough apocalypses. We've had enough martyrs. Christianity has had a two thousand–year run, and it's over." But Burton Mack never heard hymns in an African village. He didn't know Mananga, the old pastor with white hair. When Mananga smiled, which was often, you could see the incisors that had been sharpened to a point many decades before when he was a young man in a tribe of cannibals. The American missionaries I grew up among may have been tone deaf to the nuances of cross-cultural dialogue, but they earnestly believed that the gospel can change lives, families, even entire villages, for the better.

The great error that scholars like Burton Mack make is to tie Christianity to the institutions, culture, and history of the Western world.

Certainly, it would come as a great surprise to those in the villages of Africa, Asia, and Latin America that "it's over" for the church. We can learn much from the non-Western church about living with faith in the midst of an unbelieving world.

Christianity is not a product of the Western world, the way Burton Mack arrogantly assumes. Cloistered in the ivory towers of theology departments, scholars like Mack fail to recognize the vibrancy of Christian faith in Kenya or India or Guatemala. Nor do they see the vitality of evangelical faith in neighborhood churches all across America. All they see are the dead skeletal remains of a bankrupt social gospel. Mack doesn't speak for Christianity, and he's certainly not authorized to write its obituary. But what makes Mack interesting is how he embodies a certain type of secularism that has overtaken the West—and is gradually overtaking America as well. Mack thinks he's dancing on the grave of Christianity, but it's only a cultural Christianity, not the real thing.

We've lost the cultural battle. We've lost the "Christian" America we thought we had but never really did. Everywhere we see the forces of secularism advancing against the revealed truths of God. But this should not alarm us. Christ is triumphant. The spiritual war has been won at the Cross. That's the message I learned many years ago as the fires flickered in an African village. Along the way, I forgot the message, I lost touch with its power, and I had to learn it all over again.

And that's the story of this book.

My family and I returned to the States during the bicentennial year of 1976. It was a confusing place for a missionary kid who had become a teenager in Africa and suddenly found himself in a world of disco, *Jaws*, and *Happy Days*. Other things confused me too, including the strange

new mix of politics and religion. *Time* magazine declared 1976 "the Year of the Evangelical," and the phrase "born again" entered the mainstream vocabulary of our culture. When Jimmy Carter ran for president as a peanut farmer who taught Sunday school, millions of Christians embraced him with hope. America seemed ready for renewal after the long nightmare of Vietnam and Watergate, and evangelical Christians were beginning to explore what role they might play in making it happen.

This was the political world I came of age in—a world in which Bible-believing Christians like myself were determined to "make a difference," to stem the tide of moral decay in our nation and return it to its Christian roots. These were my values, and this became my vision of what Christianity could be expected to achieve in the world. The visceral understanding of the gospel that I gained in Africa—that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation—was becoming a distant memory.

Looking back, the moral and political trends that were under way in American life now seem inescapable. The cultural battle lines that were established during these turbulent years would shape the next generation. "Red states" and "blue states" had not yet been designated—that would have to wait until the divisive presidential elections of 2000 and 2004—but a great cultural divide was already forming in America. In 1973 abortion had become a constitutionally recognized right. In Dade County, Florida, Anita Bryant led a successful campaign to overturn a local ordinance that outlawed discrimination against homosexuals. Across the nation, the drive to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (the ERA) was met with fierce and growing opposition as critics began to contemplate—and sensationalize—the dark possibilities. Would men and women be forced to share unisex bathrooms?

These issues were like political nitroglycerin in their combination of moral and religious values, cultural expectations of social norms (such as

"traditional" gender roles), and the raw struggle for political power. The rise of the Religious Right—arguably the most significant development in American politics at the close of the last century—would be rooted in these struggles. Some victories would be won, such as the defeat of the ERA, though this success would prove to be moot. The American family has been breaking down for the past generation, and we don't have the ERA to blame. As for abortion, this "right" is now so well entrenched within our political culture that the most evangelicals can expect from their political leaders is a sympathetic press release every January 22 "regretting" the moral tragedy of abortion. The gay rights movement in the 1970s was so small and ineffective that Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen who sold orange juice on TV, was able to defeat it. Not so today. Now among the most powerful and well financed of all lobbying blocs, the "homosexual community" (as it is called) will settle for nothing less than an official state endorsement of same-sex marriage.

Who lost America?

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed the steady dissolution of the traditional two-parent American family. MTV took over the role of guiding America's youth toward adulthood. The personal computer and the Internet transformed our way of life, but some of the earliest homesteaders in this new frontier were pornography kingpins who discovered rich sources of revenue and millions of new addicts. On college campuses, cultural relativism was packaged as "political correctness" and spread like a virus into every corner of American society. Intellectuals, like alchemists in reverse, transformed truth into a base political category—something we construct and negotiate for personal gain. Whether or not Americans could recognize the names of Jacques Derrida or Roland Barthes, they were becoming positively French in their skepticism of truth and meaning. No one seemed immune to this new spirit of relativism, not even the president

of the United States, who struggled under oath to define the meaning of the third-person singular present indicative form of the verb "to be." All this occurred against the backdrop of fervent and sophisticated political activism by the Christian Right.

Who lost America?

For over thirty years, evangelical Christians have been waging a vigorous counteroffensive against the forces of secular humanism in American culture. Pastors have been mobilized to "wake up" their congregations and "take back America." Millions of new voters have been registered, and millions of dollars have been spent. Scores of candidates have been endorsed: many good ones, but some really bad ones too—people you'd never dream of inviting home for dinner. Christian conservatives have invested time, money, and reputation in the fortunes of the Republican party. And what do we have to show for it? The movement that burst onto the political landscape in 1980 with such hope and promise has not aged gracefully. Leaders have been forced to step down in disgrace. Religious conservatives are steadily losing clout at the polls as moral issues are trumped by economic and national security concerns. Some Christian lobbying groups have suffered splits over policy disputes. If evangelical Christians at the height of their political power could not take back America, then how is a weakened movement likely to succeed in the years to come?

A generation later, a fierce culture war still rages on many fronts—over the meaning of life, the nature of truth, the definition of a family. These are the main battlefields, the Antietam and Bull Run of this new civil war, but it's the raids and skirmishes that attract most of the attention. Should intelligent design be taught alongside evolutionary theory in our classrooms? Can Christian organizations be compelled to employ someone who is openly gay? Are decency standards no longer enforce-

able in an age of digital communication? Are Christmas trees religious symbols, and if so, should they be replaced with "holiday trees"? The issues are great and small, serious and often trivial, but every battle in this culture war seems to come back in the end to the question of our national identity—whether we are, bone and marrow, a Christian nation that has lost its way, or whether the "faith of our fathers" is irrelevant to the public policy debates in the new millennium.

How do we relate our faith to our culture? This was the question that Tertullian, the third-century church father, often returned to in his writings. When he famously asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Tertullian was referring to the intellectual values of the Hellenistic world—the philosophical legacy of ancient Greece and Rome. But he also had something to say about the street culture of Rome, the nationalistic myths of the Empire. Since there wasn't a word that captured what he wanted to say about "the qualities of being Roman," Tertullian made one up: Romanitas—the Roman equivalent of Americanism. Until the emergence of Christianity, the Latin language had no need for a word like Romanitas to describe the social, political, and moral values of the Roman Empire. Never a very self-reflective people, the Romans had defined themselves by their actions in the world; they saw themselves as a people of destiny, specially chosen by the gods to "rule mankind and make the world obey." Christianity challenged Rome's most basic set of values. This peculiar, mysterious religion had forced a distinction—a grand clarification—between what it meant to be a Roman and what it meant to be a Christian. The early church fathers were quite aware that they were Roman citizens, but they also understood that their faith in Christ transcended the political and social values of their world.

As American evangelicals, we are far too comfortable with the idea that we, like the ancient Romans, are a special people uniquely called to do God's

work in the world. We forget that Jesus turned to fishermen, not politicians, when He began His ministry; we forget that He empowered the twelve disciples with the Holy Spirit, not political charisma, to build His church. No nation, no matter how good and how strong, has ever superseded the mandate that Christ Himself entrusted to His followers. Tertullian understood an important truth that evangelicals need to reclaim: Christians of every age and every culture must "audit" their beliefs in light of Scripture. Audit literally means "to hear"—and that's exactly what we must do. As a community of believers, we must hear the Word of God, not the voices of the world. We must be willing to place our most cherished cultural values alongside Scripture to see what matches up and what falls short.

Who lost America? In the following pages I'll present an answer we don't like to hear: America was never ours to lose.

Some claim that America began its moral decline in 1962 when the Supreme Court "took God out of the classroom." Others would point to the rebellious drug culture of the 1960s, the rise of feminism, or the gay rights movement. But the battle for America wasn't lost that recently. It was lost several hundred years ago at the dawn of the modern world. Yes, America has been a beacon of hope and freedom in the world. Yes, America is great because America is good, as Tocqueville wrote nearly two hundred years ago. Yes, our Founding Fathers invoked God's name in nearly everything they wrote. But America has also been a four hundred–year laboratory experiment in living out the humanistic values of the modern age. As we move deeper into the new millennium, the pace of secularization is accelerating. How Christians respond to the emerging post-Christian America will be determined not just by our theology but by our view of history as well. Christians who are committed to turning back the tide of secularism in America fail to realize that our country, like the rest of the Western world, has been trending post-Christian right from the start.

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The first part of this book, "Losing the Battle," examines the intellectual machinery that drives our political activity as evangelicals. I'll argue that the real enemy we face has never been godless Communism, the gay lobby, the abortion industry, or the Hollywood elite. The real enemy is the same one Jesus confronted two thousand years ago: the materialistic values of this world system. For us today, this worldview is expressed in a godless secularism that would reduce all of human experience to the collision of atoms in a purposeless universe. We see the spirit of the age in the public mockery of our faith and the purging of Christian imagery from public life. But we didn't arrive at this point overnight; what we're witnessing in American culture today is the culmination of a battle that's been raging for several hundred years.

Evangelicals who have entered the political process, however, have done so in response to more immediate cultural factors. Chapter 1, "The Battle Is Engaged," presents a historical sketch of the rise and fall of the Religious Right over the past generation, from its triumphant entry onto the political stage in 1980 to the collapse of Ralph Reed's 2006 campaign in Georgia. This is not a comprehensive history—there are many good ones that have been written—but a personal interpretation of the compromises that doomed the movement from the start. The central miscalculation of the Religious Right has been its failure to recognize the real nature of the battle, how long it's been waged, and the high price we've been willing to pay for entry into the political theater. I write as an evangelical Christian who once believed that America is a Christian nation that lost its way. I'm still an evangelical Christian, but I no longer believe that this nation, or any nation in this fallen world, can be truly "under God."

The next three chapters tackle the false assumptions that lie beneath

our political activism. If, for example, we believe we're a Christian nation that has lost its way, then we'll be striving to "take back America" for God. Chapter 2, "How Christian a Nation?" argues that while history and culture give us a contradictory picture of our religious heritage, Scripture speaks very clearly to this point. No nation has a special calling from God to do His bidding in the world. Chapter 3, "Rethinking the Shining City," addresses another set of false assumptions—ones deeply embedded in our cultural DNA. The belief that America is an earthly utopia, a nation of practical, self-reliant, and devout men and women, will be placed alongside Scripture and once again found wanting. Evangelicals have also wrongly assumed that the moral and spiritual decline of America has begun in our own lifetime. Chapter 4, "The Long Defeat," will connect our history to the much longer narrative of the Western world. We'll see that Christianity has been under assault since the birth of the modern age five hundred years ago. In the end, I'll conclude that the cultural battle for America is all but lost. We are becoming the post-Christian nation we were always destined to be.

But there's a positive message here as well. The second part of the book, "Winning the War," refocuses our attention on the spiritual victory that Christ has won at the Cross. In chapter 5, "Back to the Beginning," I'll present the case that we must look beyond our culture, beyond our history, to the work that God has always been doing in creation, in individual hearts, and in the life of the church. Once we come back to basics, back to the opening chapters of Genesis, we can pose the question that drives chapter 6: "What's Worth Fighting For?" The answer is found, once again, in the beginning—in the core value of life. Before the nations were founded, before human laws were framed, our Creator inscribed this divine attribute into the structure of creation. Life is the prime value of the Christian faith. We were created in the image of God to be vessels for His glory, and we cannot be silent about the sanctity of life. The materialistic worldview denies

the character of our Creator. When we speak up in defense of life, we are ultimately bearing witness to the goodness and sovereignty of God.

But it's not enough to hold a biblical position on life. We must demonstrate a biblical approach to living. We must do a better job of modeling the abundant life we have in Christ before an unbelieving world. In the end, I conclude that a biblical view of culture can liberate us from the impossible task of attempting what God never commissioned us to do. The final chapter, "A Simple Call to Virtue," brings us back to our scriptural mandate to live virtuous and godly lives in this present age. To be "peculiar" people who testify to the transforming power of God's grace. To live lives empowered by His Spirit, not by the fleshly tools of this world system.

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From the catacombs of ancient Rome to the edge cities of modern America, living for Christ has always meant the same thing: commitment and self-sacrifice, dying to self and dying to the world. By absorbing the values of the larger culture, evangelicals have neglected their responsibility—a responsibility placed on every successive generation of believers—to present a relentless critique of our fallen world:

> That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world. **PHILIPPIANS 2:15** (KJV)

Instead, the American church has accumulated the cultural baggage of four centuries. As evangelicals, we have tethered our faith to social, political, and economic institutions. Our task should be to critique these relationships and strip our faith of the comfortable, extrabiblical debris of culture—even if this means tossing out some of our most cherished heirlooms.

An audit is long overdue. I, for one, am weary of the world's noise, the incessant din of commerce, the shouting matches of political competition. I'm longing for the church to hear the quiet voice of God, not the blaring trumpets of political victory. I'm longing to hear again the sound of voices singing in a distant village.

PART 1

LOSING THE BATTLE

CHAPTER ONE

The Battle Is Engaged

With the founding of the Moral Majority in 1979, evangelicals and fundamentalists ventured into the political process. They were not welcomed with open arms by either the political or religious establishments. Rather, they kicked down the door and marched in with such fury that they sent panic through most sectors of American society.

—CAL THOMAS AND ED DOBSON

I grew up in central Washington, in that wonderful valley ringed by snowcapped mountains and adorned with apple trees, near places with Indian names like Wenatchee and Wapato and Walla Walla. Summers were filled with vacation Bible schools, Kool-Aid ice pops, and warm evenings with little balsa planes that cost ten cents each at the neighborhood store. Our little white church sat on a street corner and held about a hundred souls on a good Sunday morning. It was a conservative flock, and our pastor was a faithful custodian of the law. Dancing was wrong. Movies were wrong. The Beatles were wrong. Long hair was wrong. Mixed bathing—I didn't even know what this was, but I knew it was *wrong.*

Granted, my memories have acquired the softened edges of a Norman Rockwell painting over the years. But peel away the sentiment, the nostalgia, the church potlucks, and the flannel-graph Bible lessons, and you see the dark stirrings of cultural fear. America was changing in

the age of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the British Invasion. The sense of peril was most evident in the first political book I remember, *None Dare Call It Treason*, a high-pitched screed that came out in the middle of Barry Goldwater's disastrous run for the White House in 1964. One of the heroes of the book was still a hero in our quarters—Senator Joe McCarthy, the man who ruined lives with his reckless accusations. Some of our church deacons were even "John Birchers," the kind of people who believed that fluoridation was a Communist plot to take over America through our water supply. It seemed to make sense at the time.

This was the old conservative movement, shaped in the teeth of the Cold War. In this dark geopolitical landscape, America was cast as a Christian nation facing godless Communism. Morality was an indicator of our national strength, our ability to face down the Communist threat. Moral weakness—as evinced by long hair, rhythmic music, and psychedelic drugs—would lead to military weakness. All you had to do was connect the dots. After all, didn't Rome fall when Rome became immoral? As a child I never questioned the history behind that claim. I didn't know that Rome, having been Christianized, was actually *more* moral when it fell than when it ruled the Mediterranean world. But when you're battling spiritual and cultural decline, even bad history can be a good sermon illustration.

Politics was politics in the old conservative movement, and church was church. Those boundaries were seldom crossed, except to denounce moral decay. Those of us sitting in the pews might have shared a common demographic profile, but we didn't talk about it in church. For all his legalism, our pastor taught the Bible faithfully—and drily. His weekly exposition, along with the steady stream of missionaries that came through our little church, would transform my family. Before long my parents felt God calling them to the mission field. This was the way you

changed the world back then, long before the church discovered politics. So off they went to Bible school and then to Europe for language training. Finally, in the early 1970s, the Babcock family ended up in the Central African Republic, which was about as far from central Washington as you could get. I look back now and see Africa as the great divide in my life.

The sights and sounds and smells of Africa would be forever etched into my childhood memories. I loved hearing the village drums at night and the warm equatorial rain as it pounded down on the aluminum roof. The open market was colorful and smelly with fresh fruits and vegetables, the *pili-pili* peppers so common across Africa, gunnysacks of flour and sugar, and Arab women who smeared their bodies with goat milk. When we came to buy meat, the Sudanese cowherd would slaughter a bull on the spot and load the carcass, flies swarming and blood running, onto the back of our pickup truck. But it was the evangelistic trips deep into the bush that I remember most. My parents, my brother, and I would gather a crowd with our instruments—three trumpets and an accordion. I was on the accordion. Dad presented a simple Bible lesson, usually a story with flannel-graph illustrations, and gave the gospel message around the interruptions of village goats, pigs, and chickens.

It was in Africa, as a child, that I first read the Bible. There was no television or video games, but that's not why I read. I had a hunger for the Word of God. I first read through the Bible from cover to cover as a twelve-year-old. And then I read it again. I memorized Galatians. I was presumptuous enough to begin writing a commentary on Colossians. The cadences and odd vocabulary of the King James Bible became familiar to me as a child (which made reading Shakespeare a whole lot easier later on). The Bible had transformed my parents' lives, and it would do the same for mine. Not immediately, though. I was a young legalist-in-training, "zealous for the law," as Paul described himself. But I was also

hiding God's Word in my heart—and God's Word would not return void. These were the contradictions in my life. On the one hand, I was idealistic and earnest, striving after God with a sense of mission and purpose. But it was all law with no grace. It was my effort, and the only thing my effort yielded was dead religiosity. Years later I would recognize the same contradiction in the political fortunes of the Religious Right. I would also come to see that this contradiction—the tug-of-war between this kingdom and the next—was central to the American character as well.

RUMBLINGS OF DISCONTENT

We returned in 1976 to a very different America. The Vietnam War was over. Watergate had come and gone. My family settled not on the West Coast but in the tobacco fields of South Carolina, in an old plantation town called Hartsville. It was a town with two public schools, one black and one white. I attended neither. Instead, I attended a private Baptist school that had been founded, like scores of others across the Deep South, during the decade of desegregation. I had left Africa behind only to find myself in an all-white school operated by an all-white church.

As a teenager suddenly reintroduced into American culture, I was becoming acquainted with a second strain of American conservatism, one rooted in the Old South and its social and religious conservatism. The Barry Goldwater movement I was familiar with had viewed moral decay as part of the global struggle against Communism. This new movement, in its best form, championed small government and family values; in its worst form, it viewed moral decay through the dirty screen of racial politics. These two cultures would come together in a movement set to explode on the political scene in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the Religious Right.

I was a living contradiction. A Westerner in the Deep South. The

descendant of a Union abolitionist family in the heart of the old Confederacy. A young man whose friends in Africa had been black children, now attending an all-white school in a still largely segregated town. A young man who had seen the power of the gospel in the heart of darkness, being drawn toward the empty political promises of a shining city on a hill.

During high school I became interested in politics. The first issue that really captured my attention was the Panama Canal Treaty in 1978. I remember writing a letter to Senator Ernest Hollings and objecting *in the strongest terms possible* to this surrender of American property—this symbol of our ingenuity and sacrifice. But it was a security issue too, since we couldn't let this vital national resource fall into Communist hands. *And so on and so on.* I wrote the letter on wide-ruled paper so there'd be plenty of room for cosignatories. Then I canvassed my fellow high school students and sent the letter off to Washington. I received a warmly patronizing response from the senator's office, and when I listened to the vote on the radio I was disappointed to hear the white-haired senator with his deep Southern drawl say, "Aye" on final passage of the treaty.

Three decades later it's clear to me that Senator Hollings was right and I was wrong.

But I was on board with the movement—the new conservative movement that jumbled up politics and religion and nationalistic pride and jingoism. I was too young perhaps to see the contradictions in any of this. I was balanced awkwardly between worlds—between Africa and America, between childhood and adulthood, between the past and the present, between two views of my country. I was at that time in life when you're trying hard to catch your balance and hold it long enough to figure out where you're standing. Perhaps I was too young to understand that we come to God with all our contradictions, all our paradoxes, all our

contrary impulses, and we find completeness in Christ. Certainly I was too young to realize that God didn't have a policy position on the Panama Canal Treaty.

All through the late 1970s this new movement would begin to coalesce around a few distinct themes—moral, cultural, political, and economic. The moral theme was motivated principally by *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision in 1973 that established the right to abortion as the "law of the land." As long as abortion was a matter for individual states to take up, as long as it was only whispered about, shuffled off to the rhetorical back alleys of American politics, then Christians weren't terribly concerned about it. But no longer. Abortion was now front and center in American life. More than any other issue, the fight to overturn *Roe v. Wade* unified religious conservatives across the theological spectrum, giving them a sense of purpose and validating those first uncertain steps into politics. But this didn't happen immediately. Perhaps it took some time for the full significance of the Supreme Court's decision to register among conservatives, but that lag time (a period of several years) has opened the door for some critics to question how big a factor abortion really was in the birth of the movement.

Abortion was just one element of a "perfect storm" gathering in the mid- to late-1970s. When the commissioners in Dade County, Florida, passed an ordinance in 1977 outlawing discrimination against homosexuals, Anita Bryant—a former beauty queen and spokeswoman for the Florida Citrus Commission ("A day without orange juice is like a day without sunshine")—stepped forward to "lead a crusade to stop it as this country has not seen before." A prolonged media circus, more like a cultural *Gong Show*, had been set in motion. Rallies were held. Gay activists organized an orange juice boycott. The former beauty queen even took a cream pie in the face at a rally in Des Moines, Iowa. A few months later

the ordinance was repealed, and Bryant took her campaign nationwide. Momentum was on her side.

The battle was won without working up a sweat. But the war was just beginning. Religious conservatives weren't the only ones organizing and entering the political arena. The "homosexual community" came out of the closet as a demographic unit with considerable capital and political clout. Long associated with San Francisco and Greenwich Village, homosexuals would become a mainstream part of American culture within a generation. In the early 1980s, the AIDS epidemic provided the newly minted Gay Rights Movement with the cultural mandate it needed to change its public image once and for all.

Meanwhile, the boycott of Florida oranges was successful. Anita Bryant's contract was not renewed in 1979. In 1980 her marriage broke up and her career was in decline. The evangelical community that had held her up as an icon of family values now abandoned her. But the movement she'd helped to launch found new leaders—and new battles.

Moral issues merged inevitably into cultural ones. In the mid- to late-1970s it looked as though the twenty-four words in section 1 of the Equal Rights Amendment were destined to become part of the U.S. Constitution. But that was before another conservative "Joan of Arc," a constitutional lawyer named Phyllis Schlafly, skillfully mobilized conservative opposition around the defense of traditional values. The feminist movement had come of age in America, but by taking on the U.S. Constitution, its leaders had tackled too much—too fast. The amendment expired in 1979, having fallen three states short of the thirty-eight needed for ratification. Though the language of the amendment itself was fairly innocuous ("Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex"), Schlafly perceived that a larger game plan had been set in motion. The

social fabric of American life could be reshaped, Schlafly warned, by a legion of activist lawyers with the full backing of the Constitution. But this is not why the ERA failed. A cultural nerve had been struck. The role of women was changing in American society—sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Ironically, many of the changes most feared by conservatives have happened anyway, such as widespread acceptance of women's roles in the military. These changes have happened in spite of the ERA's defeat, which should cause us to question how effective our political activity really has been.

New political themes were also emerging—sometimes in strange ways—and these themes would become staples of conservative rhetoric. For example, Hal Lindsey's popularization of biblical prophecy, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), can be read from the distance of almost forty years as the blueprint for a crude evangelical foreign policy. From a conservative standpoint, everything wrong with international affairs was embodied in the cold, academic figure of Henry Kissinger, national security adviser and secretary of state in the 1970s. Lindsey's apocalyptic best seller sketched out the direction evangelicals would take when thinking (for the first time) about foreign affairs in the years following Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy" in the Middle East, the détente with the Soviet Union, and the opening of diplomatic contacts with China.

Before Hal Lindsey, there was no cohesive evangelical foreign policy. The revival of interest in end times prophecy, however, provoked questions about the larger world and how our actions as a nation might fit into God's plan. In one slim package—a little book with corny chapter titles like "Russia Is a Gog" and "Sheik to Sheik"—evangelicals would find a foreign policy that addressed the major hot spots in the world: the Middle East, the Soviet Union, the European Common Market, and China. The centrality of Israel in biblical prophecy guaranteed its centrality in evan-

gelical foreign policy. Evangelical leaders were unabashedly pro-Israel and soon earned for themselves the label of "Christian Zionists." The role of Gog and Magog in the prophecies of Armageddon ensured that Russia (then the Soviet Union) would be vigorously opposed. Détente would be rejected in favor of a more robust posture toward Soviet expansionism. Christian conservatives, for example, were deeply skeptical of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) and opposed it vigorously. The European Common Market was viewed suspiciously too, as it was widely understood by evangelicals to be the forerunner of the revived Roman Empire prophesied by Daniel. Military and political support of Taiwan (another policy position taken by evangelical leaders) found its rationale in China's role in biblical prophecy. Never a favorite of conservatives, China was the nation that would bring two hundred million troops against Israel in the battle of Armageddon.

The Late Great Planet Earth became the best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s. Millions of readers, including the future president of the United States Ronald Reagan, devoured the breezily written and thinly documented book. Of course, Reagan didn't get his foreign policy from Hal Lindsey, but the fact that Lindsey's apocalyptic vision was so compatible with Reagan's political philosophy goes a long way toward explaining why Reagan and the Religious Right embraced each other with such affection.

These apocalyptic themes resonated with the political realities America faced in the world at the time. The nation was longing for a resurgence of American power. After Vietnam and Watergate, we felt like a nation in decline. The picture of a U.S. marine helicopter lifting off from the embassy roof in Saigon in 1975 became an iconic representation of our national disgrace. Two weeks later the Khmer Rouge seized a U.S. container ship, the *SS Mayaguez*, in international waters off the Cambodian coast. The ensuing mission to rescue the crew only managed

to deepen the embarrassment. The Americans had already been removed for questioning, so the marines ended up seizing an empty ship. Most of the crew members were subsequently found floating safely on a Thai fishing vessel; three more were never located. But the impression was once again reinforced that America was a shrinking giant in the world.

When the nation turned to an inexperienced Southern governor in 1976, the general feeling was that Jimmy Carter couldn't do any worse. Four years later, the general feeling was that somehow he had. Carter wanted to bring moral purpose to American foreign policy, but his emphasis on human rights only conveyed a sense of collective guilt. Conservatives were outraged at the "blame America" subtext of all this lecturing on human rights. And when Carter "gave away" the Panama Canal in 1978, conservatives believed that America was presenting the face of weakness to the world. Before long, Communist insurgencies were on the march in Central America, the Soviet Union rolled its tanks into Afghanistan, and fifty-two Americans were held hostage in the U.S. embassy in Tehran.

Nothing captured the sense of political decline more than the Iran hostage crisis. During the final year of the Carter administration, the world watched a helpless America wring its hands. I was a first-semester college freshman at the time, and I remember watching Ted Koppel report on the diplomatic crisis on the show that would later become *Nightline*. Every night the somber music cued up as the title appeared on screen: "America Held Hostage" (as the show was initially called). And every night the show bluntly reminded us how many days America had been held hostage. Day 168, Day 223, Day 345—all the way through the 1980 election. Ronald Reagan couldn't have purchased a more effective TV commercial for his campaign.

My own political values were shaped by these dramatic events. I was

a serious student who actually paid attention to what was going on in the world. Disco and *Star Wars* hadn't made a dent on my imagination. But geopolitics certainly did. Where I had been a child who voraciously read the Bible, compulsively outlined passages, and memorized entire Epistles, I was now a young adult who pored over the voting records of U.S. senators and followed international events with an intensity I once reserved for Matthew Henry's commentary.

Meanwhile, my legalism, which had been nurtured in the doctrinaire culture of a fundamentalist church in the Deep South, took a bitter turn. Our youth pastor suddenly packed up and moved away without even saying good-bye. Nothing was said about it in church, but everybody soon heard through the rumor mill about his multiple affairs and his relationship with a teenage girl in the church youth group. It would be a few years before I would fully recognize the body blow that cultural Christianity had delivered to my spiritual life. I wasn't able to put my finger on what was happening in my life, but I knew I was tired of my own legalism and hypocrisy—and I didn't know what to replace them with. Though I remained sympathetic to the "conservative cause," I was walking away—step by step—from my childhood faith. I had always expected to study the Bible and go to the mission field. But by the time I entered college in 1979, political science seemed the logical choice of study for me. I directed my intellectual passions toward the study of this world, disregarding in the process the great trade-off I was making. My passion for the things of God was dying.

The election of 1980 was approaching, and it was an exciting time to be a political science major. Now there was a new player on the national political scene, one that I was still culturally and politically sympathetic with—the Religious Right. And this movement gravitated naturally toward Ronald Reagan, who spoke our language fluently. To these moral,

cultural, and political messages that had been developing for a decade, Reagan added an economic message of low taxes, small government, and free trade. He closed the deal with the nation—and secured the undying loyalty of the Religious Right.

A MOVEMENT IS BORN

As early as 1976, conservative activist Richard Viguerie had predicted that "the next major area of growth for conservative ideology and philosophy is among the evangelicals." Viguerie was among the core activists—along with Paul Weyrich and Howard Phillips—who recognized that the conditions were right for religious conservatives to enter the political fray. They had found a natural ally in Ronald Reagan, and all that was now lacking was the catalyst to move them into politics.

Paul Weyrich, one of the movement's original architects, tells of the unlikely series of events that kick-started the Religious Right as an organized movement. According to Weyrich, it ultimately took the Internal Revenue Service to pull evangelicals into the political ring. That happened in 1978. Evangelical Christians had voted in large numbers for the "born-again" farmer from Georgia, but they were quickly disappointed with his policies on social issues and foreign affairs. Disappointment turned to outright hostility, however, when the IRS issued new guidelines that would have removed tax-exempt status from thousands of fundamentalist schools, largely across the South. The kind of all-white school I was attending suddenly found itself in the crosshairs of the tax collector.

Specifically, the IRS ruled that private schools would lose their tax-exempt status if they had been established during the time of court-ordered desegregation and if the number of minority students currently in the school was less than one-fifth the percentage of minority children in the local community. It wasn't widely known at the time, but these

guidelines weren't drawn up originally by the Carter administration at all. Jimmy Carter, whose presidency was one long example of bad timing, was implementing a policy formulated several years earlier. The IRS had trained its sights on "discriminatory" private schools as early as 1970. President Nixon was well aware of the policy and endorsed it on July 10, 1970, in a statement issued by the White House:

> The President approves of and concurs in the IRS decision regarding tax exemption for discriminatory private schools. He believes that ultimately the tax status of racially discriminatory private schools will be determined by the courts and that this is desirable.

Nixon went on to affirm "at the same time" his belief that private schools offered "diversity" and "strength" to the American educational system and that a continuation of their tax-exempt status was desirable for those implementing a "racially nondiscriminatory admissions policy."

The perception that these schools practiced active discrimination was wrong, but there can be little doubt that many of them were in fact started as a direct response to court-ordered desegregation. This was the unspoken history we all understood at schools like the one I attended in South Carolina. Desegregation was the hot political issue when private schools began to pop up across the South. In 1961, nine black students in Rock Hill, South Carolina, sat down at a whites-only lunch counter in a downtown store and refused to leave. In 1962 a young black man named Harvey Gantt won a long legal battle to be admitted to Clemson University. In 1963 the private Baptist school that I would later attend opened its doors for the first time. By the strict letter of the IRS guidelines, my school would have lost its tax-exempt status. It was established in the throes of desegregation, and the percentage of minority students was considerably less than

the arbitrary threshold set by the IRS. When I attended in the late 1970s, the school's minority population stood at 0 percent.

Of course, there's another story told about the founding of these schools, a more favorable narrative that emphasizes moral outrage at "God being taken out of the classroom" with the 1962 Supreme Court decision on school prayer. There can be no doubt that *Engel v. Vitale* reverberated throughout America. Billy Graham described this as "another step toward the secularization of America." Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina declared that "the Supreme Court has made God unconstitutional." This event fixed itself in the collective memory of religious conservatives because it seemed to clarify the whole picture of what was going wrong with America in the 1960s. Student uprisings, the drug culture, the sexual revolution—all of this could be explained as the logical consequence of taking God out of the classroom.

In the years following the 1962 decision, school prayer figured prominently in the grand narrative of loss and restoration that conservative Christians began telling about their nation. Forget that the practice was never universal. Forget that the prayers were mostly ceremonial recitations performed in unison. Forget that Christian children have always had the right to pray to their heavenly Father whenever, wherever, and however they desire in the solitude of their own hearts. What mattered was the symbolism of it all. What mattered was that this one court decision came to represent the loss of a Christian America.

School prayer became the backstory that explained the existence of these schools after the fact. Who could blame Christian parents if they wanted to shelter their children from the godless trends of public education? But throughout the South in the 1960s and 1970s, God was no more—and no less—a presence in public schools than He had ever been. The one conspicuous change within the larger culture, though, was the

desegregation of public schools. Among the students I went to school with, some were there because their parents (mine included) wanted a traditional Christian education for their children. But others were there because their parents didn't want them to go to school with African-Americans. One of my classmates—a sweet, quiet girl named Lisa—gave a speech in our social studies class on why the Ku Klux Klan was a misunderstood organization that had actually done a lot of good throughout the South. Then she smiled and sat down. For me at least, the IRS controversy has always been clarified by this one horrible speech.

Lisa's candor was matched by George Andrews, a congressman from Alabama, whose response to the 1962 Supreme Court decision was especially revealing. "They put the Negroes in the school," he said, "and now they've driven God out." By linking these two matters so crudely, Congressman Andrews was putting his finger on the real issue that reverberated throughout the South: The federal government was forcing its secular values down the throat of good Christian people. This was a region, after all, whose view of the federal government was still being shaped a century later by the memory of the Civil War. However, the first response of Christian Southerners was not to organize political resistance to federal policy but to retreat into fundamentalist communities. What led them, a decade and a half later, to change strategies so dramatically? Here's where Weyrich's claim is stunning: The threat to these communities, more than any specific moral issue like *Roe v. Wade*, galvanized fundamentalists throughout the South to take up political arms and fight.

The story Weyrich tells about private schools and the IRS is intriguing—and a little troubling—as it puts a self-interested spin on the rise of the Religious Right. The federal government was the great enemy, forcing desegregation upon the South, forcing its federal tax code on our schools. Always in the South this opposition to the federal government was tinged

with the old cultural animosities that went back to the Civil War. Reagan would be the one to pull these themes together. During the years between his failed presidential campaign in 1976 and his victory in 1980, Reagan maintained a high profile and gained a loyal following. His message of small government, low taxes, and a less intrusive federal bureaucracy was heard daily in radio commentaries broadcast on several hundred stations across the nation. It was a message that resonated in the Southern states that had voted for Strom Thurmond and George Wallace. Reagan's bona fides with the new cultural conservatives was matched by his credentials with the old guard. He was the staunch anti-Communist who would follow the path Barry Goldwater had blazed a decade before.

Political pundits had greatly underestimated the potency of this combination. The conventional wisdom held that Reagan was an inherently flawed national candidate—the one Republican Jimmy Carter most wanted to face. Who could forget how Barry Goldwater in 1964 was branded a trigger-happy ideologue who couldn't be trusted with a nuclear arsenal? A columnist for the *Globe and Mail* described the Reagan nomination as "political suicide" in this analysis written in March 1980: "Mr. Reagan would lose by 2–1," he wrote. "The former California governor would be the Barry Goldwater of 1980. He is too right-wing to appeal to enough moderates to win and he is too prone to incredible gaffes." This was a widespread view among the political establishment, but the 1980 election would witness one of the most spectacular failures of political wisdom. The unelectable Reagan won in a landslide. His coattails were even long enough to pull the Senate into the Republican column for the first time in twenty-five years. Certainly the pundits had misgauged the therapeutic appeal of Reagan's optimism, coming as it did at the end of a really bad decade. But they also failed to recognize the political viability of a grassroots movement that was coalescing in the 1970s. The Moral

Majority emerged as the most visible evidence that evangelicals had crossed the political Rubicon and were ready to be political players for the first time since Prohibition.

In 1979, Paul Weyrich traveled to Lynchburg, Virginia, along with fellow activists Howard Phillips and Richard Viguerie, to meet with Jerry Falwell and lay the groundwork for the new movement. Falwell related in his autobiography that he, like other fundamentalists of his generation, had been reluctant at first to venture into politics. As the son of a bootlegger, Falwell knew how ineffective the temperance movement had been in changing the culture. Political strength had led to dramatic change—no less than an amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which is something the new conservative movement has not yet been able to match. But the law was widely unpopular and virtually unenforceable. Prohibition led to organized crime and creative new uses for bathtubs. It also led ultimately to NASCAR, as bootleggers souped up their vehicles to outrun federal agents on the back roads of the rural South. Prohibition also gave fundamentalists a black eye. So, too, did the 1925 "Scopes Monkey Trial" in Tennessee over the teaching of evolution. As the 1970s progressed, however, Falwell became convinced that Bible-believing pastors must address moral decline in America. In that decisive conversation in Lynchburg, Weyrich used the phrase "Moral Majority" for the first time. Falwell instinctively recognized the power of the phrase. "If we get involved," Falwell said, "that's the name of the organization." The Moral Majority would be committed to a "pro-life, pro-traditional family, pro-moral and pro-American" agenda—which was pretty much the same platform Ronald Reagan had been running on for four years. The movement had met the man.

What the Moral Majority lacked in political sophistication, it made up for in sheer energy. Like an old-time circuit preacher, Falwell barnstormed the country staging "I Love America" rallies. The rallies were old-fashioned

and nostalgic, and it was easy for Falwell's critics to dismiss them as political theater. Weyrich had envisioned a finely oiled machine that could mobilize millions of voters behind core conservative policies. What he got was a traveling revival service. The rallies debuted in Richmond, Virginia, on September 13, 1979, and the first reviews in the mainstream press were little more than sneering put-downs. In an article that was unrelentingly patronizing, *Time* described Falwell as "the hyperactive founder and director of a religious empire" and the "star" of a production that was "Fourth of July inspiring." Falwell's constituency was described as "overwhelmingly white and heavy with farmers, blue-collar workers and small businessmen." A racial theme runs throughout the piece—a telling detail, as this theme would become, by the end of the decade, the principal weapon wielded by the Left against the New Right.

The lasting legacy of Falwell's entrance into national politics would not be the elections that were won or the policies that were enacted. Falwell helped to validate an evangelical Christian voice within the political system, and once all the controversial moments in his career are stripped away, that's how he should be remembered as a political figure. Christians may debate where the boundary line falls between pulpits and voting booths, but the age-old tradition that Christians must speak to the moral issues of their day had been decisively reaffirmed.

That year I proudly cast my first vote as an eighteen-year-old for Ronald Reagan. Christians like me all across America had high hopes for the changes that had come over Washington. We believed that more would come from the ballot box than the usual office shuffle as one team of bureaucrats replaced another.

The next few months would show just how wrong we were.

WHO LOST REAGAN?

The weeks between the election and inauguration of a new president always give an early read on the shape of things to come. What emerged in the winter of 1980 was an inner cabinet of California cronies and pragmatic, old-establishment Republicans. Few evangelicals were tapped for top-level positions. One of the few encouraging signs was the appointment of Dr. C. Everett Koop to the previously obscure position of surgeon general. Dr. Koop was well known among evangelicals through his collaboration with Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer on a pro-life book and film, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Surely this offered a crucial opportunity to translate evangelical values into material political gains. Liberals certainly thought so and mounted a vigorous confirmation battle that Dr. Koop eventually survived. Conservatives were confident, though, that the soft-spoken doctor and devout Presbyterian would, in the end, advance their cause.

But that's not what Dr. Koop is remembered for. Early into his tenure, the surgeon general made it clear that he would not use his office as a bully pulpit to advance a pro-life agenda. To many evangelicals it began to look as though Koop was overly concerned about proving his liberal critics wrong. Or had they just misread him in the first place? When AIDS broke into the national consciousness in the early 1980s, the question was quickly resolved. Koop was less a moralist than a pragmatist. He approached the epidemic as a health issue, not an ideological battlefield, and his liberal opponents soon became his biggest fans. Koop even took pains to distance himself from the rhetoric of religious conservatives who seemed to view AIDS as an opportunity to drive home their message about moral decline in America. Yes, morality was declining in America. And yes, the AIDS crisis was driven by a subculture of promiscuity and anonymous sex. But people were also dying. Religious conservatives

never found the right balance between righteous condemnation and the message of God's grace, forgiveness, and compassion.

This would be the first great defeat of the Religious Right—a defeat not so much in public policy as in public opinion. An unflattering view of conservative Christianity was being shaped at the intersection of rhetoric and policy. After years in the political wilderness, evangelicals were politically naive. They underestimated the hard rules of the game. They forgot that their political opponents would be looking to define them in the public eye before they got the chance to define themselves. The morality promoted by the Religious Right was caricatured as harsh and uncompassionate, quick to condemn and slow to love. Evangelical Christians appeared to be more concerned with scoring moral points than saving lives. Meanwhile, the "homosexual community" would emerge from the controversy as sympathetic victims. It is perversely ironic that the AIDS crisis allowed activists to repackage the "gay lifestyle" as a mainstream alternative, when that very lifestyle—with its bathhouses and cruising bars—had done so much to worsen the crisis in the first place. The relabeling of right and wrong gained traction because the public proved to be less interested in moral condemnations of homosexuality than in addressing a present health crisis. Pragmatism had triumphed, as it would time and again during the Reagan years.

Early into the Reagan presidency, it became clear that image would trump substance. Surprisingly, though, evangelicals seemed willing to accept that. When Reagan did the unthinkable and fired over eleven thousand striking air traffic controllers, evangelicals were among those who cheered his no-nonsense approach to government. And when he took a bullet in the chest and nearly died, Reagan acquired heroic status. It was hard to criticize a man who could joke about "not ducking" while being wheeled into surgery. Evangelicals would become principal custo-

dians of the lore and legend of Ronald Reagan—the man who wanted to shrink government and restrict abortion but who was thwarted time and again by an obstinate Congress. The truth is that Reagan passed up some golden opportunities to invest his political capital in the social and moral issues that drove evangelicals to support him in the first place.

One of these opportunities came in 1981 when a vacancy opened up on the Supreme Court. Evangelicals knew what was at stake. One choice—one careful choice—and the balance of the high court would be shifted for a generation. Reagan, however, followed a different set of priorities. As a candidate he had promised to nominate the first woman to the Supreme Court, even though the pool of qualified conservative women was rather limited. The selection of Sandra Day O'Connor puzzled evangelicals, as her political record was clearly to the left of Reagan's core constituency. As a state senator, O'Connor had supported the Equal Rights Amendment and the legalization of abortion. Nevertheless, Reagan asked his supporters to sit on their hands and allow the process to play itself out. After all, O'Connor came from Senator Barry Goldwater's home state of Arizona, and she enjoyed his complete support. But even the endorsement of Mr. Conservative wasn't enough for evangelicals. When Falwell publicly questioned whether "good Christians" could get behind the O'Connor nomination, Senator Goldwater responded with a vulgar retort. The split between the old guard and the New Right was never more clear. But the record now shows that Falwell was right and Goldwater was wrong. When O'Connor retired in 2006, her praises were sung most loudly by liberal activists, feminists, and law school academics. Conservatives, on the other hand, always viewed O'Connor's confirmation as the really big fish that got away. Reagan had fulfilled a campaign promise: He nominated a woman to the high court. But he also undermined the promise he'd made to the Religious Right to work vigorously to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Tangible victories were hard to find on the legislative front as well. Right from the start, evangelicals were at odds with the Reagan administration over its political priorities; and right from the start, Reagan asked for patience. When Congress convened in 1981, Senate majority leader Howard Baker announced (in conjunction with the White House) that the conservative social agenda would be dealt with later—once the economy was under control. But "later" never came. A steep recession, a sharp military buildup, the global challenge of facing down the "evil empire," a campaign for reelection—all these required considerable political capital. Another election came and went, and evangelicals could not yet point to any substantive achievement. Conservatives held out hope that Reagan would push their social agenda in his second term, but that never materialized either. Reagan's 1984 landslide was so huge it blunted any talk that the Religious Right had been a decisive factor. As Reagan's time in office began to wind down, the Iran-Contra scandal brought the political machinery of Washington to a standstill. Reagan turned instead to foreign affairs, delivering his famous speech in Berlin ("Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!") and negotiating arms control with the Soviet Union. The Gipper left office as a beloved figure among evangelicals, but he had fallen far short of their expectations.

How much did the Religious Right contribute to Reagan's election in 1980? Certainly evangelicals were quick to capitalize on the perception that their entrance into politics that year had been decisive. But was this true? The scale and breadth of Reagan's victory in 1980 calls that assumption into doubt. Reagan was already an established political figure when he ran for president in 1980, having fallen just short of seizing the nomination from a sitting president four years earlier. Reagan, a two-term governor of the most populous state in the country, had maintained a high public profile through radio and newspaper commentaries. Religious

conservatives were just one of many demographic groups embracing Reagan's optimism that year.

Still, Reagan's victory lives on in the mythology of the Religious Right. As early as 1982, however, persuasive arguments were raised against this "election scenario." Two eminent social historians, Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, analyzed the election data and concluded that "the political strength of organizations like the Moral Majority" had been seriously overrated. The authors were writing from the unfriendly perspective of their liberal academic backgrounds. In the politically charged environment of the early Reagan years, it was easy to dismiss their judgments as tainted by partisan interest. In fact, their article was published in a book whose title lacked any subtlety whatsoever: *Speak Out against the New Right*. But a generation later, Lipset and Raab's conclusions look prophetic:

> The Americans who "turned Right" in the last election [1980] did not by any means agree with the Moral Majority or New Right programs. These Americans were not supporting specific political solutions any more than they usually do. They wanted a government that would more demonstrably reflect their mood: a more assertive America on the world scene, and on the domestic front a serious campaign to fight inflation and refurbish American industry. That is the extent of their political conservatism.

The unflattering conclusion reached by Lipset and Raab is that voters are self-interested, materialistic, and pragmatic, which shouldn't surprise us in the least. The authors went on to argue that the 1980 voters were therefore not "captive to any political movement" but were "shopping." The eventual decline of the Religious Right and the success of Bill Clinton in the 1990s largely validated these claims.

Lipset and Raab's article was prophetic in other ways too. The direction

that liberal counterattacks would take later in the decade is all too apparent in the way the authors casually introduced racial politics into the equation. The New Right, they wrote, "recalls groups like the clergymen affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s." They hastened to add that "today's evangelical groups have made it a point to avoid this kind of hatemongering," but this concession hardly lessened the damage caused by gratuitously dropping the KKK into their analysis. The association between religious conservatives and the dark underside of post–Civil War Southern society would remain a fruitful field for liberal partisans to plow. Many years later, Senator John McCain would even tap into that rhetoric when he described religious figures like Falwell as "agents of intolerance." It was an old, worn-out slur by the time he used it in the 2000 campaign, but it still worked its magic. McCain lost that nomination, but he gained the favor of the mainstream media.

By the end of Reagan's tenure, racial rhetoric would be the dominant weapon used against religious conservatives. In the late 1980s, the political campaigns of white supremacist David Duke would only make things worse. The racial theme would reach its culmination, however, in the failed nomination of Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court. Liberal activists such as Common Cause (a group specifically mentioned a decade earlier by Falwell as one of his main reasons for founding the Moral Majority) spearheaded the opposition to the man they claimed would "turn back the clock" on civil rights. Unfortunately, the murky prehistory of the Religious Right, with its roots in the old segregationist South, only made the liberal race-baiting more effective.

Who lost Reagan? It would be wrong to see the movement's failure during the Reagan years as merely tactical. But this is exactly the assumption that Paul Weyrich has always made. In Weyrich's alternate time line, conservative Christians could have achieved material success

in the early Reagan years if they had held the president's political feet to the fire. Instead, evangelicals opted for political *access* when political *success* was theirs for the taking. They were content with holding a seat at the table, as Weyrich saw it, rather than securing real legislative victories. Weyrich's critique has some merit, but it's also the convenient analysis of a man who has long held that the moral battles of our day could be won through the instruments of power and persuasion. The Moral Majority never grew into the kind of grassroots powerhouse that Weyrich had envisioned. By 1986 the name that had achieved so much notoriety, Moral Majority, was abandoned, and the organization was renamed the Liberty Foundation. In 1989 the Liberty Foundation was disbanded altogether.

A FLAWED CRUSADE

Meanwhile, as the Reagan years were winding down, I turned away from politics completely, opting instead to study dead cultures and dead languages at the University of Minnesota. In the summer of 1987 I was far from the political turmoil that dominated headlines back home. I was in Salzburg, Austria, studying German along with a diverse collection of Americans and Canadians. Most of us were knocking out language requirements for various degrees, all except for one man who seemed out of his element. David wasn't a student—not, at least, in the traditional sense. We didn't know exactly who he was, as he didn't talk much about himself. He had a lot to say, however, about Jewish conspiracies and why the Holocaust never happened.

A fellow student in the language institute took me aside one day after sizing David up for a week or so. "I have the feeling," she said, "that I've seen this guy before."

"Oh? Where?"

"In a documentary. *A documentary on the Ku Klux Klan.*"

"You're kidding," I said. But of course she wouldn't be kidding about *that.* I didn't think any more about it until a few months later, back in the States, when the former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, ran for political office in Louisiana and attracted national attention. I remembered the face on the television screen. This was the oddly ill-at-ease man I had repeatedly defeated at table tennis in the Alpine city where *The Sound of Music* was filmed.

David Duke was a gift to the American Left, a windfall of propaganda. Liberals learned to pounce on every coincidence of interest (however slight) between Duke and religious conservatives. Any echo in the rhetoric, and certainly any overlap in their constituencies, became one more opportunity to brand evangelicals as white supremacists in church clothes. Of course, the attacks were unfair—a form of demagoguery. But that's politics, and those who play the political game should know that their political opponents are going to hit hard. They should expect every skeleton in their closet to come out, which just might include the sad segregationist history of the church in the Old South. It's the nature of politics to deceive and distort, because politics is all about the struggle for power. Carnal instincts bring out carnal methods—and therein lies the great danger of trying to accomplish God's work through political means.

The movement was only a decade old but was already transitioning into its second fateful period that would see the rise and fall of the Christian Coalition. Where the strategy of the Moral Majority had been to rally pastors to the cause, the Christian Coalition sought to create a sophisticated and permanent political machine. This opportunity came when Pat Robertson ran for president in 1988. Long a familiar, if controversial, figure among evangelicals, Robertson claimed that God had told him to run. The affable television personality was known to millions as the host of *The 700*

Club. Only two hundred miles of tobacco fields and peanut fields separated the Robertson and Falwell ministries, but they were light-years away from each other in personality and background. Falwell was the son of a bootlegger and the graduate of a small Midwestern Bible college. Robertson was the son of a U.S. senator and a graduate of Yale Law School. As Falwell began to withdraw from his public role and focus increasingly on building Liberty University, Robertson stepped onto the stage. And there was no bigger stage than running for president.

In the Iowa caucuses in 1988, Robertson stunned Vice President George Bush, placing just ahead of him to take second place. The lead in the *New York Times* article noted that "Pat Robertson has made clear that he cannot be written off as an electronic Elmer Gantry, a colorful distraction from the rest of the Republican Presidential field." But after some early success and enthusiasm, Robertson's campaign failed to sustain itself beyond the early contest in New Hampshire. It had been a flawed crusade, but it would end up reinventing the Religious Right in the 1990s. From the ruins of Robertson's campaign would come new life, new strategies, and a new face—the boyish face of a political whiz kid.

Ralph Reed was a twenty-nine-year-old activist when he was hired to run the new organization founded on the mailing list of the Robertson for President committee. It wouldn't take long for Reed to gain his reputation as the boy wonder of the Religious Right. He wasn't shy about his intentions either. "What Christians have got to do," Reed boldly told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1990, "is take back this country, one precinct at a time, one neighborhood at a time and one state at a time. I honestly believe that in my lifetime, we will see a country once again governed by Christians . . . and Christian values." Reed was underscoring the strategic shift destined to transform the movement in the post–Moral Majority years. Reed was a professional operative, not an evangelist, and he wanted

to build a state-of-the-art grassroots organization. There would be no "I Love America" rallies on his agenda.

The Christian Coalition achieved some quick political successes, especially in North Carolina, where the distribution of nearly a million voter guides was widely credited with helping Senator Jesse Helms eke out a narrow reelection victory in 1990 over Charlotte mayor Harvey Gantt. This was the same Harvey Gantt who had been admitted, under court order, to Clemson University in 1962. Reed's reputation as a political tactician was cemented in Republican quarters with the Helms victory. Money flowed into the organization. Its membership swelled as new chapters opened up across the country. The party establishment was happy to use the Christian Coalition as a subcontractor in difficult races like the Helms reelection campaign. And all the while, Ralph Reed touted his new take-no-prisoners strategy.

Reed's critics have pointed to a disturbing theme of hubris that runs through the comments and strategies of the youthful political operative. One of Reed's methods, for example, was to encourage conservative candidates to take a bait-and-switch approach to selling themselves to the voters. Popular positions on taxes, for example, could mask a less popular social agenda that the public might never buy. In this way, the public would get what was best for them whether they realized it or not. This is the same hypocrisy, of course, that conservatives had long decried in candidates who ran campaigns on the values of Main Street but ended up governing like an elite ruling class.

In one of his most peculiar self-descriptions, Reed described his political tactics as those of a Turkish assassin with a long knife. "I paint my face and travel at night," he said. "You don't know it's over until you're in a body bag. You don't know until election night." In Jesus' day, the people who painted their faces and traveled at night were called *zealots*, the guerrilla warriors

(another one of Ralph Reed's favorite terms) who were trying to overthrow the kingdom of Rome. Jesus certainly recruited disciples from their ranks (Simon the Zealot), but He taught them a different way to change the world. We are not to "travel at night" and conquer the world at the ballot box; we are to let our light so shine before men, that they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven (see Matthew 5:16).

The Christian Coalition was at its height after the "Contract with America" election of 1994. As the Moral Majority had done in 1980, the Christian Coalition was quick to claim a role in the dramatic shift of power as Republicans took over Congress for the first time in forty years. The Religious Right had many new friends in Washington, but once again the congressional leadership put social reform on the back burner behind government reform, tort reform, and economic reform. Once again, the movement had failed to deliver. It was 1981 all over again as conservative Christians were told to take a number and wait. Ten years later the pattern would play itself out one more time when so-called values voters in 2004 were widely credited with turning an election around for conservative candidates. "Now comes the revolution," Richard Viguerie wrote in a memorandum to conservative activists in November 2004. "If you don't implement a conservative agenda now, when do you?" But once again, despite some early optimism that Congress and the president would push an initiative on marriage, nothing happened. More pressing issues, such as the Iraq War, crowded out the social agenda.

By the time Bill Clinton's presidency was nearing its end, the Christian Coalition had ceased to be an effective advocate for conservative religious values. Many factors—some internal, some external—had contributed to the movement's stunning collapse. Reed's stealth tactics had become self-defeating, and the organization lost credibility with its own evangelical base. President Clinton had regrouped and won reelection decisively in

1996. The election was a fiasco for the Christian Coalition, as it exposed the movement's inability to affect anything but razor-thin elections. In Clinton's second term, evangelical leaders publicly supported the articles of impeachment drawn up against the president, and they paid the price of a public backlash. Clinton survived, and the Religious Right ended up looking vindictive, mean spirited, and ineffectual.

In retrospect, the Clinton years (1993–2001) underscored the fallacy that there is a "moral majority" in America. Where Carter was moral and incompetent, Clinton was immoral and politically competent. Americans chose competence with Clinton, buying into the "we can do better" rhetoric of his 1992 campaign. Where Carter had been tone deaf to the political currents around him, Clinton brought a virtuosity to the White House that has seldom been equaled. Basing policy positions on focus groups and opinion polls was ideally suited to a cynical public that valued materialism over morality. Wasn't this in some small way what the Christian Coalition had done as well? Wasn't Clinton just better at the political game?

In 1997 Ralph Reed left the Christian Coalition, and within a year the organization largely collapsed. Reed had once claimed that he wanted the Christian Coalition to become "the most powerful political organization of its kind by the year 2000." He fell considerably short of the mark. In many ways, Reed was the personification of all that went wrong with the Religious Right as it entered its second decade. With the pursuit of political success came compromise, arrogance, and even deception. Trade-offs and compromise are the language of politics, not the language of faith. Christians are to bring clarity, not nuance, to the central spiritual issues that confront humankind.

In the presidential campaign of 2000 there was no Moral Majority and no Christian Coalition. But there was Gary Bauer. Well known to evangelicals, Bauer was the former undersecretary of education in the Reagan

administration and director of the Family Research Council. Like Pat Robertson before him, Bauer campaigned hard in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. He garnered 9 percent of the vote in Iowa and one percent in New Hampshire. Days before the primary vote, Gary Bauer appeared at one of those quirky events that are staged every four years in New Hampshire: the Bisquick Pancake Presidential Primary Flip-Off. While tossing a pancake high in the air, Bauer reached too far with his griddle and tumbled off the stage. It was an embarrassing moment, caught on video and endlessly replayed, but it was also a fitting metaphor for a movement that had reached too far. Appearing at the same event, Texas governor George W. Bush caught all his pancakes.

What would be the future of the movement at the turn of the millennium?

Focus on the Family rose to prominence among the traditional elements of the Religious Right, but new voices were raised as well. The growth of the Internet in the late 1990s meant that the movement was destined (like every other political movement) to become more and more decentralized as new voices competed with old on Web sites and blogs. Rod Dreher, a conservative columnist for the *Dallas Morning News*, has noted that "younger evangelicals are looking for something different [now]. They are not embracing their parents' view. They are looking for fresh thinking" on the future of conservativism in America. The movement had evolved well beyond the 1970s when the mailing list of the *Old-Time Gospel Hour* was the nerve center of the New Right and rallies on state capitols were its chief strategy.

A BROKEN REED

What happened to the man who vowed to take back America one precinct at a time? At the biblical age of thirty-three, Ralph Reed had become

a *Time* magazine cover with a headline that read, "The Right Hand of God." As director of the Christian Coalition, he was at the top of his influence after the political earthquake of 1994 brought a Republican Congress to Washington. Within a few years, Reed would leave a shrinking organization, return to Georgia as a political consultant, and begin plotting his own entry into politics. The race for lieutenant governor in 2006 was to be the first of many steps into the political ring, perhaps one day even leading to the White House. Early in the race for the Republican nomination, Reed was outpacing his lesser-known opponent in opinion polls, fund-raising, and organization. And then the wheels came off. Reed lost the nomination by 12 percent.

The morning after Reed's primary defeat, the *New York Times* could hardly contain its glee, judging from how much they managed to pack into the lead sentence:

> Ralph Reed, the former director of the Christian Coalition and a former Republican lobbyist involved in the Jack Abramoff scandal, suffered an embarrassing defeat in his effort to win the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor on Tuesday.

As the *Times* was quick to point out, the most "embarrassing" reason for Reed's collapse was his connection to superlobbyist Jack Abramoff, who pleaded guilty in January 2006 to influence peddling. Before the year was out, candidates in both parties who had been associated with Abramoff, including Ralph Reed, had been dragged down to defeat. Some were found guilty of wrongdoing, such as Representative Bob Ney of Ohio, but most of the politicians caught up in the scandal were tainted by association. It was electoral poison just to have met with Abramoff and taken campaign money from his interests, even if no laws had been violated. The Abramoff scandal focused the national spotlight on money

and corruption in American politics, but it also exposed the tragic compromises that conservative politicians and evangelical leaders like Reed had been willing to make in pursuit of their own careers.

The connection between Abramoff and Reed surprised many, but their friendship actually extended back into their college years, when both were active as College Republicans. Later, when Reed left the Christian Coalition and established his own consulting firm in Atlanta, Abramoff became one of the first contacts in a growing Rolodex file—and not just because his last name starts with *A*. "Hey, now that I'm done with electoral politics," Reed wrote to Abramoff in an e-mail, "I need to start humping in corporate accounts! I'm counting on you to help me with some contacts." The trade-off would involve "3,000 pastors and 90,000 religious conservative households" in Alabama that Reed could mobilize for a retainer fee of $20,000 per month—all in an effort to defeat a state lottery initiative. It seemed a natural fit for Reed to tap into the old networks of the Christian Coalition to defeat a gambling measure.

But Abramoff was no moral crusader. Behind the public campaign lay another agenda. Abramoff wanted the state lottery defeated because it would compete directly with the gambling monopoly that his client, the Choctaw Indian tribe, held in the state. The tribe stood to lose millions if Alabamans started lining up at their neighborhood 7-Eleven to buy lotto tickets instead of visiting the Indian casinos. Without knowing it, the ordinary voters on Reed's mailing list had joined a game of political blackjack—and they were being rolled. Evangelical voters had been enlisted in the noble cause of helping one gambling interest neutralize another. The tactic was a classic bait-and-switch, the product of behind-the-scenes calculations that evangelical voters never endorsed. No illegalities were ever alleged, but Reed had undermined his credibility

with his own base—a fatal political mistake. Ironically, this is the same path of compromise that Reed had taken the Christian Coalition down in the 1990s, when he encouraged conservative candidates to soft-pedal their social agendas and play up their more popular positions on taxes and government waste. One can understand the sense of disillusionment and even betrayal that many felt when the Reed-Abramoff connection was fleshed out in media outlets that had always been hostile to evangelicals. Reed had handed his enemies the one weapon they could never forge for themselves—the hypocrisy of the movement.

In his defense, Reed claimed not to have known that the 4 million dollars directed by Abramoff toward Reed's consulting firm was "gambling money." But this is exactly the kind of thing that Reed, with his reputation as a micromanager and a savvy operative, might be expected to know. Predictably, his opponent for the Republican nomination, state senator Casey Cagle, pointed out the inconsistency in a devastating series of ads. Reed had called gambling immoral, Cagle reminded voters, but then accepted thousands of dollars from the Indian casino industry. The Religious Right had traveled a long road from defending the rights of the unborn to defending the right of the Choctaw Indian tribe to maintain a gambling monopoly.

The rise and fall of Ralph Reed should be a cautionary tale for evangelicals, teaching us that the mixture of politics, religion, money, and influence leads inevitably to compromise. The movement that had sought to speak the truth fearlessly to its generation ended up compromising its message, its methods, and its mission. One historian has written that the Christian Right experienced early political success when it "learned to engage the world." And how did it do this? The movement "learned to engage the

world *because it has become more like the world*." This is a sad, but inevitable, commentary on a failed political movement. How could it have been otherwise? Jesus told us plainly that "what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). In this passage, Jesus was denouncing the arrogance of the Pharisees, who were the guardians of public morality in their day. "No servant can serve two masters," Jesus also said, "for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other" (Luke 16:13, KJV).

What we need as evangelical Christians is a radical reassessment of our core cultural values—the kind that Jesus brought to the legalistic Judaism of His day, the kind that early Roman Christians brought to the pagan, materialistic culture of Rome. Evangelicals need to assess how much of the world's values we've absorbed and turned into public extensions of our theology. Certainly, the rise of evangelical activism has been motivated in part by righteous anger, but it's also been driven by the cultural fear of "losing" America. Evangelicals must come to terms with our failure to effect substantive change within American society, our failure to prevent a further slide into a post-Christian future. What accounts for this failure? The answer lies, I believe, in a defective view of the past and a compromised view of the church's role within society. As we look toward the future, I trust that "success" for Christians in the public arena will be gauged by our faithfulness to the truth, not by specific victories at the ballot box or in the courtroom. We've allowed our standard of success to be dictated by a whole set of assumptions that come from the culture around us, not from the Word of God. For millions of believers, the distinction between what is "Christian" and what is "American" has become hopelessly blurred—which is why we must turn next to the controversial question of America's Christian heritage.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

Burton Mack declared. As quoted in Charlotte Allen, "The Search for a No-Frills Jesus," *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 1996).

Romanitas. Tertullian used the term in *De Pallio*. The term Romanitas is complex, as Tertullian was really defending the legitimacy of North African culture (not specifically "Christian" values). Still, the consciousness of Christianity as a culture brought about this awareness of Roman culture that Tertullian was denouncing.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BATTLE IS ENGAGED

Epigraph. Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson. *Blinded by Might* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999).

Richard Viguerie had predicted. In an interview in 1976, as quoted in Herbert F. Vetter, ed., *Speak Out against the New Right* (Boston: PUBLISHER, 1982).

According to Weyrich. See Dan Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 78–79.

President Nixon. Source for IRS policy statement: www.presidency.ucsb.edu.

Billy Graham described this. As quoted in James Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1985), 147.

Senator Sam Ervin. As quoted in Stephen J. Whitfield, "Separation Anxiety: From Founders to Fundamentalists—Separation between Church and State," *Judaism* (Spring 1995).

George Andrews, a congressman. Ibid.

A columnist for the *Globe and Mail*. Cited by Kathryn Jean Lopez, ed., *The National Review Online* (September 22, 2007), http://corner.nationalreview.com.

Time described Falwell. "The Rev. Jerry Falwell Says God Has a Message for Caesar," *Time* (October 1, 1979).

Two eminent social historians. Quotations from Lipset and Raab in this passage are taken from "The Election and the Evangelicals," retrieved online at www.harvardsquarelibrary.org.

In Weyrich's alternate time line. See Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 85.

The lead in the *New York Times* article. Wayne King, "Pat Robertson: A Candidate of Contradictions," *New York Times* (February 27, 1988).

Reed boldly told the *Los Angeles Times*. As quoted May 1, 1990, by the Religious News Service.

"I paint my face and travel at night." Virginia Norfolk-Pilot (November 9, 1991).

"Now comes the revolution." Richard Viguerie, as quoted in David D. Kirkpatrick, "Some Bush Supports Say They Anticipate a 'Revolution,'" *New York Times* (November 4, 2004).

Rod Dreher. As quoted by ABC News (May 4, 2007), retrieved on www.abcnews.go.com.

The morning after Reed's primary defeat. Shaila Dewan, "Ralph Reed Loses Georgia Primary Race," *New York Times* (July 19, 2006).

Reed wrote to Abramoff in an e-mail. As quoted in Susan Schmidt and James V. Grimaldi, "Panel Says Abramoff Laundered Tribal Funds," *Washington Post* (June 23, 2005).

One historian has written. Bryan F. Le Beau, "The Political Mobilization of the New Christian Right," retrieved from http://are.as.wvu.edu/lebeau3.htm.

CHAPTER TWO: HOW CHRISTIAN A NATION?

Epigraph. John MacArthur, "The Christian and Government: The Christian Responsibility to Government, Part 1." Transcription of sermon retrieved from www.biblebb.com.

Alexis de Tocqueville's. The phrase "America is great because America is good" has been demonstrated to be a spurious quotation; it was not included in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. This hasn't stopped politicians (including Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan) and evangelical leaders from "quoting" these words as authoritative. For details on this legendary quote, see John J. Pitney Jr., "The Tocqueville Fraud," *Weekly Standard* (November 13, 1995).

Gettysburg. Official text and draft copies are quoted from the Library of Congress Web site: www.loc.gov.

But Lincoln repeatedly confessed his fatalism. Lincoln quotations are taken from Allen C. Guelzo, "Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Winter 1997).

John Adams and John Hancock. The story of Adams and Hancock at the home of Reverend Jonas Clarke in Lexington, Massachusetts, on the eve of the Revolutionary War (April 18, 1775) has been recounted many times. Their statement was reportedly a response to British Major Pitcairn's demand for them to surrender. See, for example, the Web site of the Lexington Historical Society: www.lexingtonhistory.org.

Thomas Jefferson. The statement "I am a real Christian" is found in his letter to Charles Thomson (January 9, 1816).

In a pamphlet entitled. Pamphlet by James Dobson, as quoted in Albert Soto, "The American Rebellion," retrieved from: www.atruechurch.info/revolution.html.

A man who wrote to the Danbury Baptists. Jefferson's letter (which contains the famous words "a wall of separation between Church and State") is found at the Library of Congress Web site: www.loc.gov.

A retired president of Yale University. Theodore Woolsey, History, Essays, Orations, and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance, held in New York, October 2–12, 1873, edited by Philip Schaff and S. Irenaeus Prime (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874).

Woolsey contended that. Ira Mark Ellman, "The Misguided Movement to Revive Fault Divorce," published in Martin King Whyte, ed., *Marriage in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 189.

The substance of our national Promise. Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* (1909) is in the public domain and is available online at www.gutenberg.org.

Scripture is clear that Israel was the only nation. We see Israel's role (to be a witness of God's glory, to reveal God's holiness, to deliver God's law, and to usher the Messiah into the world) described in Isaiah 43:1-7; Leviticus 19:2; and Isaiah 42:1-7, among other passages.

Romans saw the blessing of Jupiter. One of the recurring themes of the great Roman epic Virgil's *Aeneid* (written ca. 27 BC) is that Rome was a chosen people, living out its destiny under the guidance of the Roman gods.

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