

Unsustainable Evangelical Politicism:  
How Evangelical Churches Became Republican  
And  
What it Means for Politics and Religion

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November 16, 2017

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For the last 50 years, the Republican Party has increasingly relied on white, primarily Evangelical, voters to win regional, state, and national elections. In an era where the demographics of the U.S.A. are shifting dramatically, the Republican Party continues to lean on the same demographic. How was this relationship between Evangelical Christians and the Republican Party born, and how do these past events create the political situation we see today? Perhaps more importantly, how will this relationship change in the future? Today's connection between Evangelicals and the Republican Party was formed through intentional political and social processes. This relationship will fail without major changes from both institutions.

The term "Evangelical" can have many different connotations. In a broad sense, an Evangelical is simply a person who spreads the Gospel of Christ. However, I will follow the thread of author Frances FitzGerald, who defined "American Evangelical" as the religious descendants of the First and Second Great Awakenings of the 1700s and 1800s<sup>1</sup>. Today, "Evangelical" is an umbrella term for many Protestant denominations, including Southern Baptist, Mennonite, Methodist, evangelical Anglican, and some Christian and Presbyterian churches. The majority of Evangelicals in America are located in the Bible Belt of the American South and Midwest.

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<sup>1</sup> Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 2.

## I: History

Evangelical Christians rose to prominence in the political world only a few decades ago in the 1960s and 70s, perhaps in support of Ronald Reagan or in opposition to Jimmy Carter. To view Evangelical influence in politics as a recent phenomenon, however, is to ignore centuries of political involvement from Evangelical religious groups and their predecessors. The Evangelical movement we see today evolved out of religious revivals in the early United States, namely the Second Great Awakening of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>2</sup>. The religious fervor that swept this new nation was strongly influenced by elements of Romanticism taking hold in the minds of philosophers, poets, and public speakers around the Western world. Romantics of this age strongly believed in the overwhelming beauty of nature and the significance of feelings and emotions over the mind and logic that was so strongly advocated for by Enlightenment thinkers of previous generations. As such, the religious ideals of these born-again Christians emphasized the evangelism of the Gospel, or the duty of Christians to spread the Word of God to all who would listen. At the time of the Second Great Awakening, nearly all Christians in the new United States would have likely considered themselves “Evangelical”<sup>3</sup>. Among different groups of Evangelicals arose social movements such as temperance, health reform, and abolitionism that would have major political impacts until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. Northern Evangelicals, including individuals such as Charles Finney and William Lloyd Garrison, were outspoken abolitionists

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<sup>2</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 41.

and assisted in the founding of both the American and the New England Anti-Slavery Societies<sup>5</sup>. From the very beginning of the Evangelical movement, members have been outspoken in their social and political stances in ways that shaped the political conversation in the United States. More recently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Evangelical voters played increasingly significant roles in shaping the political arena.

The rise of Soviet Communism and the Cold War in the 1940s and early 1950s led to a resurgence of nationalistic Evangelicalism. No individual better embodies this union of patriotism and religious fervor than Billy Graham. An outspoken anti-Communist, Graham stated, “Either communism must die or Christianity must die because it's actually a battle between Christ and Anti-Christ.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to being an outspoken Southern Baptist minister and preacher, Graham also served as a spiritual advisor to a number of U.S. presidents, including Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon<sup>7</sup>. Graham’s nationalist rhetoric in response to a perceived Communist threat to Christianity led to extremely high levels of American patriotism in Evangelical churches. Graham would often in his rhetoric divide the world into two spiritual camps, a Western culture-based camp led by the Bible and a Communist-controlled side influenced by Satan himself<sup>8</sup>. Graham’s self-proclaimed crusades against immorality and Communism swept across the country, and was seen by politicians as a tool that could be properly utilized for public approval. Graham began meeting with U.S. senators (from both parties), and gave public devotionals in Congress<sup>9</sup>. Graham’s rhetoric found its way into

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<sup>5</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Adler, *Ask Billy Graham: The World's Best-Loved Preacher Answers Your Most Important Question* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2007), 25.

<sup>7</sup> William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 34.

<sup>8</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 174.

<sup>9</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 177.

Evangelical (primarily Southern Baptist) churches across the United States, and invariably politicians who appeared close to Graham in the media were often perceived as upright and just in the eyes of many conservative Evangelicals<sup>10</sup>. Graham laid the groundwork for modern political Evangelicalism, but a glance at the political situation of his time shows that things were not yet fully evolved into what we see today. Most strikingly, the Democratic Party of Graham's years still appealed to social conservatives and Graham, a Southern conservative, was a registered Democrat for most of his career<sup>11</sup>. Richard Nixon, who was considered a close friend of Graham's, would be heavily responsible for molding the Republican Party into today's conservative bloc, and drawing Evangelicals who agreed with Graham's political stances.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Frances FitzGerald views the 1960s as the pivotal decade for American Evangelicals. FitzGerald attributes the swing of conservative Evangelicals to the Republican Party to Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy and fellow Republican leaders like Senator Barry Goldwater<sup>12</sup>. Nixon's Southern Strategy was an electoral strategy used to gain white, Southern voters who were traditionally Democrats for the Republican Party. This strategy was not explicitly religious, although the majority of individuals it was directed toward were Evangelicals. Richard Nixon and the Southern Strategy solidified the Republican Party as the party of discontented white Evangelicals who may have feared the civil rights movement and the apparent "culture wars" as a threat to their traditional lifestyle. In the 1964 presidential election, Republican candidate Barry Goldwater won the then-traditionally Democratic states of Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Mississippi<sup>13</sup>. Although Goldwater ultimately lost the election by a wide margin to Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson, his fiery anti-Communist rhetoric

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<sup>10</sup> Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 233.

<sup>13</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 244.

and opposition to federally mandated desegregation drew the interest and votes of many Southern Evangelicals<sup>14</sup>. The Southern Strategy came into bloom in the 1968 presidential election, where Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey lost every Southern state to Republican Richard Nixon and Independent candidate George Wallace<sup>15</sup>. President Nixon had succeeded in drawing Evangelical voters away from the Democratic Party into his own Republican camp, and the majority of white Evangelicals (across the country, not just the South) have remained with the GOP ever since.

Televangelist Jerry Falwell was the natural successor to Billy Graham and his Evangelical politicism. Falwell, also a Southern Baptist pastor, solidified the connection between the Republican Party and Evangelicals. A major political figure throughout the 1970s and 80s, Falwell founded Liberty University, a megachurch in Virginia<sup>16</sup>, and the Moral Majority<sup>17</sup>. Falwell's organization, the Moral Majority, was established to advocate for Christian conservatism in American politics and oppose views that at this point were championed by Democrats, including abortion, homosexuality, and the Equal Rights Amendment<sup>18</sup>. Falwell himself was quick to distinguish the connection he was making between Evangelicalism and conservative politics, once stating, "The war is not between fundamentalists and liberals, but between those who love Jesus Christ and those who hate Him."<sup>19</sup>. Many of the Moral Majority's policies are still looked on favorably by Evangelicals. For example, supporting prayer in public schools was a distinct issue for which the Moral Majority pushed. In 2013, sociology professor

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<sup>14</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 243.

<sup>15</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 247.

<sup>16</sup> Michael S. Winters, *God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 47.

<sup>17</sup> Winters, *God's Right Hand*, 113.

<sup>18</sup> Winters, *God's Right Hand*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 267.

Philip Schwadel found that although support for prayer in public schools has dropped among every other religious denomination, over 70% of self-identified Evangelicals still support Christian prayer in schools<sup>20</sup>. Before being disbanded, the Moral Majority criticized President Jimmy Carter and endorsed Presidents Reagan and H.W. Bush<sup>21</sup>. When he dissolved the organization in 1989, Falwell made clear that he was disbanding the Moral Majority in victory, not defeat. “The religious right is solidly in place,” Falwell said on the dissolution of the Moral Majority, “religious conservatives in America are now in for the duration.”<sup>22</sup> Falwell and the Moral Majority effectively froze conservative Evangelicals into the voting base of the Republican Party, and the next several decades would only tighten this relationship.

President Ronald Reagan was the perfect poster child for the new Evangelical conservative movement. Reagan continued anti-Communist rhetoric and actions with the largest American military buildup in peacetime and his infamous support for the anti-Communist Contras in Nicaragua<sup>23</sup>. The vast majority of Evangelical leaders, including Jerry Falwell, supported Reagan’s economic reforms<sup>24</sup>. Falwell embraced Reagan and his policies so fervently, in fact, that he actively campaigned for Reagan’s pro-nuclear and military buildup “Peace Through Strength” movement<sup>25</sup>. Reagan consistently addressed conservative Evangelical organizations, including the National Religious Broadcasters Convention, the Baptist Fundamentalist Convention, and the National Association of Evangelicals<sup>26</sup>. Ronald Reagan’s extremely religious rhetoric often involved quoting Biblical figures and events, and created a

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Schwadel, *Study: Generational Changes Cause Drop in U.S. Support for School Prayer* (University of Nebraska-Lincoln Press, 2013), Web.

<sup>21</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 291.

<sup>22</sup> Winters, *God’s Right Hand*, 250.

<sup>23</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 320.

<sup>24</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 320.

<sup>25</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 322.

<sup>26</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 322-323.

general expectation that political leaders must be deeply religious. Reagan won reelection with the largest Electoral College margin in U.S history, and over 75% of white evangelicals voted for him despite few of his policies actually being in line with their social stances<sup>27</sup>. Reagan's presidency was narrowly focused on military buildup and economic reform, but his extremely religious rhetoric created a near cult of personality for generations of Evangelical Republicans<sup>28</sup>.

Another significant political figure to inject his policies and rhetoric with striking Evangelical beliefs was President George W. Bush. Bush (43) has drawn his fair share of criticism for injecting Evangelical rhetoric to justify foreign policy choices many viewed as either unnecessary or sinister. Theologian Jim Wallis was one such critic, who argued that, "Patriotism means loving your country and its best ideals, enough even to oppose it when it is grievously wrong. And Christian faithfulness always supersedes patriotism."<sup>29</sup> Wallis especially opposed Bush's decision to invade Iraq, and said that American Christians should remember they are part of a worldwide Church, and owe allegiance to their brothers and sisters in Christ before anyone or anything else<sup>30</sup>. Wallis' main point is that when considering the Iraq War, and any other political situation, Christians must turn to Christian theology before a leader or nationalistic agenda<sup>31</sup>. Because Evangelical charismatics so effectively tied their movement to the Republican Party and because political leaders like Nixon, Reagan ("City on a Hill" rhetoric), and H.W. Bush built a tradition of utilizing religious rhetoric to appeal to Evangelical Christians, Bush (43) managed to maintain general support for the Iraq War among Evangelicals<sup>32</sup>. Under W. Bush,

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<sup>27</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 326.

<sup>28</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 326-327.

<sup>29</sup> Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 109.

<sup>30</sup> Wallis, *God's Politics*, 109-110.

<sup>31</sup> Wallis, *God's Politics*, 124.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Newport, *Protestants and Frequent Churchgoers Most Supportive of Iraq War* (Gallup

the conservative Evangelical movement solidified into the form they are today, and we begin to see the political effects of religious nationalism. With this growing belief in a “Christian empire”, we see dangerous connections to historical religious nationalism and the catastrophes it caused. The close tie of Eastern churches to the Byzantine Empire at the end of the first millennium was a major cause for the Great Schism in 1054 between the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches<sup>33</sup>. Prominently, Adolf Hitler and his Third Reich promoted their version of Christianity through their “Positive Christianity” as justification for human rights atrocities<sup>34</sup>. There is historical precedent for Christian imperialism resulting in degradation of Christian morals and loss of life.

## II. Evangelicals and Politics Today

Falwell’s Moral Majority George W. Bush’s religious rhetoric successfully cemented white American Evangelicals together with the Republican Party. Organizations such as Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council that rose to prominence under the Reagan Administration remain major players in the conservative political playing field<sup>35</sup>. There are many theologians and academics who view this religion of politics as a threat to both true Christianity and true conservatism. Opponents of this political religion, such as professors Charles Amjad-Ali

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News, 2006), Web.

<sup>33</sup> “Great Schism”, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2005)

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Eldridge, *Ideological Incompatibility: The Forced Fusion of Nazism and Protestant Theology and its Impact on Anti-Semitism in the Third Reich* (International Social Science Review, Vol. 81, 2006), 151-165.

<sup>35</sup> Axel R. Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 140.

and Lester Ruiz, view religious rhetoric from organizations and politicians as “extremely unjust and malevolent politics”<sup>36</sup>. There is conflict that arises when a large denomination of Christianity in America becomes inseparably tied to political policies that advocate for the wealthiest Americans, American exceptionalism, and against poorer individuals who are viewed as unable to “give back” to the U.S.<sup>37</sup>. Amjad-Ali and Ruiz argue that as religious rhetoric has continued to become inserted into our politics, both the theology and politics of everyday Americans draw farther away from the dimension of *Deus revalatus*, *Deus absconditus*, which prohibits any group from claiming God entirely for themselves and not at all for others<sup>38</sup>. This claim that God is for us and against our enemies, tied with increasing social expectations of nationalism, has dangerous results.

An extremely impactful consequence of this tie between theology and nationalism is that political and religious beliefs are increasingly being merged into one encompassing set of values. Specific social issues, such as abortion, homosexuality, and the environment, are increasingly viewed as religious issues by not just Evangelicals Christians but many denominations<sup>39</sup>. When attending an Evangelical church today, one’s faith might be called into question if it appears they hold a view on one of these issues that is different than the expectation. When only slightly above 10% of American Evangelicals identify as politically liberal (identify as a Democratic or Democratic-leaning voter) and over 56% see themselves as “very conservative” or “conservative”, it is all too easy to allow one’s personal political beliefs to seep into their

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce Ellis Benson & Peter Heltzel, *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>37</sup> Ellis & Heltzel, *Evangelicals and Empire*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Ellis & Heltzel, *Evangelicals and Empire*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Corwin E. Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 192.

personal religious beliefs and, in turn, impact their religious community<sup>40</sup>. I am drawn again to Jerry Falwell's statement that, "The war is not between fundamentalists and liberals, but between those who love Jesus Christ and those who hate Him."<sup>41</sup>. This close-knit relationship, however, does not just affect Evangelical Churches, but also the Republican Party who has tried so hard to successfully woo Evangelicals.

Political decisions such as Bush (43)'s Faith-Based Initiative and the controversial HR-7 has served to increase the divides between sections of the Republican Party<sup>42</sup>. When Bush created the Faith-Based Initiative, he drew praise from prominent Christian Right leaders, but also critical Republican organizations such as the Log Cabin Republicans, a gay Republican group who's endorsement had reportedly gained Bush a quarter of the openly gay vote when he was first elected president<sup>43</sup>. House Resolution 7, or HR-7, allowed the federal government to fund organizations based around religious conversions. The resolution also allowed religious organizations to hire or fire individuals based on how effectively they lived out the practices of their religion<sup>44</sup>. This resolution, like the Faith-Based Council, isolated groups like the Log Cabin Republicans who were small but significant portions of Republican votes. Increasingly, under both Bush presidents and now under president Trump, the Republican Party has been forced to rely on gaining larger portions of traditionally Republican demographics instead of expanding their voting base. Although still a conscious choice, many will justify this political decision as a

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<sup>40</sup> Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today*, 193.

<sup>41</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 267.

<sup>42</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 461.

<sup>43</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 458.

<sup>44</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 461.

necessity, as rhetoric and projects such as the ones put forward by W. Bush have alienated minority demographics that may have otherwise voted conservative<sup>45</sup>.

Another key manner in which the Republican Party has “allied” with Evangelicals but isolated minority and more moderate Republicans is increased affiliation between Christian Right organizations and individuals. Unlike Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, these organizations are not explicitly political nature. Instead, groups such as Focus on the Family make public stances on social issues in the name of religion while also being extremely outspoken in favor of, or in opposition to, specific politicians. For example, the Focus on the Family website describes the organization as the place for “relevant Christian advice on marriage, parenting, and other topics”<sup>46</sup>. However, the website also contains prominent articles stating opinions on religious freedom, “Christian” education, abortion, homosexuality, sex education, and a variety of other topics<sup>47</sup>.

In a similar vein to Focus on the Family, young Earth creationist Ken Ham and his Answers in Genesis organization have gained prominence in the news and in politics. Kentucky governor Matt Bevin expressed his support for Ham and his construction of a life-size ark in Williamstown, Kentucky; Kentucky’s state government would eventually award Ham’s “Ark Encounter” with and \$18 million tax break, despite learning the park would only hire Christian employees<sup>48</sup>. The increasingly pro-Evangelical rhetoric from politicians like Governor Bevin and increasingly pro-Republican rhetoric from organizations like Focus on the Family have helped create an expectation in both groups that if you support one, you must also support the other.

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<sup>45</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 468.

<sup>46</sup> Focus on the Family website

<sup>47</sup> Focus on the Family website

<sup>48</sup> Linda Blackford, *State Awards \$18 Million Tax Break to Noah’s Ark Theme Park* (Lexington Herald-Leader, 2016), Web.

FitzGerald writes; “The Republican Party had absorbed its issues to the point where reporters looking for spokesmen found mainly elected politicians... In other words, the Christian Right was no longer a movement but simply a faction within the Republican Party”<sup>49</sup>.

The most startling impact of unwavering Evangelical support for the Republican Party is the election of President Donald Trump, who until his political campaign exemplified everything Evangelicals claimed to oppose. Evangelical support for Republican candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election represents an abandonment of traditional Evangelical morals and beliefs in favor of political expediency. One could argue that Evangelical support for issues such as the Iraq War is not wholly surprising, given traditional Evangelical belief in American Exceptionalism. What is surprising is the high level of support Trump received from Evangelicals from his campaign announcement speech to inauguration and into the first months of his presidency. Of Republican primary voters across all 50 states, over 48% identified as Evangelical<sup>50</sup>, and 80-82% of Evangelicals ultimately voted for Donald Trump in the general election<sup>51</sup>. This extremely high number can be compared to W. Bush’s Evangelical support in 2004 (78%). In last year’s election, 16% of Evangelicals said they voted for Democrat Hillary Clinton, a substantial drop from Obama’s 20% support in 2012<sup>52</sup>. How could such a staggeringly high number of Evangelicals support a thrice-married Hollywood star who misquoted the Bible<sup>53</sup>, was pro-choice and identified as a Democrat until several years ago<sup>54</sup>, and claimed he

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<sup>49</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 623.

<sup>50</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 629.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, *White Evangelicals Voted Overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, Exit Polls Show* (Washington Post, 2016), Web.

<sup>52</sup> Bailey, *White Evangelicals Voted*, Web.

<sup>53</sup> Jessica Taylor, *Citing 'Two Corinthians,' Trump Struggles To Make The Sale To Evangelicals* (NPR, 2016), Web.

<sup>54</sup> NBC News, “Trump in 1999: ‘I am very pro-choice’” (NBC News Video, 1999), Web.

never had to ask God for forgiveness<sup>55</sup>? Jared Yates Sexton, a creative writing professor and journalist, attended multiple Trump rallies throughout the campaign and witnessed many self-proclaimed Evangelicals participate in extremely inappropriate manners. On December 7 2015, Sexton attended a Trump rally aboard the *USS Yorktown* in South Carolina. At this rally, Trump made his infamous call on banning all Muslims from entering the U.S.:

The crowd surrounding me inside the aircraft carrier exploded. They'd been cheering every custom-made applause line. They'd called President Obama a coward, a criminal, and – this was the dirtiest of words that night – a Muslim. Anything the outside world could see as racist or vile they'd eaten up and shouted back: 'Amen!' and 'Preach!' as if they were a congregation in a racist church that was just getting going. When protestors interrupted the speech, and at least five of them did, a crowd of men surrounded them, shoved their fingers in their faces, and screamed "Trump! Trump! Trump!" until security carried them away. The looks in those men's eyes said we were only days away from one of these scenes getting out of hand.<sup>56</sup>

In South Carolina, where this rally took place, Trump won the Republican primary with just over 32% of the total vote<sup>57</sup>. This event, as well as similar ones Sexton witnessed at nearly every Trump rally he attended, could simply highlight the fanaticism of a few extreme individuals utterly enraptured by the populism Donald Trump exuded. Perhaps that is an easier option to imagine than seeing these borderline violent supporters as a physical embodiment of how many Trump voters felt before and during the election process. FitzGerald argues that there are many possibilities for why Trump was able to woo so many Evangelicals, chiefly the

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<sup>55</sup> Eugene Scott, *Trump Believes in God, But Hasn't Sought Forgiveness* (CNN, 2015), Web.

<sup>56</sup> Jared Yates Sexton, *The People Are Going To Rise Like the Waters Upon your Shore: A Story of American Rage* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2017), 95.

<sup>57</sup> Sexton, *The People are Going to Rise*, 97.

possibility that increasing numbers of Evangelical Christians were placing politics before theology. Trump appealed to the prosperity gospel and its followers, and perhaps this was enough to sway Evangelicals<sup>58</sup>. I would agree with FitzGerald's assessment, but also add that Evangelical support for Trump was a culmination of decades of drift toward the extreme political right. Trump winning the election with a solid majority of religious voters was not a coincidence, and could easily happen again.

### **III. Moving Forward**

Where do Evangelicals and Republicans go from here? There is a clear danger to Evangelical Christians if conservative politics (or politics in general) continues to be placed in front of theology. There is also clear threat to the Republican Party if they continue to appeal to the religious right while isolating minorities. I will use this section to delve into these dangers and what both groups must do to survive.

Today, Evangelical Christians account for about 25.4% of the American population<sup>59</sup>. 56% of American Evangelicals identify as Republican, compared to 28% identifying as a Democrat<sup>60</sup>. In 2007, nearly 80% of Americans would have identified as Christian in any denomination. By 2014, however, that number has dropped to 70.6%<sup>61</sup>. Although a portion of this change could be attributed to population increase, nearly every Christian denomination has

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<sup>58</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 629.

<sup>59</sup> "America's Changing Religious Landscape" (Pew Forum, 2015), Web.

<sup>60</sup> "America's Changing Religious Landscape" (Pew Forum, 2015), Web.

<sup>61</sup> "Religious Landscape Study: Party Affiliation by Religious Group Statistics" (Pew Forum, 2017), Web.

lost members in that eight-year period. One exception is Evangelical Christians, who have actually increased in number by roughly 2 million since 2007<sup>62</sup>. However, Christians are not merely leaving other denominations to join Evangelical churches. In the same time period, Americans who define themselves as “religiously unaffiliated” (agnostic, atheist, or otherwise) has risen by about 20%, or 19 million people<sup>63</sup>. It is reasonable to suggest that even Evangelical churches will begin losing more and more members as younger generations come of age. Among the Millennial generation (ages 18-33), only one-fifth are Evangelical and less than 60% identify with any form of Christianity. In contrast, at least 70% of older generations identify with a denomination of Christianity<sup>64</sup>. This means that as older generations continue to dwindle and more adult Millennials become socially active, less Americans will consider themselves Evangelical, Christian, and conservative in general.

Evangelical churches will suffer because of their close ties to the Republican Party. As churches begin to lose members and the population of Evangelical Americans will dwindle. A possible solution Evangelical leaders may try is to further politicize and polarize the church movement in an attempt to gain more attention and, in doing so, more followers. This is a risky option, however, as steps taken toward the conservative end of the political spectrum will further isolate the Evangelical church from younger and increasingly left-leaning generations. Instead Evangelical churches should distance themselves as much as possible from the Republican Party and any one political platform on a whole. Both politics and religion attempt to address serious social issues, and it would be unreasonable to expect either field to defer to the other in that aspect. Evangelicals certainly can and in some cases should base their beliefs (socially,

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<sup>62</sup> “Religious Landscape Study” (Pew Forum), Web.

<sup>63</sup> “Religious Landscape Study” (Pew Forum), Web.

<sup>64</sup> “Religious Landscape Study” (Pew Forum), Web.

politically, etc.) off their religion, but it is harmful to fully align with one political party or side. Instead, Evangelical churches should build their own stances on social issue separate from a political party. These stances may align with one, both, or neither major political party. What is significant is that Evangelicals would come to these beliefs out of their religion, and not in an effort to gain political power.

Similarly, the Republican Party will lose prominence on the national stage if they don't make serious attempts to expand their voting base, change their polarizing policies, and distance themselves from religious rhetoric used to gain influence and power. As FitzGerald writes, "For more than thirty years Christian right leaders had held evangelicals together in the dream of restoration and in voting for the Republican establishment and policies that favored the rich in exchange for opposition to abortion and gay rights. No more... Many millennials have left the church because of what they saw as the Christian right's intolerance and bigotry."<sup>65</sup> FitzGerald also points out that there are Evangelical groups that have formed in opposition to Christian right leaders, such as the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). NAE has taken a number of steps away from traditional conservative Evangelical social issues, endorsing the Evangelical Climate Initiative in 2006 and issuing a resolution against the death penalty in 2015<sup>66</sup>. If the Republican Party refuses to change their policies or appeal to a wider demographic, they will not only fail to gain significant number of new voters, but will also begin losing Evangelicals disillusioned with the alliance between politics and religion.

There is a long historical precedence for Evangelical Christians to be heavily involved in America's political process. Evangelical leaders were essential to the growth of both the

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<sup>65</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 635

<sup>66</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 634

temperance and abolition movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, recent decades have seen an intentional relationship grow between the Republican Party and Evangelicals that threatens to undermine the morals and stances of both parties. Evangelical Christians must be cautious to distance themselves from the platform of any one party, and instead should choose their own social issues to take a stand on. Similarly, the Republican Party cannot continue to be tied solely to one religious group, or they will lose prominence in politics as younger and increasingly un-Evangelical generations become voting. The Republican Party must adapt their rhetoric and policies to appeal to a broader base of voters, who could reshape the party for the next several decades.

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