

Dispensationalism's Evolving Theory of Political Action: How *Roe v. Wade* and Jerry Falwell Brought Dispensationalism from Rejecting Political Action to Embracing It

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Since the 1960s, when Carl McIntire² railed against theological and political liberalism,³ few well-known

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² Carl McIntire (1906-2002) was a “firebrand fundamentalist preacher whose radio show, *20th Century Reformation Hour*, was broadcast daily on more than 600 radio stations during the 1960s. The son of missionaries, McIntire helped found the Bible Presbyterian Church in 1937. Under his leadership the church grew into a multimillion-dollar ministry that owned radio stations and operated a publishing division. McIntire’s radio show gradually lost its audience; however, after the Federal Communications Commission ruled in 1971 that a station run by the church violated a ‘fairness doctrine’ by failing to provide free time for opposing viewpoints to be presented. The show went off the air in 1973” (Karen Sparks, “Carl Curtis McIntire: American Evangelist,” *Brittanica.com*, accessed August 5, 2020).

³ “No other figure in 20th-century fundamentalism so defined himself by identifying his enemies. His worldview, like that of other fundamentalists and not a few evangelicals, was unrelievedly dualistic—good versus evil, conservative versus liberal—making it impossible to countenance ambiguity, theological or otherwise, or to discern shades of gray” (Randal Balmer, “Fundamentalist With Flair,” *ChristianityToday.com*, May 21, 2002,

American evangelicals have been as overtly political as Jerry Falwell Jr. As president of Liberty University, Jerry Falwell Jr. has been an unabashed supporter of President Trump, praising Mr. Trump's conservative credentials at the Republican National Convention in 2016. In 2018 Liberty sent 300 students to Washington to support the nomination of Supreme Court Justice Brent Kavanaugh in order to "counter what the Yale students are doing."⁴ In 2017 President Trump delivered the commencement address at Liberty.⁵ In 2019 it was Vice President Pence,⁶ and this year it was Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.⁷

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Rev. Falwell added a religious imperative to his political endorsement of President Trump by stating that "it may be immoral for [Christian conservatives] not to support him."⁸ In justification of this statement, Falwell cited economic advances in the African-American and Hispanic communities.⁹ When asked whether or

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/may21/7.52.html>. Just months before his death, when asked to identify his enemies, McIntire shot back, "The liberals,' ... Then he sounded a note of defiance: 'But they can't stop me!'" (ibid.).

⁴ "Liberty to Send 300 Students to DC to Support Kavanaugh," *apnews.com*, September 27, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/90d054575b8341059b36a8311f70b05d>.

⁵ "President Donald J. Trump to deliver Commencement Keynote Address," *liberty.edu*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.liberty.edu/news/2017/03/21/president-donald-j-trump-to-deliver-commencement-keynote-address/>.

⁶ "Vice President Pence to Give Commencement Address at Liberty," *apnews.com*, March 2, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/b94a10cc312b45d4804ab256554373d9>.

⁷ "Secretary of State to Address Liberty University Graduates," *apnews.com*, January 27, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/0945268510182947886edc6b48216344>.

⁸ Joe Heim, "Jerry Falwell Jr. Can't Imagine Trump 'Doing Anything That's not Good for the Country,'" *WashingtonPost.com*, January 1, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/jerry-falwell-jr-cant-imagine-trump-doing-anything-thats-not-good-for-the-country/2018/12/21/6affc4c4-f19e-11e8-80d0-f7e1948d55f4_story.html.

⁹ "It may be immoral for them not to support him, because he's got African American employment to record highs, Hispanic employment to

not it was hypocritical for evangelical leaders to support someone “who has committed adultery and lies often,” Falwell responded with an argument that sounds similar, at least superficially, to Augustine’s understanding of the heavenly city and the earthly city.¹⁰

record highs. They need to look at what the president did for the poor” (ibid.).

¹⁰ Even though Falwell’s two cities sound similar to Augustine, in reality there is almost no overlap between Augustine and Falwell. Falwell sees his two kingdoms as having different realms of authority. Augustine defines his two cities as different citizenry and affections: “Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience” (Augustine of Hippo, “The City of God,” in *St. Augustine’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887], 14.28.1). Concerning the inhabitants of these two cities, unlike Falwell in his kingdoms, Augustine includes the angels: “And certainly this is the great difference which distinguishes the two cities of which we speak, the one being the society of the godly men, the other of the ungodly, each associated with the angels that adhere to their party, and the one guided and fashioned by love of self, the other by love of God” (ibid., 14.13.1). Augustine argues that the main motivation of the earthly city is peace, even if the attainment of that peace means the suppression of other peoples through war. Since a well-ordered society of peace is beneficial to those inhabitants of the city of God, the inhabitants of this latter city should “make no scruple” about how this is achieved. Put another way, the Christian should not be concerned about politics as long as the true worship of God is not affected. “The earthly city, which does not live by faith, seeks an earthly peace, and the end it proposes, in the well-ordered concord of civic obedience and rule, is the combination of men’s wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life. The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith, makes use of this peace only because it must, until this mortal condition which necessitates it shall pass away. Consequently, so long as it lives like a captive and a stranger in the earthly city, though it has already received the promise of redemption, and the gift of the Spirit as the earnest of it, it makes no scruple to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things necessary for the maintenance of this mortal

There's two kingdoms. There's the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. In the heavenly kingdom the responsibility is to treat others as you'd like to be treated. In the earthly kingdom, the responsibility is to choose leaders who will do what's best for your country. Think about it. Why have Americans been able to do more to help people in need around the world than any other country in history? It's because of free enterprise, freedom, ingenuity, entrepreneurship and wealth. A poor person never gave anyone a job. A poor person never gave anybody charity, not of any real volume. It's just common sense to me.¹¹

Likewise, when queried about his statement that “Christians should stop electing nice guys,” Falwell responded with the same argument:

It's such a distortion of the teachings of Jesus to say that what he taught us to do personally—to love our neighbors as ourselves, help the poor—can somehow be imputed on a nation. Jesus never told Caesar how to run Rome.¹² He went out of his way to say that's the earthly kingdom, I'm about the heavenly kingdom and I'm here to teach you how to treat others, how to help others, but when it comes to serving your country, you render unto Caesar that which

life are administered; and thus, as this life is common to both cities, so there is a harmony between them in regard to what belongs to it ... This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognizing that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace. It therefore is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced. Even the heavenly city, therefore, while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth, and, so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness, desires and maintains a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessaries of life, and makes this earthly peace bear upon the peace of heaven” (ibid., 19.17.1).

¹¹ Quoted in Heim, “Jerry Falwell Jr.”

¹² This is an interesting comment for it appears that Falwell is arguing for the opposite, that is, exercising political power to force Caesar to run Rome in a particular way.

is Caesar's. It's a distortion of the teaching of Christ to say Jesus taught love and forgiveness and therefore the United States as a nation should be loving and forgiving, and just hand over everything we have to every other part of the world. That's not what Jesus taught. You almost have to believe that this is a theocracy to think that way, to think that public policy should be dictated by the teachings of Jesus.¹³

While it is not immediately obvious where Jerry Falwell Jr. learned his Augustinian dichotomy of two kingdoms,¹⁴ it is immediately evident where he acquired his understanding of political responsibility. He received it from his father, Jerry Falwell Sr.

Prior to 1973, there was nearly universal agreement among dispensationalists that political action was either outright forbidden or a choice left up to the individual believer. By all accounts, the believer's responsibility to the political system, if such a responsibility existed at all, was a (far) distant second to the believer's responsibility towards personal and global evangelism.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the sea-change in dispensational thought brought about by Jerry Falwell Sr. Both the actions and motivations of Jerry Falwell Sr.¹⁵ will be examined to determine if these modifications to dispensationalism are indeed a good thing.

Summary of Traditional Dispensationalism's Political Ethic Prior to 1973

While there are differences between dispensationalists from Darby to Ryrie, such as the extent of allowable political involvement for example, the areas of agreement far outweigh any divergence of opinion. This continuity of outlook allows one to draw a general description of the traditional dispensational (TD) political ethic.

¹³ Quoted in Heim, "Jerry Falwell Jr."

¹⁴ Although it seems likely he learned it from his father, see n. 23.

¹⁵ Hereafter simply Jerry Falwell. Jerry Falwell Jr. is not discussed beyond this point.

First, all agree that the Christian is not called upon to change the world or bring in “kingdom ethics.”¹⁶ There is a strong recognition of the futility of such effort. Lost people cannot be made better.¹⁷ This is an impossibility. Only when someone is born again is real moral change possible. What is true for the individual is also true for society.

This is not to say that TD does not believe in societal transformation. It is clear that society needs to be transformed and indeed will be transformed. The question is when does that transformation take place, and who does the transforming. It is only when Christ establishes his kingdom at the second coming that civilization will be made right.

Another major emphasis in TD is the sovereignty of God. No rebellion is authorized against any established authority, because every authority is established by God. Part of the sovereignty of God is displayed in the world's inexorable march toward apostasy and total corruption. As this wickedness is incorporated into God's plan for the future, it becomes impossible to know exactly what God is doing at any given moment on the global

¹⁶ The authors examined in order to draw these conclusions were J. N. Darby, H. A. Ironside, L. S. Chafer, Alva McClain, John Walvoord, and Charles Ryrie. For a more complete discussion, see Bruce A. Baker, “Closing a ‘Theological Loophole’: A Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism's View of Social and Political Action” (PhD diss., Baptist Bible Seminary, 2016). It should be noted that the majority of this paper is taken from this work.

¹⁷ This statement is true in the ultimate sense in that man cannot be made right with God or do works pleasing to God without the renewing work of God the Holy Spirit. That being said it is also true, as Augustine puts it, that men may be made “less base.” Referring to the early Romans, Augustine observes, “Glory they most ardently loved: for it they wished to live, for it they did not hesitate to die. Every other desire was repressed by the strength of their passion for that one thing.... That eagerness for praise and desire of glory, then, was that which accomplished those many wonderful things, laudable, doubtless, and glorious according to human judgment” (Augustine, “City of God,” 5.12.1). “Nevertheless, they who restrain baser lusts, not by the power of the Holy Spirit obtained by the faith of piety, or by the love of intelligible beauty, but by desire of human praise, or, at all events, restrain them better by the love of such praise, are not indeed yet holy, but only less base” (ibid., 5.13.1).

stage. As a result, TD advises a “hands off” approach to the evils of this world. While some would label this “pessimism” or “social disengagement,” TD would counter that this is biblical realism.

This being said, the believer is called to do good to all people. Therefore, if some act of love may ease the suffering of an individual or provide some benefit—particularly if this benefit aids evangelistic efforts—then one should be about it. But such good works are directed at individuals, not society as a whole.

What then is the church to be about? *The task of the church is evangelism.* While there is strong opposition to efforts intended to make the world better for its own sake, there is also general agreement that it is the preaching of the gospel that has the largest beneficial effects on this world. In fact, the favorable effects of the gospel are so great, one must be on guard against the temptation to make them an end in themselves.

So, at the end of the day what does TD teach? It teaches that evangelism is *the primary task* of the believer. All ethical considerations should be made with a view toward their effects on evangelism. Good works should be done to all, but particularly to those in the church. Good works outside the body should have a focus on the individual, not society as a whole, and again, with evangelism always in mind. Any attempt at societal reformation is futile, and a distraction from the real mission of the church. Only when Christ returns will society be put right. As Scofield pleads,

Dear friends, let us leave the government of the world till the King comes; let us leave the civilizing of the world to be the incidental effect of the presence there of the gospel of Christ, and let us give our time, our strength, our money, our days to the mission distinctively committed to the church, namely: to make Christ known “to every creature.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Scofield, *Prophecy Made Plain* (Glasgow: Pickering & Inglis, n.d.), 41.

Jerry Falwell Sr.

Without question, Jerry Falwell subscribed to TD, being both premillennial and pretribulational.¹⁹ Falwell's commitment to TD may be seen, at least in part, in his early understanding of social and political action. In practice and in ideology, Falwell maintained fidelity with the general TD social and political ethic described above.

Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals. We are not told to wage wars against bootleggers, liquor stores, gamblers, murderers, prostitutes, racketeers, prejudiced persons or institutions, or any other existing evil as such. Our ministry is not reformation but transformation. The gospel does not clean up the outside but rather regenerates the inside. ...

We pay our taxes, cast our votes as a responsibility of citizenship, obey the laws of the land, and other things demanded of us by the society in which we live. But, at the same time, we are cognizant that our only purpose on this earth is to know Christ and to make Him known. Believing the Bible as I do, I find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else—including fighting communism, or participating in civil rights reforms. As a God-called preacher, I find there is no time left after I give the proper time and attention to winning people to Christ. Preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners. ...²⁰

¹⁹ Jerry Falwell, *Falwell: An Autobiography* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty House, 1997), 374.

²⁰ Jerry Falwell, "Ministers and Marches: 1965," in *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Matthew Avery Sutton, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013), 58–59. Falwell also believed that evangelism is the only cure to the social ills against which people were marching: "If the many thousands of churches and pastors of America were suddenly to begin preaching the old-fashioned gospel of Jesus Christ and the power that is in His atoning blood, a revival would grip our land such as we have never known before. If as much effort could be put into winning people to Jesus Christ across the land as is being exerted in the present civil rights movement, America will be turned upside down for God. Hate and prejudice

***Roe v. Wade* and Political Action**

This conviction against political action changed with the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973. Horrified at the sinfulness of abortion and its threat to the traditional family,²¹ Falwell began “to teach and preach against it,” shocking his congregation in the process.²²

would certainly be a great measure overcome. Churches would be filled with sincere souls seeking God. Good relations between the races would soon be evidenced. God is Love, and when He is put first in the individual life and in the church, God’s people become messengers of love” (ibid., 59). “As Christians, we detest discrimination. But we do need to see that we can never stop it through any other means than that weapon which we given the church 2,000 years ago—the preaching of the gospel of Christ” (ibid., 60).

²¹ It is interesting to note that not all evangelicals were immediately opposed to abortion on demand. As Brown comments, “Unfortunately for those who consider abortion a moral evil, indeed, under most circumstances a crime, the evangelical community was very slow to react to *Roe*. Prominent Christian leaders such as W. A. Criswell greeted *Roe v. Wade* with favor, in some cases apparently by what seemed a reflex anti-Catholicism. Questioned on his stand by this writer, Dr. Criswell responded with the strange rhetorical question, ‘Who can say what and when is murder?’ This lack of clarity was of course fostered and promoted by the pro-abortionists, who always alleged that they did not favor abortion, but only freedom. This has culminated in the slogan, which became so effective after *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* (a mildly restrictive Supreme Court decision of 1989), of ‘freedom of choice.’

Evangelicals did not generally awaken to the problem until stimulated by the late Francis A. Schaeffer, whose film cycle, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (produced together with Dr. Koop), began to play nationwide in 1979. Earlier, Dr. Billy Graham had helped Dr. Koop and this writer launch the Christian Action Council (1975) and initially indicated his interest in supporting the anti-abortion cause. His wife Ruth became one of the Council’s sponsors, and Graham himself indicated a willingness to address the National Right to Life Committee. Soon, however, warned off, it would seem, by the late Harriet Pilpel, his attorney at the time, and a prominent strategist of the abortion movement, Graham dropped all support, and his wife withdrew as a sponsor” (Harold O. J. Brown, “A Method in Which Killing Represents a Solution: The Soul of the Unborn and the Soul of America,” *Trinity Journal* 14, no. 2 [Fall 1993]: 176–177).

²² Falwell, *Autobiography*, 365. “People were shocked and surprised by the change in emphasis they heard in my preaching. Until the 1970s, I had

At the heart of his decision to become politically active was his new understanding of Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees concerning paying taxes to Caesar (Matt 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:20–26).²³ Moving beyond a more limited TD understanding of submission to government,²⁴ Falwell, as a result of *Roe v. Wade*, now understood in the phrase “render to Caesar,” a responsibility to “play our part in maintaining the world of humankind.”²⁵

On the plus side, Falwell understands that the believer lives in two separate worlds, and has a responsibility to both.²⁶ Unfortunately, Falwell fails to recognize the evil nature of the world system, or at least fails to recognize it fully. He maintains that the world of men operates with different rules. As a result, to get things done, one must operate within the rules of the world of men:

Each world works differently. What we do in God's world and with His people has different rules from what we do in the world of government, with elected officials and volunteers. America is not

been a typical Baptist pastor who was opposed to Christians, especially the clergy, getting involved in political action. Suddenly I was calling for all-out political involvement by the Christian community. I had read and reread the stories and the sermons of the Old Testament prophets and their call to justice. I had re-studied the life and teachings of Jesus, with His love for the little children and His command to see that no harm should come to them. I read the letters of Paul, Peter, and John, the books of Acts and Revelation. I felt a growing commitment to take my stand prophetically against the influence of Satan in our nation and through our nation to the world” (ibid.).

²³ Ibid., 366.

²⁴ “In these words Jesus definitely answered their question by showing that the people of God are responsible to Him in things spiritual, but must be obedient to the powers that be in things civil and national” (H. A. Ironside, *Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005], 187).

²⁵ Falwell, *Autobiography*, 366.

²⁶ “There was a second important reminder for me in that story. When Jesus said, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,’ He was not just telling us to be responsible in both worlds. He was also reminding us that we live in two worlds simultaneously and that we need to keep the worlds apart” (ibid., 367).

a theocracy, a government with God as its Commander-in-Chief. America is a democratic republic with a man (perhaps one day a woman) as its chief executive officer. In God's world, we decided by God rules. In a democratic republic, we work together, governed by the will of the majority. In God's world, we submit to Him. In man's world we submit to God and to the law of man.²⁷

It is difficult to imagine that Falwell is actually suggesting that there are two sets of rules for the believer and that one set or the other determines the behavior of the believer, depending on the circumstances. Yet it appears he comes perilously close.

Still, if the world of men is governed by the will of the majority (a doubtful proposition), then political action by believers is necessary if the moral decay of the nation is to be halted. To be clear, Falwell does not see political action as joining with the evil world system. Instead, he sees political action by believers as bringing God's will into the world of men.²⁸ It follows, therefore, that mere voting is not sufficient. Grassroots political action by the church and in the church is required:

I began to urge my fellow Christians to get involved in the political process. I encouraged them to study the issues, to support qualified candidates who stood for the renewal of morality and good sense in the land, or to run for office themselves. I pushed for Christians to use their churches to register voters. I dared Christians to go door-to-door getting out the vote, making the issues known, campaigning precinct-by-precinct for the candidates of their choice and using their cars and buses to get voters to the polls.²⁹

As this movement into political action progressed, Falwell expanded his vision: "In 1975 the nation's bicentennial celebration was only a year away when we begin to dream about influencing the moral and ethical course of the nation in an even

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "When we feel the law of man is unjust or contrary to the law of God, we work to change man's law" (ibid.).

²⁹ Ibid., 368.

larger way.”³⁰ Don Wyrzten’s musical *I Love America* was chosen as “the first offense we launched to mobilize Christians across America for political action. ...”³¹ Seventy students were trained for a “musical ministry,”³² and “were given college credits”³³ to perform this musical in 141 cities.³⁴ As one might imagine, this production did not come cheap. The students traveled on “ministry-owned” busses which were followed by “two tractor-trailer trucks carrying the stage equipment and costumes, sound systems, and lights.”³⁵ Falwell was flown back and forth to these rallies on “purchase or leased private planes,” so that he could maintain the various ministries of Thomas Road Baptist Church.³⁶

Unfortunately, there is much to criticize in this initial offensive. First, it is, at the very least, questionable whether or not spiritual duties incumbent on the church should be motivated by American patriotic nationalism. God has promised to bless his word (Isa 55:10–11), which should therefore be the primary motivator of his people. Additionally, songs with titles like “I’m Just a Flag Waving American,” “The Red, White and Blue,” and “Johnny Bull,” do not a biblical appeal make.³⁷ To make matters

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 369.

³⁴ Ibid., 368.

³⁵ Ibid., 369.

³⁶ Ibid., 369–70.

³⁷ The song list for this musical is as follows: (1) “I Love America,” (2) “I’m Just A Flag-Waiving American,” (3) “Johnny Bull,” (4) “Historical Interlude,” (5) “In God We Trust,” (6) “My Home, America,” (7) “America the Beautiful,” (8) “God of Our Fathers,” (9) “The Red, White and Blue,” (10) “My Home, America (Reprise),” (11) “Praise the Lord and Give Thanks, America,” (12) “It’s Time to Pray,” (13) “If My People,” (14) “Jesus Is Calling America,” and (15) “Battle Hymn Of The Republic.” See “John W. Peterson, Don Wyrzten - I Love America: A Patriotic Musical (Vinyl, Lp),” *Discogs.com*, accessed March 26, 2016, <https://www.discogs.com/John-W-Peterson-Don-Wyrzten-I-Love-America-A-Patriotic-Musical/release/4761980>.

worse, the one song that references scripture (“If My People”) cannot be applied to the United States when taken in context.³⁸

Second, there seems to have been a fair degree of emotional manipulation involved in this appeal. Falwell would fly into town “just in time to have dinner with the pastors and lay leaders of the city.”³⁹ He would speak during and after dinner about his conclusions concerning political action and urge the pastors “to join us in taking a stand against the forces of evil at work in their towns and around the country.”⁴⁰ Falwell describes what would happen next.

The pastors were then escorted to reserved seats in the front rows of the city auditorium, where I honored them and their families. Then the lights dimmed. The snare drums and tympanies rolled. The trumpets played a fanfare and seventy wonderful young people sang their hearts out to an inspired crowd who usually responded with an enthusiastic standing ovation. Then I concluded the evening with a Biblical challenge to the Christians gathered in those large auditoriums or coliseums to unite with their brothers and sisters in Christ to save the nation.⁴¹

One cannot help but contrast this emotional appeal with Chafer’s early ministry with nationally known evangelistic teams.

³⁸ The use of 2 Chronicles 7:14 in this musical is particularly unfortunate as this promise is given specifically to Israel, echoing the stipulations of the land covenant. There is no exegetical evidence that this particular promise may be applied to any other nation. This is not to say that the general sentiment expressed cannot be found other places, such as Jeremiah 18:5–10, where the nations generally are in view. This does not excuse, however, the misuse of the previous passage. Unfortunately, this employment of 2 Chronicles 7:14 became a mainstay in Falwell’s basic appeal: “And though my words sounded ominous, I always concluded each patriotic rally on the steps of each state capitol building with God’s promise: [2 Chron 7:14]” (Falwell, *Autobiography*, 383).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Chafer had ample opportunity to watch the “methods” of the high-powered evangelists of those days. J. Wilbur Chapman was applying his “machinery” to gospel preaching, organizing his meetings to the point of spotting trained personal workers in every fifth row to converge on the audience during the invitation. He stormed the big cities with 25 evangelists holding simultaneous meetings. For a while, Chafer was one of the 25.⁴²

Chafer strongly disapproved of the high-pressure techniques that were used in these meetings to induce a decision for Christ. In fact, he disapproved so much that he later condemned altar calls, labeling them “a false issue,” and “a denial of the doctrine of grace.”⁴³

The Moral Majority

Perhaps Falwell's most enduring legacy in this effort was the creation of the Moral Majority, a “political lobbying organization.”⁴⁴ The Moral Majority had a fourfold platform: “pro-life, pro-traditional family, pro-moral, and pro-American (that included favoring a strong national defense and support for the state of Israel).”⁴⁵ The purpose of this organization was to organize the millions of Americans ignored by the media who agreed with these issues.⁴⁶

Just as Falwell's newfound commitment to political action required a re-thinking of his understanding of the mission of the church, so the birth of the Moral Majority required a re-thinking of his concept of theological separation. Falwell admits that “since becoming a Christian I had lived a rather separatist life. I believed that ‘being yoked with unbelievers’ for any cause was

⁴² John D. Hannah, “The Early Years of Lewis Sperry Chafer,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144, no. 573 (1987): 15.

⁴³ Chafer, *True Evangelism* (New York: Gospel Publishing House, 1911), 26.

⁴⁴ Falwell, *Autobiography*, 387. The Moral Majority was incorporated in June 1979 (*ibid.*).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 384.

off limits.”⁴⁷ “Any cause” included marriage, “business partnerships, and deep-rooted involvements and relationships.”⁴⁸

The Moral Majority was “never intended to be an evangelistic enterprise,” nor was it “a religious movement.”⁴⁹ Falwell’s goal was to organize “Baptists and Catholics, Mormons and Jews, believers and unbelievers” to bring about political change.⁵⁰ Still, it is difficult to imagine the Moral Majority as anything less than a business partnership or deep-rooted involvement with others not of like faith. It is at this point that Falwell had to face his “own personal psychological barrier.”⁵¹

Despite his theological convictions, Falwell admits, “I determined to find the way it could be done.”⁵² The theological rationale necessary for him to set aside his separatist convictions was provided by Reformed theologian and apologist Francis Schaeffer.⁵³ Specifically, it was Schaeffer’s co-belligerency argument Falwell found persuasive.⁵⁴

Schaeffer argues that a co-belligerent is different than an ally. Schaeffer is opposed to alliances with groups that have a non-Christian base. But co-belligerency is “temporary and focused at specific points.”⁵⁵ Therefore he encourages co-belligerency and “criticized evangelicals for leaving the battle

⁴⁷ Ibid., 385.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 385-86.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 389.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 386. It is troubling to see how a deep-seated theological conviction so quickly changed to a “personal psychological barrier.”

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Schaeffer was a Presbyterian following in the Dutch Calvinist tradition (Mark Edwards, “‘How Should We Then Think?’ A Study of Francis Schaeffer’s Lordship Principle,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 60, no. 2 [1998]: 192).

⁵⁴ Falwell, *Autobiography*, 386.

⁵⁵ Don Sweeting, “Changing American Evangelical Attitudes Towards Roman Catholics: 1960-2000,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7, no. 4 (2001): 26.

for human life to the Catholics.”⁵⁶ Falwell adopted this argument to justify his retreat from his previous separatist stance.

The Effects of Politics on Falwell's Ministry

Interestingly, Falwell was under no delusions about the effect the Moral Majority had on his gospel ministry: it interrupted it. While attending President Reagan's second inauguration, Falwell reflected on the previous six years of political activity: “As the President spoke I reviewed one more time why I had interrupted my own primary task of evangelism and church growth to take

⁵⁶ Ibid. This view of co-belligerence now seems so thoroughly ingrained in evangelicalism that those who oppose it are considered “extreme”: “Given the cultural disaster we face, and what is at stake, it simply makes sense for men and women who share basic worldview concerns to gather strength from each other, join hands and hearts, and enter the cultural fray. On this point, all but the most extreme separatists among us would agree” (R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Standing Together, Standing Apart: Cultural Co-Belligerence without Theological Compromise,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7, no. 4 [2001]: 8–9).

Nevertheless, the dangers of co-belligerency are very real. Carson's observation is worth careful consideration. “Most evangelicals are entirely happy with what Francis Schaeffer used to call ‘co-belligerency’ on select issues: e.g., abortion, the importance of persons, the social importance of the family, and much more. We will disagree on some social/moral issues (e.g., gambling). But recent evangelical/Roman Catholic pronouncements in this area have, ironically, done more to set back co-belligerency than to advance it. Instead of focusing on the agreed social issues, some evangelical and Roman Catholic theologians have agreed to use ambiguous language to project an image of *theological* agreement where both sides mean quite different things. Those who think that the theological issues are of minor importance in comparison with the social issues, and who feel that theological differences should be buried in order to confront the common foe of secular humanism, are delighted. In my view, they are, at best, naive. Candor, integrity, and even the moral issues are not advanced by uses of language that mask profound differences. Substantial numbers of evangelicals quite frankly feel confused and betrayed by these agreements. They point out that no generation ever defends the truth on only one front, and if the price paid for common statements on, say, abortion, is sacrifice of the evangelical understanding of the gospel, the price is too high” (D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011], 418–419).

up my responsibility as a citizen.”⁵⁷ Having promised “five years of [his] life to political leaders in 1979,” he had actually given eight, before returning to his first calling.⁵⁸

Politics, however, is not so easily given up. Falwell’s sermon “America Must Return to the Faith of our Fathers,”⁵⁹ delivered six years⁶⁰ after his “return to his first calling” and four years after the dissolution of the Moral Majority,⁶¹ is a case in point. Falwell’s five-point outline is as follows.

First, “there can be no restoration for America unless we know who we are.”⁶² Consisting mostly of quotations,⁶³ Falwell attempts to show that the United States is a Christian nation. Second, “those persons who reject America’s Christian heritage are accountable to God.”⁶⁴ In this section Falwell levels (much

⁵⁷ Falwell, *Autobiography*, 405.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* “Two years later, in 1987, I stepped aside from the presidency of the Moral Majority and returned to my first calling at Thomas Road Baptist Church and Liberty University. I had promised five years of my life to political leaders in 1979, as they urged me to step forward and mobilize religious conservatives in America. I actually gave eight years of my life to this cause. While I shall always be a voice for the moral and social issues, I have never been confused about God’s call on my life” (*ibid.*).

⁵⁹ Jerry Falwell, “America Must Return to the Faith of Our Fathers,” (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 1993). This message is a follow up to a previous message entitled, “Our Children Must Be Told: America is a Christian Nation” (*ibid.*, 2).

⁶⁰ This sermon was delivered “on February 28, 1993 at the Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia, and aired nationally on the Old Time Gospel Hour Television Network March 21, 1993” (*ibid.*).

⁶¹ “On 10 June 1989, Falwell announced that ‘our mission is accomplished’ and dissolved the Moral Majority, effective 31 August 1989” (Itai Sneh, “Moral Majority,” *Dictionary of American History, Encyclopedia.com*, 2003, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/moral-majority>).

⁶² Falwell, “America Must Return,” 3.

⁶³ Falwell quotes Woodrow Wilson, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Horace Greeley, Daniel Webster, Patrick Henry, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, Harry S. Truman, and Noah Webster.

⁶⁴ Falwell, “America Must Return,” 6. It is particularly unfortunate that Falwell ignores Paul’s admonition in Romans 13:7 to give honor to whom

deserved) criticism against President Clinton's policies concerning abortion and homosexuality. Third, "all American citizens will be punished for the ungodly actions of our leaders."⁶⁵ Fourth, "we must believe that national reform is possible."⁶⁶ Falwell lists three action items to accomplish this: (1) "we must aggressively resist the agenda of radical minorities"; (2) "we must reclaim our public schools"; and (3) "we must quickly build the largest and finest Christian school system in history."⁶⁷

What is notably absent from this sermon thus far is any reference to the gospel as a basic need of the sinner, society, or even as a means of social reform. Falwell's fifth point promises to address this, but sadly, does not. His final point is "we must evangelize America beyond any past efforts."⁶⁸ This is by far the shortest section of the sermon. As this section is so brief, the majority of what was said will be quoted below.

As the Pastor for the past 37 years of the 22,000-member Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, I have freshly committed myself to evangelizing our own Central Virginia population. With more than 200 television stations now carrying the Old Time Gospel Hour worldwide, I am recommitted to giving the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world. As I have stated earlier, we must renew our vows to provide Christian education for

honor is owed. Speaking of the sitting president and first lady, Falwell says, "And now, this 42nd President and his Mother Superior, Hillary Rodham Clinton, are outdistancing the Supreme Court in their anti-Christian programs and endeavors" (ibid., 7). This is one of the dangers of democracy, according to Darby: "Even popular religious preaching" will not be afraid to "[despise] government, says the apostle, presumptuous, self-willed, not afraid to speak evil of dignities" (J. N. Darby, *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly, 34 vols. [Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, n.d.], 32:334).

⁶⁵ Falwell, "America Must Return," 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12–13. A major rationale for promoting Christian schools is that it would require children to read the Constitution and The Federalist Papers. (ibid., 14).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

our young people. New Testament evangelization of the five billion souls on this planet must be a renewed first priority for every believer and every local church. This commitment to world evangelization and political involvement is not a new doctrine in America. Action must be taken immediately by all who have a burden for this generation of young people.⁶⁹

Evaluating this section of the sermon is, frankly, heart-rending. Falwell speaks of the thousands in his church and the number of television stations world-wide that carry his program. He renews a vow to provide Christian education to young people. In all of this there are only four lines (in the entire sermon) that address evangelism or the gospel.⁷⁰ Of those four, one of them ties evangelism to politics.

While it is impossible to say whether or not this sermon is typical of Falwell's post-Moral-Majority preaching without a thorough review of all his sermons during this time, the fact that even one sermon exists with so little gospel emphasis is telling.⁷¹ That the sermon originates from an Independent Baptist Church with a program called "The Old Time Gospel Hour" is even more striking. One would find it difficult to believe that this is the same pastor who so eloquently preached against political action in 1965,⁷² if the evidence were not there.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15. Following the section above, the sermon immediately concludes with a quote about politics by Charles Finney.

⁷⁰ They are, (1) "I have freshly committed myself to evangelizing our own Central Virginia population"; (2) "I am recommitted to giving the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world"; (3) "New Testament evangelization of the five billion souls on this planet must be a renewed first priority for every believer and every local church"; and (4) "This commitment to world evangelization and political involvement is not a new doctrine in America."

⁷¹ At this point it should be remembered that this sermon is a follow up to a previous sermon entitled, "Our Children Must Be Told: America is a Christian Nation."

⁷² "Believing the Bible as I do, I find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else. . . . As a God-called preacher, I find there is no time left after I give the proper time and attention to winning people to Christ. Preachers are not called to be

Evaluation

That Jerry Falwell firmly adhered to TD early in his ministry is beyond question. As has been shown, his initial view of political action in and by the church is completely compatible with the general TD social and political ethic as outlined previously.

While not abandoning TD in its entirety, Falwell's political ethic deviated completely from this received tradition after *Roe v. Wade*. It appears the specter of abortion drove his new theological positions. It is highly doubtful that Falwell would have made the pivot to political action had it not been for this Supreme Court decision. Put another way, one suspects his new understanding of "render unto Caesar," and his new conviction regarding ecclesiological separation were driven by current events, not fresh exegetical insights.

Falwell recognizes that his political activities interrupted his gospel ministry. Yet even when his overt political activities were complete (i.e., after the Moral Majority), there is evidence that political concerns still interfered with this ministry. The sermon mentioned above is almost completely devoid of any gospel content.

There is little evidence that Falwell's political activity had any lasting effect. While in the short-run there seems to have been electoral consequences as a result of registering and getting new voters to the polls, the long-term goal of "turning America back to God" did not happen. One might argue that sinful policies such as support for homosexuality were slowed and support for Israel was strengthened. But these short-term victories did not turn into long-term political advantages.

Conclusion

It is impossible, of course, to know what would have happened if Falwell had stayed true to his convictions of 1965. What seems clear, however, is that Falwell's pivot to politics changed evangelicalism, and particularly dispensationalism, in

politicians but to be soul winners... (Falwell, "Ministers and Marches: 1965," 59).

the United States. Largely due to his efforts, many American churches and believers began to see political action as a *necessary activity of the church*.

A Proposed Solution

To be clear, I am not advocating a full-bored return to Darby's political ethic. His understanding of voting as an entanglement with the world and, therefore, a forbidden activity, seems extreme.⁷³ There is only slight justification for the claim that the Christian may have only worldly principles when engaging in any and all political activity. A believer may still walk in the Spirit when appearing before the city council requesting a building permit, for example. Additionally, the NT is silent on the issue of voting, evidently leaving it to the individual's conscience.

What I am advocating, however, is a return to the realization of the completely evil nature of the world system. The fact that it is controlled by Satan has ramifications for political action. For one must remember the world's political structures have foundations embedded within this evil system. As a result, using the world system in general, and politics in particular, to remove injustice or improve morality logically implies a non-Christian truth: There is something in the world system that can make the world a better place.⁷⁴ As a result, working within the world system to make the world a better place is a failed strategy, as

⁷³ Speaking of voting, Darby writes, "It seems to me so simple that the Christian, not being at all of this world, but united to Him who died and rose again, has no business to mix himself up with the most declared activity of the world, by an act which affirms his existence as belonging to the world, and his identification with the entire system which the Lord is about to judge ..." (J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby*, 3 vols. [Sunbury, PA: Believer's Bookshelf, 2007], 1:129–30).

⁷⁴ "If I am to set the world right I must join with the world, and cannot have any principles but theirs. Then I must give up Christianity: for they have none to be governed by.... If [the Christian] joins with an infidel he owns infidelity can set the world right" (Darby, *Collected Writings*, 1:129–130).

this study of Falwell indicates. There is no biblical (and almost no practical)⁷⁵ evidence that this will lead to success.

But more importantly, I am advocating that we change the object of our affections. Instead of living as flag-waving loyalists to these United States, I urge we take seriously the biblical injunction to live as aliens and strangers scattered in this present world (Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 1:1, 17; 2:11). During our sojourn here we should refocus our patriotic love away from this temporal (and all too wicked) nation, move our nationalist fervor to our true kingdom, a better country which has been promised for which we sometimes must suffer (2 Thess 1:5). I suggest that if we remove the American flag from our hearts and replace it with the flag of the coming kingdom—our true home—we would not only be more obedient as individuals, but our churches would be more vibrant and God would be more glorified.

Facing Our Fears

When one remembers that Falwell's position changed, not because of new exegetical insights but rather because of the horrors of the world around him, it seems prudent to evaluate our own personal convictions as well. What is stopping us from returning to the dispensationalism before Falwell (or even a return to the Falwell of 1965), sound exegesis of relevant passages or the pressures of a fallen world always in crisis around us? Stated more bluntly, are the political practices of the church

⁷⁵ Falwell's efforts in electing Republicans in general and Reagan in particular did not pay the dividends hoped for, at least in the area of abortion: "As a result of the opportunity granted President Reagan—and later, his successor, President Bush—to appoint presumably pro-life justices to the United States Supreme Court, anti-abortion interest centered on bringing to the Supreme Court cases that might be expected to overturn the unlimited abortion liberty granted by Roe. The most promising opportunity seemed to arise in the 1992 case, *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*, involving moderately restrictive anti-abortion regulations in Pennsylvania. To the surprise and shock of anti-abortionists, President Reagan's first Supreme Court appointee, Sandra Day O'Connor, joined another Reagan appointee, David Kennedy, and the Bush appointee Donald Souter, in reaffirming Roe" (Brown, "Killing Represents a Solution," 177).

at large based upon faith in clear biblical teaching or fear of what will happen if we do nothing?

Rome fell, according to Augustine, because of the profound wickedness of the populace. Even so, the fall of Rome did not cause rejoicing in God's people because of the wickedness that had been punished. No, the sack of Rome caused enormous grief and even weeping within the Christian community.⁷⁶ Yet it was all according to the plan of God. Perhaps the rapid descent into wickedness we see in this nation around us is merely the prelude to another great working in the plan of God. How are we to know? Understanding this limitation of our knowledge, it seems best to be about the explicit commands in God's word about the great responsibility of the believer, namely, to know Christ and to make him known.

While I am loath to take our theology from our hymnody, perhaps, just this once, we might do well to remember a hymn we used to sing: "This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget, That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ "After more than eleven hundred years of steady and triumphant progress, Rome had been taken and sacked. It is difficult for us to appreciate, impossible to overestimate, the shock which was thus communicated from centre to circumference of the whole known world. It was generally believed, not only by the heathen, but also by many of the most liberal-minded of the Christians, that the destruction of Rome would be the prelude to the destruction of the world. Even Jerome, who might have been supposed to be embittered against the proud mistress of the world by her inhospitality to himself, cannot conceal his profound emotion on hearing of her fall. 'A terrible rumor,' he says, 'reaches me from the West telling of Rome besieged, bought for gold, besieged again, life and property perishing together. My voice falters, sobs stifle the words I dictate; for she is a captive, that city which enthralled the world.'" (Marcus Dods, "The City of God: Translator's Preface," in *St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887], xii).

⁷⁷ Maltbie Davenport Babcock and Franklin L. Sheppard, "This Is My Father's World," in *Hymns for the Family of God* (Nashville: Paragon Associates, 1976), 6.