

Religious Influence on the 20th-Century Republican Party

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The politicization of evangelical Christianity, and its association with the Republican Party, was one of the most significant developments of the late 20th century. It began in the 1920s with the Scopes Monkey Trial and the work of Protestant revivalists (including Aimee Semple McPherson) and continued after World War II, when evangelical Christianity influenced Republican positions on the Cold War, consumerism, and identity politics.

This tutorial examines the development of the relationship between evangelical Christianity and the Republican Party in four parts:

1. The Four Square Gospel

Members of the “**nervous generation**” sought to preserve traditional values as society rapidly modernized during the 1920s.



TERM TO KNOW

Nervous Generation

Americans who reacted to the changes of the 1920s by reaffirming traditional customs and values. State laws that banned the teaching of evolution in public schools, like the Tennessee law that was the focus of the **Scopes Monkey Trial** in 1925, illustrated how Protestant fundamentalism and evangelicalism influenced American politics and society.



TERM TO KNOW

Scopes Monkey Trial

The trial of John Scopes, who was charged with teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school in violation of state law.

The highlight of the trial came when **Clarence Darrow**, who defended **John T. Scopes**, questioned the religious beliefs of **William Jennings Bryan**, an evangelical Christian who interpreted the Bible literally. Darrow's questions undermined Bryan's beliefs and highlighted his ignorance of modern science. Some evangelical Protestants considered Darrow's actions (and the trial) as an attack on their faith.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Clarence Darrow

Defense attorney in the Scopes Trial who sought to ridicule evangelical belief in biblical literalism and its rejection of modern science.

John T. Scopes

Biology teacher in Tennessee who was at the center of the controversy in the 1920s for teaching evolution in classrooms.

William Jennings Bryan

Evangelical Christian and prosecuting attorney in the Scopes Trial whose defense of biblical literalism earned him the praise of many Protestant evangelicals who saw the trial as an attack on their faith.

As a result of the publicity that the trial received, many Americans experienced a rekindling of their beliefs and a determination to defend them. Evangelical Protestantism flourished during the 1920s and thereafter by combining traditional messages with effective organization and new technology.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In the 1920s, evangelical ministers began to broadcast radio programs.

Perhaps no one used radio more effectively than **Aimee Semple McPherson**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Aimee Semple McPherson

Protestant evangelical minister in the 1920s whose Angelus Temple in California drew thousands of followers to hear her “Four Square Gospel” on the values of God, home, school, and government.

In addition to radio, McPherson anticipated the “megachurches” of the late 20th century when she opened a stadium-sized church in a suburb of Los Angeles in 1923. Angelus Temple, as it was named, was the location from which McPherson preached the “Four Square Gospel,” which included four key tenets: God, home, school, and government.



Aimee Semple McPherson preaching in 1923.



Angelus Temple, which opened in 1923, accommodated over 5,000 people. Note the cross at the top of the building, which was illuminated by bright neon light.

Like the other evangelists of her day, McPherson believed and taught that the Bible was the word of God—exact and complete. It was, therefore, flawless. She also preached Jesus Christ’s universal love and practiced faith healing. Above all, McPherson espoused the individual work ethic. If one had the ability and willpower to work hard, they could be rewarded with a blessed life.

➔ **EXAMPLE** McPherson was the first woman to operate a Christian radio station. As over 5,000 people packed into the Angelus Temple to hear her sermons, thousands more listened via the radio.



Aimee Semple McPherson stands (center) surrounded by assembled choirs in 1929.

2. “In God We Trust”

The popularity of Aimee Semple McPherson (and of her evangelical message) is an example of the influence that religion has had in the lives of Americans throughout the nation’s history. As the 20th century continued, prominent preachers drew large, enthusiastic audiences and, eventually, linked their religious message to political goals. In 1942, the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action was formed.



DID YOU KNOW

In a poll taken in 1959, almost 70% of Americans indicated that they belonged to a church or a synagogue.

The overwhelming majority of these respondents said that they belonged to a Protestant denomination.

There were two main reasons for the continuing influence of Christianity in the United States after World War II:

- The Cold War
- Consumerism and materialism

2a. The Cold War

Many Americans opposed communism because they saw it as being anti-religion. The Soviet government confiscated church property, taught atheism in schools, and denigrated religious expression. For these reasons, a number of American politicians and citizens referred to the Soviet Union as “godless.” At the same time, Americans continued to view the United States as a unique, exceptional nation—one empowered by God and called upon by the Declaration of Independence to promote liberty around the world.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation that added the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance.

2b. Consumerism and Materialism

As millions of Americans prospered following World War II, they began to consume a variety of nonessential products and services. Rock and roll music was one of them. As performed by Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and others, it celebrated young love, freedom, and rebellion.



A promotional photograph from the film *Jailhouse Rock*, starring Elvis Presley.

The major movie studios began to release films that involved these themes, and magazines advertised the latest fashions and cosmetics.

As consumption increased, Protestant ministers and other commentators warned that rampant consumerism would destabilize families and lead children astray. They pointed out that Americans were increasingly placing their material desires above their spiritual needs.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1955, Congress passed legislation that added the words “In God We Trust” to all U.S. currency. In this context of the Cold War and consumerism, evangelical preachers made steady gains. Among the most notable of them was **Billy Graham**.

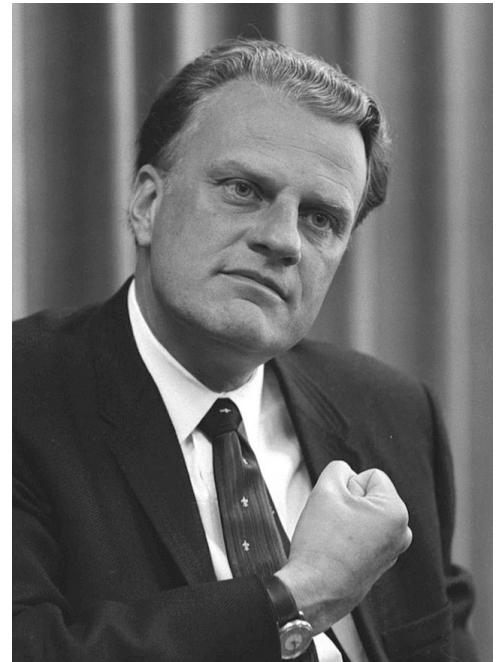


PEOPLE TO KNOW

Billy Graham

Christian evangelist whose sermons against the “godless” Soviet Union and the Christian foundations of America reached tens of thousands of White, middle-class, conservative Protestants in the 1950s.

Like Aimee Semple McPherson, Graham preached traditional Christian values with the help of modern technology. In the 1920s, McPherson connected with many of her followers via radio. Graham used television in addition to radio to reach his listeners.



➔ **EXAMPLE** During the late 1950s, Billy Graham appeared on a weekly television show, hosted a weekly radio

broadcast (*Hour of Decision*), and published a Christian magazine titled *Christianity Today*.

Television networks broadcast Graham’s revivals, also known as “crusades.” In his sermons, he effectively included themes related to the Cold War and rampant consumerism. For example, Graham stated the following to an audience of over 14,000 people in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1958:

Billy Graham, Revival Broadcast, 1958

“The political world is crying for help. Communism and democracy, the East and the West, are at each other’s throats with two diametrically opposed political ideologies. And the whole political world is saying, ‘Help us’ . . .

We are so taken up with our money-making, so taken up with the amusements and places and comforts of modern American life, that we don’t realize that the forces of evil are closing in round about us. Unless we can turn to God and have His help, we are done for as a nation and as a people.

I do not think that the Charlotte crusade ought to be ‘another crusade’ . . . I think it ought to be something different. I think it ought to be the beginning of a revival throughout the South that can sweep the nation. I think it ought to be something that will set an example to the world and say to the world, ‘We have an answer. We can solve our problems at the foot of the cross as a community, and we have found an answer to our individual needs in Jesus Christ.’”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What references to the Cold War are included in Graham’s sermon?
2. In what ways does Graham criticize post-World War II consumerism?

3. The Culture Wars

The Cold War and consumerism, combined with controversies related to **identity politics**, mobilized evangelical Protestants during the 1960s and 1970s.



TERM TO KNOW

Identity Politics

Political movements and actions to further the interests of a particular group based on culture, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

Like Billy Graham, evangelical ministers including **Jerry Falwell** and Pat Robertson preached that premarital sex, homosexuality, and drug use contributed to a decline in family values. Instead of supporting the **Great Society** and equal protection for all citizens, these ministers mobilized their listeners to oppose the sexual revolution.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Jerry Falwell

Virginian minister who founded the “Moral Majority” in 1979 to advance a “pro-life, pro-family, pro-America” agenda and who quickly aligned with the Republican Party to advance socially conservative policies in the United States after 1980.



TERM TO KNOW

Great Society

Lyndon Johnson's plan to eliminate poverty and racial injustice in the United States and to improve the lives of all Americans.



In addition to founding the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell built private schools and universities that offered a curriculum based on an evangelical Christian perspective. These institutions included Lynchburg Christian Academy and Liberty University in Virginia.

In a 1981 letter, Falwell claimed that Americans were under attack as a result of a “homosexual revolution.”

Based on his view that homosexuality was a sin, he argued that acceptance of gay rights would earn the United States the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah, the Biblical cities that God destroyed to punish the inhabitants for their sins.

Jerry Falwell, Evangelist

"I refuse to stop speaking out against the sin of homosexuality

Romans 1:24-28, Paul clearly condemns the sin of homosexuality. In verse 28, when a nation refuses to listen to God's standards of morality, the bible declares, 'God gave them over to a reprobate mind.'

Recently 250,000 homosexuals marched in the streets of San Francisco. Several weeks ago 75,000 more were marching in the streets of Los Angeles

It sounds a great deal like Sodom and Gomorrah. As I interpret Scripture, when a society becomes like Sodom and Gomorrah, it is not far from destruction

Practicing and flaunting gays are teaching children in classrooms today. They are preaching in some of our pulpits today, and they are exerting great influence on television networks today. They have plans for your children and mine. They have plans for turning America into a nation that will cause 'God to give us over to a reprobate mind.'"



THINK ABOUT IT

How would Falwell and his followers have interpreted the HIV/AIDS epidemic during the early 1980s?



DID YOU KNOW

In Christian theology, "reprobate" refers to a sinner who is destined for damnation.

Falwell's insistence that homosexuality was a sin and that the gay rights movement was leading the United States into a disaster of biblical proportions shows that evangelical Protestants were highly involved in the "culture wars" of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.



TERM TO KNOW

"Culture wars"

Social and political conflicts between conservative and liberal values in the United States during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

For these reasons, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and other evangelical organizations sought the assistance of Republicans associated with the **New Right** to advance their agenda. This relationship was solidified in the 1980s. Evangelical Christians, including Falwell's Moral Majority, were among the strongest supporters of Ronald Reagan's campaign for president in 1980. By this time, evangelical Christians had become an important political and social force in the United States.



TERM TO KNOW

New Right

A coalition of American conservatives, including business leaders, Southern Whites, intellectuals, and evangelical Christians, who organized in response to the socioeconomic changes of the 1960s and 1970s.

Billy Graham established close relationships with several presidents, including Ronald Reagan.



Billy Graham (left) meets with First Lady Nancy Reagan and President Ronald Reagan at the 1981 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC.

Jerry Falwell met with President Reagan on several occasions during the 1980s to discuss issues that concerned the Moral Majority.



Ronald Reagan (left) and Jerry Falwell (right) meet in the Oval Office in 1983.

Despite the support he received from conservative Christians, Reagan was not an ideologue. However, he did believe that traditional values were threatened by an immoral popular culture. Although Reagan did not actively seek the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and did not call for a constitutional amendment to protect prayer in schools, he and other Republicans cultivated the support of evangelical leaders during the 1980s.

4. Religious and Partisan Divides

By the early 1990s, many of the core beliefs of evangelical Protestantism—including the infallibility of the Bible, individual salvation, and U.S. exceptionalism—were shared by conservative Republicans.

During the 1992 presidential primaries, Republican incumbent George H. W. Bush was challenged by conservative **Pat Buchanan**. Although Buchanan failed to win the nomination, he spoke at the Republican National Convention in 1992, declaring that a “cultural war” for the “soul of America” was underway.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Pat Buchanan

Conservative activist and challenger for the Republican presidential nomination in the election of 1992 who opposed the socially liberal movements of the 1960s and 1970s and warned that premarital sex, homosexuality, and drug use were contributing to a decline in traditional family values.

According to Buchanan, the Democratic platform (i.e., the platform that Bush’s opponent, Bill Clinton, would implement if elected) “would impose on America: abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat units.”

“[T]hat’s not the kind of change America needs,” Buchanan continued. He went on to state that the core tenets of evangelicalism had been incorporated into the Republican platform, including the following:

- “The freedom to choose religious schools”
- Opposition to “the amoral idea that gay and lesbian couples should have the same standing in law as married men and women”
- Support “for right-to-life and for voluntary prayer in the public schools”
- Support for “communities to control the raw sewage of pornography that so terribly pollutes our popular culture”

These principles listed by Buchanan remained significant points of contention as the “culture wars” persisted into the 1990s and early 2000s. The desire of Christian evangelicals for local control of what they viewed as moral issues, as federal intervention to protect civil rights increased, complemented the Republican Party’s desire to limit federal involvement. Buchanan and conservative evangelicals found support for their beliefs in the Republican Party and disparaged Democrats for taking positions diametrically opposed to their own. The partisan divide was alive, well, and growing.



SUMMARY

Evangelical Protestantism has been involved in American society and government throughout the nation’s history. During the late 20th century, it became increasingly affiliated with the Republican Party. Factors including the Cold War, rampant consumerism, and the sexual revolution led many Americans to turn to religion and charismatic ministers like Billy Graham. In the context of the “culture wars,” Graham, Jerry Falwell, and others sought Republican support for their spiritual and moral vision. By the early 1990s, their efforts contributed to a growing divide between the Republican and Democratic parties.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Lyndon Johnson's plan to eliminate poverty and racial injustice in the United States and to improve the lives of all Americans.

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Political movements and actions to further the interests of a particular group based on culture, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

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Americans who reacted to the changes of the 1920s by reaffirming traditional customs and values.

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Scopes Monkey Trial

The trial of John Scopes, who was charged with teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school in violation of state law.



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