

Trend Toward

CHRISTIANS IN POLITICS

During the past decade we Christians have discovered that not only can we voice our opinions, but by actually getting involved in the political process we can have great influence.

By **BRUCE** and **MICHELE BUCKINGHAM**

In 1976, pollster George Gallup surprised the nation with the results of a survey on religion in America. According to the poll, a full one-third of adult Americans claimed to be "born again." Nearly half of all Protestants, and almost one-third of all Catholics, said they believed in a literal translation of the Bible—a doctrine once thought to have been held only by the most conservative Christians. The media reacted by calling 1976 the "Year of the Evangelical."

It was also in that year that America elected its first self-proclaimed "born-again" Christian president, Jimmy Carter. "If there are those who don't want to vote for me because I'm a deeply committed Christian, I believe they should vote for someone else," Carter stated during his campaign. But he didn't have to worry. Christians responded to his open profession of faith in large

numbers at the voting booth. Carter picked up 46 percent of the Protestant vote alone—more than had any other Democratic candidate since 1952 except Lyndon Johnson.

Despite a later disenchantment with the Carter administration, Christian voters—fundamentalists, Pentecostals and conservative evangelicals from a variety of denominations—emerged in the "Year of the Evangelical" as a vocal and powerful political force that has become increasingly important. Ronald Reagan's elections in 1980 and 1984, as well as the election of hundreds of officials on the local, state and federal levels across the country, have been attributable in large part to support from what has come to be known as the "New Christian Right."

What has brought about the tremendous surge of Christian participation in the political process in the last ten years?

Most observers agree that the major factor has been the alarming decline that Christians have witnessed in the nation's morality since World War II, epitomized by the 1962 Supreme Court decision which removed prayer from the public schools and the Court's 1973 decision to legalize abortion. Christians have watched from the sidelines as many of the United States' traditional Judeo-Christian values have been usurped by groups hostile to the establishment of any moral standard and bent on individual "rights"—the right to have an abortion, the right to live a gay lifestyle, the right to promote pornography.

"The last 10 years have had an electrifying influence on Christians awakening to the realization that we're losing our culture and our country to a small, anti-religious, secularist-oriented elite," says Tim LaHaye, president of the American Coalition for Traditional Values. "During



the previous 50 years, we Christians abdicated our governmental responsibilities and left government to the 'nice, civic-minded' people who, around the mid '60s and certainly in the '70s, turned out to be secular humanists—antagonistic towards Christianity, church and religion and opposed to traditional values.”

During this same period, however, the church probably tripled in size, LaHaye notes. Thus, when the 1976 Gallup poll was released, Christians were “struck with a strange paradox: at a time when Christianity was tripling in numbers, our influence on our culture was going in the opposite direction.”

This stark realization was a catalyst which brought large numbers of Christians into the political mainstream from a partly self-imposed exile. Up to that time, many fundamentalists, Pentecostals and other traditionally conservative Christian groups had tended to focus their attention on their heavenly citizenship. Politics was a “worldly” concern with which they didn’t want to dirty themselves. Others believed that the nearness of Christ’s second coming precluded any concerns other than that of evangelism and personal holiness.

In addition, many Christians had been lulled into an acceptance of the secularist assertion that the Constitution’s “separation of church and state” meant there was no role for religious-based arguments on political issues. Yet while Christians avoided mixing religion and politics, traditional values were rapidly being eroded underneath them by anti-religious groups who had no such bars to government access.

In the past ten years, however, Christians from a variety of religious backgrounds have become morally outraged over the United States’ humanist turn. Large numbers of believers have become convinced that the future of their children, and perhaps the nation, depends upon a return to government based on traditional moral values.

Clearly, the two issues that have sparked the greatest concern among Christians, and the ones on which there has been the highest degree of agreement and political activity, are abortion and prayer in public schools. The abortion issue, in particular, has struck a deep emotional chord among believers, who say they are incensed that the murder of unborn children is being protected by politi-

cians and the courts as an individual’s legal right. While not as emotional, the school prayer issue is nonetheless considered crucial because the banishment of prayer in schools has come to symbolize the country’s moral decline.

A strong consensus among Christians has also grown up in opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, pornography, gay rights and excessive government regulation of private Christian schools, as well as in support of tuition tax credits. In addition, many Christian agendas include broader questions of foreign and domestic policy, such as the U.S. military buildup and support for Israel.

As Christians have rallied behind major issues, they have become more aware of the inner workings of the government as well. They have learned how to lobby and what a political action committee is, and have become aware of the impact a change in justices in the Supreme Court will have on concerns.

While some political observers spoke of the evangelical vote as a “sleeping giant” prior to the mid-1970s, the movement’s snowballing effect has been a surprise to many both inside and outside the Christian community because it has been

What Others Say About Christians in Politics

“Much more than a moral majority, we need a redemptive minority of people who are willing to transcend differences to carry out the biblical imperative. The need today is for more sacrificing followers like Mother Teresa, who are willing to lay down their lives for one another rather than be power brokers in the ecclesiastical trappings.”

SENATOR MARK HATFIELD

Charisma/December 1985

“I’m reminded of a humorous story: an evangelical minister and a politician arrived at heaven’s gate one day together. St. Peter, after doing all the necessary formalities, took them where their quarters would be. He took them to a small single room with a bed, a chair and a table and said this was for the clergyman. The politician was a little worried about what might be in store for him. He couldn’t believe it then when St. Peter stopped in front of a beautiful mansion with loveley grounds and many servants and told him that these would be his quarters. He couldn’t help but ask, he said, ‘But wait, how—there’s something wrong— how do I get this mansion while that good and holy man only gets a single room?’ And St. Peter said, ‘You have to understand how things are up here. We’ve got thousands and thousands of clergy. You’re the first politician who ever made it.’

“I tell you there are a great many God-fearing, dedicated, noble men and women in public life, present company included. And, yes, we need your help to keep us ever mindful of the ideas and principles that brought us into the public arena in the first place. The basis of those ideas and principles is a commitment to freedom and personal liberty that, itself, is grounded in the much deeper realization that freedom prospers only where the blessings of God are avidly sought and humbly accepted.”

RONALD REAGAN

Charisma/October 1984

marked by a cooperation among believers whose denominational schisms could always be counted on to keep them apart in the past.

This growth and impact has not gone unnoticed by opponents. Norman Lear has organized People for the American Way, a group that blatantly opposes Reagan's ties to the evangelical community. Yet as the Christian influence increases, it should be expected that groups that have heretofore been unchecked will react.

**Christians previously
at odds with each
other on questions of
doctrine have become
increasingly aware
that the same Spirit is
working in all.**

Undoubtedly, the growth of the Charismatic movement across denominational boundaries in the last decade has helped lay the groundwork for this unprecedented cooperation and coming together of believers. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christians previously at odds with each other on questions of doctrine have become increasingly aware that the same Spirit is working in all. And many Charismatics have taken leadership roles within the burgeoning Christian political movement.

"For the first time, we see fundamentalists, evangelicals, Charismatics and people from various walks of life, theologically speaking, coming together to work for common political and theological aims and objectives. That's how we've had an impact, not by highlighting our differences but by highlighting those areas which we can agree upon," notes Roy Jones of the Moral Majority.

To harness this groundswell of Christian political concern, numerous Christian organizations, such as LaHaye's coalition for Traditional Values, the Christian Voice, the Christian Roundtable, Freedom Council and Concerned Women for America, have sprung up to fight for Christian morality and traditional values in government.

Perhaps the best known is the Moral Majority headed by Jerry Falwell, who

was recently called one of the twenty most influential men in America by *U.S. News and World Report*. Founded in 1979, the Moral Majority claims 6.5 million members and has played a leading role in encouraging Christians to go to the voting booth in the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections.

"In 1980, outside polls said that [the Christian Right] registered two million people, which gave Ronald Reagan a significant edge in many states. And in 1984, they said we offset two to one everything Jesse Jackson did in registering liberal Democrats across the country," Jones says. "It's all a matter of getting new people involved in the political process."

Falwell's organization is a prime example of the role that television evangelism has played in the politicization of the Christian community. In fact, the increase of Christian activity at the polls has run almost concurrently with the rise of the "electronic church." TV evangelists such as Falwell, Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network and Jim Bakker of the PTL Club frequently use their widely viewed programs to encourage political participation among Christians.

The efforts of Christian broadcasters, in fact, were credited for the tremendous success of the 1980 "Washington for Jesus" rally in which 200,000 Christians converged upon Washington, D.C. to pray for the country's return to moral values. Conceived by John Gimenez, pastor of Rock Church in Virginia Beach, the rally drew the support of several key TV preachers who promoted the event on their television shows.

"We have a message for the members of Congress and the president," Pat Robertson, the rally's co-chairman, told the crowd in 1980. "There is a group of people in America that love their God, and we're praying for our president. This nation must turn back to God. It is Christ or chaos."

Many observers, however, including some from the Christian community, are concerned that the message is becoming too closely aligned with a strictly partisan agenda. So far, the new political activism among believers has largely benefited the Republican Party, and Ronald Reagan in particular.

The leaning towards the Republican Party can be traced to the disillusionment many fundamentalists and other conservative evangelicals felt after the election of Jimmy Carter, who "betrayed" them

by advocating passage of the ERA, continued public funding for abortions and gay rights.

Further, while the Democratic Party has been building a constituency over the last decade among special interest groups such as feminists and gays, whose demands for "rights" pose a threat to traditional moral values, the Republican Party has appeared to embrace, in word at least, the cause of the Christian Right. Not only was Jerry Falwell a key speaker at the 1984 Republican convention in Dallas, but many expressly Christian positions were ultimately reflected in the national Republican Party platform.

Other charges have been leveled at the Christian political groups that have sprung up in the last few years. Many detractors believe that these groups are seeking to institute a "Christian nation" at the expense of other faiths whose expression is protected under the Constitution. Others object to the implication that the groups represent all Christians, when much diversity of political opinion continues to exist within the church.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt in the minds of Christians involved on the political battlefield that their growing influence is the work of God, and that in reversing the humanistic decline of the 1960s and early '70s they will continue to have an impact far into the future.

"There may have been some Christians who said back in the '70s and the initial Reagan campaign, 'We'll get involved, straighten out this town and go home,' " says Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals, which opened its Washington, D.C., office in 1942 and considers itself the "grandfather" of Christian political organizations. "But there's too much mature thinking out there about what our responsibility is to turn back now."

In fact, several factors point to an increased role for Christians in government in the future.

First, the influence that the united Christian voting bloc has been able to wield at the federal level has been encouraging. Not only has the Christian Right had an impact on the elections of presidents and members of Congress, but it has forced some progress on legislation favored overwhelmingly by Christians.

For example, a measure allowing voluntary student religious groups to meet in public high schools, the so-called "equal access" bill introduced by Christian congressman Don Bonker (D-

Washington), was signed into law last year after a very heavy Christian lobbying effort on Capitol Hill. A gauntlet of Christian leaders, including Pat Robertson and Loren Cunningham, rallied support. And while the House of Representatives fell short of voting to permit spoken prayer in public schools in 1984, it did succumb to Christian pressure in forbidding state and local educational agencies from prohibiting voluntary silent prayer by students.

**There is little
doubt in the minds of
Christians involved
on the political
battlefront that their
growing influence
is the work of God.**

Clearly, members of Congress—whose elective status makes them easily impressed by numbers—are becoming increasingly responsive to pressure from what they know is a large and influential new voting bloc. Continued and increased Christian activity is certain to bring about more victories at the federal level.

In a similar manner, state legislatures and local governments are responding to Christian concerns. Across the country, organized Christian efforts are being credited with the defeat of gay rights ordinances, the adoption of stricter laws against pornography and limits on state abortion funding.

Secondly, Christians are beginning to look beyond the voting booth and are running for elected offices themselves.

"The long range solution to the ills of America is to flood the electoral process with thousands of candidates committed to traditional values who will run for every imaginable office in the country, and use their governmental influence in a positive direction," says LaHaye.

Robert Partlow, executive director of Freedom Council, says, "Christians have decided that it's OK to get involved in politics. But too many times we get involved at the 11th hour, just before the election. We must start long before that."

While Christians *are* being elected in larger numbers at the federal and state levels, their positive influence is perhaps being evidenced best on the local level,

where government decisions have an immediate impact on daily living. Potter County in Western Pennsylvania, for example, has thrived under the leadership of a large number of Spirit-filled Christians elected to offices ranging from county commissioner to judge to chief of police.

"God said that when the righteous lead, the people prosper. This is actually what we've seen happen in Potter County," says Thomas Bowman, chairman of

Freedom Council has recently inaugurated a program to promote Christian involvement in the government process on the grass roots level.

the county commissioners. "In the five years that we've been on as commissioners here, we have never had to raise taxes, and in fact, last year we reduced them."

According to Bowman, the county has been so prosperous that it tried to return \$100,000 in surplus housing funds to the federal government—a virtually unprecedented act that created a great deal of confusion in the federal bureaucracy. Ultimately, federal officials told the county to keep the funds and use them for economic development.

Bowman says he expects to see a growing number of Christians elected to government offices in the coming years. "Christian politicians have been standing out there alone," he notes. "But now that Christians are becoming organized, there's a bloc of people that will stand with them."

Likewise, in Kentucky, Spirit-filled representatives have promoted specifically Christian causes. Legislation was passed permitting the Ten Commandments to be posted in public school classrooms. (However, opponents requested and gained a legal opinion from the attorney general which overturned the legislation. As a result many schools removed the Ten Commandments, but some remain posted). State Senator Gene Huff, who is also a Pentecostal preacher, and Representative Tom Riner have been successful in promoting legislation on local

issues and even on international causes. Displaying just how much influence the Christian vote has, a boycott of Romanian goods sold in Kentucky was once passed unanimously in the state legislature protesting religious persecution in that Eastern bloc nation.

Thirdly, the results of the comprehensive efforts being undertaken to educate Christians about political issues and their responsibilities in government have yet to be fully realized.

The National Association of Evangelicals, for example, holds annual federal seminars for college students and "Washington insight" briefings for pastors. Other groups, such as the Moral Majority and LaHaye's American Coalition for Traditional Values, sponsor conventions on political activism and how to get elected. LaHaye's wife, Beverly, president of Concerned Women for America, directs a unique "535 Program" which recruits and trains Christian women to lobby effectively Congress' 535 members on pro-family issues.

Freedom Council has recently inaugurated a program to promote Christian involvement in the government process on the grass roots level. Executive Director Partlow says, while the Freedom Council is involved in specific religious rights issues, it will not have a particular political agenda. Rather he said the group will instruct others with specific causes on how to become politically active—how to lobby and how to get elected to a political post.

According to Jones, the impact of the Christian political movement is "something that hasn't come close to peaking yet. What we're seeing is just the very, very tip of the iceberg."

LaHaye agrees. "The results of this massive education effort will show themselves in '88 and on into the 21st century."

"It takes a long time to realize some of the fruits. But all the things that people are doing nowadays will bear fruit down the road," says Cizik.

If that is the case, then Christians have much cause for optimism about the future of their communities, their states and their country. ■



Bruce Buckingham is Charisma's correspondent in Washington, D.C. He formerly served as a congressional legislative assistant. **Michele Buckingham** is Bruce's wife and a congressional legislative assistant.