

# The Washington Post

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## BORN AGAIN

THE NEW STRENGTH OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

### *Life of the Grand Old Party*

#### Coalition Energizes Into Another Political Phase

*First of Two Articles*

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CHESAPEAKE, Va.

**F**or Christians, perhaps the most dramatic moment in the Bible occurs when a group of women visits the tomb of Jesus and is met by an angel who asks: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

Compared with that, politics is a tiny thing. But the angel's question is echoing through political conversations across the country—in shocked tones, triumphal tones, horrified tones, depending on the speaker—when the topic turns to the Religious Right. Written off by most pundits as a spent force after the 1992 Republican

National Convention, the Religious Right today is very much among the living.

"Religious Right" has a hundred meanings, but the phrase can be a useful broom, sweeping up the millions of Americans who believe their religious faith demands vigorous conservative politics from the school board to the White House. In that broad sense, the Religious Right in recent months has out-organized every other force in the Republican Party, sponsored a rump attack on the governor of Minnesota, thwarted a liberal school curriculum in New York City, seen its candidate receive the party's U.S. Senate nomination in Virginia.

"The general church-going conservative public has become pretty disgusted with what's going on in America," said Michael Cromartie of the conservative Ethics and

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# Overtaking Other Forces In the GOP

COALITION, From A1

Public Policy Center. "Because of that, the Religious Right is growing; it has become a player."

The movement has not yet shown it can, by its own force alone, elect candidates in general elections. But the defeat of President George Bush "was not the end, just the end of the beginning" for the Religious Right, Cromartie said. And because movements need an enemy, President Clinton has become their energizing foe.

Though Clinton attends church more publicly than any recent chief executive, his Christianity is not the faith of the Right. His support of gay rights, abortion rights, feminism, sex education and government health reform—along with his personal "character issues"—has catalyzed the movement.

Renewed, the Religious Right has entered a new phase of political sophistication, on the airwaves, in the lobbies of Congress, at precinct meetings. It has not happened in lock step: Radical antiabortionists have resorted to violence; and Jerry Falwell, once the movement's leader, is now a marginal figure on the scene, tending his financially troubled ministry and promoting Clinton-conspiracy videotapes.

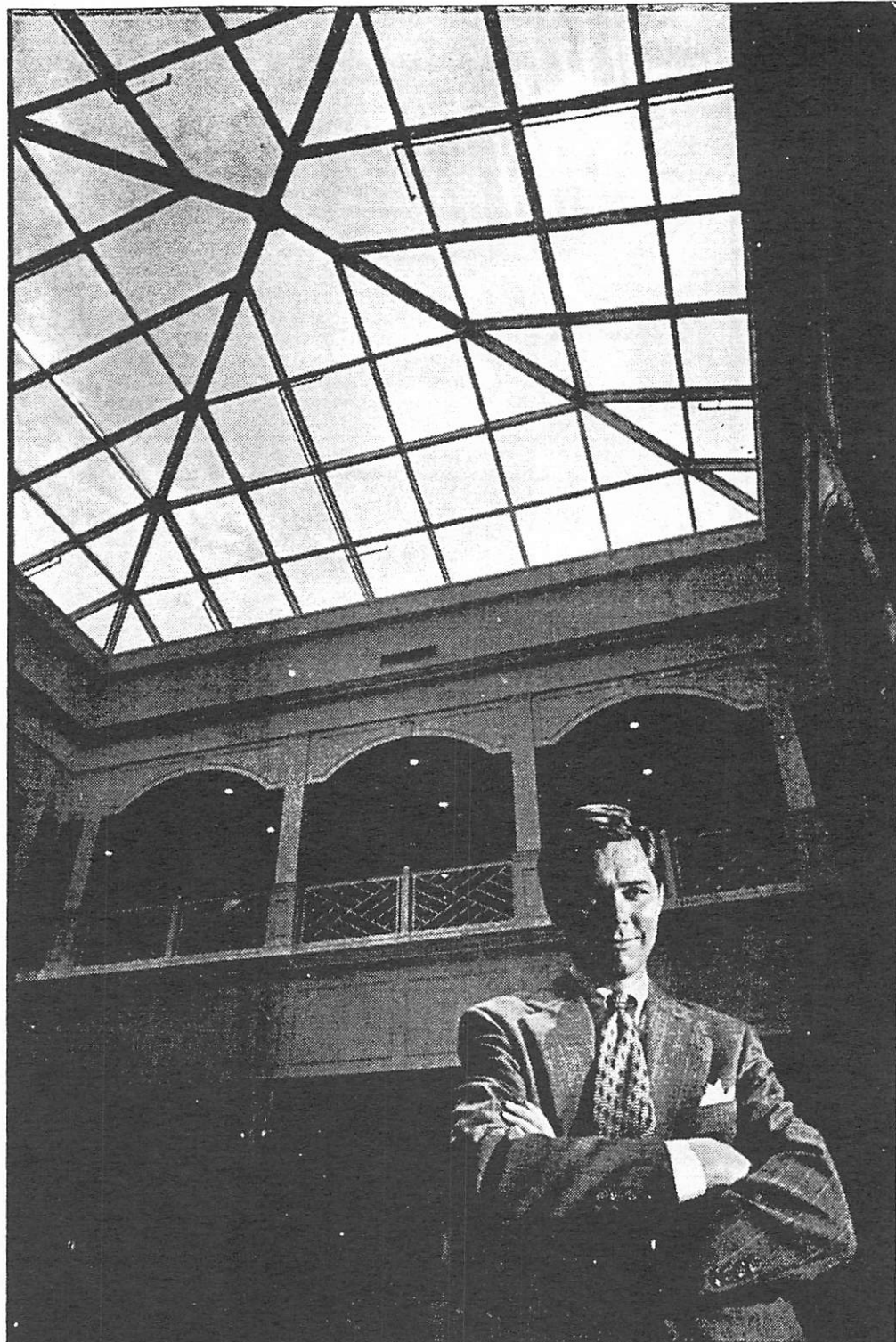
The political heart of the movement is the Christian Coalition, a sort of political action committee of the conservative faithful, raising money, registering voters, running phone banks, grading legislators. The coalition has stormed into the confusion of the post-Bush Republican Party to become its most powerful organization. This is the movement's future: recruiting at the grass roots, adept at high-tech politics, shaping its agenda for the mainstream.

To find a counterpart among the Democrats one would have to look to labor unions in terms of organization, to feminists in terms of driving the debate. No longer happy with a nod and a smile from GOP leaders, the coalition sparks love from some Republicans, fear from others. None can ignore it.

## Turbocharger of the Right

Ralph Reed, 33, executive director of the Christian Coalition, claims 1.3 million supporters in his data bank. The majority of those have given at least \$15 each in the past four months, he said. He estimates that the coalition's state affiliates dominate the GOP in a dozen states—including muscular members of the electoral college such as Texas and Florida—and are formidable influences in a dozen more. Independent observers do not dispute these figures.

By 1996, when Republicans choose their next presidential candidate, the coalition will likely be the turbocharger of the party's right. And that's fine with GOP moderates when the coalition is talking about low taxes and small government, increasingly frequent coalition causes. The same moderates fear disaster, however, on subjects such as abortion, feminism and church-state relations. Some centrists have begun to speak out and organize against the coalition.



BY MARTIN SMITH-RODDEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**Not just another face in the crowd:** *Christian Coalition executive director Ralph Reed manages an organization with a \$20 million budget and affiliates he estimates dominate the Republican Party in a dozen states, including Texas and Florida.*

"In politics, the power to divide is the power to destroy," Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) told the Iowa Republican convention earlier this summer. "The Far Right," he said, is "wrong philosophically, factually and pragmatically. . . . Philosophically, because it defies the basic American principle of separation of church and state that's older than the Constitution." The fac-

tual mistake, Specter continued, is in believing that Republicans will rally around the antiabortion position.

Specter is a founding member of the Republican Majority Coalition, formed as an alternative to the Religious Right; his Iowa speech was met by a rumble of boos from Christian Coalition members who dominate

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the GOP there. Look at Texas, Specter told his audience. Coalition members in Texas have risked splitting the party over abortion, he said, and the cost of hard-lining will be losing "a lot of votes." That, according to Specter, is the pragmatic mistake.

The face of the new Christian conservative movement belongs to Ralph Reed, and it is a face any mother could love. Many do, judging from the long line of supporters who waited for autographs or pictures with Reed after a recent speech. Reed looks fresh as a college sophomore, speaks with confidence in moderate tones and masks his hard head for politics with a smile. He is the George Stephanopoulos of the Right.

At his headquarters in an office park near Norfolk—near the center of the broadcasting empire of the Christian Coalition's founder, Pat Robertson—Reed insists that the mainstream has nothing to fear from today's religious conservatives.

"This organization is not a church," he said in a recent interview. "This organization is not seeking to legislate the articles of faith. This is an organization trying to legislate a family-friendly agenda." Reed spins off a list of priorities: strong families, safe streets, better schools, lower taxes, less government. He is the voice of conservative moderation.

And the Christian Coalition is just one element of a loose confederation of increasingly sophisticated groups doing for religious conservatives what more established groups have long done for liberals.

The American Center for Law and Justice, also founded by Pat Robertson, has a budget of over \$6 million and some 200 affiliated attorneys across the country, defending public school prayer and anti-abortion activists, among other causes. It aims to be the ACLU of the right; the American Civil Liberties Union's budget is about \$25 million.

Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America claims more members than the liberal National Organization for Women. The colossally successful James Dobson dispenses conservative child-rearing advice salted with tony dabs of political philosophy on his radio program, "Focus on the Family." Heard on 1,600 radio stations—only Paul Harvey has more outlets—and employing 1,000 people to transmit his tapes and books and magazines, Dobson commands an audience the avuncular lefty Phil Donahue would envy.

These religious conservative operations are not robots moving in formation. "They cooperate, but they all promote their own agendas. There's an intense competition for funds out there," said Cromartie. But each group's work tends to build up the broader cause. They support the same things, like school vouchers, public school prayer and abortion restrictions. They oppose the same things, like legal protections for homosexuals, liberal curricula in schools and most federal intervention in state and local government.

They mail and broadcast and publish and televise, and their constant repetition of themes fertilizes the rightward field.

Reed is reaping the harvest. In the public mind, the Religious Right is associated with social issues primarily, most of them "below the belt," in political parlance. But sex is secondary in Reed's vernacular; he and his lieutenants emphasize the wallet issues. Taxes and safety: That's where there's room to grow.

In speeches to the faithful, Reed talks about "protection for the unborn." At election time, though, the coalition often compromises on abortion, pushing stricter regulations and waiting periods rather than outright prohibitions.

Nor does Reed talk much about homosexuality or pornography, and you will never hear him pushing Religious Right themes from the 1980s like "creation science," the purported conspiracy for one-world government, or America as a "Christian nation."

"Church and state are separate issues," Reed said, acknowledging that one of the biggest problems the Christian Coalition faces is the sense of many Ameri-

cans that religious conservatives want to write their theology into the statute books. "What does it matter who I think is going to heaven?"

### Comparing Voting Records

At the Christian Coalition's humble offices, the steady thrum of activity certainly seems to have more to do with precincts than paradise. In one room, a group of women sit around a circular table, headsets on, fingers tapping swiftly over telephone key-pads. They were, one recent day, calling voters in a South Carolina congressional district, identifying conservatives and urging them to register for the upcoming primary.

Come November, the women at the table will be overwhelmed. Whenever that happens, the coalition subcontracts the overflow to a phone-bank-for-hire.

Next door at coalition headquarters, employees huddle over letter-opening machines. The machines slit the envelopes; the envelopes yield the fruits of constant mass mailings. This particular day, the envelopes contain preprinted cards urging senators to oppose a bill that might impose new regulations on religious broadcasters. The cards go into boxes, the boxes go into stacks, the stacks go into walls of cards awaiting delivery to Capitol Hill.

Another cubbyhole: Here a graphic designer peers into a computer screen preparing neon yellow post-cards. The cards are mailed in hundreds of political races, from city council to U.S. Senate. Candidate A and Candidate B, side by side, with columns of type comparing their voting records. The coalition grades on taxes, the balanced budget amendment, term limits, federal funding for abortions, gays in the military, health care reform, school vouchers and gun control.

It favors the Right straight down the line: no on taxes, yes on balanced budget, yes on term limits, no on abortion, no on gay rights, no on health care, yes on vouchers, no on gun control, and if a voter misses the point there are long articles on every subject in Christian American, the coalition's monthly newspaper, which claims a circulation of 700,000.

Its mailing list grows constantly. If you subscribe to Christianity Today, Charisma, or Guideposts, you will get the coalition's mail because it buys the subscription lists of those Christian magazines. If you subscribe to Sojourner's or the National Catholic Reporter—liberal Christian publications—don't hold your breath.

If you bought a new appliance recently, and found a little questionnaire in the cardboard box, you may be joining the coalition's mailing list soon. About 2.5 million people each year answer these surveys, according to Reed, and the coalition buys the names and addresses of everyone who answers "yes" to the question: "Do you read the Bible daily?"

More than 60,000 churches are entered in the coalition's computers, churches where conservative pastors have offered to distribute coalition voter guides or preach a sermon in favor of turning out on Election Day. And the coalition has hundreds of names on its "press list"—mainstream media types as well as talk show hosts throughout America's vast radio Babel—all accessible through the "burst fax" machines in the Chesapeake office park.

### Era Ended in the 1920s

Computers, direct mail, phone banks, faxes: Through these techniques and others of state-of-the-art politics, the Christian Coalition has built its list of donors and subscribers and rally-attendees from 57,000 in 1990 to a projected 1.5 million by the end of the year. Reed's budget has more than doubled since 1992, to \$20 million this year, and in the past 12 months, he said, his group has dispersed 40 million pieces of mail.

With his doctorate in history, Reed takes the long view. The Christian Coalition—and religious conser-

vativism in general—are the second generation in a gradual political maturing, he said. In the colleges and think tanks, scholars generally agree.

Socially conservative, Bible-based Christians were familiar forces in American politics at the turn of the century. The Women's Christian Temperance Union was out banning booze. William Jennings Bryan was the dominant force in the Democratic Party, unhindered by his bedrock faith that every word in the Bible was literally true.

That era came to an end somewhere around 1925, the year Bryan was humiliated by Clarence Darrow despite winning a conviction in the Scopes "monkey" trial. Fundamentalist Protestants turned away from politics, and kept their backs mostly turned for some 50 years. They were less likely even to vote than "mainline" Protestants, Catholics and Jews.

Along came Jerome Kurtz, Internal Revenue Service commissioner under President Carter. In August 1978, Kurtz announced plans to strip the tax exemptions from private schools—many of them church schools—that had been founded during the backlash against court-ordered public school desegregation.

Kurtz had "kicked the sleeping dog," according to Richard A. Viguerie, the direct-mail wizard who immediately began building the outraged parents and administrators of the targeted schools into a conservative political force. Robert Billings organized a campaign to keep the exemptions, and after he won that fight helped Jerry Falwell form the Moral Majority.

"Jerome Kurtz has done more to bring Christians together than any man since the Apostle Paul," Billings said in 1979. For a brief moment, the conservative Christians seemed like a loosed leopard in the political jungle. Ronald Reagan paid court; at a Religious Roundtable meeting in 1980, he noted that the ministers might not feel comfortable endorsing a candidate. But the applause was thunderous when Reagan added: "I endorse you."

### Moral Majority Is Disbanded

That was the first generation, according to Reed, and its problem was that the Moral Majority "was a preacher-led organization." It was not organized at the grass roots. It could not generate the thousands of phone calls and postcards to Congress, let alone write the state party platforms.

"Jerry Falwell seemed to think if the Moral Majority could help change the man at the top, everything would fall into place. Reagan proved that it wasn't going to work like that," said Michael Cromartie. Having pushed hard for Religious Right votes, Reagan left the movement's social agenda on the back burner.

By the end of the 1980s, Falwell's ministry was in financial trouble and the Moral Majority was disbanded. But something important had been accomplished, according to John Green, an expert on the Religious Right at the University of Akron. "They convinced a lot of evangelical Christians that they had to be involved in politics," said Green, "and they broke down a lot of old theological divisions on the Protestant right: 72,000 ministers, people who had never spoken to each other before, came together."

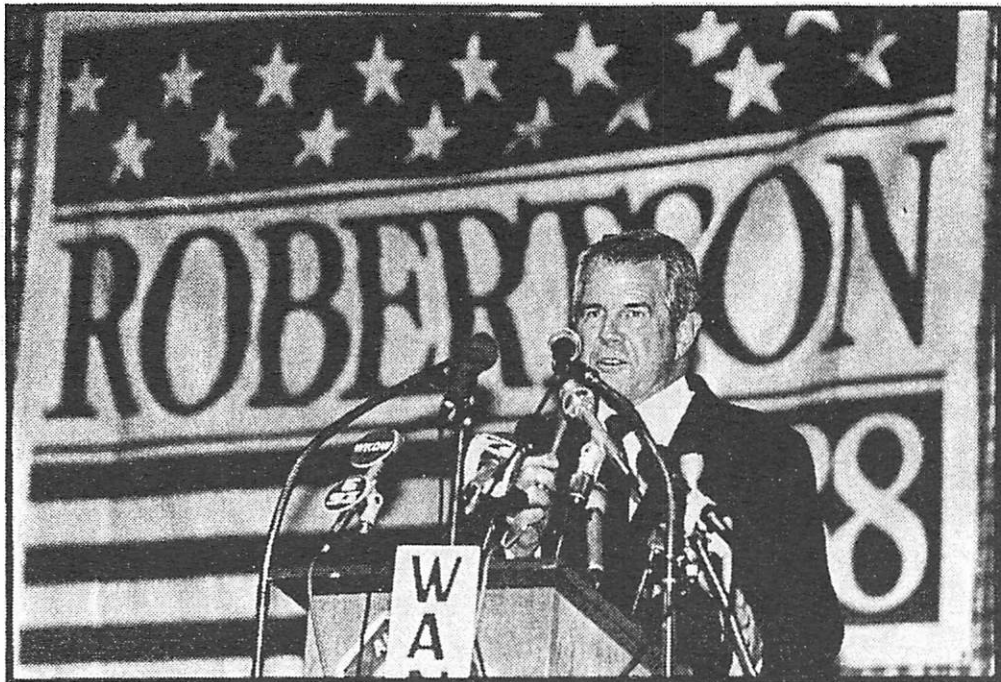
Pat Robertson took the next step. The most formidable figure in the history of religious broadcasting (the son of a U.S. senator, host of "The 700 Club," chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network, founder of The Family Channel), Robertson ran for president in 1988. Working the grass roots with savvy and confidence, he defeated the eventual Republican nominee, Vice President George Bush, in the Iowa caucuses. Though his campaign soon fizzled, Robertson had shown that religious conservatives could play in the political big leagues.

From the remnants of the Robertson campaign, the Christian Coalition was born. Robertson's campaign donor list produced the coalition's first backers, and Robertson organizers became some of the group's first field workers.



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The New Strength of the Religious Right



THE WASHINGTON POST

**At work in the fields of big league politics: Pat Robertson campaigns for the 1988 GOP presidential nomination. Robertson defeated Vice President George Bush in the Iowa caucuses before his bid fizzled out but he paved the way for the Christian Coalition.**

# At Grass Roots, on Air, in Lobbies, Movement Becoming Political Force

Robertson did for religious conservatives what Barry Goldwater did for secular conservatives, according to Reed. Political movements have to run and lose if they want to learn what it takes to win, he said. Robertson "was a midwife that took what was largely a social protest movement and transformed it into a political movement that elects candidates."

### One-Third of the GOP Base

But it isn't clear, not yet, how many candidates the coalition can actually elect.

Numerous voter exit polls over the past decade suggest that conservative Christians represent roughly a third of the Republican base vote. That is too much power for the party to ignore, but not enough to dominate the political center. Of the 26 congressional votes graded on the Christian Coalition's official scorecard this year, the group supported the losing position more than two-thirds of the time.

And the coalition may be riding a wave more than stirring one up. A recent poll found that the "moral climate" of America—collapsing families, rising crime, failing schools, spiritual decay—has become far more threatening to voters polled than the economy.

Thus some of the coalition's biggest "victories" have come when the group spotted public outrage and hopped aboard. It happened in New York City, where the coalition caught wind of a proposed curriculum that included, among many other aspects, elementary school books supportive of households headed by homosexuals.

Though opponents of the new curriculum won a majority of the New York School Board races, many analysts believe they would have done so without the co-

alition's support. The races were too easy to be a barometer.

Likewise, conservative Christian Mike Huckabee's election as lieutenant governor of Arkansas last year could be chalked up to anti-Clinton sentiment, and the same could be said of Christian bookstore owner Ron Lewis's win in a special congressional election in Kentucky this year.

All these results suggest, though, that being aligned with the Religious Right is no longer an albatross. In Virginia last year, Michael P. Farris ran for lieutenant governor with Religious Right credentials flying; though he lost as his two Republican ticket mates were elected, he got more votes than the Democratic candidate for governor.

The Christian Coalition's unquestioned victories have been inside the Republican Party. Reed insists that the coalition is nonpartisan—the group has put its influence behind a few conservative Democrats in primary elections this year—but the trumpeting brass elephant in the organization's conference room blares the reality. So far, this is a Republican outfit.

Within the party, the coalition's biggest project has been trying to show that it can compromise for the greater glory of conservatism, especially on abortion. The group has backed abortion moderates such as Republican Sens. Paul Coverdell in Georgia and Kay Bailey Hutchison in Texas. In Washington state, the coalition had the votes to choose anyone for GOP chairman, but accepted Ken Eikenberry, a traditional Republican, rather than pushing an abortion absolutist.

"The people on the Religious Right more and more recognize that the principles of self-reliance and personal responsibility are the bond that can bring the party together," Eikenberry said. "The overarching issue is uniting people more than the single issues divide them."

### Room to Grow in Suburbs

How far can the Christian Coalition move toward the middle, though, without losing its base of support on the socially conservative right? The future of the movement hangs on that question, the perennial question facing any movement in a two-party democracy. As John Green observes, there are a lot of votes across America that might conceivably go to the coalition, but winning them will take flexibility.

By Reed's rough estimate, membership in the Christian Coalition is roughly 40 percent Baptist and 20 percent Pentacostal or Charismatic; another 20 percent comes from the "mainline" Protestant churches; this includes Reed, raised a Methodist, now a conservative Presbyterian. The rest are Catholics and nondenominational Christians.

The good news for the coalition is that it has room to continue growing among Pentacostals and the nondenominational churches now flourishing in America's middle-class white suburbs.

But Reed has a larger ambition, and here the outlook is less promising. He wants to attract substantial numbers of Catholics and African Americans. Roman Catholic church leaders share the Religious Right's opposition to abortion, but there is huge gap between conservative Protestants and Catholic bishops on economics and the role of government.

"Their laundry list of issues is not our list," said J. Mark Brinkmoeller, director of the office of social justice for the Catholic Diocese of Des Moines.

### Planning to Woo Black Voters

African Americans, as a group, are quite conservative on social issues; for that reason, Reed has hopes. "One of the biggest blotches on our movement, historically, is that we have not been racially diverse," Reed said. But strong differences exist in the theology of black and white Protestant churches, especially among the sects where the coalition is strongest. And African Americans overwhelmingly identify with the Democratic Party. Serious gains among black voters might be more than a generation away, Reed admits.

Recent history shows two paths for the Christian Coalition and its religious conservative backers. In 1972, the leftward wing of the Democratic Party took control and nominated Sen. George McGovern (S.D.) for president. Disaster followed at the polls, and in the ensuing 20 years the only Democrats to reach the White House had to prove to voters that they were untainted by the liberal fringe. By contrast, in 1980 and 1984, Ronald Reagan energized his rightward base while making big gains in the center among southern and suburban Democrats and independents.

Some moderate Republicans fear the Christian Coalition will McGovernize the party; Ralph Reed wants to Reaganize it. He's taking it one step at a time.

"Politics is not a sprint, it's a marathon," Reed said. "In the long train of history, this movement is still in early adolescence."

NEXT: Religion and politics

**BORN AGAIN***The New Strength of the Religious Right***UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT**

**G**rouped together under one roof are a variety of religious beliefs and outlooks that have two major things in common—they are Christian and they are conservative:

- **FUNDAMENTALIST** Originally a Protestant movement of the early 20th century, taking its name from a series of pamphlets called "The Fundamentals." The term has come to mean a belief that the Bible is literally true (although many prophecies are understood to use metaphorical descriptions of future events). In politics, this view typically means that biblical laws, values and judgments remain valid and binding for today's society. A person can be "fundamentalist" in almost any faith, but the term continues to be applied most commonly to certain Protestants.
- **BORN-AGAIN** A phrase taken from the Gospel of John: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." All Christians subscribe to some form of this view, expressed for many in the moment of baptism. In recent decades, the term has come to describe people who have experienced a specific moment at which they "received Christ" and dedicated themselves to Him. This common usage emphasizes the believer's personal relationship to God as opposed to a commitment to a denomination, and often includes a fundamentalist view of the Bible as a guide for one's life.  
(Many pollsters use "born-again" and "fundamentalist" to estimate roughly the number of religious conservatives by counting the number of people who say they are both. This is an imperfect guide for many reasons. Many African Americans, for example, are "born-again" and "fundamentalist" but do not
- vote for conservatives. Many Roman Catholics and a smaller number of Jews and Muslims vote conservative but would not describe themselves by either term.)
- **PENTECOSTAL** From the Pentecost described in the Book of Acts, when the Holy Spirit filled Jesus's apostles and gave them extraordinary powers of speech and healing. This term describes a view of Christianity, found among both African American and white Protestants, emphasizing the presence of the Holy Spirit guiding the lives of believers. One's nearness to God is often shown by becoming "filled with the Spirit." Pentecostals and fundamentalists historically have engaged in bitter theological disputes.
- **CHARISMATIC** A broad term encompassing the Pentecostal view but extending also into Catholic and mainline Protestant churches. It refers to the Charismatic Renewal movement, which began in 1958 in an Episcopal church in California. The movement called for a deepening of spiritual experience over liturgy and dogma. To be charismatic does not suggest a particular political view.
- **NONDENOMINATIONAL** A rapidly growing phenomenon among Protestants. This describes congregations built around a particular minister, a shared neighborhood, a common social and religious outlook, but not affiliated with any larger sect. Nondenominational Christians can be a particularly potent political force because they are free to act on their own views and choose causes without concern for a bishop or governing body.
- **MAINLINE** A term often used loosely to describe the structured denominations traditionally thought of as defining Protestantism; for example, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians and Congregationalists. These churches have been declining in membership over the past 40 years while fundamentalist, Pentecostal and nondenominational sects have been growing. The largest single Protestant group now, by far, is the Southern Baptist Convention, which is not considered a "mainline" church.
- **EVANGELICAL** Used, since about 1800, to describe Protestants dedicated to spreading a pious and even puritan Christianity among nonbelievers and the faithful gone soft. But in a broader sense, this term applies to all Christians who proclaim or witness to their faith; for this reason, the term no longer signifies any specific theological or social views. The related term "evangelist" typically applies to anyone preaching Christianity to large and changing groups of listeners.
- **CATHOLIC** Generally a shorthand term for Roman Catholics, who believe that Jesus instituted a structure for the Christian church when he commissioned his apostles. Over the centuries, this structure has developed, from the Bible and from the "nature" of Creation, a complex system of beliefs. Maintaining and teaching these beliefs is the responsibility of the bishops, at whose head is the bishop of Rome, the pope. The pope and the American bishops take pains not to ally themselves with any political party, and whether Catholic belief supports a conservative or liberal position depends on the issue.

—David Von Drehle