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# The Evangelical Crackup

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The hundred-foot white cross atop the Immanuel Baptist Church in downtown Wichita, Kan., casts a shadow over a neighborhood of payday lenders, pawnbrokers and pornographic video stores. To its parishioners, this has long been the front line of the culture war. Immanuel has stood for Southern Baptist traditionalism for more than half a century. Until recently, its pastor, Terry Fox, was the Jerry Falwell of the Sunflower State — the public face of the conservative Christian political movement in a place where that made him a very big deal.

With flushed red cheeks and a pudgy, dimpled chin, Fox roared down from Immanuel's pulpit about the wickedness of abortion, evolution and homosexuality. He mobilized hundreds of Kansas pastors to push through a state constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, helping to unseat a handful of legislators in the process. His Sunday-morning services reached tens of thousands of listeners on regional cable television, and on Sunday nights he was a host of a talk-radio program, "Answering the Call." Major national conservative Christian groups like Focus on the Family lauded his work, and the Southern Baptist Convention named him chairman of its North American Mission Board.

For years, Fox flaunted his allegiance to the Republican Party, urging fellow pastors to make the same "confession" and calling them "sissies" if they didn't. "We are the religious right," he liked to say. "One, we are religious. Two, we are right."

His congregation, for the most part, applauded. Immanuel and Wichita's other big churches were seedbeds of the conservative Christian activism that burst forth three decades ago. In the 1980s, when theological conservatives pushed the moderates out of the Southern Baptist Convention, Immanuel and Fox were both at the forefront. In 1991, when Operation Rescue brought its "Summer of Mercy" abortion protests to Wichita, Immanuel's parishioners leapt to the barricades, helping to establish the city as the informal capital of the anti-abortion movement. And Fox's confrontational style packed ever more like-minded believers into the pews. He more than doubled Immanuel's official membership to more than 6,000 and planted the giant cross on its roof.

So when Fox announced to his flock one Sunday in August last year that it was his final appearance in the pulpit, the news startled evangelical activists from Atlanta to Grand Rapids. Fox told the congregation that he was quitting so he could work full time on "cultural issues." Within days, The Wichita Eagle reported that Fox left under pressure. The board of deacons had told him that his activism was getting in the way of the Gospel. "It just wasn't pertinent," Associate Pastor Gayle Tenbrook later told me.

Fox, who is 47, said he saw some impatient shuffling in the pews, but he was stunned that the church's lay leaders had turned on him. "They said they were tired of hearing about abortion 52 weeks a year, hearing about all this political stuff!" he told me on a recent Sunday afternoon. "And these were deacons of the church!"

These days, Fox has taken his fire and brimstone in search of a new pulpit. He rented space at the Johnny Western Theater at the Wild West World amusement park until it folded. Now he preaches at a Best Western hotel. "I don't mind telling you that I paid a price for the political stands I took," Fox said. "The pendulum in the Christian world has swung back to the moderate point of view. The real battle now is among evangelicals."

**Fox is not the only conservative** Christian to feel the heat of those battles, even in — of all places — Wichita. Within three months of his departure, the two other most influential conservative Christian pastors in the city had left their pulpits as well. And in the silence left by their voices, a new generation of pastors distinctly suspicious of the Republican Party — some as likely to lean left as right — is beginning to speak up.

Just three years ago, the leaders of the conservative Christian political movement could almost see the Promised Land. White

evangelical Protestants looked like perhaps the most potent voting bloc in America. They turned out for President George W. Bush in record numbers, supporting him for re-election by a ratio of four to one. Republican strategists predicted that religious traditionalists would help bring about an era of dominance for their party. Spokesmen for the Christian conservative movement warned of the wrath of "values voters." James C. Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, was poised to play kingmaker in 2008, at least in the Republican primary. And thanks to President Bush, the Supreme Court appeared just one vote away from answering the prayers of evangelical activists by overturning Roe v. Wade.

Today the movement shows signs of coming apart beneath its leaders. It is not merely that none of the 2008 Republican front-runners come close to measuring up to President Bush in the eyes of the evangelical faithful, although it would be hard to find a cast of characters more ill fit for those shoes: a lapsed-Catholic big-city mayor; a Massachusetts Mormon; a church-skipping Hollywood character actor; and a political renegade known for crossing swords with the Rev. Pat Robertson and the Rev. Jerry Falwell. Nor is the problem simply that the Democratic presidential front-runners — Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Senator Barack Obama and former Senator John Edwards — sound like a bunch of tent-revival Bible thumpers compared with the Republicans.

The 2008 election is just the latest stress on a system of fault lines that go much deeper. The phenomenon of theologically conservative Christians plunging into political activism on the right is, historically speaking, something of an anomaly. Most evangelicals shrugged off abortion as a Catholic issue until after the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision. But in the wake of the ban on public-school prayer, the sexual revolution and the exodus to the suburbs that filled the new megachurches, protecting the unborn became the rallying cry of a new movement to uphold the traditional family. Now another confluence of factors is threatening to tear the movement apart. The extraordinary evangelical love affair with Bush has ended, for many, in heartbreak over the Iraq war and what they see as his meager domestic accomplishments. That disappointment, in turn, has sharpened latent divisions within the evangelical world — over the evangelical alliance with the Republican Party, among approaches to ministry and theology, and between the generations.

The founding generation of leaders like Falwell and Dobson, who first guided evangelicals into Republican politics 30 years ago, is passing from the scene. Falwell died in the spring. Paul Weyrich, 65, the indefatigable organizer who helped build Falwell's Moral Majority and much of the rest of the movement, is confined to a wheelchair after losing his legs because of complications from a fall. Dobson, who is 71 and still vigorous, is already planning for a succession at Focus on the Family; it is expected to tack toward the less political family advice that is its bread and butter.

The engineers of the momentous 1980s takeover that expunged political and theological moderates from the Southern Baptist Convention are retiring or dying off, too. And in September, when I called a spokesman for the ailing Presbyterian televangelist D. James Kennedy, another pillar of the Christian conservative movement, I learned that Kennedy had "gone home to the Lord" at 2 a.m. that morning.

Meanwhile, a younger generation of evangelical pastors — including the widely emulated preachers Rick Warren and Bill Hybels — are pushing the movement and its theology in new directions. There are many related ways to characterize the split: a push to better this world as well as save eternal souls; a focus on the spiritual growth that follows conversion rather than the yes-or-no moment of salvation; a renewed attention to Jesus' teachings about social justice as well as about personal or sexual morality. However conceived, though, the result is a new interest in public policies that address problems of peace, health and poverty — problems, unlike abortion and same-sex marriage, where left and right compete to present the best answers.

The backlash on the right against Bush and the war has emboldened some previously circumspect evangelical leaders to criticize the leadership of the Christian conservative political movement. "The quickness to arms, the quickness to invade, I think that caused a kind of desertion of what has been known as the Christian right," Hybels, whose Willow Creek Association now includes 12,000 churches, told me over the summer. "People who might be called progressive evangelicals or centrist evangelicals are one stirring away from a real awakening."

The generational and theological shifts in the evangelical world are turning the next election into a credibility test for the conservative Christian establishment. The current Republican front-runner in national polls, Rudolph W. Giuliani, could hardly be less like their kind of guy: twice divorced, thrice married, estranged from his children and church and a supporter of legalized abortion and gay rights. Alarmed at the continued strength of his candidacy, Dobson and a group of about 50 evangelical

Christians leaders agreed last month to back a third party if Giuliani becomes the Republican nominee. But polls show that Giuliani is the most popular candidate among white evangelical voters. He has the support, so far, of a plurality if not a majority of conservative Christians. If Giuliani captures the nomination despite the threat of an evangelical revolt, it will be a long time before Republican strategists pay attention to the demands of conservative Christian leaders again. And if the Democrats capitalize on the current demoralization to capture a larger share of evangelical votes, the credibility damage could be just as severe.

“There was a time when evangelical churches were becoming largely and almost exclusively the Republican Party at prayer,” said Marvin Olasky, the editor of the evangelical magazine World and an informal adviser to George W. Bush when he was governor. “To some extent — we have to see how much — the Republicans have blown it. That opportunity to lock up that constituency has vanished. The ball now really is in the Democrats’ court.”

**I covered the Christian conservative** movement for The New York Times during the 2004 election, at the moment of its greatest triumph. To the bewilderment of many even in the upper reaches of his own party, Karl Rove bet President Bush’s re-election on boosting the conservative Christian turnout, contending that Bush lost the popular vote in 2000 because four million of those voters stayed home. President Bush missed few opportunities to remind evangelicals that he was one of them — and they got the message.

I bowed my head in a good number of swing-state churches in 2004. I saw the passion Bush aroused among theologically orthodox Protestants. And I got to know many of the most influential conservative Christian leaders, most of whom threw themselves into urging their constituents to the polls.

Now, as the 2008 campaign heated up in the months before the first primaries, I wondered how the world was looking from the pulpits and pews. And so I went to Wichita, as close as any place to the heart of conservative Christian America. Wichita has a long history of religious crusades. A hundred years ago, Carrie Nation made her name smashing up Wichita’s bars. More recently, the presence of Dr. George Tiller, a specialist in late-term abortions, has kept anti-abortion passions high, attracting Operation Rescue to Wichita for the Summer of Mercy protests in 1991. Two years later, a lone activist shot and wounded Dr. Tiller. Evolution, the flash point that split mainline and evangelical Protestants in the early 20th century, is still hotly debated in Wichita. The Kansas school board has reversed itself on the subject again and again in recent years.

At the same time, Wichita is also a decent proxy for plenty of other blue-collar but socially conservative places like Allentown, Pa., and Columbus, Ohio — the swing districts of the swing states that decide elections. A center of aerospace manufacturing, Wichita was a union town and a Democratic stronghold for much of the last century. But all that changed when the conservative Christian movement took root in its suburban megachurches three decades ago, turning theological traditionalists into Republican activists. That story was the centerpiece of the liberal writer Thomas Frank’s 2004 book, “What’s the Matter With Kansas?” He might have called it “What’s the Matter With Wichita?”

I arrived just in time for the annual Fourth of July Patriotic Celebration at the 7,000-member Central Christian Church, where Independence Day is second only to Christmas. Thousands of people drove back to the church Sunday evening for a pageant of prayers, songs, a flag ceremony and an American history quiz pitting kids against their parents. “In God We Still Trust” was the theme of the event. “You place your hand on this Bible when you swear to tell the truth,” two men sang in the opening anthem.

“There’s no separation; we’re one nation under Him.”

“There are those among us who want to push Him out And erase

His name from everything this country’s all about.

From the schoolhouse to the courthouse, they are silencing

His word Now it’s time for all believers to make our voices heard.”

Later, as a choir in stars-and-stripes neckties and scarves belted out “Stars and Stripes Forever,” a cluster of men in olive military fatigues took the stage carrying a flag. They lifted the pole to a 45-degree angle and froze in place around it: a re-enactment of the famous photograph of the American triumph at Iwo Jima. The narrator of a preceding video montage had

already set the stage by comparing the Iwo Jima flag raising to another long-ago turning point in a "fierce battle for the hearts of men" — the day 2,000 years ago when "a heavy cross was lifted up on top of the mount called Golgotha."

A battle flag as the crucifixion: the church rose to a standing ovation.

**There was one conspicuous** omission from the Patriotic Celebration: any mention of President Bush or the Iraq war. The only reference to the president was a single image in a video montage. Bush was standing with Donald Rumsfeld, head bowed at a grave in Arlington National Cemetery.

Every time I visited an evangelical church in 2004, it seemed that a member's brother or cousin had just returned from Iraq with reports that much greater progress was being made than the news media let on. The admiration for President Bush as a man of faith was nearly universal, and some talked of his contest with John Kerry as a spiritual battle. It would have been hard to overstate the Christian conservative leadership's sense of the presidential race's historical significance. In the days before the election, Dobson told me he believed the culture war was "rapidly approaching the climax, with everything that we are about on the line" and the election might be "the pivot point."

The morning after the Republican triumph, a White House operative called Dobson to thank him personally for his support, as Dobson told me in conversation later that day. He bluntly told the operative that the Bush campaign owed his victory in large part to concerned Christian voters. He warned that God had given the nation only "a short reprieve" from its impending "self-destruction." If the administration slighted its conservative Christian supporters, most importantly in filling Supreme Court vacancies, Dobson continued, Republicans would "pay a price in four years."

On that front, at least, Bush has not disappointed. President Bush's two appointees, Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr., have given Dobson and his allies much to be thankful for. Nor has Bush flinched from any politically feasible Christian conservative goal, even when it has been unpopular. He has blocked federal financing for embryonic stem-cell research and intervened to help keep Terri Schiavo on life support. But of course there were moments when the White House seemed to care more about Social Security reform, and in the end the culture did not change.

Today the president's support among evangelicals, still among his most loyal constituents, has crumbled. Once close to 90 percent, the president's approval rating among white evangelicals has fallen to a recent low below 45 percent, according to polls by the Pew Research Center. White evangelicals under 30 — the future of the church — were once Bush's biggest fans; now they are less supportive than their elders. And the dissatisfaction extends beyond Bush. For the first time in many years, white evangelical identification with the Republican Party has dipped below 50 percent, with the sharpest falloff again among the young, according to John C. Green, a senior fellow at Pew and an expert on religion and politics. (The defectors by and large say they've become independents, not Democrats, according to the polls.)

Some claim the falloff in support for Bush reflects the unrealistic expectations pumped up by conservative Christian leaders. But no one denies the war is a factor. Christianity Today, the evangelical journal, has even posed the question of whether evangelicals should "repent" for their swift support of invading Iraq.

"Even in evangelical circles, we are tired of the war, tired of the body bags," the Rev. David Welsh, who took over late last year as senior pastor of Wichita's large Central Christian Church, told me. "I think it is to the point where they are saying: 'O.K., we have done as much good as we can. Now let's just get out of there.' "

Welsh, who favors pressed khaki pants and buttoned-up polo shirts, is a staunch conservative, a committed Republican and, personally, a politics junkie. But he told me he was wary of talking too much about politics or public affairs around the church because his congregation was so divided over the war in Iraq.

Welsh said he considered himself among those who still support the president. "I think he is a good man," Welsh said, slowly. "He has a heart, a spiritual heart."

But like most of the people I met at Wichita's evangelical churches, his support for Bush sounded more than a little agonized — closer to sympathy than admiration. "Bush may not have the best people around him," he added, delicately. "He may not have made the best decisions. He is in a quagmire right now and maybe doesn't know how to get out. Because to pull out now would

say, 'I was wrong from the very beginning.' "

Some were less ambivalent. "We know we want to get rid of Bush," Linda J. Hogle, a product demonstrator at Sam's Club, told me when I asked her about the 2008 election at her evangelical church's Fourth of July picnic.

"I am glad he can't run again," agreed her friend, Floyd Willson. Hogle and Willson both voted for President Bush in 2004. Both are furious at the war and are looking to vote for a Democrat next year. "Upwards of a thousand boys that have been needlessly killed, it is all just politics," Willson said.

**The 16-million-member** Southern Baptist Convention — the core of the evangelical movement — may be rethinking its relationship with the Republican Party, too. Three years ago, I attended its annual meeting in Indianapolis and tagged along as the denomination's former president and several of its leaders invited the assembled pastors across a walkway to an adjacent hotel for a Bush-Cheney campaign "pastors' reception."

Over soft drinks, Ralph Reed, the former Christian Coalition director then working for the Bush campaign, told the pastors just how far they could go for the campaign without jeopardizing their churches' tax-exempt status. Among the suggestions: "host a citizenship Sunday for voter registration," "identify someone who will help in voter registration and outreach" or organize a " 'party for the president' with other pastors."

Republicans should not expect that kind of treatment from Southern Baptists again any time soon. In June of last year, in one of the few upsets since conservatives consolidated their hold on the denomination 20 years ago, the establishment's hand-picked candidates — well-known national figures in the convention — lost the internal election for the convention's presidency. The winner, Frank Page of First Baptist Church in Taylors, S.C., campaigned on a promise to loosen up the conservatives' tight control. He told convention delegates that Southern Baptists had become known too much for what they were against (abortion, evolution, homosexuality) instead of what they stand for (the Gospel). "I believe in the word of God," he said after his election, "I am just not mad about it." (It's a formulation that comes up a lot in evangelical circles these days.)

I asked Page about the Bush-Cheney reception at the 2004 convention. He sounded appalled. "That will not be happening with me," he said, repeating it for emphasis. "I have cautioned our denomination to be very careful not to be seen as in lock step with any political party."

Southern Baptists called their denomination's turn to the right the "conservative resurgence," meaning both a crackdown on unorthodox doctrine and a corresponding expulsion of political moderates. Page said he considered his election "a clear sign" that rank-and-file Southern Baptists felt the "conservative ascendancy has gone far enough."

Page is meeting personally with all the leading presidential candidates in both parties — Republican and Democrat. (His home state of South Carolina is holding an early primary.) But unlike some of his predecessors, he won't endorse any of them, he said.

"Most of us Southern Baptists are right-wing Republicans," he added. "But we also recognize that times change." For example, Page said Christians should be wary of Republican ties to "big business."

Elders like Dobson say the movement has been through doldrums before. Think of the face-off between the Republican Bob Dole and President Bill Clinton in the 1996 election. Dobson later said he had cast his ballot for a third party rather than vote for a moderate like Dole. But then, it was defeat that sapped morale; today, it is victory. Some younger evangelical conservatives say they are fighting just to keep their movement together. (Dobson told me he was too busy to comment for this article.)

The Rev. Rick Scarborough — founder of the advocacy organization Vision America, author of a book called "Liberalism Kills Kids" and at 57 an aspiring successor to Falwell or Dobson — has been barnstorming the country on what he calls a "Seventy Weeks to Save America Tour."

"We are somewhat in disarray right now," he told me, beginning a familiar story. "As a 26-year-old man, I heard there was a born-again Christian from Georgia running for president." Millions of evangelicals turned out for the first time in 1976 to vote for Jimmy Carter. But then, the story goes, his support for feminism and abortion rights sent them running the other way.

"The first time I voted was for Carter," Scarborough recalled. "The second time was for 'anybody but Carter,' because he had

betrayed everything I hold dear.

“Unfortunately,” Scarborough concluded, “there is the same feeling in our community right now with George Bush. He appeared so right and so good. He talked a good game about family values around election time. But there has been a failure to follow through.”

**For the conservative Christian leadership**, what is most worrisome about the evangelical disappointment with President Bush is that it coincides with a widening philosophical rift. Ever since they broke with the mainline Protestant churches nearly 100 years ago, the hallmark of evangelicals theology has been a vision of modern society as a sinking ship, sliding toward depravity and sin. For evangelicals, the altar call was the only life raft — a chance to accept Jesus Christ, rebirth and salvation. Falwell, Dobson and their generation saw their political activism as essentially defensive, fighting to keep traditional moral codes in place so their children could have a chance at the raft.

But many younger evangelicals — and some old-timers — take a less fatalistic view. For them, the born-again experience of accepting Jesus is just the beginning. What follows is a long-term process of “spiritual formation” that involves applying his teachings in the here and now. They do not see society as a moribund vessel. They talk more about a biblical imperative to fix up the ship by contributing to the betterment of their communities and the world. They support traditional charities but also public policies that address health care, race, poverty and the environment.

Older evangelical traditionalists like Prof. David Wells of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary near Boston argue that the newer approaches represent a “capitulation” to the broader culture — similar to the capitulation that in his view led the mainline churches into decline. Proponents of the new evangelicalism, on the other hand, say their broader agenda reflects a frustration with the scarce victories in the culture war and revulsion at the moral entanglements of partisan alliances (Abu Ghraib, Jack Abramoff). Scot McKnight, an evangelical theologian at North Park University in Chicago, said, “It is the biggest change in the evangelical movement at the end of the 20th century, a new kind of Christian social conscience.”

Secular sociologists say evangelicals’ changing view of society reflects their changing place in it. Once trailing in education and income, evangelicals have caught up over the last 40 years. “The social-issues arguments are the first manifestation of a rural outlook transposed into a more urban or suburban setting,” John Green, of the Pew Research Center, told me. “Now having been there for a while, that kind of hard-edged politics no longer appeals to them. They still care about abortion and gay marriage, but they are also interested in other, more middle-class arguments.”

Some rebellious evangelical pastors and theologians of the new school refer to themselves as the emergent church. Others who are less openly rebellious but share a similar approach point to the examples of Rick Warren and Bill Hybels. “What Warren and Hybels are doing is reshaping the perception of what it means to be a Christian in our country and our world,” McKnight says.

Warren and Hybels are also highly entrepreneurial. Each has built a network of thousands of mostly evangelical churches that rely on their ministries for sermon ideas, worship plans or audio-video materials to enliven services. As a result, their influence may rival that of any denominational leader in the country.

Warren, pastor of the Saddleback church in Lake Forest, Calif., is the author of the best seller “The Purpose Driven Life.” His church has sold materials to thousands of other churches for “campaigns” called 40 Days of Purpose and, more recently, 40 Days of Community. If more Christians worked to alleviate needs in their local communities, he suggests in the church’s promotional materials, “the church would become known more for the love it shows than for what it is against” a thinly veiled dig at the conservative Christian “culture war.”

Warren is clearly a theological and cultural conservative. Before the 2004 election, he wrote a letter to other pastors emphasizing the need to combat abortion rights and same-sex marriage. But these days Warren talks much more often about fighting AIDS and poverty. He raised hackles among conservatives last year by having Barack Obama give a speech at his church. And he also came under fire last year when he traveled to Damascus, Syria, where he implicitly criticized the Bush administration for refusing to talk with unfriendly nations.

“Isolation and silence has never solved conflict,” he said in a press release defending his trip.

Hybels, founder of the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, is very possibly the single-most-influential pastor in America; in the last 15 years, his Willow Creek Association has grown to include more than 12,000 churches. Many invite their staff members and lay leaders to participate by telecast in Willow Creek's annual leadership conferences, creating a virtual gathering of tens of thousands. Dozens of churches in Wichita, including Central Christian and other past bastions of conservative activism, are part of the association.

As his stature has grown, Hybels has seemed more willing to irk Christian conservative political leaders — and even some in his own congregation. He set off a furor a few years ago when he invited former President Bill Clinton to speak at one of his conferences. And the Iraq war has brought into sharp relief Hybels's differences with conservatives like Dobson.

Most conservative Christian leaders have resolutely supported Bush's foreign policy. Dobson and others have even talked about defending Western civilization from radical Islam as a precondition for protecting family values. But on the eve of the Iraq invasion, Hybels preached a sermon called "Why War?" Laying out three approaches to war — realism, just-war theory and pacifism — he implored members of his congregation to re-examine their own thinking and then try to square it with the Bible. In the process, he left little doubt about where he personally stood. He called himself a pacifist.

Hybels traced the "J curve" of mounting deaths from war through the centuries. "In case you are wondering about this, wonder how God feels about all this," he said. "It breaks the heart of God."

At his annual leadership conference this summer, Hybels interviewed former President Jimmy Carter. To some Christian conservatives, it was quite a provocation. Carter, after all, was their first great disappointment, a Southern Baptist who denounced the conservative takeover and an early critic of the Bush administration. Some pastors canceled plans to attend.

"I think that a superpower ought to be the exemplification of a commitment to peace," Carter told Hybels, who nodded along. "I would like for anyone in the world that's threatened with conflict to say to themselves immediately: 'Why don't we go to Washington? They believe in peace and they will help us get peace.' " Carter added: "This is just a simple but important extrapolation from what a human being ought to do, and what a human being ought to do is what Jesus Christ did, who was a champion of peace."

In a conversation I had with him, Hybels told me he considered politics a path to "heartache and disappointment" for a Christian leader. But he also described the message of his Willow Creek Association to its member churches in terms that would warm a liberal's heart.

"We have just pounded the drum again and again that, for churches to reach their full redemptive potential, they have to do more than hold services — they have to try to transform their communities," he said. "If there is racial injustice in your community, you have to speak to that. If there is educational injustice, you have to do something there. If the poor are being neglected by the government or being oppressed in some way, then you have to stand up for the poor."

In the past, Hybels has scrupulously avoided criticizing conservative Christian political figures like Falwell or Dobson. But in my talk with him, he argued that the leaders of the conservative Christian political movement had lost touch with their base. "The Indians are saying to the chiefs, 'We are interested in more than your two or three issues,' " Hybels said. "We are interested in the poor, in racial reconciliation, in global poverty and AIDS, in the plight of women in the developing world."

He brought up the Rev. Jim Wallis, the lonely voice of the tiny evangelical left. Wallis has long argued that secular progressives could make common cause with theologically conservative Christians. "What Jim has been talking about is coming to fruition," Hybels said.

Conservative Christian leaders in Washington acknowledge a "leftward drift" among evangelicals, said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council and the movement's chief advocate in Washington. He told me he believed that Hybels and many of his admirers had, in effect, fallen away from orthodox evangelical theology. Perkins compared the phenomenon to the century-old division in American Protestantism between the liberal mainline and the orthodox evangelical churches. "It is almost like another split coming within the evangelicals," he said.

**Wondering how** those theological and political debates were unfolding in conservative Wichita, I sought out the Rev. Gene

Carlson, another prominent conservative Christian pastor who left his church last year. He spent four decades as the senior pastor of the Westlink Christian Church, expanding it to 7,000 members. He was one of the most important local leaders of the Summer of Mercy abortion protests. He tapped Westlink's collection plate to help finance its operations and even led a battalion of about 40 clergy members and hundreds of lay people to jail in an act of civil disobedience.

Sitting with his wife in a quiet living room with teddy bears on the bookshelves, Carlson, who is 70, told me he is one member of the movement's founding generation who has had second thoughts. He said he still considers abortion evil. He called the anti-abortion protests "prophetic," in the sense of the Old Testament prophets who warned of God's wrath. But Carlson was blunt about the results. "It didn't really change abortion," he said.

"I thought in my enthusiasm," he told me with a smile, "that somehow we could band together and change things politically and everything will be fine." But the closing of Dr. Tiller's clinic was fleeting. Electing Christian politicians never seemed to change much. "When you mix politics and religion," Carlson said, "you get politics."

In more recent battles, Carlson has hung back. On the Sunday before the referendum on a state constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, Carlson reminded his congregation that homosexuality was hardly the only form of sex the Bible condemned. Any extramarital sex is a sin, he told his congregation, so they should not point fingers.

"We wouldn't want to exclude some group because we thought their sin was worse than ours," Carlson told me with a laugh.

Carlson is a registered Republican, though he now considers himself an independent. He volunteered that he now leans left on some social-welfare issues and the environment. He considers himself among the "green evangelicals" who see a biblical mandate for government action to stop global warming. The Westlink church is another member of Hybels's Willow Creek Association and a satellite location for telecasts of the annual leadership conference. Carlson said he admired Hybels for "challenging some of the sacred cows that we evangelicals have built."

"There is this sense that the personal Gospel is what evangelicals believe and the social Gospel is what liberal Christians believe," Carlson said, "and, you know, there is only one Gospel that has both social and personal dimensions to it." He once felt lonely among evangelicals for taking that approach, he told me. "Now it is a growing phenomenon," he said.

"The religious right peaked a long time ago," he added. "As a historical, sociological phenomenon, it has seen its heyday. Something new is coming."

These days, Westlink has found less confrontational ways to oppose abortion, mainly by helping to pay for a medical center called Choices. Housed in a cozy-looking white-shingled cottage next to Dr. Tiller's bunkerlike abortion facility, Choices discourages women from ending pregnancies by offering 3-D ultrasound scans and adoption advice.

Carlson's protégé and successor, Todd Carter, 42, said: "I don't believe the problem of abortion will be solved by overturning Roe v. Wade. It won't. To me, it is a Gospel issue."

The Rev. Joe Wright, the longtime senior pastor who built Central Christian to 7,000 members, was the third leading pastor in Wichita to step down at the end of last year. He is a tall, heavy man, and he embraced me in a sweaty bear hug the first time we met, at a local chain restaurant.

Wright, who is 64, had been another leader of the Operation Mercy protests. But unlike Carlson, he plunged further into conservative politics, eventually as a host of the radio show "Answering the Call," with Fox. They spent months together traveling the state and lobbying the Statehouse during the same-sex marriage fight.

Wright retired in good standing with his congregation, but he told me the political battle had taken a toll.

"On Sunday morning when I would mention it, there were people who would hang their heads and say, 'Oh, here we go again,' " he said. "And then, of course, some of them wouldn't come back."

Wright said he was worried about theological and political trends among young evangelicals, even in Kansas. "If we had to depend on the young evangelical pastors to get us a marriage amendment here in Kansas it never would have happened," Wright

said.

He went on to say he was dismayed to feel resistance to his political sermons and voter-registration drives from younger associate pastors at his own church, some of whom moved elsewhere. (Some of his parishioners had already told me the same thing, separately.)

“Even in the groups I travel in and grew up in — the preachers who are from the same background I was in, who run in the same circles I ran in, who went to the same schools I did — I don’t find many young evangelical preachers who are willing to stand up and take a stand on the hard issues, because they think they might offend somebody,” he said.

“I think the Gospel is offensive, and I think the cross is offensive,” Wright continued. “I think Jesus loved everybody and I think he loved the Pharisees, but he certainly told them how the cow eats the cabbage.”

Paul Hill is one of the young associate pastors who left Central Christian after philosophical clashes with Wright. He took a band of young members with him when he started his own emergent-style church, the Wheatland Mission. “Even in Wichita, times have changed,” Hill said. “I think people will hear the Gospel better when it is expressed not just verbally but holistically, through acts of hospitality and by bringing people together.

“In the evangelical church in general there is kind of a push back against the Republican party and a feeling of being used by the Republican political machine,” he continued. “There are going to be a lot of evangelicals willing to vote for a Democrat because there are 40 million people without health insurance and a Democrat is going to do something about that.”

With Wright, Carlson and Fox out of the spotlight, new religious leaders are stepping to the fore. When legalized gambling was proposed in the Wichita area this year, the pastor who took the lead in rallying other clergy members to stop the measure was Michael Gardner of the First United Methodist Church, a mainline liberal who supports abortion rights and jousted with Fox over the same-sex marriage amendment on competing church telecasts.

After decades when evangelical megachurches have exploded at the expense of dwindling mainline congregations, Gardner is poaching the other way. Each Sunday night he convenes an informal emergent church worship group of his own, known as Next Wichita. Several dozen people, mostly 20 to 30 years old, show up to break bread, talk Scripture and plan volunteer projects. “People in that age group are much more attracted to participatory theology, very resistant to being told what to do or what to think,” he said.

Patrick Bergquist, a former associate pastor at a local evangelical church who as a child attended Immanuel Baptist, became a regular. “From a theological standpoint, I am an evangelical,” Bergquist, who is 28, explained to me. “But I don’t mean that anyone who is gay is necessarily going to hell, or that anyone who has an abortion is going to hell.” After a life of voting Republican, he said, he recently made a small contribution to the Democratic presidential campaign of Barack Obama.

“**Is the religious right dead**?” Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council told me that question was the title of the first chapter of a new book he is writing with Harry Jackson, a socially conservative African-American pastor.

Perkins’s answer is emphatically no — “we are seeing a lot of pastors coming back like never before” — but the 2008 election is the movement’s first big test since the triumph and letdown with President Bush. And so far most Christian conservative leaders do not like what they see. Although all the Republican primary candidates, including Giuliani, spoke at the Family Research Council’s “values voters” meeting last weekend, only the dark horses have consistent conservative records on abortion, gay rights and religion in public life.

Of these, Mike Huckabee, a Southern Baptist minister before he became governor of Arkansas, stands out in the polls and in his rhetoric. At last fall’s values-voters meetings, the other candidates focused on establishing their Christian conservative credentials. Huckabee dispensed with that by reminding his audience of his years as a pastor. Then he challenged the crowd to give more money to their churches and talked about education and health care. On the campaign trail, he criticizes chief executives’ pay and says his faith demands environmental regulation. “We shouldn’t allow a child to live under a bridge or in the back seat of a car,” Huckabee said in a recent debate. “We shouldn’t be satisfied that elderly people are being abused or neglected in nursing homes.”

Huckabee told me that he welcomed a broadening of the evangelical political agenda. “You can’t just say ‘respect life’ exclusively in the gestation period,” he said, repeating a campaign theme.

But the leaders of the Christian conservative movement have not rallied to him. Many say he cannot win because he has not raised enough money. Perkins and others have criticized Huckabee for taking too soft an approach to the Middle East. Others worry that his record on taxes will anger allies on the right. And some Christian conservatives take his “gestation period” line as a slight to their movement.

“They finally have the soldier they have been waiting for, and they shouldn’t send me out into the battlefield without supplies,” Huckabee told me in exasperation. He argued that the movement’s leaders would “become irrelevant” if they started putting political viability or low taxes ahead of their principles about abortion and marriage.

“In biblical terms, it is like the salt losing its flavor; it’s sand,” Huckabee said. “Some of them have spent too long in Washington. . . . I think they are going to have a hard time going out into the pews and saying tax policy is what Jesus is about, that he said, ‘Come unto me all you who are overtaxed and I will give you rest.’ ”

**Up to this point**, though, most conservative Christian leaders are still locked in debate about which front-runner they dislike the least. Dobson’s public statements have traced the arc of their dissatisfaction. Last October, he observed that grass-roots evangelicals would have a hard time voting for Mitt Romney because he is a Mormon. In January, he said he could never vote for Senator John McCain. More recently, Dobson panned Fred Thompson, too, for opposing a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. “He has no passion, no zeal, and no apparent ‘want to,’ ” Dobson wrote in an e-mail message to allies. “Not for me, my brothers. Not for me!”

Finally, at the end of last month, Dobson was the foremost among the roughly 50 Christian conservative organizers who declared they would support a third-party candidate if the nomination went to Giuliani, who is their greatest fear. Some even talk of McCain — once anathema to them — as a better bet.

I could see why they were worried. Among the evangelicals of suburban Wichita, I found that Giuliani was easily the most popular of the Republican candidates, even among churchgoers who knew his views on abortion and same-sex marriage. Some trusted him to fight Islamic radicalism; others praised his cleanup of New York.

“There are a few issues we are on different sides of — a lot of it is around abortion — and he is not the most spiritual guy,” said Kent Brummer, a retired Boeing engineer leaving services at Central Christian. “But to me that doesn’t mean that he would not make a good president, if he represents both sides.

“What I liked about George Bush is all of his moral side and all that,” Brummer added. “But somehow he didn’t have the strength to govern the way we hoped he would and that he should have.”

Democrats, meanwhile, sense an opportunity. Now the campaigns of all three Democratic front-runners are actively courting evangelical voters. At a White House event to mark the National Day of Prayer that I attended in the spring, Senator Clinton even walked over to shake hands with Dobson. Visibly surprised, he told her she was in his prayers.

All three Democratic candidates are speaking very personally, in evangelical language, about their own faith. What does Clinton pray about? “It depends upon the time of day,” she said. Edwards says he cannot name his greatest sin: “I sin every single day.” Obama talks about his introduction to “someone named Jesus Christ” and about being “an instrument of God.”

Many evangelicals are not sure what to make of it. “Shouldn’t we like it when someone talks about Christ being the missing ingredient in his life?” David Brody, a commentator for Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network, asked approvingly in response to Obama’s statements.

Many conservative Christian leaders say they can count on the specter of a second Clinton presidency to fire up their constituents. But the prospect of an Obama-Giuliani race is another matter. “You would have a bunch of people who traditionally vote Republican going over to Obama,” said the Rev. Donald Wildmon, founder of the Christian conservative American Family Association of Tupelo, Miss., known for its consumer boycotts over obscenity or gay issues.

In the Wichita churches this summer, Obama was the Democrat who drew the most interest. Several mentioned that he had spoken at Warren's Saddleback church and said they were intrigued. But just as many people ruled out Obama because they suspected that he was not Christian at all but in fact a crypto-Muslim — a rumor that spread around the Internet earlier this year. "There is just that ill feeling, and part of it is his faith," Welsh said. "Is his faith anti-Christian? Is he a Muslim? And what about the school where he was raised?"

"Obama sounds too much like Osama," said Kayla Nickel of Westlink. "When he says his name, I am like, 'I am not voting for a Muslim!' "

Fox, meanwhile, is already preparing to do his part to get Wichita's conservative faithful to the polls next November. Standing before a few hundred worshipers at the Johnny Western Theater last summer, Fox warned his new congregation not to let go of that old-time religion. "Hell is just as hot as it ever was," he reminded them. "It just has more people in it."

Fox told me: "I think the religious community is probably reflective of the rest of the nation — it is very divided right now. This election process is going to reveal a lot about where the religious right and the religious community is. It will show unity or the lack of it."

But liberals, he said, should not start gloating. "Some might compare the religious right to a snake," he said. "We may be in our hole right now, but we can come out and bite you at any time."

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