

Moral Minority, by David R. Swartz

reviewed by [Heath W. Carter](#) in the [January 23, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Moral Minority

By David R. Swartz

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America had lost its way. So believed 50 evangelical Christians who convened in downtown Chicago in late November 1973. They arrived weighted down by the gravity of the nation's moral failings and yet buoyed by a palpable sense of

opportunity: a social and political awakening was afoot in the churches, and if properly channeled, it could right the country's course.

No, this was not an early gathering of the Christian right. The major issues on the agenda did not include abortion or school prayer. Instead, the believers who crowded into the dingy Wabash Avenue YMCA spent Thanksgiving weekend hammering out the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern. They stated—among other things—that “we deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism,” “we must challenge the misplaced trust of the nation in economic and military might,” and “we must attack the materialism of our culture and the maldistribution of the nation's wealth.” The document immediately became a touchstone of the evangelical left.

In *Moral Minority*, David Swartz recovers the story of the unlikely coalition these progressive evangelicals forged in the 1960s and 1970s. The book unfolds as a series of engaging biographical sketches that offer a window into the diverse experiences and concerns animating the movement.

Some in the cast of characters will be familiar. For example, we meet current Sojourners CEO Jim Wallis as a much younger man, radicalized by the Vietnam War and at the helm of the “Post-Americans,” a community of twentysomething evangelicals alienated from the churches of their youth, which seemed content to abide, if not outright baptize, the military campaign in Southeast Asia. The inaugural issue of the group's eponymous magazine decried the “American captivity of the church,” which had “resulted in the disastrous equation of the American way of life with the Christian way of life.”

Swartz introduces us to a variety of lesser-known figures as well, including John Alexander, a white, Goldwater-supporting Baptist turned devoted civil rights activist, and Sharon Gallagher, a California-raised fundamentalist whose powerful encounter with the ideal of beloved community led her to cofound an evangelical commune known as the Christian World Liberation Front.

Shifting seamlessly back and forth from the lives of such leading individuals to the wider relational and institutional networks within which they moved, Swartz persuasively shows that by the mid-1970s, though the evangelical left was undoubtedly a minority movement, it boasted surprisingly broad-based roots. It even packed an electoral punch, or so it seemed in 1976, when a groundswell of

evangelical support helped a born-again Democrat by the name of Jimmy Carter to win the White House. At that moment there seemed no reason to question evangelicalism's compatibility with progressive causes and candidates.

So what happened? How was the evangelical left so quickly outmuscled by the Christian right? Swartz offers two answers. The first has to do with dynamics internal to the movement. The signers of the Chicago Declaration had always been a fractious bunch, divided—much like the larger New Left—along lines of race, gender and theology. After the Thanksgiving workshop, these cleavages proved decisive, as black and white, female and male, Anabaptist and Reformed evangelicals went separate institutional ways. This centrifugal trajectory undermined the movement's cohesion and diminished its clout.

Swartz argues that even if the evangelical left had managed to hang together, it would have faced an uphill battle by the 1980s. This is because a second source of decline lay in the changing political landscape. The evangelical left followed some Catholics in championing a "consistent pro-life ethic," which combined support for the War on Poverty with opposition to militarism, nuclear proliferation, the death penalty and, crucially, abortion rights. As Democratic support for *Roe v. Wade* calcified, many within the movement—already alienated by Republicans' positions on the issues—found themselves increasingly "without a political home."

Moral Minority infuses a welcome dose of suspense into the story of how American evangelicalism became a cornerstone of a resurgent modern conservatism. While historians have busied themselves in recent years searching for the origins of the Christian right in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, Swartz demonstrates that as late as the 1970s, evangelicals' political allegiances remained fluid. He is careful—and right—to avoid giving the impression that born-again believers stood then at a fork in the road, as likely to veer left as right. But in calling attention to the contingencies, most notably those surrounding the vexed politics of abortion, he underscores that even on the eve of the Reagan revolution some alternative routes were possible.

They still are. If one stands on this side of the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition and the values voter craze, it can be easy to forget that *evangelical* need not imply *conservative*, but history offers countless reminders of this fact. While evangelical faith has often served to legitimize unjust systems and structures, it has also ignited concerted resistance to the same. When Swartz writes that the connections between progressive politics and evangelicalism "were—and are—startlingly substantial," he

invokes the witness not just of the evangelical left but also of abolitionists, women's suffragists and trade unionists.

What comes next is another matter. With the Christian right seemingly back on its heels following the reelection of President Barack Obama, will the evangelicals of today find a more promising way forward? Will a rising generation embrace the gospel's clarion call for a justice that defies party platforms, or will a new crop of believers recapitulate their parents' wanderings in the political wilderness? In his conclusion Swartz sorts through the muddled signs of the times and musters the best answer of a historian: only time will tell.