

This review by Paul Lusk appeared under the title **Political Confusion in the US** in *Evangelicals Now* in April 2012

FROM BILLY GRAHAM TO SARAH PALIN
Evangelicals and the betrayal of American Conservatism
By D.G. Hart. Eerdmans. 240 pages. £16.99
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Darryl Hart is an academic Reformed theologian and church historian in the USA, and an elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church originally founded by J. Gresham Machen. He writes well and is a prolific and witty blogger.

His new book tracks the rise of evangelical politics in the shape of America's 'religious right'. During the 19th century, he says, a united white Protestant elite maintained an 'informal establishment' of religion despite the constitutional separation of church and state. This unity was shattered after WWI by the rise of fundamentalism, driven in its political aspect by opposing threats to society from Darwinism, Communism and alcohol.

As Americans mobilised for WWII, a new generation needed to distance itself from fundamentalism and developed the 'evangelical' identity to negotiate with the government for born-again pastors to join the forces. Post-war evangelicalism remained militantly anti-Communist but otherwise not particularly associated with the political right.

Things changed after America's bicentennial year of 1976, when a flood of popular literature proclaimed the Christian roots of God's chosen republic. Francis Schaeffer's *How Should We Then Live?* called a new, post-hippy generation to claim Christian hegemony over all aspects of culture, launching him as the intellectual father of the Religious Right. And a born-again Christian, Jimmy Carter, won the 1976 presidential election. The choice of this charming and plainly virtuous leader to clean up politics after Nixon's disgrace intrigued the jaded media establishment, with *Newsweek* famously declaring 1976 'the year of the evangelical'.

But the pastors who saw themselves as the true keepers of the evangelical flame — Falwell, Dobson, Bakker, La Haye, Roberts etc. — were dismayed at Carter's liberalism on abortion and women's rights, and his reluctance to appoint evangelicals to government. Their 'Moral Majority' allied with the Republicans to organise his fall. Carter (also facing religious fundamentalists in Iran who held American diplomats as hostages until after the election) lost to Reagan in 1980. The Religious Right had arrived.

But what next? A succession of Christian social policy coalitions rose and fell amidst financial and sexual scandal. The mantle of succession was claimed by Pat Robertson, but this charismatic proved too far-out for mainstream Christian voters and his bid for the 1988 Republican nomination failed. A new generation associated with Reed and Olansky wanted to distance the religious right from racism and hostility to social welfare, and developed 'compassionate conservatism,' a key plank in George W. Bush's rise to power.

The religious right, Hart objects, is not 'conservative'. He packs a lot of philosophy into this claim. For one thing, he means that it is not possible to derive a political ideology from the Bible, and he shows how the 'evangelical left' — Wallis, Balmer, Campolo — can produce equally sound biblical arguments. Hart derides the 'what would Jesus do?' idea of using political power to project Christian morality. Conservatives (says Hart) support a small state with a balanced budget, oppose militarism and nationalism, and leave it to families and communities to build a better society.

Conservative support for free markets is qualified by mistrust of individualism and the homogenisation of society that comes with large-scale capitalism and mass communications. Conservatives dedicate themselves to studying America's federal roots.

Many American Republicans and conservatives worry about the influence of the Christian right, blaming it for the excesses of the Bush presidency which added a stunning \$7 trillion to federal debt. But no Republican can now run for the White House without the blessing of politicised evangelicalism. Hart excellently lays out the 20th-century history of this movement. His survey of its literature and ideology surprisingly omits Reconstructionism, which expounds the most ruthlessly coherent case for a Christian state. This book focuses on the social and moral programmes offered by evangelical politics, and does not unpick their theological foundations. What seems clear is that a large part of white Protestant opinion has never truly accepted the separation of church and state. If so, the betrayal is not just of American conservatism but more profoundly of the American constitution itself.