

Evangelicals Flock to GOP Standard Feeling They Have Friend in Reagan

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DETROIT, July 15—The political commandments endorsed by the Republican Party here this week may not be chiseled on tablets of stone, but as one preppy-looking California Christian put it, "they ought to be. It's right down the line an evangelical platform."

The white, right, born-again faithful, once safe in the fold of Jimmy Carter, or abstaining from the devilry of politics altogether, are flocking to the Republican mother church this year where they feel they have a friend in Ronald Reagan.

Although he is not, as a supporter put it, a "cross waver," the Protestant former actor shares their profamily, antiabortion, antigay rights, anti-ERA vision of the promised land.

"If evangelicals are excited about the platform, which they are, and about both candidates, I'd say three or four million votes will be available to Mr. Reagan that have never been available to anybody," said electronic evangelist Jerry Falwell of Lynchburg, Va., whose "Old Time Gospel Hour" reaches an estimated 25 million viewers each Sunday.

While black churchgoers remain solid in their Democratic affiliation, the Sunday go-to-meeting white evangelicals are an important element of the small town, working class coalition Reagan supporters hope to assemble this year at the expense of Carter and the Democrats.

Falwell's political action organization, called Moral Majority, found last year that only about 55 percent of evangelicals are registered to vote, compared with a 72 percent of eligible Americans nationwide. Since then, he claims the group has registered some two million new voters. His exhortation to ministers: "Get them saved, baptized and registered."

That leaves about six million evangelicals to go and he hopes to register at least three million of those by November.

Moral Majority, one of numerous conservative fundamentalist religious organizations that have decided to fish the political waters, has some 72,000 pastors—including Roman Catholics, Mormons and a few Jews, most of whom will mobilize for Reagan—"even if he has the devil running with him, and we'll pray he outlives him," Falwell said.

But the evangelist added, "The millions won't follow if Mr. Reagan gives us a terrible choice as running mate." (He mentioned George Bush and Howard H. Baker Jr.) "They'll just sit on

their hands as they've been doing for the last 30 or 40 years."

Many of the new advocates of preacher-power do not fit the naive, otherworldly dogma-spouting stereotype of the Bible Belt fundamentalist. Born-again, but not born yesterday, they are too sophisticated to wear Jesus on their sleeves.

To Christian soldiers such as Don White, a member of the Alaska delegation, the fundamentalist crusade "does not represent any religion. We represent morals. We're pro-life, profamily, promorals and pro-America." And they are against what Moral Majority has called "the godless, amoral forces of humanism."

White is head of Alaska's Moral Majority chapter and his Christian contingent totals five of the 18 delegates from Alaska. "We approved all the others," he added.

White traveled to Alaska as a Baptist missionary 15 years ago but worked as an administrator for Wackenhut, a security service, until he took over the Moral Majority job last year.

A neat, bespectacled man in a three-piece suit, White says he expects his group, working through local ministers, to register 10,000 new voters in Alaskan congregations.

And in Alaska's GOP caucuses this year, where the expected turnout often was no more than half a dozen people, Moral Majority chapters repeatedly turned out 40 to 50. In the state's seven political districts, they elected "Christian chairmen" in six. Of the 280 delegates to the state convention, they claimed 150.

The minister of the Anchorage Baptist Temple, which White helped found, has helped defeat a city referendum on gay rights and a gay rights mayoral candidate. White said. "They've realized that churches up there have some clout."

Moral Majority "doesn't have any formal membership," said school teacher Carolyn Glover, another Alaska delegate. "We're just people with moral principles. And we're tired of Jimmy Carter's religion."

In the Virginia delegation, Guy Farley, a born-again Baptist, has played a key role in the platform fights against the ERA and abortion. Many Republicans see him as a useful bridge between the party's traditional conservatives and the religious new right for whom Baptist television preacher Falwell is a pace setter.

It's the issues, not the personalities, that draw the evangelists to the Republican party, Falwell said. "Carter last time got that [church] vote because he campaigned as born-again

Christian. But this time people will be more concerned about issues than general characterizations. Carter has proceeded to undermine the American family."

The campaign to get out the evangelism vote has resulted in sessions to teach ministers around the country how far they can go—without losing their tax-exempt status—toward endorsing candidates, taking stands on the issues as well as to instruct them on other aspects of political activism.

The IRS has ruled that ministers can make personal endorsements of candidates without jeopardizing the tax-exempt status of their church, as long as the entire church does not make a formal endorsement.

"In the southern and nonurban parts of the country, the church remains a major social and political organization; the preacher has a captive audience on Sunday," said an aide to Sen. Jesse A. Helms (R-N.C.), who is viewed by many fundamentalists as their man in Washington.

The Helms staff helped draw up a plan to "organize Christians," the aide said, with detailed procedures for direct mail organization of preachers, including sample sermons.

"I suggested a committee be set up to write the sermon, with one person contributing the religious content, another a touch of humor, a third the political moods and trends and finally an editor to make sure it spoke well," the Helms aide said.

Some critics charge this political gospel of personal salvation, as opposed to social outreach, is merely arch conservatism disguised in Bible print.

"They are very dangerous. They are not differentiating between Caesar and God. They are trying to equate Christianity with Americanism," said George Jones, director of the Northern Kentucky Baptist Association and a minister. A resident of Cold Spring, he has been an active Republican since 1936.

"They're one-issue people; they won't last long," he said. "We must keep church and state separated."

But not if Patric Dorsey has anything to say about it. A self-assured woman from New Bern, N.C., Dorsey is a Helms protege who succeeded in getting the platform committee to insert in its flowery preamble the words "With God's Help."

The wife of a retired naval officer, she said she and her husband were the seventh and eighth residents of their town to register as Republicans. "I look to God as my government, not man," she said. He governs, not man. . . . He's the bottom line."