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Book Author(s): BRADLEY ONISHI

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## Chapter 4

# SEGREGATION IS A RELIGIOUS RIGHT

**WE USUALLY WENT ONCE** a year. Some years we didn't go, but in those years, they came to us. The arrangement was a big deal for our church, a sign that we weren't racist. Friendship Baptist was a majority Black church just up the road from ours. It was as big as or bigger than our two-thousand-person megachurch, so when the two church bodies got together for our annual joint worship service—one Sunday afternoon in the spring—it felt like two entities of the same size meeting for a yearly hug. Some 98 percent of the people at Friendship Baptist were Black. A similar percentage of the folks at Rose Drive were White.

I have no idea how a Black church started in this hamlet of Orange County. Not only was the region devoid of any major Black populations; it had a serious history with racial prejudice and exclusion. In this part of Southern California, it was something of a miracle that Friendship Baptist even existed.

If it was at our place, our choir and pastor led the ceremony; if we met at Friendship Baptist, theirs did. I was fifteen when I

first attended the annual service at Friendship Baptist. Though we professed the same faith and the same savior, it felt like I had been transported to a different realm altogether. The choir roared and swayed, and the minister moved and shouted in front of them, improvising his message as he called out and the congregation responded in turn. Their robes were majestic—tassels and waves and bright colors. Women in the pews would pull tambourines from their purses in order to join in the music making. The foot stomping. The clapping. “Yes, Lord” and “Thank you Jesus!” coming from all sides.

The White folks from Rose Drive tried to keep up with the beat and make themselves look comfortable. Trying unsuccessfully to clap and tap my foot to the Gospel music, I would notice embarrassed smiles and overeager displays of approval on the faces and bodies of the Rose Drive faithful. Despite being thoroughly out of our element—and no doubt in the presence of more Black people in one building than we had been all year—we wanted to show everyone how great we thought this was. If we could get through it, it would be a whole year before we had to do it again.

A few weeks after one of those services, I learned that there was a Christian bookstore affiliated with Friendship Baptist just a few blocks away. I was ecstatic. A Christian bookstore in bike-riding distance of my house? For a nerdy future professor, this was a dream. On my first visit, the clerk gave me the side eye. I realized later that not many high schoolers came in to browse the apologetics section. She may have also wondered what a White-passing boy was doing in a shop clearly designed for her Black congregation.

As I paid for my books and headed for the exit, I noticed it hanging over the doorway: a picture of Black Jesus looking over the entire shop. Later that week I met up with a friend for a Bible study and told him about it. “Why would they have a picture of Jesus as Black?” I asked him. “Everyone knows Jesus wasn’t Black.”

“I don’t know,” he said with a shrug. We opened our Bibles to start the study. On the inside cover of our versions was another picture of Christ. Only in this one he was neither Black, nor Jewish. He was Nordic. A blond, blue-eyed man who looked like he was from Sweden, rather than Palestine.

We thought nothing of it. That was Jesus, after all.

During that same period in my teenage years, I made a habit of taking pamphlets filled with gory images of aborted fetuses and partly formed body parts to school. I’d pass them out and share with anyone who would listen. Abortion was at the forefront of the culture wars, and as a teenager in 1990s evangelicalism, I was fired up. It was a common topic in Sunday sermons, in youth group curricula, and in the teen devotional literature we read alongside the Bible. One of the reasons Christians had to be involved in politics, I was told, was to combat the holocaust of unborn babies. While issues like war and foreign policy and tax law were also important, fighting abortion was the cause everyone—including teenage zealots like me—could support. It was a binary issue with no gray area. It was the reason, the story went, that God’s people were involved in politics at all.

This is a common narrative among White evangelicals. “The abortion myth,” as scholar Randall Balmer calls it, has become the popular origin story of evangelical involvement in the public square. Evangelical Christians became politically active in the mid-twentieth century because of the abortion issue, the myth suggests. But the reality is that racism, not abortion, was the central factor that motivated White evangelical Christians to get involved in American politics in the twentieth century. Regardless of how the “abortion myth” is told, the historical record shows that White evangelical politics in the 1960s and early 1970s were centered on the fight against racial integration—not the fight for the unborn. The thing that motivated them was race—and the right to remain segregated from people of color—not preventing abortion. In fact, racism is the foundation of

White Christian nationalism, the load-bearing portion that supports the structure and weight of the entire project.

### **NOTHING IS CERTAIN BUT DEATH AND RACISM**

In chapter 1, we looked at how the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which led to the desegregation of public schools, served as a precursor to opposition to the Civil Rights Act in the South and in the Sunbelt a decade later. This was the period when Jim Crow laws were under increasing scrutiny and the de jure segregation of the South's public square was coming to an end. Part of the reason Goldwater won the Deep South was his insistence that the government shouldn't play an active part in the integration of American society. He signaled to White Christians in the South and along the Sunbelt that he would not support policies demanding the integration of schools or any other public space.

What he didn't know at the time was that this passive resistance to the extension of civil rights to Black Americans and other people of color would unite the New Right, led by Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie, with the millions of White evangelical Christians whose votes Weyrich and Viguerie needed in order to revolutionize the Republican Party. By bringing children and schooling into the mix, Weyrich, Viguerie, and the New Right touched on the central nerve in the White evangelical system: race. In other words, the brain trust behind the New Right seized on the desegregation issue in order to recruit White evangelicals (and many White Catholics) to their movement. This led to the formation of the New Religious Right.

### **THE RACIST ORIGINS OF EVANGELICAL FAMILY VALUES**

In the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, White southerners removed their children from the public school system en masse in order to avoid enrolling them in institutions with Black

students. They created private Christian schools and flooded them, creating White flight from the public school system. Between 1970 and 1980, attendance at Protestant private schools quadrupled in the South. The Virginia public school system in Prince Edward County actually shut down in order to resist desegregation. One report from the early 1980s stated that roughly 25 percent of southern private schools enrolled only White kids and another 50 percent had fewer than 3 percent students of color.

In essence, evangelical day schools served as a way for White southerners to bypass the integrated education system. White southern Christians were willing to do anything necessary to keep their children away from people of color. For them, the social order—especially when it concerned impressionable young ones—depended on the segregation of the races.

It is not surprising that White evangelical churches were the outlets for avoiding racial integration. Since the antebellum period, such southern churches had not only been complicit in anti-Black racism; their theologies had provided a powerful justification for the institution of slavery. In essence, White evangelical churches had provided the divine rationalization for the South, and eventually the Confederacy, to defend slavery as part of God's ordained plan for society and for the family.

While the time frame separating the Confederacy and the integration of schools may seem long, it was a matter of only a few generations. Only a few decades separate them. In many cases the grandchildren of the White Christians who defended slavery became the civic warriors who fought to keep their local schools segregated.

## **FAMILY VALUES FROM 1860 TO 1970**

The evangelical obsession with education and family values didn't begin in the 1960s. It goes back to before the 1860s, when White southern evangelicals claimed that enslaved people were part of the

family, the family was ordained by God, and thus to usurp its structure would be to go against God's plan for humankind. It is not hard, after all, to find passages in the Bible that seem to condone slavery—whether in the Law of Moses, comments from the Apostle Paul, or even in the references to biblical patriarchs owning slaves. In line with their reading of these passages, White southerners envisioned a patriarchal family that included slaves at the bottom of the hierarchy. This was the model for what the anthropologist Sophie Bjork-James calls the “divine institution” of the godly family.

But as the historian Elizabeth Jemison points out, it wasn't just that southern White Christians condoned slavery by biblical means; they took it a step further. By enslaving people of African descent, they saw themselves as *better* Christians than their northern counterparts. Patriarchal masters were God's earthly surrogates for their biological children, and Black people—who they believed could never become more than grown children—they “benevolently” provided for and guided. In a popular tract in 1857, Presbyterian minister Frederick Ross proclaimed slavery “ordained of God” and traced the authority structure of the patriarchal and racially ordered family all the way back to the book of Genesis. Just as it was good for women and children to submit to the male head of house as a wise and divine household figure, Ross's tract outlined, it was good for slaves to submit to their masters. In this model, freedom came through surrender to God-ordained authorities. For Black people, this meant accepting the headship of the White master as part of God's design. God the Father was embodied in their White father-figure.

For many White Christians in the antebellum South, slavery was a mandate from God. To question it, according to the historian Luke Harlow, meant to question the very order of society. Doing away with slavery might lead to the downfall of civilization. White southerners wondered if there wasn't a slippery slope to other forms of nonhierarchical family structures and societal organizing. Thus, when the Civil War began in 1861, White southern Christians across

denominational lines—from Methodists to Baptists to Presbyterians to Episcopalians—imagined themselves as fighting not only for economic, patriotic, and cultural reasons but in order to defend God’s mandated societal order. In other words, they saw themselves as defending Christian family values by enslaving other humans.

This continued throughout the era after the Civil War known as Reconstruction. The Southern Methodists claimed, about slavery, that “the position of Southern Methodism on that subject was scriptural. Our opinions have undergone no change.” The Southern Baptists wrapped their proslavery theology in the language of the Lost Cause—the myth that the South fought a just war defending a Christian civilization against the greedy and power-hungry North. The Southern Baptist Seminary started in 1846 under the auspices of a proslavery theology. After the war, it used the Lost Cause to continue to defend the “benevolent” form of enslavement that had been abolished in the wake of the South’s surrender.

Anti-Black racism—along with anti-Asian, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Latinx racisms and the religious foundation that justified them—hardly dissipated as the nation entered the twentieth century. The best example is the prevalence of the Ku Klux Klan from 1915 to the Great Depression. The KKK started in the years after the Civil War but was eventually extinguished by the end of the nineteenth century. However, in 1915 the second iteration of the Klan formed and began to spread its message of hate. By 1924, it had at least four million members—and that number likely does not capture those affiliated with the Klan who were not official members, including wives who supported their husbands’ membership but were not members themselves. In the 1920s, mayors, congressmen, and pastors were all part of the Klan. For White families in the South, belonging to the Klan was normal—as normal, even, as joining the Boy Scouts or Rotary Club today. It was seen as a sign of patriotism and, as always, a commitment to the American family. It was also a way to be part of a Christian organization full of good American boys who put God and America first.

The Klan is the most well-known White supremacist hate group in the history of the country. What is less well known is that it was founded on—and sold itself—as a thoroughly Christian organization, whose goal was to take America back for God. The Klan's identity rested on a tripartite list of enemies: religious minorities (mainly Jews and Catholics), Black people, and immigrants. It combated these foes not only in the name of patriotism but also for the sake of Christ. Klan members displayed crosses as a reminder of the character on which their organization was modeled, as explained in the Klan newspaper in 1923: "sanctified and made holy nearly nineteen hundred years ago by the suffering and blood of the crucified Christ, bathed in the blood of fifty million martyrs who died in the most holy faith, it stands in every Klavern of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan as a constant reminder that Christ is our criterion of character."

Kelly J. Baker, a preeminent scholar of the Klan's White Christian nationalism, maintains that the Klan's goal was to "re-conquer" the nation as a Protestant, White, and 100 percent American nation. Like slavery-defending Christians before them, Klan members' vision of the country was inseparable from both their Christianity and their White supremacy, because their Christianity and their White supremacy were entangled all the way through. The fiery cross that the Klan lit during ceremonies and left on the lawns of Black neighbors and other enemies, Baker argues, was both a light to the world and a warning to enemies. Seeing their nation as a city on a hill, White Christians viewed the nation's identity as being founded on the cross, which serves at the same time as a warning. "Perhaps Christ's light did emanate from the burning cross," Baker says, "but lifting up the fiery cross as a central symbol of the Klan was also an attempt to 'rally the forces of Christianity' to take back the nation. Conquering required purging the 'hordes of the anti-Christ' and the 'enemies' of Americanism from America. The cross served as beacon and warning. For Klansmen, its glow provided comfort, but for those 'enemies,' the fire terrified."

Though it never went away, the Klan dissipated by the early 1930s due to sex scandals and shady financial dealings on the part of its leaders. But its cultural ubiquity from 1915 to the Great Depression provides a clear lesson for anyone who thinks that racism and proslavery “family values” were isolated in the South. The Klan had members in all forty-eight contiguous states. It was a presence in big cities like Boston, in small towns from Kansas to Idaho, and in growing suburban enclaves—including Anaheim, California, the eventual home of Disneyland in Orange County. The Klan’s Christian nationalism, built on the foundations of racism, xenophobia, and hatred of religious minorities, reflected the family values of White America from sea to shining sea.

## WHITE VICTIMHOOD

Viewed in the context of proslavery theologies and the Christian nationalist agenda of the KKK, White Christians’ reactions to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision are not surprising. In the years after the 1954 decision, White southerners removed their kids from the newly integrated school systems in order to uphold the “family values” that had prevailed in the South, and in most of the country, since before the Civil War. The story of mid-twentieth-century America is often framed as one of ever-increasing equality and liberty for Black Americans and other people of color. And the middle decades of the century did witness the end of Jim Crow, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and the implementation of the Voting Rights Act. But the story of backlash to this progress is vital to understanding the dominant presence of White Christian nationalism in our current political and cultural landscape.

While *Brown v. Board* was a landmark moment for these parallel American stories, it was another court case that activated White evangelicals politically in the South and the Sunbelt. In 1969, fifteen years after *Brown v. Board*, Mississippi’s schools were finally set to be

desegregated after many appeals and legal blockades. The only problem in places like Holmes County, Mississippi, was that when the Black students enrolled in the previously Whites-only schools, almost none of the White children remained. Only a few dozen of roughly eight hundred students in the county were left. Their parents had seen the integrated future of the schools and had enrolled them in private Christian academies. By the following year, 1970, there were no White children enrolled in the Holmes school district. There was, however, a bustling nexus of church-affiliated, White-only private schools, which were accepting all the self-exiles from the public system.

Two related lawsuits ensued. In the first, *Green v. Kennedy*, the court decided that the segregation academies should lose their tax-exempt status because the Civil Rights Act forbade racial discrimination. While the first suit resulted in just a preliminary injunction, the following year the DC circuit court's decision in *Green v. Connally* solidified the ruling. Institutions like segregation academies that engaged in active segregation would no longer be eligible for tax-exempt status under the law.

In 1970, Bob Jones University, an evangelical university in Greenville, South Carolina, received a letter from the IRS asking if it had a segregation policy. If it did, according to the Civil Rights Act's segregation provisions the university would be in danger of losing its tax-exempt status. The university, led by Bob Jones III, answered plainly, admitting that it did not admit Black people, because the Bible mandated segregation. The battle waged on for several years, but by 1976 the IRS had revoked the university's tax-exempt status.

This created the backlash Weyrich and Viguerie needed to rouse White evangelicals to political action. They seized on the IRS's threat to tax a Christian university to rally evangelical ministers such as Jerry Falwell of Lynchburg, Virginia, Tim LaHaye of San Diego, California, and others in a new coalition bent on protecting what they called family values and religious liberty. While Falwell and his fellow evangelical ministers told their congregations to stay out of

politics during the civil rights movements, they now changed their tone. Good Christians, they argued, needed to organize, vote, and protest in order to make sure that their rights weren't trampled and God's United States of America didn't slide into godless chaos. This movement became known as the Religious Right.

### **FORMING THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT**

As Bob Jones's standoff with the IRS carried on in the 1970s, Jerry Falwell, Tim and Beverly LaHaye, and several other prominent White evangelical ministers began to meet to discuss how to take back American culture and politics. In the 1960s, Falwell was a segregationist who would not allow Black people to attend his church. In line with the times, he opened his own segregationist academy school in conjunction with his church. Throughout the 1960s Falwell railed against the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr.; he preached to his congregation that ministers should win souls, not march in the streets or get involved in social or political causes. But by the early 1970s, the desegregation issue, along with the war in Vietnam and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, was enough to draw him out of the pulpit and into political organizing. Falwell already had a television show, *The Old-Time Gospel Hour*, that reached millions of listeners each week. At one point, Falwell claimed he had a bigger audience than Johnny Carson. He wasn't alone. Evangelical preachers had been leveraging radio and television for decades as a way to reach audiences directly. They had a ready-made apparatus primed for political messaging and voter mobilizing.

Falwell would go on to become one of the faces of the Religious Right, along with the LaHayes, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, Ralph Reed, and a few others. It's worth noting that the alliance between the LaHayes and Falwell was an alliance between the South and Southern California. Falwell's Liberty Church and segregation academy were in Lynchburg, Virginia, and the LaHayes were headquartered

in San Diego, where they led a megachurch and Christian school. Their alliance cemented the connections between Southern California and the South.

In the turmoil of the tax-exemption fight, Falwell and his cohorts convinced their evangelical followers that it was time to fight back; and they knew that the best way to fight was to play the victim. Instead of framing the issue in racial terms—which they knew would sink their cause just as soon as it left shore—they instead sold the IRS's enforcement of the Civil Rights Act's segregation provision as an attack on family values and religious liberty. The IRS's revocation of Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status was an example of egregious government overreach, White evangelical leaders argued to their people, and they'd all better watch out for what might come next.

In terms of the family, Falwell and the budding leaders of the Religious Right said that they should have the right to educate their children as they saw fit—especially in a religious setting according to the contours of their faith. They complained about new sex education curricula in schools and the fact that corporate prayer was no longer allowed in the classroom. In ways endemic to Christian nationalism, they used the cover of the family to hide the racial issue at the core. Falwell encouraged anyone who would listen to take their kids out of the “damned” public school system. “I hope to see the day when, as in the early days of our country,” Falwell says in his 1979 book *America Can Be Saved!* “We won't have any public schools. The Christians will have taken over them and will be running them.” It was a bob-and-weave strategy. If he and his peers could make the desegregation issue into an attack on the family, they could sell it to their congregations and White Christians all over the country.

In addition to family values, Falwell and other leaders claimed that the tax issue made them victims of a tyrannical government. One Orange County man put it this way: “There is an inherent right there of people that our society and our Congress has decided is tax

exempt. They are not granting anything, and it isn't a question of [the IRS] granting anything." A young congressman from Georgia named Newt Gingrich also weighed in to ask why the IRS was acting like Congress in trying to enforce laws. Their job, he opined, is to collect taxes, not right social ills.

The issue came to a head in 1978, when President Jimmy Carter's administration advised the IRS to begin enforcing the law in earnest. Even though the policy was put in place under Nixon, the New Right (led by Weyrich and Viguerie) and the Religious Right (fronted by Falwell) joined forces in order to bring the issue to the forefront of American political consciousness. In 1976, Weyrich approached Falwell to propose forming a new political organization, one that would leverage the power and influence of White evangelical clergy and parachurch leaders in galvanizing the tens of millions of conservative people of faith in the South, the Midwest, and the Sunbelt to vote Republican. They could use their pulpits and media outlets, Weyrich pitched, to change the course of American politics. In turn, he offered Falwell and his coalition a political party that would prioritize their "family values," their American nationalism, and, most of all, their Christian identity. The GOP would become the host that housed the budding Religious Right in a symbiotic political alliance.

In 1979, Falwell, Weyrich, and a few others merged the New Right and the Religious Right. Their goal was to fight for an agenda that was protraditional family, pronational defense, pro-Israel, and prolife.

Their first move? Wage all-out war on the sitting president—who happened to be a Southern Baptist, Georgia-born, Bible-toting, evangelical Sunday school teacher named Jimmy Carter.

## **POLITICAL MIDWIVES AND THE VALUE OF SEGREGATION**

Before moving ahead with this story, we need to notice two aspects of the formation of the New Religious Right. First, there is a through line: from proslavery theology, to the Christian nationalism of the

KKK, to the White evangelical reactions against the *Brown v. Board* decision, to the IRS tax controversy of the 1970s. Christian nationalism is an ideology that sees the United States as a nation built for and by Christians. *White* Christian nationalism adds a racial layer to the mix by claiming that White Christians deserve to be at the top of the racial, economic, and political hierarchies. They reserve the right to make decisions about schools, taxes, and elections even if they are the minority and even if their proposals are racist and exclusionary.

The family values agenda that has been touted throughout Christian nationalist spaces since the 1960s is a direct descendant of a proslavery, White terrorist, segregationist lineage. The birth of the Religious Right as part of the New Right in the 1970s was the result of a repackaging of racist ideologies in the form of family values and protests against taxation. When Christian nationalists don't get what they want, they claim victimhood. Donning the mantle of traditional values in the face of an increasingly "secular" and "sexualized" society hides the insidious core of the movement: a centuries-long desire to maintain the United States as a White, Christian, patriarchal nation.

Second, the birth of the New Religious Right and the sweeping Christian nationalist movement that eventually took hold of the country during the Trump presidency wouldn't have come into being without the help of midwives. Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, and their New Right cohorts were, as the historian Daniel Schlozman calls them, the political "entrepreneurs" and tacticians who exploited evangelical concerns about race, taxes, and the family in order to transform this religious voting bloc of tens of millions of people into Republican stalwarts. The New Right merged with the Religious Right through the issues of race, segregation, and "family values." Weyrich and Viguerie were political operatives bent on taking America back for the White, landowning men to whom God had granted it. The evangelical cavalry was the surest way to achieve their

goals. Therefore, they did everything possible to court, contour, and mobilize them in the 1970s and beyond.

By doing so, they institutionalized the extremism Goldwater cultivated in the 1960s into a viable nationwide movement in the seventies. “We are different from previous generations of conservatives,” Weyrich said in 1978. “We are radicals, working to overturn the present power structure.”

White Christians were the perfect audience for this message. Told they were losing their country and the free exercise of their faith, terrified by an out-of-control federal government and cultural revolutions swirling all around them, the Religious Right accepted—and cultivated—the message of extremism. It is now, half a century later, the calling card of the contemporary GOP.

### **WHITE JESUS AND WAKING UP TO THE LONG CON**

When my friend and I met for Bible study that day, the White Jesus in our Bibles was the “Head of Christ,” an image created by painter Warner Sallman in 1940, but originally sketched in 1924. There’s a good chance you’ve seen it, since it is the most widespread artistic image in American history. It has been replicated and disseminated over a billion times—in family Bibles, in Gideon Bibles placed in hotel drawers, and on mantles and refrigerators and guest bathroom walls all over the country.

Sallman’s Christ is a Nordic-looking figure who looks more like a man from Sweden than a brown, Palestinian Jew from Nazareth. His fair skin, blue eyes, and wavy dirty-blond hair reflect a European savior. The work is neither a historical representation of Christ nor meant to be one. It is a projection of what Sallman and his White contemporaries imagined as properly representative of the country’s faith. And it is a decoder ring for understanding both why I assumed as a teenager that White Jesus was the real Jesus and how the New

Right merged with White evangelicals to form the New Christian Right in the 1970s.

For many White Americans, particularly in the South (and Southern California), Jesus is, and always has been, a White savior. This is not an accident. Representations of Christ as a White man indicate a larger theological, social, and racial matrix of White supremacy justified by religious means. White Jesus is a projection of White desire—a model of how the United States should be ordered: A White patriarchal savior at the helm, shepherding his flock and guiding them toward their manifest destiny.

Before leaving the evangelical movement, I made two stark realizations: the Jesus pictured in my Bible was the product of White supremacy, and my faith-based political activism had been shaped by political mercenaries rather than by the gospel. White Jesus was a tool used by politicians to activate people of faith in the mid-twentieth century. Our obsession with abortion was a front for racism and patriarchy. A sinking feeling plagued me when I learned how a political insurgency shaped the politics of family values I had adopted as a teenager and young adult. If our morals, our politics, and our culture had been formed by outside forces, I wondered, what was the real motivation for evangelical political action? What was the point of all this work to reform the country?

As I soon realized, it came down to one thing: power.