RENDER TO CAESAR: Some Baptists feel â□□caught in the middleâ□□

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Some Baptists feel ‘caught in the middle’

By Robert Marus

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It may look dead, but it’s really just evolving—even though its members might not like that word. And it may be developing into something its founders wouldn’t recognize.

That’s what some experts say about the future of the Religious Right as a political movement. And even many very conservative Southern Baptists are part of the trend.

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The recent death of Virginia Baptist pastor and political activist Jerry Falwell put an exclamation point on months' worth of media attention to

the ever-more-evident fissures within conservative Christian ranks over how to proceed in secular politics.

Although his influence had waned in recent years, Falwell widely was regarded as a godfather of the Religious Right. Historians of religion and politics regard his launch of the Moral Majority in 1979 as seminal in unifying conservative Christians as a voting bloc.

But now Falwell is dead, and his peers in the "Big Three" of the Religious Right—Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson and Focus on the Family head James Dobson—are advanced in years.

The movement they launched, meanwhile, seems to have passed the apex of its power. In 1994, Christian conservatives helped elect a Republican Congress dominated by their own kind; it stayed in power more than a decade. They twice helped provide the margin of victory for a president—George W. Bush—who not only spoke their theological language, but also provided at least lip service to their favorite legislative goals. And they, with the elevation of Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court, finally were within reach of having a reliable socially conservative majority on that powerful body.

But Democrats won the 2006 congressional elections handily, and the current top contenders for the 2008 GOP presidential nomination don't inspire in Religious Right leaders the same kind of trust that Bush did—to put it mildly.

At the same time, many younger evangelicals are rethinking which issues influence their voting. Some are beginning to assert that protecting the environment, supporting international human rights and avoiding war are "pro-life" issues just as much as efforts to stop abortion. And polls show homosexuality and government-sanctioned prayers don't get young evangelicals nearly as exercised as those old "wedge issues" do their

elders.

Is it time to break out the dirges and the black veils for a political movement?

“No,” says Barry Hankins, an expert on Christian conservatives who teaches at Baylor University, noting it’s not the first time some prematurely have declared the Religious Right dead.

“It came up in about 1989 or so when Jerry Falwell shut down the Moral Majority,” he recalled. Another flurry of eulogies for the Religious Right appeared in the press in the late 1990s, after the Moral Majority’s successor—the Christian Coalition—began to flounder.

Several years ago, Hankins proposed the notion the Christian Right wasn’t dying; it was maturing. Rather than existing as a single, highly visible organization, it was becoming a movement with diverse influences.

Such maturation could be happening to the Christian conservative movement again, Han-kins said—but it might end up looking fundamentally different as a result.

“I think you have this new kind of wider segment of evangelicals who are publicly oriented and politically conscious, but they’re not tied to the old Christian Right machinery,” he said.

Randall Ballmer, a Columbia University historian and expert in American evangelicalism, agreed. “The younger folks are worried about the environment, they’re worried about climate change, they’re worried about global warming,” he said.

Younger evangelicals also focus on international human rights, poverty and healthcare. Southern Baptist mega-celebrity Rick Warren, for instance, has adopted alleviating the AIDS crisis in Africa and other Third World

concerns as a major emphasis of his California church's ministry.

The divide between the Religious Right power structure and new leaders who want to adopt a broader set of causes as core emphases has been laid bare by well-publicized intramural battles in recent months.

One was a long-simmering dispute over the chief public-policy officer for the National Association of Evangelicals. In March, a group of conservative Christian luminaries—including Dobson and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council—sent a letter to NAE board members asking them to rein in or fire Richard Cizik, the organization's vice president for governmental affairs. Dobson and his colleagues were upset with Cizik for his outspokenness on confronting global warming.

He and other environmentalist Christians have argued that, if the scientific consensus is right that global warming is real and human-induced, millions of the world's poor people's lives and livelihoods are threatened by rising sea levels and changing weather patterns. Therefore, Cizik has said, drastic action to reverse global warming's effects is necessary.

Not so fast, said the letter writers, who echoed the view of many pro-business conservatives that whether global warming is human-caused still is an open question—as is the question of whether drastic efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions would end up having a more detrimental economic effect than climate change itself.

Just as importantly, they argued, Cizik was "using the global-warming controversy to shift the emphasis away from the great moral issues of our time, notably the sanctity of human life, the integrity of marriage, and the teaching of sexual abstinence and morality to our children. In their place has come a preoccupation with climate concerns that extend beyond the NAE's mandate and its own statement of purpose."

They released the missive to news outlets in an effort to mount a public-

relations campaign against Cizik, but NAE board members rebuffed the ouster attempt.

Ballmer hopes a broadening of the evangelical agenda reflects the movement coming back to its past.

“It’s evangelicals reclaiming their birthright and their historical legacy as reformers, in the 19th-century sense of the term,” he said, noting that evangelicals in 19th-century America and Britain often were at the forefront of progressive political movements. They led fights against slavery, for women’s rights and for child welfare, for instance.

“What I hope is happening is that evangelicals are beginning to wake up to that, to recognize that evangelical activism in the 19th century—particularly in the antebellum period—was oriented toward those on the margins of society,” he said.

Whether it’s a departure from the Religious Right or an evolution of it, the trend is evident even within the Southern Baptist Convention. Some blogging Southern Baptist pastors have included, among their complaints about the SBC leadership, critiques of its close relationship with the right wing of the Republican Party.

“While I’ve been a card-carrying member of the so-called ‘Religious Right’ since I first voted for Pat Buchanan in the 1996 Presidential primaries, I’m sick and tired of the Religious Right,” said Texas pastor Benjamin Cole, in a post on his blog (baptistblog.wordpress.com) written prior to Falwell’s death.

“I can no longer stand to see Southern Baptist leaders pander to Republican politicians, and I’m ready for a man to occupy the White House who won’t shun evangelical voters on the one hand, or flirt with them on the other.”

Cole, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Arlington, said merely opposing legalized abortion doesn't make someone 100 percent pro-life. For example, messengers to the SBC annual meeting watered down an already-mild resolution about global warming after some objected the resolution encouraged too much government involvement in the issue.

"Our predecessors in the Southern Baptist Convention, the most ardent supporters of the conservative resurgence, somehow see global warming and … ecological concerns among young evangelicals (as) somehow apart from any Christian concern," he said. "But they think the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms is very much an issue of religious liberty."

Cole said pastors like him find a dissonance in such views. "I think there's a lot of young, emerging, arising—whatever you want to call it—evangelicals who watch that and go, 'There is no coherent political philosophy of the Religious Right. There is no unifying theme except for support for the Republican Party,'" he said.

Paul Littleton, an Oklahoma pastor who operates the "Caught in the Middle" blog (middlekid.typepad.com) said in a December post that he—a Republican—is nonetheless tired of evangelicalism's close association with the GOP.

"I'm conflicted because I am a part of an American evangelical Christianity that is almost entirely and uncritically in bed with the Republican Party—who will support them as long as they support capitalism and oppose abortion and homosexual marriage. Do that, and we'll vote for you, we'll go to war with you, we'll let you spend the country into oblivion, and we'll be silent when you make sexual advances toward minor pages. And I don't go for any of that stuff," said Littleton, pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Sapulpa, a suburb of Tulsa.

Baylor's Hankins said the SBC's leaders getting closely involved with the Republican Party was an understandable part of the "ebb and flow" of Southern Baptist life.

"I think part of what we've seen over the last quarter-century is that, as the Southern Baptist conservative movement gained ascendancy and gained control of the denomination, it was a heady experience to be aligned with political power. But, on the other hand, it was genuinely a way of having an influence in the culture," he said.

"And as these things go, the avenue to Southern Baptists exercising influence in the culture can also work the other way around, with the Republican Party utilizing the power and influence of Southern Baptists for Republican ends. So, you had a nice symbiotic relationship there."

Cole hopes his generation is beginning to "regard partisan politics as the 'tar baby.' You know, you can punch at it, but you're going to get stuck in it," he said.

"As a Southern Baptist, I don't want to wake up any more in the morning and look on the pillow beside me and find an elephant."