

Focus on the Family founder James Dobson dies at 89

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(RNS)—James C. Dobson, a psychologist who advocated a “family values” brand of conservative Christian morality on his popular radio shows and in his bestselling books, died Aug. 21. He was 89.

“Dr. Dobson was a pioneer—a man of deep conviction whose voice shaped the way generations view faith, family and culture,” said Gary Bauer, senior vice president of public policy at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

“His bold leadership, integrity and compassion helped equip countless families to thrive in a world of shifting values. He was a mentor, a counselor and a steady voice of truth in turbulent times.”

A child psychologist by training, Dobson founded Focus on the Family in 1977 to promote conservative views on parenting, defending the spanking of children as a means of discipline.

The nonprofit, based in Colorado Springs, Colo., became hugely influential, first among evangelical Christians and then among a broader public thanks to his internationally syndicated radio programs.

Dobson was heard on more than 4,000 North American radio stations and his show was translated into 27 languages in more than 160 countries, according to the website of the institute.

His parenting precepts were further outlined in *Dare to Discipline*, a book first published in 1970, and its many sequels. Dobson ultimately wrote more than 70 books.

Gained political influence

As Dobson's popularity with cultural conservatives grew, political leaders sought him out. In the 1980s Dobson regularly was invited to the White House to consult with President Ronald Reagan and his staff. In 1985, Dobson was appointed to Attorney General Edwin Meese's Commission on Pornography.

In 1983, Dobson and Bauer started the Family Research Council in Washington to advocate for pro-family policies.

Franklin Graham of Samaritan's Purse, who said Dobson died after a brief illness, hailed Dobson's almost five decades of ministry.

"Dr. Dobson was a staunch defender of the family and stood for morality and Biblical values as much as any person in our country's history," Graham, a son of evangelist Billy Graham, wrote in a Facebook post. "His legacy and impact for Jesus Christ will continue on for generations."

Dobson's unflinching conservatism rankled some Republican leaders at the height of his influence. During the 1996 presidential campaign, for instance, Dobson warned that any attempt to water down the anti-abortion plank in the GOP platform would result in widespread defection from Republican ranks by evangelical voters. He also objected to suggestions that the party's presidential nominee, Bob Dole, choose a running mate who backed abortion rights.

But Dobson's mark on conservative thought and evangelical Christian politics continues to this day. In 1994, he was one of the co-founders—along with evangelical figures such as Bill Bright and D. James Kennedy—of the Alliance Defense Fund, a legal organization now known as Alliance Defending Freedom.

The ADF at one point employed Mike Johnson, who has since become U.S. House speaker, and it was a key proponent of the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case, which resulted in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022.

"The world has lost a mighty voice for truth and an incredibly influential servant of Christ today," said Kristen Waggoner, ADF CEO, president and chief counsel. "Dobson's bold leadership and commitment to the gospel shaped the lives of so many and will continue to do so many years after his passing."

Child rearing and political themes

A Shreveport, La., native, Dobson grew up in Texas and Oklahoma, the son of an evangelist and pastor in the Church of the Nazarene. After graduating from a Nazarene college in California, Dobson earned a doctorate in child development from the University of Southern California. He then joined the pediatric faculty of USC's medical school, where he taught for 14 years.

Dobson left academia in 1976, and the next year he launched Focus on the Family, beginning from a two-room suite in Arcadia, Calif. As Dobson's radio show and the organization swelled in popularity, he increasingly became a force among conservative opinion-makers.

Dobson eventually moved the organization to Colorado Springs, a conservative, largely Republican, city, where he built an international organization with a staff of more than 1,300 employees.

In addition to the radio show, the center attracted 200,000 visitors a year and opened an \$8.5 million welcome center where films, videotapes and books espousing Dobson's worldview could be purchased.

In addition to discussions of child rearing, conservative political themes

quickly became a staple of the radio show.

Discussing the state of higher education, for instance, Dobson said on one episode, “State universities are breeding grounds, quite literally, for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, homosexual behavior, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, alcoholism and drug abuse.”

Yet, unlike prominent televangelists such as Pat Robertson, who ran unsuccessfully for president, and Jerry Falwell, a longtime conservative activist, Dobson initially focused on the power of persuasion and his listening audience, which at one time swelled to an estimated 200 million in 95 countries.

Unlike religious conservative activists such as Bauer, who would run for president as a Republican, and onetime Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed, Dobson spoke less often to the secular media, an institution he blamed in part for what he deemed society’s moral decay.

“What is tragic and yet curious about the period between 1965 and 1975 is that the radical left had virtually no organized opposition. The media was entirely sympathetic towards its point of view,” said an authorized biography, *Turning Hearts Toward Home*, written by Focus on the Family official Rolf Zettersten.

Controversial view on spanking

But on his radio shows, Dobson easily switched from political topics to cultural and religious-based ones, always centering his concern on how Americans were raising their children.

“There is nothing more important to most Christian parents than the salvation of their children,” he once said. “Every other goal and achievement in life is anemic and insignificant compared to this

transmission of faith to their offspring.”

Many of Dobson’s teachings about child rearing, on spanking in particular, were questioned at the time, and even younger evangelicals have pushed back on his thinking in recent decades.

“Dobson taught people, spank your kid, but sit them down and put them on your lap and hug them,” therapist Krispin Mayfield said in 2024 about Dobson. This combination of pain and affection, Mayfield told Religion News Service, can shape how children view parents and authority figures and can impact their view of God.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, which countered Dobson’s statements and actions for decades, criticized his stance on spanking when he was appointed in the 1990s to a federal child welfare commission: “James Dobson deserves a ‘Time Out,’ not political favors.”

In reaction to his death, the foundation said in a posting on X: “James Dobson’s legacy isn’t ‘family values’—it’s intolerance. He blamed mass shootings on LGBTQ rights & abortion and reduced marriage to a sexist bargain. FFRF will keep fighting the Christian nationalism he championed.”

Left Focus on the Family in 2009

Dobson left Focus on the Family in 2009—some reports at the time said he was pushed out—and launched the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute and “Family Talk,” a new nationally syndicated radio broadcast.

“One of the common errors of founder-presidents is to hold to the reins of leadership too long, thereby preventing the next generation from being prepared for executive authority,” Dobson said in a statement when his resignation was announced.

Dobson last recorded a broadcast in March and it aired in April, according

to the public relations agency representing his family and the institute.

Dobson also turned his energy toward the imaginary, supporting an “Adventures in Odyssey” radio drama series with Focus on the Family and co-authoring the 2013 dystopian novel *Fatherless*, in which parents of more than two children are pejoratively dubbed “breeders,” reflecting the anti-family sentiments he sought to counter.

“In 1977 I founded what became a worldwide ministry dedicated to the preservation of the home,” he told RNS shortly after the novel was published.

“That effort placed me in one cultural skirmish after another, unwittingly confronting forces much darker than I knew. I don’t pretend to comprehend what occurs in the unseen realm. But I know that we all live in what C.S. Lewis called ‘enemy-occupied territory.’”

He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Shirley Dobson.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *The 7th paragraph was edited after the article first was posted to correct a date.*