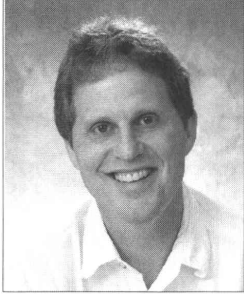


# A Tale of Two Baptists: *Jimmy Carter and Jerry Falwell*



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*At first glance they seemed to have so much in common. Both President Jimmy Carter and evangelist Jerry Falwell were products of the early twentieth-century American rural South, both born to devout mothers who stressed strict adherence to their common Baptist faith. Both stressed the value of family.*

“I had a very developed sense of family that centered around church activities,” Carter recalled. The family, Falwell concurred, “is God’s basic unit in society.”<sup>1</sup>

While both professed to be “born again” evangelicals, Carter and Falwell emerged bitter political enemies, their similarities paling as their policy differences fueled increasingly public disputes. The devolution in the relationship of these two men, sharing so much in common, tells much about how the libertine culture of the post-World War II age exacerbated tensions within the American Baptist community, proving a wedge to divide further a faith already known for its divisions. Feminism, legal abortion, and demands for gay and lesbian civil rights—among other issues—appeared a direct challenge to the traditional nuclear family and, as such, fueled a more doctrinaire, rigid, and politically active cohort of Baptists.

De-emphasizing the autonomy of individual conscience so crucial historically to Baptists, these new activists made the Carter years an

important period of transformation. The actions of Jimmy Carter and the manner in which Jerry Falwell reacted proved pivotal in this transformation. Helping to bring tensions within the Baptist community to a boil while adding publicity to the divisive issue of the nature of family, the two were at the vanguard of a new chapter in the long and fractious history of Baptists in America.

Contention was nothing new to Baptists, of course, their traditional anti-creedal sentiment and aversion to hierarchy ensuring not only an emphasis on religious freedom—separation of church and state—but also a history of denominational dispute. In 1845 with the Triennial Convention split over slavery, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) formed. After the Civil War, African Americans departed to form their own congregations while, in more recent years, Baptists frequently disagreed on issues such as the social gospel, evolution, Catholic immigration, and temperance. Scholars have noted the role Baptists played in early manifestations of the modern Religious Right, often led by grassroots activists and disagreeing on the wisdom of political involvement.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the years Baptists organized affiliations, such as the Baptist Bible Fellowship International (BBFI) in 1950, to promote particular theological interpretations. Adopting a statement of faith that suggested a more doctrinal approach and greater emphasis on the inerrancy of scripture than the SBC, the BBFI operated as a more conservative organization even if its roots and theology strongly overlapped. In short, the SBC and the BBFI maintained separate affiliations but shared a common heritage and, at least in regard to the more fundamentalist elements within the SBC, friendly relations. They both emphasized scripture, adult baptism, family, and missionary work, assuming as their primary goal the salvation of individual souls more than any collective redemption of society.

It was into this relatively stable amalgam that Carter and Falwell entered, Carter a member of the SBC and Falwell the BBFI. Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church occasionally worked with conservative SBC-affiliated congregations while Falwell sometimes coordinated education and missionary outreach with like-minded SBC leaders.<sup>3</sup> If nothing else, the associations with which Carter and Falwell aligned were distinct but still part of a collective whole, their shared traditions of independence and evangelism still providing a theological umbrella that defined

and united them.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the Carter presidency, however, all this had changed. Any unity had gone the way of past Baptist disputes. Carter and Falwell had led the charge, and Baptists in America would never be the same.

### **Foundations for a New Schism**

The old problem of race was the first hint of dissension to come. Embracing the activism of fellow Baptist Martin Luther King Jr., Carter advocated in 1966 integration of his Plains Baptist Church. "Members who were more progressive . . . split off," Carter recalled. Falwell, however, disagreed in his famous 1965 "Ministers and Marchers" sermon. "Preachers are not called to be politicians," he countered, but "soul winners."<sup>5</sup>

Such pietistic separation, however, was difficult for Falwell to maintain. Three years before his sermon the Supreme Court had declared in *Engel vs. Vitale* that school prayer was unconstitutional. By 1965 a growing youth counterculture challenged the ordered world many Baptists knew. When the Internal Revenue Service promised in 1970 to revoke the tax exemptions of racially discriminatory schools, many Baptist, and followed six years later by revoking the exemption for Bob Jones University, Falwell reversed course and embraced political activism as a defense against cultural dynamism. The IRS ruling, Falwell later recalled, "made [the SBC and BBFI] realize that we had to fight." Mirroring Falwell's new emphasis on universal truths, the SBC revised its statement of faith in 1963, adding to its preamble that Baptist autonomy did not mean "an absence of certain doctrines." This addition, another revision declared in 2000, "rightly sought to identify and affirm certain definitive doctrines" that united all Baptists. This growing conservatism strengthened the theological overlap with the BBFI but alienated many moderates.<sup>6</sup>

At the core of the new conservative critique was a concern that the libertine culture posed, in Falwell's words, a "vicious assault on the family." Feminism's narcissistic individualism mocked the traditional, divinely-ordained role of housewife and encouraged despondency. It "distorted our values," according to a Falwell colleague. "The [Baptist] church is not without blame and must reassert the dignity of the family." Falwell agreed: "God called the father to be the spiritual leader."<sup>7</sup> Tied to the critique were issues such as homosexuality and abortion. "Militant homosexuals exploit

disillusionment with marriage," wrote one Baptist. "Homosexuality is a sign of the family's failure to be what the society needs it to be: a force for stability, the locus of affection, and the place where children must learn love, trust, and belief." Abortion, others claimed, spoke to an individualism that undermined marriage, de-emphasizing family and children.<sup>8</sup>

This defense of family emphasized certain scriptural passages while denying alternative interpretations. Noting the destruction of the city of Sodom, the codes of Leviticus, and the letters of Paul, conservatives argued that scripture condemned sodomy on fifteen occasions. Moreover, the Bible proscribed women as homemakers and helpmates, the principle vessels of virtue but in need of protection. Paul's letter to the Ephesians was clear. "Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord," the verse read. "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is head of the church." Missouri Baptist pastor John Percley summarized this view of scripture: "God made men and women with a difference."<sup>9</sup>

The foundations for a new strain of conservative Baptists had only just begun, however, with any doctrine far from complete. While some Baptists protested the controversial 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe vs. Wade* that established abortion as a constitutional right, most remained silent, many maintaining that the decision was an appropriate articulation of the Baptist tradition of separation of church and state. "Religious liberty, human equality and justice are advanced by the decision," the SBC reported.<sup>10</sup> Ed Dobson, an associate of Falwell's, recalled that abortion not only failed initially to galvanize the SBC, but even the BBFI, the issue so new to discourse. While SBC conservatives were able to add wording to a 1976 resolution that discouraged abortion, the majority reiterated for the third time in six years freedom of conscience. Even the BBFI remained largely silent. Similarly, for most Southern Baptists other headlines overshadowed homosexuality.<sup>11</sup>

While an SBC resolution for the first time declared homosexuality "contrary to biblical truth," the affiliation defeated a harsher condemnation while the BBFI avoided the matter as a private, not public, sin. Polls, meanwhile, indicated that while resistance to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) paralleled church attendance in the South, the resiliency of anti-creedal sentiment ensured division among Southern Baptists.<sup>12</sup> While Falwell saw opportunity for publicity in all these issues, his

fledging ministry remained in debt and, by 1976, only recently emerged from litigation and government oversight. Even as he began to envision “a holy war for the survival of the family” that would strengthen conservatives across all Baptist associations, he recognized conservatives had not yet gained enough strength.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Emergence of Carter**

If presidential candidate Carter hoped to avoid the emerging controversy within his own denomination in 1976, his deft maneuvering helped—as did fate. When the *Washington Post* detailed in a March story his “born again” experience, an explosion of national coverage resulted, Carter later estimating that more than one hundred articles had explored his Southern Baptist faith. Reporters now spoke of the “religious issue,” and, by the end of 1976, *Newsweek* magazine had declared the “Year of the Evangelical.”<sup>14</sup>

Carter handled the new “religious issue” well overall, the one exception an acknowledgement to *Playboy* magazine that he had “committed adultery in my heart many times.” Trying to reiterate Christ’s teachings against pride, Carter stated that no man should consider himself better “because one guy screws a whole bunch of women while another guy is loyal to his wife.”<sup>15</sup> While the statement reflected well-established Baptist doctrine that all men were sinful, the explicit language shocked many Baptists and opened an opportunity for more conservative members. The pastor of the SBC’s largest congregation declared himself “highly offended,” the comments “animal thinking.”<sup>16</sup>

Moving swiftly for the publicity, Falwell pounced in a series of sermons titled “Sword of the Lord.” This, Falwell then claimed, caused the Carter campaign to threaten retribution with “an ultimatum.” When the campaign denied the charge and many stations refused to air Falwell’s comments, fearing a violation of the Federal Communication Commission’s (FCC) Fairness Doctrine, Falwell responded with a press conference at the National Press Club. “I brought in some big guns,” Falwell recalled of the conservative Baptists—from both the SBC and the BBFI—who surrounded him.<sup>17</sup>

The *Playboy* incident was the first public rift between Carter and Falwell, and, in many respects, the most public evidence to date of the

new rift between moderate and conservative Baptists. The interview, however, had no lasting impact on Carter's ability to rally a majority of the faith across the various associations. While many Baptists thought Carter's remarks reprehensible, Falwell recognized that others saw them as a "sign of honesty in the wake of Watergate."<sup>18</sup>

In reality, many Baptists embraced Carter for no other reason than the press he brought to their faith. Carter's public professions were simply "witnessing his faith in Christ," one Baptist explained admiringly, with many critics unfair to complain. "There is a growing resentment among Southern Baptists over the way Jimmy Carter is being treated by some of the secular media," reported *Christianity Today*.<sup>19</sup> If some conservatives in associations such as the BBFI quietly harbored doubts about Carter's personal theology, they could not ignore his impact. "Every indication is that evangelicalism is skyrocketing," noted one observer. Carter was born again. They were born again. It was, quite literally, an easy leap of faith.<sup>20</sup>

Despite his ambitions, even Falwell wondered. Carter was a "good moral man," he concluded, and his impact helpful. "I felt nervous about him throughout much of the campaign, fearing that he represented moderates in the SBC," Falwell recalled, reflecting his close association. "Nevertheless, the congregation did not share my doubts" with "almost two-thirds" of the most doctrinaire conservatives in the BBFI supporters. Seeking to take advantage of the momentum, Falwell shifted strategy and downplayed his differences in musical rallies dubbed "I Love America." "Carter remained popular," Falwell explained, "so there probably wasn't a single rally that we criticized him."<sup>21</sup>

Carter also downplayed the differences between moderate and conservatives, promising to convene a White House conference on the family if elected, something all Baptists welcomed. Carter's homage to the family, one author noted, was something "that Jerry Falwell could have written."<sup>22</sup> When it came to the specifics of abortion and homosexuality, however, Carter remained vague, only his support for ERA unequivocal. "Carter used language that would ring bells of recognition in diverse religious groups," biographer Betty Glad concluded, hinting at times of a literal biblical interpretation while at others quoting Kierkegaard and Barth. On the one hand, for example, he won the endorsement of Richard Neuhaus, a champion of religious orthodoxy who defined abortion and homosexuality

as “evil.” Carter publicly acknowledged homosexuality as a sin, while his campaign declared him “uncomfortable with it for personal reasons.”<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, however, Carter appointed Margaret Costanza, an outspoken supporter of gay rights, to his campaign staff while “opposing all forms of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.” It was simply hard to pin Carter down. While he promised to sign Congresswoman Bella Abzug’s gay rights bill, he did not lobby for it and, in the Democratic Convention, worked to defeat a gay rights plank. Carter promised women that he “would tear down the walls that have kept women out of the decision-making process” and even encouraged “tough” and “militant” advocacy.<sup>24</sup> He claimed to support the *Roe* decision and appointed a 51.3% Committee to give women a voice in the campaign. At the same time, however, he left open the possibility of some kind of “national statute” to restrict abortions and supported the Hyde Amendment, a proposal to restrict federal funds for abortion services. “Look, I can’t change the teachings of Christ,” Carter snapped when pressed on these issues. “I believe in them, and a lot of people do in this country as well.”<sup>25</sup>

Carter was not lying. His vagueness may have been good politics, but his positions reflected his honest interpretation of scripture. All the election-year celebration of his religion may have clouded it for many conservative Baptists, but Carter was not one of their own. “While Carter was an evangelical,” biographer Peter Bourne wrote, “he was not a fundamentalist.”<sup>26</sup> Melding a degree of existentialism into his Southern Baptist faith, he encouraged critical reasoning and interpreted many biblical passages as metaphors. As such, he shied from rigid doctrine, recognized that good people might disagree on matters of faith, and, accordingly, cherished the Baptist tradition of the separation of church and state.

While Falwell had dramatically shifted his stance on the role of government, Carter’s interpretation was more nuanced. The writings of Christian philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr represented Carter’s “political Bible” in the words of one author.<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr, in Carter’s words, was a “great twentieth-century theologian” who “particularly” influenced him.<sup>28</sup> Religion should inform politics, but one had to guard against the reverse. Government might reflect strong religious morals by example to, in Niebuhr’s view, “establish justice in a sinful world,” but policy makers had to come to terms with the relativity of human moral endeavors. This meant that policy

makers had to be realists, always working to elicit the greatest possible justice without demanding perfection. Like Falwell and the conservatives, Carter thought abortion and homosexuality sinful. Like them, he worried about the American family. Unlike them, however, he believed that it was not for government to regulate matters of individual morality. "Carter was willing to struggle with the ambiguities that exist between private views and public policy," his Baptist friend Robert Maddox summarized. Because of this stand, however, "he ran afoul of many sincere people who could not or would not operate in the middle ground."<sup>29</sup>

### The Difficult Balance

Whether a product of astute politics or broad-based "born again" pride, the 1976 election returns showed little evidence of any schism, a victorious Carter winning more southern votes than any Democrat since Harry Truman. Carter fared significantly better among self-described evangelicals than his immediate Democratic predecessors and won a majority of the Southern Baptist votes. The SBC's Broadman Press had even published his campaign biography.<sup>30</sup> In a keynote address before the SBC—which he later led—Bailey Smith was ecstatic. America needed a "born-again man in the White House . . . and his initials are the same as our Lord's." Falwell and members of the BBFI largely fell in line. While acknowledging that he might have to oppose Carter "if he violates moral codes in opposition to scripture," Falwell noted, Carter "has my respect and support." Writing his autobiography in the mid-1980s, Falwell even claimed to have been instrumental in Carter's election, the *Playboy* incident apparently forgotten.<sup>31</sup>

Baptist pride was more than evident. Before the inauguration, a group of Baptists held an early-morning "People's Prayer Service" thanking God for Carter's faith. Another group of Baptists proclaimed a "National Prayer for the President Day." Billy Graham added that he was "rootin' and tootin'" for Carter. After SBC president James Sullivan sent his congratulations, Carter promised that he would "do my best for God."<sup>32</sup> Phil Strickland of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas advocated that Carter establish a "formal relationship with the religious community," including groups such as the SBC and BBFI, and even offered a list of prominent Baptists. This was not "using the church" but might prove "critical in the success or failure of administration proposals." The



administration's form-letter reply was noncommittal, but Carter noted at the bottom that he planned "an inauguration prayer service at the Baptist Church." Carter, it appeared, was serious about the separation of church and state or, at least, did not want to be perceived as favoring his own denomination.<sup>33</sup>

Acting according to his faith without creating political enemies remained a difficult balancing act. At his inauguration Carter rejected a quote from the Old Testament book of Chronicles because he feared that some might interpret its condemnation of "wicked ways" as an embrace of rigid theology, opting instead for the biblical prophet Micah's praise of loving mercy. Despite Carter's attempt to insure privacy, daughter Amy's baptism, complete with the Baptist tradition of immersion in water, prompted a degree of ridicule. "It's terrible how Amy's baptism has been played up by the press," one Baptist wrote.<sup>34</sup> When Carter surprised the public by attending Washington's First Baptist Church the first Sunday after his inauguration, Baptists of all stripes cheered. "He is demonstrating his need for instruction from God's Word," said one editorial. "All Christians should applaud him." At the same time, however, a number of conservative Baptists protested Carter's appointment of a Vatican envoy as a special recognition of one faith. Georgia Baptists signed a petition protesting Carter's appointment of Catholics to the FCC, worried that Catholics might hinder the televised ministries of pastors such as Falwell. "Please appoint another faith or non [*sic*] at all," the petition read. "What's wrong with a Southern Baptist?"<sup>35</sup>

While Carter undoubtedly felt an obligation to his denomination, he did not want to appear to favor Baptists in policy. Accordingly, he declined an interview with the SBC's Radio and Television Commission and refused to commemorate a new Baptist television studio. When Carter agreed to meet with the SBC's Board of Directors and its Mission Challenge Commission, he did so in the hopes of maintaining good relations while also ensuring that the meetings were brief and devoid of policy.<sup>36</sup>

### **Caught in the Middle**

Carter's delicate balancing of church and state, however, quickly began to fray with the efforts of Falwell and others. In Carter's first year, a former Miss America, Baptist Anita Bryant, began a well-publicized crusade

against a Miami gay-rights ordinance. Recognizing an opportunity, Falwell invited Bryant to speak to his congregation, appear on his televised *Old Time Gospel Hour*, and coordinate a rally at the Miami Beach Convention Center. Given Falwell's publicity, a wave of new battles against gay rights ordinances across the country ensured homosexuality front-page news. At Falwell's urging, Bryant began to criticize Carter's silence.<sup>37</sup> While Carter hoped the issue would recede, his aide Costanza fanned the flames by inviting members of the Gay and Lesbian Task Force to the White House. Carter did not attend and did nothing to advance congressional gay rights legislation, prompting the frustrated gay activist Harvey Milk to counter that it was "open season on gay people." In short, Carter's inaction made him a foil for both sides.<sup>38</sup>

Pressing ahead, Falwell found another key ally in the ERA's chief opponent, the anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly. Now mirroring Schlafly's rhetoric, Falwell declared, "Many women have never accepted their God-given roles." Schlafly engineered the "state-by-state efforts" to defeat ratification, Falwell claimed, "but we offered all of our resources." Schlafly was "the quarterback while we carried the ball." Paralleling his praise of Schlafly, Falwell denounced the feminists that Carter appointed. Bella Abzug, for one, "was a joke." Falwell's growing publicity led other conservative Baptists to join the fray, evangelist James Robison terming Carter's advisors "the counsel of the ungodly."<sup>39</sup>

Carter was caught in the middle, his balance lost. After Costanza organized a protest of women against Carter's support of the Hyde Amendment, the White House forced Costanza's resignation. This "didn't win him support among conservative Baptists," Falwell recalled, as Carter fought to extend the deadline for ERA ratification and appointed liberals to the United Nation's International Women's Year Conference. Moreover, to replace Costanza, Carter selected Sarah Weddington, famous for her successful litigation in *Roe*. By 1978, Falwell had begun to join conservative Baptists decrying "secular humanism" in schools, recognizing in the words of one apologist the "dangerous influences" of "evolution as fact and the absence of prayer in curriculum."<sup>40</sup> Criticizing the "liberal educational system," Falwell described Carter's Department of Education as a "huge bureaucracy that takes control out of local school districts and moves it to Washington where the liberals control it."<sup>41</sup>

Falwell was on the leading edge of combining ERA, the *Roe* decision, and gay rights as "laws contrary to the traditional American family . . . threatened as never before in the history of the nation."<sup>42</sup> As if to give wind to Falwell's sails, Carter's White House Conference on Families broke down from the start on whether a family included single mothers and gay couples. As the administration delayed the conference until 1980, Falwell protested a lack of pro-life members on the conference's advisory committee and "an agenda to sanction homosexuality, expand day care, create new government programs to regulate families, and ensure federal funding for abortion." These "anti-family forces" had to be defeated.<sup>43</sup>

Falwell's publicity paid dividends. As Carter's polling numbers declined, conservative strength soared. The National Council of Churches (NCC) reported in its 1977 annual survey, "The most conservative churches . . . reported the biggest gains," with the BBFI at the fore. "Christianity now has a moral backbone," applauded one conservative Baptist.<sup>44</sup> Falwell's new Liberty Baptist College enrolled a thousand freshmen in 1978 and enjoyed a construction and fund-raising boom, raising \$7 million on "Miracle Day." When the Israeli and Egyptian governments invited Falwell to the Middle East, the magazine *Esquire* described him as the "next Billy Graham."<sup>45</sup> Predictably, upon returning, Falwell complained to the press that Carter's staff "never asked us to come and brief them." After Carter refused to help a Baptist charity Falwell's ministry sponsored, Falwell complained to conservative allies that Carter had dismissed his own denomination.<sup>46</sup>

Working to maximize his publicity, Falwell began in 1978 to lure conservatives from other denominations to his Baptist political base. When the IRS codified the integration standards necessary for private school tax exemptions, Falwell lobbied other religious leaders that Carter "was now seeking to control Christian schools." The SBC and the BBFI jointly complained to Carter, "Your intervention in this matter would be greatly appreciated." With the administration dismissive, Congress recognized the united religious opposition and passed legislation denying funding for implementation.<sup>47</sup>

When the administration opposed California's Briggs Initiative, banning homosexual teachers, Falwell reached out again. With every Carter initiative, Falwell saw publicity. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 outlawed discrimination against private, non-job related behavior,

arguably supporting the rights of homosexuals. New immigration policies the administration implemented no longer automatically excluded homosexuals. The ultimate defeat of the Briggs Initiative and the subsequent assassination of its greatest opponent, Harvey Milk, constituted "a judgment from God."<sup>48</sup> With the Hyde amendment now an annual appropriations battle metastasized to an array of departments, Falwell cultivated a "close friendship" with anti-abortion advocate Francis Schaeffer, leader of an orthodox resurgence in the Presbyterian Church.<sup>49</sup>

To cultivate conservative alliances, Falwell now worked to curb historic animosities many Baptists still held against Jews and Catholics. Whereas earlier he had referred to Jews as "spiritually blind," he now called them "God's people."<sup>50</sup> Carter's Camp David Accords inadequately protected Israel, Falwell now insisted. "There's not going to be any peace." Falwell applauded when the Second Vatican Council emphasized interchurch relations, and when the Catholic-Baptist Ecumenical Institute formed from conservatives in both faiths. "We have begun to develop some unity," a conservative Southern Baptist colleague of Falwell's applauded.<sup>51</sup>

Increasingly Falwell received positive press, his 1978 "Clean Up America" campaign visiting almost 150 cities while drawing 12,000 to Washington. A successful voter registration drive "urged the religious right to be counted." With his salary doubled, Falwell now flew in a ministry-owned Jet Commander. He was not, however, the lone beneficiary. The SBC's drift rightward had gained the denomination more than 113,000 new members.<sup>52</sup>

Moderates watched with concern as Carter continued to walk the thin line of church and state, declining an invitation to attend the SBC convention but issuing a welcoming statement, promising "to help raise funds" for mission work but prohibiting events at the White House. Obviously aware of Carter's predicament, Dallas's Cliff Temple Baptist Church invited him to speak, adding that its congregation "was not insufferably Republican." Carter tactfully declined. Despite treading carefully, Carter could not avoid all criticism. When Carter declined to greet one Baptist who had crawled to Washington in an act of penance, one conservative wrote, "You could not take five minutes to meet with a fellow Baptist."<sup>53</sup> Another conservative noted his "grave disappointment" over Carter's "opposition to [the Briggs Initiative] so strongly supported by

fellow Baptists." After Carter denied reports that he would appear with Anita Bryant at a Southern Baptist convention, conservatives sarcastically replied by giving her appearance a tremendous round of applause.<sup>54</sup>

The criticism was greatest when Dallas' ABC affiliate decided in early 1979 to drop the Baptist James Robison's television program after he claimed on air that homosexuals recruited children. Organizing a conservative protest at the Dallas Convention Center that crossed associational and denominational lines, Robison invited Falwell to speak. Arguing that stations "could not censor the content of sermons," Falwell implied that pressure from the White House prompted the move. In an accompanying march staged by the SBC's largest congregation, the crowd complained as much about Carter as the station. When the station relented, it was off the hook; Carter, however, could not so easily disassociate.<sup>55</sup>

Working to mend relations with many Southern Baptists, Carter appointed the Georgia moderate Robert Maddox as his religious liaison and worked closely with a leading moderate at the SBC, Jimmy Allen.<sup>56</sup> In early 1979 Allen warned Carter that SBC conservatives might pass a resolution opposing ratification of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Treaty. Allen promised to lobby for SALT and suggested that Carter gain the support of Billy Graham. Noting the rift within the SBC, the Department of State added that "energetic progressives among the Southern Baptists" still supported SALT but that the problem was shifting sentiment "within the [Baptist] mainstream."<sup>57</sup> Carter remained uncomfortable with many of these efforts and, ultimately, Graham coyly avoided a direct endorsement of SALT.

### **The New Reality**

In June 1979 the rift within the SBC exploded at its annual convention where, according to one report, a "battle erupted with lines drawn according to one's interpretation of scriptural inerrancy." It began with "preconvention politicking" and ended with hard feelings. "[Conservatives] may be as orthodox as Peter," complained one Louisiana moderate, "but they are as mean as the devil." Praising "conservative, Bible-believing congregations . . . that believe in the inerrant, infallible word of God," new president Adrian Rogers began to purge moderates from denominational offices. "The Baptist tradition of defending the autonomy of the church from the

state and the state from the church was a casualty of the conservative takeover," author Randall Balmer wrote.<sup>58</sup> Within weeks, Wake Forest University broke its relationship with the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, which had grown too conservative for the university. When Carter invited Rogers to the Oval Office, the meeting was cordial but tense. "I hope you will give up your secular humanism," Rogers admonished.<sup>59</sup>

Again recognizing opportunity, Falwell formed a new organization, the Moral Majority, to lobby for "traditional family values," a moniker that Falwell ensured opposed feminism in general and, while at least claiming nonpartisanship, Carter in particular. While Baptists held the most board seats, the organization represented a number of Protestant groups and even sought to include Catholics, naming one the editor of the *Moral Majority Report*. When one BBFI-affiliated congregation complained that Falwell had abandoned the task of winning souls for the one true Baptist faith in favor of politics, Falwell replied that the Bible encouraged diverse groups working together to please God. Republican strategist Paul Weyrich, meanwhile, cited polls that indicated most conservative Protestants welcomed the new association despite its prevalence of Baptists.<sup>60</sup>

Headlines blared the new theological reality: "Methodists Grope for a Common Center" and "Rumble of Realignment in Presbyterianism." Even in the Episcopal Church conservatives pressed for a more doctrinaire alternative, the Episcopal Catholic Church.<sup>61</sup> Donations poured into Falwell's new organization, which protested when Carter opposed the Family Protection Act, designed, in Falwell's words, to "counteract disruptive federal intervention into family life." Carter understood the implications as well as Falwell: federal restrictions on abortions and gay rights.<sup>62</sup>

In the White House, religious liaison Maddox convinced Carter to meet with a group of conservative ministers in January 1980, hoping to mute their criticism. After recording the meeting, Maddox realized that Falwell had since been misrepresenting Carter's comments. Falwell claimed to have asked Carter why he allowed "practicing homosexuals" on his staff, to which Carter had supposedly answered that his job was to "represent everyone." To this, Falwell quoted himself, "I said why don't you have murderers and bank robbers and so forth?" In fact, Maddox's recording indicated, no such exchange had taken place. Falwell was lying.<sup>63</sup>

Maddox contacted several newspapers and appeared on ABC's news

program 20/20. Caught off guard, Falwell refused interviews, his spokesman stating, "He is with his family."<sup>64</sup> Soon, however, Falwell declared his comments an "anecdote" that accurately reflected Carter's position on gay rights. Attempting to rally conservatives, he suggested that Carter supported the "homosexual lifestyle" and had allowed gays to place a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In reply, Maddox argued that Carter did not sanction homosexuality but recognized civil rights while Baptist ally Allen reminded the press of the Baptist tradition of the separation of church and state. In the end, the public spat widened the rift between conservatives and moderates, the latter enjoying the irony of a man arguing for a literal interpretation of scripture employing "anecdotes."<sup>65</sup>

### **Divide and Conquer**

The fireworks had only just begun in the election year of 1980. The extension granted the ratification period for ERA and Carter's long-awaited White House Conference on Families assured the issues of feminism, abortion, and gay rights continued prominence. While Falwell did not directly participate—saying, "my application probably would have been rejected"—he noted sarcastically that the conference title had changed from "family" to "families," a shift that implied diversity. Finally held as a series of four regional conferences, several demonstrated just how hostile the debate had become. Conservatives, now organized as the National Pro-Family Coalition, staged a walkout in two sessions while also organizing a counter conference termed the American Family Forum. Falwell hosted organizers of this forum, utilized Moral Majority resources, and was a keynote speaker, Carter remaining his chief object of scorn.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the annual conference of the SBC consolidated its conservatism by electing Bailey Smith to replace Rogers as president and passing a resolution to "preserve the doctrinal integrity" of its institutions. More notably, the delegates strongly denounced the ERA and approved a resolution supporting the anti-abortion "human life amendment" to the constitution. They also wrote Carter that the "Biblical definition of family [should] be affirmed as the only adequate definition." As this saga unfolded, several large BBFI congregations joined the now more conservative SBC. "This swing to the right," Maddox wrote his superiors, "causes me concern."<sup>67</sup>

Again moving to diffuse tensions, Carter invited not only Smith to the

White House but also ex-president Rogers and his wife. The meeting was once again polite but uncomfortable. "I among many Southern Baptists and other Christians I know are very interested in understanding your viewpoints concerning women," Rogers' wife Joyce wrote Carter afterwards. "It is difficult, however, working through the media to gain proper insights."<sup>68</sup>

Smith proved more of a wedge to divide Baptists than Rogers. "God does not hear the prayers of a Jew," Smith remarked to the Religious Roundtable, a new lobby to promote an alliance of conservative Christians. While the remarks represented Baptist theology that belief in Christ was necessary, they provoked outrage. After first suggesting "the byline came from the White House," Falwell stated that while God heard the prayers, "I do not believe that God answers the prayer of any unredeemed Gentile or Jew." When the press reported that he had agreed with Bailey, Falwell's parsing of language allowed him to take the offensive, claiming that "the liberal media" had intentionally misquoted him.<sup>69</sup> While Falwell quietly worked to repair any damages to his Jewish outreach, the Carter re-election campaign ran television ads that repeated the misquote. The Moral Majority filed a defamation suit, and the campaign pulled the ad admitting that it was "not 100% accurate." Falwell, having turned a public relations debacle into political capital, withdrew the suit.<sup>70</sup>

Bailey was not the only one speaking to the Religious Roundtable. Carter's challenger, Republican Ronald Reagan, thrilled the crowd. "You can't endorse me," he remarked, "but I endorse you."<sup>71</sup> After Reagan noted the threat abortion and gay rights posed to the family, Falwell had his champion. It appeared an odd political marriage, however, for Reagan was not a Baptist, was divorced, and had never attended church regularly. Nevertheless, in the words of one observer, "Reagan played to the evangelical community." In the view of another, Reagan saw Falwell as a tool to drive a wedge between Southern Baptists and the Democratic Party. If Reagan's rhetoric were calculated, it worked. Members of the Moral Majority volunteered time and money.<sup>72</sup>

Now working closely with the Reagan campaign, Falwell shared mailing lists with Richard Viguerie, known for his Republican fundraising. Reagan, Falwell stated, did an "exceptional job" speaking before the National Religious Broadcasters and the Moral Majority while campaign staffers distributed "Christians for Reagan" bumper stickers. This campaign



lobby, also led by a conservative Baptist, had fliers declaring that Carter was “afraid of offending the ERA crowd but not of turning his back on God.”<sup>73</sup> As the campaign proceeded, the Moral Majority’s Robert Billings joined the Reagan campaign, in the words of Falwell “to open doors to the [conservative] evangelical community.” Finally, late in the campaign, Reagan invited Falwell to a New Orleans speech. There, Falwell proudly recalled, the two “prayed together.”<sup>74</sup>

Soon rumors spread among Baptists. Wrote one pastor, Carter “had become very cold” with leaders of the SBC while Maddox “wanted nothing to do with conservative Baptists.” For many conservatives the evidence was plain. After the White House denied an SBC request for a taped greeting to honor its new president Rogers and rejected a “special VIP tour” for a group of BBFI-affiliated Baptists, Carter agreed to accept an award from moderate Baptists in an Oval Office ceremony. When the SBC forwarded a list of resolutions, the discrepancy between Carter’s stances on the “family issues” and those of the SBC were obvious, if not the growing animosity between the two.<sup>75</sup>

### **The Aftermath**

After Reagan’s victory in 1980, Falwell claimed that his Moral Majority had proved a “sleeping giant” and that elected officials should “get in step with conservative values or be prepared to be unemployed.” While in fact the landslide was such that the “family issues” were not determinative, the Republicans had won the South—the SBC and BBFI’s base—for the first time since Reconstruction. Falwell had successfully encouraged a conservative theology across denominational lines and married the new unity to the GOP, with conservative Baptists at the fore.<sup>76</sup> His efforts playing off Carter had proved crucial. In the years that followed, Falwell’s star began to wane, his Moral Majority finally ending operations in the late 1980s. The alliance he encouraged, however, endured. In 2008 a Southern Baptist preacher, Michael Huckabee, ran for the Republican presidential nomination. Within the SBC, conservative theology continued its dominance, welcoming with zest new battles over feminism, homosexuality, and abortion. It also welcomed Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church, which officially joined the SBC as if an accolade for its theological drift.<sup>77</sup>

Moderate Baptists continued as well, of course, ultimately

welcoming one of their own as president, Democrat Bill Clinton. After Carter's defeat, Washington's First Baptist Church wrote of its "love and prayerful support." Led by a moderate, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary invited Carter to teach while Jimmy Allen sent his friend a letter of condolence. "There is still much to be done," Carter replied.<sup>78</sup>

Carter was not kidding. Free from political constraints, Carter denounced the differences that divided his faith, especially "the judgmental attitudes promoted by a few demagogic political leaders." Condemning others "was never Jesus' way." The efforts of conservative Georgia Baptists in 2004 to remove evolution from schools were an "embarrassment." Such outspokenness enraged his old opponents. When Carter described Israel's treatment of Palestinians as "apartheid," Falwell thought it a sin. When Carter won the Nobel Peace Prize for his "outstanding commitment to human rights," Falwell complained that Carter's version meant "the slaughter of unborn children and the sin of homosexuality."<sup>79</sup>

Ten months into the new millennium, in October 2000, Carter renounced his membership in the SBC, becoming in the words of one report, "an enlistee in the national public relations war between moderate and conservative Southern Baptists." "My fellow Baptists," Carter explained, "I have been disappointed and feel excluded by the adoption of an increasingly rigid creed."<sup>80</sup> The following year, in the summer of 2001, Carter called for a new alliance for the growing number of moderate state conventions. Moderates had formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1990, but Carter thought a broader alliance of moderates possible. To the SBC, Carter's call was a "publicity stunt" and the former president was "out of step with the majority of Southern Baptists." Nevertheless, in Texas at least, moderates continued to coalesce, incorporating in 2002 as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas.<sup>81</sup>

"Some Christians Reluctant to Share One Cup," blared the *Dallas Morning News* in 2002. The newspaper was not referring to Carter and Falwell, but the quote applied. "Carter wouldn't even speak to me," Falwell recalled that year when their paths crossed. For Falwell's part, the feeling was mutual. "[Carter] wants to be the best former president ever, but he's been a disaster at that too." The chasm between two of the nation's most famous Baptists was wider than ever. When Falwell died in 2007, a number of conservative Baptists eulogized him while Carter

remained silent, the mutual animosity carried to the grave.<sup>82</sup> In the end, Carter and Falwell indeed refused to share the same cup, but their decades-long public dispute had long since helped shape and encourage the great divide that characterizes modern Southern Baptists to this day. The Carter years were the crucial years in defining the struggle over the “family issues” of feminism, abortion and homosexuality. The president and the famed preacher—with much publicity—had led the way. **BH&HS**

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8. Quoted in *New York Times*, August 22, 1975, 31.

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80. Carter quoted in *Dallas Morning News*, October 20, 2000, G1.

81. Quoted in *Ibid*, July 7, 2001, G1 and January 19, 2002, G2.

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