

Evangelical Old Guard makes way for change

Jerry Falwell's passing two weeks ago marks the beginning of the end. As the senior leadership of evangelical America fades from the scene, they will pass the torch to a younger ministry whose views on politics and social issues are very different. The role they will play in the Republican Party will determine America's political future for years to come.

Evangelical leaders of Falwell's generation oversaw the rise of political clout for fundamentalist Christianity. They founded the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, the American Coalition for Traditional Values and Focus on the Family. Pat Robertson even ran for president in 1988, losing to George W. Bush (although he beat Bush in the Iowa caucuses).

Political clout is a nice thing to have. It must have felt good to be courted by politicians, to help write the laws of the land, and to see liberals go on the defensive at last. There was only one problem: The social message of politically active evangelism was a poor match for a party that claims to value freedom, individual responsibility and limited government.

For Republicans to embrace conservative attempts at social legislation, they had to repudiate the limited government legacy of Ronald Reagan and Barry Goldwater. Congressional attempts to decide where life begins, where life ends, what TV shows Americans should watch, what words they are permitted to hear and what sexual acts they can perform can only work in the context of big government, not small.

Conservatives such as Falwell led the way for the big-government conservatism of the past decade. It is no coincidence that the present administration is the least fiscally responsible in 40 years, Republican or Democrat. You have to go back to the Lyndon Johnson years to find one that taxes or spends more.

But as the guard changes, there are signs the tide is changing too. Pastor Rick Warren, author of "The Purpose-Driven Life," is known for his emphasis on good works over using politics to promote Christian morality. Two weeks ago, I sat on a panel with a young pastor of a prominent evangelical church. He told a graduating class of 12th graders he supported the repeal of anti-sodomy laws. You could have knocked me over



OPINION

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with a feather.

Best of all, there's at least one young evangelical Christian intellectual who thinks it's time for Christians to rethink their ideas about morality and law. Andy Olree, professor of law at Faulkner University, is the author of "The Choice Principle: The Biblical Case for Legal Toleration." Published last October, it ought to be required reading in seminaries all over America.

Olree believes that "an evangelical commitment to moral absolutes and the authority of Scripture need not entail government endorsement

of religious truths or legislation of any particular view of what constitutes a virtuous life." This is a perspective that deserves more of a hearing in the Christian community. Unfortunately, it won't get one until the evangelical Old Guard passes from the scene.

But pass it will, as all things must. When that happens, a younger generation of clergy less enamored of politics will take the helm. If these younger leaders recognize the crucial distinction between the immoral and the illegal, between the bad and the banned, between the purpose of the Constitution and the purpose of the Bible, it could be a real sea change in American politics. A change, I would suggest, for the better.

If you're a Christian, I implore you, help make that change happen. You don't have to condone homosexuality to decriminalize it. You don't have to condone drug use to recognize the terrible costs of the drug war. Most importantly, a government that stays out of people's personal lives is one most in keeping with America's unique heritage of personal freedom, capitalism, religious tolerance, and prosperity. That's a vision that could truly unite the Republican Party.

Falwell and his like have had their moment in the sun. They have left a legacy of fiscal irresponsibility and culture-war hysteria that cost the Republicans the 2006 elections. We have enough experience now to show us that fiscal conservatism and social engineering are incompatible with one another. It is time to choose. Here's hoping the next generation of evangelical Christian leaders will choose wisely.

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