# Disciplined by Democracy: Moral Framing and the Rhetoric of Red Letter Christians

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## Abstract

In this dissertation I study both the textual reception and rhetorical production strategies of the Red Letter Christians, a discourse community whose identity is linked to these very same strategies. I contend that the Red Letter Christians engage in biblical reading strategies that make them distinct from other politically liberal or progressive religious groups. The Red Letter Christians employ a moral frame based on their particular reading of the Bible. Embedded in the notion of "conservative radicalism," such a moral frame asserts a dedication to timeless principles and truths authenticated by the gospel accounts of Jesus while it simultaneously upholds a passionate defense of social justice and the activist need to engage in political action in the present. Such a moral frame is biconceptual, expressing both conservative and progressive dimensions of moral social action. Due to the biconceptuality of the Red Letter Christian moral frame, Red Letter Christians often stress the importance of humility and non-partisan dialogue. Critics of the Red Letter Christians from both the political left and the right argue that such discourse is often incomprehensible and obfuscates the political positions the group defends in their rhetoric. I assert that in spite of their common reception as a religiously liberal group, the Red Letter Christians offer a model of discourse that at its best authenticates and otherwise justifies a model of post-partisan discourse that re-imagines religion's role in public political discourse.

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# Chapter 1
# Introduction

There must have been something in the air in 2006. The midterm elections signaled a profound dissatisfaction with the policies of then-President George W. Bush. Even the president's most ardent supporters—Christian Evangelicals—were unsettled. For the first time at least some of these religiously-minded voters were beginning to have doubts about the moral example of the "pastor-in-chief's" presidency, despite the fact that Bush's presidency had been one of the most publicly evangelical of any in United States' history (Zoll, 2006). At the heart of this dissatisfaction lay a disconcerting question—"what does it mean to be an Evangelical Christian?"

A.J. Jacobs, author of *The Year of Living Biblically* (2007a), attempted an experiment to answer the above question. In his book he suggests that one-third to one-half of all US citizens adhere to some form of biblical literalism. Jacobs states that "a literal interpretation of the Bible—both Jewish and Christian—shapes American policies on the Middle East, homosexuality, stem cell research, education, abortion" (p. 6). In an attempt to understand the influence that textual literalism holds over the electorate, Jacobs, a self-described "agnostic Jew," decided to live for a year according to a literal interpretation of the Bible's teachings. After his attempt, Jacobs concluded that "living literally" was not only difficult, but was largely antithetical to the way that most US citizens lived their lives. Consequently, Jacobs concluded that while the concept of biblical literalism reflects believers' fidelity to the word of God, they still pick and chose which parts of sacred scripture "fit their agenda." Jacobs' experiment was not the only of its kind. In 2008 Benyamin Cohen, the son of a rabbi, authored *My*

*Jesus Year: A Rabbi's Son Wanders the Bible Belt in Search of His Own Faith*. Cohen's book, like Jacobs', re-examined what the Bible means for its believers at the start of the 21st-century. The Reverend Ed Dobson, a former pastor of a Grand Rapids megachurch and father of the Religious Right, felt compelled to reassess the meaning of evangelicalism. After reading Jacobs' best-selling book, he decided that if a "non-religious Jew could [live like Jesus for a year] so could a practicing Christian" (Honey, 2008, p. A1). Subsequently, Dobson spent a year trying to follow the Bible's teachings as literally as possible, re-reading the four Gospels every single week. At the end of his yearlong experiment the lifelong evangelical observed, "I've concluded that I am a follower, but I'm not a very good one. If you get serious about the Bible, it will really mess you up" (p. A1). Dobson decided to do something that was unprecedented for him: vote for a Democratic presidential candidate. Though he acknowledged an objection to Obama's pro-choice beliefs, Dobson stated, "I felt, as an individual, [Obama] was closer to the spirit of Jesus' teachings than anyone else. He was a community organizer, so he was into the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, which Jesus is very much into" (p. A1). Dobson's decision and his subsequent publication of that decision met with backlash from the conservative evangelical community. Many traditional members of the community could not bring themselves to vote for a Democrat with liberal social views. Yet Dobson's attempt to live in the manner of the historical Jesus and his punctilious attention to the gospels illustrates that one can no longer assume that modeling Christ is an exclusively "conservative" evangelical undertaking.

Hugely influential evangelical pastor, Rick Warren, caused a similar stir in the summer of 2008 when he invited both presidential candidates—John McCain and

Barack Obama—to a forum where each could explain how his faith informs his politics. According to a *Time* magazine report of the event, Obama and McCain both needed to appeal to evangelical voters—McCain because he had not shored up his evangelical Republican base and Obama because he lead McCain in every religious demographic except for white evangelicals (Sullivan, 2008). The event was also significant because it was moderated by an evangelical known for his moderate-to-progressive views on environmental issues, poverty relief and HIV/AIDS reduction programs. A social conservative on issues related to homosexuality and gay rights, Warren was, nonetheless, a popular spiritual leader among, a wide sector of the American public. *Time* reported that nearly two-third of white evangelical voters surveyed would consider voting for a candidate who held a different position on abortion then theirs (Sullivan, 2008). The popularity of Rick Warren suggests that, at least among a modest portion of evangelicals, the political agenda has expanded beyond, but not forgotten, the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage.

The broadening of the evangelical political agenda and the public arguments framed by this broadened agenda form the focus of this dissertation. This chapter introduces the overall project, paying particular attention to the community of readers and rhetors that are its focus. Here I address a group termed the "Red Letters Christians" and discuss how its mission parallels that of Dobson's experiment to live like Jesus. In their effort to move toward a more sensitive and accurate interpretation of the Bible, Red Letter Christians (hereafter "the RLC") adopt more liberal policies and positions than what evangelicals have heretofore embraced. In the coming pages I first discuss the current state of the evangelical movement and account for its institutional

power in order to show how the decline of conservative evangelical authority gives rise to groups like the RLC. I then provide an operational definition of the RLC before discussing the hermeneutic method of this research project. This chapter concludes with an overview of the chapters to follow.

## The Political Rise of the Conservative Evangelical Movement

Two recent books forward the thesis that conservative evangelicals have joined the ranks of the institutional, cultural, and political elite; contend that they are not a fringe element of American politics. Michael Lindsay's (2007) critically-acclaimed book *Faith in the Halls of Power* discusses how evangelicals have become part of the United States' elite. He offers a three-part definition of evangelicals as those who believe the Bible is the ultimate authority for faith and a guide for righteous action, have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and are willing to adopt a public, "activist" approach to spreading their faith. Important to Lindsay's definition is what he terms "spiritual improvisation and individualism" which certainly accounts for why conservative evangelicals may be moved to act on their faith differently than liberal evangelicals. Evangelicalism, born as it is out of a Protestant religious tradition, also is free of ecclesiastical hierarchy, which may explain the political pluralism of evangelicals. Lindsay (2007) notes that regardless of political affiliation, evangelicals feel they are charged with caring for the common welfare. Specifically, Lindsay observes:

> This notion of being entrusted with a mandate to work for the 'common good' is seen as a covenant between God and His people…This provides evangelicals with hope and encouragement to persevere in trying to overcome evil. Things

> may be wrong in the world, but they, working with God, can set the world aright. (p. 5)

During the presidency of George W. Bush, progressive evangelicals, like Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo, have become more visible. Dubbed "freestyle evangelicals" these are progressive and liberal evangelicals who are conservative on some issues, but are simultaneously concerned about a progressive social justice agenda that addresses issues such as poverty, the environment, and the war on terrorism. Lindsay argues that progressive ("freestyle") evangelicals generally oppose the Religious Right. In spite of this conservative evangelicals remain the overwhelming majority among all evangelicals. Popular conservative evangelical groups, like Focus on the Family, have mailing lists topping two million, whereas progressive groups, like Wallis' Sojourners organization, merely have 200,000 members (p. 28). Clearly, conservative evangelicals have up to this point been more successful in building voter coalitions. When Lindsay argues about an "evangelical elite," he is mostly referring to the success conservative evangelicals have enjoyed since the 1970s and the birth of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority.

Jimmy Carter was the first avowedly evangelical president, and with his presidency a great many evangelicals became more politically active. Lindsay (2007) observes that Carter was initially beloved by conservative evangelicals until he threatened to remove the tax-exempt status of parochial schools because of rampant racism. His popularity dropped further after he refused to bar homosexuals from taking part in a White House Conference on families. Reagan's courting of conservative evangelicals alleviated many of their concerns about the "secularizing" influence of

White House politics. Since Reagan every President either has professed an evangelical background or has referenced his religious faith in campaigns and official presidential orations.

Most scholars contend that all evangelicals focus on cultural matters in politics. As a rule, evangelicals seem less interested in foreign trade policy and more interested in "humanitarian issues" like sex slavery, AIDS and prostitution (Lindsay, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Lindsay, 2008a). Of course the solution to these cultural ills differs depending upon which political frame guides particular evangelical groups. The evangelical movement exercises power in nearly every segment of American society. Lindsay argues that evangelicals have spent the last thirty years or so "transforming the cultural mainstream" by getting elected to office, by being appointed to high level positions in the White House, and by assembling think tanks and media networks that produce a reliable voting bloc for conservative social causes.

In addition to Lindsay's book, one other has recently made a significant contribution to the understanding of evangelicalism. Hanna Rosin, in her book *God's Harvard*, details what life is like for students at Patrick Henry, an evangelical private college that claims to train students for political life. Rosin (2007b) refers to Patrick Henry as "Harvard for Homeschoolers," as the school was founded by an evangelical home-schooling activist in the 1990s. Rosin argues that the school enlists born-again Christian students eager to learn how to better fight the "culture wars" (Hunter, 1991). Rosin points to Patrick Henry as an extraordinarily well-connected university that regularly lands students internships and volunteer opportunities under prominent Republican evangelical members of the White House and Congress. Patrick Henry

students are part of the “Joshua Generation”—those who are ready to take back the “land of Egypt” abandoned by their parents. According to Rosin, at Patrick Henry students are trained to “take back the culture” and, thereby, take back the United States from the forces of godless secularism. Rosin’s analysis suggests that evangelical institutions like Patrick Henry are keenly aware of the reputation of anti-intellectualism that plagued evangelicals in the past and aim through educational institutions to create a new evangelical “knowledge elite” on par with any Ivy League graduate.

Lindsay (2007) contends and Rosin affirms that evangelicals have been able to join the nation’s elite through institutional and rhetorical means. That is, in conjunction with institutions like Patrick Henry University and media networks such as the Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN), evangelicals also have “generated new ways to talk about the relevance of faith in public life, which has further motivated them to action” (p. 208). As a result of this evangelically specific pattern of rhetorical production, nearly every 2008 presidential contender had a “faith advisor” to help frame, where possible, policy issues through the often coded language of faith and morality. Lindsay claims that evangelical rhetoric has been part of campaign rhetoric ever since the presidency of Jimmy Carter. For evangelicals, “casting a ballot for a particular candidate is an expressive symbol, a way of saying that one’s personal values—embodied in a particular candidate—belong in the public square” (p. 210). Put differently, this pattern of religious talk emphasizing the moral dimensions of political issues openly invites the evangelical community to better identify with the candidate, trust his or her commitment to apply foundational principles of evangelical faith on a given political issue.

Lindsay emphasizes that conservative evangelicals have built powerful networks through political influence, academic respectability and creative inspiration through the enormously profitable *Left Behind* book series about apocalyptic end times, as well as films like Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ.* Conservative evangelicals have been able to sustain their success, argues Lindsay, because of "elastic orthodoxy" or the cohesive power of orthodoxy of belief that can stretch to form alliances with other groups who may fundamentally disagree with them. Evangelicals can, at times, disagree with one another about alliances formed with secular groups.

Gold and Russell (2007) observe that since 1980 there has been a growing convergence between evangelicalism and the Republican Party. The authors note that since 1992 the effect of evangelicalism has been mediated through partisanship, suggesting that evangelical identity has not had an independent effect on identification with the Republican Party. In part, the strong evangelical support Republicans have enjoyed is directly related to party mobilization of voters, and is not necessarily a result of independent identification with party platforms. As a result of the general process of "ideological realignment" that took place after Reagan, the American electorate perceived a growing polarization between Democrats and Republicans. Gold and Russell suggest that Republican mobilization efforts best explain why evangelical voters tend to support conservative policies such as "non-social" issues like economic security and national defense. The authors conclude that as a result of realignment and mobilization efforts, many evangelicals are likely to remain a dedicated part of the Republican voting bloc.

Republican conservative ideology tends to explain why social and economic conservatives have enjoyed such a successful alliance, explains Felson and Kindell (2007) in their article on the link between well-educated evangelicals and conservative economics. Well-educated evangelicals are more consistent ideologically than other evangelicals and Protestants. Felson and Kindell explain:

> Since the better educated are disproportionately politically active, politicians may be especially likely to pay attention to their interests. This may help to explain why the Republican coalition between social and economic conservatives has endured for several decades and shows no signs of abating. (p. 673)

The link Felson and Kindell establish between elite, well-educated evangelicals and economic conservatism explains media coverage and concentration of this particular voting behavior, but does not account for "lesser educated" evangelicals and their motivations for voting Republican and, by extension, economic conservatism. In particular, their claim that the Republican coalition of economic and social conservatives is likely to persist fails to take into account the unpredictability of those evangelical voters who are not elites, neither does it explain why, if lesser-educated evangelicals tend not to care about economic policy, they nonetheless vote for economic conservatives. Felson and Kindell explain that better educated citizens are more aware of expected attitudes that accompany a particular ideology and "tend to have a deeper, more conceptual understanding of politics that allows them to organize their political attitudes into an ideological system" (p. 675). The authors explain that mainstream media tend to report the opinions of elites, which accounts for news

coverage but does little to explain why many evangelicals—both those who are well educated and those who are not—have historically voted for economically conservative Republicans. One might presume that "social issues" provide a point of identification irrespective of one's economic interest.

Bartowski (1996) argues that while evangelicals differ in how they interpret the Bible, a defining characteristic of all evangelical identity is the "authoritative" or "infallible" status of biblical texts. In his discussion on the methodological utility of biblical hermeneutics, Bartowski argues that scholars of religion would do well to adopt some of the general assumptions of hermeneutic theory, including seeing the Bible as a linguistic work, and not a "natural" object. Texts viewed hermeneutically, he argues, become "semantically independent" from their author through the process Ricouer identified as "exteriorization." Out of the control of the original intent and purpose of the author, texts, including the Bible, become open to multiple, even conflicting interpretations. Evangelicals, like all readers, are "prejudicial" and impose "conditions of understanding" upon their reading of scripture. Using case studies of expectations of women's submissiveness and corporal punishment for children, Bartowski highlights the problem of taking biblical literalism on face value. That is biblical interpretations are always going to be multiple and varied, even when they are "literal" readings. Bartowski concludes that viable scriptural readings come not from individual readings of the Bible, but through the "interpretive community" in which an individual is situated. Though he stops short at calling biblical interpretation "rhetorical," Bartowski nonetheless identifies the necessary relationship between interpretation processes and discourse communities, and suggests, though faintly, that political argumentation is

inseparable from interpretive acts. This insight is important for understanding oppositional practices in religiously-themed political arguments.

**Growth of Progressive Evangelicals**

*Time* magazine reported in July, 2007, that the political "praying field" had been leveled by many Democrats in the 2006 midterm elections. The article suggests that many Democratic strategists have taken to heart suggestions Jim Wallis offered in his 2005 book *God's Politics* on how to frame moral issues. The sweeping takeover of both houses of Congress demonstrated that, at least in some races, Democratic rhetoric had achieved some degree of success of including the language of faith to successfully appeal to the legions of those evangelical voters—dubbed "freestyle evangelicals" — skeptical of a Republican Party mired in scandal and that had failed to deliver on many policy promises. The report argued that many Democrats were starting to "frame a message in terms of broadly shared values that don't alarm members of minority religions or secular voters" (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007, para. 4). Some Democrats were learning, indeed, to close the "God gap" between themselves and "values voters."

A few months later, David Kirkpatrick of the *New York Times* reported a "crackup" in the evangelical voting bloc, catalyzed by the misery of the Iraq War and the dismal social policy advances by the Bush administration. No longer could the Republican Party lay claim to a permanent alliance with evangelicals. Kirkpatrick notes that part of the division among evangelicals is generational. New evangelical leaders like widely-published pastor Rick Warren and church network mogul Bill Hybels reflect a theology more concerned with present-world injustices than with personal salvation and propriety. Kirkpatrick explains, "the result is a new interest in public

policies that address problems of peace, health and poverty—problems, unlike abortion and same-sex marriage, where left and right compete to present the best answers" (2007, para. 14.).

The Southern Baptist Convention recently elected, in a surprising upset, Frank Page, who pledged to loosen the stranglehold conservatives had on policy positions. Page, notes Fitzpatrick, warned delegates that Southern Baptists were known better for what they opposed (issues like abortion, same-sex marriage) rather than what they believed (the transformative power of the Gospel). The evangelical viewpoint reflects a broadening of the moral agenda and recognizes the need to address social problems as a matter of faith. Indeed, the new generation of evangelical leadership reflects weariness with the culture war and an increased willingness to work with political candidates who best represent a social, and not just personal, sense of morality. Kirkpatrick notes that both Warren and Hybels have made much-publicized decisions to include Democrats like Barack Obama and Bill Clinton at their conferences. Hybels observes, "We have just pounded the drum again and again that, for churches to reach their full redemptive potential, they have to do more than hold services—they have to try to transform their communities" (quoted in Kirkpatrick, 2007, para. 70). Hybels notes further that the general message of the religious left (including progressive evangelicals) given popular expression in the recent work of Wallis and the RLC, has long been that secular progressives could find common ground with theological conservatives. According to Fitzpatrick, this message is quickly gaining purchase.

E.J. Dionne, a columnist for the *Washington Post*, argues in his recent book *Souled Out*, that the broader political agenda called forth by many evangelicals is a

"renegotiation" of religion's role in public life. For Dionne, evangelical moderates and liberals increasingly possess an attitude of "flexidoxy." The term reflects a mixture of flexibility in spiritual practice in one sense, and a desire for orthodoxy of spiritual principles and faith in another. Dionne advocates for a less ideological religion free to pose a challenge to all ideologies, promoting "radical monotheism" predicated on a fundamental belief in God that promotes a "sensible skepticism" about all other earthly matters. Citing Reinhold Neibuhr Dionne emphasizes that radical monotheism, or "flexidoxy," "dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself" (2008, p. 18). Religion is therefore both conservative and progressive—conservative in that religion is nourished by tradition, progressive in its attempt to challenge and adapt traditions to contemporary exigencies. Dionne emphasizes that religion is also both public and private, arguing that it is the "drama of the interaction between these two spheres that makes public religion so contested" (p. 196).

Dionne defends the public tradition of religion. But public religion, he argues, is best disciplined by democratic rhetorical norms. Those interested in religion's role in public discourse must call for:

> a more demanding standard whereby religious people live up to their obligations to religious pluralism and religious liberty by making public arguments that are accessible to those who do not share their assumptions or their deepest commitments. And we need to understand that religion offers its greatest gift to public life not when it promotes certainty, but when it encourages reflection, self-criticism, and doubt. (p. 184)

Similarly, Wallis observes that religious convictions expressed as political appeals, should be argued on "moral grounds rather than as sectarian religious demands—so that the people (citizens), whether religious or not, may have the capacity to hear and respond" (2008a, p. 27). To this end religion must be "disciplined by democracy and contribute to a better and more moral discourse" so that religious convictions bear the form of public moral arguments. Wallis warns:

> religious people don't get to win just because they are religious…they, like any other citizens, have to convince their fellow citizens that why they propose is best for the common good—for all of us and not just the religious. Clearly, part of the work to be done includes teaching religious people how to make their appeals in moral language and secular people not to fear that such appeals will lead to theocracy. (p. 27)

Wallis, easily the most recognized figure of all progressive evangelicals, shares Dionne's assumption that moral commitment is capable of transcending "ideological debates" and that a broadened evangelical social agenda is suited to form a "moral center" capable of critiquing both the left and right. Wallis claims in his latest book, *The Great Awakening*, that evangelicals are experiencing resurgence in the public manifestation of their faith, which has effectively halted the hegemony of the Religious Right. Wallis' term for the "flexidoxy" and "radical monotheism" endorsed by Dionne is "conservative radicalism," which is rooted in "strong tradition but radical in seeking social justice" (2008a, p. 7). Wallis asserts that more and more evangelicals and other Christians are coming to terms with the seemingly paradoxical combination of conservative, fundamental faith and liberal politics.

In his books, through his monthly magazine *Sojourners,* through numerous blogs and through his recently-formed group, Red Letter Christians, Wallis argues that evangelicalism is not beholden to any political party. According to his best-selling 2005 book, *God's Politics,* the media, as a result of the broad influence of the Religious Right, exclusively frames all moral issues as those involving personal responsibility, like abortion and "family values." This moral vision promoted by the Religious right emphasizes personal responsibility over social responsibility, private religion over public religion. In the tradition of social justice, social responsibility is viewed as a liberal political position.

Tony Campolo, who co-founded Red Letter Christians with Wallis, is a prominent evangelical who served as President Clinton's faith advisor. Campolo shares Wallis concern about the Religious Right dominating the discussion on what political issues can be debated as Christian. Evangelical Christianity, for both Wallis and Campolo, is a faith that demands public works. Campolo (2006, 2008) explains that for too long too many evangelicals have taken their moral cues, and thus their voting conscience, not from biblical scripture, but from a Religious Right beholden to the interests of the Republican Party. Campolo acknowledges that evangelicals can in good conscience vote Republican if they take their inspiration from the right source. He notes to his readers that there is a "much broader range of opinion within the Evangelical community than you might think" (2008, p. 6).

For Wallis and Campolo, Democrats and moderate Republicans are most likely to respond to an alternative moral vision that considers social responsibility as important as personal responsibility. Even though some Democrats attempted to craft

religious appeals into their election strategies, journalist and author Hannah Rosin (2007a) notes that Democrats, despite their electoral success in the 2006 elections, have failed to close the "God gap"—the advantage Republicans have with religious voters. By and large "values voters" remain skeptical of Democrats who fail to convincingly adopt a faith message. Rosin reports, however, that those Democrats who earnestly developed a way to frame liberal policies with moral values enjoyed success during the elections, suggesting that an alternative moral frame may be welcome in U.S. electoral politics.

Progressive evangelicalism links the strains of thought put forth by Dionne in his defense of "flexidoxy" and Wallis with his "conservative radicalism." These categories offer audiences a moral framework through which they can deliberate public religion and its bearing on electoral politics. Given the political influence and power evangelicals have historically wielded and may continue to wield on U.S. electoral politics, it is important to address the rhetorical appeals made by individual progressive evangelical groups. The neglect of progressive evangelicals in the scholarly record and in the mass media underscores the need for an extended analysis of their rhetorical appeals to both faith and liberal politics. Statistically, Lindsay (2007) argues that conservative evangelicals occupy 30% of all evangelicals. Campolo estimates that progressive evangelicals, in particular, occupy 20-30% of all evangelicals (Eleveld, 2007). The de-stabilization of the conservative evangelical voting bloc highlights the importance of the progressives' attempt to forge a general evangelical political identity on liberal politics.

**The Red Letter Christians**

This study takes as its focal point the rhetoric of the RLC because theirs is a set of discourses concerned with grounding religious arguments generally, and publicly-articulated evangelical belief in particular, within democratic practices that stress inclusion, the common good and social welfare. The RLC are a unique type of progressive evangelical, distinguishable from others by their commitment to particular reading practices that are uncommon among evangelicals as a whole. Some scholars might argue that the RLC are not an organized religious community, as they are not affiliated with any particular denomination and do not enforce any rules of formal membership. As a formal organization with a headquarters, a board of directors and the like, the RLC do not exist. However, the theoretical position I take assumes that communities hang together through their interpretive actions and rhetorical performance. By tracking RLC networks it is readily apparent that they are reading and talking to one another and, in this regard, they form a distinct discourse community. In this section I wish to provide a brief overview of the group and their discourse.

Campolo (2008) in his book *Red Letter Christians*, explains that the origin of the name emerged from a growing discomfort of using the word "evangelical" to describe their efforts. In political discourse the dominant connotation of the term "evangelical" evokes the ideology of the Religious Right. The appellation "Red Letter" refers to the New Testament of the Bible, where publishers have highlighted in red letters the words attributed to Jesus. According to Campolo the red letters are radical in their call for social justice, and are thus not a part of the contemporary agenda of the Religious Right. Campolo claims there are three grounding principles behind the RLC. First, the RLC

hold the same theological convictions of all evangelicals, such as belief in the Apostle's Creed which stipulates that Jesus was the mortal son of God, and that he was crucified and rose from the dead, and will return on a final judgment day to usher believers into Heaven. The second principle is that biblical scripture is "guided by God" and is an "infallible guide for faith and practice." The whole Bible must be understood from the perspective provided by the "red letters" in the New Testament. Finally, the RLC believe that a personal relationship with the "historical Jesus" is vital for salvation and that all believers must have a personal relationship with him or perish. In addition a personal relationship with Jesus transforms individuals and compels them to reach out to others. Campolo concludes, "What differentiates Red Letter Christians from other Christians is our passionate commitment to social justice—hence, our intense involvement in politics" (p. 23). The RLC have targeted policies that affect the vulnerable, i.e. poverty, AIDS in Africa, the environment and war and their impact on the dispossessed around the world as their chief rhetorical targets.

I define the Red Letter Christians as a specific progressive evangelical group distinguishable from other progressive Christian groups. Red Letter Christians are:

1) Those who self-identify as Red Letter Christians.
2) Those who interpret the Bible in a particular manner that I will discus at length in this dissertation. This mode of interpretation is established by the "red letters" of the King James Version (and other contemporary versions) of the Bible that prints the words attributed to Jesus Christ in the first four books (the Gospels) of the New Testament. Further, this mode of interpretation makes four primary assumptions:

   a. The gospel accounts of Jesus are primary to understanding the Christian message.
   b. The figure of Christ and the words uttered by him provide a moral framework for social and political action.
   c. Red Letter Christians believe in the literalism of the Bible, but allow some latitude for human interpretive practices.
   d. Human interpretive practices use Jesus Christ's words as a lens for interpreting other parts of the bible.

3) Red Letter Christians advocate a particular set of progressive policies, these include mostly poverty reduction and the promotion of peace, but may at times also include concern for the environment and social justice.
4) Red Letter Christians engage in speech acts that disassociate themselves from other evangelical communities. These speech acts are at times critical of other evangelical communities, particularly conservative evangelicals historically understood as comprising the Religious Right. Because Red Letter Christians refuse to relinquish the evangelical title, they are sometimes perceived externally as belonging to the Religious Right. Similarly, because Red Letter Christians insist upon the "progressive" evangelical label, they are often perceived externally as occupying the Religious Left. Internally, they craft a distinctive identity from both the traditional Religious Right and the historic progressive communities of mainstream religious denominations and practices.

The operational definition of the RLC establishes the primary focus of my research project. There are some individuals for whom one of the criteria is not manifest; nevertheless other criteria are present around their discourse. I refer here to the Reverend Greg Boyd, who does not self-identify as a member of the RLC, but who embodies the other three criteria. Individuals who violate more than one criterion are not included in the operational definition of the RLC.

The RLC are largely a white, middle-class phenomenon. One defining feature of this particular discourse community, and of conservative evangelicalism as a whole, is its "whiteness." Every single book published by the group is authored by a white male. While women and racial minorities are frequent contributors to affiliated blogs and websites, they nonetheless occupy no leadership positions and are symbolically invisible. Historically, the modern evangelical movement with its particular focus on biblical inerrancy and/or literalism strongly emphasizes traditional gender roles. This may account for the gendered dimension of RLC leadership. While the reasons behind the whiteness of evangelicalism are myriad and varying, it is important, nonetheless, to acknowledge this racial makeup behind the movement as a whole. Wallis' own biography details his resistance in the 1960s to an overwhelming pressure from evangelical churches resisting miscegenation and racial integration into the community. While the RLC publicly state their dedication to racial justice, and emphasize Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as their exemplar, their membership, like that of most evangelical groups is predominantly white.

The RLC are undoubtedly controversial. In an interview given to *The Washington Times*, Campolo argues that the Religious Right has turned America into an

earthly kingdom of God by turning Christianity into a kind of patriotic litmus test. He notes:

> I think America is the best nation on the face of the Earth, but it is not the kingdom of God. Babylon in the Bible, in the book of Revelation, is described as a society that seduces people into worshipping it. I'm afraid that people have gotten to the point where they are worshipping America…I think the religious right has become blinded to the fact that America, at this stage in our history, may be committing some hideous sins against the rest of the world and has lost its ability to critique our country and look at it as the Hebrew prophets did. (Waters, 2007, p. A2)

Evident in the above is the identity the RLC maintain as a morally independent, critical religious voice. Standing outside the political and evangelical mainstream, they claim to be better able to offer moral critiques of the practices of the status quo. In this they sometimes stylistically model themselves after Old Testament prophets, a rhetorical form that has a rich history in American politics (see Darsey, 1997). However, the RLC claim to want to establish a moral center, an open and inclusive form of dialogue, which is far less radical than the prophetic rhetorical form. Put differently, the RLC have radical moral foundations that are sometimes best served through moderate political articulation. The RLC are adamant about being nonpartisan, though they frequently claim to share similar values with groups on the Christian Left, like Rabbi Michael Lerner's[i] "Network of Spiritual Progressives" organization.

## Interpretive Persuasion

The purpose of this study on the RLC is to use the notion of "interpretive persuasion" (see Mailloux, 1998, 1989, 1991) to theorize the simultaneous production and reception processes of the RLC as these relate to both their hermeneutic vision and in the moral framing of their political discourse. My reason for relying upon the mutually-enforcing process of rhetoric and hermeneutics is two-fold: first, I wish to ground the study of the RLC in the discipline of rhetorical studies. There are myriad scholarly methods that empirically address social movement organizations. This study is not concerned with making empirical claims about religion or social movement theory generally, or social movement organizations specifically; second, I choose the tradition of interpretive persuasion as a methodology for it best explains production and reception processes in a neo-pragmatist tradition of rhetoric that appreciates meaning as historically situated. As a rhetorical critic I am interested in the discursive processes of understanding and articulation as they relate to the RLC. In this study I am not advancing claims about theological veracity, defending a particular religious practice or expression, or establishing empirical claims about social movement organizations. My aim is to demonstrate how the insights afforded by interpretive persuasion explain the interrelatedness between a community's reading practices and its modes of discursive articulation.

The research methodology I will employ takes seriously Mailloux's notion of rhetorical hermeneutics, which speaks to the particular tradition of rhetoric that appreciates the intertwined roles of hermeneutics and rhetoric. I address how the RLC specifically use these practices in later chapters. Here I wish to first address the

theoretical dimensions of interpretive persuasion before discussing how it makes possible certain critical practices. A rhetorical hermeneutics contends there is a "pragmatic inseparability" between the related processes of hermeneutics, textual reception and interpretation and the processes of rhetoric, textual production and articulation (Mailloux, 1998). Put differently, both rhetoric and hermeneutics are productive and receptive activities. The act of interpretation is always historical, taking place in the rhetorical context of a text's reception. Following the neo-pragmatist assumptions of antifoundationalism, it is impossible to interpret outside one's own cultural assumptions—what Mailloux calls "ethnocentrism." The concept of ethnocentrism helps to explain how groups differ in their understanding of the significance of a textual event. Biblical interpretation is no exception. Mailloux observes that:

> Readers can only understand what in some sense they already know…The point is that successful interpretation depends on the interpreter's prior web of beliefs, desires, practices, and so forth…an interpreter's assumptions are not prejudices that distort meaning but the enabling ground of the process. (1998, p. 7)

Cultural expectations that precede the interpretation of a text make up what sociologist Rhys Williams (2002) terms the "symbolic repertoire," which composes the historical and cultural context that makes possible what is culturally legitimate.[ii] For Mailloux, citizens are "situated interpreters" who act within "webs of belief and desire that constitute our rhetorical contexts" (1998, p. 10). Understanding the rhetorical context, or symbolic repertoire, is important to grasping the salience of both interpretive and productive activities. The RLC predominantly make their rhetorical appeals through

moral framing. This is what Wallis means when he argues that religious convictions must be expressed in the language of public moral argument. This study aims to provide a better understanding of how precisely RLC reading practices and articulated moral frames operate in public discourse, and in what ways the rhetorical context enables and constrains these activities.

Not all groups will receive a text in the same way in large part because of the rhetorical context. A text has no singular meaning and its meanings are variable based on historical context. Ceccarelli (1998) explains that certain texts are polysemous because give rise to multiple meanings. The Bible is certainly no exception as situated interpreters attempt to make sense of the text in a particular rhetorical and historical context. Browne (2001) notes that rhetorical scholars constantly invoke context as a "necessary category for the work of interpretation" (p. 330). For Browne, context explains a text's "text-ness" within an intertextual field. The meaning of a particular text is given over to the intertextual field in which it is received. As Browne notes, "there's no such things as context—there are only contexts, overlapping, complex, competing, and frequently self-masking" (p. 333). Overlapping contexts help to explain why the reading practices of the RLC, which emphasize social justice, differ so widely from those of conservative evangelicals. Following Mailloux's defense of rhetorical hermeneutics, it is possible to explain polysemy and intertextuality as a product of rhetorical pragmatism. That is, context(s) and reception practices become all the more important when critics view texts as situated discursive acts.

The relationship between rhetoric and hermeneutics is extremely useful in explaining the historical "situatedness" of both the reading and articulation practices of

the RLC. Any translation of a text (again, the Bible is a prominent example) is always a temporally-bound "approximation." Following the assumptions of neo-pragmatism, there are no Platonic, transcendental meanings in texts, just situated interpretations (Mailloux, 1995). Rhetorical pragmatism assumes that there is no transcendental ground beyond discourse. For this reason the critic studies "specific historical acts of interpretation within their cultural contexts" (1991, p. 235). For Mailloux, a rhetorical hermeneutics describes the historical process of interpretation, what a reader contributes to interpretation and not what the text gives the reader to interpret. For these reasons interpretive persuasion is an appealing methodology to study the RLC. Interpretation practices are ultimately "politically interested acts of persuasion" that take place "in a political context and each interpretive act relates directly to the power relations…involved in that context" (1998, p. 50).

Mailloux's work understands rhetoric and hermeneutics as practices taking place in context-bound, historically-situated moments of textual engagement. Reception and production animate both interpretation and rhetoric. Mailloux explains that "in some ways rhetoric and interpretation are practical forms of the same human activity" (1998, p. 4). In Mailloux's conception of rhetorical pragmatism it is important to understand both hermeneutics and rhetoric as dynamic human practices. Rhetorical critics must move "as quickly as possible" from interpretive accounts to the rhetorical dimension of interpretation, from reception to production, without trying to theorize one in the absence of the other. When critics theorize interpretation and rhetorical as separate activities, they fail to recognize how these activities function as mutually-enforcing practices, and not as discrete processes. This is also true of religious practices because

"biblical interpretation and its hermeneutic justification are part of the same rhetorical configuration" (p. 52).

Mailloux stresses that critics make a theoretical blunder when they try to establish "foundations of meaning outside the rhetorical exchange." He goes on to note, "All theories believe that some pure vantage point can be established beyond and ruling over the messy realm of interpretive practices and persuasive acts" (1989, p. 16). The neo-pragmatist move highlights that meaning is not extraverbal, insists on an antifoundational view of knowledge. Such a move stresses human practices of meaning making in lieu of assuming that texts provide their own "correct" interpretation. Normative standards for corrective interpretation occur in and through the reading practices of interpretative communities. In Mailloux's understanding of rhetoric, interpretations (not texts themselves) constitute texts and the practice of "making sense" of texts occurs within interpretative communities and is not simply relative to "idiosyncratic" readings of individuals (1989, p. 151).

Mailloux's introduction of rhetorical hermeneutics and Leff's (1997) related notion of hermeneutic rhetoric takes into account the mutually-dependent and inseparable roles rhetoric and hermeneutics play and demonstrates how the strategies of one enter into the production of the other. This leads to Leff's acknowledgment that rhetoric and hermeneutics describe discrete practices, but are nonetheless inseparable[iii]. Leff notes that when critics proceed from the starting point of rhetoric they inevitably end up doing hermeneutical work, and vice versa. He argues, "all interpretive work involves participation in some rhetorical exchange, and every rhetorical exchange involves some interpretive work" (1997, p. 198). Mailloux's rhetorical hermeneutics

privileges the reception and understanding of literary texts in various historical moments; shows the rhetorical strategies that impact the reception of literary texts. Leff's hermeneutical rhetoric favors the production of political rhetoric as explained by particular hermeneutical strategies.

The relation between hermeneutical practices and rhetorical practice afford critics the opportunity to appreciate how a discursive community strategically interprets the past and present in order to articulate future action. Wilson (2005) has argued that the rhetoric/hermeneutic distinction is one of particular importance to the critic for it allows him/her to "disrupt" the text and invite the reader to perceive the text "not as an organic whole but as a situated, intertextual object that avoids some aspects of a discursive field while it interprets others for persuasive ends" (p. 307). Here the rhetoric/hermeneutic distinction allows a critic to demonstrate how a text moves in two directions simultaneously. Wilson observes that the text moves "toward a discursive field comprised of rhetorical norms, values and symbolic acts that are being interpreted *and* toward an audience that will be persuaded, for someone's benefit, by the interpretation" (p. 307, emphasis mine).

The rhetoric/hermeneutic distinction allows the critic to examine how texts "re-embody" historical moments and past expressions to speak to the present. Leff (1997) explains that "the old text leaves its impression on the rhetor's product, but the rhetor's productive act has left its interpretive impression on the original (p. 202). The RLC interpret the words of Jesus to try to construct a contemporary social movement that leverages political impact, thus projecting the spirit of Jesus' gospel tidings from the

past to the current moment, by re-committing themselves, as generations before have, to the "still unfinished work" at hand.

Wilson's notion of a "discursive field" is important for this analysis for it shows how a temporally-situated rhetorical context, a "rhetorical culture," is a fertile source of rhetorical intervention. A discursive field is shaped by and shapes a given series of utterances, or "symbolic exchanges." The RLC are engaged in a project that interprets the sacred values of a discrete portion of the New Testament through contemporary political and moral argument. Put differently, the texts of the RLC receive a discursive field constituted by centuries of scriptural interpretation, American religious discourse, the vulnerability of the historical political influence of the Religious Right, and public political rhetoric. The RLC interpret the discursive field through a hermeneutic vision that rearticulates the field into a rhetoric mobilizing progressive evangelicals and other "values voters." The RLC assert the relevance of their mode of moral argument based on the discourse attributed to Jesus in the Gospels of the New Testament.

We can theorize terms like "hermeneutic vision" and "moral frame" because the hermeneutic/rhetoric distinction is an "artifact of critical reflection" and not something deliberately recognized by rhetors or distinctive within a text (Wilson, 2005, p. 307). Wilson's insight is important for it suggests that a rhetorical critic is a "translator" or a "mediator" who disrupts the "organic" wholeness of a text to lay bare the simultaneous strategies of interpretation and persuasion as a single mode of invention. By highlighting the role of the critic as a translator, Wilson shows how rhetorical critics reveal for readers how interpretation strategies select and contain certain elements of a "discursive field" that comes to bear on a given reading. In the case of the RLC, they

draw from the gospels of the New Testament and certain norms of democratic modes of argumentation. Wilson's insight also permits the rhetorical critic to then show how a discourse positions its interpretation of a discursive field, past rhetorical utterances toward a new message toward an audience to be persuaded.

By taking up Wilson's suggestion that the critic disrupt the wholeness of a text, rhetorical critics demonstrate to readers how ideology pervades both reception and persuasion processes by revealing how an ideology evolves within the text. Put differently, rhetors both read ideologically and persuade ideologically. Their texts represent a unification of the two seemingly different strategies woven throughout and sutured together as a single mode of invention by ideology[iv]. Ceccarelli (1998) argues that there is a particular type of critically engaged polysemy, evident in rhetorical and literary criticism, stressing "hermeneutic depth," prescribing a way for audiences to understand a text. She observes, "Arguing that *both* an interpretation *and* its opposite are sustained by the text, this type of polysemic criticism insists that an audience accept the multiplicity of meanings to fully appreciate the text's deeper significance" (p. 408, emphasis original). This project intends to gain a more sophisticated understanding of how groups like the RLC both read and articulate moral/religious arguments by examining both the community's reception practices and the reception of the group by others. Not only will this analysis confirm the intimacy between interpretation and articulation practices, but it also demonstrates how an intertextual cultural field greatly impacts the reception and political impact of rhetorical discourse. Mailloux's pragmatic stress on interpretive persuasion reveals how "a rhetorical analysis of a particular historical act of interpretation *counts* as a specific piece of rhetorically pragmatic

theorizing about interpretation" (1991, p. 238, emphasis original). I hope that my rhetorical analysis of the RLC will reinforce the importance of interpretive persuasion as a critical method, and serves as an example of how to grapple with the interpretive practices of religious groups attempting to wield a political voice.

## Research Questions

This dissertation asks the following questions:

1) How does interpretive labor fashion a particular ideology of belief and practice?
2) How does the ideology of the RLC fashion a productive rhetoric of persuasion for the public sphere?
3) How is that rhetorical production further interpreted by the media and the public at large?

## Preview

In the second chapter I discuss the hermeneutic vision of the RLC and how it informs their interpretation of the Bible. The hermeneutic vision establishes strategic practices of reading and fashions a particular role for the believer-interpreter. The RLC demonstrate an implicit hermeneutic practice of humility and empathy that is historically, contextually attuned to present exigencies. The RLC adopt an experiential hermeneutic practice based upon performance of practices evident in Biblical scripture. In this way their hermeneutic is not based on doctrine or ideology as it is on performance—rearticulating, re-contextualizing acts Christ-like acts of generosity to the poor to meet present day situations. As part of hermeneutic practice, the RLC are not formalists, New Historians, or reception theorists, instead they are contextualists in that

the primary hermeneutic task is determining how best to apply the model of Jesus to a present context.

In the third chapter I address how the RLC articulate political arguments through a particular moral frame emphasizing humility and an ambivalent relation to partisan politics and the state. Theological "middle axioms" delimit a particular Christian relationship to the state and to political action. The productive discourse of the RLC attempts to fashion a moral center from which it can issue its "nonpartisan" appeals. The moral frame itself makes possible such claims for it disciplines religious arguments so that they are made through democratic language appealing to all. In addition to democratic language, the RLC adopt some of the values that come along with such appeals such as plurality and the desire to seek common ground solutions. In this chapter I address specific discourses advocating poverty reduction measures.

In the fourth chapter I extend the analysis of RLC productive discourse to the issues of war and healthcare reform. I build off the premise, established in chapter three, that the RLC moral frame stressed selflessness and a commitment to a bipartisanship that transcends partisan politics. The emphasis on the common ground reflects the moral ambiguity of using political power to achieve moral objectives. In this chapter I assert that when oriented around the poverty-inspired notion of justice, the same moral frame stresses an opposition to idolatry of state power on the issue of war; on the subject of health care reform it primarily gains expression through a moral directive to expand the sphere of consideration beyond one's own neighbors. In this chapter I contend that the RLC's productive discourse attends to the rejection of the idolatry of state power to achieve political objectives through war and also calls for "common

good" emphasis on the issue of health care reform. The issues of peace and health care reform reflect the insights of the productive discourse on poverty, and thicken the moral frame premised on humility and the ambivalence of state power highlighted in chapter three.

The fifth chapter addresses how the RLC's critics receive their discourse. I contend that most public critics of the RLC view them as liberal evangelicals concerned primarily with liberal social issues and not enough with inviolable evangelical positions on personal morality and the opposition to abortion and gay marriage. I discuss why the RLC selectively use prophetic appeals on social issues like poverty reduction and peace, but use more democratic appeals on personal issues like abortion and gay marriage. The reception of the RLC suggests that the mixing of styles limits the efficacy of their rhetorical appeals. The wider critical audience of RLC discourse provides critics an opportunity to evaluate RLC textual strategies, and makes apparent the ideological workings articulated within and throughout the RLC's interpretive and rhetorical labors.

# Chapter Two
## A hermeneutic vision of the heart

Practices of textual interpretation define a religious community's relation to and understanding of the authority of foundational texts. Bartowski (1996) explains that conservative evangelicals frequently disagree over their commitment to biblical authority, with some espousing the literalism of the biblical word while others note the inerrancy of biblical inspiration. Using Gadamer's notions of reader prejudice and the hermeneutic circle, Bartowski notes that "competing interpretations can often be traced to divergent presuppositions," and that a reader's assumptions are revealed in the act of opening certain parts of a text, while closing access to other parts (p. 262). As I noted in the previous chapter, Wilson (2005) notes how a critic can disrupt the perceived organic whole of a text to reveal the ideological strategies animating both its interpretation and production processes. The same ideological presuppositions guiding reading processes guide the production of rhetorical argument. While the scholarly record is full of analyses of the reading practices and strategies of conservative evangelical groups, there is a notable paucity of literature confronting the same practices and strategies of evangelical groups who identify as progressive. This begs the question: How do progressive evangelicals read the Bible differently than their conservative counterparts? In this dissertation I am concerned only with the RLC, and so I begin to draw up an answer to the question just posed by examining their hermeneutic strategies in this chapter.

The RLC do not explicitly theorize their own reading practices. Taken collectively, the published texts and, to a lesser extent, their official blog posts, serve as

a body of discourse from which a critic can identify an implicit theory of hermeneutic practice. While repeated references to particular Bible passages abound, there is little in the RLC's body of literature that specifically states *how* the community should read. One theologian[v] offers a notable exception in a recent issue of *Sojourners* in a piece straightforwardly titled, "How to read the Bible." In it Marilyn McEntyre rejects the futility of the traditional evangelical commitment to biblical literalism. She observes "hermeneutical criteria become lines in the sand, partitioning the family of God into camps where we huddle among the like-minded, clinging to readings we have come to rely on" (2009, p. 30). Noting the ambiguity of the Hebrew language and the inability of Greek to draw certain distinctions from Hebrew, McEntyre warns that evangelicals need to avoid the futility of conservatively-minded literal readings while simultaneously being conscientious not to dismiss the ambiguity, as some liberal and mainline Protestants do, of the biblical message as mere fables and mythology.

McEntyre advocates the necessity of being committed to "debate," an oft-repeated trope of the RLC, to describe the commitment to tolerance evangelicals should hold of dissenting views. She observes, "We need courage because Jesus' directives, while they resonate with wisdom, compassion, and prophetic suggestion, rarely resolve the ethical ambiguities they leave in their wake" (p. 30). For McEntyre, modern believers should begin their appreciation of Jesus' prophetic words by modeling their reaction along the lines of those who personally witnessed Jesus speak. To this effect she notes, "amazement is the appropriate first encounter with the Christ of the gospels: to be amazed is to find oneself in a maze, knowing there is a way, but unable to foresee the whole path. It is also to recognize that you have come upon something incompatible

with rational expectations" (p. 30). To paraphrase McEntyre: because Jesus spoke in parables, his followers were often baffled. Had he *intended* to relay simple truths simply, he would have done so. To take Jesus' word on the terms offered means to dwell in awe.

McEntyre notes that Christians should approach scripture with three questions: "What does this text invite you to do? What does this text require of you? And what will this text not let you do?" (p. 30). In the absence of clear answers, the best approach to read well is to "pray that on the *particular* occasion of this *particular* reading" the truth will become apparent, understanding that scripture "not only allows, but demands, reflective, flexible, open-ended interpretation" (p. 30, emphasis mine). For McEntyre and the RLC, the "gray area is holy ground," that which calls for humble reflection and a commitment to conversation and debate with others regarding that reflection. In many ways this hermeneutic formulation aligns with Michael Hyde's (2006) emphasis on the importance of co-dwelling primordially and with others. McEntyre's analysis also locates the hermeneutic moment as a historical, context-bound encounter with a sacred text. The RLC are not formalists or reception theorists, instead they are contextualists concerned with situated acts of interpretation.

The need for McEntyre and the RLC to advocate a reading strategy motivated by humility and empathy for others informs the focus on this chapter. Specifically, I argue that the hermeneutic vision of the RLC establishes a set of values constituted by particular interpretive practices authenticated by the "red letters" of the King James Version of the four gospels of the New Testament. The RLC perform a countercultural reading practice that stresses biblical examples of reversal—the poor becoming blessed,

the infirm becoming well—frequently found in parables, in order to locate exemplars to serve as guides for present-day problems. George Lakoff (2006) explains that for "Progressives," parables call for metaphorical reasoning making possible the understanding and significance of a past action for a new situation. The trope of reversal, frequently found in parables, lifts up the lowly and humbles the powerful. The reversals found in Jesus' parables are surprising because they upset the social order. I contend that the technical term metalepsis best describes the larger structure of a theory of their reading. Metalepsis describes a process whereby a present understanding is linked to a prior cause. That is, by emphasizing the transposition of Jesus' values into and for the present moment, the RLC adopt a reading strategy that seeks to answer "What would Jesus do today?" This hermeneutic vision delimits a domain of legitimation by interpreting the Bible through a lens of Jesus' sayings. The red letters, the example of Jesus, constitutes the hermeneutic horizon, delimiting the range of interpretive possibility, legitimate interpretation. The hermeneutic vision operates under a logic of subsumption that translates and understands the entire Bible, and by extension the Christian tradition, through Jesus as portrayed in the four gospels of the New Testament. Following McEntyre's analysis I will detail which passages in the Bible the RLC read and note how they interpret those passages. I will begin this chapter by discussing the theoretical premises of a hermeneutical vision. I then discuss the strategies of the vision, detailing what the vision includes and excludes from consideration. I conclude with a summary of the hermeneutic vision and offer some thoughts on its significance to my whole dissertation project.

## Theorizing a Hermeneutic Vision

A hermeneutic vision guides an interpretive community in collectively understanding a given text. The Bible serves as the primary text by which RLC members make sense of their faith and the works that are to serve it. John Arthos (2002) in his reading of Chapman's Coatesville Address explains that "vision is the engine of narrative comprehension that guides, forms, and informs the ethical journey" (p. 194). Like a narrative vision, a hermeneutic vision makes contemporary meaning through an act of remembrance. The vision guides and applies the meaning of a past utterance through a purposeful act of remembrance. In the case of the RLC this act of remembrance is coming to terms with how the Gospels generally, and the words attributed to Jesus specifically, compel the faithful to action.

A hermeneutic vision uses the "language of reflection" to receive, or remember, a past text in a decorous way. Michael Leff (2005, [1995]) observes that rhetors can use "creative equivocation" to play with the temporal movement of a narrative. In this way rhetors can use a hermeneutic vision to transport a past concern into the present situation. Further, Leff's identification of "creative equivocation" allows critics to identify when and how rhetors attempt to blend the past with the present, and in the case of the RLC, sacred scriptures with secular political exigencies. The historic becomes the present; the religious becomes the political. A hermeneutic vision looks back to interpret for the present. This vision guides the reader through its interpretive narrative of an appropriate, and indeed, necessary remembrance of a guiding sacred insight.

Mailloux (1998) explains how the interdependence of rhetoric and hermeneutics helps to explain why a legitimate interpretation of scripture, for example, cannot be independent of one's ideological position. He argues

> Biblical interpretation and its hermeneutic justification are part of the same rhetorical configuration. Indeed, a hermeneutic theory provides no guarantees for correctly interpreting Scripture or any other text, though it does provide additional argumentative strategies for making one's case (p. 52).

A hermeneutic vision is a strategy that "reembodies" and re-packages past utterances for a present situation, making textual traditions the subject for rhetorical invention in the present.

In his analysis of the Gettysburg Address, Michael Leff (1997) demonstrated that in order for Lincoln to appropriately act on the Founding Fathers' principle of equality for all, he had to reinterpret the principle for the present occasion. In order for Lincoln to preserve the principles of the Founders, he had to "change the way the public mind conceives and applies them" for what was "fitting and proper for one time and purpose must change to meet the demands of other times and purposes" (p. 210). Rhetors cannot simply restate a past utterance and expect it to have a suasive effect in the present. In this way, rhetoric and hermeneutics form a singular mode of invention. One cannot understand a past utterance without simultaneously articulating it anew in light of present circumstances. Leff observes that the present orator honors the wisdom of past values by "projecting their spirit into the future and dedicating themselves to the still unfinished work" (p. 211).

Murphy (2004) uses a lovely metaphor describing how rhetoric carries "inherited words" into a room. This explains how linguistic strategies transform ideology into action. In the same way we can understand a hermeneutic vision to carry a reading strategy into the room in order to give life to and prescribe a present course of action. Writing about John Kennedy, Murphy demonstrates Kennedy spoke in a distinctive, eloquent language "invented from the material of the past and crafted to suit the needs of the present" (p. 136). Likewise, a hermeneutic vision authorizes a strategic mode of reading and scriptural reception in order to bring the "old words" back into the room. Leff's (1997) hermeneutical rhetoric focuses on the inventional dimension of rhetorical production and explains "how members of a community can invent new interpretive strategies while remaining in that community," altering the rhetorical situation by demonstrating how "traditions can be altered without destroying their identity" (pp. 203-204).

In their discussion of iconicity, Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs contend that the rhetorical critic investigates and explains how "rhetorical performance invites certain kinds of response" (1990, p. 256). For Leff and Sachs, the critic locates this invited response by examining how the elements of style and content "interactively cooperate" to produce a textual ideological meaning. They argue that while "the ideology of the speech participates in a context of larger discursive formations and material conditions, it is also something represented within the tissue of connectives that the text constructs" (p. 269). Another way to argue their point is to suggest that textual style reveals an evolving ideological strategy within the text itself. Certainly the Bible is a remarkable discursive construct, collectively assembled and edited over many years and by many

hands.[vi] I would like to suggest that Leff and Sachs' analysis explains not only how a critic can examine a singular rhetorical event for its ideological makeup, but also a composite body of discourse, like that produced by the RLC, to reveal the ideological composition of the RLC's hermeneutic vision for reading the Bible. In this sense "iconicity" refers to the linguistic and ideological strategies implicitly operating in the works of the RLC.

A hermeneutic vision constrains interpretive possibilities along particular ideological commitments. The RLC are no exception. A hermeneutic vision both makes present certain meanings while it conceals others. It is up to the critic to reveal both strategies in order to appreciate the ideological assumptions guiding such an interpretive vision. That which is present in an interpretive community's reading as well as that which is absent both make clear how such a community envisions a proper order of things and to what extent such an interpretation (or set of interpretation) participates in other, larger discourses.

## The RLC Hermeneutic Vision

The RLC's hermeneutic vision is expressed in a reading practice defined by the trope of metalepsis. Lanham (1991) notes that metalepsis describes how a "present effect [is] attributed to a remote cause" (p. 99). Specifically, he observes that metalepsis is a "compressed chain of metaphorical reasoning" and cites Chaim Perelmen's observation that it "facilitates the transposition of values into facts" (p. 100). Perelman's insight explains in part how the example of a humble and servant-like Jesus comes to stand in for the RLC as the cause for petitioning the state to pass policy reducing poverty. For example, there is nothing in the Beatitudes, or in any of the words

attributed to Jesus, that spells out what Christian public policy should be. Jerome Bump (1985) explains that metalepsis attempts to "establish priority over the precursor by being more true to the precursor's own sources of inspiration" (p. 351). Bump's point is useful because even though the RLC are not trying to supplant Jesus, they do attempt to divine from Jesus' examples the proper "Christian" way to proceed in the present. Lanham (1991) builds on this point by citing Sister Miriam Joseph's assertion that in metalepsis "cause and effect are related productively, antecedent and consequent temporally" (p. 100). In this way the RLC assert that their reading practices and political advocacy are "Christian" because the lived example of Jesus serves as the source. Further, the RLC envision themselves as mediums of the message and not its source. I touch on this point further in the next chapter when I discuss the RLC moral frame. Metalepsis provides a technical term for understanding the larger, general structure of a theory of the RLC's reading practices. Through such a structure the RLC develop a hermeneutic vision that stresses the present day applicability of the countercultural examples of reversal found in the gospels.

Consistent with the RLC hermeneutic vision, Wallis (2005) observes that the RLC vision is reflected in what the "works of Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the New Testament writers had to say" (p. 28). Wallis' declaration provides a clear roadmap of the RLC interpretive method, for what the RLC read, and perhaps just as importantly, what they do not. In this section I will provide a representative, though not exhaustive, sample of not only what the RLC read, but also the rationale they provide for such reading practices. The examples to follow serve as an illustration of the RLC interpretive method.

**The General Example and Model of Jesus**

The RLC read the New Testament generally, and the four gospel accounts of Jesus specifically in order to understand the example for social and political action set by Jesus. In his book *Red Letter Christians,* Tony Campolo (2008) explains that the RLC are concerned first and foremost with the "grounding essentials" of Christianity, which many evangelicals often neglect. In reference to the name "Red Letter Christian," Campolo observes, that "in adopting the name, we are saying that we are committed to living out the things that Jesus taught" (p. 22).The RLC, like all evangelicals, believe the whole Bible to be divinely-inspired. What distinguishes the RLC from other more conservative evangelicals is their nearly singular focus on Jesus' gospel teachings in the first four books of the New Testament. Campolo explains, "We emphasize the 'red letters' because we believe that you can only understand the rest of the Bible when you read it from the perspective provided by Christ" (p. 23). Like all evangelicals the RLC believe in the Apostle's Creed and the virgin birth, bodily resurrection, and divinity of Jesus. Campolo confirms that RLC members believe in the inerrancy (as opposed to literalism) of the Bible, but they stress the lived examples of Jesus so stressed social justice, that all Christian reading practices should be guided by such priorities. To this effect Wallis (2005) remarks, "The Lord Jesus Christ is either authoritative for Christians, or he is not" (p. 154).

Greg Boyd[vii] asserted in a personal interview that RLC evangelicals are called to "interpret everything in the light of Jesus' example." He observed,

> The whole of scripture is inspired, but it's not all equally important, and certainly not all equally applicable. The believer's hermeneutic task is to ask,

> ‘how does this apply to me today?’ The answer is Jesus. Jesus is at the center of everything.

For both Campolo and Boyd, Jesus’ spoken words recorded only in the gospels of the New Testament serve as an interpretive lens through which the rest of the Bible is to be read. In this regard the New Testament serves as an unfolding and demonstration of the gospels’ example of humility and compassion. Claiborne and Haw (2008), citing John Howard Yoder, explain that “Every strand of New Testament literature testifies to a direct relationship between the way Christ suffered on the cross and the way the Christian, as disciple, is called to suffer in the face of evil” (p. 278). The New Testament to the RLC is a fertile field of narrative exemplifying and elaborating upon the gospel accounts of Jesus.

Imitation of Jesus is a clearly articulated goal of the RLC hermeneutic vision. The RLC cite Ephesians 5:2 and Philippians 2: 4-7[viii] as providing the textual support for the importance of such an undertaking. In Ephesians 5:1-2 Paul writes, “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us” and in Philippians 2: 4-5 Paul observes, “Look not every man[ix] on his own things, but every man on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” Claiborne and Haw note that these passages indicate that Christians should take “the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had,” meaning not to imitate the mundane dimensions of Jesus’ life, but to follow his lived example of serving others. The authors note, “The only thing all Christians are called by the New Testament to imitate is Jesus’ taking up the cross,” sacrificing so that the example of Christ lives on (p. 278). For Claiborne and Haw, “following God” means to “imitate” or “mimic.” The criterion for

whether an act exemplifies Jesus is whether it "looks like him;" specifically, Christians are to "be the things he was. We are to preach the things he preached and live the way he lived" (p. 230). Boyd (2005) notes that Ephesians 5:1-2 means that followers are to adopt Jesus' "lifestyle" and cites Jesus in Luke 14:27: "And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" as further proof that imitation is necessary for the follower of Christ.

Campolo (2008) notes that Jesus' example was not simply something to be modeled in its original context, but something that could adapt to different times and contexts. He writes that the most important assumption RLC members make is that, "the historical Jesus can be alive and present to each and every person, and that salvation depends on yielding to Him and inviting Him to be vital, transforming presence in our lives," (p. 23).

**Jesus and the Kingdom of God**

The Kingdom of God is a central part of the RLC hermeneutic vision. The Kingdom of God is established specifically in the gospel accounts of Jesus and serves as means for understanding Jesus' platform. In his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:33) Jesus instructs his disciples to "seek ye first the kingdom of God" establishing for RLC readers the centrality of this notion to their overall hermeneutic vision. The RLC tend to focus on the gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke, and pays considerably less attention to Mark and John. I expand on the possible reasons for this later in this chapter. To the RLC the Kingdom of God serves to explain the rationale for Jesus' ministry and offers a model for social action in the present. The RLC primarily cite four examples of what they interpret Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God.

First, Jesus rejects the kingdom of the world offered by Satan. In Luke 4: 1-13, Jesus is tempted by Satan and offered all the kingdoms of the world, which he refuses. The writer of Luke observes in verses 5-8:

> And the devil taking him up to into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said unto him, All this power I will give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

Claiborne and Haw (2008) interpret this passage to suggest that Jesus was preparing for public ministry by being tempted in "ways Israel had been tempted in its long history" (p. 83). The authors note the temptation of Jesus, in the context of Jewish history, was to seize power away from Rome. They observe, "Just as Israel was tempted in 1 Samuel 8 to 'become like other nations' and install a king, Jesus was tempted with a throne" (p. 85). It is noteworthy to the authors that Jesus was uninterested in establishing "God's society" from a throne, but rather from the position of a commoner. They observe, "Jesus would enter his people's story, tears, sweat, and hunger and show them a way out that doesn't require the financial, military, and political power of kings" (p. 86).

A second example of the Kingdom of God cited by the RLC comes from John 18:36. In this passage Pontius Pilate confronts Jesus after his arrest, and asks him if he is indeed king of the Jews. In verse 36 Jesus replies, "My Kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence." Citing New Testament

scholar N.T. Wright, Wallis (2008a) observes that Christians have historically been at odds with one another over this passage, with some believing that the Christian purpose is to save souls for heaven-to-come, while others asserting the importance of alleviating others' suffering in the present world. Wright observes,

> When I lecture about this [working for God's kingdom on earth], people will pop up and say, 'Surely Jesus said my kingdom is not of this world.' And the answer is no, what Jesus said in John 18 is, 'My kingdom is not *from* this world.' That's *ek tou kosmoutoutou.* It's quite clear in the text that Jesus' kingdom doesn't start with this world. It isn't a worldly kingdom, but it is for this world. It's from somewhere else, but it's for this world (quoted in Wallis, 2008a, p. 55).

For Wallis and the RLC the danger of interpreting John 18:36 is found in a resignation to the status quo and a withdrawal from present-day concerns. Wallis explains, "The kingdom of God, which Jesus came to inaugurate, is meant to create an alternative reality in this world" (p. 56).

The main thrust of the RLC's interpretation of the above passage is an emphasis on the present. McLaren (2006) emphatically states about RLC commitment to understanding the Kingdom of God as a present, and not future, phenomenon: "We've said it again and again…: the secret message of Jesus isn't primarily about 'heaven after you die.' It doesn't give us an exit ramp or escape hatch from this world" (p. 183). In addition Claiborne and Haw (2008) note that the passage does not indicate that Jesus' kingdom is "apolitical," rather it explains "*how* his kingdom is political. He clarified his statement right after he made it: the essential difference is that in my kingdom, we do

not fight to maintain the kingdom" (p. 110). For Claiborne and Haw, as for the rest of the RLC, the kingdom of God, while co-present with other earthly kingdoms, is uniquely strange in its emphasis on compassion instead of puissance.

McLaren (2006) explains that Jesus' emphasis on a present kingdom makes it an interactive one, with believers compelled to expand the kingdom in their daily lives through a lifestyle that maintains fidelity to the example Jesus set. For McLaren and the RLC, Jesus' response to Pilate makes clear that Christianity is not a mere "belief system" or "set of rituals for the select few," but is instead for an interactive relationship with a living God and a "daily way of life" (p. 83).

A third example of RLC emphasis on the kingdom of God is found in the abundance of passages in Jesus' two famous sermons, and in directives to his disciples, which address the issue of poverty. The RLC's interpretive method is quite clear on the matter of poverty. The RLC read the Sermons on the Mount and Plain, collectively, as a clear and unambiguous statement about political priority. Both sermons, argues George Kennedy (1984), function as deliberative rhetoric, because Jesus offers moral instruction and speaks to a future inaugurated in the kingdom of God. The RLC would take exception with such a characterization; would note how these sermons should be understood to be predominantly epideictic in nature with Jesus presently that the kingdom of God was now at hand, not waiting in the future.

For McLaren (2006) these two sermons represent Jesus' "manifesto" and answer the question of how God wants people to live. First, the Beatitudes. Of the eight blessings Jesus confers at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, the first, and to the RLC the most important, is "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom

of heaven" (Matt 5:3). Jesus echoes this sentiment in his Sermon on the Plain, when he declares "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God" and "But woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation!" (Luke 6:20, 24).

Perhaps the two most important passages to the RLC addressing the need to attend to the poor are found in Matthew 6:35-46, where Jesus explains that those who feed, slake the thirst and offer shelter to the poor will be blessed. In verse 40 Jesus declares, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" and, conversely, in verse 45 warns, "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me." The second passage of utmost significance to the RLC is in Mark 14:7 where Jesus tells his disciples: "For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good but me ye have not always." Wallis (2005) explains that these passages demonstrate that Jesus is "assuming that the social *location* of his followers will always put them in close proximity to the poor and easily be able to reach out to them" (p. 211, emphasis original). For Wallis, social location often determines how the Bible is read; being too distant from the poor causes Christians to misread the passage. Citing references to the poor in both the Old and New Testaments, Wallis notes that RLC members should understand poverty to be the most important biblical problem. Specifically when counting the number of references to poverty, Wallis and some seminary students discovered that it was the second most prominent theme (behind idolatry) in the Old Testament. He explains, "One of every sixteen verses in the New Testament is about the poor or the subject of money…In the first three gospels it is one out of ten verses, and in the book of Luke, it is one in seven!" (p. 212).

The fourth example of the Kingdom of God cited by the RLC sees a reversal of social logic. The RLC point to the Sermon on the Mount to reveal how the kingdom of God as described by Jesus is an upside-down kingdom where the lowly are elevated and the privileged are cursed. Such representative examples frequently cited by the RLC include Matthew 5:38-44, wherein Jesus urges his listeners to "turn the other cheek" to those who smite them (v.39), give away possessions to those who would sue them (v.40), offer to carry an enemy soldier's pack twice the length required by law (v. 41), give to those who need (v.42) and love their enemies, "doing good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (v.44).

McLaren (2006) explains that these passages are pivotal to RLC members because they reveal just how "countercultural" Jesus' message was to his listeners, and how the same countercultural message needs to persist from Christians today. He notes,

> What if our only hope lies in this impossible paradox: the only way the kingdom of God can be strong in a truly liberating way is through a scandalous, noncoercive weakness; the only way it can be powerful is through astonishing vulnerability; the only way it can live is by dying; the only way it can succeed is by failing? (p. 70).

Claiborne and Haw (2008) explain that the above passages are significant to the RLC because they offer a "third way" between passivity and violence; Jesus offers believers a paradoxical kingdom where evil is overcome not by resistance but through a transforming of hearts. They note, "Jesus' truth is that if you want to save your life, you will lose it" (p. 95). Greg Boyd observes that these passages from the Sermon on the Mount describe for readers two different kingdoms. For Boyd, the kingdom of the

Sword is emblematic of worldly power, government and ideology. This kingdom is a "power over" kingdom, in that rule is carried out over people. The "power over" model of governance is marked by turmoil and bloodshed. This kingdom ensures worldly authority and power with the threat of violence. Boyd writes, "Laws, enforced by the sword, control behavior but cannot change hearts" (2005, p. 18).

In Luke 22:49-51 Jesus' disciples ask him if they should forcefully prevent Jesus from being arrested with the power of the sword. One of the disciples, presumably without waiting for an answer, immediately cuts of a Roman soldier's ear. Jesus' responds "suffer ye thus far" and miraculously heals the wounded Roman soldier's ear. The interpretation offered by the New International Version Bible's reads, "No more of this!" Jesus rebukes the violence of his disciple. For Boyd this passage suggests that Jesus' Kingdom of God would not advance by vanquishing enemies but "by loving, serving, and hopefully transforming" one's enemy (2005, p. 28).

Boyd explains that Jesus sets a "power under" example for the kingdom of God he establishes for his followers. In John 13:14-15 Jesus gathers his disciples at the Last Supper, fully aware of his fate. He proceeds to wash the feet of his disciples, uttering "If I then, *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that ye should do as I have done to you" (emphasis in original). Jesus is clear in his instruction about service to others. In verses 16-17 he continues, "the servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." These passages emphasize the importance of service to others in the hopes that re-embodying Jesus' lived example will transform hearts in a powerful way. For Boyd and

the RLC, believers should exert power "under" people, subordinating their own interests and desires in the hope that their self-sacrificial example will prove transformative. Boyd notes, "Participants in the kingdom of the world trust the power of the sword to control behavior; participants in the kingdom of God trust the power of self-sacrificial love to transform hearts" (2005, p. 32).

The RLC further read the theme of reversal in the kingdom of God as it relates to the importance of humility. In Matthew 6 and 7 Jesus instructs his followers to pray in private, and not as attention-seeking hypocrites extravagantly praying in public (Matt 6:5-7). In Matthew 7:1-5 Jesus warns his followers "to judge not, that ye be not judged" (v. 1) and urges them to "first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (v. 5). Humility appears often in the discourse of the RLC, both in their hermeneutic vision here described as well as in the moral frame guiding their public discourse discussed in the next chapter.

**Evangelism and the Year of Jubilee**

If the kingdom of God, broadly conceived by the RLC, represents Jesus' platform, the notion of evangelism signifies for them Jesus' rationale for social action. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus proclaims his famous jubilee synagogue address:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

Claiborne and Haw (2008) note that Jesus was reading a text from Isaiah (61:1-2), citing an "economic tradition" of the Torah that called for periodic debt cancellation.

They explain that Jesus enraged his Jewish audience because after the exodus: “Israel had practiced God’s anti-imperial economy out in the desert, but now Jesus was calling them to practice it right in the middle of Pharaoh’s turf” (p. 90). Jubilee was, and for the RLC continues to be, a difficult course of action for it calls for the redistribution of wealth and resources and the caring for of one’s enemies.

The notion of Jubilee is first mentioned in the Bible in Leviticus 25. In verses 13-14 God says to Moses, “In the year of this Jubilee ye shall return every man his possession. And if thou sell ought unto thy neighbor, or buyest ought of thy neighbor’s hand, ye shall not oppress one another. In verse 35 God proclaims, “And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, thou he be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee.” For the RLC the concept of Jubilee, embedded in Jewish tradition, and revived by Jesus represents a clear and compelling directive for social action. Claiborne and Haw (2008) note that Jesus’ jubilee address was intended for the “liberation of all the poor and broken peoples of the empire;” an example of evangelizing, spreading the good word to all peoples. To this extent Claiborne and Haw notes that “Jesus reminded Israel that God’s plan wasn’t for them to be God’s favorites or to be more blessed than others. Rather, they were blessed to be a blessing for the whole world” (p. 91). The concept of Jubilee is so important for the RLC because it proclaims an evangelical imperative of spreading the good word of Jesus and the kingdom of God to the “least of these.” The jubilee address by Jesus in Nazareth identifies for the RLC: 1) what an economy of God looks like, 2) clearly locates a target for Christian compassion and service, and 3) makes clear the importance of humility in social relations with all people.

The evangelical/jubilee imperative is clearly articulated within the gospels and is therefore an important part of RLC hermeneutics. In Matthew 28: 19-20 Jesus proclaims: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations…teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; in Luke 24:47/Acts 1:8: "And that repentance and remission of sins should be repeated in his name among all nations" and "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witness unto me…and unto the uttermost part of the earth; in John 20:21: "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you;" and most prominently in Mark 16:15: And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel [good news] to every creature." For the RLC the kingdom of God message is explicitly about more than just personal transformation. It is, rather, an unequivocal commissioning of social responsibility. McLaren notes that contemporary Christians, like their ancient Jewish counterparts, often see their "calling as *exclusive* ('We are blessed to the exclusion of all other nations') rather than *instrumental* ('We are blessed for the benefit of all other nations') (p. 74, emphasis original).

The RLC read these passages and other books in the New Testament featuring accounts of the apostles as forming a performance tradition of the kingdom of God. McLaren explains that the whole "kingdom-of-God project, then, began as a community of people learning to love and play the music of the kingdom in the tradition of the Master and his original apprentices" (p. 78). The RLC read these biblical passages for inspiration, but note that these passages fail to illuminate a specific course of set of policy positions. Contexts change, and so the RLC acknowledge the importance of attempting to revive the evangelical tradition for ever-changing situations and look to

historical examples such as Martin Luther King to provide contemporary inspiration. I discuss the example of Dr. King later in the chapter.

**The Old Testament Hebrew Prophets**

The RLC do not read the Old Testament save for the work of three prophets: Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. The prophets are noteworthy for the RLC because their rhetorical example and prophetic style is akin to the same employed by Jesus. The fact that Jesus sometimes refers to them makes them, to the RLC, forebears and visionaries of the kingdom of God. In this regard their purpose for the RLC's interpretive method is quite clear. Claiborne and Haw (2008) explain that the RLC love the example set by the Hebrew prophets because they were "critics on the margins" and "cleaned up the messes of kings" by speaking truth to power (p. 39) RLC authors add that the prophets are interesting because they are "weird" and "interrupt the status quo" by setting themselves apart from society in order to correct corruption and evil by setting a personal example. Wallis (2008) adds to this by noting that the RLC pay attention to the Hebrew prophets because they prefigure Jesus' message by consistently asserting that "the measure of a nation's righteousness and integrity is in how it treats the most vulnerable. Wallis explains that the RLC need to read the example set by the prophets and by Jesus with a knowledge that "God is personal, but never private" (2005, p. 31-32). Like Jesus, the prophets did not preach therapeutic faith, rather they disrupted and enraged, exposing hypocrisy and exploitation of the vulnerable.

The RLC like to read some of the Hebrew prophets because they were imagining a different world and holding the powerful accountable for failing to deliver upon it. For example, the RLC like to cite the prophet Amos because of his vocation as

a humble shepherd and because he was one of the strongest voices opposing poverty and injustice (Wallis, 2005). In Amos 5:10-11 the prophet declares:

> They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly. Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat: ye have built house of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine from them.

Wallis observes that this passage is of importance to the RLC because it shows the condemnation of "prosperity built upon corruption" (p. 266).

The RLC like to cite the prophet Micah because of the connections he made between war, violence and poverty, especially in chapter 4, verses 3-4:

> And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it.

Wallis explains that this particular passage's importance lies in linking security and peace with equality of opportunity.

Isaiah is probably the most recognizable of the Hebrew prophets the RLC read. Isaiah declares, "Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees…to turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their pretty, and that they may rob the fatherless!" (Isaiah 10:1-2). Wallis observes that the preceding passage takes exception with the exploitation of the

vulnerable and authorizes resistance to unlawful acts that deprive those most in need. In Isaiah 1:16-17 God proclaims: “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.” McLaren (2006) argues that the above is a typical example of the prophets pointing out how God loathes sanctimonious religious observances that lack commitment to “practical compassion for the poor and weak” (p. 21).

**Jesus the Jewish prophet**

Like all evangelicals the RLC envision Jesus to be a savior of mankind, sent by God to proclaim the kingdom of God to all the people. The RLC’s interpretive method, though, stresses the practical role Jesus played as a prophet. McLaren points out that the RLC like to read Jesus as a prophet because they see him in “dynamic tension with another important religious community in Judaism: the priests” (p. 20). As McLaren explains priests are traditionally concerned with religious observance and practices, whereas the prophets would disrupt tradition or ritual when it blinded believers from their social responsibility to the vulnerable and needy.

For the RLC Jesus is a significant prophet because he claimed to fulfill prophecy instead of delivering it. For example, in his “Jubilee” speech, Jesus proclaims that his kingdom is at hand now, and not in the future. In Luke 4: 21 Jesus tells the crowd, “This day is the scripture fulfilled in your ears.” As McLaren notes, this declaration is scandalous for it claims that the “whole story of his people [is] coming to fulfillment in his time and in his person…He is claimed to be a new [King] David” (p. 30). The RLC read the Sermon on the Mount as, among other things, Jesus’ changing the kingdom of

God from a future phenomenon to a present-day occurrence. He is proclaiming it to be at hand, something to achieve in the here and now and not a kingdom to prepare to enter in death. Jesus corrects old interpretations of Jewish law in his famous sermon. For example, in Matthew 5:21 he proclaims, "Ye have heard it said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment; But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." In 5:38-39 Jesus says: "Ye have heard it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil; but whosoever smith thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Jesus uses the same format of acknowledging the past understanding while proclaiming a new one on the issue of adultery (5:27-28); divorce (31-32); cursing (33-34); being sued in court (40); carrying a soldier's pack (41); and loving enemies as neighbors (43-44). It is significant to the RLC that Jesus both acknowledges a collective understanding of an old law, while positing a new one—one based on love instead of recrimination—in its place.

At the end of his sermon the writer of Matthew notes that Jesus "taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matt 7:29). McLaren (2006) asserts that in speaking in the manner noted above Jesus is "identifying himself as a new Moses, a new lawgiver who gives the people a new law" and that his words "indicate that what has been known as impossible is now becoming not only possible but *actual* (p. 30, emphasis original). For the RLC the "thesis statement" of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew 5:17-20 where Jesus proclaims: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfill….For I say unto

you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." McLaren notes that Jesus' provocative, even insulting words, should be read as an "invitation not to lower standards [of Sacred Jewish Writings] but to raise them, deepen them, fulfill them—to take them above the level of the religious scholars and Pharisees, from the level of external conformity to internal change of mind and heart" (p. 121). For the RLC the kingdom of God is located in the heart of the believer and is not a destination reached and achieved by lifelong fidelity to external moral and legal code.

**The Style and Form of Jesus' Message**

The RLC emphasize certain rhetorical flourishes of Jesus' gospel message, stressing his use of the parable form. While they frequently cite Jesus' famous sermons, the RLC tend to stress his use of parables to convey the gospel message. Jesus was no Ciceronian orator, as McLaren notes; because he wasn't "typically" religious, his talks seemed "impromptu in response to situations that seemed to arise spontaneously" (p. 35). For McLaren and the RLC, Jesus' interpersonal interactions were not only more typical than his public addresses, but were just as fascinating. A representative sample of the parables the RLC frequently cite can be found in Matthew 13. In this chapter Jesus uses agrarian parables of planting seeds to describe the kingdom of God. For example, in verses 31-32 Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed: "Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs it is the greatest among herbs." In verses 3-9 Jesus tells the story of a sower who planted seeds, some of which were eaten by birds, others landed in stony places, others among thorns, but some "fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an

hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." In verses 24-30 Jesus tells a parable commonly referred to as the wheat and the tares, where the kingdom of heaven is like a sower who sowed good seed in his field, and whose enemy surreptitiously sowed tares. When his servants discover the tares and ask the farmer if they should go dig up the tares, he responds in verses 29 and 30: "Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest."

In the above three parables, the seeds function for the RLC as a trope for the kingdom of God. Like the mustard seed, or the seeds scattered in inhospitable places, like the seeds beset by weeds, the kingdom of God grows with patience. Citing German theologian Gerhard Lohfink, Claiborne and Haw (2008) note:

> Jesus is very aware of the 'impossibility' of the cause of God in the world. In his seed parables he depicts not only the unstoppable growth of the reign of God, but also the frightening smallness and hiddenness of its beginning; still more, he describes the superior power of the opponents who threaten the work of God from beginning to end (p. 99).

McLaren notes that there are three dimensions to Jesus' parables: a refrain, something absent becoming present and a surprise. He notes these three dimensions of the parables taken together form a "capacity that goes beyond *informing* their hearers; parables also have the power to help *transform* them into interactive, interdependent, humble…people" (p. 46, emphasis original).

> In Matthew 13:15 Jesus explains why he uses parables:
>
> For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

McLaren notes that unlike prophecy, which often seeks to anger, shame and otherwise force people to repent and change their lives, the parable does not "batter you into submission but leaves you free to discover and choose for yourself" and "if it's the heart that counts, then hearts can't be coerced" (p. 48). The RLC stress that by understanding with the heart the believer is better prepared to have an interactive relationship with God; is better able to say the right thing at the right time when faced with opportunity to evangelize, spread the kingdom of God.

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the Prophet**

The above-mentioned parable of seeds being sewn about in hazardous, inhospitable places reveals for the RLC not just that Christians are to be like the fertile soil and accept God's kingdom message, but that they, like Jesus, are to spread the seeds of the kingdom. Claiborne and Haw (2008) note, "Jesus did not think that *only he* sowed the Word of God. He was constantly sending people away, telling them also to sow the seed of his kingdom" (p. 100, emphasis original). The parables warn Jesus' followers to not be too easily discouraged if the kingdom does not spring up in a revolutionary fashion. With the above in mind, if the RLC have an idealized reader, a figure who "perfectly" gets the kingdom message, it is Martin Luther King Jr. No other figure appears more often in RLC literature as a paragon and model of getting the

gospel message right and fearlessly spreading the proverbial seeds of the kingdom of God

Wallis (2005) notes that King "'did it best.' With his Bible in one hand and the Constitution in the other, King persuaded, not just pronounced. He reminded us all of…the 'beloved community' where those always left out and behind get a front-row seat" (p. xiv). In another revealing moment Wallis states, "The key question is how do we interpret the book? For example, in Christian faith, we have the interpretation of Martin Luther King Jr." (p. 66). The superlatives reserved for King by the RLC are far too numerous to document here. However, King is an important figure for the RLC for several reasons. First, King interpreted the Bible in the same manner that the RLC advocate. Second, like Micah, King moved beyond interpretation to advocacy, linking war, violence and poverty. Wallis cites King's "A Time to Break Silence" speech by noting "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is a nation approaching spiritual death" (p. 194). The RLC admire and cite King because of his "world perspective" that linked social ills to larger structural concerns. King, as well as other prominent civil rights and anti-poverty crusaders, provide the RLC with a compelling vision for public engagement. I address that subject in the following chapter.

Wallis links King to the prophet Micah because both believed that "when you have a little patch upon which to build a life, nobody can make you afraid" and that there is "no security apart from common security" (p. 196). Claiborne and Haw (2008) also acknowledge the link between King and the prophet Micah by noting the similarities between Micah's message of "beating swords into plowshares" and King's

message of common cause and civil rights. The authors cite King's "The American Dream" speech where he proclaimed,

> To our most bitter opponents we say: 'Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our houses and threaten our children and we will still love you. Beat us and leave us half dead, and we will still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory' (cited in Claiborne and Haw, p. 297).

King's speech echoes Jesus' words in Matthew 5: 39-44 where he implores his audience to turn the other cheek and love their enemies in order to transform them. For the RLC King remains a prophetic figure who proved that Jesus was not the only person who could spread the word of the kingdom of God. In addition King's prophetic vision for justice and peace speaks to still-present concerns. It is strongly implied in the RLC's hermeneutic vision that believers need not refer to ancient contexts or use ancient language to address present-day concerns. For the RLC a transformed heart creates an interactive relationship with a living God who guides the believer adapting the proclamation of good news to any particular situation or context. As Wallis (2008) observes:

> The kingdom is the vision, but concrete political priorities and policies bring us closer to it or farther away from it. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream—a vision he called the 'beloved community,' one completely consistent with the kingdom of God. But he fought for specific goals, such as the civil rights law of 1964 and the voting rights act of 1965 (p. 68).

**The Implied RLC Reader**

Taken collectively the published works of the RLC indicate a hermeneutic vision methodically undertaken by what is and is not read by the group. Throughout this vision, as I have attempted to outline up to this point, there in an implied reader constituted in the discourse of the RLC about the Bible. RLC discourse, following Charland (1987), is a type of "identity-forming discourse" wherein the ideal or implied reader is a rhetorical effect of the text. The implied RLC readers are those who are comfortable with ambiguity, not knowing beforehand the consequences of particular actions but certain of their need to take action on behalf of others. In this is a disassociation of sorts: there is a need to act, but with incomplete information. These readers recognize that they might get it wrong and like the parables of the sower, sew the seeds of the kingdom in the wrong place, to the wrong people or even in a manner unbecoming of Jesus' example. In the effort to evangelize, the implied readers are bound to trip up. As Wallis (2008a) writes, "Humility is a difficult virtue for those who are called to a prophetic vocation—people like us" and that "most prophetic Christians I have known—present company included—are not very good at humility" (pp. 291-292). To this point it is apparent to RLC readers that there is a part of Jesus that is distinct from Christians, the infallible savior of humankind, as well as a part that is achievable through the evangelical act of living the kingdom of God. This tension is present in the implied RLC reader.

In addition to being humble, the implied RLC reader is self-critical and committed to the common good. To this extent Wallis (2005) observes that "those of us from religious communities must be the first to be critical of our own traditions,"

transforming the world in ways that always respect "religious liberty and enhance democracy" (pp. 67, 71). The implied readers always are willing to adjust their "interpretive grid" in order to learn anew from the Bible. Wallis also talks about the importance of the "teachable moment" where the believer encounters an exigency that calls into question how s/he has been serving God and that frequently results in adapting to a new approach or commitment to service. The emphasis of Jesus' parables and the rhetorical effect they had on his audience function to prescribe to RLC readers how they are to respond to the kingdom message. McLaren (2006) explains that Jesus' message was not about relaying information but about "spiritual transformation of the hearers" and that this message:

> helps to shape a heart that is willing to enter an ongoing, interactive, persistent relationship of trust in the teacher. It beckons the hearer to explore new territory. It helps form a heart that is humble enough to admit it doesn't already understand and is thirsty enough to ask questions (p. 46).

McLaren later explains that following Jesus is not like achieving a new "status" but is more like engaging in a new "practice." This acknowledges Jesus command in Matthew 28: 20 to address the world, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." The implied reader here takes comfort in the knowledge that if s/he teaches poorly, the master is always present for inspiration and to point toward a better way. Using the parable of the weeds and the wheat Jesus instructs his followers, and by extension RLC readers, to be patient when confronting evil lest they do harm in the process. In spite of

this biblical instruction, the implied RLC reader practices patience, occasionally pulling a wheat plant that resembles a weed, acting without always knowing the consequences.

**Notable Exclusions**

The RLC's hermeneutic vision excludes most of the Old Testament except for some of the Hebrew prophets I have noted in the above analysis. By emphasizing Jesus' example in the gospels specifically and in the New Testament generally, the RLC exclude the worldly kingdom of the Old Testament in favor of the heavenly kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. For the RLC the proclamations of Jesus at the Sermon correct and revise the Old Testament notion of a vengeful, angry God concerned with justice and retribution. Instead of laws that must be obeyed and justice that must be meted out, Jesus' example provides for the RLC proof of the virtues of self-sacrifice and mercy. Jesus tries to improve upon the Jewish code by demonstrating a better, more compassionate way. If the Old Testament is about fear as the beginning of wisdom, the New concerns itself with love being the basis for salvation. For the RLC the example of Jesus in the gospels is evidence of a turning away from genealogical history of the Jewish people and toward an immediate context of need, tending to poverty, suffering and present-day injustices. The RLC view this development as an important shift in temporal focus. Instead of the kingdom-to-come there is, after Jesus, a kingdom now at hand.

The RLC import from the Old Testament only one of the Talmudic laws—the notion of Jubilee—from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Jubilee is the only law commented upon by the RLC. This is presumably because Jesus made particular mention of the practice in his address at Nazareth. While Isaiah is the only major

prophet cited by the RLC, it is noteworthy that the group emphasizes the more obscure prophets like Micah and Amos. Presumably this is because their prophetic critiques of society had more to do with poverty and injustice than it did with specific critiques of Jewish practice. Micah and Amos, and some of Isaiah are more in line with the version of Jesus concerned with the "least of these." Quite simply, Micah and Amos fit the RLC's hermeneutic vision better than some of the other major prophets like Daniel and Jeremiah.

Perhaps one of the more intriguing exclusions from the hermeneutic vision, and, as I reveal in chapter four, one that conservative evangelicals prefer, are the books of John and Revelation. While the RLC certainly cite John (notably 18:36 "My Kingdom is not of this world") they largely ignore his gospel account, preferring instead the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Perhaps an obvious and practical reason is that John does not mention poverty nearly as much as the other three gospels. A more compelling reason for John's "exclusion" from the RLC's hermeneutic vision is that he focuses on personal salvation, on Christ's role as lord and savior. The RLC largely ignore Jesus' role as redeemer. Garry Wills (2008) explains that John is a gospel concerned with the "mystical body of Jesus" and is less concerned than the Synoptics with earthly manifestations of the kingdom. Wills writes that "Christians living in different situations felt it important to draw on different aspects of Jesus' life and message…John keeps the divinity of Jesus always in mind" (p. 207). This analysis can be extended to Revelation, in the Johannine family, which concerns eschatological matters.

The RLC stress that Jesus' primary purpose, expressed in the Synoptic gospels, was declaring the primacy of the kingdom of God in the present. For example, McLaren (2006) emphatically states, "One thing is for sure: he [Jesus] did not mean what many—perhaps most—people today think he meant. He did not mean 'heaven after you die'" (p. 14). Campolo (2008) adds "on the day of judgment, the Lord will not ask theological questions so much as He will ask if we fulfilled our social obligations" (p. 24). Though it is not explicitly stated by the RLC, they deeply rely upon the consistency of the Synoptic gospels to provide a relatively seamless narrative about Jesus, his purpose and the kingdom example that he asserted could be carried out by anyone, not just the elect. The RLC, perhaps unlike many evangelical groups, stress the example of Jesus' life, preferring to de-emphasize the "supernatural" and miraculous elements of his death.

## Conclusion

I noted earlier in this chapter Mailloux's assertion about how interpretation and its hermeneutic justification operate in the same rhetorical configuration. The critic's task, as Wilson (2005) explains it, is to disrupt the text, and show, in this case, that the reception of the Bible offered by the RLC is, in fact, strategic and not "natural." In laying bare a discourse community's hermeneutic method, the critic faces a difficult challenge when explaining his/her intervention into that community's literature, especially when the critic offers that community's rationale as evidence to bolster his/her own for making the case that *X* is part of the community's hermeneutic strategy whereas *Y* is not. Put differently, it is not persuasive for a critic to make a case for a community's motivation for including or excluding parts of a text by *solely* offering his or her own external reasons for that community's motivation. At some point the

community needs to speak for itself. That does not mean the critic cannot still disrupt the text, reveal the ideological strategies a community uses to mediate between text and context, interpretation and productive discourse. The critic is still indispensable in elucidating how a text translates the past and the present in order to urge future action.

The hermeneutic vision of the RLC establishes humility to be its chief virtue. But humility cuts two ways: one, it calls for the believer to set aside selfish ambition in order to serve others; but two, it also requires that the believer negotiate what "service to others" means, and, inevitably, others may disagree about the proper course of action. As McEntyre implies a transformed heart still does not know the best course of action to address a particular material need that arises. It is compelling that when McEntyre asserts that "the gray area is holy ground" she is referring more toward the unknown course of action necessary to follow Jesus' directives than she is to understanding what Jesus meant. Put differently, evangelicals are all motivated by a desire to live the example of Jesus. But, which Jesus? And how? For the RLC the prophet Jesus radicalizes service to others. In the gospels though Jesus never discusses the means to achieve such ends. In part this is why the RLC highlight Jesus' call for humility, and in part why they prize Martin Luther King Jr. as an ideal example of a prophet who was committed to democratic principles of inclusion and civilized debate.

When Wallis repeats the refrain "God is personal, but never private" he acknowledges the dilemma posed by prophetic humility. Divine inspiration does not prefigure pragmatic political solutions. The RLC understand the prophetic impulse as that which flows through a transformed heart. But the proper course of action? For the RLC that is a far more vexed proposition best undertaken with humility and a

commitment to democratic principles of debate. I address this issue in later chapters of this dissertation. For McEntyre and the RLC, answering the question she poses, “What does this text require of you?” means engaging others, not just like-minded progressive evangelicals, in conversations about the common good. The hermeneutic vision of the RLC appears to take up the same question. As I indicate in the next two chapters, the principles of humility and empathy evident in the hermeneutic vision limit and confound the effectiveness of the productive moral frames used to advance public argument on behalf of the causes of social justice and poverty relief.

# Chapter 3
## Moral framing and the campaign against poverty

In the previous chapter I established the reading practices of the RLC. Using the dominant trope of reversal, the RLC assert a counter-cultural mode of reading that emphasizes the interpretive strategies of metalepsis and the parable on all aspects of scripture. The consequences of this interpretive strategy suggest that the RLC read biblical passages with an eye toward a present-day political vision. Gospel passages providing accounts of the life of Jesus constitute for the RLC a political paragon on which to model their own practices. Even the rhetorical form commonly attributed to Jesus—the parable—signals to the RLC the righteous justice behind the reversal of social relations and power.

The RLC's interpretive strategy authenticates political action taken on behalf of the poor as "prophetic," because such political action, to them, resembles in content and in form that undertaken by Jesus in the gospels. Such an interpretive strategy matters because it provides for the RLC a foundation upon which to assert an "alternative," fuller evangelical political critique—one unlike the narrow "personal values" critique offered by the Religious Right and conservative evangelicals. In effect, the RLC's interpretive strategy allows them to rhetorically broaden the umbrella under which political issues can be viewed as evangelical concerns. In this chapter and the next I investigate the rhetorical/productive practices of the RLC, specifically focusing on language that they create and the policies that language forwards. The political positions and arguments on behalf of alleviating poverty form the primary emphasis of this chapter.

RLC productive discourse has both ethical and rhetorical dimensions. The ethical dimension of this discourse governs the proper articulation of past sacred principles. In this way their discourse reflects a set of values supporting a particular adaptation of a past text. Leff (1997) argues that foundational texts "offer models for rhetorical and political imitation," (p. 212). In this sense "foundational" texts are those from which an interpretive tradition originates; are re-interpreted over and again as originary sources making possible meaning within the context of a specific, yet simultaneously evolving textual tradition. Such texts serve as "genetic" bases for future discourse, but these texts are historical utterances that can only be renewed and "revalued" by adapting them to present historical demands. Leff explains that contexts "always enter into interpretation" and so every reading of a historical text is inseparable from the context in which it is read and understood (p. 197). The rhetorical dimension of RLC discourse relies on a moral frame, which emphasizes the humility of RLC citizens and expresses an ambivalent relationship to partisan politics.

A signature element of the RLC's productive discourse is their particular use of moral framing. Every statement is freighted with a moral frame, which allows rhetors to thematize and explain their policies through arguments of morality. Of course, this mode of argument is not unique to the RLC. Moral arguments have been intertwined in American public discourse since well before Samuel Danforth's election sermon, "Errand into the Wilderness" in 1670. It is not the uniqueness but, rather, the use of moral framing to advance a particular politic and "subject position" within the context of contemporary political argument that is significant here. In the case of the RLC, the group uses a moral frame to not only advance specific policies as moral imperatives,

they also construct themselves as captives to their moral frame. They frame themselves not as independent rhetors strategically framing their message toward a suasive end. Rather, the RLC view the moral frame, established in and through their reading of the Bible, as something that compels them to act out of necessity. Only by negating their own agency through the faithful act of obedience and service can the RLC fulfill the potential of their moral frame and impact society.

In this chapter I begin with a discussion of moral framing as explicated by George Lakoff and others. Moral framing, I contend, is an important productive strategy of the RLC because it establishes a set of values that assert a progressive moral vision while simultaneously authorizing political argumentation. The authorization of political involvement is no small matter, precisely because the RLC argue that many on the Religious Right, those that we might term conservative evangelicals, have abused their roles as citizen and spiritual leader by conflating a narrow set of policy positions with God's divine will. I contend that critics should attend to the "biconceptuality" of moral frames, for it speaks to the conflicting values a group asserts in its productive moral rhetoric. Wallis' paradoxical notion of "conservative radicalism" signals the biconceptuality of the RLC's moral frame most directly. I then build on my discussion of the RLC's moral frame by illustrating the means by which the RLC argue through the moral frame on the issue of poverty. I contend that their understanding of bipartisanship reveals their commitment to the values of humility and an understanding of the ambivalent role and the limited political agency of social witness to the state. The moral frame of the RLC reveals a tension between the desire for humility and the need to be politically active. I will demonstrate how the notion of a "social witness" becomes

an important aspect of their political agency, while simultaneously that social witness is always limited by habits of interpretation.

## Moral Framing

In order to understand what I mean by moral framing and how I will marshal that term in a mode of interpretive criticism, it is necessary to review the notion of moral framing as stipulated by George Lakoff and others. Spielvogel (2005) argues that rhetorical critics can better understand how morality works in political discourse by "regarding moral values as a *frame* used to evaluate any issue rather than just a public *argument* about moral issues" (p. 551, emphasis original.). In this way moral framing is decidedly different from moral argument. For example, a moral argument explicitly identifies an issue or controversy as moral (instead of as legal, ideological, or some other designation) and debates the issue on those moral grounds. A moral frame, however, is far less explicit than a moral argument. A moral frame is a kind of evaluative lens through which a given political issue is delimited. Put differently, a moral frame invites audiences to interpret a seemingly banal policy proposal, for example, through what Spielvogel terms, "their own deeply rooted cultural standards of what is considered right or wrong in human conduct, action, and character" (p. 551).

Spielvogel cites Jamieson and Waldman's (2003) argument that frames dictate what an acceptable range of debate is on a topic and at what point an issue has been resolved. Following Entman's (1993) analysis on framing, Spielvogel observes that frames become naturalized by appearing "objective," impose "perceptual boundaries" on an issue by inviting audiences to interpret political issues through the ultimate questions of life and death, good and evil, etc (2005). Put differently, moral frames are a

cluster of values, “naturally arranged,” used to evaluate an issue, and not a public argument about moral issues. Discourse that invites audiences to interpret issues through moral frames exerts a more “powerful rhetorical dimension” than discourse that debates moral issues.

George Lakoff (2002 [1996], 2004, 2006) argues that conservatives and liberals understand the world through different moral worldviews. Both conservatives and liberals in the United States tend to view morality through the Nation-as-Family metaphor, with conservatives operating from a Strict Father frame and liberals from a Nurturant Parent frame (2002). Lakoff’s work suggests a link between moral reasoning and political reasoning, and through differing models of the family, helps to account for why public moral argument frequently takes place through moral frames. Moral frames uphold moral priorities. Lakoff (2002) explains that the two family-based moral frames use the same moral principles, but assign them diametrically-opposed priorities. For example, the Strict Father frame typically favored by conservatives values moral strength, self-control, self-discipline and deference to authority. In contrast, the Nurturant Parent frame generally favored by liberals emphasizes empathy for others. People should seek self-fulfillment so they can be better equipped to be empathic with others, develop strong social ties and communities.

In a similar vein to Lakoff, Hunter (1991) argues that the competing liberal and conservative frames of moral understanding always have a “character of ultimacy” to them. Moral frames are not simply attitudes that can shift, notes Hunter, but are “basic commitments and beliefs that provide a source of identity, purpose, and togetherness for the people who live by them. It is for precisely this reason that political action rooted in

these principles and ideals tends to be so passionate" (p. 42). Hunter advocates for something like Williams' (2002) concept of religious cultural repertoire when arguing that cultural conflict in the United States has taken place within biblical, more or less Protestant, boundaries. The source of conflict behind competing moral frames is not necessarily over theological and doctrinal issues but differing moral worldviews and moral authorities. Moral frames in their public form are frames that describe a source of moral truth, identify moral allegiance, as well as political and cultural attitudes.

Because the RLC self-describe as progressive evangelicals—an identity, to them, which represents a moral center of U.S. politics—it might be tempting to attribute indiscriminately the progressive models of moral framing to the group. While the progressive moral frame possesses some explanatory power to describe the RLC, it is nonetheless incomplete. Theorists have traditionally understood the progressive frame as that which views moral truth as a process, a reality that is constantly discovered. Within this frame, moral authority finds its expression in the zeitgeist. Specifically, explains, Hunter, "what all *progressivist* worldviews share in common *is the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life"* (1991, pp. 44-45, emphases original). Hunter's example is applicable to the RLC, despite what they might claim about themselves. We can learn from Hunter's example that while religious groups like the RLC may not locate moral authority in the present context, they nonetheless appeal to the present demand for a response adapted from foundational, timeless principles. Put differently, this explains why Hunter's theory correctly identifies the progressive concern with the present, but fails to explain why,

for evangelical groups like the RLC, progressive moral frames potentially contain conservative elements, like abiding respect for historical tradition, as well.

Lakoff (2006) suggests that many US citizens are "biconceptual," holding one moral frame to be important for some aspects in their lives, while adhering to the other moral frame in other parts of their lives. However, Lakoff neglects to provide a case study of what a biconceptual religious group might believe. He assumes that conservative or liberal morality translates predictably into respective political behaviors. In spite of this, the notion of biconceptuality helps us to understand why the RLC identify as progressive evangelicals. Wallis (2008) acknowledges the seeming incongruity of such a term as "progressive evangelical" by observing that such a "misnomer" has now become an influential movement in US politics. For the RLC there is no contradiction in being both progressive and evangelical, because they understand evangelical theology to authorize "prophetic" political action on behalf of progressive causes.

Both Lakoff and Hunter's theorization of moral frames is useful for understanding what the RLC are trying to accomplish politically. Moral framing allows the RLC to invite voters to view what they construct as "unframed" political issues, like poverty, war, and the environment, through their "progressive" frame. Critics are correct to point out that poverty, war, and the environment have frequently been articulated within a moral frame and are part of a rich tradition of moral and religious argument, from the Quakers right down to the present. However, the RLC's attempt to frame these same issues around a broad moral coalition composed of progressives—evangelical and otherwise. It is tempting to argue, in spite of their claims to the

contrary, that the RLC are trying to construct a "permanent" progressive coalition, much in the same way as the Religious Right did with conservatives and conservative social issues, around social issues important to all progressives—like poverty, war, and the environment. Theories of moral framing reinforce the dominant understanding of evangelicals as politically conservative and aligned with the Republican Party. That is, the current literature on moral framing makes an attempt to understand liberal frames in a general sense, but there is no attention to progressive evangelicals, neither is there reason to believe that the RLC fits neatly under the various moral frames that have been discussed. Biconceptuality may be useful as it relates to the seeming paradoxical formulation of "conservative radicalism," which I discuss later in this chapter.

With the above point taken, it becomes clear that the utterances of the RLC and the moral frame through which they advance political argument reflect the contexts into which they become actively politically engaged. Moral framing helps to explain how and why groups like the RLC address political contexts with religious arguments. Yet, in all the work that has been done on religious discourse very little of it uses moral framing as a means of analysis. Christian Spielvogel's (2005) analysis of the orthodox/Strict Father moral frame in the 2004 presidential campaign contributes to an understanding of the viability of moral framing in political discourse. His analysis, though, focuses solely on the application of the orthodox/Strict Father frame. Moreover, I count his analysis as being one of two in communication studies that makes use of moral framing,[x] in spite of the popularity of George Lakoff's books on moral frames in contemporary political discourse, not to mention James Hunter's controversial, yet significant book *Culture Wars*.

It might be tempting to suggest that the absence of this method suggests moral framing is not a particularly good mode of analysis for understanding religious communities. To this I would respond with two counterarguments: One, scholars have not adequately addressed the biconceptuality of moral frames. Following Lakoff and Hunter's conclusions, scholars correctly note that progressive religious groups, including the RLC, tend to vote that way. Yet, very little research tends to the nuances of religious communities like the RLC who, while decidedly progressive on *social* issues, still identify with certain conservative *personal* issues like abortion and heteronormative marriage. While the RLC may trend toward the Democratic Party, it does not mean that their progressive morality, as Lakoff suggests, automatically predicts they will vote Democrat. Such a conflation of moral identity with political identity ignores the ways in which religious communities construct their identities and structure their public argument. Secondly, communication scholars have not really used moral framing as a mode of interpretive criticism. Moral framing in this mode attempts to understand the textual practices of a discourse community. In this type of analysis critics are not concerned with using moral framing to provide an explanation for why a community's moral identification predicts their political behavior. Instead, critics can understand a community's use of moral framing to be evidence of the interrelation between interpretation and rhetorical practices.

This project takes seriously Spielvogel's assertion that to best understand the power of morality in U.S. public discourse is to view moral argument through a frame instead of as a discrete topic of public argument. This chapter and the next attempt to understand how a biconceptual notion such as the "conservative radicalism" of the RLC

takes shape in frames that address political issues like poverty, war, and healthcare reform. So long as moral values continue to hold sway over the U.S. electorate, and so long as religious communities invite audiences to interpret pressing issues through moral frames, these frames will continue to hold a powerful rhetorical impact and continue to be a compelling point of analysis. In this next section I address the biconceptual definition of the RLC's moral frame.

## Prophetic Politics and the RLC's Biconceptual Moral Frame

Historian Michael Kazin (2006) explains in his biography of William Jennings Bryan that Christian liberalism was not oxymoronic in Bryan's time. Most historiography of Bryan specifically, and Christian liberalism generally, remarks Kazin, fails to appreciate the paradox of such a position. Citing historian Lawrence Levine, Kazin warns against "the misguided effort to characterize [Bryan] as *either* a progressive or a reactionary, without understanding that a liberal in one area may be a conservative in another not only at the same time but also for the same reasons" (p. 302, emphasis original). Kazin's concern about viewing "liberal Christians" like Bryan through false binaries aptly describes the self-styled apology for progressive evangelicalism made by the RLC.

In order to understand the foundations of RLC moral framing, it is first necessary to explain how the community claims to embrace political advocacy disciplined by democracy and limited by a negative relationship to the state. Wallis (2008a) argues that the RLC are progressive evangelicals engaged in a social movement that weighs in on political issues from a nonpartisan, nonideological "moral center" concerned with the public good. Such a statement is not paradoxical to the RLC, for it

represents what is for them a nonideological critique. That is, "progressive evangelicalism," despite its obvious political valence, is nonetheless—because of its combination of traditional and progressive elements—an embodied expression of the "moral center" to which the RLC lays their rhetorical claims. Wallis (2005) and the RLC describe such nonpartisan politics as "prophetic advocacy," because the moral concern raised by such actions originates, like the cries from the Old Testament prophets, from outside the dominant political culture. That is not to say that the RLC envision their advocacy as originating from the margins. On the contrary, at times the RLC construct their "prophetic advocacy" to represent something like Nixon's Silent Majority, or Clinton's "forgotten middle class"—as representing the moral voice of an unheard-from or under-acknowledged coalition of US voters tired of amoral party politics. In his text Wallis contrasts a moral center with mere centrism. A "vague and compromising centrism that merely splits the difference" is not what is meant by a moral center (p. 81). For the RLC, prophetic political advocacy is concerned about the moral, though not necessarily political, center. Wallis argues that many people "don't want to just go 'left' or 'right,' but deeper" and that "seeking to find the moral ground on which a new political consensus can be built" speaks to the concern for the common good (which social movements from the left and right fail to fully address) that makes up the "center" of progressives' lives (p. 81). Political parties reflect self-serving political ideologies that rarely speak to the common good.

The RLC voice their moral frame through the concept of "conservative radicalism," which for them articulates to their public their simultaneous evangelical concern for biblical authority along with the concern to make applicable such

foundational authority in the present. Citing the conservative lack of concern for the poor and zeal for American nationalism, as well as the liberal failure to speak to fundamental moral values, Wallis proposes the biconceptual notion of "conservative radicalism" as a better alternative. For Wallis, the notion of the "conservative radical" speaks to the best of both conservative and liberal political paradigms, yet "doesn't fall neatly into our modern political categories and options but could help transform them all" (p. 101).

Wallis' notion of conservative radicalism, taken up wholeheartedly by the RLC, suggests a melding of both personal and social responsibilities. Wallis explains:

> What we need most are people rooted in 'conservative' values and commitments but willing to be 'radical' enough to apply those very same values in the real world. If we are to preserve the values (a conservative goal) of equality and justice, for example, they require radical application to the needs of a broken world (a liberal goal). (p. 101)

Wallis' use of the seemingly paradoxical terms "conservative" and "radical" calls for Red Letter Christians to assume the role of a believer-citizen: upholding both a grounded respect for biblical principles along with an activist desire to act on them. This type of "nonpartisan" politics Wallis brands as "prophetic." Prophetic advocacy, Wallis explains, "always presses the question of the common good," which should "always be constructed from the deepest wells of our personal *and* social responsibility and the absolute insistence to never separate the two" (2005, p. 6). This argument suggests that for the RLC, partisan politics fail to adequately address the

commonwealth, and only a prophetic politics can check the excesses of power common to party politics.

E.J. Dionne, a well-known author and columnist for the *Washington Post*, reveals in an interview with Wallis that conservative radicalism reflects the need to create a moral center that is:

> moderate in tone and understands that people are tugged by tradition—and that's not automatically a bad thing—but that has a problem-solving orientation that's fundamentally egalitarian. I don't think those two things are at odds. Indeed, one of the reasons I have all my life been drawn to the power of religion is because religious traditions tend to reflect the popular moral sense. (p. 100 in Wallis, 2008a)

The popular moral sense to which Dionne refers to supports the RLC's suggestion that their prophetic politics more often than aligns with a common-sense public morality also neglected in partisan politics. The RLC's concern with the conservative radical moral frame reflects the need to speak publicly about the social demands of private faith.

E.J. Dionne, a catholic and ardent supporter of Wallis and the RLC, clearly supports the practicality of conservative radicalism. In his 2008 book *Souled Out*, Dionne defends the assertion that religion can be both conservative and progressive. Dionne celebrates the notion of "flexidoxy," initially introduced in David Brooks' 2000 book *Bobos in Paradise*, as a perspective upholding the rigor of conservative, timeless foundations, but one refusing to authoritatively stipulate the specific practices that put those foundations and values into play. Specifically, Brooks notes that flexidoxy

reflects the spirituality of people who live in places like Montana, a "hybrid mixture of freedom and flexibility on the one hand and the longing for rigor and orthodoxy on the other" (2000, p. 224). Nodding directly to Wallis, Dionne argues that a moral center must be activated by a social movement that is radical inasmuch as it believes that while one's belief in God is absolute, one should remain humble enough to be skeptical about everything else in public life. A moral center should thus be skeptical of all political ideologies. He argues, "Keeping God transcendent and absolute helps ensure that we work *tentatively* and *humbly* in our human realm, always open to self-correction in the light of new experience (pp. 17-18, emphases mine). The moral center called for by Wallis and Dionne emphasizes humility in public affairs. I contend throughout this dissertation that the RLC emphasize humility as perhaps the most distinguishing element of the entire hermeneutic and productive dimension of their discourse.

Humility factors into RLC discourse in their frequent defense of democratic principles of inclusion and respectful disagreement on political matters. To this effect, Dionne defends flexidoxy[xi] as a principle that allows Christians to adhere to the rigorous principles founding their faith while simultaneously respecting the moral freedom of everyone. For Dionne the future of religious influence in a post-Bush era depends upon the rejection of hard-line ideologies. He argues that religious conservatives and liberals "should respect the religious convictions of those who take their faith seriously and engage them in a common struggle on behalf of a common good" (p. 7). Flexidoxy encourages "intellectual solidarity" with all who speak of the common good. Dionne argues that "it is only in dialogue with others that our faith is tested, our ideas made explicit, our errors corrected" (p. 9). While the RLC fail to account for their own

ideological rigidity, whether it takes the form of a conservative, or more frequently, a liberal viewpoint, they nonetheless emphasize the importance of a nonideological style in public debate. It is worth noting that the RLC essentially understand ideological argument predominantly as a manner of style, not political commitment. I discuss the implications of this in chapter five.

In an attempt to avoid what they view as ideological rigidity, the RLC make clear that their address of social ills depends upon the individual issue at hand. Claiborne (2008) explains, "Perhaps a good answer when folks ask if you are a Republican or Democrat is: 'On what issue?'" (para. 6). William Jennings Bryan's seemingly contradictory liberal Christianity provides a historical model of how evangelicals like the RLC offer critiques that can come from a conservative direction on one issue and a liberal one on another. Ironically enough, like Bryan at the twilight of his career, the RLC run the risk of being misunderstood as mere liberals, or even as bad evangelicals due to the seeming incongruity of their moral frame. Regardless, the RLC emphasize their commitment to a more civil, more democratic manner of political engagement by stressing repeatedly how prophetic engagement sounds not an isolated call from a solitary marginal figure, but heralds a common ground, an unheard majority of people who, together, can hold politicians accountable by upholding "common" moral standards. It is through the tropes of "bipartisan" and/or "nonpartisan" that the RLC claim to represent the common ground.

**Bipartisanship and the Search for Common Ground**

The RLC believe that that Religious Right effectively constrained prophetic engagement because they aligned so implacably with the Republican Party. Religious

conservatives reduced moral issues, explains Wallis (2005, 2008) and Campolo (2006), to abortion and gay marriage, overemphasizing personal morality at the expense of social justice. The RLC believe that by aligning with Republicans, religious conservatives effectively made it impossible to talk about the moral dimensions of and apply prophetic engagement to any issues other than the "big two." Thus, the RLC are deeply concerned with striking a "nonpartisan" tone and style in their discourse so that they—at both the level of political issue and tone—differentiate themselves as strongly as possible from conservative evangelicals commonly associated with the Religious Right.

The RLC believe that because there are over 2,000 verses in the Bible that directly call for justice for the poor and oppressed, alleviating poverty should be their central, though not only, objective. Wallis (2005) observes in *God's Politics* that Republicans compose political argument with wealthy constituents in mind; Democrats follow suit with the middle class, thus leaving the poor unrepresented, both in public policy and in political discourse about the public good. [xii] Wallis frames the issue of poverty in discursive terms by observing that the poor in American are "trapped in the debate over poverty." He observes, "Poverty will not become overcome, or even significantly reduced, until the debate over poverty is set free from its ideological captivity" (p. 223). Here, as elsewhere, Wallis and the RLC view ideology primarily as something discursively enacted. That is, the RLC reduce ideology to one's commitment to political positions. In this formulation, the most moral solution—indeed, the most prophetic—is to break free from ideology by breaking free from partisan constraints on addressing a moral issue. For the RLC, the false binaries on offer from the dominant

political parties fail to make room for the poor in their discussions on social policy. What's worse, laments Wallis, is that when the parties do address the issue of poverty, liberals tend to "merely service" poverty, instead of addressing it wholesale, and conservatives too often blame the poor for their station instead of assuming some responsibility for themselves. Wallis makes clear that the debate itself needs to happen, but must be framed differently, for when they are "framed wrongly, they most inevitably turn out badly" (p. 230).

To offer a more moral, and bipartisan, solution to the "self-serving" debate over poverty, Wallis recommends two solutions: focusing on pragmatic results and viewing poverty as a religious (not a left-wing) issue. The first solution proposed by Wallis is that the debate over poverty be "disciplined by results." The word "discipline" here is repeated in the RLC's commitment to have moral argument "disciplined" by democratic norms. Democratic norms of inclusion, in particularly, seem to influence the rhetorical objectives stated by the RLC. Wallis' use of "discipline" both in relation to poverty specifically, and with respect to the moral frame generally, reflects the RLC's publicly-stated commitment to humility; the commitment to bipartisanship and the common good speaks to their recognition of the limits of partisan advocacy.

The RLC express both humility and ambivalence toward partisan politics in their moral frame on poverty. I discuss these expressions of the moral frame in the following section. Viewed by the RLC bipartisanship combines both dimensions of the moral frame and serves as its central concern when articulating political argument. Wallis states that for the RLC concrete, material results matter more than ideological triumph, specifically observing that "to be disciplined by results requires us to be less

concerned about ideological presuppositions and more focused on what actually works" (p. 225). Here, Wallis indicates that for the RLC pragmatic solutions often indicate prophetic involvement because they result from a common ground concern.

Wallis' second answer to resolving the debate about poverty is to articulate the issue as spiritual, religious, and moral issue and not merely a "liberal" or "conservative" concern. Here, the argument is that religion and morality are more universal qualities than political affiliations. The anti-poverty "A Covenant for a New America" document, sponsored by Wallis' *Sojourner's* magazine, observes that spiritual and religious social movements are better prepared than political parties to address the concerns of the impoverished because poverty "requires changes in culture as much as changes in policy" (2009). By defining the concern more broadly, Wallis and the RLC hope to position the issue of poverty as one worthy of action. With their rhetoric to this effect, the RLC hope to make poverty a governable and actionable issue. In addition, the move toward making moral the issue of poverty allows the RLC to articulate the issue of poverty to bipartisan concerns. Wallis explains that it will take "the best values and efforts from both conservatives and liberals if we are going to really make a difference in people's lives" for only a "values-based politics can overcome our material and spiritual poverty" (2005, pp. 226, 238).

Wallis and the RLC stress bipartisanship as an alternative to what they viewed as the excessive partisanship of the Religious Right. To this effect Wallis (2005) explains that conservatives are right to point out the social problem of broken families as a cause of poverty; liberals do well to point out the concern of poverty is not and cannot be simply attributable to personal behavior. The liberal emphasis on structural

issues touches on the assumption that institutions can and do perpetuate social inequality. It becomes clear why Wallis and the RLC see themselves as "conservative radicals," combining an appreciation for traditional, timeless values with the desire to reform institutional injustices, which need not remain timeless and constant. With recognition of the dangers inherent in "building the kingdom," Wallis acknowledges that poverty can also be addressed through civil society, or "nongovernmental" faith-based organizations. He explains:

> But anybody who is serious about the problems of poverty knows that resources to solve the problem simply don't sufficiently exist in the civil society. Government, on all levels, must be involved. How, when, and where is the most important question now. The real choices will not be defined as big versus small government, but, rather, how government can be effective in helping to mobilize new multisector partnerships and target its resources in the most strategic ways. (p. 229)

The RLC's biconceptual framing of the debate on poverty through the expression of conservative radicalism reveals the reasons for defending common ground, bipartisan/nonpartisan solutions on the basis of being the most successful (i.e. concerned with results) means to achieve the end of poverty reduction. Wallis's repeated assertion that pressure on elected officials from social movements achieves more than elections, suggests that poverty is a material issue too often erased from rhetoric privileging certain partisan policies benefitting specific populations. Put differently, for the RLC poverty must remain an issue addressed through the logic of governing apparatuses, including the state and faith-based groups, because only these

institutions have the means to truly alleviate and correct the injustice. Poverty must not remain an empty signifier floating through partisan discourse. Political discourse, notes Wallis (2005) has never really made room for poverty, and so the solution must be "deeper than politics," coming from "outside politics" through real social movements—indeed, through prophetic advocacy. He continues, "no matter how sincere our leaders are, we will not see significant change unless, and until, the pressure increases from the outside" because change historically occurs through social movements pushing on "open doors of political leadership" (Wallis, 2009a, p. 5). As I explain in the following section, the RLC's moral frame of conservative radicalism gains expression on the issue of poverty through appeals to humility and expressions of ambivalence toward using the political means to achieve their ends.

**Expressions of the Moral Frame on Poverty**

The RLC consistently speak from the moral frame of conservative radicalism, even though their application of that moral frame sometimes leads to difficult, contradictory positions. Pertaining poverty, the RLC express their frame through a commitment to humility and a stated ambivalence about the use of political means to achieve their moral objectives. I established in chapter two how readily the RLC read humility into their hermeneutic practices. Humility is also one of the most recognizable of all the emphases of RLC's productive practices. Humility—in both attention toward those most in need of help and in finding the "prophetic" common ground solution most likely to assist them—gains notable expression through the RLC's moral frame. In June of 2008 notable evangelicals not affiliated with the Religious Right drafted an evangelical manifesto[xiii], a sort of mea culpa identifying a new, less-politicized identity

for American evangelicals and reassessing evangelical commitment to public action. Chief among the authors and signatories was Jim Wallis. Rick Warren, author of Purpose Driven Life helped to draft the document. Conservative leaders of the Religious Right including James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, and Richard Land, of the Southern Baptist Convention did not sign the manifesto. While the manifesto is not an exclusive RLC text, it nevertheless is consistent with their other discourse stressing the virtue of humility.

Among other things the manifesto stresses that evangelical faith must remain public and foster independent political engagement. An editorial titled "Gospel Independence" in *Christianity Today*, the most prominent evangelical publication, observed that the manifesto correctly reminds evangelicals that "biblical, heartfelt, cross-centered faith—and not a particular arena of activity—constitutes the heart of evangelicalism" (para. 6). In this way political action is subordinate to foundational theological principles. The document reminds evangelicals about the importance of maintaining an independent faith, lest believers become "useful idiots" for a particular political party. The manifesto explicitly apologizes for the hypocrisy of evangelicals for failing to live up to the principles of their faith. The document (2008) roundly calls for humility, noting "Too many problems we face as Evangelicals in the United States are those of our own making. If we protest, our protest has to begin with ourselves."

The language of the manifesto reflects a broadening of the mainstream evangelical moral compass to include issues of social justice, including poverty, disease, and the environment—issues dear to the heart of progressive evangelicals like the RLC. Unlike the RLC's nearly exclusive commitment to the New Testament

gospels, the manifesto, and by extension mainstream evangelicals in general, still believe that all biblical scripture, not just the Gospels, provide a moral guide for believers. The manifesto (2008) issues a declaration of and commitment to "reaching out as he did to those who are lost as well as to the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, the socially despised, and being faithful stewards of creation and our fellow-creatures" (p. 6). For the RLC the foundational moral principle of humility called for by the manifesto is most prominently expressed in the gospels generally, and specifically in Jesus' Sermons on the Mount and Plain. Andrew Fiala (2007) has observed that the Sermon on the Mount is the authoritative biblical statement on Christian morality. The Sermon on the Mount, found in chapters five through seven in the Gospel of Matthew, and the Sermon on the Plain, located in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, provide for the RLC the textual evidence necessary to emphasize humility as the chief Christian virtue.

The RLC believe that they are to honor and follow Jesus' self-sacrificial example. The rhetoric of Jesus accounted for in his two famous gospel sermons overwhelmingly asserts the importance of virtue of humility. Jesus' discourse, performed publicly for his followers and privately with his disciples at the Last Supper, provides a radical example for believers. It is radical to the RLC because literally translated it calls for no less than an imitation of Jesus' example, and service through self-denial. Boyd (2005) argues that evangelicals should live a life modeled after the "humble character of a servant" (p. 35). By focusing on the red letters of the gospels, the RLC interpret the humility demonstrated by the figure of Jesus as part of a moral

frame guiding their attempts to articulate that embodied commitment to others through social and political action.

**The Ambivalence of Political Action**

The Kingdom of God, according to the RLC, enacts its present temporal mode through a "power under," a practice of self-sacrifice to others. McLaren explains that the kingdom of God is present (literally in the present moment on Earth) in a state of subordination. He explains:

> What if it [kingdom of God] can conquer only by first being conquered? What if being conquered is absolutely necessary to expose the brutal violence and dark oppression of these principalities and powers, these human ideologies and counterkingdoms—so they, having been exposed, can be seen for what they are and freely rejected, making room for the new and better kingdom? What if the kingdom of God must in these ways fail in order to succeed? (2006, pp. 69-70)

For the RLC the kingdom described by Jesus is deeply subversive for it attempts to change hearts through example and not force. As described above by McLaren, the humility and selfless service of a follower of Jesus is bizarre enough to reveal the preposterousness of worldly puissance. In this way humble service is an act of *reductio ad absurdum*.

For the RLC the end of Christian service is clear, but the means to fulfill that end remain ambiguous. The ambivalence about the appropriate means to extend service to others vexes the RLC and serves as an expression of the moral frame guiding political advocacy. Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw's book *Jesus for President* is a representative text for the RLC on the proper way to read scripture for a model of how

to serve others. The authors observe that in Matthew 22:15-22 Jesus boldly states his policy on interacting with worldly governments, in particular on the matter of paying taxes. When asked if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus responds, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21). This cryptic passage serves to further establish for the RLC the dichotomy between Caesar's model of governance and God's. The RLC interpret this passage to mean that "to serve God alone is to refuse to take the reins of world power" (Claiborne and Haw, 2008, p. 86). The interpretation of this passage suggests that state means of power (taxation, for example) and not the means Christians should use to bring the kingdom of God to life. In Matthew 23:23 and in Luke 11:42 Jesus chastises the Pharisees for faithfully paying taxes while being miserable toward those who need mercy and compassion. Fiala (2007) observes that these passages present some difficulty in determining what exactly belongs to God. He notes, "the idea of focusing on what belongs to God is not all that helpful in thinking about politics," especially as it relates to the role of the state (p. 125).

Fiala argues that Jesus' political program was really just a series of ethical acts and that serving God required no state support. The RLC seem to acknowledge the problems posed by the ambiguity of Jesus' political message. That is, what means are Christians allowed to fulfill the kingdom of God? Claiborne and Haw observe that Jesus was undoubtedly political, but that "his politics aspired to something different from state power" (p. 86). But the authors later warn that "just because our gospel gets political doesn't mean it gets political on the empire's terms" and that "political embodiment means that we become the change that we want in the world, not just lobby

politicians to change things for us" (p. 235). Jesus in his gospel discourse never specifies what political action is permitted, only what is out of bounds. The gospel message of Jesus proclaims the glad tiding of the kingdom-to-come. Though Jesus' message was personal, explains McLaren (2006), it was not meant to be private. Christians, he notes, especially members of the Religious Right, read the Bible through an "interpretive grid" and all too frequently ignore the public and political dimensions of the gospel message or restrict the political demands of the Bible to personal issues like abortion and gay marriage—issues thought of to reflect individual righteousness.

As I have illustrated, the RLC take their cues on appropriate political action from the examples of Jesus refusing Satan's offer of all the world's kingdoms, his denial to Pilate that his kingdom is of this world, his differentiating himself from Caesar to the Pharisees, and his repeated injunction to his followers to treat the least of humankind as they would treat himself. Followers of Jesus are to provide an embodied, self-sacrificial example of what Jesus was like. Jesus was ambivalent about the role of the state in fulfilling the mandates of the kingdom of God. His rebuking of Caesar and the Pharisees, as Fiala suggests, makes correctly interpreting the politics of Jesus a vexed affair. Claiborne and Haw write "Christianity is at its best when it is peculiar, marginalized, suffering, and it is at its worst when it is popular, credible, triumphal, and powerful" (2008, p. 165). A "peculiar" politics then, it seems, would for the RLC proceed through discursive and bodily means. Advocacy and action that proceeds through laws and other state-endorsed means is problematic, for it relies on means that are worldly, "traditionally" political. Greg Boyd revealed in his previously mentioned interview with me that "believers should trust the power of self-sacrificial love instead

of trying to advise Caesar." Indeed, it is difficult to imitate Jesus politically when the gospels provide only a personal account of what that mimesis entails. In other words there is no textual precedent of a state-involved politics of Jesus for the RLC to follow. Danforth (2006) explains that Jesus broke with Old Testament not in being opposed to government, but rather "in his refusal to specify how government should act" (p. 15).

The discourse of the RLC on political matters reflects the ambiguity of Jesus' political message. Claiborne and Haw's (2008) book attempts to explain what a politics of Jesus might look like, but largely it suggests that evangelicals should create a "contrast society" adopting a "peculiar way of living" unpolluted by the world. They succinctly observe the difficulty of a politics of Jesus: "Preserving the distinctiveness of the kingdom of God has always been the most important and most difficult task of the Church" (p. 240). To be of the world, yet manifesting an other-worldly kingdom in the present, is a distinctly paradoxical task. Critics of this discourse need only observe this fundamental paradox to begin to grasp the interpretive and productive burden imposed on the conservative radicalism of the RLC's moral frame.

The RLC and other evangelicals released the previously mentioned evangelical manifesto before the presidential election to make public a wiser, hopefully more humble, commitment to spreading the glad tidings of Jesus. The document also revealed the mainstream evangelical strategy for political influence, refusing to be a "useful idiot" for any one political party. Jim Wallis' (2008a) stress on the importance on a "prophetic politics" that can weigh in on moral issues from the center, and not just the right or left is instructive here for it suggests that there is a political horizon evangelical politics should not cross. Wallis' comment also underscores the difficulty with which

some of the RLC's critics have in understanding the slippage of their use of "prophetic" to potentially signify politically incommensurate positions simultaneously. The RLC claim to be able to offer situation- and issue-specific critiques from a tradition that is both conservative and radical. In this regard, they resist classification, but to their critics, as I demonstrate later in this dissertation, they are summarily viewed as either liberal or conservative. Many critics reject any notion of nuance of the RLC's position, implying such a vision is murky and self-serving.

For the RLC, the indeterminate political center is somehow kept forever open by prophetic intervention that prevents them from becoming predictably liberal or conservative in their support of political parties and candidates. To this effect, to avoid looking like the dreaded "useful idiot," Claiborne (2008) observes that RLC members should be willing to advise political candidates, but should stop short of publicly endorsing them. He notes, "Rather than spoon-feeding people answers, we hope to stir up the right questions—and trust that the Spirit will lead us as we 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling'" (para. 5). An October 2008 web editorial on the *Christianity Today* website echoed Claiborne's reservations about endorsing candidates.

Clearly present in Claiborne's assertion are the twin assumptions of humility and the recognition of the inherent ambivalence at the heart of political action like passing laws or voting for candidates. Jim Wallis notes that a "prophetic distance" is necessary to overcome the idolatry of partisan politics. In the November, 2008 edition of *Sojourner's*, Wallis acknowledges, "As Christians, we know that we will not be able to vote for the kingdom of God. It is not on the ballot" (2008d, p. 5). Wallis appeals to tolerance of differing voter preferences among evangelicals, emphasizing again, as he

does in much of his discourse, that the kingdom of God is instantiated in something "deeper than politics," what he sees as "social movements pushing for those changes from outside of politics" (p. 6).

The ambivalence of the political serves to constrain as much as it enables social action. I address this point later in chapter five. RLC discourse stresses that what changes society is not elections (though they have material consequences), but the "wise and ongoing pressure" of social movements on elected officials. In a sense this is what Wallis' term "prophetic politics" signifies. For the RLC the terrain of the political is in endorsements and elections, but not in other political action like public statements putting pressure on elected officials. In this we see the RLC attempting to negate their own agency through obedience and service. Again, it is apparent that the RLC's moral frame reveals the tension between their desire for humility and the need to be politically active. As the most prominent leader of the RLC, Jim Wallis' concern about evangelical moral arguments being broadly accessible speaks to the whole community's concern for the appearance of "nonpartisan" political advocacy. Greg Boyd affirms the importance of Wallis' work, but expresses skepticism about Wallis' ability to remain politically neutral in the process of publicly advocating for social programs that reflect the kingdom of God. In his interview with me Boyd noted, "Too many of us want to advise Caesar. The main authority of the kingdom is to be found in our lifestyle. We are not doing our lifestyle well. Until we do, we shouldn't be doing politics." Boyd's concern with the political dimension of RLC discourse reflects a larger skepticism of Wallis' disavowal of progressive evangelicalism being a shorthand term for the religious left. I address the mainstream reception and criticism of RLC discourse in chapter five.

The RLC's singular commitment to taking the gospels seriously and literally, presents a "difficult foundation on which to build a movement" explains Bill McKibben (2008) because it embodies a doctrine of reversal and redistribution, calling for Christians to do things they might rather not in voluntarily righting the balance between rich and poor and turning the other cheek—actions that will literally give offense due to their radical nature. McKibben explains that the usual methods for "covering over the radicalness of the gospel message have been to concentrate on the rest of the Bible, which offers many diversions in the place of the more straightforward gospel paths" (p. 43).

The RLC's moral frame constrains RLC rhetoric through the stated commitment to humility by "being disciplined by democracy." The prominent sociologist Robert Wuthnow observes that this type of stated ethical commitment to democratic principles is good for American democracy because it suggests an "apparent commitment to play by the rules and to speak in the same terms" (p. 165). Wuthnow expresses concern on whether those who believe in "absolute values" can find "appropriate means" for expressing their views in a pluralist political environment. Maddux (2008) expresses concern that the RLC's position generally, and the opinions of Jim Wallis in particular, affirms progressive, socially liberal causes while still asserting nonpartisanship. Indeed, the moral frame constrains the discourse of the RLC as they attempt to make their religious arguments through democratic language. Maddux's concerns echo those in the media and other religious leaders who are concerned about the integrity of the RLC's project. I address these concerns later in the dissertation.

## Moral Frames and RLC Political Witness

The RLC moral frame stresses the importance of humility and recognizes the ambiguity of political means to achieve moral ends. The RLC claim to accept their outsider status (at least in terms of their humble style, which is at odds with the violence with which the state operates) and acknowledge the potentially limited effectiveness of their advocacy even as they stress the prophetic necessity of it. With this the RLC recognize the futility in hoping to perpetually change the operations of state power. State power, though fallen and corrupt, can nonetheless be used as an instrument of prophetic advocacy. To this end, most of the texts published by the RLC cite the importance of theologian John Howard Yoder's work[xiv] on the possibility of gospel political witness. Yoder's text shows the work done off-stage, so to speak, that sets the scene for the RLC's moral frame. Yoder, primarily known for his defense of biblical pacifism, argues that Christian service to others must be disciplined by a particular moral frame. In his book *The Christian Witness to the State* (2002, [1964]) Yoder discusses the ground for a Christian witness as well as the discursive limits of that involvement. Yoder's work is important for this analysis because his theological defense of the Christian witness to the state, reflected in the RLC's moral frame of conservative radicalism, both enables and constrains the possibility of RLC prophetic advocacy.

Yoder explains that evangelical political witness provides an "aftertaste" of God's triumph as well as providing a "foretaste" of the ultimate triumph of the kingdom-to-come. The church serves its purpose in history as a "scaffold," evangelizing the world in preparation of and for God's ultimate return. This witness is a reminder of

God's triumph through Jesus and of God's triumph-to-come in saving the world. Put another way, the evangelical Christian conversion narrative explains that believers are "born again," transformed by the death of Jesus to manifest the kingdom-to-come in the present day. In this way Christians collectively serve as examples to others, enacting the kingdom-to-come through lived example. As RLC member Lydia Bean (2009) observed in *Sojourner's*, evangelicals should build for the kingdom to come, not try to build the kingdom in the present. In this the RLC's moral frame restricts the political means available to the community.

For Yoder evangelical Christian agency is valid only through witnessing, and not through representing the state or serving as its agent. This assumption is reflected in both expressions of the RLC's moral frame—in both the desire to remain humble and the directive to engage primarily "nonpartisan" political means. The application of Christian ethics to broader society is an ambiguous process, for Christian moral standards cannot simply be "transposed from one frame of reference to another" without giving some thought to the possibilities and responsibilities of translation. Political witness is for Yoder and the RLC determined negatively from a "case-by-case awareness of specific abuses which call for correction" (p. 47). For Yoder one cannot translate Christian ethics easily through the ballot, for such witnessing through the act of voting is vexed by the false choice of "two competing oligarchies." Similarly, RLC author Shane Claiborne (2008) explains that voting is a kind of damage control made through imperfect choice. Voting is a negative activity meant to *reduce* the damage done by state actors. Not voting is immoral, explains Claiborne, because Christians can serve the needy by reducing their suffering through the ballot box.

Merely voting, however, is not a valid form of political witness for the RLC. McClaren (2008) explains that under RLC Christian discipleship, political witness to the state "would certainly not end with voting, but I can't see why it would stop short of voting either" (para. 6). The Christian's political witness must address a specific injustice; but it should not be limited to the act of voting. Under this line of reasoning the Red Letter Christian should avoid getting mixed up in the machinery of the state, for serving in office as an agent *of* the state entails far too many compromises to be compatible with the New Testament. Yoder explains "never is the political situation such that all the right is one side" (p. 45).

In attempting to maintain a "nonpartisan" prophetic mode of advocacy, the RLC stress that Christian witness to the state is historical, always expressed in the form of specific criticisms addressing particular injustices. Yoder notes the impossibility of an ideal or utopian society existing in a fallen world, by observing that there is no particular pattern to which "unbelief" conforms, so Christian witness to the state speaks "not of how to describe, and then to seek to create the ideal society, but of how the state can best fulfill its responsibilities in a fallen society" (p. 32). As a result, authentic RLC political witness is limited to critique; believers can only be witnesses to the state and never agents of state action.

The RLC understand political witness to be a reactive performance of prophetic advocacy governed by their conservative radical moral frame. The necessity of Christian witness is called into being by the exigency of a particular state injustice. In this way the Christian witness always maintains a negative relationship to the state because that witness is, by definition, necessarily limited. Yoder explains that the

Christian witness expresses itself in "terms of *specific* criticisms, addressed to *given* injustices in a *particular* time and place" offering "*specific* suggestions for improvements to remedy the identified abuse" (p. 32, emphases mine). Christian witness exists as a historical critique, but never as an alternative to or substitute for state policy or as a proposal for the "establishment of an ideal order" (p. 38).

The RLC's moral frame mediates between Gospel imperatives and the democratic norms of argumentation necessary to broadly address a social injustice. Yoder explains that such frames allow Christians to "mediate between the norms of faith and the situation conditioned by unbelief" (p. 33, footnote three). Moral frames are clearly an undertaking of translation. The application of evangelical Christian principles by Christian advocates is possible "only mediately;" that is, it requires moral frames, (what Yoder sometimes refers to as "middle axioms") to translate theological principles not empirically understood by all into moral political argument on behalf of the common good.[xv]

Because the RLC believe God's will is known primarily through Jesus, they can extend those Christ-like principles through social witness to others under the guidance of a moral frame. Yoder explains that such frames allow Christians to talk to the state, to communicate between sacred and secular spheres, by "translat[ing] into meaningful and concrete terms the general relevance of the lordship of Christ for a given social ethical issue" (p. 32). This is what the RLC mean by being conservative enough to be grounded in biblical tradition, but radical enough to adapt, apply, and serve those traditions in the present moment. Moral framing allows the RLC to justify performing the work of translating sacred insight into a prophetic critique accessible to all (not just

evangelical Christians, or even Christians in general) and guided by a "common" morality which serves the common good. Witnessing is for the RLC an act of mediation attempting to address worldly injustices while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of the effectiveness of that witness. Wallis' (2007, 2008) assertion that religious convictions need to translated into public moral arguments, lest they will not be taken seriously, affirms the importance of moral framing in RLC political discourse. In the next section I address some of the ways the RLC perform public advocacy on the issue of poverty and discuss how they reflect the moral frame in such issue-specific language.

## The Public Language of Poverty Reduction

The RLC are currently engaged in two primary anti-poverty coalitions: The Mobilization to End Poverty and the bipartisan Poverty Forum. The discourse of both of these coalitions makes clear the use of the RLC's moral frame. The Mobilization to End Poverty met in April, 2009 and gathered anti-poverty advocates, both religious and secular, for a convention in Washington, D.C. The convention featured speakers such as Elizabeth Edwards, Governor Mike Huckabee, Rep. John Lewis and journalist Tavis Smiley. The conference planners offered President Barack Obama an opportunity to give an address on poverty. President Obama did not attend, but arranged a phone address to the convention. The convention declared to Congress that poverty needs to become a national priority. Repeating the oft-heard reminder that budgets are moral documents[xvi], the conveners of The Mobilization to End Poverty, predominantly rank-and-file RLC members, urged Congress to reduce by half the number of Americans living in poverty by 2019 and to urge the support of the Millennium Development Goals to reduce extraordinary poverty on a global scale.

The official policy discourse of the convention reflects the two common expressions of the RLC's moral frame. The moral frame here applied reflects the values of collaboration and the necessity of a common ground political witness. According to the document:

> overcoming poverty will require the public and private sectors, and civil society—including faith communities—to partner in creative ways that transform public ethics and generate the moral and political will to support policies benefiting the common good, merely private interests. (Our Commitment section, para. 1)

The conference's public statement of commitment explicitly emphasizes the common good over self-gain and defines the conference as outside of politics, even as it hopes to feature prominent politicians, mostly Democrat, as speakers. The conference also stated their commitment to prophetic Christian witness "through the advocacy of voice and witness, holding our national political leaders accountable to seeking the common good for our nation and the world" (Our Commitment section, para 1).

The RLC's public statements on behalf of poverty generally rely heavily on appeals to "nonpartisanship." On its website the conference observes that it, as a collective, is committed to any "particular ideological method or partisan agenda" and stress that their proposals stress both personal and social responsibility. Though the conference states its commitment to the "nonpartisan" issue of poverty and the "bipartisan" cause it engenders, many of the policy statements reflect historically liberal views. For instance, as part of its domestic strategy the conference argues, "health care is a human right, not a commodity available only to those who can afford it" (Our

Domestic Strategy section, para. 2) and that the Earned Income Tax Credit for the poor should be expanded. While the conference does advocate for policies that encourage stable families, such as housing and job training proposals, its primary focus is loosening Congressional purse-strings by advocating a budget better addressing the needs of the impoverished.

The RLC are also enthusiastically involved with The Poverty Forum, a forum heavily invested in bipartisanship. Each policy proposal is developed by a pair of anti-poverty advocates who fall on differing sides of the political spectrum. This is an example of the RLC asserting a nonpartisan ethos through a commitment to policy proposals that are explicitly bipartisan. According to Stephanie Simon (2009) of the *Wall Street Journal*, the group seems to think that the "strange-bedfellows nature of the group will command respect" because ideas originating directly from special-interest groups from the right or the left tend not to be taken seriously if they can be too easily pigeonholed to an ideology (para. 4). Simon quotes Chuck Donovan of the conservative Family Research Council as arguing the forum allows "an opportunity to get attention for some ideas that might not be taken seriously" if they were viewed as originating from his organization (para. 8). Though left unstated, members of the RLC seem to acknowledge that their witness and that coming from their advocacy arms has limited political impact when taken in isolation. For Simon, Wallis and the RLC belong firmly on the religious left and lack the political resources, unlike groups like the Family Research Council on the right, for accomplishing much in the way of public policy. I address the reception of the RLC by their critics in the fifth chapter.

Speechwriter to former President George W. Bush, Michael Gerson joined Jim Wallis to form the Poverty Forum. These two hope that by assembling together18 people of faith, both Christian leaders and policy wonks, they can offer a witness to the state on the injustice of poverty. The Poverty Forum addresses issues such as family policy, health care, education, family asset building and community action initiatives addressing crime and re-entry into communities. According to the forum's website (2009), it hopes to lead by example by enacting the popular bipartisan signifier into actual policy recommendations formed from the paired friction between the views of both liberal and conservative Christians. The expressed hope is that the common denominator of viewing poverty as a moral tragedy will drive the witness, not the professional and political affiliations of each of the forum's members. Steve Waldman, editor of the popular faith-based website, belief.net.com, explains that some bipartisan policy recommendations are not "inherently ideological," they only take on a particular political valence "by dint of who proposed it first and who (therefore) opposed it first…If you can strip away the political barnacles to reveal the pure idea beneath, you've served a real public purpose" (2009, paras. 3-4.).

The moral frame of the RLC comes to discipline the discourse offered by Mobilization to End Poverty and the Poverty Forum. Especially in the latter the RLC tacitly acknowledge that their discourse taken alone lacks the suasive effect they wish it had. It is clear that the RLC's concern with specific policy proposals addressing identified injustices in the budget, combined with their willingness to join witness with divergent viewpoints reveals their performance of a humbled, limited political witness.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to explain that moral frames can be understood as setting the standard by, or offering the justification for, which a rhetor and/or religious community, adapts the textual traditions of the past for the present. The present rhetorical exigency demands a particular response, but we might ask how do rhetors know they are being faithful to the past with their present utterance? By what ethical measure does the present rhetor interpret the past? I have offered in this dissertation generally, and in this chapter specifically, that the answer lies in the critical task of locating a moral frame behind rhetors' productive discourse. I return to Wilson's (2005) reminder that the rhetorical/hermeneutical distinction is not a "natural" or distinguishing feature of a text. Critical practice lays bare the distinctions between the two to demonstrate how rhetors interpret in two directions in order to read the past and present to determine future action. The moral frame is also an artifact of critical reflection. As I have attempted to establish in the foregoing and present chapters, the RLC indicate the presence of a moral frame in their (re)interpretation of biblical tradition with such provocative statements as "disciplined by democracy" to guide their public moral argument and "disciplined by results" to measure the type of witness to provide to the state.

The moral frame of the RLC values humbleness and a Christian historical understanding of the necessary limits of political witness. Through political action the RLC perform the role of conservative radicals, tied to the scriptural tradition of the Gospels, while witnessing, through the expressions of an underlying moral frame, on behalf of injustices in a fallen world. The RLC's moral frame helps to explain by what

standard the RLC hold themselves when imitating the Gospel imperatives set forth by the figure of Jesus. In my interview with Greg Boyd, he asserted the importance for Christians of finding the link between gospel wisdom and present problems, always asking "What does Christ's message mean for me now, here?"

William Jennings Bryan is oft-mentioned by the RLC for serving as a radical example of social witness. Bryan's legacy as a "Christian liberal" is intriguing for the complex relations in theology and practice provided by his example point toward the present example of the RLC. The notion of moral framing informed by a Christian understanding of history helps to account for how the believer-citizen lives both in the present secular world and for the kingdom-to-come. The biconceptual notion of a conservative radical only makes sense with a Christian sense of history as explained in Yoder's theological works. However, there are many who find the RLC's rhetoric to be problematic and not sophisticated or paradoxical. The reception of RLC discourse, as I will demonstrate in the fifth chapter, generally reflects a concern about what are interpreted as inconsistent or troublesome practices of their productive rhetoric. In the following chapter I further illustrate the RLC's moral frame as expressed in the productive discourse on the issues of war and health-care access.

# Chapter Four
## Rejecting idolatry and pressing for the common good: Moral framing, war, and health care reform

In chapter two I established that the RLC's hermeneutic is based on a notion of metalepsis that highlights the present utility of the countercultural trope of reversal in the gospels. In the previous chapter I demonstrated how the reversal trope manifests itself in the RLC's policy rhetoric concerning the issue of poverty and the need for poverty relief. The issue of poverty, I argued in chapter three, is central for the RLC because it is directly linked to an interpretation of the gospels that prioritizes Jesus' call to attend to the vulnerable and needy. For the RLC, poverty is the most important political charge of Jesus' ministry as outlined in the synoptic gospels. It becomes for them the issue through which all other political problems are viewed. That is, all political problems are derivative of Christ's demand that his followers care for the vulnerable and needy. Thus, the necessity to take action on behalf of the vulnerable leads to a series of additional policy positions that support the first concern.

The hermeneutic practice of reversal stresses that justice results from rejecting the status quo and embracing those who are ill-served or harmed by it. To this effect Jim Wallis (2009b) observes that "on a personal, national, and global level the physical well-being of all God's children is close to God's heart and should be to ours as well" (para. 2). Justice understood through this reading practice and framed by humility and a commitment to "common good" politics expresses the political vision, broadly understood, of the RLC. In the previous chapter I noted that the RLC's moral frame of conservative radicalism stressed selflessness and a commitment to a bipartisanship that transcends partisan politics. Their rhetoric's emphasis on common ground reflects a

tension between the drive toward consensus and notions of equity and justice and the reality of political practice which so often uses power to achieve particular interested objectives.

The issues of war and health care reform are for the RLC further examples of problems needing to be addressed by the poverty-derived notion of justice evident in the application of their moral frame. On the issue of war, RLC rhetoric establishes that state power used as an instrument for achieving political means is a form of idolatry. The use of this metaphor with a long tradition of interpretation in Christian circles, suggests that the support of state power to pursue war is a form of idolatry and idol worship. This belief is a reflection of a common expression, established in the previous chapter, of the RLC's moral frame—that partisan politics and state power are frequently corrupting. Greg Boyd (2005) explains that "fallen hearts are idolatrous" for believing in the redemptive power of violence (p. 26). RLC member Soong-Chan Rah (2008) adds that Christians fall victim to idolatry when they trust in state-sponsored and state-enforced ideology instead of Christ's self-sacrificial example.

In this chapter I assert that when oriented around the poverty-inspired notion of justice, the RLC emphasize through their moral frame an opposition to the idolatry of state power on the issue of war; on the subject of health care reform the moral frame primarily gains expression through a moral directive to expand the sphere of consideration beyond one's own neighbors. Brian McLaren (2009) notes "when I write and speak as I do about matters of justice, I am trying to mobilize the church to do what it is called to do. That includes giving—but it also includes voting and using the power

of citizenship…it is about seeking better laws for the common good of all our neighbors" (para. 14).

The issues of war and health care reform are important for the RLC not only because the welfare of vulnerable citizens is at stake, but because both issues are mired in cultural conflict that the RLC believe can be negotiated through their notions of Christian witness. The culture war is a rhetorically constituted state of public affairs that some have framed in agonistic metaphors for their own political ends. Even though they claim that the "monologue" of the Religious Right is over, and a new "dialogue" has begun, the RLC still rely on the culture wars analogy, made popular by the Religious Right, to drum up support for moral issues. They do so primarily by defending the trope of "common ground", or "nonpartisan," or "prophetic" politics as an alternative to what they believe to be the partisan and narrow framing practices of the Religious Right. Against this backdrop the RLC call for a more inclusive, democratic dialogue by defending common ground politics.

For the RLC culture wars deny the potential for dialogue on divisive issues. The "culture war" sets the context for the understanding of actual war, for example, and encourages "incompatible ideologies" to duel to the death. This state of affairs is precisely what the RLC allege they are "fighting" against. For them the moral issues are frequently debated in an agonistic forum that essentially flattens the moral dimension of the issue. Wallis (2009c) notes that too many fear the common ground because it:

> Acknowledges differences but finds practical shared goals. Practical shared goals mean people and parties with different ideologies can both 'win.' When culture wars are fought, the only people who win are those who build their

> careers off them…Reasonable people may differ on how best to accomplish this goal…but it should be a *moral* priority for all of us. (para. 3, emphasis original)

Here Wallis emphasizes the danger of partisan politics that fails to appeal to the common ground, and by extension, the justice modeled on Jesus' example. Wallis' discourse highlights the ambivalence RLC members feel about the use of political power to achieve justice. The emphasis on a broad coalition—the "common good"—reflects their slogan, "In the culture war, justice loses" (Taylor, 2009b).

It is essential to note that though the RLC see the drive toward the common good as being somehow distinct from politics, this same drive is just another form of political power and exercise. The drive toward the common good takes place within an ideology that defines common interest as one thing and not another. The RLC are misguided to believe that common good arguments are not political or interested, when in fact the very opposite is true—these arguments are heavily interested in ideologies of a particular kind of Christian practice and a particular vision of liberalism. To this critique the RLC would likely point to what they view as a broad coalition of Christian, religious, and even secular members comprising their community. The presence of non-evangelical members, however, does very little to prove that their collective rhetoric originates somehow from "outside politics." I discuss in the following chapter, for example, how the critical reception of RLC discourse suggests that the community over-exaggerates its claim to the moral middle-ground of US politics.

The RLC's formulation of state power in the exercise of war as "idolatry" and their repeated call for policies that benefit the "common good" in the area of health care reform form the basis for this chapter. The issues of war and health care reform reflect

the insights of the rhetoric on poverty, and thicken the moral frame premised on humility and the ambivalence of state power highlighted in the previous chapter. That is, the conservative radical moral frame behind the RLC's discourse shapes the issue at hand, even though these expressions are sometimes contradictory and inconsistent. The issue at hand determines the particular adaptation and expression of the moral frame. The frame shapes the discourse on a particular issue in different ways, placing emphasis on humility in some cases and stressing a "common ground" political solution in others. Thus, the issues of war and health care reform offer a good understanding of how the RLC theorize the countercultural concept of justice in their rhetoric. The rhetoric attending to the issues of peace and health care reform further reflect the hermeneutic vision of countercultural reversal laid out in chapter two of this dissertation.

In the following pages I first discuss how the RLC produce discourse promoting peace that frames the issue primarily around the rejection of state power as idolatry in favor of the universal good of all humanity. I then analyze the ways the RLC discuss health care reform by promoting a notion of serving one's neighbor inspired by the biblical example of the selfless Good Samaritan. I conclude with some thoughts on the workings of the moral frame behind RLC public discourse.

## Strategizing the Peace

In an August, 2009, *Washington Post* editorial, Robert Kagan, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, observed that President Obama's declaration that military endeavors in Afghanistan are a 'war of necessity' was disingenuous because, "unless the nation is invaded or its very survival is imminently threatened, going to war is always a choice" (para. 5). Kagan's assertion presumed the

importance of democratic norms of accountability. He noted, “The claim of necessity wipes away the moral ambiguities inherent in the exercise of power. And it prevents scrutiny of one’s own motives, which in nations, as in individuals, are rarely pure” (para. 6). Kagan’s point—that war is almost always a choice—warns against citizens and leaders who all too eagerly sanction state violence when they feel moral certainty is on their side. Kagan’s assertion that choice requires a recognition of the moral implications of war also implies that prudent use of force requires transparency and difficult debate—both of which can be impediments to swift, efficient decision-making. The takeaway from Kagan’s op-ed is that moral decision-making involving the use of force requires scrutiny from a nation’s citizens who establish the moral ground necessary to authorize such actions as legitimate. In other words the nation as a whole must repeatedly come to terms with the appropriate disposition toward the exercise of force.

While the RLC stops short of proclaiming itself pacifist, the community does articulate a presumption against state-sanctioned violence. The RLC defend the need for more debate and input from the religious community before a nation declares war. Instead of a consistent position opposing all military ventures, the RLC, consistent with their common good political vision, assert a commitment to dialogue informed by Christian and religious values. George Lopez (2009) explains that well-intentioned Christians can disagree on the permissibility of war, but they all can and should agree that pre-emptive warfare exacts far too many civilian casualties to be morally defensible. Lopez explains that just war theory has two camps: the traditionalists who believe that the criteria of just war presume against war; and the “permissives” who

believe that extraordinary circumstances permit pre-emptive war. “What we need is further debate among the contending schools; I would argue that such ethical thinking about war is now more, not less, relevant to our troubled times,” notes Lopez, indicating the role religious citizens play in enforcing the “normative standards” to which policymakers hold themselves accountable (p. 21).

For the RLC the nonviolent standard is established clearly in their reading practices. The RLC’s community, consistently quotes from the Old Testament book of Isaiah which proclaims “and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). The most common gospel example found in the RLC’s literature is from the Sermon on the Mount passages, including Matt 5:9: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” In addition, the passages surrounding conduct in the presence of one’s enemy are instructive: turning the other cheek (Matt 5:39), loving one’s enemies (44) and also in verse 41 where Jesus proclaims “And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.” The meaning that RLC derive from these passages in interpretation is key and indicative of their hermeneutic practices generally. Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw (2008) explain that the going the extra mile reveals a moral principle of *reversing* an enemy’s hatred. They explain that Roman law stipulated that civilians had to carry a soldier’s supplies for one mile--walking any further violated military law. They note, “It would simply be absurd for a Jew to befriend an occupying soldier and want to walk an extra mile with him” (p. 94). Thus, when the Jew of the Roman era or the Christian of today reverses the cultural expectations for what a person’s behavior should be in

relation to one's enemy, s/he is actually engaged in a fulfillment of God's divine purpose.

A passage from Romans 12 that seems to have nothing to do with enemies or conflict provides the most direct admonition for Christians relative to the issue of warfare, according to Wallis. Verse 2 states "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Wallis (2008b) notes:

> Support for U.S. wars and foreign policy is still the area where American Christians are most 'conformed to the world.' This is our Achilles' heel, our biggest blind spot, our least questioned allegiance, the worst compromise of our Christian identity, and the greatest failing of Christian obedience. (p. 12)

In this passage, Wallis establishes military engagements, the prosecution of war by the state and its ready sanction by the citizenry, as a form of "worldliness." Of course, the notion of worldliness represents an antithetical position to God's divine will in both evangelical theology as well as within the rhetoric of the RLC. For Wallis and the RLC, Christians must remain separate from the world by placing their faith above the interest of their national identity. The most important area where this "higher allegiance" must be exercised is in the area of military engagements.

The aforementioned biblical examples provide the RLC with proof that promoting peace is a countercultural way to live Jesus' example in the world. The above Isaiah example is central to a nonviolent understanding of national and international peace. The lesser-known prophet Micah echoes Isaiah's warning about God's beating "swords into plowshares" but adds, "but they shall sit every man under

his vine and under his fig tree; an none shall make them afraid" (Micah 4:4). This addition to Isaiah's warning provides for the RLC an appreciation for global interdependence, a cosmopolitan understanding of moral consideration of global neighbors and not just local citizens. Wallis (2008b) accordingly observes, "Our security therefore depends on more than military might, but on other people's security, well-being, and a hope that replaces anger and fear" (p. 13). For Wallis and the RLC, peace is a reversal, a turning back of the dominant force of worldly power.

The RLC assume a political role that is at once concerned about addressing present injustices just as it worries about colluding too much with governmental forces to achieve such ends. John Yoder (2002) observes that Christian political relations are necessarily paradoxical. For example, he states " the very nature of the state is force, and the Christian has committed himself [sic] to have no recourse to force, not only in his own interest but even for the sake of justice" (p. 7). Under Yoder's formulation Jesus' lived example rejects lethal violence, yet the state cannot preserve any sort of order without the threat and employment of such force. In this way, only when the state rejects violence and serves the welfare of all can it be said to be a servant of God. In this formulation Christians need to witness to the state, but only under certain conditions. Yoder's theology originates from a Mennonite tradition and serves as a significant theological influence for the RLC as a whole. Indeed, his particular form of pacifism is largely embraced by the RLC. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the RLC authorize their witness to the state through a moral frame that ensures they remain humble, resembling Jesus' role of a servant, while assuming a negative relation to the

state. That is, the witness of the RLC is to speak against injustice; to confront the state when it acts in a manner that is contrary to God's divine will and revelation.

Yoder's work is significant because it states three things: first, that Christians should oppose idolizing the use of state power; second, Christians should "demonstrate what love means" not in policy, but through and in "social relations." The priority for the Christians should not be "domination" but "sacrifice." Finally, Christians should not use "mechanisms of power to bring about an ideal society but work for the concrete good in that social order in which it lives" by encouraging democratic participation. Democratic participation best ensures the serving of the common good (Rempel, 2002, pp. 1-2). These three dimensions are assumed in the general moral frame of the RLC. Relative to war and peace, the RLC most explicitly address the first point, namely the concern with idolizing the violent means of state force. Greg Boyd (2005) explains in his book *The Myth of a Christian Nation* that the kingdom of God is separate from any kingdom of the world, and any attempt to link the two in common purpose is idolatrous. Boyd notes:

> Instead of living out the radically countercultural mandate of the kingdom of God, this myth [of America as a Christian nation] has inclined us to Christianize many pagan aspects of our culture. Instead of providing the culture with a radically alternative way of life, we largely present it with a religious version of what it already is. (p. 13)

Note here Boyd's use of "pagan" to describe the worldly dimensions of culture. In so doing Boyd encourages his readers to remain countercultural, avoid the temptation to "Christianize" the world through pagan means, which for him includes the state and all

the "worldly" means at its disposal. For Boyd, the state is the supreme power of the kingdom of the world. Boyd's language is fraught with apocalyptic imagery that implies a type of idolatry is present in the temptation to rely upon American power to advance Christian ideas. For Boyd authentic Christian witness is present in lived example, not through mechanisms of the kingdom of the world. Because Christians can and do disagree about the proper involvement in the kingdom of the world, they should proceed skeptically, always seeking common ground. For Boyd the way of the kingdom of God is "simple" and straightforward, whereas the way of the kingdom of the world is "always complex, ambiguous, and inevitably full of compromises" (p. 15). I outlined in previous chapters Boyd's notion of the "power-under" model espoused by Jesus always being at odds with the "power-over" model used by governments to preserve power. This model influences the RLC and underwrites their fundamental presumption opposing war.

The RLC assert that nonviolent means can play Christ-like roles in promoting justice and resisting violence. Jack Du Vall (2004) notes that when "nonviolent movements mobilize people to use strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and other disruptive tactics—through a strategy to subvert an unjust regime's power—democracy ensues more often then when violence is used" (p. 20). The use of the verb "subvert" is important here for it suggests that power can be toppled through passive means rather than through outright dominance or an even greater measure of force. Wallis' (2005) repeated reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. as the greatest prophet of the 20th century signifies the importance of the nonviolent example of resistance for the RLC. The Micah example of interdependence and the common fate of humanity is important for it

suggests to Du Vall that "political oppression anywhere is now everyone's business, because the violence it breeds can appear anywhere" (p. 20).

Wallis (2008b) restates the importance of the RLC's position on keeping separate from worldly powers by noting:

> Since the Bible instructs us to be peacemakers and since Christians are to have a strong presumption against war, two things must be said: First, Christians should be among the hardest, not the easiest, to convince, and should require the highest burden of proof, before military force is used. And second, Christians should not delegate to any president or national government the decision about whether a war is just or not. That decision must be made by the *collective discernment* of God's people, including the *international* Body of Christ. (p. 13, emphases mine)

In this passage Wallis warns against the temptation to embrace military force and state power, authority. Furthermore, Wallis affirms the other-worldly example of the kingdom of God as that which holds worldly powers in check. That is, Wallis is trying to remind his readers of Jesus' "other-worldly" example of serving the common, even global good, through a stance of moral independence from the state. I contend that the spiritual implication of this message is that Christians must be careful to not idolize state power, especially when confronted by the patriotic fervor that often accompanies the call to war. Wallis later notes that "ending unjust wars, as well as preventing future wars, is an obligation of faith" (p. 13). Wallis articulates the RLC's position on war by echoing Lopez's assertion that Christians can disagree on the interpretation of just war, but must never conflate the purpose of their faith with the aims of government force.

That is, by taking a global perspective, prudential Christians will reject the local aims of state power when exercised indiscriminately or immorally.

Wallis' example of the necessity of the "collective discernment" of Christians around the world is tantamount to the general RLC aim of assembling a large coalition supporting moral issues. Evident in these lines of reasoning is an important logic that, for the RLC, justifies going beyond mere critique of injustice to calling for specific state measures to address injustices. Put differently, in the previous chapter I established that the RLC assert a negative relationship to the state which authorizes them to address injustices on a case by case basis. Evident in their rhetoric, though, is a logic of the coalition, of bipartisanship (or "nonpartisanship" by virtue of a plurality of voices asserting a "singular" moral critique) that authorizes the state to serve as a means to carry out specific political goals. That is, the RLC imply in this logic that they can petition the state to carry out specific activities, policies, etc. on behalf of a larger moral good so long as they can lay claim to represent a larger moral community. This logic becomes apparent when looking at specific policy measures the RLC advocate.

**The Examples of Iraq and Iran**

The RLC's discourse on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan reflects a group deeply opposed to violently-enforced regime change, and one committed to global solutions to problems of terrorist violence. Reza Aslan (2009) notes in *Sojourners* that former President Bush's use of the word "crusade" to describe the United States' actions to combat terror around the globe serves:

> As an emblem for an era when the cross of Christ was brandished as a sword by one barbaric, theocratic empire against another barbaric, theocratic empire…the

> president not only gave Americans an apocalyptic lens through which to view the coming conflict with the Muslim world (though, in truth a great many Americans needed no encouragement), he responded with precisely the cosmic dualism that those who carried out the attacks had intended to provoke. (p. 12)

The RLC reject Bush's uncritical use of the term "crusade" by noting just how easily the president "conflate[d] America's role with God's purposes" (Wallis, 2008b, p. 13).

Unfortunately for the RLC too many American Christians, especially conservative ones, went along with and supported Bush's efforts. Wallis notes that many religious conservatives believe combating 'Islamofacism' is "really another 'life' issue, perhaps even a higher priority than their traditional concerns such as abortion" (p. 14). Christian nationalism is such a problem for the RLC because it rejects the "collective discernment" of all humanity. To this effect, the RLC believe that the proper role of Christians in the United States should be of repentance. Aaron Taylor (2009b) explains that too many evangelicals who "love Jesus and want to see his purposes fulfilled in our world" were eager to support an evangelical president who publicly claimed to seek God's counsel (para. 5). Wallis (2008b) explains that repentance has to do with "transformation, and that's exactly what the American church needs to break out of its conformity to the American government's foreign policy of fear and war" (p. 15). Here Wallis warns of the temptation of employing violent state means to achieve Christian ends. Reflected in Boyd's earlier comments in this chapter, the RLC believe that the state can only serve God's will by rejecting all violence and harm. Defined by the RLC reading of the gospels, the state cannot serve God's will through violent actions that result in harm for anyone. Here, we again encounter what

the RLC mean by their stated ambivalence toward political/partisan means of achieving moral aims. The issue of war, specifically, raises the concerns of idolatry because through the declaration of war the state markedly demonstrates violent force to achieve a presumably moral objective.

After President Bush was unwilling to meet with religious leaders before commencing operations in Iraq, members of the RLC as well as others comprising a U.S. religious delegation met with Prime Minister Tony Blair. The RLC put together a six-point plan entitled *An Alternative to War For Defeating Saddam Hussein* based on that conversation. The plan is a good illustration of the policy positions that the RLC forward from the language of their political rhetoric. The document calls for a "third way" between war and ineffective deterrence by presenting an alternative to an "attack on the people of Iraq" (2003, para. 5).

The first point calls for an international tribunal to indict Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity. The document notes that "focusing on Saddam and not the Iraqi people would clearly demonstrate that the United States' sole interest is in changing his regime and disarming his weapons" and that "it would cause world opinion to coalesce against Saddam's regime rather than against a U.S.-led war, as is now happening" (sec. 1, para. 2). This language stresses two important and interrelated points: one, support from a global community holds more legitimacy than unilateral measures taken by a single country; and two, it makes primary the moral imperative of protecting innocent civilian lives. The first point reflects the RLC's rationalizing the defense of calling upon the state to serve as a means to achieve its political objectives. The latter point emphasizes moral concerns over strategic ones. Making the solution

multilateral assures for the RLC that human interests are being served over narrow state objectives. Wallis (2008b) echoes this cosmopolitan assertion by observing, “Because the Body of Christ is an international community, we are called to be Christians first and members of our tribe or nations second” (p. 12).

The document’s third point calls for fostering a democratic Iraq through the U.N. and an international armed force that could “assist Iraqis in initiating a constitutional process leading to democratic elections” (2003, sec. 3, para. 1). It is difficult to overestimate the importance of democracy as the preferred model of government for the RLC’s community. Yoder (2002) cautiously supports democracies because they encourage broad citizen participation that, in theory, can hold state power accountable to the common interest. The promotion of democracy in the “alternative to war” document is consistent with the RLC’s frequent defense of democracy as they define it: specifically, the notion that democratic deliberations necessitates appeals to the common good, collective or shared interests, and a willingness to abandon force as a tool of self-interest.. Wallis frequently mentions that religious arguments need to be “disciplined by democracy” in order to truly address the concerns of all, even those who are not religious. Democracy then as Wallis and the RLC define it, is antithetical to the neo-liberal call for “Freedom” that necessitates military intervention. Their notion of democracy supports Christian political argument for two reasons: one, it makes the argument better because the Christian advocate must respect and come to terms with those who may not agree with her; and two, democracy fosters the potential for a population to keep their rulers accountable to common moral standards. It is no surprise then to see the RLC advocate for democratic reforms in a post-Saddam Iraq,

even as the RLC expresses discomfort with the means by which Iraq was "liberated." Indeed, the RLC's support for democracy as the preferred system of government is easily confused with a general support for American foreign policy in the "advance of freedom."

The Iraq document spells out in its fifth point the importance of maintaining a moral and humanitarian high ground in any armed conflict with Iraq. This argument relies on rhetorical disassociation by isolating the tyranny of Saddam Hussein from the global concern for the welfare of innocent Iraqi citizens. The writers of the document note:

> Focusing on the suffering of the Iraqi people, and immediately trying to relieve it [through international humanitarian assistance], will further help to protect them from being the unintended targets of war. It also helps to further isolate Saddam Hussein from the Iraqi people by contrasting the world's humanitarian concern with Saddam's indifference toward his own people. (2003, sec. 5, para. 1)

Here the RLC and the other writers of the document again stress the moral legitimacy of an international, multi-lateral effort to reduce the suffering of fellow citizens. This line of argument magnifies the significance of the Iraqi people, constituting them as subjects through humanitarian, universal language. By contrast, the RLC infer that an abstract focus on "terror" calculatedly diminishes non-military personnel to the abstract statistics of a utilitarian calculation.

The RLC's rhetoric demonstrates commitment to humility through their critique of behavior that displaces God's will with the idol of state power. The RLC's

understanding of humility is also informed by their willingness to democratically work with others to achieve the best ends. Though often unstated, this understanding of humility is deeply informed by the rejection of the perceived arrogance of the Religious Right. It is difficult to overstate the importance the example of the Religious Right provides for the RLC. In an attempt to disassociate themselves from the narrowness of the Religious Right, the RLC constantly refer to their rejection of party ideology and their willingness to form coalitions with those who do not share their particular faith—all measures that, on some level, consciously signify a rejection of the ways and means of the Religious Right. With this understanding of the importance of virtue to the RLC in mind, it becomes apparent why the community might conflate the virtue of humility with a commitment to pragmatism. For example, in the Iraq document the authors note:

> A morally rooted and *pragmatically* minded initiative, broadly supported by people of faith *and* people of good will, might help to achieve a historic breakthrough and set a precedent for decisive and effective international action. (sec. 6, para. 2, emphasis mine)

In calling for an international coalition of people compelled toward peace, the RLC acknowledge that citizens need not be religious or speak from a position of faith to express a powerful moral critique. That is, the Christian critique against war more often than not reflects the general, secular moral consensus (Wallis, 2005; Yoder, 2002). In addition, by stressing that the Iraq document is a "pragmatically minded" initiative, the RLC emphasize a political solution tempered, "disciplined" by results instead of ideology. In this way the RLC believe they are being humble because they reject party ideology in favor of pragmatic measures and a principled expression of respect for those

with whom they disagree. This distinction is very important to the RLC because it demonstrates to their audience, as well as to their critics, that they reject not only the temperament of the Religious Right, but also their means, especially their "uncritical" support of President Bush and the Iraq War. Nevertheless, the above quoted statement succinctly reflects the RLC's moral frame by recognizing the importance of humility while simultaneously embracing a coalitional political critique that has broad consequences for those potentially harmed by the state.

In 2007, the RLC joined an interfaith group composed of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim anti-war communities to publish a document titled, "Words, Not War with Iran." This document served to provide an ecumenical critique of potential armed conflict with Iran. The Iran document, unlike the Iraq one, was one to which members of the RLC contributed. I am attributing this text to the group, because although the document represented more than one policy opinion, the fact that members of the RLC signed the document makes it an expression of their voice. In this important way they become identified with the document. It is important to emphasize that the RLC, in spite of collective action taken up on behalf of the community, are not a formal organization or a kind of lobbying group that signs petitions representing a group with actual members. Here and elsewhere throughout the dissertation I attribute position statements and policy language conducted by individual RLC members as emblematic, representative of the rhetoric circulated within and outside the RLC's community as a whole.

There are many similarities between the Iran document and the Iraq one. For instance, the Iran document stresses the importance of a broad moral critique of war

authored by people of faith and those without. The RLC published the document to "suggest means by which concerned people of conscience can come together to advocate for reconciliation" (para. 4). For the RLC the choice of the language of "conscience" is an invitation to those who do not identify as religious. It is also a pragmatic choice, disciplined by democratic demands of a pluralistic populace, grounded in the acknowledgment that a moral critique voiced by many is more likely to achieve results than one that is "merely" religious. RLC member Jeff Carr notes:

> What is clear to me…is that [Iranians and Americans] must find a way to tell our stories and have our stories heard. And then we must being to write a new narrative together—one that comes out of humility, mutual respect, and shared understanding. I am convinced it is the only path for a true and lasting peace with justice. (para. 6)

Again, the RLC emphasize humility before a global community of those potentially affected (and those who could potentially affect the lives of U.S. citizens) by stressing the cosmopolitan norms of justice inspired by their reading of Jesus and Micah.

The RLC demonstrate the emphasis on "disciplining" democratic principles by stressing the importance of holding direct talks with Iran to diffuse tensions. The Iran document, in which members of the RLC participated, observes that "diplomacy is not meant to be applied only to friendly nations with whom we agree" ("Facts" sec., para. 6). Diplomacy is for the RLC a humbling activity concerned with the interests broader than narrow national aims. The very title of the document, "Words, Not War," reflects a commitment to discursive resolution of conflict pursued in the interests of the entire global community. Here, again, the RLC maintain their faith in a particular vision of

democracy. The RLC argue that this discursive solution of diplomacy needs to be voiced by more than just Christians to be really effective. Jewish and Muslim leaders joined the RLC's coalition to author the Iran document. As such the document contains reflections authored specifically for Jewish and Muslim communities, respectively. Each of these reflections contains prayers for peace, which draw from canonical religious texts of each tradition. In the Iran document the RLC refer to the ecumenical coalition as reflective of the general "Abrahamic" tradition opposed to war, and concerned with the preservation of human life. The inclusion of Jewish and Muslim voices, is, for the RLC, clear evidence of a commitment to a multilateral effort. This is important for the RLC because it demonstrates to their audience a willingness not only to engage pragmatic means, but, perhaps more importantly and less obvious, a commitment to selflessness and "moral cosmopolitanism" that, when contrasted with the narrow, ideologically-driven, and American exceptionalism of the Religious Right, is humble by comparison.

The Iran document calls into question the jingoism of citizens of the U.S. and Iran by stressing that both countries need to "cease using language that defines the other using 'enemy' images" (Appendix B sec., para. 7). The RLC re-assert their stated commitment to pragmatic solutions that reject rigid ideologies in favor of what is most likely to lead to an outcome of peace. The Iran document concludes:

> To attack Iran militarily would confuse noble ends…with dangerous and irresponsible means. Especially given the continuing tragedy and chaos of Iraq, we must not make that mistake again. The moral wisdom of many religious

> leaders and the pragmatic warnings of many military leaders now offer a common message—words, not war, with Iran. (Appendix A sec., para. 9)

Embedded in the above is the oft-repeated RLC theme of pragmatic means of state authority morally authorized by a coalition of the religious and persons of conscience. The use of the words "many religious leaders" and "pragmatic" speak to the influence of a moral frame emphasizing democratic norms of argumentation through a commitment to "non-ideological" means of political critique.

I have noted in the foregoing analysis that the RLC primarily stress a particular kind of humility, expressive of their general moral frame, when articulating their public response to war and the widespread use of state violence. The reading practices of the RLC give rise to rhetoric and the policies that language forwards. All of these discursive processes forward the twin dimensions of the RLC's moral frame. In the next section I discuss the case of health care reform and the ways in which the RLC advance language stressing bipartisan political solutions. Evident in their discourse is a distinct emphasis on the importance of political solutions that not only serve those who are un- or underinsured but that also reflect a multilateral moral consensus. This rhetoric resonates with President Obama's on the issue. The RLC in general, and Jim Wallis in particular, are deeply supportive of the President's plan and have actively been involved in promoting it within their policy language.

## The Moral Imperative of Health Care Reform

On the issue of health care reform the RLC advance arguments that stipulate the proper role of government. In perhaps an unprecedented way, health care policy brings into sharp relief the tension between the RLC's principles of a limited Christian witness

to the state and the temptation to offer explicit policy directives about the role of governing itself. Recall Greg Boyd's (2005) concern that too often evangelicals are over-occupied with "advising Caesar" on how to lead. Despite this warning, the issues of health care relate to many of the principles of the RLC; therefore, they frequently seek to influence that debate in prescriptive ways. In fact, the RLC's discourse on health care reform signifies some of its sharpest critiques of government injustice. For these reasons, health care policy offers a compelling glimpse into the RLC's moral frame, specifically the ambivalence they express toward partisan politics as a means to accomplish moral ends.

The RLC read three particular passages in the synoptic gospels to glean their mandate to act on behalf of the ill and suffering. First, Matthew 4:23-24 states that Jesus walked about Galilee, "preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people." Verse 24 states that Syrians "brought unto him all sick people…and he healed them." For Claiborne and Haw (2008) these passages clearly show believers Jesus' enactment of his stated mission. Second, the RLC cite Luke 9:2 in which Jesus gathers his disciples together and "gave them power and authority…to cure diseases. And he sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick." Jesus charged the disciples with carrying out this particular task, explains Karin Granberg-Michaelson (1984) because it was well within their power to do so. Finally, the RLC stress the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37. In verse 34 Jesus explains that the Samaritan "went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him." In verse 37 Jesus tells his audience "Go, and do thou

likewise." Mary Kay Henry (2008) explains that the Good Samaritan story is important because it stresses that social standing should have no bearing on care and compassion for those in need.

The foregoing passages in particular form a moral foundation on which the RLC argue for health care reform. Like the example of poverty, healing becomes a central component of RLC's discourse based on the example of Jesus recorded in the New Testament. To this effect, Granberg-Michaelson asks:

> In considering the healing miracles of Jesus and the profound emphasis he placed on wholeness, we must ask what Jesus wished to communicate through his healing works in people's lives. (1984, p. 26)

Granberg-Michaelson answers her own question by noting "Christ gave the gift of healing…to act as a channel through which God's healing may flow" and that "any individual can begin to appropriate this gift on behalf of another" (p. 26). These passages suggest two key points: First, that the RLC believe that Christians are to model Jesus' compassion and his healing practices. The RLC here note that believers do not need to try to approximate Jesus' miraculous powers in order to heal others with compassion and selfless devotion. The second key point raised by Granberg-Michaelson is expressed in her statement "people are not meant to embark on a journey toward wholeness alone. That is the basis of the gospel" (p. 27). This second point becomes the rationale for the RLC to transform the healing mandate they read in the New Testament into the broader concern for health care. For them, the broad issue of health care is a common practice; a social endeavor whereby those suffering can find some comfort from the larger community.

Granberg-Michaelson writes about the necessity of the church acting as a disciple of Jesus, healing those in the community. The RLC, though, tend to downplay the functioning of the Christian church in order to emphasize the democratic composition of their social movement as well as their commitment to disciplining their prophetic politics through democratic means. The effect of the emphasis on community instead of church is an important rhetorical move for the RLC because it allows them to sidestep the dearth of theological evidence supporting institutional health care in order to make the prophetic claim that the injustice of health care is best addressed through the support of government-run health insurance plans and the increased regulation of immoral for-profit health insurance companies. This rhetorical move is consistent with their conservative radical moral frame, which authorizes the believer to interpret biblical passages for the present moment. The RLC's moral frame emphasizes the flexibility necessary to properly adapt the past for the present.

Like all evangelicals, the RLC view wholeness as something completely realized in salvation after life. For the RLC, though, wholeness is a part of the kingdom of God that can be realized in the present moment. Healing was a moral charge given by Jesus to his disciples. The example of Luke 9:2 becomes for the RLC a moral mandate to follow suit in the present context. The RLC interpret Jesus' message to his disciples as signifying universal health care for all without exception. The RLC believe that health care reform must be universal because of the injustice of unequal health care coverage. Henry (2008) cites the prophet Jeremiah's plea of "Why has the health of my poor people not been restored?" (8:22) as an example of what the RLC need to be asking policy decision-makers. She adds:

> As a nation we are called to follow the example of the Good Samaritan, who bandaged wounds and provided care without regard to the social or economic status of the sufferer. Priest or Samaritan, senator or janitor, we must heed the call to do the same. (p. 7)

Henry's argument reveals that the RLC find the above biblical reference points so unequivocal in their applicability for the present problem of health care that their public position becomes uncompromising on behalf of total health care coverage.

Elizabeth Edwards wrote a piece for *Sojourners* about health care reform that builds upon the arguments made by other RLC advocates. Edwards argues that market-based private health insurance is unbiblical and immoral because it isolates those whose health is a liability. Edwards asserts:

> Our society is based on the idea that we're all in this together. If you're born health and disease-free, great. But others are not so lucky, and part of your responsibility as a member of this society is to help them out. (2008, p. 13)

Edwards' statement denies the virtues of "consumer-directed care" because it, in her estimation, is the very reason why the health care system in the United States is in crisis in the first place. Though it is unknown whether Edwards self-identifies as a RLC, her statement decrying the consumerism of health care deeply resonates with the example of the Good Samaritan, which is foundational for RLC health care rhetoric. For Edwards a collectivist approach to health care reflects both American and Christian values. She notes that a moral choice exists between telling the sick that they are on their own or that "We are with you. Your challenge is our challenge too, and we will help you face it" (p. 13). These statements reflect a defense of universal health care

grounded in the RLC's reading of Jesus. The title of Edwards' article ironically asks, "Heal thyself?" as if that is the option left to citizens under a private health care model. Clearly Edwards' appeals to community, especially in the context of *Sojourners* magazine, which functions as the *de facto* public record of RLC advocacy, are consistent with the moral frame behind the discourse through which the RLC stake their claims on health care. That is, her emphasis on humility and the injustice of a government unwilling to provide guaranteed health care resonate with RLC rhetorical strategy on health care.

While the commitment to bipartisanship is, in principle, still present in the RLC's discourse on health care reform, there remains for them a clear "moral core" to the health care debate that necessitates and authorizes the implementation of a system providing health care coverage for all U.S. citizens. The necessity of this universal coverage mandate is premised on the assumption that health care is a right and that the role of prophetic advocacy is in part holding elected officials accountable to enforcing such a moral mandate. The logic here is circular, but nevertheless stems from the RLC's interpretation of key gospel texts. Wallis (2008c) points out that the "grotesquely unequal access to lifesaving drugs and medical care has made death a social disease" (p. 5). With this statement Wallis shifts the focus from isolated cases of individual suffering to a collective problem demanding a collective remedy—one that cannot be solved, for example, merely by faith-based groups and community organizations, but only through the power of government intervention. Here, the problem is one of scale. While it is implied in certain RLC texts that the Church and individual believers need to do more to help those in need in their communities, these same texts acknowledge that

only the government possesses the resources to truly right the injustice of unequal, or nonexistent health care (Claiborne & Haw, 2008). This line of reasoning once again points to the ambivalence of state power stated in RLC rhetoric. By acknowledging as they do that the government is best equipped to address the injustice of health care, the RLC feel the need to justify calling for state action by assembling a coalition to keep the effort "nonpartisan." For example, Wallis notes that even though "we need to build consensus on principles and priorities" to make health care work, RLC members assert that U.S. citizens must begin by understanding universal health care as a "human right" (p. 5).

Unlike the issue of poverty, which for the RLC has no easily-agreed upon solution, health care reform for the RLC begins with a foundational premise that it must be universal; only the *means* to achieve such universal health care are subject to bipartisan consensus-building. To those critical of the RLC, this might indicate an inconsistent application of the RLC's stated commitment to "nonideological" means of social critique. I take up this point in the following chapter. It bears noting that on the issue of health care reform, only the government has the means to provide the level of health care insisted upon by groups like the RLC. So, in this regard the RLC find themselves squarely on the left as they advance a "non-negotiable" position on universal health care coverage. By socializing the problem of inequitable health care access the way they do, the RLC effectively limit the opportunity to make bipartisan appeals. This constraint potentially lessens their bipartisan ethos.

Health care reform precipitates uncharacteristically strong responses from the RLC. Wallis recounts a story of taking his son to the emergency room, and asserts that

"every parent should have the medical care that we got. It's just wrong if they don't" and then later notes, "it's simply wrong when health becomes a commodity" (p. 5). Wallis' intractable tone is unusual for the RLC and their expressed commitment to civil dialogue and collaboration. In the context of the August 2009 heated town hall debates on health care reform, Wallis softens his tone by warning that "with all of the shouting, the fear, and now what often looks like hatred—we are in danger of losing the moral 'core' of this health-care debate" (2009d, para. 1). Wallis, along with other faith leaders, defended this moral core when, on August 19, 2009, President Obama held two teleconferences regarding health care reform with many religious leaders, including Wallis, who is already a member of his faith-based advisory council. According to the Associated Press, Wallis said of the teleconference, "My hope and prayer is that President Obama is going to hold firm to his principle of making sure everyone is covered. Holding presidents to promises they have made is a good vocation for the faith community" (quoted in Helfand, 2009, p. 11).

The issue of health care shapes RLC discourse in ways that the usual appeals to humility and selflessness apply *only* to the discourse circulating about the best way to institute health care for all U.S. citizens. Total coverage is an *a priori* assumption outside the sphere of compromise. Instead of RLC appeals being "disciplined by democracy," they become in the shadow of health care more diametrically rendered: through truth or falsehood. According to a *USA Today* interview regarding President Obama's teleconferences, Wallis responded on behalf of the RLC that the role of faith groups is to get out the truth. He notes, "Lying is not allowed here" (quoted in Thomas, 2009, p. 9A). Citing gun-toting extremists at Obama's speaking events and a woman

asking Jewish Representative Barney Frank why he supports a "Nazi policy," Wallis observed that such hate-filled gestures and messages "aren't effective or needed" and distract from the moral impetus behind the need for reform in the first place. Wallis adds, "just because fear makes a good press clip doesn't mean that we should give up our hope" (2009d, para. 6).

In spite of their insistence on full and complete coverage for all, the RLC still aver their commitment to dialogue on the issue. As noted above, there is certainly tension between what the RLC typically mean by this and what it means for the health care debate. Wallis asserts that "what we need is an honest and fair debate (2008b) with good information, not sabotage of reform with half-truths and misinformation" (The truth sec., para. 2). While these statements suggest openness to approaching reform without an nonnegotiable policy demand, this clearly is not the case here. Despite their insistence on the need for an "honest and fair debate," the RLC bring discrete preconditions to any such discourse.

The call for humility typical of RLC discourse becomes less clear when discussing health care. So too does the pressing for "non-ideological" solutions become less obvious under health care reform. McClaren (2009) makes clear that for the RLC the U.S. government must be involved in ensuring universal health care. Using parallel case argument McClaren asserts three reasons why the government must take the lead on health care. First, McClaren cites the recent financial crisis as being a result of multinational banks not being properly regulated. He adds, "similarly, when health insurance companies…are not given proper accountability, they may make decisions that increase their profits but hurt people" (para. 5). The implication rests with the

assumption that government laws and regulations prevent private depredation of the security and health of many human beings.

McClaren's second point inoculates against "big government" assumptions of inefficiency and waste by observing, "I am suspicious of big government, as you are—but I am equally suspicious of big business…at least with government we have the right to vote out corrupt politicians" (para. 5). Because corporations are able to "keep their policies secret from their shareholders" it becomes essential to "hold them accountable through good laws" (para. 5). Finally, McClaren uses analogy to defend the democratic means of laws to bring about better government. He does so by noting that the same people who believe the government should not be trusted to handle health care, have no problem with the government handling lethal weapons. McLaren defends the role of government in health care reform, noting:

> But if governments can't handle laws well—and that's what's really needed in this situation, I believe: better laws—then they really are failing. Here we are in a situation, though, where even though government failed in the past to provide needed laws (just as they failed to do regarding big financial institutions), now they're trying, and that's why I want to support them. (para. 5)

This statement strikes at the heart of the RLC's commitment to (critics might say over-reliance upon) the government to enforce the moral mandate of health care access.

**RLC Health Care Advocacy**

The RLC sponsor Wallis' Sojourners organization a document titled "A Christian Creed on Health-Care Reform" in which the thesis: "Christians must affirm that we believe in: quality, affordable access to life-giving services for *all people*" is

supported by eight creedal statements each bolstered by biblical evidence (2009, para. 1, emphasis mine). The explicit purpose of the creed is to signal to one's congressional representative the values that the RLC hold and explain how those values are supported by biblical scripture. On a secondary level the eight creedal statements differentiate the RLC from secular liberal groups calling for universal health care. In this way the creed grounds the liberal call for universal coverage within a biblical foundation. In so doing the RLC frame the health care issue as a moral one supported by extensive biblical evidence.

In spite of the extensive quotation of biblical text evident in the creed, none of the statements explains how or why the Christian burden of ensuring wholeness and healing of all people falls upon the state. All eight statements but one cite biblical evidence compelling believers toward compassion and service toward those who are infirm. It is compelling that in the seventh statement, the Creed states:

> I believe that all people have a moral obligation to tell the truth. To serve the common good of our entire nation, all parties debating reform should tell the truth and refrain from distorting facts or using fear-based messaging. (para. 7)

It bears noting that with this document the RLC effectively warn that all dissenting opinion on total health care coverage, for reasons pragmatic or ideological, is, in effect, disingenuous. This rhetorical strategy relies on a dichotomy of truth and falsity that proceeds from the ideological assumption that all honest Christians read the Bible and draw the same clear directive to ensure the state provides healthcare for all. With this move the RLC try to assert a unified Christian position, preempting on moral grounds any position that does not start from the assumption of universal coverage. It is clear

that the issue of health care fosters in the RLC a more historically understood notion of prophetic discourse that is uncompromising in its moral certainty and radical in its message (see Darsey, 1997).

The RLC also sponsor, along with Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, the "A Guide to the Health-Care Reform Debate" document. This "toolkit" also provides resources for RLC members to petition elected officials. After establishing the biblical mandate to care for the sick and vulnerable, the authors ask:

> Do we not also have a responsibility to influence the health-care system to make it better reflect our faith values? If so, how do our faith values shape how we think about health-care policy? (sec. 1, para. 7)

On issues like poverty and war it is customary for the RLC to express hesitation, ambivalence about the reliability and utility of government means to achieve moral purposes, especially when the solutions are nakedly partisan. On heath care the RLC seem to express no such interruption moving between general biblical directives and specific policy demands like single-payer health care.

In attempting to be consistent with the repeated commitment to democracy, health care guide discusses the cons of the "public option" of health care reform by stating that reform is "meant to provide people options, not require them to get their health care from the government" (p. 5). However, the guide also states health care must be affordable for those who cannot afford private insurance. The guide says little about those who cannot afford any insurance, only that "no one should be denied coverage." The RLC understand reform in this context as that which bridges the gap between those covered under Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance, which the

guide estimates to be upwards of $46 million people (p. 3). Nonetheless, the goals of affordability and access are somewhat at cross-purposes in this particular line of reasoning as the RLC do not articulate in policy language how the public option ensures affordable insurance for those who are without it and insurance in general for those who cannot and will not be able to afford a market-rate plan.

The guide reflects RLC input inasmuch as it acknowledges the importance of common ground solutions that reflect the interests of a broad coalition of moral-minded voters. To this effect the guide acknowledges that "all people of faith will never agree on every aspect of health-care reform" yet directly states that there is "broad agreement within the faith community" that health-care reform *must* cover all U.S. citizens (p. 7). The guide does not provide any evidence backing this claim, neither does any evidence appear in separate RLC publications or rhetoric. The presumption of consensus is problematic because it emboldens the RLC to demand universal coverage. Put differently, RLC logic suggests that it is OK to petition the state so long as the request reflects the concerns of some sort of "nonpartisan" moral coalition. In the guide we see evidence that the RLC have either overlooked differences of opinion within the broader faith community, or have deliberately acted to conceal the division within the faith community. According to a Pew Forum publication titled "Religious Groups Weigh In on Health Care Reform" from October 2, 2009, only 18% of evangelicals favor health care reform and most Americans' views on health care are motivated by political, not religious, affiliation (2009).

In spite of the clear lack of consensus on health care reform among evangelicals, the guide argues there is broad agreement that reform "must include an Affordability

Standard that places limits on out-of-pocket expenses" and that lower-income children and families "must be protected by strengthening Medicaid" (p. 7). With consensus assumed on such specific policy proposals, it is difficult to see from the guide on what ground or on what issues the RLC are committed to debate. Common ground is not sought so much as it is assumed in this particular discourse. There is a distinct us-versus-them dynamic at play in how the RLC understand the health care debate. This agonistic dynamic, with truth set at odds with falsity, suggests that through their rhetoric the RLC are prepared to battle in the health care debate, instead of engaging open-mindedly and humbly in an exchange of ideas evident in their oft-repeated refrain that arguments must be disciplined by democracy. In fact, the foregoing arguments seems to be markedly at odds with their assumption that religious arguments do not have any more purchase in the marketplace of ideas than do any other arguments (Wallis, 2005).

## Conclusion

The issue of health care modifies RLC rhetoric to more closely resemble Democratic party line positions. To this effect the RLC are not as committed to discursive openness, to dialogue on the matter of health care. On this issue their tone is more morally righteous than on their stance against war. Wallis tellingly admits that "no amount of biblical exegesis or study will lead you to a policy conclusion on health care" (2009b, para. 3). With this in mind it is noteworthy that the RLC nonetheless stipulate certain policy positions before willing to engage in dialogue with others. Even the biblical mandate to care for the sick does not presume the government or another other state entity has to be the one to do so. The RLC never comment on the tension between

their nonnegotiable stance on universal health care coverage and Wallis' acknowledgment that the Bible is not a policy manual.

Health care is an issue where the RLC's rhetoric is at odds with the countercultural dimension of their moral frame. In fact, the RLC appear to be guilty of violating Boyd's assertion that the RLC need to provide the culture with a "radically alternative way of life," instead of presenting it with a "religious version of what it already is" (2005, p. 13). While the end of universal health care coverage can be argued to be, in itself, countercultural, even "anti-American" to some, the means by which the RLC support the public option, however, are nakedly political. In other words, the RLC claim a religious moral mandate to address injustice, but do so by supporting without reservation President Obama's health care plan, provided it includes his promised public option to guarantee total health care coverage. Here and elsewhere we see the RLC insist upon democratic norms of debate, yet such norms clearly limit a "prophetic" type of critique that is typified by unbending moral righteousness. As soon as a group levels a "prophetic" critique—especially when that critique is embodied in specific policy language—they give up any claim to nonpartisanship. To this effect the RLC signal their hand on which issues really matter to them—poverty, health care—while remaining committed to debate on those issues far less important to them. I touch more on this notion in the following chapter. The rhetorical intransigence of the RLC and their insistence on total health care coverage appears to make perfect the enemy of the good, which flies in the face of their more typical commitment to moral pragmatism and a "politics of the possible."

There is tension between the RLC's posture on health care and their more "non-ideological" posture on war. The RLC's discourse on war does not preclude its use, or any state-sanctioned violence per se. For them, war can be necessary though it rarely is. Their rhetoric to this effect is consistent with their moral frame and with their reading practices. Their moral critique is offered on behalf of all people, is ecumenical in its reach, and is open to dialogue with others. The RLC's discourse reveals that they seek to minimize suffering and harm around the world as a result of international strife. Nowhere in their political or policy language do they mandate that no civilian should ever be harmed by any act of war. However, the issue of health care makes such an insistence on guaranteeing coverage; a demand that is likely to be impossible to meet to every citizen's satisfaction.

It bears noting here that poverty is the best known, most public concern of the RLC. It is certainly the issue that they seem to speak of most frequently. That said, it is not, however, the issue that galvanizes their most direct policy recommendations. There seems to be a tension in this lack of commitment to policy directives. Pragmatically speaking, the RLC likely view issues like peace and health care as issues that can achieve anti-poverty ends. Short of making popular such slogans as "budgets are moral documents," the RLC has struggled to gain political support for explicitly "anti-poverty" measures, which are most commonly viewed as politically liberal. It is possible that in the years following President Johnson's "War on Poverty" in the 1960s that "poverty" is now a fairly vague signifier with mostly liberal connotations. The RLC are likely to gain a broader audience for their proposals if they are framed around issues like peace and health care. This might account for why the RLC forward more policy

initiatives on these issues than on behalf of poverty. It could be that the RLC perceive fewer rhetorical constraints with the political issues explored in this chapter than with poverty itself.

Poverty, as I discussed in chapter three, and war appear to be issues that fairly consistently reveal the moral frame behind the RLC's rhetoric. The RLC's discourse on health care reform, as I have indicated, somewhat occludes the familiar expression of their moral frame through partisanship and ideological rigidity. In the next chapter I demonstrate through an analysis of the critical reception of RLC discourse that the inconsistencies in RLC positions complicate their assertion of moral independence. These variations in rhetorical practice are intriguing to the rhetorical critic because they reveal a discourse community grappling with the past and the present to defend on moral grounds a more just future. However, to the culture-at-large these rhetorical inconsistencies tend to reveal a credibility gap in the RLC's overall evangelical political message.

# Chapter Five
## Blending evangelical tradition and progressive politics: The reception of RLC discourse by their evangelical and liberal critics

I have established in earlier chapters that Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo are the most visible RLC members. The RLC's critics, generally understood, treat Wallis and Campolo's rhetoric as synecdochic of the views of the entire RLC. The receptions of their public discourse—typically in book reviews and interviews—reflect on the RLC community as a whole. Though explicitly identifying as progressive evangelicals, the RLC make many appeals to a "moral center" and simultaneously position themselves among those representing the evangelical moderate middle. Because of this peculiar appeal to both secular and evangelical common ground, it is appropriate to investigate the inroads the RLC are making both into the so-called evangelical mainstream as well as progressive politics typically associated with Democrats. To this effect it is important to investigate not only how the evangelical conservative mainstream receives the RLC, but how their socially liberal critics do, as well.

*Christianity Today* (hereafter *CT*), a fifty-year-old magazine founded by Billy Graham, has the most subscribers of any evangelical magazine and serves as the evangelical publication of record. The publication claims to serve the mainstream of evangelical culture through their defense of biblical orthodoxy. Thus, it is significant when Wallis, Campolo or any other RLC members for that matter, appear in it defending the progressive evangelical position. It is worth noting that for the RLC, the "moral center" is a space that mirrors their self-styled configuration of socially liberal and traditionally conservative politics. In general *CT* runs reports that are frequently

skeptical of Wallis, Campolo and the Red Letter Christians, often positioning them, despite their assertions to the contrary, on the liberal margins of evangelicalism.

When interviewed about his most recent book, *The Great Awakening*, Wallis vehemently denied that he is a liberal, noting "There is a Religious Left in this country and I'm not a part of it" (Olsen, 2008, para. 1). This statement echoes the bipartisan frame of the subtitle of his best-selling *God's Politics*: "how the right gets it wrong and the left doesn't get it." The two most repeated themes of the RLC are the notions affirming the need for a nonideological "middle-ground" for moral argument and the need for an "expansion of moral consideration" beyond abortion and gay marriage, in effect broadening the evangelical social agenda. The first of these themes appears to confirm the prospect of bipartisanship, whereas the latter is far more vexing to such a "nonideological" project as the one claimed by the RLC.

In a book review of Wallis' latest work, a writer at *CT* observes that while an expansion of the evangelical moral agenda to include historically neglected social views is welcome, evangelicals will never abandon their concern with personal morality and thus their positions opposing abortion and same-sex marriage. Because of these two pillar issues, the author observes that Wallis' attempt to find the "elusive" middle and "transcend party politics never takes off" (Hansen, 2008, headline). Immediately after the RLC was formed, one of the *CT* senior editors blasted the RLC in an editorial entitled "When Red is Blue." In it, he accused the RLC of "sophistry" by claiming nonpartisanship while primarily identifying with historically liberal causes and supporting a larger role for the federal government (Guthrie, 2007). Guthrie implored his audience to give equal weight to all the passages in the Bible, not just the first four

books in the New Testament. Guthrie disassociated himself, the publication, and his readers from the RLC by dismissing the RLC's claim to nonpartisanship as dangerous for Christians.

It is not too difficult to imagine conservative, "orthodox" evangelicals, in particular, describing Wallis, Campolo and the RLC as occupying the religious left. One of the reasons why most conservative critics never perceive that Wallis and the RLC occupy the political middle is because of Wallis and Campolo's relationship to the Democratic party. Campolo served as President Clinton's faith advisor during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. For many Christians Campolo seemed to be more of an apologist than an independent counselor (Gushee, 2008). Wallis, after publishing his bestselling *God's Politics* in 2005, gave an interview to the aforementioned Stan Guthrie of *CT*, asserting that Democrats were doing some "soul-searching" after George W. Bush's re-election and he was helping them do so. Wallis stated that he advised Democrats to do three things: reframe policy issues in terms of values, reconnect with constituencies the party has abandoned and rethink big issues like abortion (Guthrie, 2005). Wallis, in addition to his advisory duties to Democrats, accepted an invitation from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid in December, 2006, to deliver the Democrats' weekly radio broadcast. On his God's Politics blog, Wallis defended his decision by noting, "I work hard to maintain my independence and non-partisanship, and didn't want to be perceived as supporting one party over the other…It was an opportunity to move outside our usual circle and reach many new people" (Wallis, 2006).

Despite Wallis' assertion "I want to be clear that I am not speaking for the Democratic Party" when delivering the radio address, he and his fellow RLC members

have faced and continue to face a momentous challenge convincing both evangelical and liberal skeptics of their nonideological "moral center." The fact that RLC are framed by conservative evangelicals as "left," and by certain ideologically liberal critics as "conservative," may actually hinder their desire to expand beyond their current audience. In this chapter, when I refer to the RLC's liberal critics, I am speaking of political liberals who have a particular investment in defending reproductive freedoms. Such liberals view "common ground" arguments such as abortion reduction put forth by political moderates and groups like the RLC with extreme suspicion. Too, such liberals notably reject as fraudulent the RLC's attempt to self-identify as "progressive." The reception of religious argument framed politically by religious and liberal media sources directs rhetorical critics to not only the efficacy of the discourse, its suasive force, but also its ability to manage differing styles attending religious and political modes of argument. .

In this chapter I wish to address a selective reception of RLC discourse by their evangelical and liberal critics. In particular I am guided by a series of questions. First, what does the reception of RLC rhetoric by their critics tell us about its appeal and its effectiveness? Second, why should rhetorical critics care about reception? It is my contention that in interpretive persuasion the critic draws upon the distinction between rhetoric and hermeneutics to uncover the cultural practices that comprise a discursive field. Studying the reception of a discourse may also make visible those elements in a discursive field that enable and constrain discourse. Reception practices clearly invite subsequent strategies for a discourse community like the RLC, just as they reveal those

discursive practices that threaten hegemonic understandings at a particular historical juncture.

I contend that the democratic norms of argumentation that the RLC uphold, which are central to their moral argument, potentially limit the effectiveness of their discourse among evangelicals and liberals alike. In particular, the RLC maintain a stated pragmatic commitment to disagreement and pluralism on the hot-button issues of abortion and gay marriage, yet uphold resolutely prophetic stances on poverty relief, the environment and war. Prophetic and democratic appeals, when mixed, reveal a contradiction in the expression of the RLC moral frame. As I will demonstrate, recently many evangelicals are displaying a willingness to be flexible about historically liberal policy issues such as the environment and poverty relief, but remain steadfastly opposed to abortion and gay marriage. In addition, many liberals are encouraged by the progressive dimensions of RLC rhetoric—poverty relief and anti-war measures, in particular—even as they are deeply suspicious of the RLC's stated conservative stance on abortion and gay marriage. If anything the RLC are flexible where evangelicals are unwilling to be, and prophetic on issues about which many evangelicals are attempting to be flexible. While the RLC orientation on these issues is provocative, it also reveals a deep hegemonic struggle for the political vision of evangelicalism—a struggle that conservatives are not going to cede to the RLC. Too, the RLC's opposition to abortion and gay marriage, reflective of the traditional evangelical position, limits, in the eyes of their liberal critics, their attempts to influence with religious argument a broader moral center reflecting "mainstream" values.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of reception practices and what they reveal about texts. I then address the evangelical reception of the RLC, addressing the issue of mainstream evangelicalism and the battle for the coveted political center, attempting to tackle the issue of why the RLC remains on the margins. I then discuss the problems the RLC has with many liberal groups, especially those concerned with reproductive rights and the historic androcentrism of evangelical leadership. I conclude the chapter by focusing on the possibilities of commingling democratic and prophetic forms of argument.

## Reception and Cultural Debates

The RLC are caught between a progressive policy position on behalf of poverty and peace and a conservative policy position on abortion and gay marriage. The "cultural style" that they forward—one that is simultaneously "evangelical" and "progressive"—is incoherent due to the separate cultural histories of evangelicalism and progressive/liberal politics. The “conservative radicalism” of the RLC is a cultural style that is, to use Mailloux words, "incomprehensible" because people do not know how to read it on its own terms. The problem of incommensurate cultures, explains Mailloux (1998), is that “in order to make sense of an alien culture’s actions, those actions, including speech acts, must be placed in their own contexts of vocabularies, beliefs, and desires—contexts that may be extremely different” (p. 17). In this chapter I attempt to show how incomprehensible the RLC cultural style is to communities who are strictly evangelical and those that are strictly liberal. By highlighting the critiques offered by both evangelical and liberal groups, I hope to demonstrate how the self-described

"misnomer" of RLC progressive evangelicalism in fact does get lost in translation among the two "alien" cultures to which the RLC claims to simultaneously belong.

Mailloux (1998) observes that rhetorical critics concerned with production and reception processes best understand rhetorical power as a cultural phenomenon or the "political effectivity of trope in culture" (p. xii). In this chapter I am investigating how the rhetorical production of the RLC is received by evangelical and liberal communities. Because the RLC discourse is recent, it is counterproductive to attempt a comprehensive rhetorical history called forth by a rhetorical hermeneutics. Nevertheless, I intend to demonstrate how interpretive persuasion, which assumes the mutually-enforcing roles of hermeneutics and rhetoric, necessitates a reception study of a particular discourse or set of discursive acts. The reception study I undertake in this chapter is far from comprehensive. Instead, I rely upon texts that offer representative views of the respective communities staking oppositional claims against the RLC's progressive evangelical vision.

As I indicated earlier in this dissertation, Mailloux's project addresses the historical reception of literary texts to reveal receptions' rhetorical character. Leff's notion of hermeneutical rhetoric suggests that historical interpretive traditions can serve as inventional rhetorical strategies for present-day rhetors. Neither of these two scholars explicitly addresses the importance of present-day reception of present-day texts; nevertheless, the work of both contains the theoretical assumptions necessary to explain the importance of such a move. A neo-pragmatic sophistic approach to rhetoric stresses an antifoundationalist ground of meaning. The meaning of a text is never inherent or given; rather, it is culturally and historically bound. Mailloux (1989) explains that

interpretation is always a political act, given meaning by cultural practices that "interpret the rhetoric of a text as participating in the cultural debates of a specific historical period and place" (p. 104). The rhetoric of the RLC directly engages the cultural debates of evangelicalism and both liberal and conservative politics. For Mailloux, if critics grasp the cultural practices of a given period when a text is produced, they can then come to some sort of understanding about why a text was interpreted in the way it was.

In this chapter I am concerned less with isolating the cultural practices that give shape to the RLC discourse than I am with understanding how these same cultural practices determine the present-day persuasive potential of the RLC discourse. Critics interested in the rhetorical and ideological impact of a text should avoid "explaining interpretation in terms of isolated readers and isolated texts" and should emphasize instead the "rhetorical exchanges among interpreters embedded in discursive and other social practices at specific historical moments" (Mailloux, p. 133). In this way I am looking at a selected reception of RLC discourse not to get a sense of its foundational, essentialist meaning, but to grasp how at the moment of its utterance it engages the cultural debates of the last half of the first decade of the 21st century.

The cultural debates of a given historical juncture are compelling in themselves, given that these "conversations" can be and are flawed accounts, as well as being

> complex rhetorical struggle[s] of everyone with everyone, a conversation traversed by uneven power relations, a rhetorical conflict implicated in social formations of race, class, gender, age, and nation…In this depiction of the cultural conversation, rhetorical power describes the argumentative forces at

> work within the particular historical contexts in which interpretive knowledge emerges. (p. 147)

As members of interpretive communities, individuals are free to interpret however they see fit, but they will always encounter a "correct" interpretation determined in and through the rhetorical struggles over a text's meaning. As I will demonstrate in the sections to come, the RLC struggle against the perceived "correct" understanding of mainstream evangelicalism as well as progressive politics.

The process of reception is, as should be apparent, relative to both the production of discourse and the reception of that discourse by various interpretive communities. Mailloux reminds us that "textual interpretation and rhetorical politics can *never* be separated" (p. 180, emphasis original). This assertion underscores the assumption of this project that reception and production processes are pragmatically inseparable. That is both interpretive and productive processes are interwoven into rhetorical process. This assumption accounts for rhetoric's dynamism, the ever-repeating cycle of reading and utterance. Studying the receptions of communities implicated in RLC discourse is the next step in accounting for the unfolding of the rhetorical process. To be sure, this process, much like the theorizing about the distinction between rhetorical and hermeneutic processes, is conducted through critical reflection. Surveying the reception of RLC discourse allows us to account for the discursive field and allows us to draw certain conclusions about the historical impact of RLC discourse at this particular juncture.

## Conservative Evangelicals and the Evangelical Mainstream

The RLC are widely received by conservative evangelicals as being the religious left because they emphasize their liberal views on social policy and relegate personal moral issues like abortion and gay marriage to the margins of their discourse. It is also significant that Tony Campolo is perhaps most famous for counseling President Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky imbroglio. The sensationalist coverage of the event and Campolo's being linked to the President reduced the nuances of Campolo's scholarship and ministry to a single image: Campolo offering forgiveness to a president whom many conservatives considered "debase."

Long a foe of the Religious Right and conservative evangelicals, Jim Wallis is no stranger to liberal politics as well. In addition to giving the Democrat's weekly radio address, his books have received endorsements from the popular rock icon Bono, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Marxist academic Cornel West. What is perhaps most outrageous to Wallis' critics is the fact that he sponsored, at the University of California at Berkeley no less, a seminar for Democratic politicians titled, "I Don't Believe in God, but I Know America Needs a Spiritual Left" (Loconte, 2006). Joseph Loconte of the conservative Heritage Foundation, commented in an op-ed to the *New York Times* that the Bible is not a "substitute for coherent political philosophy" and that Wallis, like the Religious Right before him "invoke[s] a biblical theocracy as a handy guide to contemporary politics…threaten[ing] our democratic discourse" (p. A13). Not surprisingly, Loconte urges Democrats interested in religious values to take their cues from religious conservatives. It is significant, nonetheless, that Loconte called out Wallis in the editorial pages of the *New York Times*. His account in the newspaper of

record with no apparent irony suggests that Wallis and the RLC should abandon any claim to nonpartisanship.

Even secular media sources question the nonpartisanship boasted by the RLC. *Esquire* magazine published in 2007 a list of 100 emerging ideas and trends. Editor-at-large A.J. Jacobs, author of the earlier-cited *A Year of Living Biblically,* wrote that the RLC are more "cuddly than conservative" and that they represented a new breed of evangelical who have the potential to be a "small but influential factor" in electoral politics. Despite the RLC's claim to nonpartisanship, Jacobs observes that "their politics are definitely more MoveOn.org than Fox News. Bono is an honorary member" (2007b, para. 3). Jacobs' insinuation that the RLC influence is "small" is important for it suggests that while intriguing, the RLC remains on the left margins of the evangelical mainstream. Tony Campolo even acknowledged in an interview that the RLC is widely viewed as "left-leaning." He reported, "I'm not comfortable with it [the designation as being a left-leaning evangelical], but I think it's fair. I'm certainly to the left of the religious right" (Sherman, 2007, p. A8).

What is often missed is that the discourse of the RLC suggests that to the left of the Religious Right is a moral center that represents mainstream US voters. Not surprisingly, this line of argument does not resonate with all evangelicals eager to embrace a broader agenda, but unwilling to de-prioritize the issues long important to them. Too, this line of argument about a moral center is potentially confusing to secular and religious moderate citizens who have become accustomed to rigid evangelical positions opposing abortion and gay marriage. In a *London Times* interview, Wallis acknowledges that moral issues matter to all Americans, but poverty should top the list

because it is the chief issue addressed by Jesus. Addressing the shift in evangelical conscience to address social issues, Wallis notes, “Climate change is now a mainstream evangelical issue. Human rights, Darfur too” (Smyth, 2008, p. 79). Wallis’ assertion suggests that the RLC’s moral issues have become (or perhaps always were) representative of the mainstream. In this move he is trying to validate the RLC position and square it with the newly realized mainstream of the evangelical movement as a whole.

In the same interview, the author points out that Wallis and Campolo are longstanding friends of President Obama, with Wallis serving as an advisor in the President’s Council of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. In spite of their warm affection for President Obama, he notes, Wallis and Campolo quickly “distance themselves from the ‘Christian Left’” (p. 79). While “hardly liberal” on the abortion issue, Smyth notes that the Wallis and Campolo are “anxious” to move beyond abortion debates, preferring instead, as Wallis reports, to articulate the sanctity of life as a “broader, deeper concern that includes Darfur, that includes the 30,000 children who will die today from hunger and disease” (p. 79). “This attitude,” notes Smyth, “is in tune with a younger generation of evangelicals.” Campolo adds, “Young people have a broader agenda and are interested in poverty and environmental issues. Gay marriage and abortion are at the bottom of the list” (p. 79). Thus, Wallis and Campolo align the RLC position with younger evangelicals. Indeed, RLC leaders like Brian McClaren and Chris Claiborne target their ministries to youth and young adults. In their interview Wallis and Campolo neglect to demonstrate how progressive evangelicalism such as theirs occupies a moral center of American politics. If anything, their enthusiastic

positioning with younger evangelicals rather than those evangelical organizations that claim the middle ground suggests that the RLC are not part of the elusive evangelical center.

The RLC's "red letter" rhetoric has inspired backlash from conservative evangelicals who take umbrage with Wallis' (2005, 2008a) frequent assertions that the "monologue of the Religious Right is over" and that Americans are enthusiastically embracing a "post-Religious Right America." Conservative evangelicals read such provocations as boastful, taunting rhetoric unsupported by the unwavering reality of the broad evangelical commitment to opposing abortion and gay marriage. I opened this chapter by detailing some of the responses of *CT* to the assertions made by Wallis and others about the RLC's middle-ground position. Whereas the editors of *CT* are generally skeptical of such a claim, they nonetheless appreciate the broadening of the evangelical social agenda advocated by the RLC and other more centrist evangelical groups. However, there has been some backlash to the RLC discourse, most notably in the blogosphere discourse of those who re-assert the importance of being "black letter" Christians. Members of the neoconservative Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) think-tank, for example, label the RLC as "Leftists" concerned with "steer[ing] Christians away from concerns about marriage and abortion and towards anti-war activism and environmental causes" (Tooley, 2006, para. 1).

The IRD asserts that the RLC is part of the cultural elite because of its frequent participation in such media outlets as National Public Radio and op-eds in the *New York Times*. Mark Tooley, President of IRD, asserts that:

> Red Letter Christians want to demote the issues to which the Bible speaks directly in favor of other issues dear to the secular Left that rely on a grossly expansionist interpretation of the Bible…In reality, the Bible and Christian tradition outlines the plan of salvation and a code for decent living. They offer broad principles for ordering human life; they do not, as the Red Letter crowd wants to claim, offer specific legislative policy demands that conform conveniently to the platform of the Democratic Party. (para. 15)

The irony here, of course, is that Tooley says nothing about how he and the Religious Right have lobbied for over 30 years with biblical evidence to support conservative causes. Nonetheless, the critique offered by Tooley resonates with "traditionalist" conservative evangelicals[xvii]. Black Letter Christians even have the option of buying a "TruTone" Bible, one for "Black Letter Christians who believe in the whole council of Scripture." The "TruTone" Bible goes so far as to print the words of Jesus in black so as to de-emphasize them.

Not all conservative evangelicals eagerly embrace the waning Religious Right. A Southern evangelical pastor asserts in his blog that both Red Letter Christians and Black Letter Christians err by claiming to have a corner on biblical intent. He observes, "When Christians have been made to emphasize one aspect of the Biblical record to the exclusion of another, then the Gospel itself has been compromised" (Randle, 2006, para. 4). Randle's position seems to reflect a growing concern of evangelicals open to expanding the moral compass beyond issues of personal morality. That is, evangelicals with their belief in the divinity of the entire Bible want to make sure they preserve fundamental stances on issues of personal morality, including Old Testament

injunctions against homosexuality, before expanding the social agenda. It is such Old Testament doctrine that the RLC struggle to communicate in their discourse.

**The Elusive Evangelical Center**

Part of the problem the RLC has in trying to position itself within a mainstream evangelical center results from their de-emphasis of abortion and gay marriage as the chief moral issues facing evangelical Christians. Their discourse can, at times, appear to their conservative counterparts to be equivocal on the two matters. For example, when asked about his position on abortion and homosexuality, Campolo responded that "sexual issues" should not occupy the primary focus of evangelical politics, noting "we affirm the importance of these issues, but we are pointing out that there are over 2,000 verses of Scripture that call upon people of faith to respond to the needs of the poor" (Sherman, 2007, p. A8). Later Campolo clarified his position and that of the RLC:

> I'm conservative on both. But I'm a strong contender for justice for gay and lesbian people. We're very committed to civil unions. If marriage is a sacred institution, which it is, then the question we raise is, why is the government involved in marrying people? We propose the European model. Go to city hall and register, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Then if you want to get married, go to the church. The church marries people. The government guarantees the civil rights of people. (p. A8)

Campolo suggests, though faintly, an opposition to homosexuality in principle, but he nevertheless reaffirms the importance of civil rights for gays and lesbians. His emphasis is on rights and protection. I contend that this becomes a sticking point for many

evangelicals who categorize homosexuality as a sin, a "depraved practice" that must not be tolerated or endorsed in any manner.

As a strategy of de-emphasis, Wallis and the RLC frequently deflect attention away from abortion and gay marriage by critiquing the manner in which these two issues are discussed. For many evangelicals, including those at *CT*, there is little tolerance for discursive maneuvering on those issues that matter most—indeed unite—all evangelicals. Wallis in his 2008 *CT* interview indicated that while the abortion issue is very real, the debate over it has become counter-productive. He observed that it is crucial to "protect[ing] unborn life in every possible way, but without criminalizing abortion" and that banning abortion is "never going to happen in America. And even if you do ban it, you're still going to have a huge problem in culture" (Olsen, 2008, para. 5). Because the abortion debate has become "stale" for Wallis, he asserts that abortion reduction should be everyone's concern.

Due, in part, to Wallis' lobbying efforts, the Democratic Party platform was changed during the 2008 Democratic National Convention to support abortion reduction without criminalization. Wallis expands his argument by noting, "How do you make it more difficult, yet not push people back in the back alleys? That's not pro-life. *I don't have it all figured out, and I want to seriously work on the question* (para. 10, emphasis mine). In response, the *CT* interviewer questioned Wallis about his history of being a prophetic voice for social issues, noting "Isn't the prophetic voice usually associated with articulating the bottom line without compromising on pragmatic grounds like cultural opposition or secondary effects?" (para. 12) Wallis responded that the prophetic stance on divisive issues like abortion and gay marriage is simply "dialogue. It's talking

to each other" (para. 15). It is noteworthy that the *CT* interviewer makes clear in his question to Wallis his skepticism of Wallis' pragmatic shaping of the prophetic.

Wallis' response makes evident two key points for the consideration of how this line of reasoning is received by other evangelicals: one, his and the RLC's commitment to democratic norms of argumentation, at least as they pertain to debating the hot-button issues of abortion and gay marriage; and two: the elision of the distinction between the prophetic and the dialogic strongly points to the priority the RLC place on abortion and gay marriage as issues of evangelical conscience. It is noteworthy that the RLC argue from what I have been calling the democratic frame on the aforementioned issues, but are far more prophetic on the issues of poverty relief, the environment and opposition to war. As noted above publications like *CT* reject as artificial the nuances and distinctions of such argument. Nonetheless, recall Campolo's support of civil unions and equal protection. Such stances go beyond mere dialogue to suggest particular action. When Wallis claims he does not have the abortion issue "all figured out," many evangelicals become nervous. While critics, generally speaking, might applaud the RLC's nuanced positions on gay marriage and their commitment to abortion reduction without criminalization, and though mainline Christian and other religious denominations, as well as secular Americans may well be fine with abortion and gay marriage not being central issues; evangelicals as a whole, however, are not.

In concert with conservative evangelicals, the mainstream media confirms the broadening of the overall evangelical agenda, even as it reports the abiding evangelical dedication to the nonnegotiable issues of abortion and opposition to gay marriage. Consider the case of evangelical megastar Rick Warren. Warren's *The Purpose-Driven*

*Life* has sold over 40 million copies and is second only to the Bible as the best-selling hardcover of all time (Frazier, 2008). *Time* magazine declared Warren to be without question the most influential voice in contemporary American evangelical Christianity (Van Biema, 2008). Warren presides over Saddleback Church, one of the largest churches in the United States, with over 23,000 members in Lake Forest, California. The *New York Times* declared Warren to be the next Billy Graham, the "nation's pre-eminent minister" and a "minister to the nation" (Seelye, 2008; Zeleny & Kirkpatrick, 2008). Warren is perhaps most known for his ministry on poverty reduction and HIV/AIDS. He has also established himself as an outspoken critic of abortion and gay marriage, fulfilling a key litmus test for conservatives concerned that the movement is abandoning issues of personal morality. Though publicly taciturn on the controversial California ballot initiative Proposition 8, which would overturn the California Supreme Court's decision protecting gay marriage, Warren created a video shown to his congregation behooving them to do the "biblically-sound" thing and support Proposition 8 (Pulliam, 2009).

As a further testament to his influence, Rick Warren hosted the very first presidential forum of 2008 when he invited Senators Obama and McCain to his church for the Saddleback Civil Forum. This significance of this event, though not widely reported during the run-up to the official presidential debates, was not lost on the mainstream media. The forum gave the two presidential candidates, both of whom had earned the skepticism of the evangelical community, an opportunity to speak on matters of faith. President Obama returned the favor, so-to-speak, when he invited Warren to give the inaugural invocation. The decision was not popular with liberals for it seemed

Obama was endorsing a pastor with views antithetical to those of the Democratic Party. Some lions of the Religious Right, including Gary Bauer, urged supporters not to mistake Warren's presence at the inaugural as some kind of endorsement (Zeleny & Kirkpatrick, 2008).

Regardless of the controversy created by Warren's invitation to the inaugural, it is significant that President Obama chose Warren to give the invocation and not Wallis or Campolo. It is likely that Warren's renown and influence made him an easy choice to appeal most broadly to those evangelical voters who voted for the Democratic candidate. Media outlets like *The New York Times* confirm that Warren represents the evangelical middle. He is willing to talk about poverty and AIDS, though far less likely to address environmental issues. Yet he toes the conservative evangelical and Republican Party line on issues of abortion and gay marriage. President Obama likely viewed Warren as someone who could reach more evangelicals and "values voters" than any of the willing RLC spokespersons on offer. Regardless of the intentions behind Obama's invitation to Warren, it is noteworthy that the mainstream media profiled Warren as the representative of mainstream evangelicalism. Such coverage suggests strongly that the RLC discourse claiming the evangelical middle-ground is not gaining particular purchase in the mainstream media.

It is prudent to interrogate further why Warren, and not the RLC, resonates with the majority of evangelicals in the United States. David Gushee, author of *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center* and a columnist for *CT* has written what is essentially a manifesto for the evangelical center. It is noteworthy that Gushee is able to articulate a moderate-conservative ethos and

claim to speak for the majority of evangelicals, writing as he does for *CT*. The book, published by Baylor University Press, explains how the evangelical center is a coveted, yet undefined, contested space receiving much attention from both evangelical and mainstream media. This evangelical center represents, in a sense, the vacuum created by the collapse of the hegemony of the Religious Right. To this effect, a writer for the *Christian Science Monitor* notes that "while the center shares the right's opposition to abortion and concern for the decline of marriage, it differs in its commitment to political independence, greater sensitivity to American pluralism and active embrace of a much broader agenda" (Lampman, 2008a, p. 14). Following this line of argument, both progressive evangelicals and centrists want an expanded moral agenda to include social issues, yet only centrists hold opposition to abortion and gay marriage to be inviolable. In his review of Gushee's book, Cooperman (2008) explains that because evangelical centrists focus on the both books of the Bible, they do not accept the pacifism of the liberals, are undecided about capital punishment, and are far more civil than their liberal counterparts when engaging the right.

Gushee's critique of Wallis and the RLC is instructive for our purposes. While there is little evidence that Gushee's arguments represent the evanescent "evangelical center," they nonetheless speak to a popular perception, made evident in the visibility of Rick Warren during President Obama's campaign, of what the evangelical center currently looks like. I contend that such a political position is less a reflection of coherent, ideological practice and more the result of rhetorical labors from evangelical groups struggling to assert a new hegemonic vision of and for evangelicalism as a whole. As another evangelical among many laying claim to mainstream of evangelical

practice, Gushee provides us with a viewpoint reflected in publications like *CT*. He is, after all, a frequent contributor to *CT*. I would stop short of saying that Gushee's portrait of the evangelical center is representative of most evangelicals. It is, however, far more closely aligned with the perspectives defended by the editorial board of *CT* than with those articulated in Wallis' *Sojourners*. Gushee's book is certainly distinct from the perspective of the news media, yet it is nonetheless representative of the prevailing opinions of both evangelical and mainstream/liberal news media about the RLC's "liberal evangelical" viewpoint. Gushee's arguments help to explain why both evangelical and mainstream sources are critical of the RLC's claim to an evangelical/moral center.

According to Gushee, the RLC are a type of "evangelical liberal," all of which are limited in their appeals to an evangelical center by two factors: their lack of commitment to debating abortion and gay marriage and, to a much lesser degree, the tone of their critique against the Religious Right. I begin with Gushee's concern with the tone of the RLC. Specifically targeting Wallis but including a broad representation of RLC members, Gushee observes that for over 40 years Wallis and his Sojourners organization have had their voices drowned by the clamor of the powerful and influential Religious Right. Wallis' opposition to the Vietnam War made him unpopular with his seminary and with his church. According to Gushee (2008) Wallis was the Christian version of the progressive face of the 1960s with its concern with social justice and the pursuit of peace. He hypothesizes that because Wallis stood on the margins of evangelicalism for so long, his voice obscured, he became embittered, which is evident in that "his rhetorical energy and polemical agenda clearly are directed

against the right" (p. 76). This observation stands to reason, at least inasmuch as Wallis, as well as Campolo, frequently use a turn of phrase suggesting the monologue of the Religious Right is over, and a new dialogue has begun. Immediately after Bush's re-election in 2004, Wallis proclaimed the reign of the Religious Right to be over. For Gushee this significance of this proclamation is found in its timing. Wallis employed "old arguments 'timed' perfectly to hook into the antivalues-voter backlash and represent a contrasting alternative evangelical view," passing it off as a brand new social movement (p. 66). Bohn and Underhill (2006) observe that Wallis, in particular, has a difficult time squaring his message of "reconciliation" with his frequent use of "typical liberal polemic against the religious Right" (p. 208). The authors observe that Wallis typically only offers appeals through liberal frames of acceptance.

Gushee emphasizes that the evangelical left is "most vulnerable to critique for its stances on abortion and homosexuality" as they often appear "too reticent to take positions at all" (p. 79). As I explain later, both evangelicals and liberals view this "reticence" with suspicion. While the RLC stress abortion reduction as a position indicative of a moral center, they offer, explains Gushee, not "coherent defense of the unborn" (p. 79). Gushee elaborates this point by noting that the RLC stance on abortion is:

> Not an adequate expression of an evangelical public ethic in relationship to abortion. It does not signal that it takes fully seriously the sanctity of *all* human life, including those lives developing in the womb…This leaves evangelical left thinkers vulnerable to the charge that their stance on abortion is essentially a nod in the direction of the pro-life camp to placate critics and be able to hold on to

> the evangelical label, rather than evidence of committed participation in the struggle against abortion. (p. 80. emphasis original)

Gushee critiques the tone of the RLC position on abortion and homosexuality by claiming that on these issues they speak in a "procedural voice rather than a normative one" (p. 81). Put differently, the RLC discourse on these issues is strategic, when it should reflect moral conviction. The evangelical center in Gushee's formulation desires "coherent" positions on these fundamental issues, not inconclusive, noncommittal "civil dialogue." The RLC fervently proclaim that they are evangelical, that they subscribe the same tenets of faith as all other evangelicals. Yet Gushee, echoing the criticism made by others cited earlier, alleges that Wallis and the RLC want incommensurate things: the evangelical label with its clear belief in the divinity of the entire Bible and to draw *exclusive* inspiration from the radicalness of the Gospel accounts of Jesus. This is, according to Gushee explains, "weird," because the gospels cannot be isolated from the Bible as a whole.

Gushee's admittedly conservative vision for the evangelical center is built not only from within, by expanding evangelical orthodoxy on social issues, but also from the outside in the conservative "mainstream" evangelical company it keeps. The RLC, though they explicitly denounce the politicized means of the Religious Right commit the same error by aligning with left-leaning groups and policy positions as part of their attempt to build as broad a coalition as possible, according to Gushee. In his interview with *CT,* Wallis acknowledges that his *Sojourners* magazine accepted advertising from the Human Rights Campaign. When asked why, he responded, "I had real mixed feelings about those ads…but we don't take a position on this except promoting

dialogue" (Olsen, 2008, para. 22). For Gushee, a "true" evangelical center, representative of bedrock conservative positions on abortion and traditional marriage, would not wish to align with groups—left or right—in fear that they may distort the essentialness of the evangelical mission. Put differently, when evangelical-led coalitions become too broad, the evangelical precepts initially undergirding the movement become distorted.

In *God's Politics* Wallis' chapter calling for a "consistent ethic of life" on abortion reads as if it were directed directly at Democrats. He writes of the importance of an abortion reduction platform for Democrats, noting "Such a respect of conscience on abortion…would allow many pro-life and progressive Christians the 'permission' they need to vote Democratic. Again, *there are millions of votes at stake here*" (2005, p. 299, emphasis mine). Gushee reacts to this passage by asking, "As a prophetic Christian voice rather than a political strategist, why should Wallis care whether this 'pragmatic' move on the part of Democrats would help them gain millions of votes?" and then later "my critique is that you cannot be both a party strategist and a Christian prophet" (2008, p. 84). Gushee's rhetorical attempt to define the center of evangelicalism aside, it is noteworthy that the moral frame evident in RLC discourse—that democratic norms of argumentation should discipline public moral argument—is exactly that which many commentators use as evidence against the RLC occupying any form of center, evangelical, moral or otherwise. The RLC's stated commitment to this type of moral frame limits the effectiveness of their evangelical ethos among other evangelicals. I address this matter in the next section

**Reconciling Opposites**

In this section I return to the notion of flexidoxy, introduced in chapter one, in order to explain how this perspective is received by conservatives and evangelicals alike. As I have argued to this point, many evangelicals accuse the RLC of bad theology, of reading practices that emphasize the parable over moral law. That the RLC's public positions on gay marriage and abortion are generally received as leftist among conservative evangelicals is intriguing in its own right, but it is in their defense of "conservative radicalism" where we can observe the prospects for their moral frame—both for evangelicals, and for liberals, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Recall in the first chapter I asserted that E.J. Dionne's defense of "flexidoxy" is something important to Jim Wallis and the RLC. I observed earlier that it was somewhat peculiar that Dionne, a supporter of the RLC, would defend such a term when its author, David Brooks, largely meant it as a pejorative when referring to liberals.

Brooks defines flexidoxy as a natural state of affairs of those who live year-round in Montana. This local Montana ethos stands for "depth over breadth;" it is a mindset that is suspicious of those in authority telling people what to do, yet celebrates "toughness and discipline" and a traditional, rooted appreciation for their place. Montana's spiritual ethic combines a desire to live as one wishes combined with an opposing impulse "toward orthodoxy…a desire to ground spiritual life within tangible reality, ordained rules, and binding connections that are based on deeper ties than rationality and choice" (p. 226). To be sure there is a libertarian strain to this particular formation, yet, as Brooks emphasizes, flexidoxy is inherently conservative. He explains,

"Montanans seem to accept the trade-offs, believing that the additional amusements and opportunities that a bicoastal life may bring would not compensate for the permanent and profound connections that are possible in such a rooted place" (p. 226).

For Brooks, the Montana version of flexidoxy is its "appropriate" form. Flexidoxy becomes corrupt when appropriated by bourgeois bohemians (or "Bobos") when they attempt, as the educated class, to square their progressive lifestyles and politics with "an alarming loss of faith in institutions…spiritual confusion and social breakdown" (p. 227). Bobos struggle in their attempt to have the best of both worlds, with reconciling "freedom" and "roots." Brooks' applicability to my analysis is found in his discussion of the spiritual life made possible by a corrupted form of flexidoxy. For Brooks, this type of flexidoxy offers a spiritual practice that encourages "rigor without submission," that too often the flexidox believer "pull[s] back from biblical teachings whenever those teachings clash with pluralism…this is Orthodoxy without obedience—indeed, Flexidoxy" (p. 243).

The RLC explicitly assert that their public commitment to pluralism, also evident in their moral frame, attracts, in addition to progressive evangelicals, left-leaning nonevangelicals who gravitate toward the message of inclusiveness and dialogue (Wallis, 2005; Campolo, 2008). Brooks observes that flexidoxy is usually spoken by those who are "epistemologically modest, believing that no one can know the full truth and so it's best to try to communicate across disagreements and find some common ground (p. 247). Wallis' assertion of conservative radicalism, echoed by the RLC, largely shares the assumptions of such a perspective. But, as Brooks observes and as many critics cited in this chapter would undoubtedly agree, the RLC claims of an

anti-ideological, nonpartisan approach to politics is morality on a "small-scale," lacking a "coherent moral order" (p. 251). In an interview with Gwen Ifill of PBS, Brooks observed that flexidox spirituality in an attempt to transcend both the left and the right results in an "ideological mush" and is an "unsatisfying style of politics" ("A conversation with David Brooks," 2000). In responding to Brooks' work *CT* claimed that "flexibility and small-scale morality are incompatible with a belief that moral standards are revealed and written into the fabric of the universe," which means that "'spooning' from the 'spiritual buffet table' isn't an option if you're convinced that Jesus is risen from the dead and is 'the Christ, the son of the living God'" (Rivera, 2000, para. 3). The critique articulated in *CT* and by Brooks himself is, for all intents and purposes, directed at the RLC's commitment supporting public moral argument that is "disciplined by democracy."

The RLC's commitment to the contradicting principles of orthodoxy and democratic deliberation forms the basis for their moral frame. Yet the two principles remain isolated from one another on particular political issues. It is readily apparent that the RLC believe they are prophetic on the issue of poverty—prophetic in the sense that their discourse reflects "meaningful incivility" and the commitment to the "vitality of sacred principle" (Darsey, 1997, p. x). It is important to note that a group can be orthodox in their actual approach to solving a problem, while simultaneously making their appeals in a more or less prophetic style. To this effect the RLC are orthodox in that they call for changes through existing procedural, legislative means. An "unorthodox" perspective, by contrast, might be sounded in something like the overthrow of capitalism. The RLC in no way articulate such radical solutions. The

prophetic style, explains Darsey, "derives from the vitality of sacred principle, that is, immutable law, beyond the reach of humankind and uncompromisable" (p. x). The RLC stress of the Gospel accounts of Jesus radicalizes the social policy implications that emerge from the narrative accounts. Prophetic discourse links the ideals of a society to a sacred source, to not only reinforce their importance but to illuminate the gulf between present realities and the guiding transcendental principle.

As Darsey explains, prophetic discourse seeks to reshape, to re-create the audience in accordance with a strict set of ideals as commanded by God…and assented to in principle but unrealized by the audience" (p. 202). Because prophets chide and goad, they assume the form of outsiders, even as they speak from within a culture. In the theoretical language of interpretive persuasion, we might say that prophets are both part of an interpretive community and also actively engaged in radically reshaping it. Prophets do not assume the voice of an unknowable Other, but speak to shared ideals. For Darsey, prophetic discourse possesses a "fundamental faith" in its auditors because it calls upon them to re-affirm the common and "unquestioned" vision of the good.

The RLC definitely use a prophetic style when addressing the issue of poverty. Wallis' latest book title, "The Great Awakening" aptly describes the intention of creating, to use Darsey's term, a "convulsion" in culture, re-awakening the American ideal of self-sacrifice and the common good. This is all well and good, but what of fundamental issues of importance to traditional evangelicals, like personal morality reflected in historical opposition to the practices of abortion and gay marriage? As I have shown in this chapter, most evangelical commentators critique the RLC's tone on these two issues as "procedural" and "pragmatic" instead of prophetic and radical. The

RLC position on these two issues attempts to ground their stance, albeit faintly, in the orthodoxy of the evangelical faith. That is, most RLC members publicly confirm their opposition to the aforementioned practices. These statements are invariably followed by a stated commitment to pluralism and democratic norms of tolerance and common good. It is in these two issues, and seemingly these two issues alone, where the RLC demonstrate a "flexidox" approach. It is probable, as many commentators of the RLC have noted, that the RLC simply do not wish to define themselves, as the Religious Right did for decades, on those two hoary issues. Campolo acknowledges that evangelicals tend to vote Republican because Roe v. Wade made many evangelicals feel that "there was no way they could vote for a party that has a pro-choice platform" (Sherman, 2007, p. A8). In the grand narrative of the RLC, as a result of the de-criminalization of abortion, the evangelical political conscience became complacent in its emphasis on personal morality, neglecting the social dimensions of evangelical orthodoxy.

The mish-mash of styles, orthodox and civil/democratic (or ideal and pragmatic), leads many orthodox evangelical commentators to assume that when the RLC defends norms of civility, that what that really means is that they do not care enough about the issue to be prophetic about it. This line of reasoning is over-simplistic, yet indirectly speaks to a critique offered from both evangelicals and the left —namely, that commitment to dialogue on abortion and gay marriage, while remaining fundamentally opposed to both in principle is highly suspicious. I articulate a particular liberal critique in the following section. At present, I speculate that the skepticism of a commitment to dialogue is akin to Darsey's critique of the concept of tolerance as a

means of denying righteous critique. By refusing to engage in righteous debates one way or another on these pivotal issues, the RLC raises the hackles of their critics. Their stated intention is to not ignore these two hot-button issues, but broaden the moral agenda by re-directing attention away from these hegemonically-defined moral issues. There is, of course, a deep irony here in that both liberals and the majority of evangelicals demand unequivocal statements on abortion. This development, perhaps unlike any other, testifies to the enduring power and continued success of the Religious Right's divide-and-conquer attack on abortion rights. Strategically speaking, the RLC wants to continue to appear to be pragmatic and committed to dialogue when they wish to deflect attention away from certain issues and prophetic and unwavering when they wish to radically engage the issues most important to them: poverty and peace. Specifically such a move allows the RLC to reframe, de-emphasize, and thereby strip of political capital the issues so long championed by the Religious Right as being worthy of consideration, but not foundational to a Christ-centered progressive evangelical political conscience. This move, as I demonstrate in the following section, is not a problem only for conservative evangelicals.

## The RLC and the Left

Wallis and the RLC have significant obstacles to overcome in order to successfully extend their appeals to liberals, especially women who identify with traditional Democratic or progressive politics. Immediately after the 2008 election Wallis observed that "social conservatism is now married to social justice," insinuating that a reduction in the abortion rate would result in a corresponding reduction in poverty (quoted in Posner, 2009c). That is, Wallis expressed that a conservative stance opposing

abortion could, because of a "moderate" political position like abortion reduction, could contribute to social justice. Strongly implied in his statement is a critique of past political political argument, typified in the rhetoric of the Religious Right, reflective of social conservatism. Such comments by Wallis and the RLC suggest to their liberal critics that RLC commitment to "keeping the debate open" regarding abortion is disingenuous. To this effect, Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women remarked:

> With all due respect to Jim Wallis and his very good work to end poverty…I don't want a woman's moral decisions to be determined by someone else's religion, because while the Bible does have 3,000 passages about poor people, it says not one word about abortion. (2005, paras. 20-21)

Gandy's remarks not only critique the validity of biblical reading practices forming a foundation for moral politics, but directly attempts to delegitimize Wallis' and the RLC's position of abortion reduction as part of their general common ground appeal.

Like conservative evangelicals, liberals—especially feminists—refuse to cede any ground on an issue as politically salient as abortion. The very notion of "common ground" is offensive to both groups as it seemingly delegitimizes the issue itself by framing it as a "practical" problem, as one best addressed by and through pragmatic maneuvers of compromise. For some liberal feminists the RLC defense of "common ground" precludes any critique against its legitimacy. Writing for *The American Prospect*, Posner (2008) notes that Wallis assumes that the common ground on the abortion issue is essentially anti-abortion. She observes, "Wallis frequently accuses

those of not agreeing with his anti-abortion 'common ground' of restoking the 'culture wars,' but there are other ideas of where the common ground lies"(para. 11).

Liberals often quibble with the RLC anti-abortion position as grounded in biblical faith. For example, Adele Stan, also of *The American Prospect*, notes of abortion and the progressive evangelical idea of common ground, that "there can never be common ground between people who want to outlaw abortion based on a 20th-century theological development" (2007, para. 14). Stan's comment insinuates that religious voters have no handy biblical reference guiding them to logically vote against choice. That is, evangelicals can claim a biblical mandate on the issue of poverty, but cannot claim the same for abortion. She adds, "Jesus had nothing to say about abortion, despite its prevalence in the Roman empire, and the Jewish law by which Jesus lived did not regard the fetus to be a person" (para. 14). Stan implies that Wallis and the RLC are guilty of violating their own stated code to not present an argument as religiously-formed and therefore inscrutable. That is, Stan appears to try to rescue a pro-choice perspective for religious voters by pointing to the absence of biblical evidence in opposition to the practice of abortion.

Stan's critique points to the anti-choice position of all evangelicals as a historical, and not biblical development. This assumption, for her, suggests that the evangelical opposition to abortion is grounded more in patriarchy than in biblical literalism. She explains:

> But here's where I get queasy with the Jim Wallis model of the 'religious left.' For him it's all about poverty, but not about justice for women. Because if you really believe in equal justice for women, then you have to concede that abortion

> must remain a woman's option. A fetus is not a person. No religious tradition, before the onset of women's emancipation, asserted it was. (para. 15)

For Stan, all evangelicals are caught up in a historical, culturally-specific tradition of male leadership that casts a blind eye toward injustices toward women. To this point Frances Kissling, writing for *The Nation*, notes that "part of the problem is that women are virtually absent from the leadership ranks of progressive religious movements" (2009, para. 2). For Kissling male religious leaders only understand the issues of women in the abstract, and fail to understand the "role that women and sex play in the modern world" (para. 2).

For liberals, part of the problem is that the anti-feminist leanings of religious conservatives are adopted by progressive religious groups. Kissling notes:

> Social conservatives have built their movement on hostility to women and women's rights; they have brilliantly played on the fear that both men and women feel in the face of the demand that they be equal partner in faith and family. Many progressive religionists think they can build a movement of people of faith that ignores those issues. (para. 2)

Kissling hypothesizes that male religious leaders avoid issues like abortion and gay marriage because they are excluded from these spaces. As a result, Wallis ("the most visible antiabortion cleric in the progressive movement") and other powerful male religious leaders neglect to see how legal abortion and legalized gay marriage are linked to social justice (Kissling, 2004). Posner (2009a) reminds her readers of this fact, noting that of the five all male pastors to whom Obama seeks counsel, four, including Wallis, are "social conservatives" who oppose abortion. Poor faith leadership exemplified by

Wallis and others, according to Kissling, “can sink the opportunity of poor women for a decent life” (2009, para. 10)

Wallis’ current involvement in the health care reform debate upsets many liberals because they believe he is stealthily undermining a woman’s right to choose in order to build broader support among pro-life conservatives and moderates. To stress an earlier assertion: there is nothing pragmatic about abortion for both liberals and conservative evangelicals. Kissling (2009) laments that Wallis puts pro-choice organizations in a tough spot when he insists upon abortion reduction in the health care reform bill because “no pro-choice organization wants to bear the responsibility for healthcare reform failing. And so, tacitly, pro-choice leaders have basically accepted [abortion] restrictions” (para. 2). Kissling suggests that religious leaders are supposed to challenge presidents instead of working for them. Again, this speaks to the popular lament among liberals that reproductive rights are not for leveraging. She asks, “How long the mainline pro-choice faith community will allow Wallis and a few small groups of progressive Catholics to use healthcare reform to push for further restrictions remains on abortion remains to be seen” (para. 7).

Calling Wallis a "sanctimonious” and “pompous, condescending man” actively pursuing an “anti-choice cause” as well as an “evangelist the media love” causing Democrats to “kow-tow before him,” Stan notes in her *Mother Jones* article that Wallis is attempting to use the opportunity of health care reform to reduce abortion rights. Stan alleges that Wallis is doing so by defending a provision prohibiting the use of federal funds to pay for abortions in any potential public health option. Stan laments that “you won’t hear rhetoric about no federal funding for abortion coming from mainline

Protestant denominations" (2009, para. 6). By using politically moderate mainline Protestants as an example, Stan's critiques Wallis and the RLC model of common ground as extremist and even anti-progressive. To this point Stan notes that Democrats believe that their party's "salvation is bound in right-win religion" (para. 9). Both Kissling and Stan specifically reference mainline Protestants as the ideal exemplar of the religious liberalism. It is apparent that many liberals writing in some of the more popular liberal magazines reject the prospects of RLC progressive evangelicalism.

The liberal critics of the RLC featured in this chapter seem to admit the possibility of a religious left even as they lament their public absence on pivotal issues like health care reform. Posner (2009b) even asks:

> Sojourners can call itself whatever it wants, but political positioning *does* matter. If Sojourners defines the religious left, what does that make religious activists agitating for more structural change to the economic system and for sexual-justice issues—some fringe freak show that fails to fit within the acceptable bounds of the Obama administration's outreach? (sec. 2, para. 6, emphasis original)

For Posner and other liberals, the religious left, defined by Wallis, the RLC, and their symbolic proximity to President Obama, leans too far to the right. Other liberal commentators, like Elizabeth Castelli writing for slate.com, note that Wallis and the RLC have problems not only on the level of political position, but also at the point of claiming moral authority through democratic means. Put differently, though the RLC claim that religious arguments need to be "disciplined by democracy," they nonetheless assert the primacy of religious faith as a foundation for those arguments. Under such a

formulation only the form of the argument changes, never the content. Castelli (2005) cites Wallis assertion that "the real question is not *whether* religious faith should influence a society and its politics, but *how*," noting that "religious faith is no generic category here; it means biblical religion" (para. 8, emphasis original).

Castelli underscores the concerns raised by other liberals: namely, that religious liberalism in politics is not a broad, ecumenical social movement grounded in many faiths and supportive of a liberal agenda; rather, the hegemonic formation of the religious left is presently an evangelical phenomenon, and is thereby limited by interested readings of biblical scripture that neglect to address the injustices perpetuated against women and gay and lesbians. Castelli repeats the concerns of all the liberal critics featured in this chapter when she stresses the importance of "gender justice" as that which must be included in any "overarching vision of social justice and transformation" (para. 14). Such critiques overwhelmingly reject the pragmatic framing of the issue of abortion. Though the RLC contend that anti-poverty measures will protect women, giving them more options than just abortion, their pragmatic, common ground appeals nevertheless neglect to fully appreciate just how important the issue is to liberals and conservative and moderate evangelicals alike.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to overstate the near impossibility of reconciling and translating evangelical and liberal cultures into a coherent political-religious expression as the RLC attempts to do. While the prospects and possibilities of such a project of translation are intriguing, it remains quite clear that at least for a select group of evangelical and liberal/feminist critics the RLC needs to adapt a different rhetorical strategy. Of course

this assumption is predicated on a desire to appeal to such groups. While the RLC make frequent claims about attracting as broad a moral coalition as possible, they never explicitly target conservative evangelicals (especially those still involved with whatever remains of the Religious Right), neither do they make an impassioned effort to speak to secular liberals.

Many of the critics in this chapter observe that democratic forms of argumentation limit the overall effectiveness of argument that claims to be prophetic. That is, because the RLC are seemingly pragmatic on certain issues and prophetic on others, they are not really prophetic about anything. Prophetic argument is, for these defenders of evangelical orthodoxy, an all-or-none proposition. The RLC never proclaim to defend evangelical orthodoxy, though they acknowledge that they share the same theological precepts of all evangelicals. By choosing the red letters of Jesus himself, the RLC simultaneously nod toward and away from orthodoxy—acknowledging the "inspired" nature of the entire Bible, but defending evangelical practice based upon their emphasis upon and understanding of Jesus. The RLC hint that because the Old and New Testaments contradict each other, orthodox faith and coherent political practice are essentially irreconcilable. This move on the part of the RLC is strategic for it aligns their principles of faith, articulated by the four Gospel accounts of Jesus, with political action that is in harmony with those very same principles. This is an overtly political move, reliant upon the notion articulated in my project that reading practices and rhetorical advocacy are intertwined and mutually-reinforcing.

Rhetorical critics should ask themselves if the RLC liberal democratic moral frame both enables and constrains faith-based discourse. For example, Kristy Maddux

wonders if such a frame "delegitimizes religious values as argumentative grounds" (2008, p. 135). Citing Habermas, she notes that "psychological impossibility of asking religious citizens to divorce their faith-based value structures from their participation in political discourse" (p. 135). Maddux seems to assume that liberal democratic values and religious discourse, particularly Christian discourse, are incommensurate. The history of civil religion in the United States points to the marriage, at least in theory, between Christian principles and civic engagement. I have established that the RLC strategically employ the liberal democratic moral frame when trying to posit a moderate "centrist-like" position. In these cases they do not prophetically call upon inviolable principles. To be sure the RLC offer their prophetic stand against poverty through the same frame, as is evident in their attempts to propose bipartisan solutions to poverty. But in these instances they prophetically defend the principles behind their advocacy, even as they acknowledge the virtue of finding common ground.

Maddux acknowledges that Wallis' claims speak to the present juncture, but questions its relevance in the long-term. For example, she questions why Wallis never questions the institutional, nondiscursive forces that give rise to the entrenched political interests of both Democrats and Republicans. Her critique suggests that Wallis and the RLC are hamstrung by the trope of reconciliation that is at once naïve and "narrowly" suited to the present moment if only because "his assumption that his platform will gain political credence if only enough people buy it, coupled with his inability to challenge the structures that keep the current parties in place, leaves the realization of Wallis' program doubtful (p. 138). Maddux's critique speaks to the general critique of the RLC articulated in this chapter. However, it is noteworthy that she acknowledges the need for

a religious model of public engagement, critiques religious authors on the left and right for failing to effectively do so, yet offers no model herself. I contend that rhetorical scholars find in the RLC model a moral frame that makes rhetorical use of both democratic and religious principles. The RLC model reveals strategies, grounded in hermeneutic and rhetorical traditions, for producing discourse reflecting both religious and democratic principles. I am far more interested in what their particular case might reveal about mixing secular and religious principles than I am with theorizing a general model of religious political engagement. That is because interpretive persuasion specifically, and rhetorical pragmatism in general, are concerned foremost with a theory of the case. In this formulation particular cases are far more illuminating than ahistorical, foundationalist theorizing.

In the case made against the RLC in this chapter, critics have alleged that the RLC are insufficiently evangelical because they neglect to take a traditionally prophetic stand on issues of personal morality. Wallis' assertion that dialogue is prophetic is intriguing in its own right, but is best understood as an attempt to appear to be sufficiently prophetic across all moral issues, personal and social. His answer belies the RLC strategy to simultaneously address pragmatic solutions to these "problems" such as abortion reduction and civil unions instead of marriage, while deflecting attention toward issues on which they desire to be "meaningfully uncivil" and prophetic, i.e. poverty reduction. The RLC self-consciously claim the evangelical label, but one wonders how much utility it actually provides.

The latest (2009) Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey suggests strongly that more people in the United States are becoming unaffiliated with a particular religious

tradition and the United States is becoming a minority Protestant country. Evangelicals only account for 26.3% of the population, for example. The increasing diversity and fragmentation of religious life in the United States suggests that grounding appeals in evangelical language may offer ever-diminishing returns. The majority of RLC texts pay scant attention to explaining evangelical theology. Perhaps some of the critics are right in assuming the RLC better articulate "biblical" principles instead of "evangelical ones," and perhaps some of the RLC critics are equally correct in noting that the RLC more accurately occupy the general political center instead of the evangelical one, but it is worth noting that these criticisms may speak more to the success of the RLC's rhetorical advocacy than its failures.

# Chapter Six
# Conclusion

In the months leading up to the 2004 presidential election, PBS produced a documentary on the role evangelicals played in the 2000 election of President Bush. Titled "The Jesus Factor," the documentary sought to explain evangelical voting behavior. At one point the documentary's narrator proclaimed, "To evangelicals, it is not their Christian denomination that connects them but a series of beliefs" (Aronson, 2004, para. 35). For Bush, it was more than just speaking the language of evangelical belief, but rather his use of a particular evangelical style of speaking that helped him resonate with voters. In the 1999 Republican primaries Bush's famously responded that Christ was his favorite philosopher because "he changed my heart" (para. 116). In the same documentary E.J Dionne paraphrased Bush's elaboration on his famous answer as '"If you haven't had this experience, you don't know what it is'...it's those moments when Bush speaks like that that evangelicals know in their heart that he's one of them" (quoted in Aronson, para. 121). For Dionne Bush appealed to conservative evangelicals by speaking a particular style of evangelical talk resonant with bedrock assumptions about a distinct feature of evangelicalism—the need for a redeemed, transformed heart.

While the founding assumptions of evangelicalism have not changed since the Democratic takeover of Congress in 2006, and with the election of Barack Obama in 2008, its scope has broadened in that time to include, as I have noted in previous chapters, concern for the environment and for social justice. Some believe that a fundamental change in evangelical leadership has given rise to challenges to conservative evangelicalism posed by centrist and liberal evangelical groups like the

RLC. Fitzgerald (2008) observes that in 2004 “leaders on the religious right were the only white evangelicals whose voices were heard in the public arena” (p. 28). Fitzgerald’s point is that the marketplace of evangelical ideas is so much larger now that conservative evangelical activists are no longer the only leaders speaking publicly. While RLC members like Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo and Brian McClaren have long fronted individual organizations critiquing the Religious Right, these groups were largely on the margins of received public opinion about evangelicals. It was not until President Bush’s highly unpopular second term before they, collectively as the RLC, began to be heard and responded to in the public arena. The RLC are, however, one of many evangelical organizations attempting to supplant the potentially vulnerable Religious Right. Fitzgerald notes that there is a broad movement afoot of liberal and moderate evangelicals ready to advance a broader evangelical agenda. This movement, she explains:

> has no charismatic leader, no institutional center, and no specific goals. It doesn’t even have a name. But it is nonetheless posing the first major challenge to the religious right in a quarter of a century. (p. 28)

Fitzgerald’s acknowledgment of the breadth of the “new” evangelical movement coupled with the need to come to terms with lingering questions about the role the RLC presently and potentially play in that movement forms the focus of my concluding remarks in this dissertation. Certain events like the resignation of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) vice president Richard Cizik and the election of Barack Obama, as well as the tendencies of younger evangelicals may prove to be bellwethers for the future of an evangelical movement not dominated by conservatives.

To that effect I first discuss the shift in conservative evangelical leadership, by discussing the impacts of the resignation of Richard Cizik, the election of President Obama, and the potential role of young evangelicals as they relate to the RLC, before concluding with some comments on evangelical style.

## Changing of the Guard

The death of conservative evangelical lions Jerry Falwell and James Kennedy, as well as James Dobson's stepping down as head of Focus on the Family indicates to some a "graying" of the Religious Right (Jones, 2008a). Jones explains that in endorsing Republican candidates Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani, respectively, and by spurning evangelical candidate Mike Huckabee, James Dobson and Pat Robertson damaged their credibility with evangelicals by "prioritizing power over principle" (para. 2). When Rick Warren hosted then-Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain at his faith forum, he effectively signaled to evangelicals a "new style of evangelical leadership…which is not tied to a single party and [one] has broadened its social agenda beyond that of the religious right" (Lampman, 2008b, para. 2). Michael Lindsay, the *de rigueur* sociologist of American evangelicalism, observed of the event, "This is absolutely a changing of the guard, and it suggests that the new guard of evangelical movement is able to generate the attention and focus of both parties" (quoted in Lampman, para. 4).

Perhaps the most significant watershed event signaling the proverbial changing of the guard was the forced resignation of conservative mainstay Richard Cizik. In December 2008, Richard Cizik, vice president for governmental affairs of the NAE, the largest organization of evangelicals, resigned his post after he commented that he was

"shifting" his opinion to support civil unions. According to *Christianity Today*, the previous year more than two dozen evangelical leaders, including conservative titans James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, tried to force out Cizik because of his '"relentless campaign' on global warming (Pulliam, 2008, para. 3). With his passionate defense of "creation care," Cizik came under fire from older evangelical leaders for diverting attention away from "their" issues like abortion, stem cell research, and gay marriage and toward global warming and environmentalism (Pilkington, 2008). Cizik is an important figure because he served as the face of the conservative evangelicals who overwhelmingly comprise the NAE. *Time* magazine in 2008 declared Cizik one of the top 100 most influential people in the world, in part because of his efforts to expand the scope of the NAE. Cizik's ouster is "one more sign of the struggle for the soul of an evolving American evangelicalism," a struggle that should cause current evangelical leaders to "rethink their certainty about what constitutes 'evangelical values'" (Jones, 2008b, para. 1).

Because evangelicals are not "monolithic" it behooves scholars to assess whether Cizik's position represent broad evangelical views. Jones asserts that, contrary to the accusations of conservative evangelicals, Cizik's views fall in line with the evangelical mainstream. Noting that Cizik's view on civil unions is more in line with the views of younger evangelicals, Johnson observes:

> The old guard can continue to assert loudly that the authentic evangelical way excludes rights for gay and lesbian people, but the evidence is mounting that they may increasingly find themselves treading that well-worn path alone. (para. 17)

Johnson's comment is not an isolated one. Fitzgerald (2007) reports that "centrist" evangelicals, who are "no more conservative than Americans generally except on abortion and gay rights" compose half of all evangelicals and clearly do not "see eye to eye with the other half" (para. 22). Fitzgerald observes that these "centrist" evangelicals, broadly defined, are being heard and cites both Wallis and Greg Boyd as examples of centrist leaders. Citing Fitzgerald's findings, Jones (2008a) adds that he has discovered in his polling data a "one-fifth, one-third, one-half formula" that explains how on a broad range of social issues, 20% of evangelicals are progressive, 33% are moderate and the remaining roughly 50% are conservative. Jones does not explain how he defines "progressive" or "moderate," yet his research confirms Fitzgerald's findings. Tellingly, Jones adds that the cleavage between conservative evangelicals and all others reveals itself in stark differences in both "substance and tone" (para. 6).

Building on the evidence of the evangelical divide, Lindsay (2008a) urges scholars to stop looking at voting issues and behaviors as the primary marker of evangelical identity and difference. Appearing on a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life panel, Lindsay remarked that his research has led him to conclude that "deep divisions in this movement are not between the political left and right, nor between young and old, but between 'cosmopolitan' and 'populist' evangelicals" (para. 1). For Lindsay populist evangelicals are traditional evangelicals, culture warriors set apart from the secular world, convinced of their minority status, and ready to "take the country back for their faith." By contrast, cosmopolitan evangelicals "are more interested in their faith being seen as authentic, reasonable, and winsome" and that

"legitimacy is actually more important to them than taking back the country" (para. 22). Lindsay's argument is significant because he suggests that more and more evangelicals are identifying with a cosmopolitan viewpoint. The RLC exemplify this type of cosmopolitan evangelical and its preoccupation with legitimacy through their constant appeal to the disciplining effects of democracy and on social movements originating outside politics.

The emergence of new evangelical leadership in relatively moderate figures like Rick Warren suggests a new model of and for public engagement. If Lindsay is correct, and that cosmopolitan evangelicals, very broadly defined, represent the new public face of evangelicals as a whole, it is worth noting what effect, if any, this will have on progressive politics and progressive/liberal evangelical groups like the RLC. I established in the previous chapter that Rick Warren is, to many evangelicals, the new Billy Graham. Though not mentioned specifically by Lindsay as such, Warren fits the general definition of a cosmopolitan evangelical because he is, according to Kurt Fredrickson of Fuller Theological Seminary, "representative of Evangelicals who now see that the gospel message is more than just getting people into heaven; it's about how we use our spiritual resources to make this world a better place" (quoted in Lampman, 2008b, para. 11).

In spite of the popularity of Warren, Lindsay (2008a) believes that Mike Huckabee is actually the best embodiment of a cosmopolitan evangelical poised to achieve power because of his ability to appeal to both populist and cosmopolitan evangelicals. Because Lindsay's definition of cosmopolitan evangelicals is so vague, it is difficult to come to terms with his example of Huckabee, who, by all accounts, is

more conservative than Rick Warren. Nonetheless, Lindsay warns that the expansion of the evangelical social agenda does not signal a party realignment. He observes, "But remember this: the Focus on the Family mailing list is 10 times the size of the Sojourner's mailing list. It's still a difference of size and scope" (para. 30).

Scholars encounter in Fitzgerald and Jones' analyses a largely different story than what they find in Lindsay's. That is, both Fitzgerald and Jones suggest that the vacuum of conservative leadership, as well as the broadening of the agenda, makes room for groups like the RLC to fight for influence. Lindsay's (2008a) analysis, on the other hand, strongly suggests that because evangelicalism will never alter its position on abortion, even though it may on civil unions, it is likely to predominantly vote Republican. In order to get a better sense of actual evangelical voting behavior, it is prudent to look to the effect of Barack Obama's appeal to evangelical voters to gauge the success progressive candidates and religious groups like the RLC are likely to have in mustering evangelical votes.

## White Evangelicals and the Obama Effect

> For too long, explains *Newsweek's* Lisa Miller (2008):
>
> White evangelicals have been the religion-and-politics story in this country. Their power, their rhetoric, their numbers, their theology—all have been so dominant that many of us in the media had forgotten that religious faith could be expressed any other way. (para. 1)

Miller explains that one of the most surprising exit polls revealed that Obama secured 44 percent of the vote of Americans who go to religious services more than once a week (up 9 points from John Kerry's 2004 total). Tellingly, though, only 26 percent of white

evangelicals voted for Obama, up only three percent from Kerry's 2004 total. This last number is particularly devastating for Wallis and the RLC, despite estimates from them that "Obama's numbers in this particular precinct would be much, much higher" (para. 4). Miller speculates that the overall religious vote for Obama "did not reflect a massive shift in ideology and priorities among evangelicals, but rather muscle-flexing by a coalition of others of faith" (para. 6). She builds on this explanation by noting that Bush appealed to religious voters with a simple evangelical narrative about sin and redemption, about compassion, whereas Obama appealed to religious voters by emphasizing the U.S.'s role in the world and about being taken seriously by others—points resonant with Lindsay's definition of a cosmopolitan-style evangelical.

Not all agree with Miller's grim assessment about white evangelicals. The *New York Times* reported that the Obama campaign targeted moderates, avoiding conservatives who had been voting for Republicans for a generation. Laurie Goodstein notes that the Obama campaign "visited about 10 Christian colleges in swing states" and organized more than 900 "American values house parties" where Obama supporters spoke to members of their church about the Democrat (2008, para. 9). The results, notes Goodstein, were "generational" as Obama "doubled his support among young white evangelicals (those 18 to 29) compared with Mr. Kerry" (para. 10). Goodstein reports that he enjoyed almost as much of an increase with white evangelicals 30 to 44. With these statistics are compelling, they do not, in the form presented by Goodstein, indicate just how many votes were gained. David Gushee, cited in the previous chapter for his work on evangelical centrism, directly refutes Lindsay's assertion downplaying a generational schism. Gushee asserts that "there is definitely a generational division"

because younger evangelicals are attracted to a broader social agenda (quoted in Goodstein, 2008, para. 11). Gushee's point speaks to those in the NAE who tried to oust Richard Cizik for his passionate involvement with creation care. Those like James Dobson believed that conservative evangelicalism would be distracted by and diluted with secondary political issues appealing primarily to the next generation of evangelicals (Jones, 2008b).

The election of Barack Obama, according to Lindsay (2008b), begs the question of who now speaks for the majority of evangelicals? Lindsay poses the question—"Will the Obama presidency give credence to left-leaning evangelical leaders like Jim Wallis?"—and then offers a hedged answer that "personal interaction with the president raises the stock of an evangelical leader" (para. 2). While Wallis' profile has been raised as a result of his ongoing work with Obama, it is doubtful whether this effectively makes him one who speaks for the majority of evangelicals. After all, notes Lindsay, the Obama presidency resulted in the emergence of a "new cohort of public figures" all of whom claim to represent the mainstream of American evangelicalism (para. 9). While some of these religious leaders, like Wallis, found appointments in the administration, none were chosen for high office. Much the same could be said for Tony Campolo and his service to the Clinton administration. Regardless, it bears noting that there is a sense in which Obama's relationship to various political organizations and leaders is now clearly secondary to the policies he has advanced. Obama's trend toward policy has, perhaps, left little room for the kinds of symbolic messages the he sometimes had in his campaign and that resonated with some evangelicals.

The influence Wallis and other progressive evangelicals have had and will continue to have is largely symbolic. Lindsay adds that the evangelical left lacks the organization and discipline of the evangelical right in rallying members around a cause. He notes:

> The only person [on the evangelical left] who seems to have benefited from his proximity to power is Jim Wallis. Knowledgeable sources I have spoken with have suggested that Wallis is perceived by many political leaders on the left in much the same way that James Dobson is perceived on the right. They both can mobilize certain groups to action such that it's important to be on their good sides. But they are not seen as close advisors or as spiritual counselors. One can be a modern-day prophet or sorts or a priest to those in power, but not both. (Fourth response sec., para 2)

Lindsay's assertion is compelling for two reasons: First, it intimates that in order for a religious leader to directly influence the president, it is necessary to be perceived as relatively moderate—much like Billy Graham, and Rick Warren, who, as I indicated in the previous chapter, is viewed by many as America's First Pastor. By extension, this also means that due to their perceived political extremism, Wallis and Dobson, respectively, might be a liability to a given president if they were to hold such a title. Second, if Lindsay is correct, enacting the role of "modern-day prophet" potentially allows Wallis to wield more general political influence in the mobilization of people behind certain causes. In my estimation Wallis assiduously establishes through his discourse about the need for a non-partisan "prophetic" politics, a persona that is far more prophet than spiritual advisor.

In spite of the greater visibility of progressive evangelical leaders like Wallis and his affiliated organizations, like the RLC, Obama's election does not spell the end of conservative evangelical influence. Lindsay unwittingly draws upon Kenneth Burke's theory of identification when he asserts that the Religious Right "don't need a 'god' to succeed, but they do need a devil. Nothing builds allegiances among a coalition like a common enemy" (para. 5). Because opposition to abortion remains central to almost all evangelicals, it serves as the figurative grist for the mill, an antagonism that will forever keep evangelicals from fully committing to the Democratic Party. Some journalists argue that Democrats should not waste their time trying to court evangelicals by referencing that 73 percent of evangelicals voted for McCain in 2008, which is down slightly from the 79 percent of evangelicals who voted for Bush in 2004 (Rossmeier, 2009). Rossmeier asserts that geography isolates the most religious from the least, with the former voting Republican and the latter Democrat. This assertion, however, seems a bit cavalier, especially when considering that Obama improved his standing by ten points with evangelicals in Colorado, a state home to the "capitol of evangelical America, Colorado Springs" (Goodstein, 2008). The spectacular failure of George W. Bush's second term expressed in public opinion polls coupled with Barack Obama's eloquence and masterful campaigning set the context for the 2008 presidential election. Scholars can debate the potential "Obama effect" on young evangelicals as this demographic voted, along with the rest the United States in the same historical context. Obama's unique appeal aside, the openness of younger evangelicals to certain progressive policies that resonate with a broadened evangelical social agenda should not be ignored.

## What about Younger Evangelicals?

A *Newsweek* report in January of 2009 confirmed that there exists a "yawning" evangelical generation gap. In that report Dokoupil and Miller (2009) observe that the Joshua Generation—essentially young white evangelical Christians—are a difficult group about which to predict voting behavior. For example, while they confirm that young evangelicals did double their support for Obama versus John Kerry, that still only amounts to a third of all young evangelicals. "A third," notes the authors, "is hardly a majority" (para. 6). The generational disagreements are less issue-specific and more about "how best to express Christian values in a fast-changing world" (para. 6). In essence, the disagreement is about which issues to prioritize. Younger evangelicals, like their forebears, adamantly oppose abortion, but are more likely to consider broader social issues as main points of concern. Dokoupil and Miller reference a young evangelical who asserts, "It's because I'm pro-life that I have to talk about poverty, clean water, AIDS, the environment" (para. 11).

As I have indicated here younger evangelicals tend to approve a broadened social agenda beyond abortion, gay marriage, and stem cell research. The case of Richard Cizik reveals that, in some cases, they are far more enthusiastic about global warming and environmentalism than their older counterparts. What Dokoupil and Miller note, however, is that younger evangelicals are particularly different from older evangelicals on the issue of gay marriage. A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life revealed that 26 percent of white evangelicals ages 18 to 29 support gay marriage, compared with 9 percent of white evangelicals older than 30 (para. 9). More so than their parents, younger evangelicals know someone who is gay and are accordingly far

more likely to be flexible on conservative notions of traditional marriage (Chamberlain, 2008). This particular insight should be of interest to groups like the RLC, who publicly state their commitment to dialogue on the issue while promoting civil unions. The RLC's discourse on the issue is likely to resonate with younger evangelicals who are already predisposed to be concerned with social and global issues.

Young evangelicals have a similar mix of liberal and conservative leanings as do the RLC, and for this reason, they make an ideal audience for RLC rhetoric. Chamberlain (2008) argues that because there are more young evangelicals assuming moderate political positions, "there are more moderates being mobilized to vote" (para. 27). Luckily for the RLC, they have the previously cited Shane Claiborne, who is viewed as something of a celebrity among young evangelicals. According to Chamberlain:

> Claiborne's hip appearance, from his dreadlocks to his hemp hoodie, is part of package that has attracted many young evangelicals who seek more active congruity between what they believe and how they behave. (para. 30)

Claiborne, a self-described "radical Christian social activist," practices communal living (in an "intentional religious community") so as to "embody a new economy and politics…by making our own stuff from the scraps of empire" (Claiborne and Haw, 2008, p. 258). Claiborne attracts large crowds at his many speaking engagements, and in 2008 even toured the country in a vegetable oil-run school bus promoting the idea, taken from his book, about voting the values of Jesus for President (Chamberlain, 2008, para. 29). Chamberlain even goes so far as to claim that Claiborne "has done more to

bring dialog about gay issues to young evangelicals" than any other young evangelical person or organization (para. 29).

While Claiborne certainly embodies an ethos that is attractive to some young evangelicals, his modus operandi suggests that his political achievements, strictly speaking, may be modest. Chamberlain notes that Claiborne calls for individuals to form intentional religious communities to live the change they seek, rather than mobilizing to form large pressure groups (para. 32). This move certainly limits the pressure a well-organized social movement could leverage on elected officials. The net impact of Claiborne's style of advocacy on young evangelicals will be determined, in large part, on his visibility. Conservative organizations, as I have argued, generally have more resources at their disposal to craft a wider and more visible message, thus potentially limiting the effect of grassroots efforts like Claiborne's.

## Evangelicalism as Cultural Style

As I have discussed in this concluding chapter, there are many versions of American evangelicalism, each of which is claimed by an interested party or organization to speak for the whole. As a result, it is probably best to speak of these as evangelicalisms, as competing cultural expressions. A *Christianity Today* editorial remarked that the entire evangelical movement is an "intellectual construct" attempting to "tie a number of individuals and organizations together under one socio-theological banner" (Galli, 2009, para. 9). The editorial further asserts:

> This doesn't mean there aren't significant commonalities among these people, or that these people don't identify themselves as such. It just means that we might

> not want to equate the intellectual construct with the complex dynamic at play on the ground. (para. 9)

The editorial suggests that classificatory schemes used by academics and the media alike fail to fully grasp why groups self-identify with evangelicalism and what that unique identity may entail in terms of voting behavior. In this regard evangelicalism as a totality is likely to be over-determined

Noted sociologist Rhys Williams (2008) observes that the evangelical signifier is so broad that it neglects to account for the "phenomenology and self-understanding" of evangelicals themselves (para. 7). In chapter five I noted how certain critics of the RLC accused them of not being sufficiently evangelical. Such accusations work at the level of shared assumptions about what composes an evangelical. The RLC, in the estimation of some, are pseudo-evangelicals because certain practices stand in violation to an unstated norm of conservative evangelical identity (Fitzgerald, 2007). Williams point here is that in order to better understand the cultural and rhetorical practices of the RLC and how these practices speak to different and differing evangelical cultural practices is to appreciate how evangelical talk works. Citing James Smith, Williams (2008) notes that "evangelical is an identity forged at a level more visceral than doctrinal" (para. 10). A certain "emotive identity alignment" takes place when evangelicals talk to one another. This connection, according to Williams, is established:

> through a version of 'it takes one to know one.' When people feel a connection—particularly people for whom the subjective experience of religion is highly emotional and highly legitimate—it is real for them. (para. 14)

This is important for the RLC as they attempt to reach moderate evangelicals accustomed to voting Republican, and in particular as they try to compel young evangelicals, for whom no voting pattern is set, to share their liberal/progressive vision of political engagement. Williams explains that we find the common in a cultural style, that we recognize only when we encounter it.

The notion of cultural style helps to explain why many evangelicals voted for George Bush, even if it was not in their economic self-interest to do so. For these voters, Bush was able to use authentic cultural signifiers that held a deep and abiding importance for evangelicals. In her response to Williams, Edgell rightly notes that the evangelical label "signals more than just religious content—it connotes a particular cultural style as well as a set of beliefs about government, community, and the individual" (quoted in Williams, 2008, "Responses" sec., para. 4). This insight helps to explain why Shane Claiborne is such a popular figure among young evangelicals—he not only looks the part, but enacts the gospel message to spread the good news in his daily practices. Claiborne employs an authentic cultural style that, coupled with his lifestyle of communal living and community engagement, offers young evangelicals to identify with him and his brand of evangelical message.

Cultural styles may be used to distinguish between different types of evangelical communities, but the cultures created are less important for this study than the use of texts to warrant one set of beliefs over another. The evangelical cultural style the RLC employ cuts both ways. As I discussed in chapter five, the RLC are strategically mired in the issues of gay marriage generally, and abortion specifically. While evangelical attitudes about civil unions are likely to change, views on abortion are not (Lindsay,

2008a). The RLC will face the constraint of abortion in two significant ways related to source credibility: either they are not taken seriously by some moderate and most conservative evangelicals because of their de-prioritization of the issue, or they are not taken seriously by secular progressives because of their being evangelical, and, almost by definition, opposed to abortion. The RLC are constrained by a general evangelical cultural style for the reasons above, but also on the level of coalition-building. I have established in this dissertation that the RLC publicly state their desire to build a large coalition of citizens—both religious and not—committed to social justice for religious and moral reasons. The broader and more heterogeneous the coalition, the less likely an evangelically-specific cultural style will motivate and mobilize members on a visceral level. In all likelihood the group to whom a RLC-specific evangelical cultural style is most likely to appeal is young evangelicals.

One potential problem for the RLC is that they employ multiple cultural styles to reach as broad an audience as possible. While this goal on its face is noble, it also constrains and confuses the overall RLC message. The RLC are committed to using both a pluralistic, democratic cultural style that appeals to inclusion, dialogue, and difference. They are also committed to using an evangelical cultural style that, as I have attempted to show, is sometimes at cross-purposes with their liberal democratic style. In the previous chapter I attempted to explain the confusion many in the media have about the "authenticity" of the RLC's message. I would posit that many of the RLC's readers lack the cultural literacy necessary, or even simply the desire, to decode and engage both styles simultaneously. It begs the question: Can an evangelical cultural style and a pluralist democratic style speak to one another? If so, how well do they speak to one

another? If Gushee (2008) is correct that the coveted evangelical center, embodied in pro-life, anti-gay marriage, pro-social justice figures like Rick Warren, is the future of evangelicalism, then the RLC, regardless of the integrity of their evangelical credentials, is likely to not be an influential player. In spite of the repeatedly expressed desire to occupy the "moral center," the RLC will likely find themselves on the liberal margins of evangelicalism. Their stated commitment to dialogue on the "non-negotiable" issues of abortion and, at least for the moment gay marriage, will result in their lacking the cultural capital necessary to wield much influence on conservative and many moderate evangelicals.

## Implications and Future Directions

As a critical mode of inquiry, the method of interpretive persuasion reveals several compelling limits to the discursive field from which the RLC craft their rhetorical appeals. That is, the style of post-partisan discourse crafted by the RLC only gains moderate ground in a political context sutured together by highly partisan discourses. It is the RLC's attempt to craft a post-partisan rhetorical style that is perhaps most worthy of critical attention. This fragmented style of discourse attempting to make intelligible a notion such as "conservative radicalism" accomplishes three key goals. First, the RLC provide a praiseworthy model of political discourse that is, at its best, invitational and grounded in a democratic norm of argumentation whose burden of proof necessitates addressing a plural and diverse audience.

In addition, the RLC's rhetoric creates an alternative space for religious argument in political discourse. A more progressive/liberal religious space offers up an alternative model of deliberation competing with the conservative religious argument

long-dominant in US political discourse. Finally, the example of the RLC provides a model of political discourse that allows citizens to articulate fragmented political positions informed by religious belief. The example of Williams Jennings Bryan discussed earlier in this project serves as a kind of touchstone to this idea. Rhetoric, like that produced by the RLC, permits religious argument to make claims in the public sphere that do not properly meet rigid ideological criteria of "left" or "right." Such rhetoric fragments the ideology grounding religious political positions, and evangelical ones in particular, and authorizes religious citizens to articulate a moral critique that might be simultaneously conservative in some respects, and liberal in others. The biconceptuality of such a moral frame as "conservative radicalism" reveals, as I have argued earlier, that citizens leverage critiques informed by religious belief from multiple points of emphasis and ideological origin. The rhetoric of the RLC demands that rhetorical scholars thicken their understanding of and appreciation for these variegated dimensions of religious political argument.

Evangelical and democratic/liberal cultural styles are incommensurable, but that does not mean that projects of translation coupling the two are doom to fail. There is a sense in which the RLC are a victim of their own cultural histories of liberal Protestantism and conservative evangelicalism. Future research should be done detailing these particular histories, embedding discourse communities like the RLC in their cultural and rhetorical histories in order to better understand the cultural rhetoric produced by such groups. Such studies fall in line with the work done by Steven Mailloux and others working with "interpretive persuasion." Scholars of religion and politics as well as rhetorical critics benefit from analyses of discourse communities that

robustly address the cultural politics at play enabling and constraining religious appeals made on behalf of political controversies.

The RLC are worthy of further analysis because this community tries to blend the two together in the service of a morally-inspired progressive politics. This end is noble and it behooves critics to inquire further into the possibilities afforded and difficulties presented by such discursive formations. There are those who would ask if the RLC are good for either liberalism or evangelicalism. I would offer a qualified yes on both counts. Iris Marion Young (2000) notes that "with rhetorical figures a speech constructs a relation of speaker to listeners" (p. 68). By stressing dialogue, inclusion, and common ground on some issues (The RLC fail their own test on issues like healthcare reform) the RLC perform a rhetoric that, at its best, constructs a more open and civil relationship between those advocating for change and those called upon to respond to it. At its best this rhetoric accomplishes the stated aim of providing a "better and more moral" discussion of political issues.

Taken at their best the RLC embody democratic values, holding secular liberals to their own standards of inclusion and dialogue. To paraphrase Wallis: religious individuals need to ground their appeals in democratic principles so as to demonstrate how their position affects the greater good, while secular Americans need to not fear that arguments made democratically and with religious appeals will lead to theocracy. On its face this is not a bad proposition and can provide a model for civility, at least in tone, when discussing the roles of politics and religion. Too, the democratic values of the RLC at their best provide a more humane model for competing evangelical discourses to follow. To be sure the cultural style of evangelism is unique to the

movement and does not always translate easily into democratic standards of inclusive rhetoric. That much is clear. However, even though they struggle in doing so, the RLC suggest that norms and styles of evangelical and democratic discourses are not incommensurate. In essence, the RLC engage a process of translating back and forth between these two competing sets of cultural practices.

The RLC are a compelling misnomer as is their stated commitment to conservative radicalism. Evangelicalism and inclusive democracy. It is through the reconciling of opposites that Kenneth Burke explains the functioning of rhetoric. Ideally this dialectic process produces a "higher synthesis." What this particular synthesis would come to resemble, what it could teach, and what questions it would raise remains to be seen, but it is worthy of further consideration. I have attempted to demonstrate in this dissertation that the RLC are a little-known but compelling community linked by common reading and argument practices. The next step is to further investigate the larger cultural practices in which the RLC are embedded. At stake is perhaps a more robust liberalism better prepared to serve the common good, as well as a more humane, tolerant evangelicalism. Both of these goals are worthy of critical reflection.

# Notes

[i] See Lerner's (2006) *The Left Hand of God*. New York: HarperCollins.
[ii] See also Williams' discussion of religion as a political resource (1996) and the public good as cultural resources (1995).
[iii] Diane Davis has challenged Mailloux's assumption that the processes of rhetoric and hermeneutics are necessarily mutually-dependent. She posits that there is a non-hermeneutical dimension of rhetoric that "deals not in signified meaning but in the address itself, in the exposure to the other" (2005, p. 192). Davis' Levinasian project falls outside the scope of my project's claims.
[iv] To use Mailloux's (2006 ) classroom slogan, ideology is "here, there, and everywhere." (p. 1 )
[v] I note the author's gender in this case because of the relative lack of women and persons of color among prominent members of the RLC.
[vi] See Benson Bobrick's (2001) *Wide as the Waters*. (New York: Simon & Schuster) discussion of the many translations composing the King James Bible.
[vii] Given on Monday, July 14, 2008, in St. Paul, Minnesota.
[viii] All verse quoted hereafter, unless specifically noted, are from the King James Version of the Bible, which designates the words spoken by Jesus in red letters.
[ix] In order to be consistent I cite the KJV Bible as it is recorded, even with its use of sexist, gender-specific pronouns.
[x] The other being Steve Schwarze's "Juxtaposition in environmental health rhetoric: Exposing asbestos contamination in Libby, Montana" in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, (6), 2003, pp. 313-336. Schwarze does not use moral frames, per se, but describes juxtaposition as a moral framing technique.
[xi] Brooks does not think too highly of the concept. Dionne's appreciation of the term is somewhat puzzling considering what appears to be Brooks intended signification. Brooks describes flexidoxy as more often than not being "orthodoxy without obedience." I discuss Brooks' criticisms in the subsequent chapter on popular and critical reception of RLC discourse.
[xii] It is possible to distinguish in RLC discourse the use of materialist rhetoric. Greene (1998) has observed that "rhetorical practices function as a technology of deliberation by distributing discourses, institutions, and populations onto a field of action. In so doing, rhetoric allows for a governing apparatus to make judgments about what it should govern, how it should govern, as well as offering mechanisms for evaluating the success or failure of governing" (p. 22). The RLC allege that very policy action is taken on behalf of the impoverished, they are not a population accounted for in the dominant discourse of the state. See Greene, Ron. (1998). Another materialist rhetoric. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *15,* 21-40.
[xiii] Available at http://www.anevangelicalmanifesto.com/manifesto.php
[xiv] See also Yoder's (1994) *The Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Eerdman's Publishing.
[xv] In contrast to social ethics founded on the assumption of the universal nature of humankind or the social order.
[xvi] Jim Wallis met with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi after the 2004 presidential election and before the 2006 midterm elections to advise her and other democrats on how to appeal to people of faith. The phrase "budgets are moral documents" appeared in his 2005 book *God's Politics* and shortly thereafter appeared in Pelosi's own campaign discourse. During the 2008 presidential race, then-Senator Barack Obama frequently uttered the refrain in an attempt to reach audiences of faith generally, and those concerned with poverty specifically.
[xvii] There exists a doctrinal schism between conservative evangelicals, like neo-Calvinists and other members of Reformed churches, who view God's sovereignty and authority as ultimate and the world utterly pre-determined, and other evangelicals, as exemplified by RLC members generally and Greg Boyd specifically, who are staunch defenders of free will and the belief that human action can make the world more God-like. These assumptions are frequently reflected in the political arguments made by members of the respective churches. *Time* magazine of March 12, 2009 indicated that Neo-Calvinism is a movement likely to make a large influence on United States' evangelical culture and reflects the "energy and passion of the evangelical world."

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