

Limits of politics

From the Editors in the [March 17, 1999](#) issue

When the man who coined the term Moral Majority decides that the majority is gone and that the culture war is lost, people pay attention. Paul Weyrich, who launched Jerry Falwell and Ralph Reed as religiopolitical operatives, recently declared that Americans' moral decline is so advanced and the culture so corrupt that it's futile to attempt to restore traditional values through politics. "Politics has failed. And politics has failed because of the collapse of the culture"--a culture Weyrich termed "an ever-wider sewer."

His statement naturally caused consternation among religious and political conservatives, especially people like presidential candidate Gary Bauer, who is counting on attracting voters with his message of restoring family values. Bauer and supporters can't be happy with Weyrich's conclusion: "We need to drop out of this culture."

It's tempting to argue with such dramatic claims. Is the culture that much more corrupt than it was 20 years ago, or 60 years ago? It seems more accurate to say: It's more corrupt in some ways, and less in others. But perhaps the significant point is that a major figure on the Religious Right is rethinking its mission. And Weyrich is not alone. Due out next month is a book by Ed Dobson and Cal Thomas, former associates of Falwell, who contend that when religious conservatives started organizing politically they lost their souls in a blind and arrogant quest for power.

Weyrich's remarks expose a tension that has long been present in the rhetoric of the Religious Right. Sometimes the movement has used majoritarian language, claiming to represent the views of most Americans, whose values (so the argument goes) have been ignored or trampled on by a corrupt elite. At other times, however, it claims simply to represent truths that need to be proclaimed and lived out regardless of whether the rest of the society agrees. Which is it? One has to decide sooner or later--at least if one wants to be clear about the basis of political engagement and Christian witness. This is an issue that all Christians, whatever their politics, have to face--a subject explored in the following pages by Alain Epp Weaver.

Weyrich's comments point to another significant theme: the limits of politics. He notes, for example, that if the Religious Right did manage to pass a law prohibiting abortion, implementation of the law would turn out to be a fiasco, given the strong opposition such a law would generate: "In this culture, you would create such an enormous underground [for abortion] you'd make Prohibition seem paltry." This is an interesting prudential judgment from someone who presumably is still interested in outlawing abortion.

Politics is important, but it can do only so much to shape hearts and minds. A broader recognition of that fact should lead not to "dropping out" but to more productive and coherent political engagements.