

What happened to the Religious Right?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

May 3, 2016

Donald Trump pretty much clinched the Republican nomination last night, frustrating Religious Right architects.

I watched the movement being constructed. Growing up in Florida, my parents' allegiances moved from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan. I attended a megachurch with Bill Nelson, a proud Democrat who served in Congress when I was a child. Then one Sunday when Nelson showed up to worship, I heard furious whispers about his voting record. Something changed. The church began passing out voter's guides during election season, highlighting which candidates were pro-life. Nelson stopped attending services.

With Newt Gingrich's revolution, my parents and their friends became more involved in making sure the Religious Right had a strong voice.

These days, during family reunions, I try to keep my mouth closed. My closest childhood friends are still deeply involved in Religious Right politics. An uncle used to tease me: "If you're young and conservative, you have no heart. If you're older and liberal, then you have no job!" But I'm older now, I have several jobs, and my views haven't changed much. So, I sit and chew, as they recite what they just heard on FOX News.

I think I'm beginning to realize why I haven't been to a family reunion in several years.

Anyways, I am still interested in what's going on in the Religious Right world. So I always ask my mom what's happening. At the beginning of election season, she told me how excited they were at the Party's prospects. They hoped to get "anyone but Trump."

But at this point in the primary season, it's clear that the Religious Right lost their moral authority and organizing prowess. How did it happen?

I wonder if what happened around our Thanksgiving table is a bit of a microcosm of how the Religious Right broke down. They weren't able to navigate the generational shift. **People who were born in the 1970s and later grew up with a much different economic reality**—student loan debt, unpaid internships, part-time work, temp jobs, lay-offs, downsizing, and freelancing. Those who went to college became saddled with five-digit debt before they could buy a beer. Pension plans and insurance coverage became luxuries. Mortgages became unattainable.

Meanwhile, the rich kept getting richer.

The Religious Right played into the greed and stirred up the bitter stew until it became poisonous. They added the toxins of **biblical womanhood, prosperity gospel, and individual salvation**.

In the 80s, James Dobson got on the radio to focus on the family, saying that women should not work. Women should stay home and take care of the children—an ideal that became laughable in my generation. **Dobson's message now allows women to work, but still fights against equality.** [*Straight Talk to Men*](#) says

[W]omen don't belong in 12-hour-a-day executive office positions... As long as that biology is there, women can't compete equally with men... Women and men are not equal... The economy might even improve if women came home, opening up jobs for unemployed men, who could then support a wife and children, the way it was, pre-feminism.

The logic? Because I sit down when I pee, I deserve 79 cents to a man's dollar. Unemployment has increased and wages have gone down—not because megacorps and greedy bosses forced layoffs and refuse to pay their workers—but because women entered the workforce.

Not only did the Religious Right baptize pay discrimination for half the population, but prosperity gospel preachers proclaimed that God would bless the faithful with wealth. Which meant if you weren't making it in this economy, you needed to get right with God. By adding spiritual shame to the stew of economic hardship, people began hiding their financial suffering under a pile of plastic. If God blesses us with wealth, what did that mean for those who couldn't pay their bills? Instead of finding solidarity and uniting for better wages and benefits, we bought 10 million copies of the [*prayer of Jabez*](#), and began individual spiritual battles to break through to the “blessed life.”

The greedy forces in our economy *love* having a reason to give half the population a 21% pay decrease. The wolves delight in spiritual battles that blame struggling workers for not having enough faith. The avarice continued as people felt shamed from admitting personal hardship. The Religious Right worker began praying to God for riches, and neglecting the hard work of organizing.

Which brings me to the third point. **With the evangelical idea of individual salvation, we began to imagine that we could save ourselves.** Salvation hinged on the individual's prayer, inviting Jesus into our hearts, rather than God's rich tapestry of liberation. This idea of individual salvation spilled into our economic realities. If a person wasn't making it, it was the individual's responsibility to save herself. She needed to work harder, to save more, and to be more responsible. It was never the system's fault. We forgot our historic commitments to social justice, to work for the world as it ought to be, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We worried too much about individually saving ourselves.

Is the Religious Right over? I'm not sure. But I do know that there have been generational fault lines that cannot be mended. The gender discriminating, financial shaming, and individual striving doesn't work in our generation. It's time for a new, compelling economic narrative to emerge from our country's religious landscape.