



David R. Swartz. Photo by Lisa Weaver.

# Left behind?

A historian looks at the evangelical left in *Moral Minority*

By Vicki Sairs

Identifying yourself as an evangelical in a roomful of secular people can be awkward. You get the feeling that everyone is slowly stepping back to give the fire-breathing fundamentalist (that would be you) plenty of breathing space.

Of course, this is a slight overstatement, but only slight. Many Americans also associate evangelical Christians with radical right-wing politics. The less generous among them go so far as to think that being born again makes you a warmonger.

Happily, the world of evangelicals is much more complex than partisan stereotypes imply. If you want to know just how complicated we born-again Christians can be, you might want to read David R. Swartz's first book, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*.

This is how the author describes it:

"In 1973 the *Washington Post* suggested that the evangelical left could 'shake both political and religious life in America.' In the end, it did not. While progressive evangelicals shaped the culture and living habits of millions, their movement did not take shape electorally in the way that the Moral Majority's did. This first comprehensive history of the evangelical left, to be published in September 2012 by the University of Pennsylvania Press, explains why." (From the author's blog, [moralminoritybook.com](http://moralminoritybook.com))

David is a familiar face in the Conservative Mennonite Conference. Some of us know him best as the author of the slightly twisted Top Ten lists that appear in the *Conference Crier* every summer; others know him from his time at Rosedale Bible College, first as a student,

then as a teacher and recruiter.

Now he is an assistant professor of history at Asbury University, teaching courses in American history, Western civilization, the sixties, and war in the American memory. David earned his Ph.D. in American history at the University of Notre Dame under the direction of George Marsden and Mark Noll.

Here are some of his thoughts on his book, why he wrote it, and what he hopes it will accomplish.

Karin Granberg-Michaelson and Wes Michaelson, former top aide to Senator Mark Hatfield and editor of *Sojourners*, marching in favor of a nuclear freeze in New York City in the late 1970s. Courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.



## Why did you write this book?

Professionally, it was important that I find a gap in the scholarship of American religious history. When I realized that very little had been done on moderate and progressive evangelicals, it seemed like a slam dunk, especially considering the fascinating ways that the movement intersected in my own life and family. I was discovering the writings of Greg Boyd and Shane Claiborne. As a child I ate food my mother (and father!) cooked out of the *More-with-Less Cookbook*. Ron Sider had just been to Rosedale for the Evangelical Anabaptist Symposium. I had a bumper sticker (“God Is Not a Republican . . . or a Democrat”) on my car from Sojourners.

I clearly wasn’t fitting with the religious right, which seemed obsessed with the idea of America as a Christian nation, with a budget that prioritized the military over poverty, a punitive criminal justice system, and the like. And yet I was turned off by the Democratic Party, whose pro-choice stance and militaristic diplomacy also seems anti-life. Doing research on the evangelical left was a way of wrestling with these issues.

In the end, I wanted to complicate outsiders’ perspectives on theologically conservative Christians. Doing this project was a way of saying to my Catholic, mainline, Mormon, Muslim, and secular friends, “I’m not that kind of evangelical!” As ridiculous as it seems, it has to be said out loud that it’s possible—even imperative—for followers of Jesus to follow the way of peace.

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## Who is your target audience? Why should they care?

I took a buckshot approach. I wanted it scholarly enough to publish with an academic press, general enough to appeal to non-evangelicals who don’t know terms like “dispensationalism,” and specific enough to tell a narrative that my subjects would recognize.

## Why did the evangelical left get left behind?

The evangelical left was left behind not because of strategic missteps. Rather, it failed to match the success of the religious right because of larger structural issues. The religious right found a receptive political party to align with. Prior to the 1970s the Republican Party was arguably less pro-family and pro-life than the Democratic

*Right:* Doris Longacre and her daughter Cara Sue prepared Chinese and Guatemalan recipes from the *More-with-Less Cookbook* at a seminar for home economists in 1976. Courtesy of the Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana. Courtesy of the Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana (Mennonite Central Committee Photographs, 1971-1977. Collection number IX-13-2.12 Box 1 Folder 2).

*Below:* Ron Sider was the most prominent supporter of evangelical simple living. After publishing *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, he was profiled in numerous evangelical magazines such as *Eternity*.



Party. But the Republican leadership was willing to clothe itself in those values to get an important bloc of votes. The evangelical left, with its idiosyncratic “consistent life” ethic, couldn’t attach itself to either party. It didn’t fit the Democrats because of abortion. It didn’t fit the Republicans because of their pro-big business and pro-military planks.

The evangelical left was also hamstrung by a lack of money. Overrepresented by preachers, teachers, and social workers, the movement couldn’t accumulate much money. The religious right, by contrast, got lots of oil money because of its big-business proclivities. A former member of the

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religious right put it well: “Since I started living a simple life-style, I can’t afford all the stamps I once could when I was a captive of the profit motive and working for Falwell!”

**What surprised you most when you were researching this?**

I was surprised at how influential Mennonites have been among evangelicals. In John Howard Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus*, evangelicals found a vision of the church as a community of peace that could address the problem of violence in the world. In Ron Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, they found a sharp critique of American materialism and global inequalities. In Doris Longacre’s *More-with-Less Cookbook*, they learned that kitchens were moral spaces where a theology of simple living could be practiced. From Anabaptist women in the Evangelical Women’s Caucus, they learned to apply the logic of the “priesthood of all believers” to gender. To be sure, rightist evangelicals didn’t pay much attention to these voices. But moderate and progressive evangelicals have been profoundly shaped by the characters in my book—and that trend continues now, perhaps even with greater intensity.

**At what point did you wish you weren’t writing this book?**

My wife Lisa was in graduate school while I was writing the book, and so it took three years to finish while I did the bulk of childcare. I wrote most of the book during our infant twins’ naps and late at night. I enjoyed that combination of deep thinking and diaper-changing, but there were certainly times that pounding out the words and paragraphs and pages and chapters got tedious. I never grew bored with the topic, but I did tire of the writing itself.

There have also been times when people have misunderstood my project. Some assume that I’m a political partisan or a radical out to destroy the Church. Besides the



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You can pre-order a copy now at Amazon or Barnes & Noble. To find out more, visit David’s blog at [moralminoritybook.com](http://moralminoritybook.com).

fact that I love the Church and want to keep it from exercising worldly power and partisanship, my primary task as a historian is to empathetically study people of the past. The book is descriptive, not prescriptive.

**In an ideal world, what would be the response to your book?**

I hope that those who read the book will learn to think about their faith and their politics contextually. Just about all of us, folks on the right and the left, seem so certain that we’re right, that there’s a direct line from the Bible to the ballot box. My book tries to show how diverse Christians are—and have been—culturally, theologically, and politically.

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Given different circumstances, we could have very different views about poverty, war, capital punishment, and gender roles. This ought to inculcate a profound sense of humility.

**You hint that something new is afoot today among young evangelicals – the stirrings of a new progressive movement. How can this movement avoid the things that brought down the evangelical left?**

More young evangelicals are talking about peace, poverty, and caring for God’s creation. And the structural conditions that brought down the evangelical left in the 1970s and 1980s might be changing. More and more Americans are becoming pro-life on the abortion issue. If that trend continues and anti-abortion views become more common across the political spectrum, evangelicals may be able to bypass the excesses of right-wing politics.

That said, I’m not entirely certain that success—at least in the way that the religious right “enjoyed” it—is something that any Christian should want. It depended largely on power, money, and coercion—all elemental political realities that Jesus clearly warned against. I worry that those who identify very closely with one political party—whatever party it is—will be tempted to compromise their faithfulness and their ability to speak out prophetically on issues that matter to us as disciples of Christ.