

# The 12 Worst (and Most Powerful) Christian Right Groups

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The Religious Right in America is lavishly funded and politically well connected. While the men who lead the fundamentalist Christian political movement hold different opinions about theology, they share a deep and abiding hostility to the separation of church and state. They seek to inject religion into public schools, obtain taxpayer funding for religious schools and other ministries, roll back reproductive choice and deny civil rights to gay people. And they enjoy extraordinary influence in Washington, D.C., and in many state legislatures. What follows is a survey of some of the nation's leading Religious Right organizations. Collectively, these groups raise more than three-quarters of a billion dollars annually, the bulk of it tax-exempt. Budget figures are from public tax documents and are the most recent available, in most cases from 2009 and 2010.

## 1) The Pat Robertson Empire

### Christian Broadcasting Network

Budget: \$295,140,001

Location: Virginia Beach, VA

### Regent University

Budget: \$60,093,298

Location: Virginia Beach, VA

### American Center for Law and Justice:

Budget: \$13,375,429

Location: Virginia Beach, VA

### Christian Advocates Serving Evangelism

Budget: \$43,872,322

Location: Atlanta, GA

TV preacher Pat Robertson has for many years overseen a sprawling Religious Right empire that includes a global television network, a university and an influential right-wing legal outfit. Robertson's flagship operation, "The 700 Club," is a daily television program that mixes news, faith healing, Christian lifestyle features and Religious Right politics. He calls church-state separation a "myth" and a "lie of the left." Despite his extreme views, Robertson remains well connected with the GOP power structure in Washington, and congressional leaders and presidential candidates often appear on his show. House Speaker John Boehner, for example, gave an exclusive interview in February.

Religious Right attorney Jay Sekulow runs the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), a legal group founded by Robertson in 1991. Sekulow's Christian Advocates Serving Evangelism, the ACLJ under a different name, serves a similar purpose. The combined annual budget for both entities exceeds \$55 million.

Regent University was originally founded to offer graduate degrees in areas Robertson most wants to dominate: government, education, law, communications, psychology and ministry. It now offers undergraduate degrees as well (many of them online) and has a satellite campus in Alexandria, Va., a Washington, D.C., suburb.

## 2) The Falwell Empire

### Liberty University

**Budget:** \$395,898,255

**Location:** Lynchburg, VA

### Jerry Falwell Ministries

**Budget:** \$4,208,989

**Location:** Lynchburg, VA

### Liberty Counsel

**Budget:** \$1,371,795

**Location:** Orlando, FL and Lynchburg, VA

The late Jerry Falwell, a television evangelist and founder of the Moral Majority, was a pivotal figure in the history of the Religious Right. Falwell died in 2007 and left his religio-political empire in the hands of his two sons, Jerry Jr. and Jonathan. Falwell Jr., who serves as chancellor of Liberty University, has followed in his father's footsteps by advancing a partisan political agenda. In December of 2007, Falwell issued an e-mail on university letterhead endorsing Mike Huckabee for president. In 2009, he used university resources to engineer the defeat of the Democratic member of the House of Delegates who represented the Lynchburg area. In April of this year, Liberty hosted "The Awakening," a conference that featured former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.), alongside Religious Right activists.

Liberty has experienced huge growth and now has an active online learning component. Despite Falwell's anti-government rhetoric, Liberty students receive nearly half a billion dollars in federal aid every year.

Jonathan Falwell serves as pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church and oversees the remnants of his father's TV ministry.

Liberty Counsel is a Religious Right legal group originally founded by Mat Staver and based in Orlando, Fla. It is now a part of the Falwell enterprise and operates in conjunction with the Liberty University Law School, where Staver is dean.

### 3) Family Research Council/FRC Action/FRC Action PAC

**Combined Budget:** \$14,569,081

**Location:** Washington, DC

The Family Research Council has become the nation's top Religious Right group in Washington, D.C. Led by former Louisiana state representative Tony Perkins, the FRC seeks to merge fundamentalist Christianity with government. It opposes individual reproductive freedom, engages in gay bashing and lately has sought to join forces with the Tea Party to create a massive, far-right phalanx. The FRC is so extreme that this year it was designated a "hate group" by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Perkins has a checkered political past. In 1996, while managing the U.S. Senate campaign of Louisiana state legislator Woody Jenkins, he paid former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard and notorious white supremacist David Duke \$82,000 for his mailing list. In 2001, Perkins addressed the Louisiana chapter of the Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist organization that grew out of the White Citizens Council.

Despite FRC's unsavory reputation, the group sponsors an annual "Values Voter Summit" that draws leading GOP congressional figures and presidential hopefuls.

FRC maintains an "action" arm with a 501(c)(4) tax status that enables it to be more directly political. It also funnels money to candidates through a political action committee.

### 4) American Family Association

**Budget:** \$21,408,342

**Location:** Tupelo, MS

Originally formed to advocate for censorship of racy TV shows, the American Family Association has branched out and now covers a range of Religious Right issues. The group was founded by the Rev. Donald Wildmon, a Methodist minister, and was originally called the National Federation for Decency. It advocated boycotts of companies that advertised on programs it considered salacious. Wildmon has now turned day-to-day operations of the group over to his son, Tim. An AFA staffer, Bryan Fischer, has become notorious for making outrageous

statements. Fischer calls church-state separation a “myth” and an invention of Adolf Hitler. He believes that the First Amendment protects only Christians and members of other faiths receive religious liberty as a courtesy. The AFA is stridently anti-gay and is the leading group promoting the Religious Right’s phony claim of a “war on Christmas.” It continues to boycott companies that refuse to buckle under to its demands. The AFA has underwritten a series of “pastor policy briefings” in Iowa, California, Texas and other states intended to organize fundamentalist churches into a potent political machine.

The group says it owns and operates nearly 200 radio stations across the country.

## 5) Alliance Defense Fund

**Budget:** \$30,127,514

**Location:** Scottsdale, AZ

Formed by a group of TV and radio preachers in 1993, the Alliance Defense Fund was conceived as a funding pool for organizations that worked in the courts to promote theocratic views and undermine church-state separation.

After a few years, the organization began engaging in direct litigation and formed a network of sympathetic attorneys nationwide.

ADF President Alan Sears says there is no such thing as church-state separation in the Constitution and that the bricks in the church-state wall are being removed “one by one.” The organization attacks public education and opposes legal abortion and gay rights.

Outside of court, the ADF has worked to lure evangelical churches into a vast right-wing political machine. It sponsors “Pulpit Freedom Sunday,” a ploy to openly defy federal tax law by encouraging pastors to endorse or oppose candidates from the pulpit. (While the ADF claims to be nonpartisan, all the project’s participating clergy in 2008 endorsed Republican John McCain or opposed Democrat Barack Obama.)

## 6) Focus on the Family

**Budget:** \$130,258,480

**Location:** Colorado Springs, CO

Focus on the Family was founded by child psychologist James Dobson to advocate for “biblical” solutions to family problems. Although it poses as a family-oriented ministry, the group has always been political. Vociferously opposed to church-state separation and secular government, the massive fundamentalist ministry has a worldwide presence.

Dobson, who has since retired from the group, remains an influential radio broadcaster and has authored several books. He still appears on the air daily with his son, Ryan. Dobson frequently attacks church-state separation and once said “The separation of church and state is not in the Constitution.”

FOF’s current president is Jim Daly. Although Daly said he wanted to tone down some of the ministry’s harsh attacks on gays and others, much far-right political content remains. FOF has a network of 35 state “family policy councils” that lobby in the state capitals.

## 7) Southern Baptist Convention Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

**Budget:** \$3,236,000

**Location:** Nashville, TN and Washington, DC

The lobbying arm of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, takes stands virtually identical to the Religious Right. Southern Baptists claim 16 million members. The SBC’s government action office presses for school-sponsored religion, tax aid to religious schools, reductions in gay rights, limits on legal abortion and other far-right social issues. Commission President Richard Land has stated, “When we convince a majority of Americans that we are right, that’s not called a theocracy, that’s called the democratic process.”

Although many Baptists have historically supported church-state separation, the SBC in the early 1980s became the target of a takeover by Religious Right-style fundamentalists. Once in power, this bloc began endorsing various proposals to merge church and state (such as a school prayer amendment to the Constitution). Land works hand in glove with Religious Right organizations to promote a theocratic agenda. Despite the denomination’s tax-exempt status, he openly meddles in Republican Party politics.

## 8) Traditional Values Coalition

**Budget:** \$9,888,233

**Location:** Anaheim, CA

Founded originally to work on “culture war” issues in California, the Traditional Values Coalition eventually expanded to become a national organization. Known for its gay bashing and attacks on Islam, TVC claims to work with 43,000 churches nationwide. The group was founded by the Rev. Louis P. Sheldon, who once said, “A dangerous Marxist/Leftist/Homosexual/Islamic coalition has formed – and we’d better be willing to fight it with everything in our power.”

In 2000, Sheldon accepted money from gambling interests connected to lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Sheldon, whom one lobbyist referred to as “Lucky Louie,” told Religious Right activists he was blocking the spread of legalized gambling, although the lobbying firm he was working for was actually trying to spread internet-based gambling.

Sheldon’s daughter, Andrea Lafferty, serves as TVC executive director. She is as partisan and as shrill as her father. When Democratic Party officials announced that U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) would become party chair, Lafferty pounced.

“Way to go DNC,” Lafferty snarled in a press release. “You found the candidate who best fit your profile for DNC Chairman: a junkyard dog who is mean, nasty, shrill, able to screech at a moment’s notice, aggressive, and of course able to manipulate the facts and always uncompromising.”

## 9) Coral Ridge Ministries

**Budget:** \$17,263,536

**Location:** Ft. Lauderdale, FL

Coral Ridge Ministries was founded by D. James Kennedy, a TV preacher who died in 2007. Stridently fundamentalist and far-right on the political spectrum, Kennedy insisted that separation of church and state is not in the Constitution and was known for his attacks on evolution.

Coral Ridge also produced a number of books, DVDs and pamphlets attacking church-state separation. It was known for insisting that America was founded to be a "Christian nation." Since Kennedy's death, the ministry has continued pumping out right-wing political material. Its website looks more like a far-right political site than a portal to a ministry.

Today the operation is run by Kennedy's daughter, Jennifer Kennedy Cassidy. Jerry Newcombe serves as host of Kennedy's program, "The Coral Ridge Hour."

## 10) Faith & Freedom Coalition

**Budget:** Unavailable

**Location:** Duluth, GA

The Faith & Freedom Coalition is a relatively new Religious Right group founded by Ralph Reed, former executive director of the Christian Coalition. The organization already has developed enough clout to sponsor an Iowa forum for would-be Republican presidential candidates in March of 2011. Reed, who became a political consultant after leaving the Christian Coalition, formed the group after his attempt to launch a political career in Georgia collapsed when his ties to disgraced casino lobbyist Jack Abramoff became an issue and after writing an unsuccessful political thriller called *Dark Horse*.

Although the Coalition is of modest size now, the group is just getting started. Reed's proven ability to organize the Religious Right faithful and raise money make this an organization to watch.

During his time with the Christian Coalition, Reed was known for his intemperate, often violent, imagery. (He once bragged about leaving political opponents in "body bags.") Time has not mellowed him. During the March forum, Reed discussed the possibility of "replacing the government by force."

The line is apparently part of Reed's stock speech. He also used it at an earlier gathering of Tea Party activists, telling the crowd, "[W]e have not only the right, but the moral obligation to overthrow that government by force if necessary, and form a new government that will protect our rights."

## 1) WallBuilder Presentations/WallBuilders

**Budget:** \$1,091,531 (plus proceeds from a for-profit arm)

**Location:** Aledo, TX

WallBuilders is an organization founded by David Barton, a Texan who makes his living promoting bogus "Christian nation" history to fundamentalist groups. Barton insists that church-state separation is a myth and was never the intention of the founders. He markets books, DVDs and other materials that promote this view and speaks in fundamentalist churches and other venues.

Barton helped rewrite Texas' social studies standards, which downplay church-state separation and elevate the "Christian nation" view. Barton does not have a degree in history (his degree, from Oral Roberts University, is in Christian Education), but he poses as a historian.

Despite his lack of legitimate academic credentials, Barton's profile has increased recently due to a number of appearances he made on the Glenn Beck program on Fox News Channel. Time magazine in 2005 named him one of the top 25 most influential evangelicals in America.

Mike Huckabee, former Arkansas governor and 2008 presidential aspirant, is a huge Barton fan. Addressing a Religious Right gathering earlier this year, Huckabee opined that all Americans should be forced "at gunpoint...to listen to every David Barton message."

The budget figures for WallBuilder Presentations are somewhat misleading. This organization is a small non-profit Barton runs – but he makes most of his money through a separate organization called simply WallBuilders. This group, which is a for-profit business, is not required to make its financial statements publicly available.

## 12) Concerned Women for America

**Budget:** \$11,772,009

**Location:** Washington, DC

Formed more than 30 years ago to counter the growing women's rights movement, Concerned Women for America claims to be the largest women's organization in the country. The organization, founded in 1979 by Tim LaHaye and his wife Beverly, focused originally on opposing passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

When that issue became less prominent, the group began taking on other matters, such as opposing gay rights and legal abortion as well as attacking alleged "secular humanism" in public schools. In 1984, the group sponsored a legal challenge brought by a Tennessee woman who claimed textbooks used in her child's school promoted humanism. A federal court initially ruled in favor of the woman, but the decision was overturned on appeal.

In the 1980s, CWA even branched into international affairs, launching a special project to attack Nicaragua's Sandinista government. Today, the group focuses mainly on opposing abortion, gay rights and public education, although it often attacks the United Nations and has increasingly engaged in Muslim bashing.

Like a lot of Religious Right organizations these days, CWA has been adding fiscal issues to its agenda, demanding that government reduce spending. Its current targets include Planned Parenthood, the National Endowment for the Arts, Public Broadcasting and NPR.

Tim LaHaye went on to write a successful series of apocalyptic pot-boilers called "Left Behind" and now lives in semi-retirement with his wife. Although Beverly LaHaye is still listed as CWA's chair, the group's president is now Wendy Wright. The organization claims 500,000 members.

It sponsors a legislative action committee that is a 501(c)(4) organization and an allied political action committee that in 2010 spent nearly \$300,000 endorsing conservative candidates.

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