The 1960’s were a time of great political upheaval in American history as various groups took to the country’s streets to protest the social, racial, and economic injustices that plagued the nation. Indeed, a decade that began with the relative domestic tranquility of the Dwight Eisenhower administration ended with anti-war protesters seizing control of college campuses and smoke rising from inner-city riots obscuring the gleam of America’s “alabaster cities.” Southern clergy remained relatively silent throughout most of this turmoil despite the fact that many battles were fought in the South as African-Americans began to protest in order to secure the civil rights that had been promised them since the conclusion of the Civil War.

The silence of Southern clergy ended during the 1970’s as Southern evangelicals slowly began to organize themselves into political action groups. The apex of this organization came in 1979 when the Rev. Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, which would serve as a mouthpiece for politically minded evangelicals throughout the next decade. The political rise of the evangelicals during the 1970’s appears to be rather antithetical to the prevailing sentiments of a decade that witnessed the growing disillusionment of the American public toward politics thanks to the Watergate crisis and the conclusion of the Vietnam conflict. However, the decade witnessed the convergence of several faults that had been running under the surface of American politics and society throughout the previous decade that created the evangelical earthquake.

The predominant reason behind the rise of evangelical power during the 1970’s came from what was believed to be an attack on the family structure of American
life. Such hot-button issues as abortion and women’s rights took center stage as the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a woman’s right to choose in Roe v. Wade and state legislatures began to debate the inclusion of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution. Additionally, Californians were voting about gay rights initiatives. These issues appeared to Evangelicals to be little more than the frameworks for the destruction of the American family and in direct opposition to the tenants of Biblical teaching, which many Evangelicals regarded as inerrant.

Furthermore, as American society was being “destroyed” from within during the decade the power of the United States was beginning to take a substantial beating in the world. The failure of American military might in the Vietnam conflict coupled with oil shortages and a recession crippling the nation’s economy sent shockwaves amongst eschatologically minded Evangelicals. If America was to play a role in the coming of Jesus Christ, which thanks to Hal Lindsey many though was imminent, the country had to project strength both domestically and abroad.

Yet, one can argue that similar forces were at work in the 1960’s as the “free love” movement and Vietnam woes were broadcast around the world while Southern clergy remained silent. The chief difference between the two decades lies in the fact that Southern clergy became more educated and accordingly more willing to be an active voice in politics than their uneducated forefathers had been. Additionally, as Southerners began immigrating to various parts of the country they carried with them their faith thereby planting Southern values throughout the country. These two factors combined to bring about the rise of Southern clergy in American politics.