

Crowell 1

Garrett Crowell

Dr. Lisa Langenbach

PS 3350

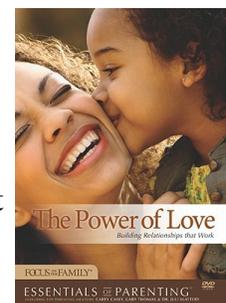
February 2013

Focus on Focus on the Family



Focus on the Family is a Colorado-based conservative Christian interest group founded by Dr. James Dobson in 1977. Their explicit primary focus is family care, the raising of children, marriage counseling, and equipping “parents, children and spouses to thrive in an ever-changing, ever-more-complicated world.” (Focus on the Family website) They attract more than 220 million listeners per day worldwide (Right Wing Watch) to their advice-dispensing call-in radio show, which was hosted by Dobson until 2005, when he retired and left the duties to others. He was so popular with listeners that they still occasionally run his old shows. The show itself receives so much mail from its listeners that the US Postal Service assigned Focus on the Family headquarters its own ZIP code.

They have what could easily be described as a publishing empire, featuring the award-winning previously mentioned radio show, plays and franchise dramatic productions, DVDs for children and families, CDs, a podcast and several books, many with best-seller status. Despite being conservative in



its views and advice given, the appeal of Focus on the Family cuts across standard political divisions in the United States and is seen by many as being non-partisan (Gilgoff 7) and simply concerned with spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ through social ministry. This is not an accurate reflection of reality. The primary reason for this shocking and widely-held misconception has a lot to do with smart political maneuvering on the part of Dr. Dobson, who often downplays his influence, preferring a behind-the-scenes sort of role and seeking to play the part of God-centric fair-minded advocate for families, but this is not exactly who he always is.



When James Dobson started FOF, there was no initial public indication that he planned to make of it any kind of political group, and indeed, the group was overshadowed in its early years in terms of political activity by the Moral Majority under Jerry Falwell & the Christian Coalition under Ralph Reed, as well as the activities of Billy Graham and other prominent evangelicals. Dr. Dobson and Focus on the Family really came to public attention and stayed there as a result of two events; the serial killer Ted Bundy gave Dobson a 1989 interview – his final interview – in which he “confessed” that the reason he had committed his murders had been due to the effects and influence of “violent pornography,” something he had never claimed before and which many felt he was coerced to talk about by Dr. Dobson. (Gilgoff 33-34) Focus on the Family came under intense scrutiny thereafter for selling video recordings of Dobson's 29 minute sit-down with Ted Bundy, but the group claims that all of the profits from these sales went to anti-pornography crusades.



The other event that cast Dr. Dobson and Focus into the public light was the controversy surrounding the removal of the enormous 10 Commandments monument from the courthouse in Montgomery, Alabama, and then-Governor Roy Moore's resistance to this. Dobson felt drawn into the public arena on this issue (Gilgoff 3-5), and it seems that after his public appearance at a rally there, he really began



to exert influence in a concrete political way in American life.



Unlike a lot of charismatic leaders of conservative evangelical groups in the United States, it really does seem as though Dobson had to be drawn out. The Focus on the Family compound in Colorado Springs is a weird, insular piece of private property with its own

security. Not just anyone is allowed in. When visitors do come in, they discover that the interiors are covered in mock Rembrandts, and statues of Dr. Dobson abound. (Murphy) Quiet simplicity more or less dominates in spite of these touches, and that seemed to be the *modus operandi* of Focus for its first few years as a spreader of the Gospel.



Dobson also carefully controls his public image, and will not allow himself to be photographed by just anyone. Typically, the only photo to accompany the rare interviews he grants is one of his two official photos. In it, he looks friendly and avuncular, like a kind grandpa looking to help you with

your problems. Obviously, this is the point.



When they decided to officially wield political influence, Focus quietly founded the Family Research Council, in 1983 as another 501(c)(3), for the express purpose of “advancing faith, family and freedom through public policy.” (FRC Website) Their primary focus seems to be the influence of public policy through the education of evangelical ministers who then encourage to in turn, educate their congregations. That news is then hopefully used by the flock to get the right guys into office, but the political influence here is indirect and always carefully tacit. The Family Research Council has offices in Washington, D.C. to this day.

Outside of his more direct efforts (covered below), the other body of which Dobson is a founding member is the Arlington Group, founded in 2002 and named for Arlington, Virginia, the place of its founding. The Arlington Group is an attempt to bring into harmony various voices within the American Christian Conservative community, and has functioned with visibly mixed public results. (Wikipedia) Dobson himself was at the middle of minor scandal within this group about a 2005 phone call regarding Bush Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers that implied Dobson was given information from the White House to which not even members of Congress were privy, and it is hard to say whether or not this flap contributed to the eventual withdraw of her nomination by the White House.

(Gilgoff 229-241)

Of course, it makes sense that Dobson would have a red line to the White House, since George W.



Bush had received Dobson's first ever endorsement for a candidate for President, and Bush's subsequent victory had mobilized 16 million evangelicals that Bush could not afford to have drift away. Why was Bush so popular with Dobson, who had been in a position to endorse Bush Sr., Reagan, Ford & Nixon? Says Dobson about Bush: "he referenced Jesus Christ. I don't know any other presidential candidate in history, maybe going back to Jimmy Carter...talking about Jesus Christ. So in that sense, we have a certain affinity with George W. Bush. But the specter of John Kerry was a bigger concern...terrifying." (Gilgoff 15) Dobson's first experience at using his influence not just to get what he wanted, but more importantly, guarantee the defeat of those he saw as opposed to his ideologies apparently galvanized him, and he became more active, from Miers to Moore and so on.

It wasn't until 2008 that Dobson and Focus' influence blew up into something that was really getting people's attention, though. People began to seek out his endorsement. He was widely seen as someone who was not beholden to a straight Republican ticket, but rather to the perception of "American conservative values." He had been asked to endorse in 1996 and declined when neither Bob Dole or Phil Gramm was conservative enough for him, but his recent spate of activity had been seen as him finally entering the political arena and making himself available for future consultation or endorsement. In this regard, 2008 was an especially busy year and saw more activity from Dobson than ever.

Dobson had resigned from the leadership of Focus back in 2002, eventually turning the reins of power over the current president, Tim Daly. Dobson's position as *de facto* figurehead still carried (and carries) a lot of power and was much sought after. He initially had endorsed Rick Santorum (Sonmez), the only candidate with a strong enough conservative lean for him. When

Santorum got knocked out of his primary, Dobson shifted his endorsement to Mike Huckabee, due to Huckabee's status as a Baptist minister. Finally, when it looked as if things were all headed towards John McCain, Dobson said, "I cannot, and will not vote for Senator John McCain, as a matter of conscience," due to his concerns that McCain wasn't conservative enough. (Wikipedia / Dobson)

That all changed when McCain selected for his vice-presidential candidate Alaska governor Sarah Palin, who was known to have a strong pro-life stance, and was publicly standing by it with a daughter who was pregnant out of wedlock. Dobson himself would publicly vindicate the Palin



family's choices in this matter. This answers the question many people had about why McCain would make this kind of selection – a relatively inexperienced PR loose cannon like Palin – with the answer straight out of 2004's Bush-over-Kerry nod and the 2005's Harriet Miers nomination – the GOP needs this block of votes to win. This kind of family values support of *in utero* life was the charge that Dobson and Focus needed – and indeed, they championed her decision - but they would not stop there.



Dobson also famously penned during the campaign season the now infamous "*Letter from 2012 in Obama's America*," a 16 page polemic with its origins in B-grade apocalyptic science fiction that predicted a stacked liberal Supreme

Court, compared America under Obama to Nazi Germany, said that Christian speech would be illegal and absent from the airwaves, and that homosexual ideologies would be forced upon schoolchildren, among other things. (Dobson, “Letter”) The “Letter” was inflammatory, and not even the entire Christian conservative movement was behind it, with some notable voices seeing it as divisive and hateful in the extreme.

The publication of the letter was the first major overt step into political arena for not just Dobson as an ostensible private citizen, but for his group, and for the people for whom he presumed to speak. Focus on the Family Action, formed as early as 2004 as the political fundraising wing of Focus was responsible for the publication and distribution of the letter, along with distribution of funds in various local races from 2005 through 2011. Their mission statement says in part, that they produce “materials on political issues and sponsors 'citizenship rallies.’” Focus on the Family Action's annual revenue is about \$10,554,000 per year, according



to Americans United, and they use that mainly to form smaller, state-bound grassroots committees to push local amendments, and for advertising buying, like the publication of the letter, and things considerably larger. It was Focus on the Family Action that paid for 2012's John 3:16 commercial (Draper) during a Denver Broncos game, and the Super Bowl ad from 2010 with Tim Tebow (and his mom)'s anti-abortion message. (Super Bowl Ads)

When they are not engaged in some of the most expensive ad buys available, they are funneling between 2 and 3 million dollars a year into committees in at least 17 states between 2004 and 2012 to promote their rather hard-boiled agenda against homosexual marriages, against

abortion and stem cell research (which Dobson calls “cannibalistic”). Of course, whatever a state committee raises once it is formed has nothing to do with the larger organization, and thus, does not affect their reporting totals. These committees have predictable names that tie into Dobson's larger, overall agenda; lots of “defense of marriage” and “protection of life” -type names, that once you look, are all either connected to or founded by Focus's Action arm.

PolitiFact and other non-partisan fact checking organizations rate the truthfulness of Focus' statements during this period at an average of about 52%, well below that of most evangelical groups. (PolitiFact) For many, this is a disturbingly low percentage for anyone, much less a Christian organizational conglomerate.



Focus on the Family Action itself has morphed and changed its name, sometime between the midterm elections of 2010 and the presidential campaign of last year. It is now CitizenLink. This

has two strategic advantages; it keeps branding fresh and attracts attention while being slightly less explicit with the removal of “Action” from its name. CitizenLink is a micro example of how Focus spreads its money (between \$100 million and \$130 million in annual revenue (Economic Research Institute)) around. It would appear that Focus on the Family, under its new leadership, is doing a couple of things; One, they seem to be diversifying, which is a genius idea for three reasons – it makes good economic sense to spread out your assets and investments while providing Focus with multiple conduits for spreading their message. Secondly, it seems as though they might be hiding additional revenue (or perhaps just using it more effectively) by dumping it into a new endeavor every time they can afford to do so.

CitizenLink has a radio show (a third one under the Dobson umbrella, by my count) which, in contrast to the FOF show, which is meant to be family advice and guidance, is strictly political, up to and including a recent video deconstruction of the President's State of the Union address. (CitizenLink) There is also a magazine and an 800 number. They have recently published articles using Western wildfires to preach a point about sexual education in schools, and addressing homosexuality as a part of our broken culture right alongside adultery and domestic violence. This fits with Dobson's overarching message about tolerance being an evil ruse perpetuated by liberals. CitizenLink has a public face, but it is also Focus on the Family Action, re-branded and separated from the primary association. Focus on the Family is a juggernaut of brands like this.



There is also National Prayer Day, chaired by Mrs. Shirley Dobson (wife of Dr. James), and representing a specific and explicit Judeo-Christian (declaring the day to be focused around “the God of the Bible”) spin on Harry Truman's 1952 proclamation. With its own website and fund-raising, its own media and niche, National Prayer Day is another arm of the Focus influence machine looking for a purchase on the eternal souls of America.

Dobson, and presumably many of his employees, and certainly the higher-ups, are virulently homophobic, and believe that homosexual marriages in particular, will destroy the American way of life, the overall institution of marriage, and so on. He quotes the proto-conservative Edmund Burke and compares marriage between straight people and marriage between gay people to the “collision of matter and anti-matter.” (Dobson, 47) In his book,

Marriage Under Fire, Dobson lays out his very specific arguments as to why gay marriage is bad for society and the people in gay marriages, and before devoting no less than ten pages to shill his other books on various subjects, devotes several pages in a row to a “mix-and-match” the paragraphs form letter that you can “mail to your local newspaper, senator or congressman,” and it will come out to “no more than 225 words.” (Dobson 108) Clearly, the book is engaging in very straightforward political activity, and would need to have been published (or at least paid for) by the PAC part of Focus, with the revenues going back into that part as well.

A fair amount of the money from these books and the other products of the media sold by Focus goes back to Focus on the Family's various anti-gay causes, like TrueTolerance, their initiative to squash the promotion of anti-bullying propaganda on the grounds that much of it is pro-homosexual, and the Restored Hope Network, which is for people affected by homosexuals in our society. Restored Hope is also a strong proponent of “conversion therapy,” the much scientifically debunked psychiatric procedure that claims to erase gay behavior.

What I am, by omission, stating in the conclusion to this paper, then, is this; on the page, Focus on the Family looks like a hydra or octopus with tentacles of non-taxable plausible separation in many things. Much of the actual lobbying done by Focus on the Family isn't done by Focus on the Family. It is done instead by “grassroots” state-level groups formed and forged and paid for by them, and then turned loose on the electorate. It is done by one of the many single issue satellite groups which orbit 'Planet Dobson,' whether he officially endorses them or not. It is done through advertising and by influence, not all of which is easily traceable. In my research and by looking through Focus' 1099s, I found that out of the money that they take in, they donate a lot of it to “anti-pornography groups” or “defense of marriage groups” or “pro-life

groups.” Some of these are loosely affiliated with Focus and/or Dobson, and some are not, and some are affiliated, but not so loosely. I couldn't follow the money to a firm conclusion without making it my mission in life. In final analysis, what I know is this: Dr. James Dobson, whether he's actually attached to Focus on the Family or in retirement (or what appears to a present quasi-state of doing both simultaneously while occasionally appearing on Fox News), will always be in their sphere of influence, and will always command attention there.

Historical reading about them seems to show another important pattern, though: Evangelical Americans seem to need a fresh face on their issue advocacy every couple or three election cycles. This would explain the Moral Majority waning to make way for Ralph Reed, who seems to fade with the arrival of Pat Robertson and his aggressively political bunch, who eventually give way to Dobson and those like-minded. They're morphing now into (or declining and making way for) whatever is going to influence elections for conservative Christians in the high teens of the 2000s, and they raise a lot of money and hold a lot of attention, so keeping an eye on their development is probably a very prescient idea.

SOURCES

Americans United (Current). **Focus on the Family Action**. Retrieved January, 2013, from <https://www.au.org/resources/religious-right/focus-on-the-family-action>

CitizenLink. (Current) Retrieved February 2013 from <http://www.citizenlink.com/>

Dobson, Dr. James, 2004. **Marriage Under Fire**, Multnomah Publishers, Oregon.

Dobson, Dr. James, 2008. **Letter from 2012 in Obama's America**, Focus on the Family Action, Colorado. Downloadable PDF at <http://www.wnd.com/files/Focusletter.pdf>

Draper, Electra, 2012. **Focus on the Family Unveils John 3:16 Ad During Broncos Game**. The Denver Post. Retrieved February 2013 from http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/ci_19745058

Family Research Council (Current). **About**. Retrieved February, 2013, from <http://www.frc.org/about-frc>

Focus on the Family (Current). **About**. Retrieved February, 2013, from http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx

Gilgoff, Dan, 2007, **The Jesus Machine: How James Dobson, Focus on the Family and Evangelical America are Winning the Culture War**, St. Martin's Press, New York

Murphy, Tim (Current). **Focus on the Family's Parallel Pop Culture**. Mother Jones Magazine. Retrieved February, 2013, from <http://www.motherjones.com/road-trip-blog/2010/09/focus-family-parallel-pop-culture>

PolitiFact (Current). **Focus on the Family Action's File**. Retrieved February 2013 from <http://www.politifact.com/personalities/focus-family-action/>

Right Wing Watch (Current). **Focus on the Family**. Retrieved January, 2013, from <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/focus-family>

Sonmez, Felicia, 2012. **Focus on the Family Founder Endorses Rick Santorum**. Retrieved January, 2013, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/post/focus-on-family-founder-james-dobson-endorses-rick-santorum/2012/01/19/gIQAr8eCBQ_blog.html

Super-Bowl-Ads.com (Current). **Focus on the Family to Air 'Celebrate Family, Celebrate Life' Ad with Tim Tebow**. Retrieved February, 2013, from http://superbowl-ads.com/article_archive/focus-on-the-family-to-air-%E2%80%98celebrate-family-celebrate-life

[%E2%80%99-super-bowl-ad/](#)

Wikipedia (Current). **Arlington Group**. Retrieved January, 2013, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arlington_Group

Wikipedia (Current). **James Dobson: Political & Social Influence**. Retrieved January, 2013, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Dobson#Political_and_social_influence

ENDNOTE: *It had been my intention to supply a Web link to the Dobson interview with the serial killer Ted Bundy, preferably in its entirety. Ironically, however, I cannot find one that does not also have obvious linkages to either gory violence photos, pornography, or some instances, both. Apologies.*