

Washington Watchdog

He's tough, he's angry, and he's not afraid to mix religion and politics. Meet Lou Sheldon, who founded the Traditional Values Coalition to protect the country from gay activists, abortion lobbyists and any politician—Republican or Democrat—who is hostile to biblical morality.

Exiting his townhouse office on C Street, Lou Sheldon hurries toward the U.S. Capitol. This energetic, 67-year-old preacher-turned-political-activist has a full day ahead of him. He will meet one-on-one in the morning with several senators and congressmen, attend a noon luncheon in the Cannon House Caucus Room, join a late afternoon briefing on the Bright Line Bill, and tonight, go head to head with Al Sharpton on the CNN show, Crossfire.

In a city where liberal agendas have dominated the political scene, Lou Sheldon has been a formidable watchdog of pro-family values. As the founder and chairman of Traditional Values Coalition (TVC), the largest nondenominational church lobby group in America, Sheldon exerts a strong presence among many of the movers and shakers on Capitol Hill.

Although groups such as Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America may make more headlines in Christian media, TVC has been quietly working behind the scenes for more than 30 years to uphold the Judeo-Christian principles upon which this nation was founded.

TVC's membership of more than 43,000 churches from across the United States and throughout Puerto Rico crosses racial and socioeconomic barriers and includes conservatives, evangelicals, and charismatics. Although TVC is a lobbying organization, its sister organization, Traditional Values Education and Legal Institute, seeks to educate its members on legislative issues of pro-family concern, including the right

to life, pornography and obscenity, rights of parents, homosexual issues and religious liberty.

Seen by some as a conservative right-winger and Republican Party pawn, Louis Sheldon says he's neither. "I don't see myself on the right or on the left," he asserts. "I see myself on the Word of God."

His willingness to take a biblical stand on tough issues often makes Sheldon a target of strong criticism from the liberal press. Though not entirely impervious to the attacks, Sheldon says he does what he has to do, and if the press and media don't like it, that's tough.

"When your family perceives you as doing what is morally and biblically right, who cares what the Washington Post says?" Sheldon remarks.

Daughter Andrea Sheldon Lafferty, who serves as executive director of TVC in Washington, D.C., sees her father as a hero. "He's been called to a very difficult ministry," she told Charisma.

"Not many people have been willing to take a stand on the hard issues. My father has done it because he loves his country, and he values religious freedom."

During the years, many forces have helped to shape this pro-family advocate. Lou Sheldon applauds his father for instilling in him many of the values he holds dear today.

"My father impressed upon me the importance of the honor of my word," Sheldon admits. "He also taught me the virtue of hard work, responsibility and a suspicion of big government."

Jesus Is for Gentiles

When he was 8 years old, Sheldon had an experience that he says planted the seeds of salvation in his life and prophetically foretold the direction of his future ministry.

"One morning I was standing outside the apartment building in Washington, D.C., where I grew up, when a black man walked over to me and asked, 'Sonny boy, do you know or love my Jesus?'

"I didn't know who he was talking about," Sheldon quips. "I thought maybe Jesus was some new kid on the block.

"Then this man, who I later learned was a Pentecostal preacher, laid his hand on my shoulder, and I fell down [under the power of the Spirit]." The next thing Sheldon heard him say was: "Sonny boy, get up. The Lord thy God calls thee to be a prophet to the nations."

"I was scared to death," Sheldon recalls, "so I ran upstairs and told my Jewish mama what had happened." Sheldon remembers that his mother just laughed and laughed and finally said, "Don't worry about him; he's just a hallelujah person."

A few months later, while Sheldon was helping his mother with the wash in the basement of their apartment building, he heard someone playing the piano and singing about Jesus. Following the sound of the music to its source, he discovered the same black preacher he had encountered earlier.

"I stood there listening to him rap about Jesus being raised from the dead, the blood of Jesus and His lordship," Sheldon remembers. "After about 15 minutes, I felt a yank on my ear and heard my mama say, 'Don't forget, Jesus is only for Goya [Gentiles].'"

This was one time Sheldon's Jewish mama was dead wrong. In time, both his parents, as well as his older brother and three sisters, all gave their lives to the Lord. "I was the last holdout in the family," Sheldon admits.

One summer evening, when he was 16, his siblings tried to convince him to go with them to hear an evangelist at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Washington. "It was the last

thing I wanted to do," Sheldon remembers, "so I ran out of the apartment."

As he was leaving, Sheldon bumped into Beulah, one of his neighbors. He complained to her about his brother's wanting to drag him to a religious meeting. "The next thing I knew," Sheldon declares, "Beulah, who was slightly intoxicated from her nightly stop at the liquor store, reached down her blouse and pulled out a dollar bill from between her bosom.

"Throwing it in my direction, she said: 'Pal [his family nickname], you need old-time religion. Go get yourself some old-time religion.'"

Sheldon reluctantly made his way to the evangelistic service that night, where he went forward and received Christ. Following his conversion, he became very active in the church and its youth group. One year later, on Easter Sunday, 1951, Sheldon says he heard God's call to full-time ministry.

After graduating from Michigan State University, he entered Princeton Theological Seminary and was ordained in the United Presbyterian Church in 1960. Sheldon pastored several churches during the years but became increasingly discontent with his denomination's liberal views.

"I was always getting into trouble because I was too evangelistic and I stuck to the Bible," Sheldon says. "I woke up one morning and realized that my denomination had turned to the left while I had stayed on course with the Word of God." After moving to California in 1969, he switched his affiliation to the more conservative Presbyterian Church in America.

A family man with four grown children and nine grandchildren, Sheldon says his wife, Beverly, has had the greatest impact on him. "During those difficult years of my ministry, she made our home a castle," Sheldon emphasizes. "And when you are secure in your home with your wife and children, it lessens

the impact of being unhappy in your job.”

Mixing Religion and Politics

It was in California that Sheldon became friends with Herb Leo, a successful Anaheim businessman and community leader, who challenged his thinking about Christianity and politics. “I began to see that this nation was in the midst of a cultural meltdown,” Sheldon told Charisma.

“I discovered that there was a gigantic war going on behind the scene over issues like pornography, obscenity and abortion.”

He credits Leo with helping him to see “that we had to lift Christianity to a more spiritual activist status and that we needed to take a stand in the political arena.” With Leo’s backing and funding, Sheldon launched the California Coalition for Traditional Values in 1980. Their first successful efforts were directed toward shutting down a few strip clubs and porno shops in Anaheim.

Sheldon then began making trips to the state capital in Sacramento, where he successfully lobbied for Senate Bill 521. This bill amended the Civic Center Act of California to allow churches to use public facilities—schools in particular—during noninstructional hours on a renewable basis. Other successes followed, including the Abstinence Education Law, voted by CBS as the No. 1 piece of legislation in 1988.

During the Carter administration, Sheldon came to Washington with the vision of influencing leaders in national government. But it wasn’t until Ronald Reagan took office that TVC gained a national platform.

Opening their Washington-based office in 1989, TVC became one of the first organizations in the nation’s capital to champion pro-family values. In those early years Sheldon worked with Pat Robertson to help birth the Christian Freedom Council and

later, CBN University, serving as its first provost.

TVC has weathered many battles on Capitol Hill, but Sheldon says the most difficult one has been, and still is, the homosexual issue. "It's a can of worms," he admits. "Most politicians I know hate the issue because there's so much emotion and passion connected with it."

Homosexuality is not a problem for only a particular segment of society, Sheldon insists, because it strikes everywhere, even in the church. He's convinced that pastors have not been adequately prepared to deal with the homosexual issue, and therefore, they're running from it.

"We haven't done a good job in the church of teaching on sexuality, let alone on the problems of homosexuality," Sheldon declares.

Traditional Values Education and Legal Institute, the research arm of Sheldon's organization, has recently become aware of some of the homosexual projects that were funded under the Clinton administration.

"One project sent researchers into gay bars to count the number of drinks it took to seduce someone into having homosexual sex," Sheldon reports. "Our job is to point out projects such as these to leaders in government who have the power to cut off their funding."

The Boy Scout Protection Act, drafted by Rep. Todd Akin, R-Mo., is one of the current bills TVC is supporting. If passed, this bill will halt the ACLU's attempt to place homosexuals in leadership roles within the organization. It will uphold a former Supreme Court decision supporting the status of the Boy Scouts as a federally chartered organization and thereby giving it the freedom to choose its own leadership.

While TVC attempts to deal with the homosexual issue on several fronts, Sheldon believes there's really only one

answer. "Homosexuality is like a fog that will not be lifted by just passing laws," he emphasizes. "The only way the fog will lift is by revival."

A Voice in the Wilderness

A preacher at heart, Lou Sheldon can be found behind the pulpit of a church almost every Sunday, whether he is in Washington, D.C., a city in California or some other city across the United States. "My father has an unusual gift of being able to transcend denominationalism," says daughter Andrea. "He can speak at a large fundamental Bible church one Sunday and in a charismatic church the next."

He models what he preaches, Andrea insists. "He doesn't hold grudges. He doesn't gossip. He doesn't murmur. And there's not a prejudiced bone in his body."

"That's why TVC is unique among conservative groups. We truly represent the body of Christ denominationally and racially."

While some people would try to demonize Sheldon for his pro-family stance, Andrea describes her dad as a very kind and compassionate person. "He was a great example to all of us children growing up," she says.

"I can tell you of time after time when I'd come home from high school or college and find someone else living in our house. Whether they were single moms, victims of domestic violence or just people in need—my parents took them in."

His passion for the nation and his compassion for people keep Lou Sheldon traveling almost weekly between his home in California and his work on Capitol Hill. As far as the current atmosphere in Washington, Sheldon says it's as if he died and went to heaven.

"I didn't know how bad things were until I had this [current administration] to compare it to," he admits. "It's an

exciting time because we now have a president who is committed to strong biblical and moral principles.”

Although Bush can't do everything, Sheldon believes he can set an example. “No more Monica Lewinsky episodes. No more Jennifer Flowers and Paula Jones,” he says. Then with a grin, he adds, “And I'm positive when Bush leaves the White House, all the furniture and silverware will still be there.”

TVC continues to work on behalf of churches, seeking to create what Sheldon calls a “level playing field” in the political arena. Working with Rep. Phil Crane, R-Ill., and Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., TVC helped to draft the Bright Line Bill, which will allow churches to lobby for and influence legislation using up to 20 percent of their gross income.

Churches would also be allowed to endorse a particular candidate if they chose to do so. “We want to remove the fear from pastors' minds that their churches can't be involved [in the political process],” Sheldon explains.

Ultimately, Sheldon believes “the strength of America lies in her churches.” He cites the writings of French political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, who came to the United States in the 1830s to discover what made America great.

De Tocqueville wrote: “I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”

Just as de Tocqueville was convinced that “Americans held their faith to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions,” Sheldon believes the church still

holds the key to the maintenance of our government.

“While early Americans understood this basic truth, the church today hasn’t begun to catch the vision,” Sheldon declares. “When the Pilgrims wrote the Mayflower Compact, they were actually writing a theological document in legal language, and that document gives the church its impetus for today’s involvement in spreading the gospel and its involvement in public policy.”

If there is one thing Lou Sheldon would like to be remembered for, it would be that he helped to destroy what he calls the “Big Lie.”

“There is no separation of church and state,” he insists. “There always has been, and always will be, a role for Christianity and the gospel in American public policy.”

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