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Folder
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America, Christianity, and American Politics, 1980.

America, Christianity and American Politics
Daniel Jeremy Silver
October 26, 1980

This political campaign has been a relatively uninspiring one. There have been few political surprises. Perhaps the only unexpected event, so far, has been the emergence of a Christian voting block, conservative Christian right. This block, which is known as the Oral Majority or the Christian Voice, it has a dozen names, seems to be united by an agenda. This agenda includes the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment. A woman's place is in the home and she is to be protected by her husband. It includes a plank which is concerned with the presence of homosexuals in government, in the public schools, the role models in our society must be normal ones, ones that are approved in the West. It believes in the strengthening of anti-pornography campaigns. It's eager that libraries cull their shelves and schools check their curriculum to make sure that the books which are presented to the children are character building and uplifting. It believes in the return of prayer into the public schools and that the teaching of Genesis I, the Biblical story of creation, must have an equal place in science classes with the teaching of the theory of evolution. It believes that our national defense must be strengthened, America must be prepared to stand up for its rights against Godless atheists, Communists. Now the presence of a fundamentalist and evangelical group in Christianity is no surprise. The majority of Christians have always been of evangelical and fundamentalist persuasion, but what is surprising is the sudden eruption of energy, political energy, among these people because normally and historically the fundamentalist evangelicals among the Christians have withdrawn from the world of politics insofar as they are Christians. They believe in rendering unto Caesar the things that are unto Caesar and to God the things that are unto God, to quote the New Testament, that essentially the political world is out there, it is separate; their world is of the interior, of the soul, they're in the business of saving souls, the conversion, the inner space. And so America has not been for a long time accustomed to seeing these groups scurrying about organizing at the grass roots, seeing to it that born-again Christians are elected as delegates to the Democratic

and Republican National Convention, seeing to it that candidates who vote according to their agenda are rewarded by support. Candidates who vote against their agenda are actively and vigorously opposed.

Now we Jews have no similar revivalist, fundamentalist, evangelical group. We have no equivalent of a Jerry Falwell that suddenly burst out like a meteor on the American religious and political scene whose Old Testament Revival Hour commands an audience of six million people, whose Gospel Hour commands an annual income from free will donations of something over fifty-six million dollars a year, whose worship services and faith healing and preaching are heard on over three hundred television stations across our land, we have no equivalent in our tradition to the Jerry Falwells of the country and so we are a little bit confused and disturbed about what this movement means, what it portends, and we're asking the two questions we always ask when something new appears on the horizon: is it good for our country; and is it good for Jews. And those are the two questions to which I'd like to address myself this morning.

Now Jerry Falwell preaches what he calls a pro-life gospel. He always preaches with the good book in his hand. He always preaches the inurency of Scripture, that is, his statement and the statement of fundamentalist Christians generally, that the Bible has no error in it; it is true, all of it; it is the word of God completely; it is the bedrock against which values, character, virtue are to be judged. Insofar as there can be said to be a shape to the teachings of Mr. Falwell, they tend to be this. We are living in a permissive society. Our society is permissive because it has moved away from the old Christian virtue. Proof of the permissiveness and the failings of our society are the rates of divorce, the rates of suicide, the rates of delinquency, the obvious violence in our communities, the visibility of sexuality in our life, the corruptability of our governmental officials. One after another he delights to tick off the failings and the failures, the sad headlines to which we have all become accustomed. The solution? The reChristianization of America, and if Americans will turn back to the good book and to its teachings and build their lives

around it, then the way of life which made this country great, that made it prosperous and strong, will be ours again. Faith will translate itself into power and prosperity and success and our problems will be put behind us. And when he is not conducting his revival hour, Falwell is one of the founders of this group which is called The New Majority. The New Majority is a fourteen-month old organization which claims to represent thirty million born-again evangelical Christians whose number is obviously inflated. It claims to have registered some three million voters in the last six months, that number may not be inflated. It claims to represent the basic will of an America, of the old America, the true America, the America which will in this election begin to come back into its own.

How are we to assess this movement? What does it represent? Is it good for America? Is it good for the world? Is it good for Jews?

Let me begin with the good book. I think I know as much about it as Mr. Falwell at least, and let me remind you of a story in the good book, we call it the Torah, the story about our father, Jacob. Jacob, you will remember, was a juvenile delinquent. ^{Mr.} Falwell would have condemned him from his pulpit. Jacob had a twin named Esau. The twin was slightly older, he had been born first. Esau had the right to the birthright which meant a double portion to the family inheritance. As you recall, when his father, Isaac, became old and blind, was about to die, Jacob tricked Esau of the birthright and then, understandably, fearing his brother's revenge he lights out. He leaves Bersheva to save himself from the anger which he so rightly deserves. And that first night when he's out in the wilderness in the Negev he's alone, he's afraid of pursuit, he's afraid of the wild animals, he's probably afraid of robbers, enemies, he has no alternative but to lie down in the open air, he uses a stone for a rock, and then suddenly that night he has a dream. And in the dream he sees a ladder, its top reaches the heavens, and angels are descending and ascending the ladder, and from the top of the ladder, from the heavens, he hears God say to him: Jacob, fear not, wherever thou goest I will be with you.

And when he awakens the next morning the Bible put into his mouth these words: Verily, the Lord has been in this place and I did not know it. Now, most of us are like Jacob. We are born into a family. We are born into a religion. We are conditioned by the values of that religion and we accept in our home the calendar and the ritual and the ceremony of the religion. It's all very comfortable. Some of it is quite pleasant and quite pleasing and the songs and the idiom and the myth of the religion become interwoven with our soul. But it's all simply cultural. It's simply part of the conditioning which makes us what we are. And then along life's way there are suddenly moments, some call it mystical, some simply call it the sense of a presence, some call it seeing beyond that which is normally available to us for the senses. There are moments when we say, verily God is in this place and I knew it not. We've seen many sunsets. We've seen the beauty of many sunsets, but suddenly there's a moment where we see the mystery of the sunset, the creative majesty of God. There are many services. There are many moments of worship, but suddenly there's a Yom Kippur, there's a holy moment when we sense the spirit moving in the congregation, moving in the music, verily, God is in this place and I knew it not.

Now, this sense of the moving of spirit, the mysterious reality which is behind the reality that we know, the immediacy of the divine intruding into our lives, this sense of the spirit is what one means when one speaks of evangelical Christianity. It's not limited to the new Christian world, obviously. It occurs in all religions among all people and evangelism is the preaching of the gospel, the preaching of the good word, the preaching of the supposed saving power of faith in the Christ. And those who preach the gospel are seeking to have the spirit move in the hearts and in the souls of their congregations. And Protestant Christianity particularly has shaped its liturgy, shaped its worship, in order to stimulate the movement of the spirit. It's the great awakening of the spirit among its people.

I came home last night from Niagara Falls where there was a meeting of the Reform congregations in this region and when we came into the house we were tired.

We turned on the television and the first thing that came across the television was a program from Akron. It was a program of the evangelists, the revivalists, a man named Ernest Angley. I don't know if you've ever seen the program, but there in the front of the church were two rows of people in wheel chairs; and there was this little cherubic man standing on the pulpit, bouncing up and down on his toes, preaching the good word. And when he had spoken the word he then went down from the pulpit among these eighty or ninety people who had been wheeled into the church and entered a program of faith healing. And there were some who suddenly got up out of their wheel chairs and were able to take some steps, and he walked a few steps with them there and then he walked back. Well, faith healing has a long history among all religions - Lourdes, St. Anne de Bouppe - but what intrigued me and what is unique in this evangelical sense is that after he had walked with the few who were able to stand up for one reason or another he would say to them: have you been taken into the spirit, and then he would suddenly put his hand on their face and say: Christ be with you, and they would pull back and collapse into their chairs, their wheel chairs. The sense, the charisma of the moment, the sense of having been healed, the sense that something has happened, the sense that God is in this place, had come into the souls of those people and to many who were watching, and that sense, the movement of the spirit, is critical to Christian worship, particularly to Protestant worship. And why?

The answer goes to the very nature of Protestant Christianity. You will recall that Protestant Christianity grew up in opposition to the authority of the papacy, to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Church claimed to be the direct descendant of the disciples, that is, authority had passed down from Jesus to the disciples in a direct line to the disciples to the Church fathers, from the Church fathers to the presbetyrs, from the presbetyrs to the bishops, from the bishops to Rome. That was their authority, their authority to define Christian dogma, to define the doctrine, the catechism, the beliefs of the Church. Now, how could one oppose this claim of authority? Protestaht Christianity, you will remember, opposed

it on the basis of the individual's right to read Scripture himself and to interpret it on his own. When the Roman Catholic Church had locked away the Scripture from the people so that the magisterian, the teachings of the Church, could not be opposed by anybody reading the Bible and saying, that's not what it says, they brought the Bible front and center. When you go into a Protestant church the Bible is sitting there open on a lectern as a symbol of the authority, but if the authority is simply anyone reading in Scripture and saying what Scripture says, then it's man's reason, not God's word, which is the ultimate authority. So Protestant Christianity had not only to bring the Bible front and center and ^{to} declare the individual's right to read the Bible, but it had to assume that the person who was reading the Bible and interpreting it had already been touched by the spirit, that God had in a sense signaled that this person was qualified to read Scripture. And so you have that sense of authority which comes in the church that those who are called, the word we do not even use in Judaism, those who are called to preach are those for whom God has signaled His acceptance by allowing the Holy Spirit to move within them. So Protestant Christianity, in order to have authority to teach what it does teach, has had to focus its worship on evangelism, on the movement of the spirit, and to trust those who claim to have had rebirth, to have been born again into Christ, to trust those to interpret the Scripture and to teach true doctrine. It is out of this world that the Christian right comes. This is not a new world, this revivalist world, this evangelical world. It is as old as American Protestantism. Many of you will remember from your courses in American History that during the eighteenth century there was in New England and New Amsterdam what was called the great awakening, a time when across the New England countryside in almost every church people sensed the movement of the spirit, rose to testify that God had been with them, and went out to live by the gospel or to teach the gospel.

Now, we tend to associate revivalism and fundamentalism with the lower middle-class, with the tent meetings, with dancing to and fro, with the holy rollers, with gesticulation, but it need not be. In New England those who sensed the spirit

stayed staidly in their pews. Those who preached the spirit did not rant and rave and dance up and down their churches. The most successful revivalist of all was a man named Jonathan Edwards who was among the greatest theologians and thinkers that American Protestantism has produced. He is said to have read his sermons in a monotonous monotone. There was nothing charismatic about the man. There was something charismatic and captivating about the moment, the congregation, the sense, and there were conversions. There were men and women who came forward to say, I have sensed and I have accepted the Christ.

Timothy Dwight, the third president of Yale University, was among the great revivalist preachers of America. Many of you may have been in Finney Chapel at Oberlin. Dr. Finney who was the second or third president of Oberlin College was the greatest of the revivalist preachers in mid-nineteenth century America when there was another efflorescence of evangelism in our country.

Evangelism is not new. Evangelism is not necessarily conservative. Evangelism is not necessarily among the small town, semi-literate elements of American society. It became that largely as evangelism moved to the West, the mid-West and to the West, and as in the East new levels of culture and the needs for pluralistic urban living came into the society. And today the great evangelical churches, the congregations of the Jerry Falwells, consist largely of the elderly, the small town, the lonely, the invalid and those who are terribly terribly frightened by the changes that are coming over America. The appeal of evangelism is exactly like the appeal of the cults. It simplifies, tells you there are simple answers to the complexities of modern life. I often analogize what happens to an electrical circuit. If you overload the electrical circuit we have the breakers that come in, the fuses that blow, and suddenly either the circuit is turned off or the voltage, the power, is reduced so that you can handle it. When too much change batters against us, when it's more than we can bear, we turn off the present and the future, we cry for mother, we return to the past, we ask for simple answers, we turn to those who say it's all there, it's all been written, others have known it, here's the word.

Evangelism is always included whether it's in the eighteenth century or the nineteenth century or the twentieth century, an appeal to return to the past, an appeal to return to the eighteenth century, to the good old ways when Sunday was Sunday, that was the great issue of the first great awakening in New England. Sunday was to be God's day, three, four, five, six hours in service, no sports, no taverns, no walking about, worship, God's Sabbath.

And in the nineteenth century the return was to temperance and then to Prohibition. The revivalists of the pre-Civil War days created the first Prohibition movement in America, and we sometimes forget that five of the Eastern states had laws imposing Prohibition within state boundaries before the Civil War.

In our time? I read you the agenda. It's an agenda of return, older ways, to the familiar, to the way we think our parents' or our grandparents' homes may have been. The outbreak of evangelism is not new. This is not the first election when the born-again Christian has presented himself for the presidency of the United States. As a matter of fact it's the fact that there was a born-again Christian presenting himself as a candidate for the presidency four years ago which kept, I believe, the evangelist movement down at the time. They felt that Jimmy Carter would carry out their agenda, and their anger now is directed against Mr. Carter because he has failed them, in their terms, because his agenda turned out not to be theirs. And so this new right has been largely pro-Reagan, determined to have the pro-life elements that were added to the Republican platform added that won those battles, and they believe with perfect faith that if Mr. Reagan comes into the White House their agenda will have priority.

Now, that aside, what are the theological elements which unite this group together? First off, they believe in the inerrancy and the authority of Scripture. They believe that Scripture is to be taken literally. Scripture represents the word of God. They believe in the right of each individual to interpret Scripture moved by the spirit, the Holy Spirit, that is they reject the scholarly approach, the academic approach, they reject the approach to Scripture that you or I might take or a

Roman Catholic priest might take, that we are misguided or misled or bringing the wrong kinds of attitudes towards Scripture, theirs are the ones which determine what it is that Scripture says. They believe in the incarnation which is to say they believe that Jesus was the son of God incarnate, that he died for mankind's sins to relieve man of the burden of Original Sin and that belief in the miracle that God suffered for man and redeems man by His suffering is the way to salvation. They believe that man is by nature evil and that is why they appeal to sinners because they tell you everyone is a sinner, I am a sinner, come and sinners together we will find the way to have the Spirit move into our lives. They believe in justification by faith rather than by justification by works which is to say they believe that it is not the merit of a man's life, the sum and substance of human beings' actions which determines whether or not they will enter heaven but whether or not they affirm the Christ. They share in the justification by faith. It is this kind of attitude which caused a man like Bradford Smith a few weeks ago to make his now famous statement that the prayers of Jews are not heard by God. It follows directly as night the day from the theology which fundamental Christianity in this form espouses. And finally, they believe in the miracle of the spirit. ^{that} the spirit is everywhere, that if men will only align themselves with the spirit their lives can be transformed, they can be saved; in that transformation we come alive, there's a great awakening within us, we cease to be crippled by our libido, by our weaknesses, by our passions, we can grasp with alcoholism, we can deal with our fears, we can come alive as full human beings. Those are the beliefs which bind them together theologically. These are the beliefs from which they spring out to their political work which has to do with reestablishing the family as the center of American life, reestablishing the old virtues as the basic virtues of American society. Not a bad set of ideas, really, except - except that ours is a pluralistic society. And, unfortunately, those who have seen the light are not amenable to reason. Politics is the art of arbitration, it's the art of compromise. But once you have seen the light how can you compromise with the truth?

You can't give the devil the right to speak, only truth has the right to be heard. And unfortunately there's a sharp edge to the political side of evangelism, to the political side of the new right which is intolerant of other opinions, which would impose upon us their values and their way.

Is it good for America? I don't think it's ever good for a group of people to turn away from their problems. You can't go back to the womb. You've got to go ahead, to accept your world for what it is and to deal with it as it is. We can't return from the big city to the small town. The big cities are here to stay. Urban life with all of its problems is going to be the context in which we and our children live. The population, demography, requires it. We can't solve all of the problems of the world by force. Clearly, it's the battle for men's minds as well as for physical power. It's never good for a major part of the society to turn away from the problems which face the society. It's never good for an element in the society to think that it can impose its ways, in terms of its assumed values and morality, upon the rest of the society if for good and moral reasons others in the society disagree with them.

Now, here the new right is not alone. There have been many groups in our society who have been eager to impose upon us in recent years their concepts of morality, and one of the things that concerns me the most about the nature of our society is the number of crusaders out there who have seen the light and who know only that their light is the true way, the way which will guide us into the future.

But at the same time I think those who have argued with great anger that this new right is somehow un (Rabbi, changing from tape 1 to another tape)

it had another agenda. If you look at the activities of the National Council of Churches or the various national bodies of the various mainline denominations you would see that they, too, have kept box scores on how Congress ^{people} voted on particular issues. What was different is the issue, not the method. We're a political society. One has to deal with politics, but the left, the mainline churches, were concerned with gun control. They were concerned with desegregation. They were concerned

with affirmative action. They were concerned with welfare reform. They were concerned with the extension of Social Security. This was their agenda. It's very different from the agenda of the Christian Right, but in an open society there is the right of everyone to go out into the political arena and to deal openly with the issues. The only thing that we hope is that they will deal with each other politically, that is ultimately compromise, ultimately achieve a modis vivendi and not extremism on one side or on the other. We have to choose where we stand on particular issues and if my sympathies lie, as they do, largely with those of the mainline churches it does not mean that I can simply read out and deny to these evangelists their right to be heard and to test themselves and their numbers at the voting booth and in the local political meetings.

Is it good for Jews? It's hard to say. Extremism is never good for the Jewish people. We're a moderate group. We have our extremists, surely, but most of us tend to want to walk our way to make the adjustments which are necessary for social life.

Is it good for Jews? Most of our agenda favors those of the mainline churches and insofar as some of these agenda items are made into law they will restrict rights and freedoms which we have taken for granted.

Is it good for Jews? In a volume that he published recently Jerry Falwell has a chapter about Israel. In that chapter he makes a defense of Israel's policies, including those of Mr. Begin, which is stronger and more extreme than any I might be tempted to make before the most rabid Zionist audience. Why? Well, in part because of theology. The return of the Jewish people to the land, the Promised Land, has always been one of the tenets of fundamentalist Christian messianism. Our return to the land precedes the Second Coming according to this Christian doctrine. But that's only part of the story. The other part of the story goes to the very nature of the Israeli society. Israel is the one country that has stood up and defended itself. It is the very model of what this fundamentalist Christian Right group wants to see the rest

of the West, and particularly our country, do. No more compromise with those whose ways of life do not agree with us. We have only contempt for what they stand for, we say. Let's stand up for our rights. Let's defend ourselves. The new Right is shocked by the ransoming or the attempt to ransom the hostages in Vietnam. The new Right supported the kind of military action that was temporarily attempted a few months ago to bring the hostages out. And Israel represents to them society, a Western society, a free society, a Bible-oriented society which is doing what they would like to see America do. And in that sense they are among the most consistent and dependable of the Allies which the State of Israel has in the United States.

Is it good for Jews? I don't know. Like all things in life the answer is yes and no, the paradox. Divisiveness is never good for us. Out of the rants of the most fervent Christians have always come the most fervent anti-semites. The New Testament is a source of much of Christian anti-semitism where the Jew was the Christ-killer, the Jew preferring the freeing of Barabas the murderer to Christ, the God. The New Testament is also the source of many gentle virtues and insofar as these are appreciated and understood it can't hurt. There is the support of Israel.

Pick, choose, make your own decision. How strong is the new Right? I suspect that they've gotten more space in the papers than they would have gotten had this been a different kind of election and had the candidates for the presidency said things worth quoting and worth discussing. There's been a desperate search these last weeks and months by those legions of newspaper reporters and columnists who spend their days following the presidential candidates, so they have to make news and they find news. But there is something new here and it's something that whoever is elected President this November will have to contend with. It's the simple fact that not only the minorities, Indian, Chicano, black, not only are the minorities hurting in America, and hurting they are, but there are a large group of whites who are hurting, the elderly, the left-behind. And there are a large group of whites who are confused as they see their standards of living dropping, as they see their communities becoming ever more violent, and that without negating in any way our concerns

over here, the social welfare and racial justice, there also must be a balanced concern over here when the elderly and the impoverished, those who have worked all their lives and can't survive now in their old age, with those who are accustomed to one way of life and see their children and grandchildren moving out into a way of life that they don't understand, who are surrounded by a world which is not of their making. These, too, must be cared for in some way and helped through a very dangerous passage. How do we do it? I don't know yet. Financial support? Obviously. But I suspect more than that somebody, some way, must find the ability, the voice, to explain to America what no one has been explaining in the last years. Where are we going and how are we going to get there? What are the values by which we live and how are we going to sustain those values? What is the shape of the new society and how are individuals going to be able to adjust to shape their lives so that they can fit within it?

That's the challenge for our national leadership, but unfortunately, no one has been verbalizing the images and forming the language which would make this clear to the American people. The past is behind us. However much they rail against the present the new Right will not be able to resurrect what has been. We're going to have to live in a new world. But people need a vision, that's what religion is all about. People need a hope, that's what religion's all about. That's why Christianity and Judaism and all the cults are being turned to again because people want a vision. There must be a national vision. There is a civil religion and there must be a national vision. Somebody must give them that vision. In a campaign which has been featured and fashioned by those who are seeking only to get one or another candidate through November is not the kind of campaign which allows a spokesman to emerge to present the vision.

The new Right, the new Christian Right, is here to stay. It is not as strong as it seems to be. It's more desperate than some think it to be. Many of its values, as I suggested, are good. Many of its methods are questionable, some unconscionable. We're going to have to deal with the needs which are being expressed

even as we've slowly learned to deal with the needs which are being expressed over here.

For Judaism one last word. Judaism, too, is going to have to find a way to allow the spirit to move, the spirit which encourages, the spirit which enlivens. We've been a great rational tradition in the last hundred years. There has to be more. Somehow in some way we are going to have to create the forms which will allow us to say, verily God is in this place. My faith is awakened because we, too, cannot live by reason alone. We, too, need faith and encouragement, and I pray that somehow in our liberal tradition this faith will emerge before liberals among us turn back to our fundamentalisms and our neo-orthodoxies and our people who are convinced that they know the right and who will not compromise their light.



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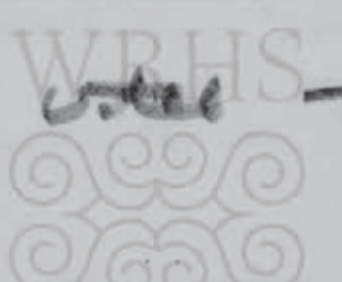
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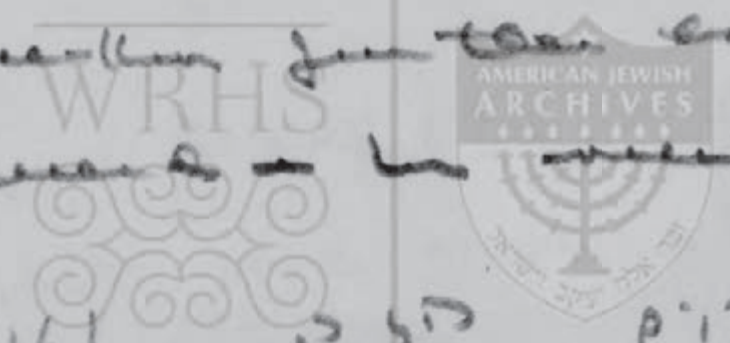
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go - We are waiting for you every day in
Bates and we are in the



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the incarnation - the house
can be saved except through
Christ - and the house is
the most brilliant prophetic
truth - and the house of the

Baker
 Smith

JUSTICE of the house by the house

20 minutes since it is very small -
can enter my life -

The next appeal - in case of Federer School - there is
a large - sample - case fund of the fund,
of your substance - [substantially - and appeal
as well] concern has not been received but
as fund the fund - the same future
last, is done - the people the appeal of cases

people of the year

WRHS



to the year of the

note - No failure of

WORLD IS OVER but

and a miracle that

and not some people believe - the people
appeal - include (already) include - some
include see / also see include / include /
include / include / include / include / include /
include / include / include / include / include /
include / include / include / include / include /

2. and year for the people - No change

to some people of people see the the

Awakened me ^{quickly} ~~early~~ center - My house seen
be large - lighted in mid and ~~the~~ - Red
to see inner in blond & colored - an C crusade
public room separate preaching house it is
No one of accommodation

The ^{devil} ~~house~~ has no stopping

2 14th - cent. - the great renewed meeting and the
center 1 the universe & immediate movement -
2 the world and a for order and help show -
3 the openness the single center - End of the
the water - but the center in the center of the

The issue is to have school support
What is done in the house - and

the center of the center

the center of the center

So the renewed meeting - more center
about the center & public - the the center of the center
- Center the pro-life agenda center - the
of center the center of the center of the center
the center of the center of the center of the center
cupped public / the center of the center of the center
document / the center of the center of the center
the center of the center of the center of the center

But how the more in one for Xth to remember -
Ourselves in any way test and in right to be heard -

The matter is not lost any one being
sincerely absent - but that we don't
leave me of what we are about -

I hope that that will see how we are a bit
reverted to last 20 years -

11 we left behind ^{just} followed and we
you

Left ⁴ conversations
Heard myself in an English as he had right -

~~about~~ As the movement just to for you -

By the way

One was some small - what was
slender self - Frederick what it is in his hand
made conversations

case for support of small - slender what

on all conversations - probably to be small

done of 2nd Carry

11 conversations to be small

of it slender up to
about 11 conversations

Page 1 of 1
band

On the band the way of Xth Lane / page or
public name - the band band /
most and band band band -
computer band band / band band band
Public band band band band

Band band band band band band band
band

WRHS



band band band band band band
band band band band band band