

Falwell Builds his Legacy

by Bill Berkowitz

Fifty years behind the pulpit and 30 years in the political spotlight have not slowed the Reverend Jerry Falwell

After 50 years behind the pulpit at the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, and nearly 30 years in the political spotlight, the Rev. Jerry Falwell has a lot to be proud of. While he hasn't achieved the iconic status of the Rev. Billy Graham, and his books have not sold the millions of copies that Tim LaHaye's "Left Behind" series of apocalyptic novels or megachurch Pastor Rick Warren's "The Purpose Driven Life," have, Falwell has been a major player in the changing political landscape over the past three decades. Now, though still a potent political figure, he has set about to solidify a permanent monument to his life's work; building a multi-million dollar endowment for his thoroughly Christian Liberty University.

In the late 1970s, Paul Weyrich, widely considered as the guru of the modern conservative movement, Terry Dolan, Richard Viguerie, the godfather of conservative direct mail, and Howard Phillips left Christian Voice and tapped Falwell, then a relatively unknown televangelist to head up a new organization called the Moral Majority. Over the years, as the Reverend became more influential politically, he became a favored guest on cable television's news programs.

From his pre-Moral Majority days, when he preached against religious folk supporting the civil rights movement, to his support for President Ronald Reagan-backed contra movements in Central America and Africa, movements that were responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people, to his invective against Nelson Mandela and South Africa's African National Congress and his support for the apartheid regime, Falwell has been a Republican Party stalwart and a dependable voice of reaction. From accusing Tinky-Winky, a character on the popular British children's television show "Teletubbies," of being gay, to being involved in a video entitled, "The Clinton Chronicles: An Investigation into the Alleged Criminal Activities of Bill Clinton," which accused President Bill Clinton of being involved in a covert cocaine-smuggling operation, to blaming pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and the American Civil Liberties Union for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Falwell has had more than his fair share of embarrassing moments.

Shortly after the Twin Towers fell, Falwell appeared on Pat Robertson's 700 Club, and said: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'"

Falwell was later pressured into issuing an apology.

From accepting a \$3.5 million donation from the Unification Church's Rev. Sum Myung Moon in 1994 to allow his then-struggling Liberty University -- a school founded in 1971 "to develop Christ-centered men and women with the values, knowledge and skills essential to impact tomorrow's world" -- to put its financial house in order, to currently presiding over a major expansion -- including a new law school, 10 dormitories, a football clubhouse and a chapel -- of the Lynchburg campus, Falwell has had the magic touch attracting wealthy conservative benefactors and philanthropists.

Coming home to Lynchburg After graduating from Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Mo., at the age of 22, Falwell "returned to his hometown and started his church with 35 members in an old Donald Duck soda bottling plant," an Associated Press story pointed out in late June. Falwell told the AP that they "scraped syrup off the floors and walls," to get the building into shape. To build a congregation, he "began knocking on 100 doors a day, six days a week," he said. A year later, Falwell's Thomas Road Church had 864 members; it now has nearly 25,000.

"Within a few weeks of starting the church, Falwell found a way to expand his reach quickly -- first with a radio program, then a live Sunday night television show -- the "Old Time Gospel Hour" -- on the Lynchburg ABC affiliate. In 1956, the move was bold," AP noted.

"Nobody else was doing it," Falwell said. In his interview with AP, Falwell dated his political activism to the

Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade ruling that established a woman's right to an abortion. "Believing life begins at conception, I became very exercised over this," he said. With Falwell at the helm, the Moral Majority, founded in 1979 (dissolved in 1989), prospered. And, unlike some of his televangelist brethren -- among them, Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker -- who were severely wounded by sexual and financial scandals, Falwell's enterprises prospered throughout the 1980s. Building the future of Liberty University

Now, in his early seventies and having recovered from being seriously ill last year, Falwell is focused on making Liberty University his everlasting legacy. Liberty University's 4,400 acre campus is home to 9,600 students and another 15,000 are enrolled in its distance learning program. "Falwell's goal is to have 25,000 on the campus in 13 years," the Associated Press reported. The university offers B.A.s from its college of arts and sciences, its schools of business, communication, education and religion, and it offers graduate degrees in 15 programs. Athletics plays a major role on campus; Liberty participates in 18 NCAA division-1 programs.

In a lengthy profile of Liberty University in Forbes magazine (September 18, 2006), Dirk Smillie wrote:

Religious instruction permeates academic and social life. Prayer leaders minister to groups of five students, who must attend chapel three times a week; the school prides itself on turning out 'champions of Christ' who take the Bible literally, believe in creationism, political conservatism and free enterprise. The law school preaches that separation of church and state was never intended by the founders. Students must submit to random drug tests and adhere to hair and dress codes. Coed dorms, partying and sexual promiscuity are out. Anyone involved with 'witchcraft, seances or other satanic or demonic activity,' warns the student handbook, will be slapped with a \$500 fine and 30 hours of community service.

The Forbes story also pointed out that Falwell, the school's chancellor, and his son, Jerry Jr., its vice chancellor, have been experiencing some tough sledding raising money to grow Liberty University. At the same time, Jerry Jr. has been focused on a number of real estate ventures. One project -- together with a real estate developer -- involves the building of a ski resort on Lynchburg's Candler's Mountain.

"Reverend Falwell, who used his television ministry [The Jerry Falwell Ministries] to raise \$2 billion for conservative causes in the 1980s, isn't the money machine he once was," the Forbes piece pointed out. "He and his son have spent the last few years battling to work off \$100 million-plus in debt, just as donations to Falwell Sr.'s Thomas Road Baptist Church, the university's onetime key benefactor, have shriveled. At the same time father and son have towering ambitions: They're looking to raise \$1 billion to solidify Liberty's legacy as a West Point for the faithful."

Despite the financial setbacks, the Falwells continued to move ahead with more than \$80 million in campus construction projects. "Nearly half that sum is being spent to transform a million-square-foot former Ericsson plant bordering the campus into a new law school and a larger site for the church. The mammoth building came courtesy of an \$11 million purchase on Liberty's behalf in 2004 by David Green, chief executive of retailing giant Hobby Lobby Creative Centers and a big backer of evangelical education."

In less than a decade, "Jerry Jr. and his private development firm have raised \$100 million or so via sales of land and leaseholds to pull in retailers -- Wal-Mart, Kohl's, Staples and Circuit City, plus a dozen restaurant chains -- around Liberty's campus. 'Jerry Jr. is a one-man real estate boom,' Christopher Doyle, vice president at CB Richard Ellis and the Falwells' point guy on the Candler's development, told Forbes.

Liberty also found a savior in life insurance mogul and Forbes 400 member Arthur L. Williams, who has dropped \$70 million into the kitty. His biggest gift came in 1997 with the proviso that he be allowed to send his finance chief to scrutinize Liberty's books. It came out that the source of Liberty's ramshackle financial state was an overreliance on donations from Falwell's diminishing TV ministry. Williams also urged him to scale back his other ministries and make Liberty the focus of the family business. 'Jerry Falwell is one tough dude,' Williams says. "He refused to let his dream die." Williams has created a few of his own: His \$12 million for a new basketball arena and football stadium helped recruit University of Virginia coach

Danny Rocco for the upcoming season. Other big gifts have come in from the likes of apocalyptic Christian novelist Tim LaHaye, whose \$7 million helped to build an ice rink and a student center with five basketball courts and an Olympic-size pool.

The Moral Majority officially shut down in 1989, replaced by the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council and a host of other conservative Christian organizations. However, 15 years later, Falwell, seeing a political opening and hoping to re-connect with his funding base, announced the formation of an organization called The Moral Majority Coalition, which he characterized as a "21st century resurrection of the Moral Majority."

As the mending-fences visit of Sen. John McCain to the Liberty University campus earlier this year, Falwell's continued deep involvement in high-level GOP politics, and his connection to the development of Christians United for Israel -- the brainchild of Texas Pastor John Hagee -- has shown, the Reverend isn't only about setting up multi-million dollar endowments and fashioning impressive real estate deals. Nearly 30 years after entering the political fray, Falwell still has formidable political clout.

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