

The Legacy of Jerry Falwell

by Cal_Thomas

Reverend Jerry Falwell, who died in his office on Tuesday at the age 73, was a seminal figure in the rise of what liberals despairingly called the "Religious Right." Without him, it is doubtful Christian fundamentalist, Evangelical Christians and conservative Roman Catholics would ever have mobilized into the significant voting bloc that elected Ronald Reagan twice, George H.W. Bush once and the current President Bush.

As a vice president of the Moral Majority from 1980 to 1985, I witnessed the rise of this movement from the inside. It had its positives, including a focus on "moral issues," such as abortion, same-sex marriage, a strong national defense and the cultural decline of the nation and the registering of many previously inactive people to participate in the political life of their nation. All of these remain hot-button issues.

The movement also had its downside, because it tended to detract from a Christian's primary responsibility of telling people the "good news" that redemption comes only through Jesus Christ. At times, this central message seemed to be replaced by one suggesting that a shortcut to moral renewal might come through Washington and the Republican Party.

Mainstream media loved the story of Christian conservatives coming out of the political catacombs, because it created controversy. The daily battles between left and right and between the religious and secular sometimes resembled professional wrestling in their intensity and animosity. TV program bookers searched for the most outrageous and extreme people to "debate" Falwell because it brought them high ratings, if not understanding and consensus.

Bill Moyers hosted a TV special in 1980 on which he wondered where these religious conservatives had come from. Most of the media had missed the growing outrage at what conservatives regarded as liberal intrusion into their sacred traditions. The outlawing of prayer in public schools in the early "60s had deeply affected them. They had prayed as children and they wondered why the Supreme Court would not allow their children to pray or read the Bible in public schools.

It was the high court's 1973 abortion ruling, however, that became the tipping point for religious conservatives. Falwell began to preach against abortion and to address what he regarded as a crumbling of America's moral underpinnings. People who had heard him preach against the danger to the church when it became entangled with politics suddenly began hearing a different message. Falwell, whose most famous sermon on the subject, preached in 1965, was called "Ministers and Marches" in which he opposed Dr. Martin Luther King's political activism, began to follow King "at least into the political arena. Falwell had credibility with a large number of conservative pastors, because he knew them and because they, too, were concerned about the direction of the country.

The flaw in the movement was the perception that the church had become an appendage to the Republican Party and one more special interest group to be pampered. If one examines the results of the Moral Majority's agenda, little was accomplished in the political arena and much was lost in the spiritual realm, as many came to believe that to be a Christian meant you also must be "converted" to the Republican Party and adopt the GOP agenda and its tactics.

One had only to look at the history of the religious left to see the danger in a shotgun marriage between church and state. Most liberal theologians long ago gave up preaching about another king and another kingdom in favor of baptizing the earthly agenda of the Democratic Party. That too many conservative Christians followed their liberal opposites into the same error was to their shame and demonstrated they had missed an important lesson.

Jerry Falwell did not fit the stereotype many sought to impose on him. He had a wicked sense of humor and he could be very generous. I once took him to a meeting of inner-city pastors and disadvantaged children in Washington, D.C. One young boy particularly impressed him and Jerry asked the boy to ride with him to the airport. The boy told him he'd like to go to college and Jerry gave him his phone number, saying, "When you graduate from high school, call me. You will have a full scholarship at Liberty University." The boy's father cried. So did I.

Jerry liked to say that when he passed away, they'd put "and the beggar died" on his tombstone because he was constantly asking for money. That won't happen. His legacy will be his university. He once said he wanted it to be like Harvard. All of the rest is "wood, hay and stubble."

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