



## Falwell's legacy: faith, hate or Teletubbies?

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CNN

(CNN) -- "When I have children one day," Samantha Krieger of Dallas, Texas, wrote to CNN.com, "they will know of the legacy that Dr. Jerry Falwell left."

But what will that legacy be?

To Krieger, who had personal connections to Falwell -- she attended the college he founded; he officiated at her wedding; her husband was his nurse -- the evangelist "was a great leader and hero."

Victoria Kidd of Winchester, Virginia, believes the exact opposite: "The damage he has done to the Christian faith is immeasurable," she wrote to CNN.com

Others would prefer to think that he has no legacy at all.

"He should be erased from every history book and media story," wrote Brian Pippinger of St. Petersburg, Florida.

Jerry Falwell was the evangelical minister who founded the Moral Majority, the Christian right political movement, in 1980. He died Tuesday at age 73, and it's clear from the differing assessments of his legacy that he was a controversial figure.

**Matt Foreman, head of the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, calls Falwell "a founder and leader of America's anti-gay industry. His lasting legacy will be the polarization of the American electorate and the rise of Christian evangelicals as a political force in American politics."**

Gene Mims, a trustee of Liberty University, which Falwell founded as Lynchburg Baptist College in 1971, says he "pulled us all towards faith." More narrowly, Mims says that Falwell's founding of the university will be his specific, lasting legacy. "For the past 10 years, that was his focus."

That seems to be what the Rev. Billy Graham believes, as well. "His accomplishments went beyond most clergy of his generation," Graham said in a statement. "Some of my grandchildren have attended, and are attending, Liberty University. "

Susan Friend Harding, a professor of anthropology at the University of California Santa Cruz, studied Falwell and his movement beginning in the 1980s, culminating in a book published in 2000, "The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics."

"I see him as a major figure in American political and religious history," says Harding, who considers him the principal leader who brought fundamentalists back into the mainstream of

society. "Jerry Falwell led fundamentalism out of political and cultural exile in the 1980s. He did so most famously as the leader of the Moral Majority in 1980s, but also through his national radio and TV ministry, Liberty University and countless sermons, campaigns, rallies, speeches, publications, broadcasts and debates over his 50-year career as a preacher. Under his leadership, fundamentalists transformed themselves from a marginal, anti-worldly separatist people into a visible and vocal force and reintroduced vigorous religious speech into American public life.

"Fundamentalists had been a separatist movement," Harding says, "which was stigmatized even by other Protestants" for three-quarters of a century, ever since their "self-imposed exile" after the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, which was ostensibly about the teaching of evolution in the schools, but in effect put fundamentalist intolerance on trial. "Falwell openly and actively disavowed the separatism."

Before Falwell, in the world of fundamentalist evangelicals, Harding says, "being a minister or a missionary was the highest calling. Now it's to be a Supreme Court justice, or the president of the United States. Or a lawyer, doctor, corporate executive, journalist, filmmaker, you name it. It even means being a teacher -- including of biology -- in all the school systems."

Falwell helped break down the walls of the separatism in many ways. "True fundamentalists didn't have friendships, even with other fundamentalists who associated with non-fundamentalists," Harding says. "Falwell said this was wrong; we're going to stop having religious tests. He included you if you supported his agenda -- an agenda that involved attacking other groups."

To many critics, this paradox is what makes his legacy so lamentable. "He made it comfortable for churches to get actively involved in politics," says the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. "His strategy will be continued by his would-be successors -- a focus on hot-button issues like gay marriage (rather than significant moral issues like child poverty and health care), and an eagerness to make outrageous statements to the media, in order to build a religious-political empire."

Many now remember him most for outrageous statements he made after leaving the Moral Majority -- in 1999, his house organ the National Liberty Journal warned parents that the Tinky Winky TV character was secretly gay and morally dangerous; in 2001, he blamed the September 11 terrorist attack on "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."

Susan Friend Harding sees these as his King Lear moments. "He had already lost power by then. It's sad to think he'll be remembered for his remark about Teletubbies."