



Loathed by liberals, Falwell was force among right-wing

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(CNN) -- The son of an alcoholic who sold bootleg whiskey during Prohibition, Jerry Falwell was the father of a movement to restore America as God's country.

Falwell died Tuesday at age 73.

A big thinker from a small town, Falwell began humbly in Lynchburg, Virginia, with 35 members of his Thomas Road Baptist Church at its first Sunday worship service in 1952. The church became a mega-sanctuary with 24,000 worshippers today, according to the church Web site.

His church's first offering was \$135. Thomas Road Church now banks \$200 million annually, according to the Web site.

On the heels of 1973's Roe v. Wade case, the Supreme Court ruling that gave women the right to have an abortion, Falwell was spurred to create the Moral Majority in the late 1970s.

Using the organization as a pulpit to rail against abortion, pornography and a host of other issues he deemed in defiance of God's will, Falwell became a lightning rod for controversy, famously saying AIDS is God's punishment for homosexuality.

Falwell joined singer Anita Bryant's 1977 campaign to revoke a South Florida ordinance that gave equal rights to gays and lesbians.

The Moral Majority aligned itself with the Republican party, taking credit for helping to elect Ronald Reagan in 1980.

In his 1980 book, "Listen, America!" Falwell said religious voters "cannot be silent about the sins that are destroying this nation," which he identified as pornography, abortion, "amoral liberals," drugs, welfare and the abandonment of biblical morality.

"If Americans will face the truth, our nation can be turned around and can be saved from the evils and the destruction that have fallen upon every other nation that has turned its back on God," he wrote.

"There is no excuse for what is happening in our country. We must, from the highest office in the land right down to the shoeshine boy in the airport, have a return to biblical basics."

A visionary to some, enemy to others

To right-leaning devotees, Falwell was a visionary.

Former President George H.W. Bush once said, "Jerry -- I'm glad to have been introduced by a loyal friend ... "

Falwell once said "Get them saved, baptized and registered."

But former President Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, once remarked of the fundamentalist leader, "In a very Christian way, as far as I'm concerned, he can go to hell!"

In the 1990s, Falwell used his television and radio shows to promote a videotape called "The Clinton Chronicles," which alleged that then-President Bill Clinton was at the center of a criminal conspiracy involving drug dealing and murder.

In the 2000 presidential race, Sen. John McCain singled out Falwell and the Rev. Pat Robertson as "agents of intolerance" within the Republican Party.

McCain lost his bid for the GOP nomination to then-Texas Gov. George Bush after a decisive primary battle in South Carolina, in which Falwell and Robertson lined up behind Bush.

But in gearing up for a second run in 2008, McCain received a warm reception when he addressed Falwell's Liberty University during its 2006 commencement.

Falwell drew the ire of many people, regardless of their their political leanings, when he said that the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 were caused by abortion providers, feminists and what he called a morally weak nation that grants too many rights to gays.

"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," he said. "I point the finger in their face and say 'You helped this happen.' "

A day later, he told CNN that he would "never blame any human being except the terrorists, and if I left that impression with gays or lesbians or anyone else, I apologize."

In 1999, an article in "Jerry Falwell's National Liberty Journal" accused the creators of the PBS children's series "Teletubbies" of using the character "Tinky Winky" to promote a homosexual agenda.

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, extended condolences to those close to Falwell. He told The Associated Press that the leader will always be remembered for his anti-gay comments.

"Unfortunately, we will always remember him as a founder and leader of America's anti-gay industry, someone who exacerbated the nation's appalling response to the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic, someone who demonized and vilified us for political gain and someone who used religion to divide rather than unite our nation."