



Moral Majority founder Falwell dies

Evangelical leader, 73, was found unconscious in his university office

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LYNCHBURG, Va. - The Rev. Jerry Falwell, the television evangelist who founded the Moral Majority and used it to mold the religious right into a political force, died Tuesday shortly after being found unconscious in his office at Liberty University. He was 73.

Ron Godwin, Liberty's executive vice president, said Falwell had been found unresponsive around 10:45 a.m. and was taken to Lynchburg General Hospital.

Godwin said he was not sure what caused the collapse but noted that Falwell had "a history of heart challenges."

"I had breakfast with him, and he was fine at breakfast," Godwin said. "He went to his office, I went to mine and they found him unresponsive."

Dr. Carl Moore, Falwell's physician, said the evangelist had had a heart rhythm abnormality. He said Falwell was found without a pulse and never regained consciousness.

Falwell had made careful preparations for a transition of his leadership to his two sons, Godwin said. "He has left instructions for those of us who had to carry on, and we will be faithful to that charge," Godwin said.

Falwell survived two serious health scares in early 2005. He was hospitalized in February for two weeks with what was described as a viral infection, then hospitalized again in March with congestive heart failure after being found unconscious. At that time he had to be resuscitated by EMTs at the hospital emergency room.

President Bush issued a statement after Falwell's death, saying, "Jerry lived a life of faith and called upon men and women of all backgrounds to believe in God and serve their communities. One of his lasting contributions was the establishment of the Liberty University, where he taught young people to remain true to their convictions, and rely upon God's word throughout each stage of their lives.

"Today, our thoughts and prayers are with his wife Macel and the rest of the Falwell family."

Politically powerful

Falwell, a television evangelist who founded the Moral Majority in 1979, became the face of the religious right in the 1980s. He later founded the conservative Liberty University, which began as Lynchburg Baptist College in 1971, and served as its chancellor.

"Jerry has been a tower of strength on many of the moral issues which have confronted our nation," fellow evangelist Pat Robertson said Tuesday.

Born on Aug. 11, 1933, Falwell was not particularly religious until his sophomore year of college in 1952, when Falwell said he underwent a religious conversion. Instead of accepting an offer to

play professional baseball with the St. Louis Cardinals, he transferred to the Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Mo.

Four years later, Falwell returned to Lynchburg, where he founded Thomas Road Baptist Church, which started with 35 members. Today, the church has 24,000 members and the annual revenues of all of his ministries total more than \$200 million, according to his biography on Liberty University's Web site.

Falwell started taking on political causes in the late 1970s. He stood for voluntary prayer in schools, balanced budgets, military strength and aid to Israel. And he stood against the Equal Rights Amendment, pornography, abortion, homosexuality, gambling and rock music.

Falwell believed that the Bible was "the inerrant Word of God, and totally accurate in all respects."

He took that conviction in the Bible to his rallies. "If a man stands by this book, vote for him," he was quoted by Time magazine as saying at one rally in 1979. "If he doesn't, don't."

The Moral Majority's stated mission was to "reverse the politicization of immorality in our society." In the 1980s, Falwell's group claimed 6.5 million members, raising \$69 million for conservative politicians and helping to elect Ronald Reagan president in 1980.

In 1986 Falwell founded the Liberty Foundation as a way to broaden his base. Other victories attributed to his influence include the election of President George H.W. Bush in 1988, several conservative Supreme Court decisions and influencing the creation of the powerful Christian Coalition.

"I shudder to think where the country would be right now if the religious right had not evolved," Falwell said when he stepped down as Moral Majority president in 1987.

With Falwell's high profile came frequent criticism, even from fellow ministers. The Rev. Billy Graham once rebuked him for political sermonizing on "non-moral issues."

"We did not always agree on everything, but I knew him to be a man of God," Graham said Tuesday. "His accomplishments went beyond most clergy of his generation."

The Moral Majority's influence dropped sharply following sex scandals in the late-1980s involving two other television evangelists, Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart.

Falwell dissolved the Moral Majority in 1989, saying that its political aims had been achieved.

But he re-entered the political arena by the mid-1990s, selling a video that accused then-President Clinton of crimes and calling him an "ungodly liar."

Falwell delivered the benediction at the Republican National Convention in 1996.

In 1999, he told an evangelical conference that the Antichrist was a male Jew who was probably already alive. Falwell later apologized for the remark but not for holding the belief. A month later, his National Liberty Journal warned parents that Tinky Winky, a purple, purse-toting character on television's "Teletubbies" show, was a gay role model and morally damaging to children.

Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Falwell said he held gays and feminists among those partially responsible. He later apologized.

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, extended condolences to those close to Falwell, but added: "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."

Against stem cell research

Falwell was re-energized after family values proved important in the 2004 presidential election. He formed the Faith and Values Coalition as the "21st century resurrection of the Moral Majority," to seek anti-abortion judges, a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and more conservative elected officials.

In 2006, Falwell marked the 50th anniversary of his church and spoke out on stem cell research, saying he sympathized with people with medical problems, but that any medical research must pass a three-part test: "Is it ethically correct? Is it biblically correct? Is it morally correct?"

A pioneer of televangelism

The big, blue-eyed preacher with a booming voice started his independent Baptist church with 35 members. In 1957, from his living room, Falwell began broadcasting his message of salvation and raising the donations that helped his ministry grow.

"He was one of the first to come up with ways to use television to expand his ministry," said Robert Alley, a retired University of Richmond religion professor who studied and criticized Falwell's career.

In 1987, Falwell took over the PTL (Praise the Lord) ministry in South Carolina after Jim Bakker's troubles. Falwell slid fully clothed down a theme park water slide after donors met his fund-raising goal to help rescue the rival ministry. He gave it up seven months later after learning the depth of PTL's financial problems.

Largely because of the Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals, donations to Falwell's ministry dropped from \$135 million in 1986 to less than \$100 million the following year. Hundreds of workers were laid off, and viewers of his television show dwindled.

Liberty University was \$73 million in debt and on the verge of bankruptcy, and his "Old Time Gospel Hour" was \$16 million in debt.

By the mid-1990s, two local businessmen with long ties to Falwell began overseeing the finances and helped get companies to forgive debts or write them off as losses.

Falwell devoted much of his time to keeping his university afloat. He dreamed that Liberty would grow to 50,000 students and be to fundamentalist Christians what Notre Dame is to Roman Catholics and Brigham Young University is to Mormons. He was an avid sports fan who arrived at Liberty basketball games to the cheers of students.

Atheist father, religious conversion

Falwell's father and his grandfather were militant atheists, he wrote in his autobiography. He said his father made a fortune off his businesses — including bootlegging during Prohibition.

As a student, Falwell was a star athlete and a prankster who was barred from giving his high school valedictorian's speech after he was caught using counterfeit lunch tickets his senior year.

He ran with a gang of juvenile delinquents before becoming a born-again Christian at age 19. He turned down an offer to play professional baseball and transferred from Lynchburg College to Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Mo.

“My heart was burning to serve Christ,” he once said in an interview. “I knew nothing would ever be the same again.”

The day before he died, Falwell “had been up on the mountain by the logo, and students were up there picnicking, and he had had a happy exchange with those students,” Godwin said. Tuesday morning, he said, Falwell was talking about plans for the future.

Falwell is survived by his wife, Macel, and three children, Jerry, Jonathan and Jeannie.