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The Legacy of Falwell's Bully Pulpit

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By Hans Johnson and William Eskridge

In striving to distinguish between the passing of a man and the impact of his activism, the gay community and its allies show a moral and strategic sophistication that is itself a legacy of the Rev. Jerry Falwell.

For 30 years, the televangelist from Lynchburg combined lacerating sermons with loving disclaimers to rekindle and redirect the religious right. Gay advocates, gradually realizing that they could not beat him through vehemence alone, learned to seek out religious spokespeople, cultivate multiracial alliances and trade diatribe for discipline so as to use Falwell's polarizing statements to gain moderate supporters.

The ability to distinguish between individuals and the larger causes they are part of is a ground rule of both family values and public life. But it was not always a hallmark of Falwell's ministry.

Falwell became a household name in the late 1970s with attacks on homosexuality that were often crude and dehumanizing. At a rally in Miami in 1977, just days before a referendum on a recently approved local ordinance to outlaw bias against gays, Falwell told the crowd that "so-called gay folks would just as soon kill you as look at you." Voters repealed the ordinance.

In 1981, having championed the election of Ronald Reagan, Falwell took issue with a bid in Washington to repeal the District's anti-sodomy law. Relics of puritan zeal to penalize non-marital intercourse, such laws remained on the books in a majority of states. For decades they proved a tool for police and blackmailers to coerce gay men and lesbians. Bosses in private and public agencies, in turn, made sodomy charges the basis for firings.

Consequently, gay rights activists increasingly sought to undo the laws through legislation and legal challenge. Facing such a drive in the seat of the nation's government, where Congress wielded veto power, Falwell was loath to relinquish a powerful weapon in what had become a coast-to-coast battle against the gay rights movement. "The homosexuals are on the march in this country," he wrote in August 1981 to supporters of his "Old Time Gospel Hour" show and others on his direct-mail list. "Please remember, homosexuals do not reproduce! They recruit! And, many of them are after my children and your children."

Pushed by Falwell and a group of black ministers in Washington whom he helped mobilize, the House took the extraordinary step of debating and rejecting the bill to overturn the D.C. statute. The sodomy law remained intact for 12 more years.

We met Falwell in his later years, after the collapse of the Moral Majority and his rebuke by the Internal Revenue Service for improper politicking through charitable organizations. He had retreated somewhat from the political limelight to the Blue Ridge foothills to run Liberty University, a religious institution he fashioned as a counterweight to secular, liberal-arts campuses.

Like many gay people who interacted with him, we were impressed by his kindness and warmth. We could see the qualities that led aides such as his gay ghostwriter, the Rev. Mel White, to befriend and trust Falwell.

Harder to reconcile was the man who could profess compassion for individual gay people, and even hug an interviewer who probed his hostility toward abortion rights, with the glowering figure who lambasted gays and people with AIDS. "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals," he once said. "It is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals." As late as 1997 he thundered, "If we do not act now, homosexuals will 'own' America! If you and I do not speak up now, this homosexual steamroller will literally crush all decent men, women, and children . . . and our nation will pay a terrible price!"

Even against this backdrop, we admire Falwell's achievements: building Thomas Road Baptist Church from a flock of three dozen into a multimedia megachurch; drawing thousands of religious conservatives into politics; marshaling thousands to electoral activism for nearly a decade; identifying issues that resonate across denominational and sectarian lines to reach a broader evangelical audience.

Yet we also marvel at the changes Falwell helped unleash in churches and families and in the law. By speaking about gay people as outsiders, and even as disease-bearing strangers, he forced many Christians to look honestly at their congregations and reexamine the premise of their faith. By casting gays as threats to the survival of families, he forced parents, siblings and relatives of all kinds to reassess what values bind them together and how they care for one another. By approaching the law, especially in privacy and civil rights, as a battleground for competing visions of righteousness, he goaded a generation of scholars and activists to talk not simply in terms of precedents and entitlements but ever more persuasively in terms of conscience, morality and fairness.

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