

Falwell leaves complex legacy: A pension for rhetoric coupled with personal warmth

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Few figures in the second half of the 20th century have proved as polarizing in American popular and political culture as Jerry Falwell, who died May 15 at the age of 73. But the outspoken fundamentalist preacher and political activist, who preached a black-and-white gospel and described a stark world of evil versus good, leaves behind a legacy far more nuanced and complex.

The media impresario was best known for his blustery public statements—including more than a few gaffes for which he later apologized—on subjects as controversial as homosexuality, the AIDS crisis, the apartheid regime in South Africa and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

According to allies and opponents alike, Falwell personally had a softer, gentler side that corresponded with some of his less-publicized work on behalf of the downtrodden. Even pornographer Larry Flynt, who prevailed over Falwell in a landmark 1988 Supreme Court libel case, had kind words to say after the death of his erstwhile enemy.

“I hated everything he stood for, but after meeting him in person, years after the trial, Jerry Falwell and I became good friends,” Flynt said. Postmortem comments of a similar nature came from black preachers Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, Reform Judaism leader Eric Joffie and Soulforce co-founder Mel White, a gay activist who once was a ghost writer for Falwell and Pat Robertson.

The independent Baptist failed to revive “fundamentalism” as an acceptable movement under that divisive banner, but nevertheless he turned a small church in an out-of-the-way Virginia town into a religious, media and educational empire and played a key role in shaping American politics in the past quarter century. He did it, in part, with his controversial statements.

In the 1950s, Falwell supported legal segregation, and in the 1960s he publicly opposed the activism of Martin Luther King Jr. and other ministers involved in the civil rights movement—both positions he later disavowed.

In the 1980s, while saying he personally opposed the racist apartheid regime in South Africa, he also opposed placing sanctions against that nation's white-ruled government. Falwell said he feared a revolution that would create a communist state.

In the early days of the AIDS crisis, Falwell said the epidemic was “the wrath of a just God against homosexuals.” He later recanted that stance.

During Bill Clinton's presidency, Falwell used time on his *Old Time Gospel Hour* television show to sell a series of videotapes called the “Clinton Chronicles,” which insinuated that Clinton was guilty of all manner of crimes, up to and including orchestrating murders.

And, perhaps most infamously, appearing on Pat Robertson's *700 Club* television show two days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Falwell declared that some of his favorite political punching bags—abortionists, feminists, the American Civil Liberties Union, gays and lesbians—were at least partly responsible for the tragedy. He later apologized for those remarks, as well as for his 2002 statement calling the Prophet Muhammad a terrorist.

Despite his support for a political movement that emphasized traditional Christian teachings on sexuality more than the faith's antipoverty and social-justice thrusts, Falwell also quietly built a series of institutions serving the down-and-out. They included a program for alcoholics and a home for pregnant teens who wanted to avoid abortion.

“While most people knew him as the founder of the Moral Majority, the face of the religious right, and by some of his more controversial statements, many saw only his opponents' caricature of the real man,” wrote Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and pastor of a Southern Baptist megachurch in California, on the *Washington Post* Web site.

Baptist historian Bill Leonard said Falwell's penchant for rhetoric coupled with personal warmth was a legacy of his independent Baptist background. The three hallmarks of that tradition, Leonard said, were that Falwell was “an absolute . . .

opponent of liberalism politically and theologically,” that he embraced “an unashamed commitment to church growth, meaning that numbers proved theological orthodoxy,” and that he was “a pulpit controversialist who used rhetoric to encourage an often-fearful constituency that sees the world encroaching and to beat up on—indeed, create—enemies.”

Leonard, dean of the divinity school at Wake Forest University, continued: “I think his modus operandi was . . . not inconsistent with certain fundamentalist megachurch pastors in that independent Baptist tradition. When you met them, they were good-old-boy pastors. So they were fun to be with; they were jokesters; they had larger-than-life personalities. But when the issues came down, they took no prisoners.”

Leonard said Falwell struggled throughout his public career to walk a tightrope between his hard-core fundamentalist base and the larger public he was trying to woo to his side. But Falwell’s strongly stated conviction “sounds like bigotry when it is broadcast in the public square—and that is when he had to apologize,” he said.

A new generation of evangelical leaders, Leonard said, has learned how to tread that line more carefully than did Falwell.

Not only that, many younger evangelicals are developing a view of public morality that extends beyond the sex-related matters that consumed much of the late preacher’s rhetoric. *—Robert Marus, Associated Baptist Press*