

Red Letter Revival seeks to give voice to those on evangelical margins

## **A group of progressive Christians gathered near Jerry Falwell Jr.'s Liberty University, both critiquing Falwell's theology and asking to pray with him.**

by [Jack Jenkins](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue

Framed as an alternative to the theology of Jerry Falwell Jr., a two-day gathering called the Red Letter Revival met near the campus of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, where Falwell is president.

A few hundred people sang and prayed at the event in early April at the E. C. Glass High School auditorium, where Martin Luther King Jr. once spoke.

One of the revival's speakers, author Jonathan Martin, has referred to Falwell's leadership style as "authoritarianism." He was escorted off Liberty's campus by police in October while attending a concert a few days after calling for a peaceful protest of the school.

William Barber II—for many the most important leader of the religious left today—said Falwell is "justifying the GOP's immorality" in the "same way" slaveholders used the Bible to justify slavery.

Tony Campolo, a leader of the Red Letter Christians advocacy group, said religious disagreement does not mean personal attack. He pointed to his own televised debates with Jerry Falwell Sr. as proof that theological sparring partners can disagree respectfully.

Falwell did not respond to requests for comment, but Liberty provided a statement to the Lynchburg newspaper, *News and Advance*, which cited Matthew 22:21 about rendering unto Caesar. "All Christians have the free will to make whatever political choices they deem best for their country," said the statement.

[Shane Claiborne, an event organizer, posted on social media a letter he sent to Falwell inviting him to join them for the revival and asking permission to bring a group on campus for a prayer vigil. “I already pray for you, but I would love to pray with you,” he wrote. Claiborne also posted on social media a letter he received from Liberty University police threatening arrest for trespassing if he came on campus.

“I was very clear that what we have in mind is a prayer vigil, not a protest—no signs, megaphones, banners or chants,” Claiborne wrote in a post, “just Bibles and candles. We had even hoped to do a communion service, inviting folks who disagree politically to come to the table together.”]

Falwell did not reply to the group’s request for a formal debate and personally stifled efforts by the Liberty student newspaper to cover the revival, according to a student editor. Erin Covey, a 20-year-old news editor, said that after she contacted Falwell via email, he responded by instructing her not to write the story. Covey said discontent has been “building up” after “direct oversight” from administrators increased during and since the 2016 election cycle.

The Red Letter Revival group, which holds little sway in more mainstream evangelical circles, may hold a similar gathering later this year in Dallas. The city is home to Robert Jeffress, a pastor and religious adviser to Trump. Jeffress preached a sermon about the president titled “When God Chooses a Leader” on Inauguration Day and had his choir sing a song titled “Make America Great Again” to celebrate the Fourth of July. —Religion News Service

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Red Letter Revival gives voice to those on evangelical margins.”*