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## From Separatism to Activism: The Political Life of Jerry Falwell and the Making of the Moral Majority

Christine Kelly

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From Separatism to Activism:  
The Political Life of Jerry Falwell and the Making of the Moral Majority

Christine Kelly

Professor LaGrand

HIST 401: Senior Honors Thesis

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There have been few culture warriors like Jerry Falwell, the long time pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia and a prominent leader of the Moral Majority Movement in the 1980's. Falwell's ardently held views expressed through the deep baritone of his voice - accented with the slightest sing-song sound of a Southern drawl - led him to be regarded as the lion of the New Christian Right for decades. So often associated with his advocacy of the political process, his commitment to restoring respect for morality in American society, and his clear alliance with the Republican Party, Falwell has been labeled a fanatic for conservatism, a right-wing demagogue, and an unbearable hothead.<sup>1</sup> His supporters, of course, would deny these claims, considering him a bold leader in the cause of restoring American life. Both sides of the spectrum testify, at the very least, to this: Falwell was a divisive figure, eliciting few moderate reactions to his beliefs, rhetoric and objectives. Yet the person of Jerry Falwell extends beyond the banter of the culture war opinions, and his life reveals itself to be one of complexity, uncertainty and courage. To truly understand Jerry Falwell and his participation in the 1980's conservative ascent, we must explore the deep historical underpinnings for his roles as a pastor and a political activist.

When surveying the events of modern American history preceding Falwell's rise to influence, many historians and political scientists have suggested his work to be a direct reaction to particular failings in the American system throughout the 1960's and 1970's.<sup>2</sup> To explain Falwell's role, they have explored the widespread anger and social breakdowns associated with Vietnam, Watergate, and a decline in the authority of American institutions. Taken together, these events, combined with an energy crisis, the social movements of the 1960's, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Reed, review of *Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography*, by Jerry Falwell. *The New York Times*, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> These include, among others, Frank Lambert, William Chafe, Irwin and Debi Unger, Michael Lienesch, Randall Balmer, and Amy Black.

decline of the welfare state all led to a sharply discontent American public. From this context we see the emergence of a massive conservative reaction, the New Christian Right playing an instrumental role. Yet Falwell himself gives a different explanation for his decision to enter politics, one that we must not neglect as we evaluate this era. He suggests that a series of social ailments, namely abortion, the breakdown of the American family, pornography, sexual permissiveness, and increases in crime began to trouble him while ministering at Thomas Road in the mid-1970's.<sup>3</sup> We must recall that before he was anything else, Falwell was a pastor, and the national problems disturbing to him were obvious moral concerns to one trained in the ministry. Although certainly not unrelated to the growing secular culture the 1960's unleashed, Falwell's early interest in politics stemmed from very specific moral issues rather than a high interest in foreign policy or even the struggles of Presidential administrations in his day. When we peel back the layers of Falwell's development as a thinker and a leader, we first discover Falwell the separatist Baptist who inhabited a tight-knit and exclusivist social circle, encouraging his Christian flock to lead lives of personal piety and to ignore the godless society around them. It took years of formative events to push him away from his separatism, and even at the peak of his new activist life we see a Falwell who was not always certain of his decision to use politics to solve social ills. In Falwell we uncover a unique moment in modern American history, where a pastor of openly fundamentalist and separatist conviction changes his foundational thinking to embrace a public persona that could face off any number of opponents in the public sphere, using his talents of persuasion, speech and compromise where necessary in an effort to give American conservatism a previously unheard voice.

Falwell the Preacher: "The Little Church on Thomas Road"

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<sup>3</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 358.

Before the political activity which would characterize his public life in the 1980's, Jerry Falwell was a Baptist minister. While the culture and values of the Southern Baptist life he led would be influential in his later life, his pre-political career is independently significant and should be understood on its own terms. To understand Falwell as a whole person, in all of his richness and complexity, we must understand and explore this stage of his vocational development. As a youth in the 1950's Falwell lived in a household of only moderate piety, with what he describes as a gentle, committed mother and an alcoholic, bootlegging father.<sup>4</sup> Though academically gifted, Falwell preferred to invest his time on neighborhood pranks and reflected only minimally on matters of religion and piety. He believed throughout high school that upon graduation he would attend one of the finer schools in his location, Lynchburg College, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, or Notre Dame among his options.<sup>5</sup> Falwell chose to enroll at Lynchburg College to pursue a degree in engineering, but while there he began to regularly attend Park Avenue Baptist Church. An energetic church, the congregation at Park Avenue was strongly evangelistic. Its leaders with a number of lay participants would routinely evangelize door-to-door throughout Lynchburg inviting nearby residents to receive the gospel message and to attend weekly services. At Park Avenue Falwell developed a close friendship with two pastors, Paul Donnelson and Jack Dinsbeer, and together the three engaged in a series of long theological conversations surrounding Biblical passages and their relevance in ordinary life.<sup>6</sup> Falwell's involvement at Park Avenue led to a conversion experience in 1952, and from there his "determination to graduate from Virginia Tech in engineering was weakening."<sup>7</sup> From his exchanges with Donnelson and Dinsbeer, Falwell had developed an interest in becoming a pastor

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<sup>4</sup> James Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America: A Sourcebook on Religious Conversion Autobiography* (New York: Greenwood, 1992), 93.

<sup>5</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

himself, but he was conflicted on whether he should act on this new ambition. Becoming a pastor would mean abandoning engineering for a different career path altogether. It would also mean leaving a pragmatic program at an established institution to receive an unaccredited theological degree. Yet Falwell's fervor for the spiritual life was growing, and he wanted to heed the will of God above his own uncertainties and previous objectives. After two years at Lynchburg College, Falwell followed Donnelson and Dinsbeer's encouragement to transfer to Bible Baptist College in Springfield, Missouri.<sup>8</sup> He graduated in 1956, where he received a bachelor's of theology and was infused with the traditional Baptist understanding of society common at his time of attendance. Staunchly separatist, the educators at Bible Baptist believed that interest or participation in civic life "alienated people," according to Falwell, and that a Christian was best served to focus his attention on the community of faith and to ignore the wider secular world.<sup>9</sup> While Falwell would eventually describe his curriculum at Bible Baptist as one which "indoctrinated" him into a particular worldview, he maintained a sense of gratitude for the instruction he received there.<sup>10</sup> He also met Macel Pate, who became his wife in 1958, while a student at the college.<sup>11</sup> After Bible Baptist Falwell would go on to invest himself full-time in a life of Christian ministry.

Returning to Lynchburg after college, Falwell once again attended Park Avenue Baptist Church. A recent graduate with a passion for his work and an enthusiasm for the world of opportunity lying before him, Falwell wanted to found a church of his own to minister to parts of Lynchburg unreached by Park Avenue. His goal was to "win [the] city for Christ," and the early days of what would become Thomas Road Baptist Church consisted of roughly thirty-five

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television, October 16, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Strober and Ruth Tomczak, *Jerry Falwell: Aflame for God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 34.

attendees meeting at a local elementary school.<sup>12</sup> Eventually Thomas Road received a building of its own, which many of its new members, including Falwell, helped to construct.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Road matured to become a highly influential church in the area, rapidly growing to a member count in the thousands. Although at the height of his separatist years, Falwell was a very active pastor within his accepted sphere.<sup>14</sup> In 1959, for example, he founded the Elim Home for Alcoholics in Appomattox County, Virginia, a rehabilitation center for recovering alcoholics which taught them “a life of discipline with a Christ-centered orientation.”<sup>15</sup> Jerry Falwell was known among his friends and collaborators to be a person of endless energy. Throughout his lifetime, Falwell usually worked on several large projects simultaneously. His founding of Thomas Road, in conjunction with a home for alcoholics at nearly the same time, would become a pattern of behavior which stayed with him throughout his lifetime. This is evident in yet another project Falwell began at this time, his founding of a radio program.

In 1956, just a week after founding Thomas Road, Falwell launched his radio show *The Old Time Gospel Hour*.<sup>16</sup> It aired for thirty minutes, once a week on WBRG, a local country and western music station. He broadcasted a short sermon with an evangelistic message, encouraging his listeners to accept the saving power of Christ. Throughout the 1950's and 1960's, evangelism was a key objective of most Christian churches. Mainline Protestants, for example, had founded the World Council of Churches in 1948, a large, ecumenical body designed to improve missions activity throughout the world. While many Baptists were slower in committing to an attitude of evangelism that wanted to reach wide audiences, Falwell acted on

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>14</sup> Wheaton, IL, Billy Graham Center Archives, Records of Christianity Today International, Collection 8.

<sup>15</sup> Strober and Tomczak, *Jerry Falwell: Aflame for God*, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 39.

the idea immediately after the founding of Thomas Road.<sup>17</sup> He believed the world to be in deep need of salvation, and much of his early work is a testament to the value he placed on evangelism. Describing himself as a Christian fundamentalist, Falwell believed that all individuals were divinely required to have a conversion experience in which they explicitly repented of wrongdoing throughout their lifetime and accepted the work of Jesus Christ as atonement for their actions.<sup>18</sup> Falwell believed that without this experience, people were otherwise condemned to the penalty of eternal damnation. Falwell took these beliefs seriously, and consequently much of his early work was dedicated to evangelism.

In 1971, together with his lifelong colleague Elmer Towns, Jerry Falwell wrote a book entitled *Church Aflame*, a guide on methods to revive and expand church ministries for an audience of pastors and lay readers alike. In it, Falwell asserts that Christians have long neglected their necessary and proper roles in the world. They have an essential duty to evangelize the world's unsaved and to encourage a Christian way of life, one of moral values and pious living. In order to do this, Christians must be doing – activity, in the form of church ministries, was a responsibility of all congregations.<sup>19</sup> Falwell believed that while many fundamentalist churches preached rather helped the poor or seek out the lost, secular or mainline Protestant “social action” replaced “Christian ministry.”<sup>20</sup> From a mainline Protestant or even non-religious perspective, religious belief did not only imply accepting particular creeds or doctrines, it was to meet the needs of society through social programs. Falwell was dissatisfied with the reality that Christians from his fold, true Bible believing followers of God, were doing

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<sup>17</sup> Jerry Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Capps, *The New Religious Right: Piety, Patriotism, and Politics* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Martyn Percy and Ian Jones, eds. *Fundamentalism: Church and Society* (London: Holy Trinity Church, 2002), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Church Aflame* (Nashville: Impact Books, 1971), 153.



so little in comparison with other groups.<sup>21</sup> The book outlines a number of approaches “productive” Christians could take, including direct mail, a reorganization of church Sunday schools, bus ministries to churches, one-on-one conversations, and many other forms of persistent evangelism.<sup>22</sup> There are moments in Falwell’s writing within *Church Aflame* in which his tone becomes impassioned to the point of near militancy. When encouraging Scripture memorization to argue effectively against non-believers, for example, he describes this strategy as a “secret weapon,” one to be used at the most intense points of witnessing encountered.<sup>23</sup> In light of his Baptist leanings, it is natural that Falwell should express himself this way. Inheriting a deeply Scriptural tradition, Falwell’s religious language, taken mostly from the Old and New Testaments, comes from several narratives of people acting on behalf of God’s authority in powerful and even bellicose ways.<sup>24</sup> Falwell’s interpretation of Scripture as an intense battle between good and evil caused him to speak sharply and emotionally, even when discussing relatively mild subjects. In Falwell’s later life, many of his religious and political opponents would sternly criticize both Falwell’s opinions and the way in which he expressed them. Falwell asserted his views with heated rhetoric, not infrequently condemning opposing opinions.<sup>25</sup> Yet Falwell’s language was not always a result of how deeply he held his opinions. It was the product of his theological training and understanding, one which used heavy language to convey ideas.

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<sup>21</sup> A word about religious terminology is in order. When referring to Jerry Falwell and the congregation at Thomas Road, it is important to clarify exactly the type of Christian beliefs that they held. Falwell was a separatist Baptist fundamentalist. He was a separatist in that he believed in pious withdrawal from the currents of mainstream society. He was a Baptist in that he accepted public, adult baptism to affirm one’s discipleship to Christ, the world’s savior from eternal damnation. He was also an independent Baptist, meaning that he had no formal connection with Baptist ecclesiastical groups, like the Southern Baptist Convention, for example. Finally, he was a fundamentalist in that he believed in Biblical inerrancy and pre-millennial dispensationalism.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Capps, *The New Religious Right*, 45.

By the mid to late 1970's, both of Falwell's major ministries in Thomas Road Baptist Church and his weekly radio program *The Old Time Gospel Hour* were experiencing great success. Thomas Road had grown to approximately 3,200 attendees for Sunday service, but Falwell was reaching a wider audience still.<sup>26</sup> Early on in his career Falwell detected promise within the use of mass media, an increasingly available option for him to propagate his ministry as broadcasting technology developed.<sup>27</sup> As Falwell preached, four television cameras faced him, recording the service to later air a newer version of *The Old Time Gospel Hour*, a televised broadcast of Falwell's sermons to be shown on 327 television stations.<sup>28</sup> The partnership of religious ministry with the mass media would prove to be well received, rendering a lucrative business. In 1978, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article on Falwell's mass media successes in a front page article entitled "The Electric Church." The *Journal's* name for Falwell's and similar ministries, the article pointed out the impressive growth of religious broadcasting, which generated "thousands of jobs and an annual cash flow of hundreds of millions of dollars."<sup>29</sup> While the *Journal* attributed the success of these ministries to the ability of "fundamentalism" to provide "simple answers" to the deep questions of human life, the fact remains that Falwell had garnered tremendous support among "born again" Christians who generously donated and worked for his expanding ministries.<sup>30</sup> Falwell's favorable economic position throughout the 1970's is a testament to the substantial influence he had over Christian communities before he considered entering politics. Falwell was a prospering, active minister

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<sup>26</sup> Jim Montgomery, "The Electric Church: Religious Broadcasting Becomes Big Business, Spreading Across U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 1978.

<sup>27</sup> Macel Falwell, *Jerry Falwell: His Life and Legacy* (New York: Howard Books, 2008), 45.

<sup>28</sup> Jim Montgomery, "The Electric Church," *Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

within religious circles, having developed substantial influence since the late 1950's when he entered church life.

Another extension of Jerry Falwell's ministry was introduced in 1971, when he decided to establish an "educational arm" of Thomas Road Baptist Church.<sup>31</sup> As Falwell's immersion within his own ministry grew deeper, he became aware of an apparent decline within institutional church life generally. From "theological liberalism and a turning away from the Scriptures," widespread secular or insipid mainline Protestant culture was pervading what ought to be an enthusiasm for building up local churches.<sup>32</sup> Falwell wanted to somehow proliferate churches with visions to connect with an ardent and active faith in God. He started an educational movement, therefore, "centered in a return to biblical fundamentals," with "a desire to reflect godly Christian living, a purpose to reach the whole world through aggressive New Testament church evangelism, and a sense that the signs of the time point to the imminent return of Jesus Christ to the earth."<sup>33</sup> Falwell's newest project would "reflect [the] movement of God in the latter part of the twentieth century."<sup>34</sup> His objective was to regenerate church life by educating youths in effective approaches to building faith communities. An attempt to realize these goals, Lynchburg Baptist College opened in close association with Thomas Road, drawing much of its early support from the congregation there.<sup>35</sup> The first several years following the college's establishment, however, were marked by a series of difficulties which posed significant threats to the institution's continuing existence. Among the greatest of these was a suit the Securities and Exchange Commission filed against Thomas Road. Calling for relatively

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<sup>31</sup> Falwell and Towns, *Church Aflame*, 153.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Wheaton, IL, Billy Graham Center Archives, Records of Christianity Today International, Collection 8.

significant accusations against the church, the SEC dilemma would create a serious distraction for Falwell as his church temporarily floundered under this issue.<sup>36</sup>

As Falwell and several collaborators expanded the radio, television, and related ministries at Thomas Road, they found a need for more funding to push these programs forward.<sup>37</sup> Throughout his lifetime Falwell made most of the top financial decisions for his ministries with only the aid of occasional advisers.<sup>38</sup> There were moments then, where Falwell's lack of economic expertise would harm his objectives. Certainly this was true regarding the SEC issue. To sustain their mass media programs, Thomas Road borrowed several million dollars through the purchase of obligation bonds from fourteen hundred of its supporters.<sup>39</sup> Yet the church had failed to acquire a proper prospectus on the bond sales though required by federal regulations and did not keep its financial ledgers up-to-date.<sup>40</sup> Given these violations, the SEC pushed to forbid the continued sale of church bonds and wanted to assign a temporary receiver to takeover the business affairs of Thomas Road until the church regained sound financial grounding. As the crisis wore on, the church found itself to be a few million dollars in debt and with discontinued legal authority to earn money from *The Old Time Gospel Hour*.<sup>41</sup> With vital sources of funding cut off, Falwell faced the possibility of terminating both *The Old Time Gospel Hour* and Lynchburg Baptist College. Yet Falwell's support for his church and educational ministries was stronger than ever, and this was especially evident among the student body at Lynchburg Baptist. A small and very close community, the college was bound together by its Falwelleian vision.

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<sup>36</sup> Macel Falwell, *Jerry Falwell: His Life and Legacy*, 92.

<sup>37</sup> Strober and Tomczak, *Jerry Falwell: Aflame for God*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Terry Muck, "Home to Lynchburg: Assessing Jerry Falwell after the Moral Majority and the PTL," *Christianity Today*, 1988.

<sup>39</sup> Strober and Tomczak, *Jerry Falwell: Aflame for God*, 54.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

Given its dedication to its role as an institution for empowering ministry, the students at Lynchburg Baptist were willing to take uncommon measures to preserve their institution.

In 1975, the “LBC Chorale” was launched, a music group consisting of Jerry Falwell and several Lynchburg Baptist students.<sup>42</sup> Embarking on a seven-month long music tour, their goal was to raise three million dollars in cash donations and pledges from performing a series of gospel concerts. Donations would then be applied to the needs of Lynchburg Baptist to make up for the lacking funds from the SEC scandal. This proved to be a rigorous time for participating students who spent months with limited rest as they performed in various locations throughout the United States.

As the LBC Choral traveled throughout the country, sharp cultural distinctions surfaced between the Lynchburg Baptist community and wider American society. Several of the concerts students performed were entitled “I Love America!” and drew from a blend of patriotic and religious themes.<sup>43</sup> Often shows would end with an animated monologue in which a student would cry, “I believe that this is the greatest nation on earth; and I am proud to serve her, to follow her flag, to defend her, and if necessary to die for her, for I love America.”<sup>44</sup> In addition to their nationalist enthusiasm at a time when American morale was at a general low, LBC students also led their lives at some distance from youth culture at large. Not only were they marked by Southern Baptist distinctives in their modest, clean cut appearances, alcohol and tobacco free living, and disciplined day-to-day routines, but the students perceived themselves to be a surviving outpost against what was widespread cultural decay.<sup>45</sup> This is particularly evident

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<sup>42</sup> Strober and Tomczak, *Jerry Falwell: Aflame for God*, 65.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Wheaton, IL, Billy Graham Center Archives, Records of Christianity Today International, Collection 8.

in an anecdote that has survived the LBC Chorale era, crystallizing the students' worldview as they experienced opportunities to interact with peers outside of their religious enclave.

During their tour, the Chorale performed a concert at a room within a large coliseum in Seattle, Washington. The LBC students thought the show had gone relatively well, but toward the end, they were interrupted by the sounds of another concert. As the students were packing up, Falwell led a handful of them into the concert room to watch the disruptive performance, and to "see their mission field." What they saw had a powerful effect:

Thousands of young men and women were lying on the floor, engaged in every filthy act imaginable. The discordant sounds were deafening. On the stage the rock star hero of thousands of American young people stood with outstretched arms in front of a cross with psychedelic, fluorescent lights twirling around him. Those who were not engaged in some immoral act at the moment were bowing down to him. Drug-caused smoke so permeated the atmosphere that the policemen on patrol in the room had been instructed to work only thirty-minute shifts inside.<sup>46</sup>

Stunned at this scene, Falwell and the students of LBC spent extensive time in prayer and searched for ways in which to improve their shows to attract more followers to their salvific message in Christ.<sup>47</sup> This response to what was more or less an ordinary 1970's style concert is telling on a variety of levels. Here was a group of Christian separatists who were alarmed by the apparent intensity and lawlessness of these rock music fans. Although these separatist Christian students had little intimate acquaintance with rock music and the wild behavior at rock concerts, what they saw that night went against every moral assumption of their Baptist upbringing. Yet their reaction, interestingly, was to pray and evangelize. What we see here is that Falwell and his following at LBC were not strictly separatist, because this lifestyle would prevent few significant encounters with the wider world.<sup>48</sup> The LBC Chorale's nation-wide tour is not typical separatist

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 66 – 67.

<sup>48</sup> Jerry Falwell, ed. *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 145.

behavior. Second, their experience at the rock concert would be abhorred and condemned. An often impenetrable divide emerges between the people of the religious community and the perceived corruption around them. But Falwell and his students observed social ills in this concert – from drug use to immorality – and responded with confrontation. Their perceived divide, therefore, while significant, was not made of iron.<sup>49</sup> They were willing to straddle the cultural barrier, interacting with those outside of themselves, even if it was to evangelize them. It serves us to recognize this attitude within Falwell, because while a separatist, there is little doubt that his social interest renders him an atypical one.

The SEC scandal posed a serious problem for Thomas Road and Lynchburg Baptist College for close to two years, and while it persisted it allowed for several formative experiences for Falwell. Yet eventually the issue was resolved. The Commission's more severe charges of "fraud and deceit" were dropped and a receiver was no longer required to handle Thomas Road's finances after some courtroom negotiations.<sup>50</sup> Yet the scandal left at least one lasting outcome on Falwell's ministries, and this was LBC Chorale. The musically inclined students at LBC did not stop performing, but continued to go on frequent tours with Falwell to raise money for the college. Promoting themes with ever-increasing patriotism, concert titles changed from "I Love America" to more urgent messages like "America, You're Too Young to Die!"<sup>51</sup> As the 1970's progressed, the person of Falwell began to change. Occurring subtly and gradually, Falwell's priorities began to differ from what they were before. Falwell emphasized nationalism in combination with the Christian faith more often, and he was spending substantially more time

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<sup>49</sup> Kevin Roose, *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University* (New York: Grand Central, 2009), 315.

<sup>50</sup> Strober and Tomczak, *Jerry Falwell: Aflame for God*, 57.

<sup>51</sup> Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America:" A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2002), 156.

interacting with the religious public outside of Thomas Road as he toured the nation with LBC.<sup>52</sup> Falwell's awareness of society around him was sharpening dramatically, and while he was devoted to his separatist principles, he came to believe that America was on the decline socially and spiritually. Despite his separatism, this began to trouble his action-oriented personality. Simultaneously, Falwell also saw his worldview to be more aligned with a body of morally focused Americans than he previously understood, and they would pave the way for an eventual turning point in his career.

### Falwell and the Decline of Separatism

By the mid to late 1970's, the United States was in a massive social, economic and political slump. The nation was gradually recovering from the ramifications of the conflict in Vietnam and the vitriolic tendencies of student protest movements. Presidential administrations were clinging to New Deal liberalism that by this time was contributing to a bloated and ineffective welfare state.<sup>53</sup> Conflicts in the Middle East as Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian Revolution pushed the Arab world on a path toward authoritarianism disturbed Americans and affected their fuel costs.<sup>54</sup> While the nation was undoubtedly in distress, few of these mainstream issues seems to have had a major effect on Falwell and his flock at Thomas Road and LBC, the abbreviation "L" now standing in for "Liberty" instead of Lynchburg. Inspired by a Scripture verse in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, "where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," the college changed its name in 1976.<sup>55</sup> While Falwell carried on his ministry paying relatively

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<sup>52</sup> Wheaton, IL, Billy Graham Center Archives, Records of Christianity Today International, Collection 8.

<sup>53</sup> Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, eds. *The Times were A Changin': A Sixties Reader* (New York: Three Rivers, 1998), 94.

<sup>54</sup> William Chafe, Harvard Sitkoff and Beth Bailey, eds. *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 327.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



little attention to America's widespread social ills, it would be unfair to suggest that wider cultural events had no effect on him. Specifically, what would elevate Falwell's attention were not the headlines on the daily newspaper, but the growing tolerance of sexual permissiveness established by 1960's social liberation movements.<sup>56</sup> Falwell was also upset by the increasingly secular leanings of American society which seemed to directly impact the lives of those at his church community. Even so, the changing nature of America's cultural climate would take time to seriously stir Falwell, and his shift from general non-interference with most national affairs to a different attitude was a process which several events helped to form. Falwell was never a ready-made culture warrior, but the political activism he would later embrace was a response to what he believed were serious social issues.

When interviewed in later life about his first impressions of the American social and political landscape, Falwell recalled a distress over the 1960's Supreme Court cases regarding school prayer. While *Engel v. Vitale* is often cited as the landmark case on this issue, Falwell mentioned *Abington School District v. Schemp*, decided in 1963 and permitting references to Christian scripture only in instances of objective study.<sup>57</sup> Although Falwell did not approve of the decision, he advocated no substantive action against it, immersed at the time in his separatist convictions. This was also true for another serious social and political issue at the time, the hotly contested Civil Rights movement. Throughout his career, Falwell's connection to this movement was an awkward one, chiefly because the issue of race has become profoundly sensitive in American life and Falwell's interaction with Civil Rights was usually interpreted through a present-day, rather than a 1960's, lens. Other than school prayer, the Civil Rights movement was the only national issue Falwell followed during his early days as a pastor throughout the

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<sup>56</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Listen America!* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 121.

<sup>57</sup> Jerry Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.

decade.<sup>58</sup> He believed that racial integration was on a sure path toward realization and failure was seriously unlikely. In a famous 1965 sermon “Ministers and Marches” Falwell affirmed the church’s role as purely spiritual and evangelistic, not to be involved with the politicized and dangerous activity of the movement.<sup>59</sup> While an understanding of Falwell’s separatism helps explain his apparent apathy toward and even contempt for the movement, a blurry understanding of Falwell’s early interactions with race have led to depictions of him that range from mild white superiority to ardent segregationist. It is important therefore, and even essential to probe this issue a layer deeper to unearth a better picture of Falwell’s response to race in the 1960’s.

Until 1968, Thomas Road was a church of decidedly white membership. Falwell’s wife Macel described this attendance demographic as a result not from “personal hatred,” but “decades of social traditions.”<sup>60</sup> Thomas Road members were certainly not exempt from the segregated nature of southern life, such that several families left the church after Falwell hired an individual of Indonesian descent to work for the church’s music ministry.<sup>61</sup> While Falwell defended the music minister’s position in spite of opposition, he had definite reservations about the prospect of welcoming black members into the church throughout the early part of the decade. Yet like other turning points in Falwell’s life, his change of mind has been rendered through a personal anecdote, and his wife Macel once delivered a particularly telling one:

Every Saturday morning, Jerry drove to Main Street and sat in a chair at Lee Baca’s shoe-shine business. Every week at 10:00 in the morning, an elderly black man named Lewis shined his shoes. A fellow Christian, the lines on Lewis’ face and his gray hair spoke to a life well lived and filled with wisdom. Every week the dialogue was the same. “I heard your sermon on the television last week, Reverend,” Lewis would begin. “I sure do like the way you preach.” “Thank you Lewis,” [Falwell replied], “how are you and the Lord getting on?” “So good,” Lewis responded, “The Lord is so good.” ...Then one morning, Lewis lowered his voice and whispered in a question he dared not speak aloud. “Say, Reverend,” he asked, looking up from

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 337.

<sup>60</sup> Macel Falwell, *Jerry Falwell: His Life and Legacy* (New York: Howard Books, 2008), 100.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 100.

the rag he used to buff a shine onto Jerry's shoes, "when will I be able to join that church of yours over on Thomas Road?"<sup>62</sup>

Falwell reported feeling tremendous guilt after this exchange with his acquaintance, Lewis. While it is naïve to suggest that this event alone eliminated Falwell's earlier racial predilections, the narrative places a human face on this issue, revealing Falwell to have considered the intimate implications of segregation. While Falwell maintained a distance from Civil Rights activism, we must recognize that Thomas Road admitted its first black members just after the death of the movement's leader, Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>63</sup> Certainly the wider social and political landscape had an effect on Thomas Road's approach to Civil Rights, but not an entirely direct one. There was a complicated interplay between Thomas Road's separatist non-involvement and the highly charged social atmosphere the Civil Rights movement created. Although on an official level the church ignored the movement, it drew attention from Falwell and other church leaders who knew African Americans personally, dislodging their long-time comfortability with segregation. When this happened, they did not cling to their former belief patterns; on the contrary, they desegregated Thomas Road. Yet through the 1960's and into much of the 1970's, the official position of Falwell and Thomas Road remained against any kind of direct involvement with social and political affairs.

Jerry Falwell remained comfortably separatist throughout the 1960's and into the early 1970's, although within this decade he would come to seriously question this position. On a winter morning in 1973, Jerry Falwell woke up and prepared himself for breakfast. Looking over the newspaper headline that day, so his often and well-told story goes, he noticed a banner that read "Lyndon Johnson Dies," followed by a series of articles on the former President's

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 103.

passing.<sup>64</sup> Yet buried within Johnson's extensive front page obituary was another headline, "Supreme Court Legalizes Abortion," announcing the decision made in the recent case *Roe v. Wade*. Shocked at the news, Falwell was unable to lay aside his reaction to the decision. "I don't usually let the newspaper interfere with my breakfast with my family," he later recalled, "but on that day my coffee grew cold and my family ate alone."<sup>65</sup> It is difficult to trace the origins of Falwell's aversion to abortion's legalization, if there are any of course, outside of what he himself has offered. In many of his writings, but especially his famous work *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, Falwell attributed his strong moral sensibility against abortion from his faith in God, who uses female pregnancy as a pivotal life-creating event.<sup>66</sup> This is in addition to his understanding of motherhood, which was to him a loving, sacrificial and intimate affair which the fundamental objective of abortion destroyed.<sup>67</sup> The national legalization of abortion through *Roe* was a blow to these understandings, and Falwell had a tremendous time believing that the Supreme Court allowed it. "We like the Catholics," Falwell said, "never thought that [this] would be, not in this country."<sup>68</sup> As Falwell thought and paced in his living room over the Court's decision, he decided that it "was the straw that broke the camel's back."<sup>69</sup> Yet we might justifiably wonder about what Falwell means by this. Were there other burdens that Falwell and his separatist community at Thomas Road were carrying? If Civil Rights was the most important socio-political issue of his day, and Thomas Road responded to that in a relatively moderate fashion, then what other problems could be concerning the church community? The most outstanding issue was the climate of moral permissiveness in the 1960's and 1970's. As early as

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<sup>64</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 335.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Jerry Falwell, *If I Should Die Before I Wake* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 11.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

the 1950's, mainstream American society was becoming increasingly accustomed to public displays of sexuality in popular culture. The use of pornography was rapidly proliferating as well as a greater tolerance of sexual themes in ordinary books, films and magazines. Yet Falwell, along with his community of like-minded believers, valued the role of gender, parenting and family to such a degree as to render it nearly sacred.<sup>70</sup> Believing in both specific and important responsibilities for each member of a marriage or family, Falwell could not grasp the loose, irresponsible, and indulgent behavior advocated by the culture around him. Certainly he would not accept it. Worse still, was the ever more common acceptance of abortion as the antidote to sexual adventures gone awry, and to Falwell, this was sacrilege against his concept of women as delicate and life-giving creatures. What seemed to have “unfolded before [his] eyes was a drama of innocence defiled: sexual and mental abuse of women; pornographers trading in a distorted view of women as a masculine wish fulfillment; babies slain in their mother’s wombs – all in the name of sexual ‘freedom’ that, ironically, did more to oppress women than to liberate them.”<sup>71</sup>

Falwell was undoubtedly aroused by the *Roe* decision, but initially the only action he took on the matter was through his preaching. Passionately condemning the decision, he cried foul against “America’s national sin,” but he found his words to be accomplishing little in the face of a social crisis.<sup>72</sup> Falwell claims that *Roe* had a serious impact not only on himself, but on huge populations in the country who shared his worldview.<sup>73</sup> Those around him considered

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<sup>70</sup> Macel Falwell, *Jerry Falwell: His Life and Legacy*, 59.

<sup>71</sup> Sean Wilentz, “God and Man at Lynchburg: The Surprising Fate of Falwell and his Movement,” *New Republic*, April 25, 1988, 33. Sean Wilentz, a cultural critic and writer for the *New Republic*, has not been consistently friendly or open toward Jerry Falwell or the religious right throughout his career. While his work is not always reliable when attempting to reach a degree of objectivity in religious right studies, he has also written some fair-minded pieces which provide strong insight into the meaning of the movement.

<sup>72</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 337.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

taking action against *Roe*, but “such a step was entirely against [Falwell’s] nature.”<sup>74</sup> He continued to feel that “being ‘yoked with unbelievers’ was off limits.”<sup>75</sup> Yet Falwell increasingly regarded this psychological barrier as a “terrific problem.”<sup>76</sup> Falwell’s resolve to remain separatist was weakening, and it is *Roe* that sees him begin to take the possibility of civic activism seriously. When discussing the factors that led him into public life, Falwell often mentions a laundry list of social ills, naming problems from high crime rates to divorce.<sup>77</sup> Yet it is apparent that abortion was the priority concern on Falwell’s mind. He mentions it at too much length, emphasized it too often throughout his career, and wrote about it too extensively for this to be otherwise. Although we must recognize that abortion alone did not draw Falwell away from separatist life, it was certainly his most valued issue.

As Falwell deliberated a shift toward activism, he began a process of intensive information gathering. “We all got to rethinking,” he later commented, “and I began meeting with people like Dr. Francis Schaeffer. [I asked him] how can I get involved? I’ve preached against involvement... how can we change that?”<sup>78</sup> Francis Schaeffer was a popular theologian and cultural critic in the 1970’s. Writing at length on the decline of moral principles in American society, Schaeffer advocated activism on the part of Christians to counter the problems of society. Unique and compelling, Schaeffer’s modish lifestyle, reminiscent of the 1960’s Jesus Movement, combined with his deep philosophical reflection made a big splash among Christian circles. His unapologetic denunciation of contemporary society was evident in much of his work, but particularly within his 1983 book *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* In it he argued against a widespread tolerance of abortion, which he linked with such related issues as

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>75</sup> Brown, *For a “Christian America,”* 155.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 342.

<sup>78</sup> Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.

infanticide and euthanasia. Falwell's reading of Schaeffer in addition to their meetings became an important influence on his decision-making regarding activism.<sup>79</sup>

Apart from Francis Schaeffer, Falwell's travels with the LBC Chorale were also instrumental in his considerations. As the Chorale moved from city to city, in between performances Falwell would meet with a whole host of individuals from the wider Christian community, including prominent ministers and lay leaders.<sup>80</sup> By 1979, Falwell had also earned the acquaintance of not only religious figures, but of political leaders as well, and at this time Falwell had at last made his decision to pursue his moral vision for America through public, politicized means. Meeting with Republican leaders Bob Billings, Paul Weyrich, Ed McAteer and Howard Phillips, Falwell laid each of his social concerns out for discussion.<sup>81</sup> During this meeting, Weyrich turned to Falwell and said, "Jerry, there is in America a moral majority that agrees about the basic issues. But they aren't organized. They don't have a platform... somebody's got to get that moral majority together."<sup>82</sup> Later that year, Falwell and several collaborators founded the Moral Majority, a non-partisan organization dedicated to confronting their concerns with American society.<sup>83</sup> From this point forward, Falwell's role would permanently change from full-time pastor to something far more complex. He was still a minister, but one with a two-pronged objective for his vocation: to continue caring for his congregation at Thomas Road, but to simultaneously take on a project that was now much broader than what his ministry had been before. He was entering the fierce and unpredictable world of the public arena.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Brown, *For a "Christian America,"* 156.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid..

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> William Chafe, Harvard Sitkoff and Beth Bailey, *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America* (New York: OUP, 2008), 375.

<sup>83</sup> Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.

<sup>84</sup> David Snowball, *Continuity and Change in the Rhetoric of the Moral Majority* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 48.

“An Idea Whose Time Had Come:” Falwell and the Moral Majority

When formed in June of 1979, the Moral Majority movement existed through a two-armed organization. First there was Moral Majority, Inc., a political lobbying corporation, and the Moral Majority Foundation, which was an educational organization. The Moral Majority Foundation was responsible for publishing newspapers, launching radio and television programs, and conducting lectures and seminars throughout the country.<sup>85</sup> Its first board of directors consisted mostly of well-known ministers who, like Falwell, had been convinced of public activism as a means of reaching their ends. In addition to Falwell, these were D. James Kennedy, Charles Stanley, Tim LaHaye and Greg Dixon. While the Moral Majority had obvious connections with a religious worldview, it was not a decidedly religious or evangelistic enterprise.<sup>86</sup> It was instead made from “people of like moral and political values [who] were uniting to save the country.”<sup>87</sup> When discussing the Moral Majority, Falwell has maintained that its support was not chiefly from Baptists like himself, but from a blend of pastors, priests, rabbis, and even agnostics or atheists who shared the organizations values and goals.<sup>88</sup> While the Moral Majority almost certainly did receive backing from diverse sources, most of its financial donations came from Baptist, fundamentalist, and evangelical congregations, and indication that, contrary to Falwell’s perspective, the Moral Majority grew more closely around the religious demographic of his following than he has suggested. Even so, the Moral Majority was certainly a popular organization, rising to an estimated 400,000 supporters in its beginning years of operation.<sup>89</sup> It was, as Falwell himself has declared, “an idea whose time had come.”<sup>90</sup> The

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<sup>85</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 363.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Sean Wilentz, “God and Man at Lynchburg,” *New Republic*.

<sup>90</sup> Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.



Moral Majority was an organization that rode the wave of national mood, which by the 1980's was on the eve of great changes to the nation's political fabric, a factor which undoubtedly contributed to its success.

In order to more fully understand the Majority's purpose and vision, we must first explore the organization's agenda and how each of its goals was an outgrowth of the historical moment from which it emerged. Falwell, together with the board of directors, devised a four-fold platform for it. First, the Moral Majority was a pro-life organization.<sup>91</sup> While an unsurprising stance given at least Falwell's stance on the matter, it begs an important question concerning the life issue and its wider interaction with religious communities in America. Although Falwell was astonished and angered by the *Roe v. Wade* decision immediately after its passage, this was not the universal reaction among all faith-based or morally attuned groups at the time. Other groups, including socially traditional ones like the Southern Baptist Convention, for example, paid relatively little attention to *Roe*, and some even supported aspects of it for various reasons, like pregnancy from instances of rape or incest. There is a certain incongruity between Falwell's long-time insistence that thousands of Americans were outraged over *Roe* versus what competing evidence has suggested. While there is clear consensus among historians that the Roman Catholic community, given its theologically-based reverence for unborn life, opposed the decision from the beginning, the same opposition is not definite elsewhere. This incongruity may also be from the complexity alone of the issue's development. Despite its seemingly minimal impact in 1973, it is plausible that a certain lag time should exist between the decision and its generating organized opposition. Certainly the development of the Moral Majority can attest to this. Between 1973 and 1979, Jerry Falwell, who had no significant political experience or interest in public life, changed this view utterly to create an organization

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

that used just these means to fight against *Roe*. Time is inherent to changing one's mind, just as it is to forming a resistance movement. Certainly it was a change of mind – not only in Falwell's shift from separatism, but in a gravitation of moral groups toward a non-acceptance of *Roe* – that occurred in the 1970's. As America approached the decade's end, it was becoming an increasingly polarized society, and mild positions on *Roe*, in addition to other issues, would be replaced with firmer and more fixed persuasions.

In addition to its pro-life advocacy, the Moral Majority was also “pro-Israel,” and in favor of a strong national defense system.<sup>92</sup> In an era where the failings of Vietnam were still vivid in the national mind and the soft-power diplomacy of President Carter's foreign policy was wildly unpopular, the Majority's positions in this area are understandable. This interesting foreign relations component to the organization is an interesting one, however, given its ordinary commitment to domestic, social affairs. This highlighted what was a growing alliance between the Moral Majority, and specifically Jerry Falwell, with one of the organization's most enthusiastic supporters, Ronald Reagan. Reagan had a sizeable impact on communities of faith as early as 1976 when he first sought Presidential office.<sup>93</sup> “You can't endorse me,” he once quipped, “but I endorse you.” Reagan and Falwell developed a relationship in the 1980's when his work with the Moral Majority was at a height, and the President certainly knew how to appeal to Falwell and his following. Aligning with the Moral Majority with such issues as school prayer and abortion, Reagan frequently spoke to them about how the moral and spiritual decline of America troubled him greatly. Yet Reagan also incorporated foreign affairs into his religious speeches, often spiritualizing issues related to the Cold War. As Reagan got tough on communism, he classified life in the Soviet system as under “the darkness of totalitarianism,”

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<sup>92</sup> Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

and suggested that “the quest for human freedom is not material, but spiritual.”<sup>94</sup> As Reagan determined to usher in an end to the Cold War, this elevated foreign policy issue, and his influence generally, bled into the Moral Majority’s objectives, rendering it an interest in foreign as well as domestic issues.

Next to its pro-life and pro-Israel goals was the Majority’s pro-family position. Often intermingled with its pro-life sentiments, the Majority held the American family to be greatly imperiled from threats that changed throughout the decade of its existence.<sup>95</sup> In the late 1970’s it denounced high divorce rates as the most significant threat to the American family. By the 1980’s, this would become the homosexual alternative which the Gay Liberation Movement pushed into the mainstream public eye.<sup>96</sup> The Majority promoted healthy, heterosexual, anti-feminist and loving households.

The fourth and final platform of the Moral Majority was pro-Christian education. Falwell has claimed that with the Majority’s assistance, 50,000 Christian schools were opened throughout the 1980’s.<sup>97</sup> This was a clear response to the Supreme Court’s decisions regarding prayer in public schools, as well as other problems with public education, including sex education and the entrance of secular ideals into the educational mainstream. The Moral Majority years were Falwell’s most active, and he spent them pushing its vision forward as he advised presidents, guided new initiatives, and promoted his cause through preaching and public speeches. Falwell also devoted attention to Liberty Baptist College, daily growing by leaps and bounds.

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<sup>94</sup> Gastón Espinosa, ed., *Religion and the American Presidency* (New York: Columbia University, 2009), 388 – 389, 392.

<sup>95</sup> Moral Majority, Inc. officially closed in 1989.

<sup>96</sup> Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

Just as Falwell moved from pious separatism into a life of activism, in some sense, LBC moved with him. The college's grounds and facilities sizably expanded throughout the 1970's, and its core educational mission changed as well. While LBC was first established as an institution to better the functionality of churches and ministries within Christian circles, by the early 1980's Liberty became an establishment which promoted a systematic education into a socially and politically-based worldview. 1980's LBC information brochures often began with the following declaration: "The United States has been and still is a great nation. It has been great because it has been free. It has been free because it has trusted in God and relied upon the principles of freedom which are set forth in the Bible. If America is to remain free, we must raise up a generation of young people who will call this nation back to God..."<sup>98</sup> Embedded within the words of this admissions booklet was the new Liberty Baptist College: one that planned to raise up a generation of "champions for Christ" who were going to combat the culture of secularism, permissiveness and destruction that its Chancellor, Falwell, saw all around him.<sup>99</sup> LBC was no longer a college that existed outside of wider society. It was instead a place where the assumptions of modern America were continually considered, critiqued and challenged as students were trained to think about the world around him with a combination of concern and a willingness to love and reform the culture.<sup>100</sup> Certainly it was also influenced by the Cold War nationalism of the Moral Majority movement. A growing institution, Liberty was rapidly propelling far from where it had been just a few years earlier.

As Falwell immersed himself farther and farther into public life, he never forgot about his role as a preacher. Delivering the Sunday sermons at Thomas Road until his dying day, Falwell was still committed to the kind of theological reflection necessary to the life of a pastor. In the

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<sup>98</sup> Wheaton, IL, Billy Graham Center Archives, Records of Christianity Today International, Collection 8.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Roose, *The Unlikely Disciple*, 245.

mind of Falwell, this was always one of his most important callings, and there were times when the Moral Majority struggled that caused him to occasionally doubt his leap into the public sphere. He was known in later life to drop comments now and again that indicated a fragment of doubt over his decision. “The religious right got involved in politics,” he said, “perhaps too involved!”<sup>101</sup> While uncertainty played a definite role in Falwell’s public life, he nevertheless remained strongly committed to his decision. Yet Falwell the preacher was often compelled to provide a theological justification for his change of heart. Delivering an explanation reminiscent of the Calvinist model of the Kingdom of God versus the Kingdom of Man, Falwell described his understanding of earthly activism in combination with a heavenly goal.

To Falwell, all people “live in two worlds simultaneously,” an earthly world and an eternal one.<sup>102</sup> The primary allegiance of all must be to God, but individuals also have an obligation to behave as responsible citizens. He emphasizes, however, that the practices of each world are distinctly different; the rules and expectations in God’s world are not the same as those of man’s, including what Falwell specifies as “earthly governments.” Humans have a responsibility to heed concurrently both the laws of God and the laws of man. Nevertheless, in the event that these laws should conflict, the law of God takes precedence over the law of man.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, God’s law should be defended in the face of man’s law by courageous and obedient servants of the divine. Through this theological understanding of an attitude of activism, Falwell is able to hold on to some semblance of his separatist past. Yet in a highly reasoned way, he provided a theological backing to his new persona. Falwell is additionally understood through some of his other faith perspectives which also contributed to his activism. Trained in Old Testament narratives, Falwell seemed to have considered himself a kind of Old

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<sup>101</sup> Falwell, interview by the Archive of American Television.

<sup>102</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 343.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

Testament prophet, crying out against a lost generation.<sup>104</sup> From the same understanding, he also had a highly developed concept of national, as opposed to individual sin, and believed in the impending wrath of God should repentance be neglected.<sup>105</sup>

A final dimension of Falwell's theology worth unpacking was his interaction with Christian fundamentalism in conjunction with evangelical Christianity. Fundamentalism, with its emphasis on Biblical inerrancy, pre-millennial dispensationalism, and social separatism is widely regarded as a stricter form than its evangelical counterpart, which holds more moderate theological assumptions and social expectations.<sup>106</sup> Falwell, unlike other Moral Majority leaders and substantial personalities in his time, including Billy Graham and Pat Robertson, had come from a fundamentalist background. This was the reason for much of his separatism, and yet in very tangible and important ways, it conflicted with both Falwell's personality and new values he would embrace over time. Even as a staunch separatist pastor at Thomas Road, Falwell was endlessly exploring ways in which to draw attention to the church's gospel message. He introduced his congregation to the enormously attention gathering mediums of television and radio. He was an author of multiple books. Falwell was, in other words, constantly acting for goals both in and outside of his church community. Once he crossed the boundary from official separatism into activism, Falwell knew how to temper his positions to accomplish his goals, and how to persuade others to into his perspective. This talent would become one of Falwell's most valuable resources, and contributed greatly to many of his accomplishments. On the issue of life, for example, several early Moral Majority leaders subscribed to the strictest pro-life positions possible. Abortion, in their view, should be banned in any and all circumstances given its universally reprehensible nature. Falwell, however, called for his colleagues in the Majority to

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<sup>104</sup> Percy and Jones, *Fundamentalism: Church and Society*, 19.

<sup>105</sup> Snowball, *Continuity and Change in the Rhetoric of the Moral Majority*, 34.

<sup>106</sup> Sean Wilentz, "God and Man at Lynchburg," *New Republic*.

allow for some circumstances in which abortion should occur, particularly, he believed, in instances where childbirth posed a risk to the mother.<sup>107</sup> Allowing room for stipulations, Falwell was able to broaden his support base and better reach his ends.

Throughout the 1980's, Falwell and the Moral Majority were a substantial influence in the public eye, yet a great deal of the attention he received was not necessarily positive. Many Americans who opposed Falwell's perspective condemned him as uneducated, foolish and chauvinistic.<sup>108</sup> Falwell's rhetoric was especially bothersome to his opponents. With "a full-volume, double-barreled baritone voice," they found his words "awkward and inelegant."<sup>109</sup> He sounded unreasonable in his expectations for the piety he wanted the nation to observe, and his lists of national woes seemed clichéd, arbitrary, and "loopy."<sup>110</sup> Although Falwell's words were perhaps not akin to literary greats, it is in some sense obvious, however, that they were still an example of his genius. Falwell never ceased to make his opponents angry; there was not a time at which he seems to have lost his edge. This testifies to his enduring ability to decipher what issues the public cared about and how he believed secularists were in the wrong. His words, which are simultaneously playful and yet razor sharp, show how well Falwell could draw the sword of his tongue.

While Falwell was no doubt a warrior for his causes, this did not stop the backlash from coming, and it was increasingly heavy-handed as the 1980's wore on. The New York Times aligned him with Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, who unlike Falwell was a theocrat and a dictator, was nevertheless a religious fundamentalist just like Falwell.<sup>111</sup> The Times also compared him

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<sup>107</sup> Brown, *For a "Christian America,"* 157.

<sup>108</sup> Roose, *The Unlikely Disciple*, 258.

<sup>109</sup> Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000), 165.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Roy Reed, review of *Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography*, by Jerry Falwell. *The New York Times*, 1987.

to Fidel Castro of Cuba, pointing out Falwell's ability to gather support and lead a fight, much like Cuba's 1959 communist uprising.<sup>112</sup> In response to these comments, Falwell has said simply the following: "There were a lot of people surprised to see what a small bunch of preachers could do when they had united with men and women of like moral values to take an organized political stand."<sup>113</sup> On a very deep level, Falwell's reply is entirely accurate. Prior to the Moral Majority's spread of social and political conservatism in the late 1970's and 1980's, the right was considered a marginal and conspiratorial force in American life. Cast to the side with the likes of John Birch, the liberal hour reigned in America. It was not until the rise of what historians have since called "The New Christian Right" that the situation became otherwise. Falwell then, was aware that his work was relatively small, and that his followers had almost no political voice until organizations like the Moral Majority, which were very new, emerged.

Despite the newness of Falwell's activity opponents never ceased to be strongly attack it. In 1988, Falwell received what was in all likelihood his most severe opposition. Larry Flynt's *Hustler Magazine* published an advertisement for Campari liquor using Falwell's imagined endorsement. A provocative parody, the advertisement included a short article on Falwell's "First Time," indicating that he had engaged in a drunken sexual rendezvous with his mother. Falwell litigated against Flynt, but to both Falwell's and Flynt's surprise, Falwell lost the case in *Hustler Magazine v. Jerry Falwell*. Preserving the right for publishers to release political cartoon-like criticisms, however severe, was the priority of the Court.<sup>114</sup> While the decision left Falwell appearing as "a proponent of censorship and an enemy of Constitutional rights" to his enemies, Falwell handled his squabble with *Hustler* like he did with most others. In a 1997

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<sup>112</sup> Roy Reed, review of *Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography*, by Jerry Falwell. *The New York Times*, 1987.

<sup>113</sup> Falwell, *Strength for the Journey*, 368.

<sup>114</sup> Louis Fisher and Katy Harriger, *American Constitutional Law*, vol. 2, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2009), 37.



*Larry King Live* segment between Falwell and Flynt, Larry King asked Falwell if he ever “harbored any ill feelings toward Flynt.” Falwell, with a devilish grin, responded with “oh I’ve never had any ill feelings toward him... I think his magazine is sleaze and garbage and demeaning toward women and children,” and King interjects, “but no ill feelings toward him?” “Of course not.”<sup>115</sup>

### Falwell the Public Figure

A well-known leader of the Moral Majority and the New Christian Right, Falwell has been long associated with social and political activism. What has been lesser known, however, is that the heart of Falwell’s theological core was a commitment to social separatism. It was a long and challenging process spurred by many factors – from the *Roe v. Wade* decision to his travels with the LBC Chorale – which caused him to seriously consider activism. Though highly political, Falwell was not always so, and while perceived as a substantial and assertive personality, he was nevertheless a human being. Falwell had struggles, trials and doubts, and was often unsure of his decision to leave full-time ministry at Thomas Road. Yet simultaneously, his character was always an active one despite his background, and ultimately this pushed him away from his taught beliefs. While confronting the culture around him, it also appears that Falwell, and his Liberty Baptist College, grew closer to it. A non-separatist life is one which engages culture, even if it is to go against it. An often misunderstood and simplified figure, we must come to terms with Falwell for the complex person that he was: a man of courage and conviction who stood behind his values, though to do so changed the course of his life. And his vision for Christians in public life remains: the evangelical vote in today’s America is no small force in our political process.

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<sup>115</sup> Jerry Falwell, interview by Larry King, *Larry King Live*, CNN, 1997.

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