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Dr. Jerry Falwell – Culture Warrior: A Personal Reminiscence

By Fred Smith*

My first memory of Jerry Falwell was seeing him on the ABC TV program, “Nightline” about one week after the 1980 presidential election. Ronald Reagan had won that election with help from the Moral Majority and Dr. Falwell was being interviewed by Ted Koeppel. Along with him was a purely secular conservative and the contrast between the two men was startling. The secularist was full of fire and venom. He spoke of his hatred for liberals and of the plans his organization had to sweep more of them out of congress in the next election. His attitude was arrogant and vindictive. What an incredible contrast that was to Jerry Falwell, whose conciliatory spirit, evident humility, and positive attitude spoke volumes about his heart beat for America and even more of his heart for Jesus Christ. Jerry Falwell asserted that night that he and the Moral Majority did not hate anybody and that their goal was to win over liberals to a higher and better vision for America. He wanted to see this nation’s life and culture founded squarely on Christ and His word. There was a beauty, sweetness and graciousness in Dr. Falwell’s manner that was completely lacking in the other conservative panelist.

In the years that followed, I saw the ups and downs of his influence as a preacher and as a culture warrior. He seemed to be a constant presence on the news, in Christian publications, and in the consciousness of many people who were active in politics. Compared to other culture warriors of that time, and even among many of his followers who ranked themselves as Moral Majority adherents, Falwell maintained a focus on Christ both in his personal conduct and the goals he espoused that was inspiring.

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He modeled a level of graciousness and compassion that was unmatched, even by other Christian leaders in the culture war. Many times he appeared on CNN or ABC and exhibited a Christ-like spirit that never wavered even under the severest provocation. A favorite tactic of news organizations seeking sensationalism was to pair him with someone who was exceedingly liberal and exceedingly nasty about it. Jerry Falwell never lost his cool, and never allowed himself to be baited into a shouting match. He presented himself, and the issues about which he cared, in ways that made serious Christians proud. I remember seeing him once on a news program when Liberty University was establishing its School of Law. He was paired with a man who accused him and Liberty University of wanting to train a cohort of jihad-style terrorists who would set out to destroy freedom in America. Falwell never quit smiling and spoke positively of bringing glory to Jesus Christ through training lawyers who would be dedicated to preserving the letter of the law and protecting our freedoms. He did not respond in kind to the most vicious attacks of his opponent. His winsomeness allowed the love of Christ to be made apparent on broadcasts to homes all across the country.

Three things have deeply impressed me about Jerry Falwell as a culture warrior. First was the comprehensiveness of his vision. While he was best known for his activities in the political arena, Jerry Falwell always knew that the culture war was much bigger than a political fight. His vision for Liberty University from day one was that it should be a university that offered training in every area of life. He wanted to see “Champions for Christ” out there as salt and light in every part of life: teaching in classrooms, ministering in hospitals and clinics, and standing up for sound principles and moral goodness in the boardrooms across this nation. It was never a vision restricted to seeing Christ glorified only in pulpits and in the halls of government. This is true even though his detractors, including some within Christianity itself, often

complained that Falwell's vision was limited to just electing 435 evangelical Christians to Congress, thinking that would change America. He always knew better, which is why he poured so much of his life and energy and effort into building Liberty University.

Second, Jerry Falwell carried on the culture war with a level of integrity that was inspiring. Many culture warriors in those years gave in to the temptations of power and personal aggrandizement., Jerry Falwell, however, never wavered in his commitment to living a life of humility, honesty, and selfless service to a cause greater than himself. Under circumstances where many even within the Christian right movement were consumed by their lust for power, and by their hatred for secular humanism and liberalism, Jerry Falwell was consistent in his obedience to Christ's command to love others, no matter who they were. He often startled people, especially his detractors, by forming friendships with people like pornography publisher Larry Flynt and leftist icon and senator Ted Kennedy. He lived on a comparatively modest income and gave a large amount of even that away. He was willing and eager to serve others in need. One always had the impression that it was never about Jerry Falwell, whether it was in the area of ministry or of politics or Liberty University or some pressing moral issue. The vision, the need, drove him, not a lust for power or prestige. His compassion for the unborn drove his opposition to abortion. His love for moral purity drove his commitment to family values. His love for wisdom underlay his advocacy of maintaining a strict construction of the United States Constitution, the rule of law, and wise government policies. In all things he was honest, loving, wise, humble, and positive.

Third, as comprehensive as his vision was and as many issues as he addressed, he never lost sight of the main thing. It was never ultimately about a principle but rather about a Person. The victories he sought were not victories for conservatism; they were victories for Christ. His

vision for America was not for American greatness as an end in itself. It was that we might become a nation in which life achieves its greatest good in the context of healthy families and healthy communities anchored by Christ honoring churches; a nation where the good things of life were valued because they pointed beyond themselves to Christ, the ultimate good; and where good and evil, right and wrong, sacred and profane, were all understood in light of the character of Jesus Christ Himself. Jerry Falwell never joined a political party though his movement was closely associated with the Republicans. He never sought to create an alternate political party. He sought to stand outside the system and speak prophetically, lovingly, and effectively to all Americans on both sides of the political aisle and on both sides of the culture wars. He knew that only by standing squarely on the foundation of Jesus Christ could he have any real and lasting influence. If he and his movement ever became captive to any political party, effectiveness would be gone.

We who still fight the culture wars in the twenty-first century and who grieve over the moral and spiritual decline of this nation should draw inspiration from Jerry Falwell's example and we should seek to recapture for ourselves his vision of a culture war that must be fought on all fronts, at all levels of society, and by all kinds of people. We should never lose sight of the fact that if a moral victory is won here, and a political victory is won there, it amounts to nothing if it is not Christ's victory. Any battle we win, if it does not bring Him glory, build up his church, and point people to Christ, is an empty victory, a hollow shell that will not last. Jerry Falwell understood this so well. May we in these times share that passion, that vision, and that wisdom.