



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on April 6, 2020

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Falwell and the Political Awakening of American Christians

In the months after the U.S. Supreme Court's infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision of January 22, 1973, Baptist minister Jerry Falwell had endured a tortured struggle on how to respond. He had always opposed abortion. But before *Roe*, abortionists faced prison time and fines in his state of Virginia. In 1967, the state Supreme Court had upheld the five-year sentence of a doctor who had performed an abortion on an 18-year-old college student. Because of this, there was little reason for Falwell to become *politically* involved on the issue. He could, and did, condemn the practice, but he did not see any need for political action in his state.



With *Roe*, however, the U.S. Supreme Court had decreed that states could not stop the practice. Despite their angst at the decision, fundamentalists such as Falwell had always chosen not to get involved in political issues. Falwell himself had preached against such secular involvement.

Then there was the time element. Not only was Falwell the pastor of a church with 15,000 members, he had a television and radio ministry, and he was writing books, teaching classes, and administering both a private Christian school and a growing Christian college. He was also in high demand as a speaker across the country.

He also felt inadequately prepared to speak on political issues, knowing that he would have to immerse himself in the issue if he was going to play a positive role in fighting abortion. Additionally, he was concerned that getting involved in politics — even on a moral issue such as abortion — could divide his congregation.

Finally, he sat down with his family to discuss the problem. “I confessed my own growing need to do more than preach against the Court’s decision,” Falwell recalled in his 1987 autobiography, *Strength for the Journey*. After summarizing the horrific results of the Court’s ruling, he told his children that it was doubtful they would live in a free America when they reached his age.

At this, Falwell’s seven-year-old son, Jonathan, walked toward him and looked directly into his father’s eyes — eyes filled with tears. “Daddy,” he said, “why don’t you do something about it?”

“A little child shall lead them,” were the words of Jesus, Falwell thought. “In that brief moving moment of consensus, our family began a brand-new journey together. Jonathan was absolutely right.”



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The Clout of the Moral Majority

The decision to get politically involved in fighting against abortion eventually led to the creation of the “Moral Majority,” which proved to be a highly effective organization. Pollster Lou Harris credited Falwell’s Moral Majority (MM) with the victory of Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election, and the defeat of several liberal Democratic senators. While this may be debated, it is clear that MM greatly impacted the magnitude of Reagan’s 44-state landslide. After a majority of evangelical Christians had supported Jimmy Carter in 1976 (who had openly appealed to evangelicals by saying he had been “born again”), evangelicals supported Reagan in 1980 over Carter by a margin of 56 to 34 percent.

MM altered not only elections, but also public opinion. Falwell and MM joined the fight against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), along with Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum and the constitutionalist John Birch Society. Millions of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians who had often not even bothered to vote shook off decades of political lethargy and entered the political battlefield. But the Moral Majority was larger than just evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. Through Falwell’s leadership, Roman Catholics (almost one-third of the membership of MM), conservative Jews, Mormons, and even non-religious persons concerned about the decline of morality joined MM as well. By 1984, MM had over six million members, plus many more who were in sympathy with, and were influenced by, Falwell’s organization.

Photo: AP Images

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In his autobiography, Falwell admitted that he struggled with forming a coalition with those of different faiths, or even no faith at all. “I was faced with a terrific problem: my own personal psychological barrier. All of my background from Baptist Bible College and other places and persons providing my religious training made it difficult for me to consider such a prospect.” And yet he realized it was necessary “to turn back the flood tide of moral permissiveness, family breakdown, and general capitulation to evil and to foreign philosophies such as Marxism-Leninism.”

He found help in the writings of Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer, who spoke of “co-belligerents” in the fight for morality. Schaeffer argued that there was no biblical prohibition against evangelical Christians joining hands with others for political and social causes, just as long as there is no compromise of theological beliefs. This would allow Baptists to align with Catholics, and Jews with Presbyterians (for example) to advance common causes.

All of this was no small achievement. Millions of Christians, including Falwell, had opposed such direct political involvement prior to *Roe v. Wade*. Many did not even vote.

The Opposition of Fundamentalists and Evangelicals to Political Action

To understand Falwell’s initial reluctance to involve himself so directly in secular politics, one must have a proper understanding of fundamentalism. Unfortunately, the term conjures up images of Islamic terrorism, or wild-eyed, book-burning, backwoods preachers. Christian fundamentalism has more to do with beliefs than such behavior. It was a rejection of theological liberalism, and comes from *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, published in the early 20th century, written by Christian intellectuals such as B.B. Warfield, Cyrus Scofield, and G. Campbell Morgan. For these fundamentalists, the key issue was the accuracy of Scripture. They were not country bumpkins, but renowned scholars.



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To these men, fundamentalism had little to do with dress and hairstyles, but instead stressed the inerrancy of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ's death for all sin, the literal resurrection of Christ, and the second coming of Christ.

While fundamentalists are often cast as intolerant, it was the liberals who ran the fundamentalists out of many of the colleges and the seminaries. Fundamentalists became more intensely focused on sharing the gospel and preparing for eternity, rather than wallowing in the nasty here and now.

It was in this separatist tradition that Jerry Falwell came of age. He was an unlikely candidate to lead any sort of Christian movement as a youth. His father was an agnostic and a bootlegger. By his own admission, he was quite worldly until his conversion in his college days. He started a Baptist church on Thomas Road in an abandoned Donald Duck bottling company in Lynchburg, Virginia, with only about three dozen members. Within a month, the church had grown to a hundred. In a year, the church's membership was approaching a thousand.

For several years, Falwell concentrated on his preaching at Thomas Road Baptist Church and his radio and television ministries, dubbed "the Old-Time Gospel Hour." During these years, he never interjected politics into his sermons, explaining that, at that time, he figured "the country could take care of itself."

Like most white Southerners at the time, he believed in the segregation of the races, although blacks sometimes visited his church. In 1965, he preached a sermon, "Ministers and Marches," in which he opposed preachers getting involved in civil rights and politics. "We have a message of redeeming grace through a crucified and risen Lord. Nowhere are we told to reform the externals. We are not told to wage wars against bootleggers, liquor stores, gamblers, murderers, prostitutes, racketeers, prejudiced persons or institutions, or any other existing evil as such. The gospel does not clean up the outside but rather regenerates the inside." He insisted that it was not his place to use the pulpit to inveigh against communism or to participate in civil rights reforms.

Falwell's opposition to integration changed, and he decided he had been wrong on the issue. By 1968, blacks were allowed to not only visit, but join Thomas Road. Before that, there was no rule against blacks joining the church, but none had asked to join, and Falwell admitted, regretfully, "we had not asked" them, either. By 1983, Thomas Road had 400 black members.

By the 1970s, Thomas Road and its pastor were quite well known across America. A former seminary student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, told me a story that his evangelism professor, Dr. Roy Fish, had told the class about Falwell. Fish traveled to Lynchburg, dressed up in old clothes, with a bottle in a sack as if he were imbibing alcohol, and sat on the front steps of the church. Fish wanted to know how the church would respond. He was pleasantly surprised when several members asked him on their way into the building if they could help him in some way. Finally, Fish was ready to leave when he felt a presence behind him — it was Falwell. Falwell also asked Fish what he or the church could do for him. Fish concluded that both the preacher and his church were the real deal when it came to Christian concern for such men as he was pretending to be.

It is quite clear that Falwell had a "full plate" pastoring a church of 15,000 members, running TV and radio ministries, opening a private school, and launching Liberty Baptist University. While he advocated tuition tax credits for Christian schools, supported prayer in the public schools, and asked for less government intrusion in the affairs of the churches, he most likely would have lived out the rest of his days at Thomas Road Baptist Church if not for *Roe v. Wade*.



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The Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* Decision of 1973

Then came the Supreme Court's 7-2 decision — a decision denounced by one of the dissenting justices, Byron White, as an exercise in “raw judicial power” — which somehow “found” a “right” to abortion in the U.S. Constitution, declaring the laws of those states making the practice illegal to be “unconstitutional.”

Falwell immediately began to denounce the decision — publicly, and from the pulpit. Noting that abortion had been illegal in the United States for 193 years, Falwell thundered, “It was a crime to kill an unborn baby. Suddenly, by a 7-2 vote you decide that little unborn babies are not human beings and therefore have no human rights. Strange that in 1857, by the same 7-2 vote, you [the Supreme Court] held that black people were not human beings.... You were wrong then and you are wrong this time.”

Falwell expressed regret that Protestant ministers, including himself, had been largely silent on the issue, while the Catholics “stood alone and fought the abortion issue.... It is their moment of glory and our moment of shame. But we have good news for them. We are not going to be silent any longer. We have joined the fight.”

As Falwell entered the political fray, some seasoned conservative political activists such as Paul Weyrich and Howard Phillips took notice. They asked for a meeting, a meeting that led to the creation of the Moral Majority in 1979. At first, Falwell was reluctant to head such a movement. “I was hoping that someone else would do it,” Falwell explained later in his autobiography.

Paraphrasing a radical slogan from the '60s, Phillips looked at Falwell, and asked, “If not now, when? If not Jerry Falwell, who?” The charter of MM called for a strengthened American military; opposition to abortion, drugs, and promiscuity; and support for the family unit in society. Along with Falwell, the board members would include Charles Stanley pastor of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta; evangelist Tim LaHaye; Greg Dixon of the Indianapolis Baptist Temple; and James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Florida.

“I don't want a theocracy,” Falwell explained at the launch of MM, drawing upon the strong Baptist tradition against using the government to advance the work of the church.

As Dinesh D'Souza explained in his book *Falwell: Before the Millennium*, “They [the fundamentalist Christians such as Falwell] were not initially interested in politics, but the politicians became interested in them.” The late conservative political commentator Joseph Sobran said at the time, “The separation of religion and politics ended when the state started trying to redefine right and wrong.”

Possibly reflecting Falwell's dispensational theological views, MM was going to be supportive of the state of Israel, and of Jewish people everywhere.

Attacks on Falwell and His Moral Majority

Oddly, despite Falwell's clear support of Jews as a people and for the nation of Israel, detractors of him and his Moral Majority quickly denounced both as anti-Jewish. Liberal TV producer Norman Lear accused Falwell of anti-Semitism. A reelection TV ad for President Jimmy Carter even claimed that Falwell had said that God does not hear the prayers of Jews. This falsehood was repeated often over the years, despite the fact that it was actually said by another Baptist preacher in Oklahoma, and was disputed by Falwell.

Rabbi Alexander Schindler of the United Hebrew Congregation accused Falwell's MM of being the



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“most serious attack of anti-Semitism since the era of World War II.” Leftist activist Julian Bond said, “Television preachers like Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority feel free to drop racist comments about Jews.” The *Atlanta Constitution* opined, “Falwell doesn’t much like Jews.”

Of course, there were the typical assertions that MM wanted to pry into the personal lives of millions of Americans. And almost mirroring the contemporary attacks from the Left, an Associated Press story reported, “Moral Majority, conceding that a good public servant doesn’t have to be a church-going teetotaler, says it will ignore the personal lives of Reagan Administration officials as long as they are true believers in political issues the fundamentalist group considers important.”

As with many AP stories today, there were several false assertions in the story, including calling MM “fundamentalist,” despite its including Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and non-religious people in its membership.

The attacks continued as the Moral Majority increased in political clout, receiving caustic criticism from Jane Fonda, Ed Asner, George McGovern, Ted Kennedy, and Jimmy Carter. Falwell was compared to Jim Jones, who led the People’s Temple group to mass suicide by drinking poison-laced Kool-Aid. (Of course, Jones was actually an atheistic leftist who was praised — before the suicide — by fellow left-wingers such as Jane Fonda!) Others found similarities between Falwell and the Ayatollah Khomeini. Some even tried to make something out of the name of the town where Falwell’s church was located — Lynchburg — implying it had a particularly odious history of racial hatred toward blacks. But the town was named after a man named Lynch. During Colonial days, some in the town would hang Tories (Colonists who supported the British, rather than the Patriot cause), by their thumbs, dubbing it “lynching.”

Despite Falwell having died in 2007, the falsehoods keep coming. In the Wikipedia article about him, it is asserted that his Lynchburg Christian Academy was opened in 1967 as a segregation academy, but this is not true. No “whites only” policy existed. Only white students applied during the first two years, but in 1969 the first black child was enrolled. The school was launched to provide a Christian education, not as a segregation academy.

But this assertion — that Falwell had opened a “segregation academy” — is instructive for those wishing to use Internet sites such as Wikipedia. The author of the article on Falwell cited Seth Dowland and Max Blumenthal for the accusation that Falwell ran a segregation academy. When one examines these two men — used as the source for the slur — we find that Dowland is a strong opponent of the pro-life movement, arguing in his book *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* that opposition to abortion is just a cover for men who want women confined to the roles of wife and mother.

Blumenthal, on the other hand, is a frequent critic of Israel, even writing for *Al Jazeera*. It is not surprising that Blumenthal would not like Falwell — who was a vocal supporter of both Jews and Israel. When Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel died in 2016, Blumenthal even objected to his being honored. He undoubtedly did not like Falwell’s other conservative views either, if Blumenthal’s praise of Venezuelan socialist dictator Nicolás Maduro is any indication.

Attacks From the Right on Falwell and the Moral Majority

Some of the attacks did not come from the Left. Senator Barry Goldwater, long a conservative icon, even denounced Falwell, saying, “Every good American ought to kick Falwell in the a**.” The cause of Goldwater’s caustic remarks about Falwell is unclear, but it is believed that the libertarian-leaning Goldwater misunderstood Falwell, thinking the Baptist preacher wanted the government to impose



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religious values on individuals by law. (This was despite Falwell's insistence that he did not want a theocracy in America.)

While Falwell largely brushed off attacks from left-wingers such as Fonda, the attack from Goldwater greatly bothered him, as did the attack from fellow fundamentalist Bob Jones. Jones cited famed 19th-century preacher Dwight Moody, who considered political action as similar to "polishing the brass on a sinking ship." Jones argued that Christians should focus on individual salvation, not societal improvement.

Falwell acknowledged that he had shared Jones' aversion to politics, until recently. But Falwell said the devil ("the first liberal") had politicized everything. "Separation of church and state is intended to restrict the power of the state, not of the church. It is meant to protect the church from the state," Falwell opined.

Falwell added, "We have been irresponsible as Christian citizens. For too many years we sat back, as if waiting for apostasy to take over at any moment, and nearly let our country destroy itself because of inward decay."

One can certainly understand the views of Christians (and others) who simply want the government to just leave them alone. But all persons must interact with the government, so it is prudent to have an influence over that government. In the early years of Christianity, the churches could wield little clout with the government of the Roman Empire. The Apostle Paul, who was clearly focused on the gospel message, not on politics, understood that Christians had to recognize the government could be an obstacle to the churches. In I Timothy 2:1-2, he urges his fellow believers to pray for every person, including "kings and all those who are in authority." While this is usually interpreted today as important so as to pray for God to grant government officials "wisdom" (and there is certainly nothing wrong with that), a closer reading of the text will demonstrate an important reason for Christians to pray for those in positions of authority is "so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life."

In other words, Paul was urging prayers for government officials to leave the Christians alone — a prayer that should be in line with all of us who believe in the concept of limited government. While in his letter to the church in Rome Paul urges Christians to "submit to the governing authorities," Paul also gives the reason for government: "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad" — in other words, any legitimate government should punish those who inflict harm on their fellow neighbors. Thomas Jefferson, in his first inaugural address, said that the "sum of good government" was to "keep men from injuring one another," but to otherwise leave people alone. While Jefferson said some things that Bible-believing Christians would argue with, this should not be one of them.

Paul also asserted his rights as a Roman citizen. In the Book of Acts, chapter 16, we read that Paul is going to be released from jail after being unjustly beaten by Roman authorities. Rather than simply being content with being released, Paul responds, in verse 37, "They beat us in public without a trial, although we are Roman citizens, and threw us in jail."

This complaint brought a hasty apology from the local Roman officials who had violated Roman law by beating and jailing them without a trial. The lesson here is that while Christian citizens should not make themselves a problem for the governing authorities, Christians are free to assert their rights as American citizens, the same as non-Christians. This would include, of course, rights such as freedom of speech, press and religion, and the right to keep and bear arms. Following the example of Paul, it is not



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un-Christian for a Christian to assert his or her rights, either in the court system or through the political process.

In some cases, Christians must refuse to obey the government. Examples abound in Scripture of times when God's people chose to obey God, rather than men. As Falwell once said, "Silent pulpits bear in part" responsibility for the persecution of the Jews in Germany. Similarly, the pulpit and the pew have a responsibility to challenge the abortion holocaust in our own country, which Falwell rightly called "a slaughter."

Falwell was not perfect, but no person is. But he should certainly be remembered — and praised — for his courageous efforts in awakening the sleeping giant of fundamentalists, evangelicals, Catholics, conservative Jews, and others who value morality and limited government.

By the end of Ronald Reagan's tenure, it probably appeared to many that Falwell's goals had been accomplished, leading to a dramatic fall-off in donations and fervor for the cause. Alas, such optimism was premature, as the past three decades have demonstrated.

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