

THE FALWELL LEGACY: THE BIBLE, THE BLOOD, AND THE BLESSED HOPE

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

In the 60s and 70s I used to hear some Baptist summarized their beliefs by saying that we believe in the Bible, the blood and the blessed hope. This was not all they believed in, but it stressed an emphasis. The Bible is the basis of their authority since it was inspired and without error. The blood, of course, referred to the blood of Christ, which is the basis for salvation. This emphasized the priority of the preaching of the gospel. The blessed hope is a reference to the pre-trib rapture, which is a motivating and forward-looking hope. I once heard the late Jerry Falwell proclaim his belief in these three items.

JERRY FALWELL

Jerry Falwell went to be with the Lord on May 15, 2007 at the age of 73. Falwell was likely the most influential American clergyman of his time. Born and raised in Lynchburg, Virginia, Jerry spent his entire life in his hometown, except for a few years in Springfield, Missouri when he went to school at Baptist Bible College. From Lynchburg he impacted the entire world and works that he built and left behind will continue to do so.

Jerry's grandfather claimed to be an atheist and his father an agnostic, but his mother was a praying Baptist and this played a role in his conversion to Christ at the age of 18. Almost immediately he abandoned his goal of becoming a journalist and surrendered for the ministry. Jerry said of his call into the ministry, "My heart was burning to serve Christ. I knew nothing would ever be the same again." Upon graduation from college, Jerry returned to Lynchburg and started the Thomas Road Baptist Church, which this year has been celebrating its 50th anniversary.

Thomas Road Baptist became the launching pad for the many ministries begun by Falwell. The church now has 24,000 members, just moved into a new 6,400 seat auditorium and says that over the years these ministries have led 3.5 million people to make "decisions for Christ." This is an amazing legacy for an individual pastor and does not include those he helped influence and train for the ministry and their impact. Jerry certainly believed in the power in the blood of Christ to save sinners and he steadfastly and boldly preached it until his death.

Jerry's most enduring legacy will most likely be Liberty University, the 27,000-student school (@11,000 in residence) that has graduated 125,000 in 36 years. He began the school in 1971 and it has now risen to become the largest evangelical University in America. Liberty University is an institution that will continue for many years to have an on-going, global influence for the cause of Christ.

CONTROVERSIALIST

Jerry was no stranger to controversy, in fact he seemed most at ease in the midst of the storm. If that is true, I believe it is because of his clear and unobstructed belief that the Bible is the Word of God. Jerry declared, "The entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is the inerrant Word of God, and totally accurate in all respects." The certainty that he had access to God's Word produced in him an amazing confidence that what he said was backed-up by God Himself, the Creator of the universe. Jerry believed that the mark of a true Christian was one who believed in biblical inerrancy

that in turn provides an authoritative base for action in this life. When an individual fears God and His Word, they will not fear what men think. That was indeed Jerry Falwell! "People have asked me, 'Franklin, do you agree with Jerry Falwell?'" said evangelist Franklin Graham who was one of the two main speakers at Falwell's funeral. "Every time he opened the Bible, I agreed with Jerry Falwell. And you know what? He opened the Bible a lot." That is one of the things I admired about Jerry, his willingness to open the Bible in any situation, public or private; secular or religious.

It was as his role as founder of the Moral Majority in 1979 that resulted in Jerry becoming a nationally known figure within our nation's political realm. It is impossible to be involved in politics and avoid controversy. Jerry (along with Tim LaHaye) was credited with helping Ronald Reagan win his first term as President. Jerry credits Francis Schaeffer with influencing his thought concerning whether to speak out on political issues as a pastor. It was because the Bible speaks to every area of life, including the political, that Jerry realized that he could not be neutral in his stance on public issues.

The issues of homosexuality and abortion are two issues that God clearly defines His position on in the Bible, and so it should be surprising to none that Jerry stood faithfully with God and His Word on these matters. Faithfulness to God's Word is the source of such hatred and opposition from those who are pro-homosexual and pro-abortion towards Jerry over the years. Many have rejoiced in his sudden home going to heaven. 1 Corinthians 4:2 says, "it is required of a steward that one be found faithful." Jerry was always faithful in his stand and service for our Lord. This is why I am confident that the Lord said upon Jerry's entrance into heaven: "Well done thou good and faithful servant."

Former Southern Baptist Convention President Jerry Vines, whom Jerry Falwell often called, "his best friend in the ministry," said Falwell was given "a special touch for a special task" by the Lord. "He said, 'I believe God has called me to confront the culture,' and did he ever confront it," said Vines, who preached the main sermon at Falwell's funeral where an estimated 10,000 people attended. "And he was criticized and he was vilified and he was unfairly misquoted but he just kept on smiling and he kept on speaking the message of morality and the glorious message of Jesus Christ to our culture. And the political landscape of America has been different since that day."

THE BLESSED HOPE

Jerry believed strongly in the blessed hope—the pre-trib rapture—and every day looked for the coming of the Lord. Jerry said publicly (and privately to me many times) that this is why he and Tim LaHaye wanted the Pre-Trib Research Center at Liberty University (we have been here for two years now), was to let all know that he unwaveringly held to pretribulationism and wanted to strengthen that belief at Thomas Road Baptist Church and at Liberty University and Seminary.

Why was Jerry so committed to the rapture of the church in light of so many other interests? He believed that since Christ could return at any moment, at this very moment, then it was a motive to live a holy life in the moment, at every moment. "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2–3). The rapture was motive for living a pure life before God, which Jerry did. He also believed that the blessed hope was a powerful motive to evangelism and world missions. A believer needed to urgently preach the gospel because Christ

could return in the air at any-moment. Jerry believed that if the urgency were removed then one would slide into a lax attitude which would negatively impact our service for Christ. Anyone who knew Jerry also knows that he was constantly in motion. He was a bundle of energy for the Lord. Jerry was a lot of things but he was never lax, he knew that he has all eternity to relax and take it easy.

ISRAEL

Since Jerry loved God's Word, he took it literally. This means that when one reads the Bible and it mentions Israel, then it refers to Israel, never the church. Since Israel is mentioned regularly from Genesis to Revelation, it means that God has a future plan for His chosen people in His chosen land. Jerry believed that when God told Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3), that it is still true today and is likely a basis for God's continued hand of blessing upon America.

Like those who see a prophetic future for Israel, Jerry believed that the modern state of Israel was a fulfillment of Bible prophecy. As with most of his public views, this came under great criticism from both within Christendom and secular pundits alike. Typical of his bold stand for Israel was voiced at the Falwell funeral:

A Chicago-based Jewish leader, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, attended the Falwell rites, acknowledging it was unusual for a Jewish cleric to heap praise on an evangelical Christian. Eckstein told reporters that Falwell opposed then U.S. President Ronald Reagan's speaking at a cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, where Nazi soldiers had been buried: "Jerry Falwell was one of the few evangelical Christian leaders who agreed [with our protest]. It was not just when it was convenient that he stood with Israel," Eckstein said.¹

In the early 1980s, Jerry received Israel's Jabotinsky Award for his support, probably the highest service award given by Israel. Jerry supported Israel so intensely and won the confidence of the Israeli government that immediately after Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin telephoned Falwell before calling President Ronald Reagan to ask him to explain to the Christian public the reasons for the bombing, which Jerry did.

Jerry will be missed by many of us. However, as believers we have the sure knowledge that we will one day all be reunited with our Lord in heaven in order to spend eternity with the One who redeemed us. Until that day, we say so long and see you later to a giant of a man who faithfully served his Lord! Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Mark A. Kellner, "Analysis: Falwell's Funeral Low Key, But Not His Legacy," Adventist Review, accessed on the internet at: www.adventistreview.com/article.php?id=1179