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Monday, Sep. 02, 1985

Jerry Falwell Spreads the Word

By Robert Ajemian

Six miles high, flying through the midnight sky in his white, Israeli-made jet, the inexhaustible Reverend Jerry Falwell was on his way to Boston, scheduled to appear the following morning on a television show. During the trip, however, an urgent telephone message arrived: there was a suicide emergency at Falwell's center for alcoholics in Lynchburg, Va. A distraught veteran was threatening to blow his head off with a loaded pistol unless Falwell came back and talked to him. The would-be suicide was put on the phone, and, slick as butter, the Reverend began to calm him. Falwell explained, as one reasonable person to another, that he had to be on a national television program. But Falwell promised, he would certainly be back in Virginia by 6 o'clock that evening. The veteran agreed to wait. Falwell did his show, flew home, met the upset man and converted him to Christ.

Obviously, it takes a lot to deflect Jerry Falwell from broadcasting his message, for television is the pump of his vast Fundamentalist empire. And yet there is something shockingly worldly about his endless selling. What are we to make of this fatherly Bible banger, this artful entrepreneur in rube's clothing who sups with Presidents and world leaders, and reaches out directly to the simplest of men and women? His earnest warnings about America's moral decay, the breakdown of family values, are instinctively appealing. Is he, as his followers proclaim, the truest and bravest voice in the whole Fundamentalist movement, crying out against the rising tide of sin and sleaze? Or is he, with his swift mind and glib tongue, a modern Elmer Gantry, a power preacher with a corrupt soul?

Falwell is the most effective--and maybe because of his tremendous impact, the most unnerving--of the nation's video preachers. His is a spectacularly risky mission. He must on the one hand reassure his zealous followers that he is faithful to the fierce absolutes of the Bible. At the same time, he must appear reasonable and unmenacing to the watching outside world. Explains Falwell: "We want to be part of society without endorsing all the philosophies and life-styles of that society."

Just to keep going, Falwell must raise \$100 million a year, promoting religion with all his corporate daring and guile. His Thomas Road Church in Lynchburg is the cockpit of the whole enterprise. Jammed with TV directors and monitoring screens, it is where Falwell tapes his Sunday-morning service, which is broadcast that evening as the Old Time Gospel Hour to 392 stations across the country. A bank of 62 telephone operators takes incoming pledges after the show.

Beyond Lynchburg, reaching into all 50 states, is Falwell's most controversial venture, Moral Majority, a lobbying and political-action group that claims 6.5 million members. Falwell started Moral Majority in 1979, thrusting the religious right into front-line politics. The way Falwell saw it, if liberal clergymen could march for civil rights, conservative Fundamentalists could wage political war on immorality. Moral Majority espoused an odd ecumenism that aligned Falwell on various issues with Catholics, Jews and Mormons, all scorned in the past by strict Fundamentalists.

Besides his church base and political legion, Falwell during the past 14 years has created a Fundamentalist college, Liberty University, that teaches 6,500 students on a lush, wooded 4,400-acre campus in Lynchburg. Each year Liberty sends out some 300 graduates to churches around the country, a growing network of supporters ready to serve Falwell's Fundamentalist causes. Thus far, 700 of them are pastors of their own churches in the U.S.

Falwell himself marches into the secular world with his chin outthrust. Unlike the many electronic ministers who flee direct questioning, Falwell challenges hostile outsiders. He travels 8,000 miles a week, lashing out at abortion, pornography and homosexuality. He has been to Harvard to duel with jeering students who spilled over into three auditoriums to hear him, and to Oxford to debate Prime Minister David Lange of New Zealand about nuclear weapons. He dares Scientist Carl Sagan to debate creationism; Sagan has declined the challenge. He has a private session with South Africa's President P.W. Botha and sides publicly with his white government.

Falwell these days, however, is less the bullying, backwater figure that he used to be. Gone are the polyester suits, half boots and swept-back hairdo of his early ministry. A cruel streak used to show up in his arguments then. Today the belligerency is more concealed, although last week's attack on Bishop Desmond Tutu demonstrates that the streak runs deep. Falwell used to rail that homosexuals would spend an eternity in hell. He still condemns homosexuality but now expresses sympathy for those who practice it. Abortionists are not routinely labeled murderers. The less obnoxious Falwell of today draws far fewer protesters. "The liberal establishment has lost its fire," he says.

But the street fighter in Falwell still shows through. Six feet tall, a big man with a waistline that rides over his belt, he walks right up to anti-Falwell demonstrators and pumps their hands. He usually wears dark suits and shoes and always carries a Bible. His deep, booming voice dominates all encounters. Up every morning at 6 after only five hours' sleep, he reads from Scripture for about an hour. Falwell does no exercise, watches little television except for boxing and TV news and spends hours on the phone. He has a surface knowledge of history, philosophy and even the current affairs on which he makes pronouncements.

No one gets close to Falwell except his family, Wife Macel, Sons Jerry Jr., 23, and Jonathan, 18, and Daughter Jeannie, 21. During periods of crisis in the church, associates have asked Falwell whether he wishes any particular prayers said for him, but he politely brushes them off. Instead, he urges, pray that the money keeps coming in. Though he takes a salary of only \$49,500, the church provides him with a lovely 150-year-old home and use of the jet. Curiously, for all his pugnacity, Falwell has trouble confronting problems among his 2,200 employees. People who rile him are dropped into cold storage for months, not invited to meetings, or ignored when Falwell calls upon colleagues to offer prayers. He runs his church state like a monarch. Frequently at management meetings, when everyone is lined up to vote a certain way, and Falwell differs, the boss simply disregards them and goes his own way. Close supporters say Falwell badly needs some stronger people around to moderate his unchecked power.

In many ways, Ronald Reagan made Jerry Falwell possible. The preacher is routinely introduced to audiences as a friend of the President's. In 1980 Falwell lined up Moral Majority behind the candidate, and Reagan agreed with the Fundamentalist positions on such issues as school prayer and abortion. When Reagan visited Liberty University in October 1980, Falwell basked in the limelight. Last February, when the President turned down an invitation to address the National Religious Broadcasters in Washington, the organization turned to Falwell. After he called the White House, both Reagan and George Bush agreed to speak.

Falwell grew up in a family that had considerable land and money but little standing in the Lynchburg community. Longtime associates see this early rejection as a key to Falwell's energy and driving ambition. His father Carey, whom Falwell describes as an agnostic, had several servants, and the young Falwell did few chores. His father owned the local power company, ran a dance hall and trucked bootleg whisky during Prohibition. He was a heavy drinker and shot his own brother to death before Jerry was born. A judge ruled the act to be self-defense, since the brother was wielding a pistol. Jerry was a rowdy in his school years, drove cars at 100 m.p.h. and hung around outside a neighborhood cafe late at night with his buddies stopping traffic and taunting motorists. When he proposed marriage to Macel Pate, who played the piano at the Park Avenue Baptist Church, the girl's mother was crestfallen that she had taken up with a Falwell.

Falwell felt no special urge for the church, although he used to lie in bed Sunday mornings captivated by the robust radio voice of a California evangelist, Charles E. Fuller. The night of Jan. 20, 1952, Falwell sat in the front pew of Park Avenue Church listening to a minister speak Charles Fuller's exact message: It was possible to have a personal relationship with God through Christ. Thrilled by the words, Falwell took the invitation to come forward to the altar and be born again. He bought a Bible the next day. After graduating from a Missouri Bible college as an ordained Baptist minister, he started the Thomas Road Church in Lynchburg and began to broadcast his services on radio. Within a year his membership jumped from 35 to nearly a thousand. Falwell was a smooth storyteller and his blunt, biting tongue gave his Fundamentalist listeners a new sense of confidence. He thundered against adultery, drinking and premarital sex. He built his church audience with a series of stunts, importing Christian karate experts to smash blocks of ice in front of the congregation and exhibiting the "world's tallest Christian," a 7-ft. 8-in. wrestler from the Midwest. Falwell desegregated his church in the mid-'60s but spoke out sharply against clergymen becoming involved in issues like civil rights.

By the '70s Falwell's Thomas Road Church was packing in 20,000 people through five Sunday services. As the money poured in, his financial managers got overambitious and the Securities and Exchange Commission accused them of illegally selling unsecured church bonds out of state. Charged with fraud and deceit, Falwell agreed to sell no more bonds, and the charges were dropped.

Some fellow clergymen viewed his ministry as an entrepreneurial sideshow. One of them, the Rev. John Killinger of Lynchburg's First Presbyterian Church, rose in the pulpit in 1981 and asked his parishioners whether they believed Jesus would ever have appeared on the Old Time Gospel Hour. It was a sharp rebuke from the right side of the tracks. Falwell struck back with typical venom, mispronouncing Killinger's name as Dillinger. Falwell's aggressive tone may have given some of his supporters violent ideas: Killinger and his family began getting death threats.

In those days Falwell took criticism badly. When local reporters questioned his apocalyptic fund-raising letters, he would mount the Thomas Road pulpit the next Sunday and attack them. After one woman with a masculine-sounding first name wrote a critical magazine article, Falwell insinuated from the pulpit that she was a lesbian. "I don't know for sure why she changed her name," he taunted. When the local newspaper did a story about how much church money went to purchase TV time and how little was allotted to outside charities, Falwell was

furious. "The day may come," he told his applauding congregation, "when we just have to take away one fourth of (the paper's) subscription list and their advertising."

Sitting in the parlor of his highceilinged home, Falwell spoke with apparent ^ repentance about his urge to attack. "Those remarks of mine don't fit this ministry," he said slowly. A customary glass of Diet Coke in hand, he explained that he simply was not prepared for the stinging criticism that came after he started Moral Majority. His wife had placed a bowl of fresh strawberries on the table and he picked at them. Outside, wide green lawns shaded by towering white oaks stretched around the white-columned house. Over the years, Falwell has received his share of hate mail, envelopes that contained used condoms and human feces. His house is surrounded by 8-ft.-high concrete walls, and security men track him constantly. Despite these precautions, his mailbox has been blown up several times.

Falwell's mood picked up. Abortion is no longer a Roman Catholic issue, he said with satisfaction, but a Moral Majority one. His 261 clinics to assist pregnant women in having their babies and placing them for adoption, Falwell explained, will eventually swell to 10,000. If the Supreme Court sees such an alternative system, he predicted, the Justices will surely reverse the 1973 decision legalizing abortion, especially after Reagan appoints some new members. Falwell sees a new attitude among young people. "More and more of them have decided the social experiments of the '60s and '70s have failed," he said.

He spoke of successes in the campaign against pornography: five national chains that run 6,000 drug and grocery stores recently agreed to wipe their shelves clean of offending magazines and books. His own computers, Falwell said enthusiastically, now hold the names of 110,000 pastors around the country, all of them sources of support. He regards politically conservative American Jews as allies. Falwell's firm backing of Israel has gained him a dozen invitations to that country. "Whoever stands against Israel," he said, tapping the Bible at his side, "stands against God."

Falwell then headed outside for the brown-and-white van that he likes to drive. He wanted to show off Liberty University. He considers the school his most enduring monument, and last year put \$30 million into its administration and \$10 million into new construction. "There it is," he said delightedly as the college came into view. He drove along the winding mountain roads, proudly pointing out the low, tan brick school buildings. He stopped by the auditorium. "Almost every Cabinet officer has spoken here," he said. "And Reagan, Bush, Ted Kennedy, Jack Kemp." His great pride was obvious and understandable.

When he spoke of the rules at Liberty, he seemed almost unaware of their anachronistic rigidity: the restriction on freshman and sophomore dating, the ban on alcohol and tobacco, the outlawing of unauthorized demonstrations, the taboo against rock music, even country and western. "The students know I love country and western, and listen to it at home," Falwell smiled. "But it's the discipline that counts. Families send their children here for discipline and values."

With some foreboding, he said the money just had to keep coming in. He told of an insurance policy on his life worth \$35 million. It would be worth \$105 million if he died accidentally, enough to keep his ministry and school going for a year. Falwell has constructed a somewhat grandiose plan for his succession. Locked in a vault at Thomas Road is a 45-minute tape recording that reveals his secret choices for church leadership. Falwell has updated the tape annually and no one, he says a bit pretentiously, will hear it until after he dies.

But Falwell had a more pressing worry about the future. He is troubled about what will happen to Fundamentalist renewal after Ronald Reagan departs. The conservative tide, he fears, might run out altogether. "If the Democrats win," Falwell said, "I don't know what will happen to us." The highflying preacher, the entrepreneurial wizard who built his holy empire on boldness and Scripture, suddenly sounded oddly vulnerable. In spite of all his optimism, it was as if, for a moment, he sensed something darker: that before the coming of the period of great tribulation he constantly warns about, Falwell may face his own.

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