

National Public Radio (NPR)

May 18, 2007 Friday

SHOW: Tell Me More 9:00 AM EST

Falwell's Conflicted Legacy

ANCHORS: MICHEL MARTIN

MICHEL MARTIN, host:

And now it's time for faith matters, where we talk about the legacy of one of America's most influential religious leaders, Jerry Falwell. He died on Tuesday at the age of 73. Born in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1933, he founded the Thomas Road Baptist Church. Later, he started Liberty University in Lynchburg.

But what most people know about Jerry Falwell is that he founded the Moral Majority, a conservative Christian political movement, the basis of what we now know as the Christian right. He is credited for harnessing the power of evangelical Christians and making politics part of the message.

But did empowering the faithful also lead to polarization? We have three religious leaders to talk about this. Reverend Dr. Hershael York teaches at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville. He joins us from their studio. Reverend Anthony Evans heads the National Black Church Initiative, a coalition of 16,000 African-American and Latino churches. He joins us from member station WFAE in Charlotte, North Carolina. And Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum also joins us. She is senior rabbi of New York's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the country's largest gay and lesbian Jewish synagogue. She joins us from her office in New York.

Welcome to all of you.

Rabbi SHARON KLEINBAUM (Congregation Beth Simchat Torah): Happy to be here.

Reverend ANTHONY EVANS (President, National Black Church Initiative): Thank you. It's good to be here.

Dr. HERSHAEL YORK (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary): You're very welcome.

MARTIN: Now Dr. York, if you would start, will you please tell us about how you became acquainted with Jerry Falwell's work?

Dr. YORK: Well, I've known of Jerry Falwell since I was a child, because he and I followed the same trajectory. I was just several years behind him. Like Jerry Falwell, I grew up an independent Baptist and later joyfully joined the Southern Baptist Convention because of its increasingly definite conservative direction. And so I had much in common with Dr. Falwell. I don't think I ever heard him preach and said, wow, what a great sermon, but I frequently heard him preach or speak and said, wow, what a leader. He was able to harness the power of the media to build a coalition of people with disparate points of view on many things and yet bring them together for a single purpose.

MARTIN: Just briefly, though, at the time that I remember that Reverend Falwell was getting active in politics it was really not considered appropriate in some circles for religious leaders to be so politically active.

Dr. YORK: That's exactly right. And in fact, ironically, there was actually a Southern Baptist in the White House. And I think it was frustration with Jimmy Carter and his lack of taking up issues that were dear to evangelicals that made someone like Falwell say we need to stand up for the issues that are close to our hearts and that we think are very important, and that we have a right to be in the arena of public opinion and so let's get our opinion out there.

MARTIN: Reverend Evans, you belong to a tradition of African-American leaders who have long felt that the political process needs to be engaged by religious leaders, I mean, going back to Martin Luther King. So how did Jerry Falwell's message resonate in black churches?

Rev. EVANS: Well, it was surprising because of course we'd never heard the white church speak with such clarity in terms of morality; in many incidents, those stances were consistent with the African-American church. One of other things that people don't know about the African-American church is that on social justice issues we are liberal, but on moral questions we are conservative.

MARTIN: And so do you feel that Reverend Falwell had a following in the black community?

Rev. EVANS: Oh, no question. In dealing with moral questions like homosexuality, and the importance of marriage, and the importance of having an honest and Christian character, he did have a following in terms of that.

MARTIN: Reverend Kleinbaum, how was Reverend Falwell viewed both within Jewish religious leadership and also within the gay community?

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: Well, I don't think I can speak for the entire Jewish community. From my perspective, his anti-gay position, which he advocated with such vehemence, I felt was a form of bigotry using the language of religion. And I was deeply saddened to hear him repeatedly and with great affect on many people use the language of God and the Bible to vilify and demonize affection of God's people. I hope and pray that wherever

he is now, he will find a way to see that vilifying and demonizing a whole section of God's people is neither moral nor just.

MARTIN: Rabbi, Reverend Falwell was also a vocal supporter of Israel. How did that play?

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: No, he was a supporter of a certain position in Israel, and he didn't support all the peoples of Israel. Israel is made up of Palestinians and Jews, and I don't think that his support of the state of Israel reflects the entire Jewish community.

MARTIN: Dr. York, what do you think Reverend Falwell is most remembered for? Is it harnessing political activism per se? Is it harnessing evangelical Christians to be politically active on key issues? I mean I think it's a widely accepted now that this activism was a major factor in the election of Ronald Reagan.

Dr. YORK: I think it depends on which angle of prism you examine his ministry by. Those like the rabbi that see him basically because of his moral position, they're going to interpret him that way. I just don't think Ronald Reagan would have been elected had it not been for Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority.

For those of us that identify with the faith, the scriptures that Jerry Falwell preached, we see him primarily as an evangelist. Jerry Falwell knew that the only assessment of his ministry that really mattered would come from Jesus Christ himself, and that was the direction for which he lived.

MARTIN: Rabbi Kleinbaum?

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: I'd like to just add, as a Jew and as a lesbian, knowing that Jerry Falwell taught and thinks theologically that I'm going to hell does not allow me to look at him and say that he was a profound moral leader. He had a political position that he wanted to codify into this country both in terms of the Christian, his Christian beliefs, and in terms of what he believe about gay people.

MARTIN: Did you fight Rabbi - I'm sorry...

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: He blames me personally as a lesbian for being responsible for this September 11th attack. How is that a proper position for a moral or a religious leader?

MARTIN: Rabbi, he apologized for those remarks, though, didn't he?

Dr. YORK: Yes, he did. He did.

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: He retracted that when there was great pressure on him, but he said over and over again that this country was being punished, not just September 11th but different points, that God would punish gay people and the country...

Dr. YORK: Well, he certainly took those parts at the Old Testament seriously that talked about God judging his people because of sin.

Rev. EVANS: No.

Dr. YORK: And I don't think he ever retracted that view.

MARTIN: This is TELL ME MORE from NPR News.

We're talking about the legacy of the Reverend Jerry Falwell, who died on Tuesday at the age of 73. We're speaking with Dr. Hershael York. He's a professor at Southern Baptist Seminary. Reverend Anthony Evans of the National Black Church Initiative, and Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in New York.

Reverend, I just wanted to ask you about Reverend Falwell as a media figure.

Rev. EVANS: I think that what he did, approximately, is took a tradition that we know within the hearts of America and he put it on television. And he inspired other evangelists like T.D. Jakes, and Eddie Long, and (unintelligible), and everybody else who followed him in that respect.

And I agree that Jerry Falwell may have been a controversial figure, but in terms of the Christian faith, he preached the Gospel. And sometimes by preaching the Gospel you offend people. But by preaching the Gospel, we just have to state what Christ tells us to state.

MARTIN: Rabbi, did you find him a threatening figure? Was he - did you...

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: I believe that there is a great power in the use of language and that words are important, and that moral and religious leaders who have access to any kind of bully pulpit have a moral responsibility.

And we, my colleagues and I, might disagree about what gets said, but we understand that our words are important. To say things like AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals, it's God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals, seeds a bigotry and a level of discrimination in this country and in the world.

Now I understand my colleagues are saying that bigotry and discrimination is in the name of Jesus. I'm not Christian. If that's their position, I certainly support their right to believe anything they want to believe.

MARTIN: What do you think Reverend Falwell's legacy is, then?

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: In this regard, I think it is to identify publicly a deep brand of religious Christianity with an anti-gay agenda.

MARTIN: Reverend Evans?

Rev. EVANS: No, absolutely not. Jerry Falwell's legacy is a Christian clergy who were not afraid to take a public stand and represent Christ's views in the marketplace.

MARTIN: Was he a complicated figure for you, Reverend Evans? I'm curious because so many African-Americans - I mean he supported conservative political figures who many African-Americans found to be hostile to their own political interests.

Rev. EVANS: Oh, no question.

MARTIN: And yet, on a moral level, you're saying that some of his message resonated. I'm just curious how you sort both of those things out.

Rev. EVANS: We always said that if you preach the Gospel that you preach it for Jesus Christ only, but when you live your life, you live it for yourself. We hope that your life will reflect Jesus' characteristic, but often it does not. And Jerry Falwell was a product of his environment. He was a white male from the Deep South, and he took up the stereotypes against African-Americans just like other white males did and continue to hold in some cases in this country. But I think that he emerged from that.

MARTIN: Reverend York, I'd like to hear from you. Do you think that Jerry Falwell changed America's relationship with faith?

Dr. YORK: Not really, because I believe this has always been the legacy of America's relationship with faith from the founding of this nation on. If anything, what he did was he sought to reclaim it. He sought to take us back to that. Because he saw an America that was drifting the left, away from the moorings of faith, and he wanted to remind us that this was our heritage and this was our right. Jerry Falwell did not hate homosexuals. He loved homosexuals. He simply loved them enough to tell them the truth.

MARTIN: Reverend York, in recent years, another generation of evangelical leaders has come to prominence. And some suggests that perhaps the Jerry Falwell's particular brand of expression, you know, very blunt, very obviously some consider sort of polarizing, has had its day. Do you think that's true? Do you think that the next generation of leaders will express themselves differently? Do you think, I guess, his moment has passed?

Dr. YORK: Well, obviously, his moment has passed because he has passed. But do I think there is a more media savvy evangelical leader on the rising? Yes, I think that he taught us and we learned from his gaffes. And he wanted that. You know, he was really himself never troubled by his own missteps and misstatements. But you're right, there comes behind him now a little bit more sophisticated kind of leader that knows how to be a self-monitoring speaker perhaps more than he did, and they are who they are because they learned from him.

MARTIN: What did you learn from him?

Dr. YORK: I learned the power of a man who has a vision of what God can do. That's, you know, for a man to accomplish what he did is a testimony to the power of the individual who is submitted to the belief in a God that leads him to act, and he certainly taught us that.

MARTIN: Reverend Evans, how will you remember Reverend Falwell?

Rev. EVANS: Conviction. And I will support anyone who is brave enough to get into the market square and lay their convictions down. And the rabbi there, I love her, I'm proud of her because she lays her convictions down. And by laying your convictions down, you teach us, and then we all reason together.

MARTIN: Rabbi Kleinbaum, how will you remember Jerry Falwell?

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: Well, I'll remember him as someone who did understand the power of words and the power of his position and, unfortunately, as someone who used that position and his words to advocate in the name of religion some pretty hateful philosophy.

MARTIN: Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, senior rabbi of New York's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah. Thank you for joining us.

Rabbi KLEINBAUM: Thank you very much, and thank you to my colleagues.

MARTIN: Reverend Dr. Hershael York, professor at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville. Thank you so much for joining us.

Dr. YORK: You're welcome. Thank you.

MARTIN: And Reverend Anthony Evans of the National Black Church Initiative. He joined us from Charlotte. Thank you so much, Reverend Evans, for joining us as well.

Rev. EVANS: Thank you very much, and my colleagues as well.

(Soundbite of music)

MARTIN: I'm Michel Martin. You're listening to TELL ME MORE from NPR News.