

Welcome to the resurrection

By Bill Berkowitz

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Riding the tide of the 2004 elections, the Reverend Jerry Falwell thinks he knows which way the waves are breaking. In the November 9 edition of his online newsletter, “Falwell Confidential,” the Rev. Falwell said that in order to “finish” what he started twenty-five years ago, he was announcing the launch of The Faith and Values Coalition, an organization that he intends to become the 21st Century version of the Moral Majority. The central purpose of the new organization “is to utilize the momentum of the November 2 elections to maintain an evangelical revolution of voters who will continue to go to the polls to ‘vote Christian,’” the Rev. Falwell stated.

The Rev. Falwell’s Moral Majority was one of the first and most important conservative Christian operations to emerge from the nascent New Right of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Along with the founding of the Heritage Foundation, the rise of the conservative movement’s funding engines – right wing foundations and philanthropists – the emergence of Richard Viguerie’s direct-mail empire, and the non-stop agitation by Paul Weyrich, the Rev. Tim LaHaye, Phyllis Schlafly and others, the Rev. Falwell’s founding of Moral Majority in 1979 stands out because of its engagement of a grassroots army of foot soldiers like no other conservative evangelical Christian organization before. While the Rev. Falwell was becoming one of America’s best known and most strident voices of moralizing and right wing extremism he had his eyes on the prize: making conservative evangelical Christians an indispensable wing of the Republican Party.

“During Moral Majority’s heyday,” the Rev. wrote, “we registered millions of new voters and re-activated millions more. More than 100,000 pastors, priests and rabbis and nearly seven million families joined hands and hearts to reclaim America for God. Many historians believe the result was the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the genesis of what the media calls the ‘Religious Right.’”

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One of the Moral Majority's first efforts was fighting against the Equal Rights Amendment. At the time, the Rev. Falwell said: "I listen to feminists and all these radical gals... These women just need a man in the house. That's all they need. Most of the feminists need a man to tell them what time of day it is and to lead them home. And they blew it and they're mad at all men. Feminists hate men. They're sexist. They hate men; that's their problem."

The Moral Majority closed up shop in 1989 at just about the time the Rev. Pat Robertson was pulling together his Christian Coalition – an organization that rose directly out of the ashes of the Rev. Robertson's failed bid to attain the Republican Party's 1988 presidential nomination. By developing sophisticated technology and combining it with a huge national mailing list of conservative Christian donors and grassroots activists, attaching the organization to the booming voice of his powerful Christian Broadcasting Network, and hiring of the politically savvy and boyish-looking Ralph Reed as executive director, the Moral Majority had essentially been rendered vestigial.

The shut down of the Moral Majority did not spell the end of the Rev. Falwell. Over the past fifteen years, he has never been far from the public spotlight. The rise of the 24/7 news cycle and the cable television news networks allowed the Rev. Falwell a ready-made platform from which he could be counted on for the surprising and sometimes outrageous sound-bite. He came out swinging against President Bill Clinton and was a passionate advocate for his impeachment during the Monica Lewinsky affair. Appearing regularly with CNN's Larry King and Geraldo Rivera on his then-CNBC program, the Rev. Falwell often shared the spotlight with Hustler magazine's Larry Flynt, the Rev. Falwell's longtime adversary. At a pastor's conference, the Rev. Falwell, who prides himself on being a good friend to Israel, riled up the Jewish community by claiming that the Antichrist, the archenemy of God, may be a Jew. And, who else but the Rev. Falwell would have the chutzpah to charge Tinky-Winky, a character on the British television show "Teletubbies," with being gay?

While the Rev. Falwell's reputation took a minor hit when it was revealed that in 1994 the Rev. had accepted a \$3.5 million donation for his Liberty University from the Unification Church's Rev. Sun Myung Moon, his personal low point occurred seven years later, shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Appearing on the Rev. Pat Robertson's "700 Club," the Rev. Falwell claimed that the terrorist attacks were caused by gays, lesbians, pro-choice activists, the ACLU

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and a host of other liberal likely suspects.

On Pat Robertson's "700 Club," the Rev. Falwell told viewers: "The ACLU's got to take a lot of blame for this... throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle... all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

Falwell added: "God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve." According to the Washington Post, the Rev. Robertson wasn't an innocent bystander: He agreed with Falwell's remarks saying "Jerry, that's my feeling." Robertson added: "I think we've just seen the antechamber to terror. We haven't even begun to see what they can do to the major population."

Thoroughly condemned and rocked by nearly universal criticism, the Rev. Falwell issued a series of non-apologetic apologies. He survived that monumental blunder.

With all this behind him, the Rev. Falwell now sees great possibilities in his newly founded Faith and Values Coalition and he has committed himself to a four-year term as national chairman. He has also brought Mathew Staver, the founder and general counsel of the Orlando, Fla.-based Liberty Counsel on board as vice-chairman. The Rev. Falwell's son, Jonathan Falwell, will serve as executive director. Dr. Tim LaHaye, the longtime Christian activist and co-author of the wildly popular "Left Behind" books, a series of apocalyptic novels that have sold well over 60 million copies, will serve as the Coalition's board chairman.

The organization's three-part agenda is simple and concise:

"The confirmation of pro-life, strict constructionist U.S. Supreme Court justices and other federal judges,"

"The passage of a constitutional Federal Marriage Amendment," and

"The election of another socially-, fiscally-, and politically-conservative president in 2008."

The political landscape has changed enormously since the Rev. Falwell last led a national organization. Evangelical Christian activists are fully embedded within the Bush Administration; the House and the Senate are fully stocked by

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evangelical Christians; and right wing radio outlets, the Fox News Channel, and the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Washington Times have given conservative evangelical Christians ready-made outlets for their agenda.

We have come nearly full circle in 25 years. These days, the Christian Coalition has more or less become a paper organization, and other more powerful organizations have emerged to lead the evangelical Christian right. The Washington, DC-based lobbying group, the Family Research Council, Dr. James Dobson's Colorado Springs, Colorado-based Focus on the Family, a multi-million dollar media empire and ministry, and Dr. D. James Kennedy's Florida-based Coral Ridge Ministries are leading the fight against gay marriage and an array of Christian right-backed issues.

A revived Rev. Jerry Falwell claims that he's "feel[ing] the leading of the Holy Spirit to answer that call and to once again mobilize people of faith to reclaim this great country as 'one nation under God.'" He says that he intends to organize "in all 50 states" and to recruit and train "millions of Americans to become partners in this exciting task of bringing this nation back to the moral values of faith and family on which it was founded." He also pledged to use his National Liberty Journal newspaper "as a springboard for this great effort." Will the Rev. Falwell fit seamlessly into the current mix? Will The Faith and Values Coalition be able to get enough funding to implement its agenda? Stay tuned.