

Charms of an ideologue: Jerry Falwell at Duke

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [June 12, 2007](#) issue

"Did you ever meet Jerry Falwell?" someone asked me the day Falwell died. "Meet him? Jerry nearly got me fired," I responded.

This was true. During Falwell's days at the Moral Majority a student dared me to ask Falwell to speak at Duke. Never thinking that the famous, busy man would come, I invited him. A couple days later I received a gracious acceptance. I had underestimated Jerry's love of publicity and a good fight.

Not having mentioned money in my invitation, I wrote him back, saying that we could pay only for his travel; there would be no honorarium. Falwell immediately replied that the honor of speaking at Duke was payment enough and that, since he was flying down in his private jet, travel expenses would be on him. He asked only for my prayers.

There was no deterring this man.

When I asked the university president if she would like to introduce Falwell, she said, "Are you crazy?" And then she added: "Who put the idea to invite Jerry Falwell in your head anyway? When are you next up for a job evaluation?"

I advised against any publicizing of the event, but once the *Duke Chronicle* heard about it, a storm of protest arose. After its headline appeared—something like "Dean of the Chapel Invites Notorious Homophobe Christian to Duke"—things got nasty. Even my disclaimers that I didn't personally know Falwell, that I had hardly read the book of Leviticus, and that I had only once even been in the vicinity of Lynchburg didn't help. The Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgendered Alliance called for my resignation and for a massive show of defiance against Falwell's "closed minded, racist, homophobic, self-righteous, incendiary rhetoric." We liberals are nothing if not open-minded.

“Jerry Falwell says that God doesn’t hear the prayers of Jews,” said another letter. My pointing out that it was the president of the Southern Baptist Convention who said that had little effect. “After we get through with you, the only place you’ll ever be chaplain is at Liberty Baptist,” was the reply.

The afternoon of the speech, as a thunderstorm approached, I received a phone call from Jerry. We were now on a first-name basis. “Will, just calling so you won’t worry. My pilot tells me we can avoid this storm. No problem. The Lord is with us, Will! See you at six!” What did it take to get this guy not to show up?

I gathered Jerry and his entourage at the airport. He brought with him a very attractive Liberty student, a woman whose father, Jerry proudly informed us, had been an ambassador to Switzerland. The student leader of the Duke Campus Ministry immediately lost interest in Falwell and spent the rest of the evening trying to get the woman’s address.

Jerry wasn’t at all like he was on *Larry King Live*. I was unnerved by his charm and grace, which I figured was the way he softened people up before he let loose with the homophobic, self-righteous, incendiary rhetoric.

I now had the task of introducing Jerry while at the same time distancing myself from him. At my first mention of Jerry’s name a number of people began to hiss and boo. It sounded like the response to Dean Smith when Duke played North Carolina in basketball. This is going to be a long evening, I thought. Please, Lord, do not let the Duke students martyr this man and make a fool out of themselves.

Jerry, grinning from ear to ear, got up and said what an honor it was for him to be at this great Christian university. More boos and hisses. Jerry then said that he would like to talk on the role of faith in higher education. Assorted hisses. Jerry rambled for about 30 minutes, speaking of the founding of Harvard as a place of Christian learning. He mentioned Princeton too. In fact he managed to mention every school with which Duke competed, noting that we had the church to thank for their existence today. Gradually the hissing and booing faded away. The students were obviously disappointed that he had yet to say anything offensive or even interesting.

When Jerry ended his remarks, he asked for conversation. Now things would really get nasty, I thought. The first student at the microphone was an African-American woman. She asked something like, “I can’t stand your right-wing narrow-mindedness. You say you are a Christian, but you preach hate. How many African

Americans do you have at your Liberty University?" The audience responded with jeers and applause.

Jerry paused, wiped his brow, and said, "Young lady, you could not have asked a question that hurts me more deeply." Some hissing. "In asking about minority student enrollment, you have named my most regrettable failure at Liberty University. I have prayed, I have worked, I have been throughout this country attempting to recruit ethnic minority students, and though we have had greater success among some ethnic minority groups, I am sad to report that our enrollment today stands at only about 12 percent African American." A few guffaws from the audience.

Jerry continued, "Of course, we are a very young university, less than a decade in existence. We have such a small endowment. But how can I be sure that I am not simply deceiving myself? I am unwilling to accept excuses for our infidelity in regard to our ministry with African Americans. Just the other day I was pouring my heart out on this very matter to Coretta—you know, Coretta Scott King—we try to get together every few months—she is a wonderful person. She told me not to be so consumed with this problem. But I can't help myself." At the mention of Coretta Scott King the audience became eerily quiet.

"Do you know, by the way, how many African Americans are enrolled at Duke?" he asked. No response.

"I'll tell you. Six percent. Six percent! Your endowment is 50 times bigger than ours. You have had years to work on this issue (though admittedly you spent half of your life as a racially segregated school). In fact, I struggled with whether the Lord wanted me to come here tonight to a school that, though you have been given great gifts, has such a poor record of minority enrollment. I pray that you will let the Lord help you do better in this area." Dead silence in the packed auditorium.

From there Jerry went on to field every question with great aplomb. Somehow he had a name to drop as part of every response. He invoked Teddy Kennedy (with whom he sometimes vacationed), Nelson Mandela (whom he had found to be a wonderful confidant), Jesse Jackson (golf partner?) and every other member of the liberal pantheon except for Bill Clinton. I sat there seething with contempt for the wimpishness of the Duke audience. Is this all it took to shut them up? They were putty in this Baptist's hands. When Jerry finally finished his avuncular banter, he

received a warm ovation. "The man's no fool," I thought to myself. "Lord, give me a portion of his gift at manipulating an academic audience."

"You can have a great ministry here," Jerry jovially told me on the way back to his jet. "You can have a remarkable influence upon talented young lives." n