

Rare dialogue: Falwell's gesture

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Jerry Falwell loves making grand gestures and startling statements. In the mid-'80s he took over the scandal-ridden PTL empire from Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and proudly took a plunge down the water slide at PTL's Heritage amusement park. In the mid-'90s he raised Clinton-hating to a new level of vitriol by promoting a series of books and tapes charging that the president was a cocaine-addicted drug smuggler and possibly a murderer. Earlier this year he warned about the homosexual threat of the "Teletubbies" TV show: Tinky Winky, he decided, was a homosexual symbol. Falwell is, in short, a man who acts on hunches, and they are usually not inspired ones.

But Falwell's latest dramatic move was indeed inspired. He invited a delegation of gays, led by Mel White of the Metropolitan Community Churches, to his church in Lynchburg, Virginia. Falwell has consistently condemned homosexuality as a "sinful lifestyle" and has urged gays to renounce their homosexuality. Though he hasn't changed his mind on that score, he said he wanted to tone down the rhetoric and ensure that his followers' hatred of what they regard as sin does not eclipse their love of the sinner. The avowed aim of the meeting with White's group was to discuss ways to end violence and hateful speech against gays and Christians.

It is not clear whether Falwell is willing to learn all that much from the dialogue or significantly change his rhetoric. Some even suggest that the meeting was simply a strategic move on Falwell's part to clarify his identity in the shifting political sands of the Religious Right. (White, for his part, had been trying to arrange such a meeting with Falwell for seven years.) Still, Falwell's move was a rare public gesture of reconciliation. We need all the examples we can get of opponents who look together for common ground. It's not all that often people sit down to talk with those they truly believe are sinners.

Which raises one curious aspect of the Lynchburg meeting: According to reports, the members of Falwell's church who met with members of White's group refused to eat with them, citing biblical injunctions against eating with sinners. Even if one accepts the questionable premise that homosexual activity is unambiguously sinful, this is a

strange action for anyone who remembers that Jesus himself was rather careless about whom he ate with—and that it was his critics who worried most about protocols for table fellowship.