

Liberty University, your roots are showing

On Saturday, Donald Trump gave his first commencement address—at Liberty University. How could the Moral Majority and a famously immoral president form this alliance?

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May 15, 2017



President Trump at Liberty University on May 13, 2017. Photo courtesy REUTERS/Yuri Gripas.

Donald Trump gave his first commencement address at Liberty University on Saturday. In this move, the president centered the institution, moving it from its position as a fringe campaign stop. Trump rewarded the loyalty of Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Liberty, who inherited the position from his famous father and stood beside Trump even when a [board member resigned](#) and [students rebelled](#). Falwell

lauded Trump as a [“dream president for evangelicals.”](#)

On one hand, the alliance makes sense. Out of all the unpredictable behavior of this midnight binge-tweeting, [double scoop ice creaming](#), genital-grabbing president, loyalty seems to be the most predictable determining factor of rewards. Trump will recognize those who stand beside him. And those who pledge honesty over fealty? [They will get sacked.](#)

Loyalty explains why Trump loves Falwell, but why is the feeling mutual? Why would Falwell see such dreamy qualities in Trump?

This Trump/Falwell alliance has made many people scratch their heads. The religious right had a prominent voice during Bill Clinton’s presidency because they believed in the value of the family and therefore could not abide Clinton’s philandering ways. Evangelicals fought against abortion because they are pro-life, and many don't like the idea of sex without consequence. They wrestled against same-sex unions, because they believed in the sanctity of hetero-marriage. So how could Trump and Falwell become BFFs? How could the Moral Majority and a famously immoral president form an alliance? And how could most evangelicals go along with it?

It’s because we have a false story of the religious right in our minds. Though they have touted their pro-family stance in recent decades, abortion was not the organizing force behind the movement. And if we pick up another yarn of history, we can see how Donald Trump and Liberty University perfectly align. Falwell and friends have no problem with Trump, even though Trump seems to go against every bit of decency that they have fought for in the last 40 years, because Trump appeals to the religious right roots.

We might think that the conservative movement formed to fight feminism and same-sex love, but it actually came into being with [segregation and Civil Rights](#). As [this article](#) explains, Jerry Falwell Sr. championed segregationists. In one sermon, the elder Falwell preached in reaction to the Supreme Court’s decision to desegregate public schools:

If Chief Justice Warren and his associates had known God’s word and had desired to do the Lord’s will, I am quite confident that the 1954 decision would never have been made. The facilities should be separate. When God has drawn a line of distinction, we should not attempt to cross that line.

The elder Falwell went on to say that integration will “destroy our race eventually.” Falwell worked to start a white Christian school in response to desegregation and strongly defended others who started them. Then in 1971, when the IRS moved to revoke the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University, a school that forbade interracial dating, the movement that led to the Moral Majority began.

Now Liberty University’s ugly roots are showing, so it makes sense that President Trump, who vilifies Muslims and Mexicans, who wants to build walls and institute bans, who hired Jeff Sessions as attorney general, would find friends at Liberty University. Trump touted his religious freedom executive order that enables “Americans and their organizations to exercise religion and participate fully in civic life without undue interference by the Federal Government.” This may have illicit yawns from most scholars, but in Falwell's setting, the order spoke to the historic roots of a movement that started because of the fear that government would interfere in segregation. History repeats, and so we are waking up to the Falwell dream, as much of the diverse and beautiful society that we built crumbles.

The question is, will white evangelicals continue to support this shady union? Or will they wake up to another dream? It is not too late for us to join together while loving our neighbors, welcoming the stranger, and seeing the image of God in all humanity.