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A reminiscence: Falwell Goes to Duke University

June 01, 2008 | The Rev. Dr. William H. Willimon

“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. Back during Jerry’s fire-breathing Moral Majority days a student dared me to ask Falwell to speak at Duke University. Never thinking that a famous, busy man like him would come, I invited him. A gracious acceptance followed in a couple of days. I had underestimated Jerry’s love of publicity and a good fight.

Having not mentioned money in my invitation, I wrote him back, telling him that we could only pay for his travel from Lynchburg to Durham — no honorarium. Jerry immediately replied that the honor of speaking at a place like Duke for a fine Christian writer like me was payment enough and that, since he was flying down in his private jet, travel would be on him. He asked only for my prayers.

There was no deterring this man once he had been invited.

The first hint of trouble came when I asked Duke’s president if she would like to introduce Falwell when he spoke. “Are you crazy?” she graciously replied. “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 publicity but once the “Duke Chronicle” heard the rumor, a storm of protest arose. After the headline, “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 been in the vicinity of Lynchburg (Va.) once didn’t help.

The Lesbian-Bisexual-Pre-Operative and Post-Operative Transgendered Alliance called for my resignation and for a massive show of defiance against Falwell’s “closed-minded, racist, homophobic, self-righteous, incendiary rhetoric.”

Another letter read: “Jerry Falwell says that God doesn’t hear the prayers of Jews.” My pointing out that the then-president of the Southern Baptist Convention was the one 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.

I dreaded his arrival on the appointed evening. That afternoon, 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 6!"

What did it take to get this guy not to show up?

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 the homophobic, self-righteous, incendiary rhetoric to follow. We arrived on campus to find the auditorium packed. 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 in my cold, terse introduction, people began to hiss and boo, the same tone they took with Dean Smith when we played UNC in basketball. This is going to be a long evening, I thought.

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. He said he would like to talk on the role of faith in higher education. Assorted hisses. He 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 silenced as students grew weary. They were obviously disappointed that he had yet to say anything offensive or even interesting.

When Jerry ended his remarks, he asked for open conversation. Now things would get nasty. The first student at the microphone was an African-American. She asked a question that went 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-Americans." 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 — and she told me not to be so consumed with this problem. But I can't help myself."

At the mention of Coretta's name, the audience became eerily quiet.

"Do you know, by the way, how many African Americans are enrolled here 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 throughout the packed auditorium.

From there Jerry went on to field every question with greatest aplomb. 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 a Baptist’s hands. When Jerry finally finished his avuncular banter, he received — if not a standing at least a warm — ovation.

“The man’s no fool,” I said to myself. “Lord, give me a portion of his gift of manipulation of 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.”

Only if I were you, I muttered.

The Rev. Dr. William H. Willimon was elected in July 2004 as Bishop of The United Methodist Church. He leads the 157,000 Methodists and 792 pastors in North Alabama. For 23 years he was Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University, Durham, N.C.