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The Leadership of Dr. Jerry Falwell

By David Hirschman*

Dr. Jerry Falwell was a man of extraordinary ability. From his faith and vision, to his ability to inspire and motivate, and his incredible endurance, Dr. Falwell was a man with few equals. Among his identifying characteristics, one trait is conspicuous, his ability to lead. Falwell's leadership influenced not only students of Liberty University and members of Thomas Road Baptist Church, but also churches and people across the United States, and provides evidence that leadership skill was his strongest characteristic. In the inaugural year of the University and several years thereafter, Dr. Falwell successfully encouraged and led churches other than Thomas Road Baptist Church to support the new school with monthly financial giving. With the "I Love America" rallies in the mid 1970's, Dr. Falwell's leadership was influential in highlighting the drift of America's moral compass, and calling the country back to God.¹ Perhaps his greatest demonstration of leadership aside from more than fifty years as pastor of one of America's largest churches and as Chancellor of Liberty University was Dr. Falwell's role in establishing the Moral Majority, a movement of conservative Americans, many of them evangelical Christians, to influence the 1980 elections. Dr. Falwell is credited with mobilizing the conservative vote to elect Ronald Reagan as the fortieth President of the United States.²

Early students of LU consider Dr. Falwell a pioneer leader. One early graduate stated, "Everything about him was pioneer, from planting a church, to starting ministries, including

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¹ This volume contains Dr. Falwell's vision along with challenging messages for national revival. Jerry Falwell, *America Can Be Saved* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1979).

² Jerry Falwell, *Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 357-381.

LBC, Jerry was unafraid to go after what he was convinced God wanted him to do.”³

Another early graduate described Dr. Falwell as a “pioneer who had close contact with his students and was constantly challenging them to do their best for the Lord. He was an encourager and motivator whom God greatly used to start a great institution of higher learning.”⁴

An early volume chronicling the ministry of Jerry Falwell also identified this pioneer characteristic of his life regarding the beginning of Thomas Road Baptist Church, and starting TRBC was only a first step in a series of leadership steps that would characterize his life.

Additional steps included beginning a radio/television ministry in the mid-1950’s, establishing an alcohol recovery ministry decades before such ministries became commonplace, opening a free summer camp for children in central Virginia, and other ministry related ventures, not the least of which is Liberty University.

Dr. Falwell’s leadership ability appears to be the combination of natural aptitude and the supernatural endowment of God as opposed to the product of academic preparation, perhaps in preparation for a life of rigorous ministry and moral leadership. Dr. Falwell’s academic training consisted of the Graduate of Theology degree from Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri, in addition to several honorary doctorates received throughout his ministry.⁵ With comparatively limited academic training, Dr. Falwell was able to employ his leadership ability to accomplish items of spiritual and strategic importance.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the subject of church leadership, increased in prominence in the United States with a number of authors contributing sources that have become

³ Glenn Kurka. 2009. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. August 22.

⁴ Rodney Kidd. 2009. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. October 5.

⁵ Dr. Falwell received the following honorary degrees: Doctor of Divinity from Tennessee Temple Theological Seminary, Doctor of Letters from California Graduate School of Theology, and Doctor of Laws from Central University, Seoul, Korea. Liberty University, Undated, “Liberty University Executive Biographies,” <http://www.liberty.edu/index.cfm?PID=6921/> (accessed February 13, 2010).

standard references for the subject. Well-known authors contributing to this topic from a ministry background include Henry and Richard Blackaby, John C. Maxwell, and Elmer Towns. Sources from these authors along with corporate leadership contributions authored by John R. Noe⁶ and Jack Welch⁷ provide a reference with which to interpret Dr. Falwell's leadership characteristics. Table 1 presents the key elements of each authors' model as a foundation for constructing a form for referencing and comparing the leadership qualities of Dr. Falwell.

The process of identifying Dr. Falwell's leadership strengths includes a review of each authors' expression or concept of key leadership characteristics, identifying the elements shared by each author, and then interpreting those elements in light of Dr. Falwell's life and ministry. The authors' tendency to use different terms to describe similar characteristics or to cite characteristics that have relevance to a rather broad range of applications requires a comprehensive comparison of each authors' material and at times, a somewhat subjective interpretation of the material in an attempt to produce a collective list of leadership distinctives. The purpose of this process is not to introduce a discussion of the various authors' material, rather it is to simply and clearly identify leadership characteristics common to each for use as a tool in identifying Dr. Falwell's leadership strengths. Table 2 presents a combined view of each author's characteristics as presented in Table 1, identifying areas of similarity or complimentary interpretation.

⁶ John R. Noe is a motivational speaker who uses his mountain climbing experiences to "inspire non-mountain climbers to reach great heights in their own lives." John R. Noe, *Peak Performance Principles for High Achievers* (New York: Berkley Books, 1986), Inside Cover.

⁷ Dr. Jack Welch has written numerous articles and publications on leadership and is a recognized leader in corporate leadership. He served as CEO of General Electric Inc. from 1981 to 2001. Jack Welch, "Biography," *The Welch Way*, Undated, 2008, <http://www.welchway.com/About-Us/Jack-Welch/Biography.aspx/> (accessed February 13, 2010).

Table 1. Leadership Models⁸

Blackaby	Maxwell	Noe	Towns	Welch
"Influence"	"21 Laws"	"6 Attitudes"	"8 Laws"	"5 Essential Traits"
God's Authentication	The Lid	No small plans	Dreams	Positive Energy
Encounters with God	Influence	Willing to do what they fear	Rewards	Energize Others
Character/ Integrity	Process	Willing to prepare	Credibility	Edge (Tough Calls)
Successful Track Record	Navigation	Willing to risk failure	Communication	Talent to Execute
Preparation	E. F. Hutton	Teachable	Accountability	Passion
	Solid Ground	Heart	Motivation	
	Respect		Problem Solving	
	Intuition		Decision-Making	
	Magnetism			
	Connection			
	Inner Circle			
	Empowerment			
	Reproduction			
	Buy-In			
	Victory			
	Big Mo			
	Priorities			
	Sacrifice			
	Timing			
	Explosive Growth			
	Legacy			

⁸ The following sources were used to compile Table 1: Henry Blackaby and Richard, *Spiritual Leadership - Moving People on to God's Agenda* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001); John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998); John R. Noe, *Peak Performance Principles for High Achievers* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Co, 1986), 49; Elmer Towns, *The 8 Laws of Leadership* (Lynchburg, VA: Church Growth Institute, 1992), and Jack Welch, "Are Leaders Born or Made," www.thewelchway.com, December 19, 2005, <http://www.welchway.com/Management/Leadership/What-Makes-a-Leader/Are-Leaders-Born-or-Made.aspx/> (accessed February 9, 2009).

Table 2. Combined Leadership Characteristics

	Description	Blackaby Influences	Maxwell "21 Laws"	Noe "6 Attitudes"	Towns "8 Laws"	Welch "Essential Traits"
Blackaby	God's Authentication		Influence			
	Encounters with God		The Lid			Passion
	Character/Integrity		Respect		Credibility	
	Preparation		Process	Willing to Prepare		
	Successful Track Record		Victory		Rewards	
Maxwell	The Lid	Encounters with God				
	Influence	God's Authentication				
	Process	Preparation				
	Navigation				Problem Solving	Edge (Tough Calls)
	E. F. Hutton				Communication	Energize Others
	Solid Ground					
	Respect	Character/Integrity			Credibility	
	Intuition				Dreams	
	Magnetism					
	Connection					
	Inner Circle					
	Empowerment					
	Reproduction					
	Buy-In					
	Victory	Successful Track Record				
	Big Mo					
	Priorities					
	Sacrifice			Heart		Passion
	Timing					
	Explosive Growth					
Legacy						
Noe	No Small Plans				Dreams	
	Willing to do what they fear					
	Willing to Prepare	Preparation				
	Willing to risk failure	Encounters with God				
	Teachable					
	Heart		Sacrifice			Passion
Towns	Dreams		Intuition	No Small Plans		Passion
	Rewards	Successful Track Record				
	Credibility	Character/Integrity	Respect			
	Communication		E. F. Hutton			Energize Others
	Motivation		Influence			Positive Energy
	Problem Solving		Navigation			Edge (Tough Calls)
	Decision-Making					Talent to Execute
	Accountability					
Welch	Positive Energy		Influence		Motivation	
	Energize Others		E. F. Hutton		Communication	
	Edge (Tough Calls)		Navigation		Problem Solving	
	Talent to Execute				Decision-Making	
	Passion	Encounters with God		Heart		

The combined information in Table 2 was further reduced by using terms selected from the authors' lists that described similar items in a collective fashion, thus producing a modified list of leadership characteristics. Table 3 presents this reduced list of characteristics.

Table 3. Reduced Leadership Characteristics⁹

Characteristic/Quality	Description
Influence	God's Authentication, Motivation, Positive energy
Integrity	Respect, Credibility,
Passion	Encounters with God, Heart,
Vision	Dreams, No small plans,
Victories	Successful track record, Rewards
Edge	Navigation, Problem solving, Tough calls,
Communication	Energize others,
Decision-Making	Talent to execute,
Preparation	Willing to prepare, Process,
Timing	Knowing when the time is right
Risk-Taker	Willing to face failure, willing to face fear
Sacrifice	Counting the cost, Willing to do what it takes

In addition to the authors listed in Tables 1 through 3, Neff and Citrin identified ten leadership traits common to business leaders; traits similar to those previously mentioned, and others not included by the previous authors.¹⁰ Neff and Citrin's traits appear to bear some importance to an overall leadership model and are presented in Table 4.

⁹ The information in Table 3 is a restatement of key material from the sources used for Tables 1 and 2, and combines like or related information using at times a variation of the original terms, but endeavoring to maintain each authors' intent.

¹⁰ Thomas H. Tunncliff uses this source (Neff, T. J. and Citrin, J. N. *Lessons from the Top: The Search for America's Best Business Leaders*. (New York: Random House,) 1994.), in his Ed.D dissertation, "The Early Leadership Development Experiences of Highly Effective Senior Pastors." PhD diss., The Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, 2005, 90.

Table 4. Neff and Citrin’s Common Leadership Traits¹¹

Trait	Description
Passion	Energy, drive, contagious and essential
Intelligence	Clarity of Thinking
Great communication skills	None provided
High energy level	None provided
Ego in check	“We were struck at how small the eyes of our leaders were, many were quite humble” (383)
Inner peace	“The most successful appear to be the least stressed” (no reference given)
Capitalizing on formative early experiences	“positive and negative” (no reference given)
Strong family ties	“Married to their original spouse, the vast majority have children and grandchildren” (366)
Positive attitude	“learn from mistakes and thankful for the opportunity to make a difference” (no reference given)
Focus	“They focus on doing things right

The combined information from Tables 3 and 4 produces a restated and final list of leadership characteristics/qualities/traits presented in Table 5, and provides a model compiled from a variety of ministry and business sources with which to identify the leadership strengths of Dr. Jerry Falwell.

Table 5. Restated-Final Leadership Characteristics/Qualities/Traits

Characteristic/Quality	Description
Influence	God’s Authentication, Motivation, Positive energy
Integrity	Respect, Credibility,
Passion	Encounters with God, heart, energy, drive, contagious
Vision	Dreams, No small plans,
Victories	Successful track record, Rewards
Edge	Navigation, Problem solving, Tough calls,
Communication	Energize others,
Decision-Making	Talent to execute,
Preparation	Willing to prepare, Process,
Timing	Knowing when the time is right
Risk-Taker	Willing to face failure, willing to face fear
Sacrifice	Counting the cost, Willing to do what it takes
High energy level	Ability to keep going
Ego in check	Small in their own eyes
Inner peace	Lack of or control of stress
Strong family ties	Strong marriages, children and grandchildren

¹¹ Thomas H. Tunnicliff, "The Early Leadership Development Experiences of Highly Effective Senior Pastors." PhD diss., The Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, 2005, 90.

Dr. Falwell's leadership as Senior Pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church and Chancellor of Liberty University mirrors many of the characteristics presented in Table 5, and his leadership became the primary source of influence for early graduates in their understanding and approach to ministry following graduation. For example, Dr. Falwell's influence was that of a God authenticated leader who built one of the largest ministries in the United States, evidenced by a successful track record and repeated spiritual victories. As such, he was a highly motivational communicator, a source of positive energy, able to motivate students, church members, and tremendous portions of the American public alike. Dr. Falwell was a man of great vision and spiritual passion who encouraged students to meet with God early and long every day, an outgrowth of his own practice that led to encounters with God at strategic moments in the history of Liberty University and Thomas Road Baptist Church.

Among the more prominent of Dr. Falwell's leadership characteristics was his penchant for taking risks, sensing the timing of God for strategic moves, and his willingness to sacrifice for what he believed was the will of God. His greatest risk-taking attempt may be seen in establishing Liberty University, a tremendous effort without benefit of established funding, facilities, personnel, and other necessary resources essential for success. Sensing God's timing for continued growth in the university, Dr. Falwell continued to take risks, frequently the result of extended times of fasting and prayer. These two practices are illustrative of Dr. Falwell's willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the ministry and students. This author and his wife personally experienced Dr. Falwell's sacrificial kindness in 1979 when at a chance meeting at a local grocery store, with little money for food, he left money with the store manager to pay for our purchase and gave an additional \$50.00 to help two young people in financial difficulty.

A focus on several additional areas is necessary to present an accurate description of Dr. Falwell's leadership characteristics or qualities, specifically *High Energy Level*, *Strong Family Ties*, and *Ego in Check*, items mentioned exclusively by Neff and Citrin. Regarding energy level, Dr. Falwell possessed a tremendous energy level and required only momentary amounts of rest to continue throughout a demanding schedule. Several early LU graduates recalled that while flying with Dr. Falwell, he would typically sleep for fifteen to twenty minutes to rest and recharge in preparation for hours of ministry ahead. Over the years, many of Dr. Falwell's associates have marveled at his seemingly limitless energy and drive enabling him to continue through hours and days of strenuous schedule. Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary professor Carl Diemer recalled receiving a phone call from Dr. Falwell at 1:00am and conversing for nearly an hour regarding a particular aspect of the seminary program before ending the conversation.¹² Dr. Falwell never permitted this energy and drive to interfere with his family. Jonathan Falwell commented, "Dad never missed something important at home. Although he was busy, he purposely made time for us. He demonstrated by his actions his love for mom and us, and his desire to support us in whatever activity was going on in our lives at that time. He would always take one of us with him on trips when he could."¹³

Another significant characteristic highlighted by Neff and Citrin, but surprisingly absent from other the sources, is what they label *Ego in check*. Although Dr. Falwell was extremely confident and persistent in his pursuit of God's plan for TRBC and LU, he was never known for conceit or egotism, rather for his gracious nature and lack of self-promotion. When approached by students wishing to thank him for some expression of help, he would quickly diminish the act and change the subject.

¹² Carl Diemer. 2009. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. November 15.

¹³ Jonathan Falwell. 2009. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. December 17.

Perhaps an appropriate characterization of Dr. Falwell's leadership is a term Kadence Buchanan employs, *Transformational Leadership*, which Buchanan defines as "leading by motivating."¹⁴ Buchanan continues, "Transformational leaders provide extraordinary motivation by appealing to followers' ideals and moral values and inspiring them to think about problems in new ways. These followers have felt trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect for them and were motivated to do more than they thought they could, or would do. In essence, transformational leaders make tomorrow's dreams a reality for their followers."¹⁵ This was certainly true of Dr. Falwell as seen in his efforts to restore religious principle to American culture during the I Love America rallies, and through the activities of the Moral Majority and the Presidential election of Ronald Reagan. However, his leadership was particularly transformative in its ability to inspire LU students in their own concepts of leadership, faith, vision, and approach to ministry. Early graduates were transformed from ignorance and inexperience, to effective visionaries and communicators, frequently modeling Dr. Falwell's example in their evangelism efforts, pastoral styles, and ministry programs.

Dr. Ron Hawkins identifies an important leadership characteristic/quality not included in the previous tables; that of a servant's heart.¹⁶ Hawkins writes, "Character manifests itself in a selflessness that sacrifices personal gain for the enrichment of the church, family, friends, and others."¹⁷ While somewhat related to the leadership characteristic, *sacrifice*, which may occur from time to time in a leader's life, a servant's heart or servant leadership tends to define an

¹⁴ Kadence Buchanan, "Transformational Leadership." Transformational Leadership EzineArticles.com. <http://ezinearticles.com/?Transformational--Leadership&id=314423> (Accessed November 1, 2009).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Dr. Ronal E. Hawkins serves as Vice Provost of Liberty University

¹⁷ Ronald E. Hawkins. DigitalCommons@Liberty University, http://digitalcommons.Liberty.edu/ccfs_fac_pubs/24/ (A Servant's Heart: The Key to Spiritual Leadership; accessed December 18, 2009). This article was originally published in the January 1988 edition of the *Fundamentalist Journal*.

underlying approach that flavors or enhances a leadership style. A servant's heart is a contributing factor in Dr. Falwell's approach to leading. Many accounts have been repeated among early students of Dr. Falwell's willingness to listen, encourage, counsel, and assist them as they faced decisions or difficulties. Although always busy, Dr. Falwell would never hesitate to stop for those who needed a few minutes of his time. To his previous expression of servant leadership, Hawkins adds, "Ultimately, a leader's greatest attribute is to possess the heart of Christ, and to minister out of that servant's heart."¹⁸ Among all of his leadership characteristics, this quality was one of Dr. Falwell's greatest strengths.

An inspirational tribute was written to Dr. Falwell more than twenty years before his passing, and speaks of his leadership and inspirational influence to those who came in contact with him. It states,

What some can only dare dream – he has done. Roads many fear to travel, he has not only traveled, but won. What some see as only wishful ideals, he has accomplished. Ezekiel said the Lord sought for a man to "stand in the gap." Jerry Falwell is such a man. Dr. Lee Roberson has often stated, "Everything rises and falls on leadership." When I think of Jerry Falwell, "leadership" is the acronym. Only history shall reveal your total impact, Jerry. You have been an encouragement to millions. You have said to us all, "It can be done." But, more than that, you have proven it!¹⁹

Summary

The leadership of Dr. Falwell was his most significant characteristic influencing students, church members, and those with whom he came in contact. His faith, vision, drive, sense of divine calling, endurance, and other aspects addressed previously, combined to create a powerful and inspiring example for students, one which became the ultimate point of reference for their understanding and approach to ministry following their graduation and embarking on their own

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Fletcher A. Brothers, "We've come this far by Faith - 25 Years of Miracles" *Faith Aflame*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (Spring 1981).

ministry endeavors. Among the many statements by Christian leaders following Dr. Falwell's death, two have special meaning. Billy Graham stated, "His accomplishments went beyond most clergy of his generation... He leaves a gigantic vacuum in the evangelical world."²⁰ Somewhat longer, Rick Warren's statement expressed the following sentiments.

The story was never told about his compassionate heart, his gentle spirit, his enormous sense of humor, and the millions he invested in helping the underprivileged... I believe Jerry Falwell's primary legacy will not be his political leadership, but the church he pastored for 50 years; the university he founded that has produced two generations of leaders; the millions who heard him preach the Good News; the innovations in ministry he introduced; and the thousands of young pastors, like myself, whom he constantly encouraged, even when we did it differently.²¹

Dr. Falwell consistently encouraged early students with the words, 'go out and do it bigger and better than we have done it here.' These students believed Dr. Falwell, and knew that he believed in them. Following graduation, many students went out from Liberty University to attempt a variety of ministry pursuits. Some were similar to TRBC and others were significantly different, yet behind each were graduates inspired by a pastor and chancellor who made them believe that God could do anything, anywhere, anytime, anyway, and through anyone, if they would simply believe him.

Two entities stand as testaments to the vision and leadership of Dr. Jerry Falwell; Thomas Road Baptist Church and Liberty University. Since 1956, TRBC has achieved the distinction as one of America's largest churches, and Liberty University stands alone as the largest "distinctively Christian" university in the world.²² Both of these accomplishments are directly related to Dr. Falwell's faith and efforts to fulfill God's plan for his life. However, a

²⁰ Tim Morgan, "Jerry Falwell Dead at 73," *Christianity Today Liveblog*, May 15, 2007.

²¹ Ted Olsen, "Rick Warren and Jerry Falwell," *Christianity Today Liveblog*, May 16, 2007.

²² The phrase "distinctly Christian" has been a part of the university's description for many years and denotes Dr. Falwell's desire to build a superior academic institution within a Christian context. Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. recently used the phrase in the April 29, 2009 State of the University address - <http://www.liberty.edu/index.cfm?PID=18495&MID=7540>.

third and equally important testimony to Dr. Falwell's inspirational leadership are the lives of the students whom he influenced. Dr. Falwell was a man who believed God and walked by faith, and by his example challenged students to walk by faith believing God also, willing to take risks to see God do "great and mighty things."²³ While he was alive, nearly every student of the university benefitted from Dr. Falwell's influence; however, early ministerial students benefitted in ways later students could not. The unique challenges of building a new college/university required unique leaders, faculty, and students willing to exercise faith, and believe God for needed provisions. With Dr. Falwell as their example, early students began to emulate his ways to such a degree that for many, their experience as students served as a foundation for the continued exercise of their faith in building their own future ministries.

²³ Jeremiah 33:3, NKJV.