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The Ministry Methods of Jerry Falwell

Rod Dempsey*

I came to Liberty Baptist College in January of 1979. I was nineteen years old. I grew up in a Christian home... in a manner of speaking. My mother and father came to know Christ in the spring of 1966 in a small country church in southern West Virginia. The church did a good job preaching the gospel, but it did not do a very good job in helping to develop disciples for the Lord. During my teen years I was up and down spiritually and by the time I turned 19, even though I was saved, I was not following Christ as my Lord. That all changed on December 31, 1978. My mother invited me to attend a "Watch Night Service" at the church. For those of you who may not be familiar with a watch night service... it is a service in which the members of the church at an appointed time during the service, step forward and light candles signifying that they are going to let their light shine for the Lord in the coming year. Since I had no intention of doing that, I had no intention of attending the service and so I told my mother that I would not be attending and had already made plans to ring in the New Year with some of my friends. As the time drew near for the family to get ready leave for church, I found myself strangely not getting ready to go out with my friends, but instead I found myself getting ready to go to church. What was happening to me I wondered? I felt the Lord working in my heart drawing me back to Himself. So on that evening instead of going out with my friends, I went to church with my family and when the invitation was given to go forward and to light your candle for the Lord, I went forward and immediately I was broken before the Lord. I couldn't see for the tears streaming down my face and I could

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barely speak, but when I did manage a sentence, I humbly proclaimed that I would go anywhere and do anything that the Lord wanted me to do. It was at that moment that my life changed from being a selfish, confused, miserable secret agent Christian to a forgiven, joyous, and purpose filled follower of Christ.

The next week a deacon in our small country church, approached me after the service and said, "I heard what you said the other night. Did you really mean what you said?" I told him that I did mean it and he said, "There's a Christian college in Virginia, that I think you should consider. It is led by a man named Jerry Falwell and they are doing some great things for God." I told him that I was all set to return to Marshall (University) in a few days. Then, he told me something that I will never forget. The dear deacon said, "I don't think you should do that. Marshall will not help you follow Christ, in fact, it will probably destroy your new commitment." I talked with my Mom and Dad and they said they would like for me to go to this new school, but they weren't prepared for that financially, because Marshall was less expensive. They suggested that I wait until the fall. That sounded reasonable to me and when I told the deacon, who first suggested Liberty to me, he said, "Rod you need to go to Liberty this semester and I am willing to pay your first semester, if you will just go. Your parents can pay me back, if they want, but I believe you should not wait and you should not go back to Marshall." So I loaded up my Fiat and moved to Lynchburg.

My first experience with Jerry Falwell and Thomas Road Baptist Church, occurred on a Sunday morning service in January of 1979. I had never seen a church this large and I had never seen so much energy and passion for Christ. Don Norman led the worship and we sang hymns with all of our might. There was special music by Mack Evans and the congregation applauded their approval. Finally this relatively young pastor

took the pulpit and preached a simple, but powerful evangelistic sermon. That man was Jerry Falwell. When Dr. Falwell gave the simple invitation, he would always say something along the lines, “God has a plan for your life and you should obey God in whatever He wants you to do. Some of you need to come forward for salvation, some of you need to come forward for rededication, and some of you need to come forward to join this Bible believing, Bible preaching church.” People came forward by the dozens for all the above reasons and more. Counselors greeted the people as they came forward, prayed with everyone and everyone completed a commitment card. As quickly as it could happen, the cards were then given to Dr. Falwell and he read the person’s name and gave the reason for their commitment and the congregation gave their approval by saying “Amen.”

After I had been attending for a while I learned that the Sunday morning service was only part of what was going on in and through the ministries of this “super aggressive”¹ local church. There were numerous ministries going on behind the scenes, so to speak, and there were hundred’s of volunteers making this church move and go. I had no idea how one local church could be making such an impact on a community and on a nation.

Thomas Road Baptist Church was founded on the passion of a man that wanted to share the gospel with every person. In fact Dr. Falwell created a statement that summarized his passion for evangelism and this statement was called “Saturation Evangelism”². Saturation evangelism is simply this, "Reaching every available person

¹ Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *“11 Innovations in the Local Church”* (Ventura California: Regal Books, 2007), 115

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/15/AR2007051501304.html>

with the gospel using every available means at every available time.” I want to take the rest of my time in this article to summarize some of the ministries that Jerry Falwell and Thomas Road Baptist Church instituted that illustrate the ethos of “Saturation Evangelism.”

Thomas Road Baptist Church was started in June 1956, when Jerry Falwell returned to his hometown. The following is from the church’s website:

On June 17, 1956, thirty-five adults and their children gathered in the Mountain View Elementary School in Lynchburg, Virginia for the church’s first Sunday worship service. That week, leaders of the church and a particularly aggressive young man named Jerry Falwell, the church’s founding pastor, searched for a place to house their new church. They found a building, which was formerly used by the Donald Duck Bottling Company.³

The foundation of “Saturation Evangelism” began when Jerry Falwell intentionally started knocking on 100 doors a day to share the message of the Gospel and to share that a new church was starting down the street and that they were invited to attend. I’ve personally heard Dr. Falwell review his story hundred’s of times of knocking on doors and I’ve also heard him say, that before he left the home that he was visiting he offered to pray with the family and he (this is key) gave them his business card with his name, the Church’s name and phone number and he told them this, “If you ever need a Pastor, just give me a call.”⁴ In addition to the card, Dr. Falwell also combined the visit with a copy of the church’s newsletter mailed out the next day and the household also receive a phone call from lady volunteer on Saturday morning. The phone call went

³ <http://trbc.org/visitors/history/>

⁴ Jerry Falwell; “*Falwell an Autobiography*”, (Lynchburg, Va. Liberty House Publishers 1997) 213

something along these lines:

“Miss Jones?” the caller would begin. “This is Mary Smith. I am a member of Thomas Road Baptist Church. Pastor Falwell asked me to call you. He mentioned that he had dropped by to see you on Tuesday and invited you to attend our services this Sunday. He asked me to remind you that the service begins at eleven a.m. and that he is preaching on ‘How to Pray and Get Your Prayers Answered.’ He also said to remind you that if ever he can help you in any way, just call the church or Pastor Falwell’s home.”⁵

It turned out that a lot of people needed a Pastor because the church grew quickly that first year. Not only did Falwell knock on doors he also trained a group of men to go on the visits with him. His training was on the job, “These men learned on the job. They walked the streets with me. They watched me knock on doors, converse with strangers, field questions, handle problems, and counsel others before they had to do it by themselves.”⁶

The first year also saw a radio ministry started and during the same time the church began to broadcast on a local television station. A local church on television was almost unheard of at this early stage of television. Falwell recounts, “In September of 1956, I began our radio ministry... I realized how I could present the message (of the gospel) to all those people simultaneously from one convenient location. So it was only natural for me to begin to dream about expanding our church’s electronic ministry through television.”⁷ At the end of the first year the church was dreaming and hoping for 500 in attendance in Sunday School. They did not meet that goal, but there was no disappointment because 864 people showed up for their first anniversary service on

⁵ Ibid, p. 215

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, p. 223

second Sunday in June 1957.⁸

The church continued to grow dramatically and by 1958, “the church had moved into a new sanctuary to accommodate the ever-growing church attendance. The following year, the Elim Home ministry was established for alcoholic men on a 165-acre farm just outside of Lynchburg.”⁹ Elim Home was one of the first ministries the church started and was very close and dear to Jerry Falwell due to the fact that his father was an alcoholic and died an early death due to the affects of alcohol. This is Dr. Falwell’s account of his father’s death, “Dad had a drinking problem that worsened as he grew older. This never seemed to affect his business performance, but it worried my mother very much. Dad died when I was only 15.”¹⁰ Elim Home was established because people needed to hear the gospel no matter who they were or what they were struggling with. Saturation evangelism meant that every person needed to hear the gospel and if that involved knocking on doors or starting a radio program or televising a gospel program or starting a home for alcoholics... that was what would be done.

Jerry Falwell was a man of enormous energy and worked very hard. I have personally heard him say many times, “I determined early on in my ministry, that I may not be the smartest or the most gifted, but I will work the hardest.” Falwell recounts his schedule during this time:

“I spent my time during the 1960’s doing what every pastor is called to do: visiting the sick, witnessing to our neighbors, praying and counseling with the men of Elim Home, training volunteers, working on the church’s nonstop building programs, broadcasting live from Lynchburg’s radio and television stations, preparing sermons and Bible studies,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://trbc.org/visitors/history/>

¹⁰ http://www.bhsbees.com/jerry_falwell_bio.htm

guiding discussion groups and prayer meetings, holding revival meetings in nearby towns, attending pastors' seminars, reading writing studying and playing an occasional game of sandlot baseball or football with the young people of Thomas Road Baptist Church, and driving my little green Renault madly up and down the streets of Lynchburg and across most of Campbell County.”¹¹

This schedule was maintained for over 50 years of ministry. From this personal recollection by Dr. Falwell, one can see that he did most everything a normal pastor does, but there is one caveat: he did all this so that he could share the gospel with the people he was serving and ministering to. This passion fueled the growth of the church. By 1964, “the congregation moved into its third auditorium on Thomas Road which seated 1,000 people. The following year, the two-story Spurgeon Building was completed, offering temporary relief for the overcrowded Sunday School.”¹² By the mid- sixties Thomas Road was averaging over 1,000 people a week and Jerry Falwell's goal of saturating Lynchburg with the gospel of Christ was in full swing.

Growing the church through the Sunday School was a constant emphasis and priority. Falwell highlighted this when he said, “The large church should be the showcase of the Sunday school. Large churches should be a pattern by having the best teaching program, an effective reaching program, outstanding facilities, and efficient organization.”¹³ The Sunday School was a centerpiece of the church's growth and it was a mainstay for the follow up on the many people who were getting saved at the church. Also during this time the church sponsored tent meeting and revivals. Here are just a few

¹¹ Jerry Falwell, “*Falwell an Autobiography*”, (Lynchburg, Va. Liberty House Publishers 1997) 283

¹² <http://trbc.org/visitors/history/>

¹³ http://elmertowns.com/books/online/ChurchAflame/Church_Aflame_part1%5BE_Towns%5D.pdf p. 25

of the popular evangelists that came to Thomas Road in those days.¹⁴ Oliver B. Greene, Hyman Appleman, Lester Roloff, J. Harold Smith, B.R. Lakin, Freddie Gage, Jack Van Impe, E.V. Hill, Chuck Milhuff, Del Fehsenfeld, David Ring and Tim Lee. As a student I heard in person, Smith, Lakin, Gage, Van Impe, Ring. In fact Tim Lee still preaches at the University every year. The regular appearance of the powerful gospel preaching evangelist was a mainstay of the church's ministry methodology.

Around this same time the church purchased an island in the middle of the James River and named it "Treasure Island."¹⁵ Treasure Island was a summer camp for the community and thousands of young people came to know Christ through this dynamic camping ministry. Also, in 1970 Thomas Road started a new ministry called "Hope Aglow". Hope Aglow was a ministry dedicated to ministering to the prison population by visitation and by "offering a free mail-order Bible study course to prisoners in the United States and some foreign countries."¹⁶ 1970 also brought the implementation of a high attendance day called "Harvest Day." The church had 10,163 in attendance.¹⁷ Just two years later on the "sixteenth anniversary of the church, June 25, 1972, Thomas Road Baptist Church is said to have had the largest Sunday school since Pentecost when 19,020 people were in attendance."¹⁸ This church service was so large that it had to be held at Lynchburg's City Stadium. In addition to the Sunday School another major reason for this dramatic increase in church attendance was the bus ministry of Thomas Road Baptist

¹⁴<http://salvationlinks.com/discussions/oliver-b-greene-preaching/>

¹⁵<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1979&dat=19711211&id=oI4iAAAAIBAJ&sjid=W6oFAAAAIBAJ&pg=846,6317100>

¹⁶<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1356&dat=19800912&id=l1MxAAAAIBAJ&sjid=qwUEAAAAIBAJ&pg=7071,6534491>

¹⁷http://elmertowns.com/books/online/ChurchAflame/Church_Aflame_part1%5BE_Towns%5D.pdf p. 25

¹⁸http://elmertowns.com/books/online/capture_town/Capturing_A_Town_For_Christ%5BE_Towns%5D.PDF p. 8

Church. During this time the bus ministry was very well-organized.

“At 9:30 A.M. Sunday morning, just fifteen minutes before Sunday school starts, the Sunday-school buses begin arriving at Thomas Road Baptist Church. The Sunday-school bus director meets each bus, shouts a word of encouragement to the driver, and registers the number on the bus for that day. The buses begin parking to the rear of the lot and by the time they have all arrived over sixty-five buses have occupied a huge slice of the parking lot. One visitor mused as he visited Thomas Road Baptist Church for the first time, “I drove into the parking lot with extra time before Sunday school began. I wanted to look around and see how things operate. As soon as I got out of my car, I had to start dodging the buses as they arrived.” Another visitor joked, “Make sure your insurance is paid, when you come to Thomas Road—you might get run over by a bus, there are so many.”¹⁹

Another method the church employed during this time was something called “phone evangelism.” The book *Church Aflame* describes how this phone evangelism worked,

“The ladies use city directories in contacting certain groups of people on Saturday. For instance, an entire Saturday can be spent calling persons living within ten blocks of the church. The message is written and mailed to each telephone brigade captain. The message might read: "Hello-I am Mrs. Jones from the Thomas Road Baptist Church. My pastor, Jerry Falwell, asked me to call and invite you to our services tomorrow. Dr. Falwell will be speaking on the subject 'Will We Know Each Other in Heaven'. He felt you might have some interest in this message and asked me to invite you as his personal guest to our Sunday school class in the morning." The ladies are instructed to keep the

¹⁹ *ibid* p. 14

conversation very brief, courteous and to the point. By using imagination, the possibilities of telephone evangelism are unlimited. The church has made at least 2,000 calls in a given day.²⁰

1970 also brought the first “Living Christmas Tree” to central Virginia. The ‘Living Christmas Tree’ was an outreach for the community that was presented during the first couple of weeks in December each year. Again, thousands of visitors came to the church and at the end of every performance; the gospel was clearly presented to church members, friends, family members and guests. Dr. Falwell’s passion for saturation evangelism and city reaching was captured in the following statement, “God is looking for local churches with a vision that will conquer and capture towns and cities for Christ. A church must begin at its Jerusalem and capture that city for Christ and then reach to the regions beyond: Judea, Samaria, the uttermost part of the earth.”²¹

This commitment to take the gospel of Christ to the world was the motivation to begin Liberty Baptist College in 1971. The motto for the college was and is, “Training Champions for Christ.” The church had come very close to saturating Lynchburg with the gospel and now it was time to turn the attention of this “super aggressive” local church to becoming worldwide force for the gospel. It was around this time that I became a student at Liberty Baptist College. The college was started with a commitment to present an “action oriented curriculum” in which students would learn in the classroom and they would also seek to apply what they were learning. “They learn by doing.”²² Learning by doing meant that every student was given instruction in “Personal Evangelism 101”. This

²⁰ http://elmertowns.com/books/online/ChurchAflame/Church_Aflame_part1%5BE_Towns%5D.pdf p. 25

²¹ *ibid* p. 22

²² <http://www.liberty.edu/seminary/index.cfm?PID=8247>

class was led by J.O. Grooms. Student memorized the “Treasure Path to Soul Winning”²³ and went on Friday evenings and Saturday to share the gospel to anyone who would listen.

Also connected to “action oriented curriculum” during this time and to this day every college student is required to fulfill a “Christian service” commitment each semester. I signed up to be a bus captain and was assigned a route on top of Candler’s mountain. Bright and early on Saturday morning we would gather in the gym at Liberty Christian Academy and eat a pancake breakfast. By 9:00 am we all would head out to the various parts of the city and county and knock on doors and invite boys and girls to come to Thomas Road the next day for Sunday school. We had information to drop off at the door of the home if no one was home, and if someone answered the door we would smile and give them a well rehearsed invitation that the bus would be coming by tomorrow and if they wanted to attend a fun and exciting church they were welcomed to come. If they said yes we would note the address for the next day pick-up. On Sunday morning we would reconvene at the church bus parking lot and climb on board with our maps and noted locations of the boys and girls who had just the day before agreed to come. Thousands of boys and girls came to know Christ through this method. Entire families were won to Christ, because before long the Mom and Dad would start attending as well.

It was during this time that I discovered the passionate prayer ministry of Thomas Road. Each Sunday before the Sunday evening service there was a prayer meeting at the prayer chapel. The room was always packed with people on their faces before God, begging Him to move and act in the hearts of people throughout the community. Men like

²³http://www.liberty.edu/wwwadmin/globals/dsp_v2_wwwINDEX.cfm?PID=18495&MID=17470

R.C. Worley and Bill Sheehan led the prayer meetings and the presence of God filled the room and filled the prayers of God's saints. It should be mentioned that Jerry Falwell, himself, was an incredible prayer warrior who cultivated the art of asking God for the impossible. Dr. Falwell's faith and prayers are well documented in several books, "Say it Faith" and "Building Dynamic Faith" are just a couple examples. In fact Dr. Falwell popularized an expression that is directly attributable to him, "Nothing of eternal significance ever happens apart from prayer."²⁴ If evangelism was the engine and driving force of Thomas Road, prayer was the fuel and it started and proceeded from Jerry Falwell.

By the mid-seventies churches around the country wanted to find out why and more importantly how Thomas Road Baptist Church was growing so quickly. As a result "Super Conference"²⁵ was born out of a desire to help other churches discover and possibly use some of the principles that were working to bring the gospel to a city and a region. This conference was held annually for over 30 years. After Dr. Falwell's passing the conference was renamed "Innovate Church Conference" and now it is called simply, "Refuel." However, the purpose remains the same-- to encourage other churches to grow and take the gospel to their community.

In addition to knocking on doors, broadcasting on the radio and television, ministering to recovering alcoholics, hosting citywide Sunday school campaigns, camping ministries, revival preaching, telephone and personal evangelism, the passion for the gospel by Falwell and the church knew few boundaries. "If we don't reach them

²⁴Jonathan Falwell, *Innovate Church* (Nashville, Tn. B & H Publishing Group 2008) 171

²⁵Macel Falwell, *Jerry Falwell: His Life and Legacy.*" (New York, N.Y. Howard Book, 2008) 200

with the gospel,” Falwell challenged his staff one morning, “they will die in their sins and we will be responsible for their souls.”²⁶

In the years since the home going of Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr., Thomas Road Baptist Church continues to be passionate for evangelism under the leadership of Jonathan Falwell. The church continues to reach out to the community by sponsoring annual events like “Celebrate America”, an awesome summer Vacation Bible School and outreach events for the region like “Beast Feast” and “Community Groups”. Dr. Falwell may no longer be here, but his passion for evangelism continues through Jonathan who continues to share the gospel with anyone and everyone who will listen. Thomas Road was started by the passion of a man to share the gospel with the world whose legacy continues through his son and the church he started!

²⁶http://elmertowns.com/books/online/ChurchAflame/Church_Aflame_part1%5BE_Towns%5D.pdf p. 33

Appendix

In my judgment, Dr. Falwell's ministry followed this progression (all under the umbrella of "saturation evangelism")

"Reaching every available person by every available means at every available time."

1. Knocking on Doors
2. Pastoral Care (Down through the years Dr. Falwell performed thousands of weddings and funerals to minister to families to earn the right to share the gospel).
3. Radio
4. Television
5. Follow Up (Triple Whammy)
6. Elim Home
7. Hope Aglow
8. Prayer Ministry
9. Camp Ministry- Treasure Island
10. Bus Ministry
11. Sunday School Class System
12. Sunday School Campaigns
13. Revivals/ Conferences (Prophecy) (Oliver B. Greene, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TW-KDySRRi0> Hyman Appleman, Lester Roloff, J. Harold Smith, B.R. Lakin, Freddie Gage <http://oldpathsermons.com/allspeakers.php?spid=11> E.V. Hill, Chuck Milhuff, Del Fehsenfeld, <https://www.lifeaction.org/revival-resources/revive/30th-anniversary/glory-church/> , David Ring, Tim Lee)
14. Liberty Baptist College/ University
15. Telephone Evangelism
16. Super Conference
17. The Center
18. Soul Winning (J. O. Grooms Treasure Path http://www.liberty.edu/wwwadmin/globals/dsp_v2_wwwINDEX.cfm?PID=18495&MID=17470)
19. Liberty Godparent Home
20. Living Christmas Tree
21. Celebrate America
22. Beast Feast
23. Vacation Bible School
24. Community Groups