“Once the family’s gone, our country’s gone”

The Rev. Jerry Falwell visited Greensboro last Monday to preach about morality in America at the Carolina Theatre as part of his “God Save America” pageant. He spoke with Editorial Page Editor John Robinson.

Q. Where do you think the country is headed morally?
A. I think that America, at the moment, is in a moral free fall. When you consider that 70 percent of the black children born in America last year were born out of wedlock and that 30 percent of the white children were born out of wedlock, and that trend is spiraling. The traditional family is in danger of becoming extinct. We have a 50 percent divorce rate. As I see it, the breakdown of the family in this country is at intensive care levels and demands the undivided attention of all the pastors, teachers, political leaders, entertainers, etc.

Q. What does the church need to do?
A. I think that the churches must, through their pastors and officers, begin focusing on parenting, the sanctity of marriage, taking a stand against divorce, teaching young people the importance of moral purity. The problem we have with the Swaggarts, the Bakkers and other religious scandals, plus the horrible situation with our president and others in government, is that the role models for children are almost disappearing.

WANT TO LISTEN?
To listen to the full interview with Jerry Falwell on the Internet, go to the News & Record Online at The Depot. Users can access the RealAudio interview by going to www.greensboro.com/kronline/ and clicking on the Falwell link.

Q. How is this different from what churches have traditionally done?
A. Through the years, the church has taught the biblical structure of the family — the husband, wife, children relationship. But today, the family’s under assault. It’s never been under assault before. There was never a time in American history when anyone was promoting homosexuality as an acceptable alternative lifestyle. That is taught today. There is a strong effort today at different levels to legalize gay and lesbian marriages, gay and lesbian adoptions.

Further, there has never been a time until 25 years ago in this country where abortion was legal. Beyond that, we have never had the media — television, the movie screen, contemporary music — as the enemy of the family. But today, parents who care about their children virtually have no programming available to them.

Q. That’s a political/cultural perspective. Where does the church fit into this?
A. I think the pastors have to become outspoken on the sanctity of the family and the definition of the family. There is no morality that will run counter to what they get in the public school classroom, certainly counter to what they get from the media.

The church has an almost singlehanded responsibility to rebuild the moral standards of the nation. We call it the Judeo-Christian ethic. That’s simply meaning the principles of morality from the Old and New Testaments. The church today, unlike in yesteryear, stands alone in its position on these issues. Government is not with us. The entertainment industry is not with us. And certainly public education is not with us.

Q. What is your take on the recent polls that show that Americans believe the president is lying but still give him an 80 percent approval rating?
A. I think polls and surveys are very deceptive. You can almost get the answer you want by asking the question in a contrived way. ... I also think that the mood of the country right now is very volatile. In 24 hours those percentages could flip flop.

Q. Because?
A. For example, if a smoking gun is found. Some reliable, unimpeachable evidence that the president has lied to the media and lied to the public.

Q. Is it your sense that the approval numbers are wrong?
A. It’s my feeling that we are in a media frenzy. I’m not talking about print media. I’m talking about the 24-hour-a-day drum roll of the talk shows and the breaking news so that people are hearing the president’s men and women and the opponents of the president. They’re finally so frustrated by this information and misinformation that they’re saying, ‘Get on with the business at hand.’

What is happening in this country is not unlike the past. I remember Watergate when Mr. Nixon’s polls were very high after the revelations of Watergate. And even into the impeachment inquiry. I don’t think you can give any meaning at all to the polls. This is a matter of law. If Ken Starr and I don’t know if he does or doesn’t, but if Ken Starr delivers concrete evidence to the House of Representatives, the House of Representatives will have no alternative
but to impeach him. If he does not have incontrovertible evidence, the president will be acquitted and it won't come down to polls and public feelings. It will come down to basic law: Is he guilty or not guilty based on a fair application of American law. At the present moment, I think, looking at what I see, he probably is guilty, and most Americans believe that's true.

Q. Is it your sense there is still a strong moral center in America?

A. There is a strong moral center in America. It is weakening with every new generation. I go back to about 1960 to 1962 when the modern feminist movement really had its genesis. The sexual revolution was virtually launched. And when the "Me Generation" — if it feels good, do it — became a way of life. That's pretty well concurrent with broadcast media's domineering influence in the public. There has been a diminishing of moral values in the country and a desensitizing of the American attitude toward the wrongness of sin.

But the root is there. I think that, as just after Watergate, the same will be true now. Jimmy Carter, who was perceived to be a born-again Baptist with morality and virtue, was the alternative that the people wanted as an overreaction, perhaps, to the deception of Watergate. I think that when this thing is all over and we arrive at the year 2000, anybody who has been near him or close to him is a dead duck, politically. And Mr. Gore will regret for the rest of his life all those resounding introductions because I can see them played over and over again during the 2000 campaign by somebody. I think it leaves the gate open for a (Rep.) John Ashcroft, an unknown moralist from Missouri, or you name it, a real strong moralist from anywhere who may not be a front runner but who is perceived by the American people to have the ability to bring us back to our senses. And then we'll follow that line for a while and then, depending on the economy, good or bad, we'll fluctuate into another crisis.

Q. If you buy into your theory about the moral center being weakened as each generation passes, and the entertainment media being a major cause, how do you turn the media around? The media is not receding, it is exploding.

A. Christian people bring videos home now from Blockbuster and, with their children, laugh at things they condemned 30 years ago. If someone said audibly and personally in their homes some of the things said on the video, they'd be thrown out of the house. And there's no question that is part of that desensitizing I'm talking about. Because the children see Mom and Dad smile at it, their assumption is "not so bad." And now the children are bringing home to their parents terrible stories. One parent told me ... that his son, a 15-year-old boy, came home with a very salacious joke about Mr. Clinton. I don't know where he might have gotten it, probably someone at school, may have seen it on Leno or whatever...

So we talk about things in mixed audiences that we wouldn't have talked about in mixed audiences 30 years ago. There is no question all of this is hurting the country and the country is without a doubt in worse condition morally than it was a generation ago. There's no way to cover for the breakdown of the family. It's a reality. Once the family's gone, if it's allowed to go, the country's gone.

The church must quickly identify where our major problem is and make that a priority.

At our church at Thomas Road, we have 22,000 members. We have classes now for the once married. We didn't have that 30 years ago. But today we have classes for the once married. Some are divorced. Some are widowed. Some have children, some don't, but their problems are unique. We try to socially group the people with similar backgrounds and similar problems and teach at those problems.

Now with single parents — some who have not been married at all — we can't condemn where they are, that doesn't help them at all, or condemn what they have done, that doesn't help them. We must show them how to get from where they are to where they need to be. And to successfully raise that child or those children in the meantime.
The church has got to get sophisticated on addressing the family problems today and not deal with where we wish the family was but deal with where the family really is. The family is fractured today. Almost everybody who walks in the church door either has had a family problem or is having one right now and unless the church is meeting those needs most people find little reason to be there. The old puritanical approach of one man, one woman, one lifetime or don't attend here will empty any church today.

Q. What's your sense on the role of religion in politics today?
A. I think that religious people—and I prefer to use the term "people of faith"—had best get involved quickly and deeply. We are debating right now a partial birth abortion ban in Congress. Democrats and Republicans have passed it overwhelmingly twice. The president has vetoed the ban twice. While they have enough votes in the House to override the veto, they're three votes short in the Senate this year. If the church does not get involved, we will essentially have legalized infanticide. ... Euthanasia is not that far around the corner. The Jack Kevorkian thing makes it clear that it's very difficult to even prosecute somebody who is a practitioner of euthanasia. A generation from now, if we haven't as a church dealt with that, people 70 and older will be an endangered species. So all these things that seemed really absurd a generation ago, and only alarmists were talking about them, are now reality.

I think it has been the absence of the church from politics for the past three or four generations that has caused the country to get into the condition it is now. We have a lot of catching up to do. Not everyone agrees with this, but I believe the pastors who were called by God to the pulpit should never consider running for public office. I think that we're called to wield influence, not control, and ours is to be from the outside, not the inside. We compromise ourselves when we become part of government.

Q. Where are the churches' voices on this?
A. I have intentionally refused to appear on the Clinton issue. I think piling on and joining the frenzy for a pastor is out of character. I think speaking to the moral and social issues, which I do constantly, is all right. I think when it gets personal when facts are not in is a major problem for the clergy. So I would say that most clergy have done the same thing that most Republicans leaders have wisely done and that is keep quiet. I have pastors who often tell me, I appreciate what I heard you say on "Larry King Live" or "Crossfire," but don't mention my name. So that's a popularity issue. It's sad.

A second reason—and I hate to even say this—but pension and financial security reasons. A pastor can lose his job and may lose his pension. His wife is telling him at home, "Just keep quiet, preach the Bible and let somebody else do that." It's a cowardly approach. It's a wrong approach because the public has traditionally looked to the men of the cloth to give them guidance on the moral and social issues and if you can't look to the church for it, I don't know where you can look for it.
Falwell’s fortunes

To mount a good political crusade, he needs a devil in the White House. With the Clintons, he’s doubly blessed.

Jerry Falwell, the conservative Republican politician who also is a Baptist preacher, had a lot of fun here Wednesday lambasting liberals and feminists and the other hobgoblins of the Christian right. Mr. Falwell is ever the cheerful soldier, even on the eve of what he predicts will be a national moral collapse brought on by the Democrats’ recapture of the White House.

In fact, Mr. Falwell has a lot to be cheerful about. George Bush was the sort of lukewarm ally who cooled even the considerable ardor of the Christian right. Though the slide toward national degradation didn’t slow noticeably during the Reagan-Bush years, it was hard to mount a proper campaign when the best demons available were the likes of Murphy Brown — especially when her TV show got better ratings than Mr. Falwell’s.

With the election of Bill Clinton, Mr. Falwell is matched against a worthy adversary again. In fact, the national political struggle is looking more and more like the internal struggle in the Southern Baptist Convention — only with a different outcome thus far.

It may seem odd, but when his friends Ronald Reagan and George Bush were in the White House, Mr. Falwell fell upon hard times. He folded his Moral Majority in 1989. By 1992, his Liberty University had piled up $73 million in debt and there was talk of bankruptcy. Nothing takes the energy out of a crusade like winning.

In this perpetual wrestling match for the nation’s soul, it seems the grapplers are bound in bear hugs of mutual need. With the Clintons in the White House, Mr. Falwell is a battler reborn. He is even talking about reviving the Moral Majority. It reminds you of how the Sierra Club prospered when President Reagan made James Watt his secretary of the Interior.

Mr. Falwell is a terrific speaker, quick-witted, a tad bombastic and never in doubt of the righteousness of his cause. He can thank the Clintons for providing a lot of new material. He told his audience here — a couple of thousand people at an evangelism conference at Hickory Grove Baptist Church — that “This 42nd president and his Mother Superior are outdistancing the Supreme Court in their anti-Christian pronouncements.”

It did strike us as odd, though, when Mr. Falwell bemoaned Mrs. Clinton’s influence on the president and labeled the Clintons “new- agers.” After all, the most powerful first lady in recent years was the wife of Mr. Falwell’s favorite president, Ronald Reagan, and according to White House insiders, she told him what to do after consulting with an astrologer.
Evangelist Jerry Falwell calls on conservative Christians to remake American society in their image.

BY LEX ALEXANDER
Staff Writer

Evangelist Jerry Falwell brought his “God Save America” pageant to Greensboro on Monday night, telling a rain-diminished crowd of 500 in the half-full Carolina Theater that it’s time for them to get mad.

“A person who is never angry — or, as the politically correct would say, negatively energized — is not much of a person,” the Baptist minister from Lynchburg, Va., told the crowd.

America would be a better place, he said, if its 70 million evangelical Christians wrote letters to the editor, called sponsors to complain about sex and language on television, and hounded local school boards not to allow teaching about homosexuality and evolution.

“We’re not here to talk politics, Republican or Democratic,” he said early in the 2½-hour program. “We’re not here to talk about the president or Congress or the courts” — but he talked about them all, pointing out that if evangelical Christians had done their duty a generation ago, “we wouldn’t have those losers on the Supreme Court who have no respect for unborn life.”

Falwell is in the second year of his effort to take his pageant into 200 major population centers in all 50 states.

The program, featuring both locally recruited choir members and singers and musicians from Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church, includes old-time gospel songs buffed to a Broadway sheen at rock concert volume.

The program also includes a salute to the military, with renditions of the hymns of all five service branches, punctuated by blank rounds from the weapons of the color guard. Falwell briefly ac-
Rev. Jerry Falwell speaks at the Carolina Theatre in Greensboro on Monday. Falwell called for America's 70 million evangelical Christians to get mad about sex and language on television and the teaching of homosexuality and evolution in schools.
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FALWELL

knowledge that the United States may be poised to resume military operations against Iraq.

He did not mention that because of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's plans to place civilians around military targets, those attacks likely will result in large numbers of Iraqi civilian casualties.

Falwell hopes the pageant will spur local churches to pray for national spiritual revival. But the pageant also asks audience members to sign petitions — "If you're here as a couple, (signing) 'Mr. and Mrs.' is adequate" — calling on Congress for a "Christian Bill of Rights" including:

• A ban on partial-birth abortion, and euthanasia, which is illegal nationwide.
• A ban on same-sex marriages and "other diverse family forms."
• A "return to Biblical decency, which includes removing gratuitous sex and violence from television."
• A call on the president and Congress to proclaim a voluntary national day of fasting and prayer.

Falwell pledged to deliver 1 million of these petitions to congressional leaders later this year.

As has been his habit since founding the now-defunct Moral Majority in the late 1970s, Falwell struck a strongly pro-Republican position in his remarks, saying, "I pray for (Whitewater) prosecutor) Ken Starr, I pray for the Congress, I pray for the courts, but mostly I pray for this country." He did not speak of praying for President Clinton, saying that Americans "got what we deserved" for electing him.

Outside the theater, Guilford College students handed out copies of a letter to Falwell from the college's chaplain, Max Carter.

The letter, on behalf of the national group Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding and a number of Guilford College faculty and students and other local Quakers who visited the Middle East this past summer, expressed concern about Falwell's support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

Netanyahu's coalition opposes giving up more land as part of the peace process between Israel and Palestinians; Carter's letter expresses the fear that Palestinian Christians and others might be harmed by that policy.

Monday was observed by Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding as a national day of fasting and prayer for Mideast peace.

Falwell's unequivocal support of Netanyahu — he pledged in January to mobilize the pastors of 200,000 evangelical Christian churches in this country to help prevent any more concessions of land to Palestinians — has been criticized even by some of Falwell's fellow Baptists.

They fear reprisals against U.S. Christian missionaries evangelizing in Muslim countries.
Alexander covers religious issues with perception

My thanks to Lex Alexander, your religion editor, for his perceptive accounts of events pertaining to religion. In his report on the visit of the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who called for the "restoration of the right of children to pray in schools," Alexander pointed out that this is a right which already exists under the law.

Perhaps Falwell wants a return to the days when organized prayer was conducted in tax-supported schools and all students were expected to participate. The needs or preferences of children from families with no religion or whose religion was not the same as that of the majority were ignored.

As things are now, students may pray in selected situations, or silently, or as some do, at gatherings held before or after school — and no student is re-
Rev. Jerry Falwell to speak at Grandfather Mountain

Jerry Falwell To Preach At The “Singing On The Mountain” June 22

The Rev. Jerry Falwell, pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church and chancellor of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., will bring the message at the 73rd “Singing on the Mountain,” Sunday, June 22, at Grandfather Mountain.

A pastor, educator and newsmaker, Falwell is the president of the Old Time Gospel Hour, the longest running religious program in history. Televising the weekly service at Thomas Road Baptist Church, the Old Time Gospel Hour has been broadcast uninterrupted for 40 years.

In addition to his work at Thomas Road Baptist and Liberty University, Falwell has earned a reputation as a newsmaker.

Falwell organized the Moral Majority in 1979 as a vehicle for mobilizing the Christian church on behalf of moral and social issues and to encourage participation in the political process.

He guided that organization for a decade, formally dissolving it in 1989 because dozens of other like-minded organizations had begun to flourish at virtually every level of society.

Few mountain traditions are older than neighbors coming together to give thanks, and the Grandfather “Singing” is one of the oldest of such gatherings in the Southern Appalachians. Founded in 1924 as the Hartley family reunion, the “Singing” is an authentic mix of camp meeting, family reunion, dinner on the grounds and church bazaar.

The Greene family will again serve as host group for the “Singing.” Also appearing will be bluegrass legends, The Primitive from Candler as well as the 1996 International Country Gospel Music Association bluegrass group of the year, The Cockman Family of Sherrills Ford.

Others appearing will be songwriter Michael Combs of Jacksonville, Fla., whose current hit is titled “I’ll Be Back;” Troy Burns of Bryson City, former lead singer with The Inspirations; The Singing Cookes from Kingsport, Tenn.; The Gospel Enforcers of Morganton; The Joyaires of Jamestown, Tenn.; The Singing Dixons; and Pure Heart.

In all, a dozen outstanding groups are expected to perform at this year’s event.

The “Singing on the Mountain” is a day-long Gospel gathering held out-of-doors in a meadow at the base of Grandfather Mountain. Music begins at 8:30 a.m. and continues throughout the day, pausing at 2 p.m. for Rev. Falwell’s message. Many families bring lawn
Jerry Falwell comes to Greensboro Nov. 3 in a plea for national spiritual renewal.

By Lex Alexander

The Rev. Jerry Falwell, one of the nation's best-known conservative Christian leaders, will speak in Greensboro Monday, Nov. 3, in a public worship service.

Falwell, founder of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., and the founder of the now-defunct Moral Majority, will bring his "God Save America Crusade" to Friendly Avenue Baptist Church. Falwell plans to present the "God Save America Crusade" in all 50 states.

Falwell and his assistant, Duke Wesler, were traveling earlier this week and could not be reached for comment.

But according to the text of a radio advertisement used in other markets, Falwell hopes the program will spark spiritual revival in America.

"I believe America desperately needs a wake-up call," Falwell says in the ad. "As Christians we cannot afford to sit back and watch our nation enter a post-Christian era."

The program will include music from such well-known gospel singers as Doug Oldham and Kendra Cook-Penn, as well as the Old Time Gospel Hour Trio and a choir.

The Rev. Pat Cronin, senior pastor of Friendly Avenue Baptist, said Wednesday the musical program also will include a local, 100-voice adult choir and a 100-voice children's choir. Other local church musicians will be invited to participate, although details are not set.

In a letter to Cronin, Falwell says his message "will be one of simple repentance and spiritual awakening."

Friendly Avenue's youth pastor, the Rev. Alex McFarland, is a Liberty graduate and member of the school's Board of Regents.

Falwell, longtime pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, gained fame in Christian circles with his "Old Time Gospel Hour" television show.

He won wider notice after founding the Moral Majority in 1979. That activist group united theologically diverse fundamentalist and Pentecostal Christians under a banner of conservative social concerns.

The group helped Ronald Reagan win the presidency in 1980 and contributed to the election of a Republican majority in the Senate that year.

After Republican George Bush succeeded Reagan in 1989, Falwell shut down the Moral Majority to concentrate on building Liberty University, founded in 1971, into a major academic institution.