



A Bible autographed by the Rev. Jerry Falwell awakened memories for Liberty Baptist College graduate Glenn Scofield Williams.

My Wish for Falwell

Exclusive look at the man from one of his queer students

by Glenn Scofield Williams

Jerry Falwell died May 15. He owed me \$1.75.

Most of my friends applauded and rejoiced at the news, making jokes about the surprise he got in hell a few minutes after his unholy heart gave out. Part of me rejoiced as well. Especially the part of me who remembered sitting in his church in the early 1980s as the new “gay cancer” spread its deadly wings, the part of me that squirmed in the pews as Falwell intoned that it was God’s wrath, punishing gays for their “godless and immoral lifestyle.” As if God lacked the capacity for love that I, a 19-year-old Montana kid, had. The part that rejoiced was the part of me that hated Falwell and his crusades against everything and anyone who was different: gays, women, liberals, intellectuals, unbelievers, anyone with a sex drive.

I attended Jerry Falwell’s Liberty Baptist College off and on from the fall of 1978 until I graduated in May

1985. Mine was the first graduating class to be fully accredited and the first to bear the words “Liberty University” on our diplomas. I graduated with a degree in drama and enough credits in Christian theology to make a second major. I had entered Liberty to become a preacher. But during a sermon contest my sophomore year, the judges told me I was “too effeminate” and should learn to preach “in a more manly style.” I switched my major the next day.

Looking back, I recognize in myself a naive kid who hadn’t a clue as to the makeup of his identity. I am tempted to look at the boy, sitting in the pew beside Anita Bryant, serving as one of her bodyguards as gay rights organizations protested outside the church, and call him a coward. But how can I? I knew that I loved men and women both, that I found sex pleasurable without worrying about what organs it was that shared that pleasure with me. But I hadn’t a clue that I was gay or bi or any-

thing like it. The words didn’t somehow “apply.”

I remember the first time I tried the word “homosexual” on myself. It was my junior year at Liberty, after a particularly nasty harangue from Falwell on the evils of the “homosexual agenda.” The day before I received a really excellent blowjob from a beautiful young man in a department store bathroom. That Sunday afternoon, after Falwell’s sermon, I stood in my dorm room on the Liberty campus, staring into the mirror.

“Homosexual,” I mouthed silently into the mirror. Scared the fuck out of me.

Who we are can be quite a surprise and can take a long time to find words for.

But there was another part. When I heard Falwell died, I remembered, of all the fucked-up things, his kindnesses toward me. I remember how

he praised my performance as Oedipus in Sophocles’ tragedy. He told the entire congregation of Thomas Road Baptist Church that they needed to see the production.

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Falwell’s wife, Macel, used to drag him to all of our productions (“hoping to get me a little culture,” he would joke). He always sought me out backstage after a show to thank me and praise my acting. I sought that praise like a boy seeking his father’s approval.

Backstage at *Oedipus*, he fake socked me in the shoulder and said in his pear-shaped baritone, “Glenn, that performance was dynamite!” That night, I pulled him aside and asked him if he would write a little note to my grandparents, who were big Falwell fans. My relationship with my grandparents was strained at the time, and I thought this might make me a temporary hero. Falwell clicked his ballpoint, grinning that famous jowly grin of his and said, “What are their names?” He wrote a little note to them and signed it. I never saw a photo of me on my grandparents’ walls. But that note was framed and hung on the wall of their living room until the day they died.