

Jerry Falwell Jr. Responds After Liberty University Alumni Call for His Resignation Over Scandal

Nearly three dozen black alumni of Liberty University denounced school President Jerry Falwell Jr. on Monday, suggesting he step down after he mocked Virginia's mask-wearing requirement by invoking the blackface scandal that engulfed the state's governor last year.

In a letter to Falwell, shared with The Associated Press, 35 faith leaders and former student-athletes told Falwell that his past comments "have repeatedly violated and misrepresented" Christian principles. They said they would stop urging students to attend Liberty, would no longer donate to the university, and would urge fellow people of faith to avoid speaking at the school unless Falwell changes his behavior or steps aside.

"You have belittled staff, students and parents, you have defended inappropriate behaviors of politicians, encouraged violence, and disrespected people of other faiths," they wrote, advising Falwell that "your heart is in politics more than Christian academia or ministry."

Falwell, a stalwart backer of President Donald Trump, is the son of the late evangelist the Rev. Jerry Falwell, whose legacy the alumni invoked in imploring the younger Falwell to "stop this infantile behavior."

In response, Falwell said his comment about the blackface scandal was made in defense of Liberty students, including minorities, who would be affected by tuition assistance cuts proposed by Gov. Ralph Northam, a Democrat. Falwell said his

involvement in politics was in the spirit of Jesus Christ, “who was not silent about the establishment political folks of his era.”

“All they need to do is read the Gospels—Jesus got involved in politics,” Falwell said in an interview.

In recent weeks, Falwell has jabbed repeatedly at Northam while downplaying the public health risks of the coronavirus. Last week, Northam issued an order that masks be worn inside all retail stores, while using public transportation or in any other indoor place where people congregate.

The next day, Falwell tweeted that he was “adamantly opposed” to the mask mandate “until I decided to design my own.” With it, he posted a picture of a mask bearing a racist photo that appeared on Northam’s medical yearbook page and—when made public last year—sparked a scandal that nearly forced him from office. The photo showed a person in blackface and another in a Ku Klux Klan costume.

Falwell referred to Northam as “Gov. Blackface” and then followed up with another tweet that said, in part: “Just a way to shine a spotlight on the fact that Democrats are and always have been the real racists in this country.”

Monday’s letter was signed by more than 30 former students at Liberty, one of the nation’s biggest Christian universities, including pastors with churches in Virginia, Tennessee and Michigan. Current pro football player Walt Aikens and former pro football player Eric Green were also among the signatories.

“While your tweet may have been in jest about Virginia’s Governor, it made light of our nation’s painful history of slavery and racism,” the alumni wrote to Falwell. They described the tweet as “a microcosm of the past several years of divisive rhetoric” that falls short of their faith’s ideals.

Signatories included a daughter and son-in-law of the vice chairman of Liberty's board of trustees, Virginia pastor Allen McFarland.

The rebuke came after an online instructor for Liberty, a black pastor who also teaches at Ithaca College, announced his resignation online in response to the tweet.

The alumni who wrote Monday's letter also lauded their experience at the university and offered to meet with Falwell to "provide counsel on ways for L.U. to best move forward" if he stays in office.

They asked him to "withdraw your racist tweet immediately and make a public apology."

The Virginia General Assembly in March passed a budget for the 2021-2022 biennium that eliminates a tuition assistance grant for online students at private colleges such as Liberty. Existing students are grandfathered in, said Laura Osberger, spokeswoman for the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

"The governor's intent was to harm Liberty, and to harm minority students and to harm low income students," Falwell said, linking the cuts to his tweet by saying that as a result, "people needed to be reminded of (Northam's) racist past."

Northam initially said he was in the yearbook photo and then denied it the next day, while acknowledging that he did wear blackface to a dance party that same year. He faced swift, widespread calls to resign, but he resisted, saying he instead wanted to help heal the state's lingering racial wounds and devote the rest of his term to promoting racial equality.

The governor and the university president sparred indirectly in March, as the coronavirus began to take a bigger hold in the U.S. and Falwell decided to "welcome" students back to

campus after their spring break. Northam quoted from Scripture in urging Falwell to rethink that decision.

A spokesman for the governor said Monday that it was good to see ministers “speaking out for civility” and that Northam would not dignify the tweet with a response.

“But I recall that Matthew’s gospel teaches us to ‘beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. By their fruits you will know them,’” Northam’s chief communications officer, Grant Neely, wrote in an email. {eo}

Rankin reported from Richmond, Va.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through the Religion News Foundation. The AP is solely responsible for this content.