

Jim Bakker: Back From the Brink

At one time, Jim Bakker was the biggest name in Christian television. In the 1980s, his PTL Network raked in as much as \$158 million a year and employed 2,000. His headquarters at Heritage USA outside Charlotte, North Carolina, was the biggest tourism draw in the state.

Then in 1987, the ministry came crashing down in a scandal so big people still talk about it. A one-time affair Bakker had with a woman was plastered all over the newspapers and TV. To sidetrack getting into trouble with his Pentecostal denomination, Bakker resigned and turned the ministry over to a Baptist who filed bankruptcy when the donations dried up.

In a few short years, the PTL Network was gone; Bakker was sentenced to 45 years in prison on charges that were later proven frivolous; his wife divorced him; and the home where he raised his children burned to the ground.

In short, Bakker who had been head of perhaps the largest evangelical ministry in America, lost it all.

I had a front-row seat as editor and publisher of *Charisma*. We tried to make sense for our readers of what was happening from a spiritual point of view, while the secular media covered his fall like vultures picking apart roadkill.

The Highs and Lows of Jim Bakker

Three years before, I had put Bakker on the cover of *Charisma* as part of a series we called "Television and the Great Commission." When I, as a young journalist, interviewed Bakker in 1983, I was only 32 years old. He was only a decade older but already had built a ministry so large he attracted the attention of President Ronald Reagan and was invited to film

an interview with him. His ministry's fast growth itself made him somewhat controversial.

In 1983, I got up early and caught a flight from Orlando, Florida, to Charlotte, spent the day with Bakker, asked him lots of questions and then flew home that night. My article consisted of how I spent my day and some of my observations. I also asked him some pretty pointed questions—not to embarrass but to give him a chance to go on the record with his side of the story. Bakker carried a reputation of having a huge ego. He hired and fired at will. It's safe to say many ministries envied Bakker, and he was criticized as being out of control. I felt the secular journalists—and I was trained as a secular journalist—should have reported not only the criticisms but his side as well.

On that trip, I reported that I found Bakker to be more humble than I expected. I also saw a certain genuineness about him that did not match the superficial persona he portrayed on *The Jim and Tammy Show*. I decided he was not in it “for the money” as many charged—the running joke was that PTL stood for “Pass the Loot.” Bakker seemed to love God. He came from a humble Assemblies of God family. And I could identify because that's my background too.

My article about Bakker was not a puff piece. When I pulled it out three decades later, I found it more interesting than I remembered. I wrote: “In a single day, I had caught something of Bakker's spirit. I had seen his dream. I had heard him talk about the struggle and pain he has gone through.” I concluded: “I began to sense that in spite of Bakker's weaknesses, he is a strong man. Lesser men would have been crushed by what he has had to endure.”

That was how I perceived PTL at the time. *The Charlotte Observer* worked continually to dig up dirt and was ultimately successful in triggering an FCC investigation. That raised eyebrows in the Christian community *Charisma* served. Little

did I know what was ahead with “the fall” and the 1,711 days he spent in prison.

When his 632-page book, *I Was Wrong*, came out in 1996, I read every word. It went into great detail on how Bakker allowed himself to get off base with beginning to believe that God wanted Christians to prosper, which led to a sense of entitlement that he should be rich and famous and have people wait on him. That led to other compromises, and so it goes.

It’s interesting to pull out my original 11-page article and read it in light of what happened since: Bakker’s public trial and incarceration, the collapse of PTL as a ministry and all the people who were hurt in the process.

Getting to Know the New Jim Bakker

After Bakker was released from prison in 1994, I invited him to dinner once when he was in Orlando. He was at a low ebb. He wasn’t sure what he would do next, and he was pretty sure no one liked him. He was surprised I reached out to him.

Over the years, I’ve interacted with him numerous times, and *Charisma* has reported some of what he had done. I knew he was working with Tommy Barnett at the Dream Center in Los Angeles, where he met and married Lori Graham, who bares a striking resemblance to his ex-wife, Tammy Faye. I knew he started a new ministry called Morningside in the Branson, Missouri, area. And I knew he was having some success.

But it wasn’t until Bakker got behind Jonathan Cahn’s book *The Harbinger* that I was aware of the size of his new audience. As publisher of the best-selling book, I am good friends with Cahn. He told me about Morningside and how it was developing. When I was invited to appear on *The Jim Bakker Show* with Cahn, I was astounded by how much Bakker’s new ministry looked like Heritage USA, an American Christian theme park and residential complex Bakker’s PTL Club had built many years earlier.

As I interacted with him, I could also tell that Bakker, now in his 70s, was a changed man.

I pulled out the old issue of *Charisma* with Bakker on the cover, had it framed and gave it to him as a memento. He had forgotten being on the cover or even what I wrote. I was also interested in re-reading my own article, written only three years before Bakker's fall. Had I been naive in what I wrote? Could I have seen the fall coming? What led Bakker to change so much and to come back from the greatest fall I had ever personally witnessed? (For you history buffs, look up the entire original article online at .)

I had never seen someone fall further or come back more. *Was it time for another story?* I wondered. *What has happened to Bakker since he was released from prison? What conclusions would I come to, and would my readers even care after all these years?* After numerous calls and emails, I arranged to return to Morningside to spend a day following Jim as I had in Charlotte 33 years before.

Having written about nearly every charismatic or evangelical leader, I know not many could admit they were wrong about anything. And if they had the misfortune to land in prison, I doubt they would have reacted like Bakker. He first learned to forgive those who hurt him and then dived into the Word—reading what the book of Revelation and Jesus in the Gospels said about the end of the world.

How Billy Graham Helped Bakker Back on His Feet

When Bakker's conviction was finally overturned—which is a story in itself—and he was released, he had nothing and nowhere to go. It was the Billy Graham family that took him in, loaned him a car and a home to stay in for 3 1/2 years until he could get back on his feet.

Several members of the Graham family had come to visit Bakker in prison, including Billy Graham himself, who showed up once

unannounced. Prison officials let him in because of who he was! Franklin Graham also visited him monthly and spoke to the other inmates while he was there. Ruth Graham gave him Bibles he was able to give to the other inmates.

“Do you understand what the Graham family did for me? How they stuck their necks out?” Bakker told me when I interviewed him at Morningside. “They didn’t need me. So there are real Christians! That’s all I want to say. I just want people to know there are real, real Christians.”

When he got out and had nowhere to go, the Grahams invited him to stay in a farm house they owned. Bakker objected. He remembers saying, “I couldn’t do that. I don’t want to hurt your ministry. I’ve been in prison.” Ruth Graham looked at him and said, “No one will ever tell me who I can love and not love, and I want you here.” So on the first Sunday he was out of prison, Ruth Graham had Bakker sitting next to her Sunday morning at her fancy Presbyterian Church.

Franklin Graham brought him two briefcases. Bakker told me: “I still can’t get over that. He said, ‘I didn’t know which one to pick.’ I told him I wouldn’t need a briefcase. He said, ‘Yes, you’re going to need a briefcase.’ He saw me coming back. At that time, I still didn’t plan to come back.”

Bakker’s comeback didn’t happen overnight. First, a few churches began to invite him to speak and to tell his testimony. I saw a video of how he spoke at a pastor’s conference in February 1995 for Tommy Barnett at Phoenix First Assembly. It was one of the most emotional services I’ve ever seen.

That connected him to the Dream Center in Los Angeles, where he lived from 1998 to 2000. It was there he met Lori Graham, who had been working at Barnett’s church in Master’s Commission, and she had been ministering to children in the ghetto. After Jim and Lori married in 1998, they ended up in

the Florida panhandle at Camp Hope, which they began to rent for \$1 a year in 2001.

“That’s when we got all our kids,” Bakker explains. “I was off the stage for years raising a family, raising this amazing, big family and the best thing, if I can call it things, I have is my kids. And now my grandkids.

“I had nothing when I came out of prison. At Christmas, there are probably 35 family members in our house. We put the biggest tree we put up to the ceiling and the kids have a tradition. They all spend the night Christmas night, Christmas Eve night, and so we have Christmas Day together. They sleep all over the house—on the floor, on the sofas. The whole family spends the night. That’s the best night of my life. That’s when restoration is real. It’s the kids, it’s the family, it’s amazing.”

Bakker’s Triumphant Return to Television

About this time, he met a Missouri millionaire developer named Jerry Crawford, whose marriage had been turned around through the PTL ministry. That caused Crawford to think kindly of Bakker even as the PTL ministry imploded and Bakker was sent to prison.

“As a businessman, I knew there was more than what the papers said,” Crawford told me.

When he heard Bakker was speaking at a ministry in Branson where he lived, Crawford asked to meet Bakker and told him how he’d had a “life-changing experience” through PTL. A friendship developed. Later, Crawford was invited to Jim and Lori’s wedding in California. He even visited Camp Hope once.

Then someone approached Crawford about starting a small Christian resort in the Branson area. Crawford remembered how successful Heritage USA was and flew Bakker in to give them advice.

The friendship with Crawford resulted in his building "Studio City," where Bakker relaunched his television ministry Aug. 30, 2002.

Crawford never forgot wanting a small Christian resort like he'd seen at Heritage USA. His attempt with the other ministry never developed because, Crawford says, the man was more interested in real estate than in ministry. But in Bakker, Crawford found a man who wanted a home for his ministry.

One day, as they drove around the area, they saw a sign near the Arkansas state line offering 580 acres for sale. Crawford put up \$17 million to buy the land and to build the original building, including 115 condos that surround Grace Street, the centerpiece of the development where *The Jim Bakker Show* is filmed.

The agreement was that, over time, Bakker's ministry would buy back the development, which now totals 705 acres. Today, the ministry owns 520 acres and plans to buy the rest when the money comes in. Meanwhile, they've also built other buildings, like the barn, some tiny homes, an RV campground, a school of ministry and Lori's House for unwed mothers, and soon they will build a prayer mountain.

The main building is made up of nice condominium apartments that together look like the Heritage Grand, part of the old Heritage USA. In the center is a "Main Street" complete with a church, stores and places to eat (like Heritage had), and it also serves at one end as the studio for his daily hour-long *The Jim Bakker Show*, which launched Jan. 2, 2002, and is shown on DirecTV, DISH Network, the internet, Roku, AppleTV and many local stations. The ministry describes its audience as "similar to the former PTL viewership—worldwide, multicultural, multigenerational, multidenominational."

Nearby are "tiny homes" where people can stay, an RV park, a barn, a home for unwed mothers (like they had in Charlotte)

and a media school to train young people on how to run a TV ministry. And all this is sprawled over nearly a square mile. While it's not as big as the four-square-mile Heritage USA, it's obvious that the genius behind this is Jim Bakker.

An End-Times Comeback

When Jim had me as a guest on his program, I found myself making this point—how much this reminds me of what he built in Charlotte. I told him that, in my opinion, no one had ever lost more or fallen further than he had nor had anyone bounced back as he had in only a few years. The program was taped live, and I hadn't checked ahead of time to see, in the context of his ministry, if saying that was "politically correct." At my age, I didn't care, and I knew they could edit out my comments.

Even if they had edited it out, I could say that here because I believe it and because it's the truth. Except for Charles Colson, who was in the Nixon White House and went to prison before founding Prison Fellowship, I can't think of anyone else who even comes close. Even with Colson, he wasn't saved when he "fell," and when he came back, he didn't go back to the White House, and he was never able to practice law again.

I'm not the only one who thinks this about Bakker. I had noticed a photo in his office with Mike Huckabee, the popular former governor of Arkansas. Because I know Huckabee and have interviewed him, I made a mental note to ask him about Jim.

His response was so concise I want to end this article with it:

"Jim Bakker is a man who has truly experienced God's amazing grace," Huckabee told me. "After a rough and rocky period in his life in which he lost his ministry, his wife, his dignity and even his freedom when he was sentenced to prison, he has remained faithful to God and is being used in what might be his most effective days of ministry. I love Jim because he is

a living reminder that God never gives up on us, and Jim never gave up on God. I count him a friend and appreciate the living proof in his life that Jesus never fails.”

I couldn't have said it better myself. Having watched Jim rise and fall—and rise again like a phoenix from the flames—I can only marvel at the goodness and mercy of God. Bakker's comeback—and makeover as a prophetic sentinel for the end-times church—should inspire us all that no matter what you go through and no matter what mistakes you make, your destiny in Christ is still secure when you turn to Him with all your heart.

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Jim Bakker shares the final key to his restoration after prison—and it was harder than you think. Visit .