

Tammy Bakker: The Other Side of the PTL Story

Note: This article originally appeared in the March 1991 issue of Charisma magazine and does not reflect the current life of Jim Bakker. Jim and his former wife, Tammy, divorced in 1992. Tammy died in 2007 at age 65.

The banner headline across the cover of *Newsweek* magazine read: "Holy Wars: Money, Sex and Power." A photo of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker accompanied the August 6, 1987 story. It appeared at the height of the struggle over the PTL ministry and Heritage USA property in Fort Mill, North Carolina.

Several subsequent attempts to revive PTL failed, with the bankruptcy court finally putting the place up for sale and closing it down. Meanwhile, Jim Bakker was charged with mail and wire fraud for having oversold the partnerships at Heritage USA and having a salary that was too high. For this, he received a 45-year prison sentence, which he is now serving at a federal facility in Minnesota.

Before Jim Bakker was sent to prison, he and Tammy Faye had moved to Orlando, Florida. She continues a new ministry they started and pastors New Covenant Church in Orlando. But much of Tammy Faye Bakker's effort has been focused on preparing an appeal for Jim.

In late October 1990, Bakker's lawyers went before a federal appeals court in Richmond, Virginia. They argued that Jim Bakker should be retried on the original charges. The outcome of this appeal was not known at press time. Lawyers said it could be dragged out for months.

Wanting to tell her side of the story, Tammy Faye Bakker answered questions posed by *Charisma* founding editor Stephen Strang several weeks before the appeal. Also interviewed were

former PTL contractor Roe Messner and former executive assistant to Jim Bakker, Shirley Fulbright, in her first media interview since Bakker resigned from PTL.

Strang quizzed the trio, which was videotaped to be aired in early 1991 on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) as a journalistic “special” called “The Other Side of the Story.” Here we include the edited highlights of that television interview:

Strang: Were you treated fairly or unfairly by the media?

Bakker: I feel in my heart that we were treated very unfairly. I feel like they [reporters and editors] wanted [to report the] negative rather than the positive. And the negative made a much more exciting story than the positive did. So, they would take a tiny little bit of truth and then build their own story around it.

Strang: How is the Jim Bakker that you know different from the stereotypical Jim Bakker that we’ve come to know in the media?

Bakker: Jim is the kindest, nicest, sweetest man you’ll ever meet. He’s a very gentle man. He’s a very private man. He’s a very bashful man, really. He’s a man who loves the Lord with all of his heart and loves people with all of his heart. He is not a man who screams and yells. I’ve never known Jim ever to raise his voice. He’s a very soft-spoken man. And he’s a very giving man.

That is the Jim Bakker I’ve lived with for 29 years. How they could make the kind of Jim out of him that they made, I will never know. It was an image created in the media.

Strang: Even before all this happened, on SCTV, they were doing skits about you.

Bakker: That doesn’t bother me. I just thank God that they [on SCTV] were focusing on my eyelashes instead of my hips. I can

do something about these.

Strang: But you were also cast as a greedy spendthrift who didn't really have a grip on reality. Even in the made-for-television movie in which Bernadette Peters played your part, that's the sort of role that you have.

Bakker: I didn't watch the movie, but greedy is one thing I'm certainly not. I'm probably one of the most giving persons around. I'd give you anything you'd ask for; it's yours. You know, I'm just giving and giving and giving. But that doesn't make a difference; they still portray you as what they want you to be.

Strang: How did the Bakkers and Jerry Falwell get hooked up?

Bakker: It started with Jimmy Swaggart. Jim [Bakker] had taken Swaggart off our satellite network because he was talking against the Catholic church and others. Jim [Bakker] felt it was wrong for anyone to talk against someone and use their name on our network. It made Brother Swaggart angry. When Swaggart found out about Jessica Hahn, he told Falwell that he had some information that would destroy Jim Bakker and PTL and that he was going to use it against us.

Rev. [Richard] Dortch [then PTL vice president] called us at our home in Palm Springs [California], where we were staying. He said that Falwell had called him with the news of what Swaggart was going to do. He said that Falwell wanted to come to California with some of his men and offer his help. Dortch said that he trusted Falwell and that he felt that we should accept Falwell's help. So Falwell [and his associates] flew to California to meet with Jim and me.

They were all very kind to us. Jerry put his arms around Jim and me and told us that Swaggart had found out about the Hahn affair. Falwell told us that his sins were a lot bigger than that, so he wanted to help us. He said that if he didn't stop Swaggart, he and his ministry would be the next ones to be

hurt by Swaggart. He said that he would get hold of Billy Graham and that together they would go to Jimmy Swaggart and try to persuade him to stop what he was going to do. Falwell said that he loved us and our ministry and would never hurt us.

I left the hotel. They had a meeting after I left. In that meeting, they threatened Jim [Bakker] with the news media. They scared him. They said if Jim didn't resign the ministry and let Falwell help him, in the next day's newspaper there were going to be headlines.

In a couple of hours, I received a call that [Falwell's lawyer, Roy] Grutman and Jim [Bakker] were coming to the house to talk to me. They got there. Grutman said he would be our lawyer and protect our rights. He said he watched us on TV and thought a lot of us. He said if we didn't [resign], that Swaggart had contacted the *Charlotte Observer* and that they were going to run a story the next day about Jim's affair with Hahn. He said the headline would read: "Jim Bakker Rapes Church Secretary." He said if Jim would resign PTL for a few weeks, that the headlines would read instead: "Jim Bakker resigns PTL."

We later found out that Grutman was lying to us and that there were no headlines the next day or any other day. They just wanted to scare Jim enough to cooperate with their takeover plans.

At that time I began to realize that something was terribly wrong. But Jim was so frightened that I could not convince him of that. All he could think about was stopping those headlines the next day.

Jim said he would go ahead with the plan of Falwell helping us if they would keep Rev. Dorsch on as the president of the corporation and hire a board of directors of his choosing. They said the board would take the ministry for six weeks. And

that in six weeks we would have our ministry back and that we would have the resignations of the new board so that at any point in time we could put back in our own board of directors.

Jim said, "Okay, if that's the way it is, I will for six weeks step back and let this thing work out." Falwell and his men immediately went back to PTL. They hired their own board of directors, never even contacted the people that we had asked them to contact. Falwell called the news conference, said he had never heard of a Jimmy Swaggart plan to take over our ministry and immediately began to put Jim down. He called him everything you could imagine. He said Jim had stolen millions of dollars, called him a homosexual, and for hours he stood on television and said what horrible people Jim and Tammy were. We were watching it on TV at home, and all of a sudden we realized that Jerry Falwell had taken Jimmy Swaggart's plan and done it himself.

Strang: Much of what you've shared has come out in various forms before. And, of course, as this played out in the media over a period of time and as it later went to a grand jury and went to trial, it wasn't Jimmy Swaggart, and it wasn't Jerry Falwell that created the legal problem—it was the partnerships. So much has been said about the partnerships that I'm not sure I know what a partnership really was.

Bakker: I'm not sure I know anymore.

Strang: Was it a time-share?

Bakker: No, it was not a time-share. If a person donated \$1,000 to the ministry to be used in any way that we saw fit, they would receive four days and three nights [a year] at the Heritage Grand Hotel for the rest of their life, or any of the other facilities. There were hundreds and hundreds of rooms at PTL that they could take advantage of. If they wanted to camp, it was 10 days and 10 nights a year. But there was no contract with the partners at all. They gave us a gift, and we gave

them a gift. It was as simple as that.

Strang: If the partnerships were a gift, then how did you oversell them?

Bakker: They said we gave out more than we had room for. But it was first come, first served. There was no promise that you could have a week every year.

The partners were very happy, and they got everything that we promised them. Everything. If they couldn't get in and were unhappy, Jim sent their money back to them. We sent probably well over a million dollars back to our partners who were unhappy because they couldn't get in at Christmas, or they couldn't get in at Easter, or they couldn't get in at the Fourth of July. How can that be dishonest?

Strang: You were able to raise millions of dollars and build huge facilities. Why did PTL go bankrupt?

Bakker: It was not bankrupt.

Messner: [In] the fiscal year [1986-1987], they had raised about \$150 million. On the calendar year, that last year Jim was there, they raised \$170 million. Their debts were probably, at that time, around \$25 million. The income vs. debt ratio was very good.

Strang: Then how was it thrown into bankruptcy?

Messner: I think that was a plan to take it over. You can file chapter 11 on a reorganization to try to re-establish a business.

Bakker: We kept probably the best records of any company around. Jim always said, "If there's any question at all on taxes or anything, pay them."

Strang: This has been a very difficult thing for you to go through. Where do you feel God was in this?

Bakker: Sometimes I felt He was off on vacation, but I'm sure He was there.

Strang: Did you question your Christianity?

Bakker: I questioned my Christianity. I questioned whether there even was a God. I questioned a lot. But I found out one thing: God is who He says He is. He will never leave you, He will never forsake you; and when you need Him, He really is there.

Strang: Roe Messner, you were the contractor at Heritage USA. Did Jim Bakker build everything he said he'd build?

Messner: Yes, he did. My company worked down there for Jim for about six years. We designed and built most all the buildings at PTL—probably about \$90 million worth of buildings during that period of time. We started off with the Heritage Grand Hotel, which is a 504-room hotel. Then we built the Tower Hotel, which is a 513-room hotel.

Strang: The Tower Hotel is not finished yet, is it?

Messner: No, it's not. We were about 60 days from opening the hotel when we quit. It's carpeted up through the 10th floor; it's wallpapered up through the 13th floor. There's not that much to do to complete the hotel. But we were working on other projects all over the property. I think altogether we were building over 3,300 different types of rooms and campsites.

Strang: When Jim Bakker left, you were owed a great deal of money, weren't you?

Messner: When Jim left, I was owed \$8 million. When Dr. Falwell left, I was owed \$15 million.

Strang: \$15 million?

Messner: I did \$7 million worth of work while Dr. Falwell was at PTL—while he was doing his May emergency [appeal] and

raising all of these millions and millions of dollars. He was raising the money under the pretense of paying me as the contractor, and the television stations, but I never received a penny.

Strang: You have invested a great deal in Heritage USA, and you're still owed a great deal of money. But if I were owed that kind of money, I'm not sure I'd be here to talk about someone like Jim Bakker. So you obviously must still be a friend of his.

Messner: I've spent 37 years designing and building churches. I've had the pleasure of building over 1,200 churches. I've gotten to know a lot about the ministry, and I can truthfully say I never worked for a better man than Jim Bakker. He was honest and fair with me in everything that he did. Regardless of what the press said, or whatever you've heard from the media or any other source, Jim Bakker always treated me fair.

Strang: Is it true the salaries of PTL executives were as big as was reported? Did Jim Bakker really make \$3 million?

Bakker: Over a period of five years, yes. Jim and I together made \$3 million. So, when they keep saying we've stolen money, that is what they're talking about. The government felt that we were not worth that, even though it was paid to us over a five-year period and included our bonuses and any other things like our home. Yes, Jim did receive that.

Jim and I never asked for one penny. When we were on the evangelistic field, in every church we went to, we never asked for a penny; we took whatever they gave us. And many times we left with \$50 a week. It was the same way at PTL. Not one time did we ever ask anyone at PTL for any amount of salary. Our board of directors loved us. They respected what Jim was doing, and they set our salaries. Jim was not in the room when they set the salaries.

Fulbright: I was present at those board meetings. The board

members set his salary and also his bonuses.

Bakker: I have the board minutes to one meeting. It says, "The board was asked to consider bonuses for Christmas for Mr. Bakker and Mrs. Bakker. Mr. Bakker asked the board not to consider a bonus for him. As discussion progressed, Mr. Bakker asked to be excused from the meeting, discussion ensued, and a motion was made and seconded and passed unanimously." And many times when they were passing out bonuses, Jim would say, "Please do not give me a bonus." But our board cared about us. They loved us, and they did what they felt was right.

Messner: Let me put it [the salaries and bonuses] in perspective. Jim and Tammy never received royalties on their books and records over this period of five or six years. An audit was made of the books to see what their royalties would have amounted to, and they would have amounted to \$8 million. A \$3.5 million salary over five years is an enormous salary. But this puts it in perspective.

Bakker: Everybody asked, "Why didn't you take your royalties, Jim and Tammy?" Because we felt it was dishonest. We felt that if we were pushing our books and records on the air, then it was not right for us to take the royalties. So, we felt we were doing the honest thing by not taking our royalties. But when the board looked at our royalties and realized that if we took them we would be making millions and millions of dollars, I'm sure that's what they based our salary on.

Strang: You are saying that Jim Bakker never asked for a huge salary and allowed millions of dollars of royalties to go back into the ministry. Then how has the opposite perception become what people believe?

Bakker: Because it's easier for people to believe the negative than the positive. You don't have to have any proof for the negative.

Strang: Do you feel that Jim Bakker got a fair trial?

Bakker: I don't think anybody feels that Jim Bakker got a fair trial. You could not be a Christian and be on the jury. You could not have watched any Christian television and be on the jury. I feel that Judge [Robert] Potter went into the trial prejudiced. He said, "I am sick and tired of these television evangelists out there raising money, and I'm going to stop them."

When our ministry tape came on [as evidence during the trial], Judge Potter sat in the courtroom and covered his ears with his hands so he could not hear the "ministry."

Then, we were not allowed to enter evidence that would have freed Jim. They would not open up the building plans that Roe [Messner] had there. They would not let Jim present his chart that said we were not bankrupt and that we had not overbooked the hotel. They would not let him present anything. The judge's favorite words were, "Take it up on appeal."

There was a circus that was going on outside the courthouse. They let people put couches outside the courthouse on the lawn. They had people crawl under those couches and mimic Jim when he was so terribly sick during the trial. Radio stations gave away records if the people would lay under the couches. Judge Potter allowed this to happen while the trial was going on.

Strang: What really happened with Jim during that trial?

Bakker: Jim had what was called an anxiety attack. It's when you can't breathe, you can't think—you just feel like you're going crazy.

They would have put any other sick person in a hospital and helped him. But they took Jim to a mental ward in chains. He didn't have bathroom tissue. He had no pillow. He was on a cot out in the middle of a bare room.

They would come and take blood out of him at four and five

o'clock in the morning. They kept him awake all night long.

Fulbright: He had two psychiatrists that were attending him at the time. They were pleading that he not be taken there.

Bakker: They were pleading that they not send him to that prison. And they did not even tell me and my family where Jim was. The lawyers called and told me that Jim was very ill. The next thing I knew, out in front of our yard [in Orlando] were hundreds of cameras. I called 911 because I was afraid. I said, "Somebody come and help me, there's hundreds of cameras out in my front yard. What has happened?" They [the 911 operator] were the ones who told me that they were sending Jim to a prison.

Messner: I was there [at the trial] and a witness for one day. I think the American public will agree that the trial wasn't the fairest trial that's ever come along. Let's say he was guilty of everything. Let's say he did get too much salary. Let's say he did overbook the hotel, and all these things. Let's talk about the sentence. You can murder somebody and maybe get eight years, or you can be a drug dealer and get two or three years. Jim got 45 years!

Strang: The court examined the legal matters. Let's talk about a spiritual matter. Did Jim Bakker, did Tammy Bakker, do anything wrong?

Bakker: I'm sure we did lots of things wrong. Everybody does. If you're going to run a business, no matter what you do, you're going to make some mistakes. I'm sure that we made mistakes; I'm sure we did. But we certainly didn't make intentional criminal mistakes.

Messner: That's the big point. I don't believe Jim ever had any criminal intent to take a nickel from a PTL partner.

Bakker: Never. He wouldn't let our kids take a 25-cent candy bar from the store. We could have walked in any store [at

Heritage USA], and our kids could have taken potato chips and candy bars and stuff. Jim always made sure every month that every single time those kids went to the store, it was put on a bill. At the end of every month, he paid it.

Fulbright: One of the things with Jim Bakker was that if you refused a glass of water to a partner, you were automatically considered terminated. He loved those partners. He had a deep burden. I've seen him cry just reading a simple little letter. So I know the man's heart. He was building it [Heritage USA] for the people. It would have been foolish for him to try to deceive them in any way. He couldn't have, even if he'd tried. They [the partners] were his first priority always.