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Plans for a proposed debate between liberal Christian leaders and representatives from Liberty University, a theologically conservative evangelical Christian school, have stalled, with participants unable to agree on a topic or a date for the event.

The Rev. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a North Carolina pastor slated to participate in the event, suggested Liberty University had backtracked.

"It seems Charlie Kirk and Jerry Falwell want to launch a center and fire people up about the dangers of an imagined socialism, but when they publicly challenged us and we said we would be glad to pay our own way to come and make the biblical case for taxing corporate wealth to address real human needs, they aren't willing to back up their tweets," he told Religion News Service in a text.

Liberty spokesman Scott Lamb disagrees.

He told RNS the school wants to hold the debate — which was originally planned for the spring — but prefers to push it until after the Democratic and Republican

conventions this summer.

"I think it's a lot more interesting conversation after the RNC and DNC have their conventions and draft their platforms," he said.

Talk of a debate between liberal faith leaders and representatives from Liberty first emerged in November 2017, when Wilson-Hartgrove and the Rev. William J. Barber II, co-chair of the activist group The Poor People's Campaign, joined other clergy in signing a public letter calling on Liberty to host a theological sparring session between themselves and school President Jerry Falwell Jr., a vocal supporter of President Donald Trump.

Falwell and Liberty initially did not respond.

Then, in November 2019, the school announced the creation of the Falkirk Center for Faith and Liberty — a think tank with the goal of defending "Judeo-Christian" beliefs that is co-founded by Falwell and Charlie Kirk, the 26-year-old head of the conservative group Turning Point USA.

A few days later, the Falkirk Twitter account challenged Wilson-Hartgrove and a partner to debate representatives from the center over the question "Was Jesus a Socialist?"

Wilson-Hartgrove pushed back against the focus on socialism, agreeing instead to a "public conversation about what the Lord requires of us in public life" and saying that he would be accompanied by Barber.

Wilson-Hartgrove said initial talks with the Falkirk Center about the debate went relatively smoothly. Representatives from Liberty agreed to expand the slate of participants to three debaters per side, allowing Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove to be accompanied by the Rev. Yvette Flunder, pastor of the City of Refuge United Church of Christ in Oakland, California.

All three faith leaders have been vocally critical of Falwell, Trump, or both. Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove spoke at the " Red Letter Revival " convened in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 2018 — right down the road from Liberty — decrying both the leadership of the school and Trump. Flunder also joined both pastors in signing an open letter in October 2019 voicing support for an impeachment inquiry into the president.

Wilson-Hartgrove proposed that the Falkirk Center be represented by Kirk, Falwell and "a fellow from the Falkirk Center" and that the event focus on disagreements over "the role of Christian faith in public life." It would be hosted at Liberty University in March, be either televised or livestreamed, and each side was tasked with inviting its own moderator to ask questions.

Moderators for the debate had not been agreed upon, although Wilson-Hartgrove said MSNBC's Joy Reid had tentatively said she would ask questions if she could make the scheduling work. (Reid did not respond to requests to confirm her involvement.)

Wilson-Hartgrove said that Lamb contacted him on Monday to suggest pushing the event back until the fall semester. He said Lamb told him that Falwell did not want to participate and that the focus of the debate should be on socialism.

"We definitely want to have a debate about socialism with members of the religious left," Lamb told RNS. "Let's have a conversation that enlightens the voters."

Lamb clarified that there is "no final word" on whether Falwell would participate.

If held, the debate at Liberty would have some precedent. In 1999, Fawell's father, Jerry Falwell Sr., debated the Rev. Tony Campolo about religion and politics in America on the television show "Crossfire."

Campolo is the founder of the Red Letter Christians network, whose members also include Wilson-Hartgrove. The term "red letter" refers to the words of Jesus, which are printed in red in some Bibles.

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