

Christians Divided Over Election

The 2008 race to the White House has divided evangelical Christians more than any other election in recent history. 'Charisma' takes a look at the issues that have been so contentious.



[] When Stephen Mansfield started writing his book *The Faith of Barack Obama*, the Illinois senator was a long-shot presidential hopeful whose religious background was of little interest to most. One year later, Obama is the Democratic nominee for president, and his faith is a popular topic. In fact, national media outlets such as *Newsweek* began calling Mansfield long before his book released in August.

“I didn’t know this was going to end up being the only book on Obama’s faith in an election about faith,” Mansfield says. “I’m not smart enough to figure that out.”

Although the presidential election of 2008 has been a race about plenty of other things—the war in Iraq, the economy, rising gas prices—it has been one with a particularly strong emphasis on faith, from Obama’s association with the controversial Rev. Jeremiah Wright to Sen. John McCain’s embrace and then rejection of charismatic pastors John Hagee and Rod Parsley.

And with the Democratic candidate being, ironically, more candid about his

religious beliefs than the presumptive Republican nominee, Christian voters are more divided this election season than at any time in recent history. Some observers say the election signals a changing of the evangelical guard; others believe Christians' political priorities are shifting. Whatever the case, the 2008 race for the presidency is proving that conservative Christian voters are not a monolith and that faith remains a critical factor in shaping U.S. politics.

Putting Faith Front and Center

Despite the aggressive press coverage of the candidates and their backgrounds, questions about the faith of both men persist. In April, one in 10 American adults believed Obama to be a Muslim despite the senator's frequent denials of the claim and his relative ease in discussing his Christian faith. That perception has been shaped by e-mails that said Obama attended a radical Islamic madras in Indonesia and that he was sworn into the U.S. Senate with his hand on the Quran.

And then there are the divisive sermons that Wright, Obama's longtime friend and pastor, preached from the pulpit of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. When some of Wright's sermons appeared on YouTube, many wondered if Obama shared his pastor's radical views.

Mansfield, a former pastor who penned *The Faith of George W. Bush* in 2003, has visited Trinity, which Obama attended for 20 years before resigning

his membership in the wake of the Wright scandal. Far from an Obama apologist, Mansfield found that the “gospel was preached” at Trinity but so was “liberation theology”—a complex belief system that sees the biblical narrative through the eyes of the oppressed.

“Wright, for example, would be stridently supportive of the Palestinians, not because he hates Jewish people but because he believes in standing with the oppressed,” Mansfield says.

That view flies in the face of comments Obama has made in support of Israel. Wright has also said the U.S. invited the 9/11 attacks by participating in terrorism of its own, which included using nuclear weapons against Japan during World War II. Obama has repudiated this view, as well which begs the question: Why would Obama have attended Wright’s church?

“He initially went because the people he was working with [as a community organizer] in the inner city of Chicago said, ‘You’re not going to make as much progress with these folks unless you make some progress with your faith,’ ” Mansfield says. “He’s very transparent, and he’s said that he initially went there because it would help him with people of faith.”

Through that imperfect church and Obama’s less-than-perfect motives, Obama became—Mansfield says unequivocally—a committed Christian. This despite his having grown up with an atheist mother who was “caught up in the secularism and liberalism of the ’60s” and with “Unitarian Christian”

grandparents.

McCain's faith has been more circumspect than Obama's—no long-standing ties to pastors with incendiary views about America or Israel, no childhood in a predominantly Muslim country; rather, a diploma from an Episcopal high school in Virginia and membership with a quiet Southern Baptist church in Arizona. Yet McCain has been more hesitant than Obama to discuss his faith in public—something Mansfield attributes largely to a generational difference.

In *Faith of My Fathers*, McCain writes that his mother, the daughter of an Episcopal minister, saw to his religious instruction. While a prisoner of war in Vietnam, McCain says he prayed regularly and once served as a chaplain for the men under his leadership.

In his 2002 memoir *Worth the Fighting For*, McCain says his divorce from Carol Shepp—one month before his marriage to Cindy Helmsley in May 1980—was due to his “selfishness and immaturity.” He told Beliefnet in 2005 that past mistakes have made him “a much bigger believer in redemption.” He says, “I’m much more of a believer in a loving God, a personal God. I’m much less inclined in every way to believe in a vengeful God.”

Despite his longtime association with conservative Baptists, McCain has had more high-profile scrapes with evangelicals than his Democratic rival. Earlier this year Focus on the Family chairman James Dobson said he may not vote in 2008 because he was dissatisfied with the candidates. Dobson has

criticized McCain for having “a legendary temper” and often using obscene language—which some critics see as a sign of uncontrolled anger.

Dobson announced his support for the Republican candidate only after McCain chose Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate, saying McCain’s selection of the strongly pro-life, outspoken Christian was “a very encouraging sign” for his campaign.

This isn’t surprising. McCain has had an awkward relationship with evangelicals for years—from his comment in 2000 about the Rev. Jerry Falwell being “an agent of intolerance” to his more recent rejections of endorsements from two megachurch pastors. Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, was accused of making disparaging comments about Catholicism, while Parsley, pastor of World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio, had said that Islam was inherently violent—reasons McCain ultimately distanced himself from both men.

Rallying the Conservative Base

Unlike Obama, who hired a Pentecostal minister to help him connect with the faith community, McCain was slow to reach out to Christians this election season. That didn’t stop evangelicals from endorsing him, however tepidly. In early July, more than 90 evangelical leaders, including *Charisma* publisher Stephen Strang, met in Denver and announced that they were endorsing McCain. One of the participants, Phyllis Schlafly, president of the conservative

family advocacy group Eagle Forum, said: "The alternative is so bad we must support John McCain"—not exactly the stuff of pep rallies.

The tenor began to change after pastor Rick Warren hosted both candidates at a civil forum at Saddleback Church. During the event, McCain gave what many evangelical leaders saw as more decisive answers to questions about abortion, gay marriage and evil in the world.

"People were, before, just kind of wringing their hands thinking, what kind of mess do we have here, what kind of choice do we have," Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council, told Politico after the forum. "I think he stopped the ... ambivalence that was out there toward John McCain."

Perkins says the lack of evangelical fervor for McCain was never entirely justified. "While McCain has not always [articulated] solid positions on conservative social issues, he does have a pretty consistent voting record," he says.

Learn where the candidates stand on the issues.

On abortion and gay marriage, McCain has staked out conservative positions. He has said he is in favor of overturning Roe. v. Wade, and he opposes gay marriage, though he voted against the 2004 federal marriage

amendment, which would have altered the Constitution and prohibited all same-sex marriages. He believed it was a state issue, not a federal one.

Yet despite his more permissive stance on abortion, Obama is catching people's ears and drawing ardent supporters. The Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell—despite his close friendship with the Bush family and his previous support for President George W. Bush—endorsed Obama early this year and at one time was in weekly contact with the Obama camp.

"I still have a great relationship with the Bush family," says Caldwell, pastor of Houston's 14,000-member Windsor Village United Methodist Church. "But ... our relationship is not built on the foundation of politics or policies."

Though Caldwell had read Obama's two books and heard many of his speeches, he didn't decide to support Obama until meeting him in person at a private reception in Houston in 2007. He was impressed with his moral vision, which Caldwell compares to Methodist leader John Wesley's concept of "personal piety and social holiness."

"I think [Obama] personifies the nexus of moral consciousness and social responsibility that we need in America today," Caldwell says. "It would be a stretch for me to say he's a 21st century version of John Wesley, but when you look at the options in the public square today, I think he comes the closest."

Caldwell has occasionally had to defend his support for Obama to other Christians. He recently came under fire for having an outreach to people with unwanted same-sex attraction removed from his church Web site. Although he was accused of cowering to gay activism, Caldwell says he had it removed when the Obama camp called because he hadn't warned them it existed.

"If I'm going to officially support a candidate, then I'm responsible as well, I think, for vetting myself and letting them know of any potential ... intriguing issues which may arise that could help or hurt the campaign," Caldwell says. "The campaign did not ask me to remove it. I felt so badly that I didn't tell them up front, I removed it."

Caldwell says he sees no conflict between his choice for president and his personal convictions on issues such as gay marriage and abortion. Although Obama supports civil unions for gay couples, Caldwell says he has heard him say "on more than one occasion" that he is opposed to same-sex marriage.

Caldwell believes that Obama would not require clergy to perform same-sex unions, and he is convinced Obama would not pass legislation that would prevent pastors from preaching that homosexuality is a sin—a view Caldwell holds.

On the abortion issue, Obama is personally opposed to it, but unlike McCain has never talked about overturning Roe v. Wade and instead has sought ways to reduce the number of abortions. "I am pro-life. Period,"

Caldwell says. "But I am pro-life both before birth and after birth. ... It's shameful and sinful to abandon the baby before it's born, and it's equally sinful to abandon the baby after birth."

Caldwell adds: "Obama's positions and policies are designed to decrease abortions and the need for abortions, and this is where the rubber meets the road. During the administrations of pro-life presidents, you do not see a decrease in abortions, so ... why not give [Obama's] policies a chance?"

A New Kind of Christian Voter

According to Cameron Strang—founder and publisher of *Relevant* magazine, which targets 20-something Christians—a significant portion of his readership, are, like Caldwell, socially conservative and supporting Obama.

"They are pro-life, they are by and large against abortion, but they're redefining pro-life to include a broader perspective," Strang says of younger Christians. "They're looking at the war, or pre-emptive war, as a life issue. They're looking at the environment as a Christian issue in that Jesus talks about stewardship and Jesus didn't promote excess and consumption and waste."

Strang, who was invited to pray at the Democratic National Convention but declined because he didn't want to appear partisan, says many younger voters are looking at all the issues and saying, "Out of 10 issues, I agree with Obama on maybe nine of them—the only one I agree with McCain on is abortion

legislation—but I actually agree with Obama on issues that as a Christian matter to me.’ And then when you have [Obama] actually courting the Christian vote, you see a lot of support right now from younger Christian voters.”

It’s the sort of thing that makes people like Lou Engle, founder of TheCall—a series of large prayer gatherings—scratch his head. Engle is a passionate pro-life activist who sees the abortion issue as the seminal moral evil of the day. “TheCall is not supposed to be political, but when issues such as abortion become a political issue rather than a moral issue, then it is our standing to stand with truth,” Engle says. “God is neither a Democrat or a Republican, but He is righteousness and truth.

“There’s a whole wave or movement going on in evangelical churches that says that abortion is an issue, but it’s one of many issues ... and there are many issues. But there are certain issues ... of such foundational truth that if you mess with those issues, you incur the discipline of heaven.”

Carrie Gordon Earll, senior director of issue analysis for Focus on the Family, echoes Engle’s sentiments. “When I know that Obama in the White House would work to solidify Roe v. Wade ... it would for me be a sin to vote for him,” she says.

Pentecostal minister Sammy Rodriguez Jr., president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, says ending abortion and protecting

traditional marriage are significant issues to Latino evangelical voters, too.

But he says polls conducted by his organization show McCain winning less than 50 percent of the Hispanic evangelical vote—significantly less than the 68 percent Bush won in 2004.

Rodriguez attributes the reticence to Republicans' handling of the debate over immigration reform—an issue Rodriguez believes McCain is still deeply committed to despite the fact that he said he would no longer vote for the immigration reform bill he introduced because it doesn't prioritize securing U.S. borders.

"The Republican National Committee needs to apologize to the Hispanic voter ... for not repudiating the xenophobic and nativist rhetoric that infiltrated the entire conversation about immigration reform," he says.

"[Hispanic evangelicals] like McCain, they don't trust the party. [They're asking], Do I vote for a person who I like in a party that doesn't want us? Or do I vote for a party that wants us but does not believe what we believe in? That's going to be the choice in 2008."

He says McCain must step up his outreach to evangelicals—especially Latino Christians. Without at least half the Latino evangelical vote, McCain "might as well write this one off," Rodriguez says. "All things being even, the Hispanic evangelical vote will be the deal breaker."

Marc Nuttle is an attorney, conservative political adviser and the author of *Moment of Truth*. He has no illusions about the changing political landscape in America. Culture warriors such as the Rev. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Falwell have died, and other politically active Christian conservatives such as Christian Broadcasting Network founder Pat Robertson are getting older—all factors that are helping to make this presidential election unpredictable.

Nuttle argues that the conservative movement in America peaked in 2006 and is slowly being replaced by new evangelical coalitions. He says the next generation of evangelical leaders will emphasize fighting poverty and protecting the environment alongside ending abortion and preserving traditional marriage. “The values won’t change, but the priorities will, and you’ll find new organizations that are different from the old-guard Christian right,” he says.

The next battleground, he predicts, will be over how to solve the world’s major problems—through government solutions that lean toward socialism or private initiatives that protect individual freedom. “I think the future will be less driven by Republican and Democratic labels and more by, Do you believe all your answers will be [provided] by the government or do you believe in a higher calling?” he says.

With the presidential candidates holding opposing views about how much

government involvement is necessary, Nuttle says voting is critical. "If you don't vote ... you're basically putting your baby on the door of a stranger," he says. "It may work out, but why would you take the risk?"

-Cameron Conant