

PLUS: God and the Governor

Charisma's exclusive interview with George W. Bush.

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In this exclusive interview with Charisma, George W. Bush talks about how he rededicated his life to Christ and how he applies his Christian faith to moral and political issues.

Charisma How would you describe the change that occurred in your life as a result of your conversion experience?

Bush: A Bible verse that is important to me is the one that says I shouldn't try to take a speck out of someone else's eye if I have a log in my own. I like that verse because it reminds me that we're all sinners. When you admit you're a sinner, it is recognition that there is a need. And that need, for me, was met through Christ.

You can be a sinner and live under a bridge. Or you can be a sinner and be the governor of Texas. To me it is an understanding that the human condition requires a power greater than self. In 1986 I came to that realization. I had been raised a Christian, but my faith was reconfirmed in a much more powerful, personal way—because I sought, and I found.

Regarding my encounter with Billy Graham: He was a messenger. I can't really think of the words he said, but I know he lit a spark inside me that kindled into a flame over time. Billy Graham planted a seed, and then I went back to Midland [Texas] and got involved in Community Bible Study—which is a very active national program. That's when I began to read the Bible every day. Now I seek God's guidance. But of course, as a politician, I am mindful of the fact that my faith doesn't make me better than anyone else.

How has my faith manifested itself? I am more mindful of the needs of others. I also have a certain confidence about my life. It is not dependent upon material success, or electoral success for that matter. I am going to fight like heck and give this campaign my best shot, and I hope I will be the president. But should it not work out, I understand that there is a force greater than myself—and it gives me great comfort.

Charisma When your father was in office he didn't seem to understand evangelical Christians. Yet you seem comfortable talking openly about your faith.

Bush: My dad is a deeply religious man—a man of enormous integrity. But he came of age in a very different period of time than I did. I will promise you that a lot of his religion came out of not only how he was raised, but by the fact that he got shot down at age 19 or 20 [during World War II] and wondered whether or not he was going to live. It is the kind

of religion people often find during times of battle.

So he was not quite as forthright in being able to describe his faith in personal terms. Some would interpret that to mean that he might not have been as comfortable with different facets of Christianity. I don't believe that is the case at all. Also, he was raised in New England, and I was raised in Texas. Texans are less reserved.

But these days we need to be mindful of that old Southern phrase, "You can talk the talk, but you need to walk the walk." The folks who read your magazine know it is a lot easier to talk the talk. We need people who live what they say.

Charisma Has your wife, Laura, had a rededication experience like yours?

Bush: Laura's spirituality is a very quiet confidence in the Lord. She came to Christ in a different way than I did. Mine has been much more public in nature because I've talked about it a lot.

It's kind of like Billy Graham and his wife, Ruth. They came to the same conclusion but through different routes. Laura's is a spirituality that has been very firm since childhood. Laura is a very quiet person. She doesn't talk a lot about her faith, but she lives a faithful life.

Charisma Who is advising you in your efforts to court the Christian vote?

Bush: Well, I do have a person on staff who is in charge of the evangelical vote. But to really answer your question, my feeling is that if you need somebody to coach you, then that's a problem. If I need somebody to say, "Act this way," in order to court a vote, then to me there may be a flaw in the candidate's approach.

I understand the evangelical community. I understand that it's important for me to be in communication with evangelical leaders. For example, James Robison is a friend of mine. I don't view him as a political consultant; I view him as a friend. Tony Evans [pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship Church in Dallas] is a friend. These are spiritual leaders with whom I have met on occasion who pray for me. I'm grateful for their prayers, and I accept their friendship.

I will tell you one of the great things about America is the number of people who walk up to me and look me in the eye and say, "Governor, I pray for you every day." The fact that people would pray for me on a daily basis is an unbelievably comforting and humbling feeling.

Charisma President Clinton says he has sought forgiveness from God for his mistakes.

What effect do you feel the Lewinsky scandal had on our nation spiritually?

Bush: You never know, ultimately. In the short run, it had a very negative effect because mothers and dads were so disillusioned trying to explain to their children what [the Lewinsky scandal] was all about. I know we did in our household. It was hard.

But hopefully this is an awakening for all of us to be able to understand how important it is to keep a check on carnal desires and to be responsible for the decisions we make in life.

We need to change the culture of America, but cultures don't change instantaneously. But we've got a culture that has sent a signal that says: "If it feels good, just go ahead and do it. And if you have a problem in society, then blame somebody else."

This attitude existed before this recent scandal. I think what this country needs to do is to usher in what I call "the responsibility era"—where you are responsible for the decisions you make. But we can't usher in the responsibility era when a figure that is on your TV screen on a daily basis has behaved irresponsibly. It sends a mixed message. What's needed in a president is a consistent message.

Charisma You have been promoting the idea of letting faith-based organizations receive federal funding. But how are you going to do this when so many people out there criticize this as a violation of the separation of church and state?

Bush: The state should not be the church, and the church should never be the state. But we ought to welcome people of faith into the political process. And we ought to understand that government can hand out money, but it cannot put hope in people's hearts. Government is limited in its ability to encourage love.

Therefore, while the government spends money, it should not preclude programs of faith that are helping people in times of need. The church and state can be separated even when we welcome faith-based programs onto government property.

Charles Colson's Prison Fellowship ministry comes to mind. They are operating a Christian prison in Texas. They are saying, "Why don't we change prisoners' hearts—and watch their attitudes change." Look at the Teen Challenge ministry. I think taxpayers' money should be allowed to be redeemed in these kinds of programs without forcing them to change their mission.

I don't believe that is violating the separation of church and state. I think we just need to understand the power of the church, synagogue and mosque to change people's lives. We need to welcome them into the process in a hospitable way, in a way

that doesn't threaten them or in a way that creates a bureaucracy that prevents them from fulfilling their mission. If the government helps a person so that they make a choice as to where they can get their life saved, that's not a violation of the separation of church and state.

Charisma Some of our readers are intrigued with the idea of a Jewish vice president. They feel Sen. Lieberman might be more committed to morality than some of the Christian presidents we've had lately. What would you say to those people?

Bush: I respect Sen. Lieberman's faith. But he's not going to be the president. The vice president is not the president. It's the president who makes the decisions. He sets the tone. My response is if they want four more years of the attitudes of the Clinton-Gore administration in Washington, then I'm not the right person. But if they want a fresh start, I would hope they'd give me a chance.

Charisma We have readers who used to vote solely on whether a candidate was pro-life, but now they say the issue of abortion doesn't matter because the courts will never restrict it.

Bush: The battle has not been lost. The battle for life begins with changing the culture. We need to convince people of the preciousness of life. If we do get a better understanding of the preciousness of life, then people will start making better choices.

And I don't mean just the life of the unborn. I'm talking about the life of the elderly. I'm talking about teaching our children the value of life. The 1999 Columbine massacre was really an issue of teen-agers who didn't value life—kids who would walk into their school and take somebody's life. That was a clear sign that this country needs to have a renewed understanding of the preciousness of life.

But there are some practical things that can happen. I will sign a ban on partial-birth abortions. That's a bill that can make it to my desk that will save lives. Also, I can encourage parental notification laws. In the debate on this issue in Texas, our position was that parental notification will save lives. Also, we can herald adoption as a beautiful alternative to abortion.

Charisma Many Christians believe the death penalty is supported by Scripture, while others believe it isn't. How have you applied your faith to this issue?

Bush: It's a very difficult issue for a lot of people. And it's not easy being the governor in a death penalty state. But nevertheless my job is to uphold the laws of our land. When I

swore on the Bible at my inauguration as governor of Texas, I swore to uphold the laws.

I also believe that it is important to focus on the innocent victim when it comes to crime. If the death penalty is administered surely, swiftly and justly, it will save lives because people will know that there is going to be a consequence to crime.

Charisma We have many African American readers who believe the Republican Party represents a racist agenda. What would you do to heal the racial chasm in our country?

Bush: I can understand why some African Americans look at the Republican Party and say, "Well, they don't care about me." We've been labeled as being against things. We were labeled as being against public education—yet public schools are one of the greatest hopes for children from all walks of life to be able to access the American dream.

But the public school system is not fulfilling its promises under the Clinton administration, and we'd better think differently about education. In Texas, we lead the nation when it comes to including minority students.

So I'd say to your African American readers that I hope they forget the old stereotypes and focus on which candidate has solutions to problems that brought people into poverty. In

every African American community they'll hear the same message everyone else is going to hear, that I'll bring honor and dignity to the White House. Personal responsibility. This isn't a race issue. It's an issue that affects all Americans.

Charisma You mentioned how much it means that Christians pray for you. What are your biggest personal concerns?

Bush: You could pray that God will protect my children. My biggest worry about running for president is not about me; it's about my family. We've got two 18-year-old daughters who mean a lot to us, and their daddy is running for president. People are going to say ugly and hurtful things.

Secondly, I pray for peace of mind and wisdom. The power of prayer is real. It's comforting. And it keeps life in perspective. I want to win, and I'm a tough competitor, but I also understand that winning this election may not be in the larger plan of things. I think it will be, but it may not be.

Prayer helps me keep perspective. I'm not so anxious to be the president that I will say whatever it takes to win. I think that has to do with my faith and how I was raised. To me, faith is a long walk. It's not a moment. It's a walk. *

Charisma editor J. Lee Grady and Carol Chapman Stertz, a frequent Charisma contributor, interviewed Bush on Aug. 29 during a campaign flight from Texas to Maine. Go to to participate in our Election 2000 Forum.