

# The Faith of George W. Bush

He says he had a spiritual rebirth in 1986 and that his new faith in Christ helped him quit drinking. But it won't be certain until Election Day whether Christians believe George W. Bush's God-talk is genuine.

George W. Bush didn't waste much time after deciding to run for president. Just weeks after he formed his exploratory committee and began seeking the Republican Party's nomination, he did what he knew he must do to win this election.

He went to a prayer meeting.

It was April 15, 1999. Bush was escorted by state troopers to Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship Church in Dallas on that Thursday morning, where several dozen ministers and their spouses were waiting nervously in a choir room to shake hands with the Texas governor. He was greeted first by nationally known black preacher Tony Evans, pastor of Oak Cliff. Also hosting the low-key meeting was Fort Worth-based televangelist James Robison, who had invited area ministers to Evans' church to dialogue with Bush, ask questions about issues and show friendly support.

Of course Bush had already figured out that he needed the backing of the evangelical community—since his famous father lacked that support during his 1992 campaign against Bill Clinton. But the governor's appearance at this prayer meeting was not just about courting votes. Those who listened to Bush's comments felt that he sincerely wanted God involved in his campaign.

Near the close of the 90-minute session, the pastors stood around Bush in an awkward huddle—worrying his bodyguards. The ministers asked God to bless the Republican front-runner, his wife and his twin teen-age daughters. Among those who prayed, besides Evans and Robison, were Dallas-area evangelist Rudy Hernandez, Pentecostal preacher Carlton Pearson of Oklahoma, Southern Baptist pastor John Morgan and David Walker, pastor of Alamo City Christian Fellowship, a charismatic church in San Antonio.

It was a holy moment. Nobody in the room tried to turn the prayer meeting into a coronation. No one prayed that Bush would defeat Al Gore. No one spoke in tongues or poured oil on Bush to anoint him as the next president. Everyone there, including those who privately had been skeptical about Bush's policies, believed that Bush wasn't just mouthing words when he talked about his faith in Christ.

"Every time we've prayed for the governor, he's been tearful," says Robison, who has known Bush since the early 1990s when Bush was managing general partner for the Texas Rangers baseball team. The evangelist has prayed with Bush on several occasions, and Bush shared his testimony on two episodes of Robison's Life Today TV program last year. Bush has even been known to call Robison on his cell phone for spiritual advice, even though he knows that Robison has no plans to publicly endorse a candidate in this election.

"Gov. Bush doesn't want to use God to get elected," Robison told Charisma. "He doesn't want to ride in on a God plank. He just wants God to use him."

## **A Reluctant Leader**

Although Bush is more comfortable than most politicians when it comes to discussing Jesus Christ in public, his faith is subdued when compared with the demonstrative preachers who prayed for him at Tony Evans' church in Dallas. Bush found Christ in a quiet way, almost gradually, after a conversation with evangelist Billy Graham in 1986.

It happened at Walker's Point on the Maine coastline, near the Bush family home in Kennebunkport. Graham reportedly asked Bush, "Are you right with God?" Bush, who was about to turn 40, replied: "No, but I'd like to be."

Bush wrote about the experience in his 1999 book, *A Charge to Keep*. "Rev. Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year," he wrote. "It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ. I was humbled to learn that God sent His Son to die for a sinner like me."

Bush didn't shout hallelujah or tell everyone he knew that he was "saved" after his conversation with Graham. But he went home to Midland, Texas, and continued his involvement in a Tuesday night men's Bible study. His closest friends had already noticed something different about him. Bruce Robinson, a leader of the study group, told *The Washington Post* that he had always thought of Bush as a joker until that year. "Suddenly we were standing there talking very seriously about our spiritual life," Robinson said. "And I remember thinking, 'Man, you've changed.'"

The transformation was more obvious after Bush quit drinking and smoking. Secular observers of his spiritual turnaround say it must have been the result of a midlife crisis, or because his wife, Laura—a lifelong Methodist—threatened to leave him

if he didn't stay away from alcohol. Bush himself prefers to downplay the decision to stop drinking, instead emphasizing that after his rededication to Christ he started reading the Bible every day.

He sowed some wild oats during his college days at Yale (his worst fraternity prank was stealing a Christmas wreath from a hotel), and during that period he got into a heated argument with his famous father after coming home from a party drunk. During his prosperous days in the oil business he partied on—and some say there is an incriminating photo to prove that he was living like the devil. But all that changed in 1986. It was almost as if a dormant faith—instilled during his childhood when he was an irreverent Episcopalian altar boy—finally came alive after Bush realized that being a high-paid oil executive and the son of a powerful politician wasn't enough to satisfy his soul.

"I had been raised a Christian, but my faith was reconfirmed in a much more powerful, personal way—because I sought, and I found," Bush told Charisma in an exclusive interview.

After navigating through his youthful rebellion, and after jumping from one career path to another until he ended up a millionaire after selling his stake in the Rangers in 1993, Bush had found God. It was only after he had made his spiritual commitment that he began to sense what he describes as a "calling" to public office.

He says he heard that call the loudest in January 1999 just after his re-election as governor of Texas. He and Laura were seated with other members of the Bush family at a private inaugural chapel service in the Capitol in Austin, Texas. The speaker that day was Mark Craig, pastor of Highland Park

United Methodist Church, the wealthy Dallas congregation where Bush had been a Sunday school teacher in the early 1990s. Craig spoke about how Moses, a reluctant leader, gave God all kinds of excuses about why he couldn't lead God's people.

"Even Moses had doubts. It's not always easy or convenient for leaders to step forward," Craig said. "America needs leaders who have the courage to do what is right for the right reason."

At some point after the sermon, Bush's mother—the former first lady—leaned over and said to her son: "He was talking to you."

## **Is Bush the Man?**

Recent polls show that although Bush has lost ground to Gore in key states, a majority of evangelical Christians have thrown their support behind Bush. A survey conducted by the Barna Research Group in August showed that Bush led Gore 54 percent to 23 percent among voters who describe themselves as born-again Christians.

That's mostly because of Bush's stand on key issues such as abortion (he has vowed to sign a ban on partial-birth abortions if elected), morality (he has taken a strong stand for abstinence education in schools) and his promise to restore "dignity" to the White House after the Clinton sex scandal. Also, Bush's promise to funnel government funds to churches and other "faith-based organizations" that are involved in social services—a campaign he calls "compassionate conservatism"—has won broad support even from some Democrats.

But there are still big questions about Bush among some Christians. They still remember that George W.'s father was out of touch with the concerns of evangelicals during his administration, and they fear that a similar scenario will be repeated. But Bush insists that he understands evangelicals better than his father, who was raised in a different era and in a more traditional religious environment.

It is true that the son knows more than the father about Christians. Besides the fact that George W. claims his own conversion experience (something that President Bush never mentioned), the younger Bush learned the ways of the religious right by hanging around Doug Wead, a campaign aide with Pentecostal roots who served as President Bush's liaison to the evangelical community. Wead

told The Washington Post that after meeting George W., "I could see right away with this guy that I wasn't going to have to write a 20-page memo explaining what 'born-again' means."

Rich Cizik, government affairs director for the National Association of Evangelicals in Washington, D.C., said President Bush never grasped why evangelicals had a problem with government funding of lewd art, for example, or why Christians opposed government endorsement of gay rights organizations. "But unlike his father, George W. Bush does understand us," Cizik said.

African American Christians, however, aren't convinced that they should support Bush—especially since his father opposed a civil rights bill in Texas in 1964 and his brother, Jeb, the governor of Florida, scrapped an affirmative action program just a few months ago. The Barna survey showed that while most evangelicals plan to vote for Bush, 88 percent of black Christians favor the Democratic ticket.

Bush has reached out to black pastors such as Tony Evans and T.D. Jakes of Dallas. Yet, at Jakes' huge women's conference in Atlanta in July, a video greeting from Bush prompted booing from a crowd of 80,000 black women. In random calls to black Pentecostal churches, Charisma found overwhelming opposition to Bush.

Other concerns about Bush have been expressed by Christians from the political left and right. James Dobson of Focus on the Family has publicly chastised Bush for being too wishy-washy on abortion—since Bush doesn't favor a pro-life amendment to the Constitution. Other Christians believe Bush is part of an evil conspiracy because he and his father both are members of Yale's secretive Skull and Bones Society. (George W. has downplayed the connection, saying that the induction ceremony was a harmless ritual.)

Some Christians also worry that Bush is only pretending when he talks about his faith. After all, they say, President Clinton is a professing Christian who made appearances at prayer breakfasts during the time he was having an affair with a White House intern. Maybe Bush is pretending, too?

His pastor, Jim Mayfield, says Bush's faith is not an act. "Gov. Bush is not a theologian. But he is a good man of genuine faith," says Mayfield, who pastors Tarrytown United Methodist Church, a white middle-class congregation in Austin just a few miles from the Capitol. The Bushes regularly attend either the 9 a.m. or 10:55 a.m. service on Sundays. And while virtually everyone in the church likes Bush, and some have contributed to his campaign, "not everybody here is going to vote for him," Mayfield told Charisma.

Then there's the matter of Bush's vocabulary. Questions arose in September when a media crew taped him using a vulgar word to describe a New York Times reporter. The public forgave his slip of the tongue, but conservative Christians aren't used to hearing coarse language coming from the converted.

To make matters worse, a Talk magazine article from 1998 quoted Bush using worse profanity. James Robison, who wrote a letter of concern to Bush after he read the Talk interview, says Christians should forgive the man's human weaknesses. Regarding the incident with the Times reporter, Robison says, "That goes back to the days when George W. Bush was spending a lot of time in the oil business, and with people in the sports world—where everything is seasoned with expletives."

Robison added: "You certainly can't say that his entire life has been centered around the most powerful spiritual influences."

### **The Mantle of a Champion?**

Months before Bush announced his candidacy, he met with several ministers at Ed Young Jr.'s Southern Baptist church in Dallas. At the appropriate moment, San Antonio pastor David Walker asked the governor if he could lay hands on him during prayer, and Bush willingly submitted. Walker then asked God to place "the mantle of a champion" on Bush.

"Nobody said he would be the next president," Walker told Charisma. "But it was obvious that this man's heart gravitates toward the things of the Lord."



Those close to Bush say he is a determined fighter who could squash Gore if he put his boxing gloves on and attacked the Clinton-Gore record on moral issues. After all, says former congressman Bill Armstrong, a Christian, Clinton's White House represents "the most corrupt administration since Caligula."

But Bush has shown remarkable restraint in his personal comments about Clinton and Gore, suggesting that if he is really supposed to be president, it will be because of God's providence.

He told Charisma: "I'm not so anxious to be the president that I will say whatever it takes to win." Bush's evangelical supporters believe that a man with that kind of spiritual sensitivity could lead America to a place of spiritual renewal.

They are especially impressed by the boldness Bush has shown in calling for the government to let churches and religious organizations play a key role in transforming society. Bush has demonstrated that boldness in Texas, where he allowed Prison Fellowship, the ministry founded by Charles Colson, to assume responsibility for an entire correctional facility.

"That was a courageous thing Bush did when he turned that prison over to Chuck Colson's ministry," Robison says. "He genuinely wants those men to never go back to prison. I see a man who wants to make a difference. These are matters of the heart—not of political expediency."

"George W. Bush is a compassionate man, but he is also very practical," says Mayfield, his pastor. "He sees that the work

of reclaiming lives through faith-based groups produces more bang for the buck. He knows that if the spirit of a person is not transformed it's not going to work."

That is the heart of Bush's vision for this country's future: To get government out of the way so people of faith can roll up their sleeves and help others. Though his campaign rhetoric got muddled this summer with talk of prescription drug plans and budget proposals, his underlying theme started as a simple one: "Faith changes lives. I know, because it changed mine."

That's what he told a church in Houston last year. That's what his supporters hope he will keep saying right up until Election Day. \*

J. Lee Grady is the editor of Charisma. His new book, Ten Lies the Church Tells Women, was released this month.