

The Spiritual Side of Al Gore

Conservative Christians have criticized Al Gore for his pro-abortion views. But he maintains that his public policy is guided by a deeply personal Baptist faith.

During the Clinton years, Vice President Al Gore defined himself as a Harvard-educated intellectual, a forward-looking environmentalist and a visionary leader for the new millennium. But when the presidential campaign heated up late last year, another side of his personality was revealed: Al Gore, man of faith.

Gore wasn't hiding his religious beliefs before the 2000 race. It was common knowledge that he had a graduate degree in religion from Vanderbilt University and that he attended a Baptist church in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. But in late 1999—about the same time that Republican presidential contender George W. Bush was talking about his relationship with Jesus Christ—Gore said in an interview on 60 Minutes that he, too, was a born-again Christian. And he even criticized nonbelievers for “making people who do believe in God feel like they’re being put down.”

Some conservative Christians have blasted Gore, either for his defense of Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal or for his pro-abortion views. They’ve even accused him of promoting New Age ideas in his 1993 book on environmental stewardship, *Earth in the Balance*.

But Gore claims that Christianity is his core philosophy. “I freely acknowledge the role of faith in my life and the centrality of faith in my belief system,” he says.

Gore’s mother belonged to the Church of Christ. His father was a Baptist. Gore says he made a commitment to Jesus as a child, and then again at 21. He and his wife, Tipper, were baptized together while Gore was in Congress.

Gore freely quotes from Scripture (he once summoned his campaign staff to a midnight meeting in which he lectured them about the story of Gideon), and he's comfortable speaking from any pulpit. When he visits African American churches to court votes from the faithful, observers say he knows how to wow the audience by using the unique cadence of black preachers.

But Gore isn't always welcome in church. Last fall, when he offered a 20-minute homily during Mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Detroit, a group of protesters showed up to condemn his visit. "Al Gore is the innocent unborn child's worst nightmare," protester Larry Giroux told *The Detroit News*.

It is Gore's record on abortion that has created so much distance between him and many conservative evangelicals. He told the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League in 1997: "America's women have the right to choose [abortion], and no one will steal that right behalf of President Clinton, I vow to you here, and to all listening, that we will never ever let anyone take that right away."

Rich Cizik, governmental affairs director for the National Association of Evangelicals in Washington, D.C., says Gore's pro-abortion stance is only one reason he is concerned about a Gore victory on Election Day. The Clinton-Gore administration, Cizik says, appointed an exclusive liaison to the homosexual community but did not create a similar position for evangelicals—even though Presidents Reagan and Bush had such appointees.

"My sense is that Al Gore is more of an ideological liberal than Clinton," Cizik told *Charisma*. "But no matter how much we disagree with Gore on the issues, we have an obligation to go to him and ask him to consider our views."

Gore may be classified as a liberal, but he confused everyone last summer when he announced that he believes schools should

be allowed to teach creationism alongside evolution. That was just a month after an appearance at a Salvation Army center in Atlanta, where he announced that he favors a controversial plan that will offer government funding to faith-based organizations that provide drug rehabilitation and other social services.

His proposal—similar to one being touted by Bush—was met with hostility by Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Because Gore had always emphasized a strict separation between government and God, they urged him to retract his plan. But Gore has remained firm, telling audiences: “I believe strongly in the separation of church and state, but freedom of religion need not mean freedom from religion.”

Is Gore’s faith sincere—or is he, like many politicians before him, using God-talk to appeal to religious voters?

Gore answered that question himself when he told U.S. News & World Report: “I think there is a natural, healthy, uniquely American skepticism about anyone in politics talking volubly about his or her encourage them to maintain that skepticism because they’ll know the real thing when they encounter it, and that’ll be by deeds and not words.”