

[Print Page](#)

Volochinsky, B. P. (2010). "The Bush Presidency: Undermining the Separation Between Church and State ." *Student Pulse*, 2(07). Retrieved from <http://www.studentpulse.com/a?id=266>

# The Bush Presidency: Undermining the Separation Between Church and State

By Brigitte P. Volochinsky  
2010, Vol. 2 No. 07

## Introduction: The Establishment Clause

The Establishment Clause is an important element of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." However, the Establishment Clause does more than reinforce the freedom of religion; given the high religious diversity of the United States, the Clause functions to "de-politicize" religion. The Establishment Clause is supposed to remove religious issues from the ballot box and politics, overall (Levy 1).

\* The Establishment Clause separates government and religion in order to maintain civility between believers and non-believers. In spite of the Establishment Clause, religion saturates American public life. Every president swears the oath of office with one hand on the Bible and often says "So help me God." Almost every president has proclaimed days of prayer and thanksgiving to God. The Supreme Court opens its session only after the bailiff has asked God to save the Court and the United States. Witnesses in court swear to tell the truth, "So help me God." Congress, as well as every state legislature, starts its daily sessions with a prayer from a chaplain whose salary is paid using public tax money. All of us, including schoolchildren, invoke God on behalf of our nation when pledging allegiance to the flag. Even U.S. currency announces that "In God We Trust" (Levy 2).

Despite the intentions of the Establishment Clause it is clear that religion still plays a great role in both American's daily lives and the U.S. government. However, it is especially concerning when the president of the United States allows his religious beliefs to shape his political agenda. George W. Bush has been described as the most religious president in recent American history. While this may be an overstatement, Bush certainly is among the most religious presidents in the sense that he blurred the line between religion and politics. This chapter will analyze religion's affect on George W. Bush's political agenda and his blurring of the line separating church and state.

## Finding God

George W. Bush was 39 years old when he rededicated himself to Christ. Bush began "reading the Bible more regularly, he read daily devotionals, turned more to prayer, and joined a men's Bible study group." Soon after, Bush gave up drinking, later he gave up smoking and chewing tobacco. "He attributes his healthier lifestyle and subsequent political success directly to his decision for Christ." Bush has stated, "There is only one reason that I am in the Oval Office and not in a bar. I found faith. I found God. I am here because of the power of prayer" (Berggren 615).

179

Bush has always been comfortable sharing his faith with others. This was especially evident during the 1999 Republican presidential debates. When asked who his favorite political philosopher was Bush responded, "Christ, because he has changed my heart. When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that's what happened to me." George W. Bush also feels very comfortable in front of Evangelical audiences. He considers many Evangelical preachers to be close friends and Bush often surrounds himself with fellow believers in his personal, business, and political life (Berggren 615).

Unlike most other presidents, George W. Bush does not separate his faith from politics. Bush sees "politics as a religious vocation, a calling, and a sacred duty to be performed for God and humankind." Bush has stated that he prays that he be as good a "messenger of His will as possible." For personal strength, Bush consults not his father, the former president of the United States, but the heavenly Father (Berggren 616).

President George W. Bush transformed the White House into a place of faith, specifically Evangelical faith. Bush chose several individuals with strong religious backgrounds or devotional habits to serve in his administration. He opened every cabinet meeting with a prayer and insisted on a "high moral tone" in the White House. Overall, the Bush White House became a "largely tee-totaling, non-smoking, non-cussing affair." Former speechwriter David Frum, an orthodox Jew, explained that if one wants "to understand the Bush White House, you must understand its predominant creed and culture – modern Evangelicalism." Frum also noted that the first words spoken to him in the White House were "Missed you at Bible study" (Berggren 614).

George W. Bush has made numerous references to his belief that he could not be president if he did not believe in a "divine plan that supersedes all human plans." Richard Land, of the Southern Baptist Convention, recalled Bush once saying, "I believe God wants me to be President" (Wallis 65).

From day one, George W. Bush integrated his faith into his presidency. His first official act as president was to make Inaugural Day a National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving, stating "I cannot succeed in this task without the favor of God and the prayers of the people." During this proclamation President Bush asks the American people to "bow our heads in humility before God that calls us not to judge our neighbors, but to love them, to ask His guidance upon our Nation and its leaders in every level of government" (Kengor 89-90).

Bush's personal faith helped his interest in promoting his policy of compassionate conservatism in dealing with faith-based initiatives, abstinence, abortion, stem-cell research, and same-sex marriage as part of his new administration (Wallis 62). Also, Bush's religion shaped his foreign policy after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

## Faith-Based Initiatives

\* One of the first major acts of the Bush presidency was also the most controversial policy of the administration. On January 29, 2001, just nine days after his inauguration, President Bush introduced a major public policy initiative; it proposed to provide government funds for churches that offer social service programs to the needy. Bush called this 'Faith-based Initiative' and it was the foundation of his compassionate conservatism. President Bush sought to "encourage contributions to religious organizations and, at the same time, encourage those groups to take on a wider range of social services using funding from the federal government" (Formicola 5).

In order to achieve this, President Bush signed two executive orders. The first order created a White

299

House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives. The goal of the office was to ensure that local community “helpers and healers,” who operate within faith-based or religiously affiliated organizations and institutions, can receive federal money with less bureaucratic obstacles to overcome (Kengor 98). The second order established centers at five cabinet agencies – Justice House and Urban Development, the Department of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services – to ensure cooperation between church related service programs and the government (Formicola 5).

President Bush also created a Compassionate Capital Fund which aimed to match private giving with federal money. Bush recommended allowing taxpayers to deduct charitable contributions with the hope that this would spark an increase in charitable giving. He also sought to implement a ‘charitable choice’ policy, which would ensure that faith-based groups are not denied federal contracts simply because they are faith-based (Kengor 99).

\* In December 2002 Bush signed yet another faith-based initiative executive order. The order directed all federal agencies to give equal treatment when providing social service grants. It elaborated that faith-based organizations should not be held to different standards or denied government grants because they are faith-based. Bush stated, “The days of discriminating against religious groups because they are religious is coming to an end” (Kengor 101).

\* Additionally, Bush singled out several federal agencies with the claim that they had a history of discriminating against faith-based groups. Specifically he ordered that the Federal Emergency and Management Agency (FEMA) “revise its policy on emergency relief, which denied funding to religious organizations seeking to offer assistance after natural disasters.” President Bush also singled out the departments of Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services. Bush then announced that the federal government would be producing a guide book explaining how faith-based organizations can apply for federal grants (Kengor 101-102).


Federal assistance to faith-based organizations was a priority on Bush’s political agenda. Bush often spoke of the power of religion in helping him overcome substance abuse and he connected his own experience with the work of “religious providers seeking to transform lives” (Formicola 7). Bush believed that faith-based initiatives would “enforce the positive role of religion in society, recognizing that in many cases churches, synagogues, and mosques are the only institutions able to suffer with the poor and act as the voice of the voice-less, in a world that equates check-writing with charity.” It was believed that faith-based initiative was a good way to get the poor on the political agenda. Bush argued that faith-based initiative served to empower the poor and allow faith-based organizations to continue their great work. Competing for government funds would only enhance the service currently being provided. The President stated many times, “I have faith that faith will work in solving the problems” (Formicola 15-16).

\* Realizing that opponents of the faith-based initiative would cite violation of the Establishment Clause Bush explained that the initiative “respects the role, mission, integrity, and autonomy of religious groups.” Bush continued that although the initiative allows faith-based organizations to hire individuals who subscribe to their spiritual point of view it also requires respect for both the religious and non-religious views of the beneficiaries of publicly funded religious agencies. Therefore, religious belief is not a prerequisite for faith-based assistance. “The policy stipulates that if an individual client objects to the religious character of a social program, a secular alternative must be provided” (Formicola 15).

There still existed many opponents to Bush’s faith-based initiative though. Concerns were raised that there was no empirical evidence suggesting that faith-based social services are more effective than secular programs in reducing dependency or changing people’s lives. Also, some were concerned that religious groups would compete with each other for funds rather than work in cooperative ways to deal

309

with problems in their community. However, the most prominent criticism was that the faith-based initiative violated the separation of church and state. These critics explained that the initiative creates an “entangling alliance and in many cases may end up funding specific religious or theological views.” They also worry about “governmental enforcement on the ban on religious proselytizing.” The Bush administration has insisted that faith-based organizations will not use American tax dollars to proselytize; however, there is no way to guarantee that a church will not require a prayer for food or shelter. There is also no guarantee that religious groups will not refuse to hire individuals of different faiths (Formicola 16-17).

 Even though America has one of the highest rates of religious affiliation and church attendance in the world, the U.S. Constitution has long been interpreted as requiring a separation of church and state. It is strongly believed that Americans feel they can worship freely because the government steers clear of organized religion. President Bush’s faith-based initiative threatens this balance. Claiming that social service of churches is not recognized and is not properly supported by taxpayer funds challenges the “American achievement of religious vitality in the midst of church-state separation” (Formicola 161). President Bush allowed his personal religion and support of faith-based organizations to affect his political agenda and blur the line between church and state.

### **Abstinence, Abortion, and Stem-Cell Research**

The controversies surrounding family planning and reproductive health policies began long before the George W. Bush presidency, however Bush played an integral role in the development of these policies. Upon assuming office President Bush successfully advocated for authorization of a federal abstinence program called Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE). There existed two other federal abstinence programs dating back to 1981 and 1996; however Bush’s program had the most rigid guidelines. It required that educators, often religious organizations, teach that abstinence from sexual activity is the *only way* to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Also, during the Bush administration funding for family planning services, emergency contraception, and condoms decreased (McFarlane 408).

Overall, during the Bush administration, abstinence programs became far more prominent, support for contraceptive programs decreased, and induced abortion faced many new restrictions, as will be discussed next.

At the Republican National Convention during the 2000 presidential campaign Bush gave a speech stressing the importance of protecting the unborn. The change on abortion was almost immediate. On his first day in office Bush authorized a ban on all U.S. funding of abortion right groups internationally. Additionally, Bush appointed prominent pro-lifers to key cabinet positions including John Ashcroft as Attorney General and Tommy Thompson as Secretary of Health and Human Services (Kengor 92-93).

President Bush’s anti-abortion tactics did not end there, in the months and years to come Bush enacted many more anti-abortion policies. On August 5, 2002 Bush signed the Born Alive Infants Protection Act which provides for the protection of a child who survives an abortion. “In doing so, it affirmed the right to life of newborns.” If a child was able to survive an abortion it would now need to be protected rather than “destroyed by a doctor or nurse, regardless of whether its birth was intended or desired” (Kengor 93).

More policies followed; in January 2003 Bush signed the Sanctity of Life bill which defined human life as beginning at the time of conception. Two months later, President Bush chose not to veto the Republican Senate’s passage of a ban on partial-birth abortion. This was an especially significant move

409

