



## FACULTY OPINIONS...

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### Talking About God: Rev. Clinton vs. Rev. Bush

By [Dr. Paul Kengor](#)

It was quite telling that the strongest religious statement made at the Republican convention came not from a Republican but from a Democrat, Georgia Senator Zell Miller, who claimed, among other things, that the current President is the same person on Saturday that he is on Sunday morning.

Convention speeches are carefully managed. And I suspect that a shrewd Republican handler ensured that the convention's most emphatic statement in support of Bush's faith be offered by a Democrat. Why? Because the Bush team has learned a crucial lesson: The press does not express outrage when Democratic politicians, unlike Republican politicians, talk about God. Consider the example of the two most recent presidents, Democrat Bill Clinton vs. Republican George W. Bush.

The under-reported story at the start of convention week was Bill Clinton's Sunday talk at the radical Riverside Church in New York. Clinton addressed the congregation during the worship service. He accused Republicans of bearing "false witness" and being "the people of the Nine Commandments." The pastor introduced Clinton as part of an announcement of the church's Mobilization 2004 campaign, the kind of political activity that drives liberals wild when done by Republicans or conservative churches.

Liberals in the media must ignore the Clinton-Riverside incident. Otherwise, they would not be able to portray George W. Bush as a man who, uniquely in their view, drags God into politics for his own purposes.

Here's the reality: Though clearly a devout Christian, Bush is no more outwardly religious than the vast majority of this nation's presidents, including the most recent.

I researched the Presidential Documents—the official collection of every public presidential statement. An examination of the mentions of Jesus Christ by George W. Bush and Bill Clinton showed that through 2003, Bush cited Jesus, or Jesus Christ, or Christ in 14 separate statements, compared to 41 by Clinton during his eight years in office. On average, Clinton mentioned Christ in 5.1 statements per year, which exceeded Bush's 4.7.

Bush's biggest year was 2001, when he mentioned Christ in seven statements. This was the year of September 11; he was especially introspective, and often looked upward for strength. In 2002, he cited Christ in five statements. Most interesting, in all of 2003, the Presidential Documents displayed only two statements in which Bush mentioned his Savior: the Easter and Christmas messages. It may be reasonable to conclude that the hostile press reaction to Bush's mention of Jesus has pressured him into silence.

Such pressure was never placed on Bush's Democratic predecessor. President Bill Clinton's top year for Christ remarks was 1996—the year of his reelection campaign—when he spoke of Christ in nine separate statements. Clinton mentioned Christ almost twice as much in election years.

In addition, the Presidential Documents list only three incidences of Bush speaking in a church through his first three years. By contrast, Clinton spoke in churches 21 times, with over half in election years. And often what he said and did in these churches was blatantly partisan, from identifying New York's Democratic Governor Mario Cuomo as a "prophet" to instructing worshippers to go vote. No politician in modern times mixed politics and religion with complete impunity to the extent Bill Clinton did. Here is a mere sample:

"By the grace of God and your help, last year I was elected President." Clinton, Church of God in Christ, Memphis, Tennessee, November 1993.

"Our ministry is to do the work of God here on Earth." Clinton to a church in Temple Hills, Maryland, August 1994.

"God's work must be our own. And there are many questions before us now in this last presidential election of the 20th century."  
Clinton to a church in Newark, New Jersey, October 1996.

"The Scripture says, 'While we have time, let us do good unto all men.' And a week from Tuesday, it will be time for us to vote."  
Clinton, Alfred Street Baptist Church, Alexandria, VA, October 29, 2000.

"But I am pleading with you.... I have done everything I know to do.... [But] you have to show. So talk to your friends, talk to your neighbors, talk to your family members, talk to your co-workers, and make sure nobody takes a pass on November 7th."  
Clinton, Shiloh Baptist Church, Washington, DC, October 29, 2000.

Bill Clinton's vote-pushing in churches was no anomaly: His wife, as the U.S. Senate candidate for New York, did the same in November 2000, as did Clinton's vice president, Al Gore, the Democratic nominee for president. According to the New York Times, on election eve 2000, Hillary Rodham Clinton campaigned in seven churches in seven hours.

And while George W. Bush was pilloried for having the audacity to cite Jesus as his favorite philosopher in Iowa in December 1999, nary a reporter raised an eyebrow when presidential candidate Dick Gephardt said the following to Democratic voters in Iowa in December 2003: "He [Jesus] was a Democrat, I think." Needless to say, Maureen Dowd did not accuse Gephardt, unlike she did with Bush, of playing the "Jesus card."

God talk by a conservative Republican like George W. Bush is not tolerated, whereas liberal Democrats can talk about God as much as they want, even for explicitly partisan purposes. The double standard is quite sad and unfair. This is America, and politicians on both sides ought to be able to freely exercise their faiths—without attack.

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