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'The Jesus Factor' and American Evangelicalism

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Monday, May 3, 2004

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Producer Raney Aronson introduced the series and set the stage for debate: "President Bush has been called the most openly religious president in modern history. The documentary explores what that means for George Bush, both as a person and as president of the United States." The program went back to survey the roots of George W. Bush's faith and then considered the impact of the president's faith on his politics, largely through a series of interviews with academics, advisors, and Christian leaders.

The program went back to consider the earliest years of George W. Bush as the son of one of America's most influential leaders, and the forty-first president of the United States. George H. W. Bush, now known within the family as "forty-one," was raised in a traditional Episcopalian household. His father, Prescott Bush, was a prominent Connecticut businessman who later served in the United States Senate. George Bush the father was raised in the context of the northeastern establishment and within a denomination and religious culture that considered faith to be a historical reality with a personal dimension—but that personal dimension was kept strictly private.

With the rise of George W. Bush to political prominence—and eventually to the presidency—the Bush family presented a very different faith and a very different form of Christian piety. "The Jesus Factor" provided a fascinating perspective in the development of George W. Bush's Christian pilgrimage.

Looking at the political angle, the documentary argues that George W. Bush served as a critical liaison to the evangelical community even as his father was running for president in the late 1980s. Wayne Slater, often Bureau chief of the Dallas Morning News, reflected, "If it wasn't for the son, George Bush the father wouldn't have received as much support as he did in the evangelical community. George W. Bush reached out to some key evangelical ministers, reassuring them about the values of his father in a way his father, an Episcopalian, never could."

Richard D. Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, suggests that George W. Bush's understanding of evangelical Christianity can be traced to his childhood in Midland, Texas—about as far as one can get from Connecticut in cultural terms. George Bush the son was raised in the context of public piety in a culture that was overwhelmingly influenced by evangelical Christianity. Yet, George W. Bush was not yet at this stage a believing Christian. A crisis in his life would later lead to a conversion to Christianity—and a commitment to Christ that evangelical Christians both share and understand.

The PBS documentary covered the waterfront of views about the President's spirituality. Representatives of the secular

and religious left recoil at the President's use of religious language in his speeches, his signing of the partial-birth abortion ban act and similar legislation, and his use of the language of good and evil in defining the war on terror.

Predictably, the program also tried to define what it means to be an evangelical. This is the point at which so many on the cultural left lose touch with reality. For others, this is an invitation for an exercise in wishful thinking. Ownership of the word "evangelical" is very important in terms of today's political and cultural landscape. "The Jesus Factor," both in its documentary form and its accompanying website, presents a range of views on this question.

Steve Waldman, editor-in-chief of Beliefnet, argues, "People tend to think of evangelicals as a monolithic group. All conservative, all Republican, a lock for Bush. We looked at the evangelical voting block and actually, there are actually two types of evangelicals politically. There's conservative evangelicals and a group that we call 'freestyle evangelicals'." This definition of "freestyle evangelicals" allows Waldman to expand the definition of the word beyond plausibility.

John Green, author of *Religion and the Culture Wars* took a more academic approach: "The differences between fundamentalism and evangelicalism are a bit subtle, and oftentimes difficult to understand from the outside. A lot of it is a style. Fundamentalists tend to be very strict. They tend towards intolerance... They tend to be very judgmental. They tend to want to require an awful lot of individuals who have joined their communion. And they tend to be very, very, critical of other Christians—even other evangelical Christians—who don't share their very strict approach to religion." Green went on to argue that evangelicals are distinguished from fundamentalists because fundamentalists "tend to read the Bible literally."

All that is typical of how sociologists have attempted to understand conservative Christianity in America. So far as Green is concerned, the difference between a fundamentalist and an evangelical is basically a matter of tone. On the other hand, he seemed to imply something far deeper: "Also, when it comes to the question of who Jesus was, fundamentalists tend to have a fairly narrow, specific, very strict view of who Jesus was. Evangelicals have a somewhat broader interpretation of who Jesus was." What in the world is he talking about? Both fundamentalists and evangelicals would likely be perplexed by Green's argument.

"The Jesus Factor" presented something of a spiritual autobiography of the nation's forty-third president. Using the President's own words as well as reflections by his colleagues and friends, the documentary dealt honestly with the president's conversion to Christianity. During the 1980s George W. Bush arrived at a personal crisis, and even though the presenting issue was a drinking problem, the underlying reality was a far deeper hunger. As is now well recounted, George Bush made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ in the course of struggle to come to terms with himself, his sin, and his need for redemption. The secular left can forgive this kind of language if it is understood to be nothing more than a form of therapy—something like a twelve-step program toward personal recovery. But for George Bush, his conversion to Christianity entailed a comprehensive transformation of worldview and a sense of personal mission. Put simply, the president's Christianity took on both a private and a public passion.

Of course, the PBS documentary was focused on the 2004 Presidential election. Looking back at President Bush's election to his first term, the documentary argued that his alliance with evangelical Christianity was absolutely instrumental in his election. Looking to the 2004 vote, the experts arrayed for the program were in fundamental agreement that the evangelical vote will be crucial.

How will that play out in the 2004 race? John Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at The University of Akron, points to the issue of same-sex marriage as a critical factor. "Evangelicals are very likely to conclude that President Bush is a stronger defender of traditional marriage than the likely Democratic Presidential nominee, although evangelicals have been fairly critical of President Bush because he was not very quick to come out in defense of traditional marriage, and often said what they would perceive as fairly soft and wimpy things about the whole question of marriage. But in the end, it's likely that the Republican Party will be seen as the vehicle for preserving traditional marriage, and the Democratic Party seen as a vehicle for attacking traditional marriage."

Richard Land, who described the Bush administration as "the most receptive White House to our concerns and to our perspective of any White House that I've dealt with," pointed to issues of abortion and embryo research as other issues crucial to evangelical concern. Interestingly, Land argues that Ronald Reagan, the first president to be elected on a pro-life platform, was "pro-life by gut instinct." As Land explains, "It just horrified him. The whole process horrified him. He just couldn't conceive of people arguing that people ought to be able to routinely kill unborn babies." George W. Bush on the

other hand, approaches abortion as “a settled faith conviction.” As Land reflects, “I’ll take settled faith convictions over gut instincts, anytime.”

The PBS website devoted to “The Jesus Factor” raised other fascinating aspects of the evangelical question. Richard Cizik argues that the political process has taught evangelicals to be patient, and to have limited aspirations in the political sphere. Cizik argued that “evangelicals have matured; not only about our methodology in politics, but we’ve also come to understand you can’t change America solely by politics. It won’t happen. You have to change the hearts and minds of the public on issues like abortion. We’re not going to statutorily prohibit abortion in America, I don’t believe. Not for a long time.” Cizik also argued that the Federal Marriage Amendment might never get through the political process. Land responded with vigor, “Well, he’s wrong,” arguing that judicial activism and homosexual advocacy will be met with a political response from millions of evangelical Christians.

“The Jesus Factor” presented a fascinating and generally fair analysis of President George W. Bush, his personal faith, and the public role of evangelicals in America. At the same time, the program should serve to remind conservative Christians that we are considered something of an exotic tribe that continually requires analysis and interpretation. In other words, the cultural elite—as well represented by PBS and its media allies—get interested in evangelical Christians when we dare to intrude into the public debate on issues of politics and morality. PBS should be congratulated for its fairness as represented in this documentary. Perhaps the experience will encourage the media elite to become a little more closely acquainted with the faith and worldview held by vast millions of Americans.

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