

Jimmy Carter **“Evangelical” President**

The story of Jimmy Carter’s spiritual journey needs to be told in two parts. The first part focuses on his life after he left the U.S. Presidency in 1981. In second part, Carter describes his traditional “evangelical” Baptist faith and explains why he and his wife, Rosalynn, broke from the Southern Baptist Convention.

Part I:

In August 2015, Jimmy Carter thought that he had just two or three weeks to live after diagnosed with that melanoma had spread to his liver and brain. The then 90-year-old made a promise to Rosalynn, his wife of 69 years, “I’ll cut back on my schedule.”

It was not said lightly. Carter’s philanthropic efforts on behalf of the Carter Center, the nonprofit foundation he and Mrs. Carter founded in 1982 around “waging peace, fighting disease and building hope,” put demands on the former president’s time that would exhaust someone a third of his age. But upon reviewing his itinerary item by item, Carter had a change of heart. “They’re all counting on us,” he said. The schedule remained entirely in place.

While Carter’s health took a miraculous turn for the better after surgery, radiation therapy and a groundbreaking new treatment called immunotherapy, his commitment remained as fixed as the appointments on his calendar. The former president who served a single White House term from 1977 to 1981, ascribes his lifelong charge to make the world a better place to his religious faith. Most weekends the 93-year-old can be found attending services, or even teaching Sunday school, at Maranatha Baptist Church in his hometown of Plains, Georgia.

In a rare interview, Carter told *Parade* that he has spent his life trying to “apply the premise of the Christian faith” and as much as he can, “emulate the perfect life of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.” He also credits his mother with “making a good impression” on him in his formative years. “Miss Lillian,” as she was called, never believed in racial segregation, despite being a product of the Deep South, where Jim Crow segregation laws pervaded.

“I was lucky enough to grow up in a community where all my playmates and friends were African-American, so that gave me a good start on human rights,” Carter says. During his tenure as president, Carter was able to “keep the peace and to promote human rights,” including brokering the Camp David Accords, which allowed for a historical peace agreement between Israel and Egypt that has lasted for forty decades.

After leaving the White House in the wake of his stinging reelection defeat, Carter embarked on what he called “an altogether new, unwanted and potentially empty life” as he struggled to determine in what he would do as a former president. A revelation came when he awakened in the middle of the night with the epiphany that his presidential library could serve as a dynamic, nonpartisan center for conflict resolution.

In the days that followed, he and Mrs. Carter talked excitedly about using the center to address other issues of interest to them: peace and human rights, famine and health issues affecting the world's poor; and furthering the work Mrs. Carter had done destigmatizing and generating awareness about mental health issues, a cause she had first taken up in 1971 as first lady of Georgia during her husband's one term as the state's governor.

The result was the Carter Center, an internationally renowned and respected nongovernmental organization, and a beacon of hope for many in developing nations whose problems have not been addressed by other NGO's, their own government or the United Nations. As Mrs. Carter has said, "We work with the poorest, the most isolated people in the world. And often, if we weren't there, there would be no one to help them."

Disease eradication has become one of the center's chief objectives. Working with other organizations, the Carter Center has successfully battled little known tropical diseases that permeate many developing countries. One of them is Guinea worm, an infection caused by parasitic larvae spread through drinking water or contaminated water. In 1986, an estimated 3.5 million were afflicted with the disease. Today, due largely to the Carter Center's efforts, there are only 30 documented cases, making it likely to be first human disease to be eradicated since smallpox.

In an effort to nurture and strengthen democracies, the Carter Center has monitored 107 elections in 39 countries and has peacefully helped resolve disputes throughout the world, including Haiti, Sudan, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition to his work for the Carter Center, Carter continues to be involved with Habitat for Humanity, devoting a week each year to Carter Work Projects throughout the United States and the world.

Somehow, the former president has also found time to become one of our most prolific presidential authors, producing 31 books. In 2002, Carter became the first former U.S. president to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded to him for "his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development."

Part II:

My basic, or traditional, beliefs were most persuasively taught to me by my father, who was deacon and my Sunday school teacher at Plains Baptist Church. Most of the rudiments of my faith in Christ as Savior and the Son of God are still shared without serious question by Protestant, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Copts, Seven-Day Adventists, and many other religious people. We also absorbed some special characteristics of our Baptist denomination. For us, baptism was only for those mature enough to have personal faith in Christ, and by total immersion underwater, symbolizing the death, burial, and resurrection of our Savior. We receive the Holy Scripture in its entirety as the revealed will of God, agreeing that the words and actions of Jesus Christ are the criteria by which the

Holy Bible is to be interpreted. Although often helpful, human interpretations of the Scriptures were not to be regarded as infallible or as creeds or instruments of doctrinal accountability.

We believed in the principle of autonomy for each local church, with decisions made by votes (it is hoped by consensus) of its baptized members. We emphasized scriptural passages that described how Jesus refrained from giving even his own disciples authority over other people. As evangelicals, we were committed to a strong global mission to share our Christian faith with all other people without prejudice or discrimination.

One of our most fervent commitments was to the complete separation of church and state. This was an issue of great importance, and we studied Christian martyrs who had sacrificed their lives rather than let any secular leader encroach on religious freedom. Although individual Christians (including my father) were free to participate in public affairs, we abhorred the concept of church congregations becoming involved in the partisan political world. We also believed in religious freedom, compassion for unbelievers, and respect for *all* persons as inherently equal before God.

My father and other farmers in the congregation would pay close attention to the pastor's sermons, based on such texts as "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." When humans were given power over the land, water, fish, animals, and all of nature, the emphasis was on careful management and enhancement, not waste and degradation.

I have used the past tense in the paragraphs above, but these are these are still my fervent religious beliefs, as an evangelical Christian and a Baptist.

Since my mother and my wife were Methodists, I always assumed that equally devout Christians could have different worship and organizational customs and still practice our faith in harmony. It is disturbing to hear Baptists make such statements as "You say you are to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense, I don't have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist" (Pat Robertson, *the 700 Club*).

As a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy,* I taught Bible lessons to the children of officers and enlisted men assigned to serve in Annapolis. It was during this time that I began to explore more deeply the ideas of some prominent theologians. Later, when I was running for governor, I mentioned that I found Reinhold Niebuhr's books to be especially helpful, and I was pleased several months later when his wife, Ursula, sent me a collection of his taped sermons.**

While in the White House, the newly elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention came to the Oval Office to visit me. This had been a routine ceremony for many years, especially when the president of the United States happened to be a Baptist. I congratulated him on his new position, and we spent a few minutes exchanging courtesies. As he and his wife were leaving, he said, "We are praying, Mr. President, that you will

abandon secular humanism as your religion.” This was a shock to me. I considered myself to be a loyal traditional Baptist, and had no idea what he meant.

Later I met with our pastor and asked him to explain the troubling comment. He surmised that I had made some presidential decisions that might be at odds with the political positions espoused by leaders of the newly formed Moral Majority and other groups of conservative Christians. Some of the things we considered were that I had appointed many women to high positions in government, rejected using government funds in religious education, established an independent Department of Education to enhance the public schools, accepted the *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision of the Supreme Court, worked with Mormons to resolve some of their problems in foreign countries, normalized diplomatic relations with the Communist government of China, called for a Palestinian homeland and refused to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and was negotiating with the Soviet Union on nuclear arms control and other issues.

Both my pastor and I were still in a quandary, but I had no alternative to ignore the condemnation and continue doing what I thought was best for our country (and also compatible with my traditional Baptist beliefs). At the same time, I began to learn what I could about both Islam and generic aspects of fundamentalism.

I soon learned that there was an intense form of fundamentalism, with some prevailing characteristics:

- Almost invariably, fundamentalist movements are led by autocratic males, who considered themselves more superior to others, and, within religious groups, have an overwhelming commitment to subjugate women and to dominate their fellow believers.
- Although fundamentalist usually believe that the past is better than the present, they retain certain self-beneficial aspects of both their historical beliefs and of the modern world.
- Fundamentalist draw a clear distinction between themselves, as true believers, and others, convinced that they are right and anyone who contradicts them is ignorant and possibly evil.
- Fundamentalists are militant in fighting against any challenges to their beliefs. They are often angry and sometimes resort to verbal or even physical abuse against those who interfere with the implementation of their agenda.
- Fundamentalist tend to make their self-definition increasingly narrow and restricted, to isolate themselves, to demagogue emotional issues, and to view change, cooperation, and other efforts to resolve differences as signs of weakness.

To summarize, there are three words that characterize this brand of fundamentalism: rigidity, domination, and exclusion.

After we left the White House, Rosalynn and I began to observe changes within the political and religious arenas of American life, and their slow but steady confluence. We had

no idea how profound the impact this revolution would be, both on us personally and on our nation.

A major and perhaps permanent schism occurred at the annual Southern Baptist Convention in 2000, when a new “Baptist Faith and Message” statement was adopted. Of permanent concern to many Baptists was the deletion of the previously statement that “the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ, whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.” In effect, this change meant substitution of Southern Baptists leaders for Jesus as the interpreters of biblical scriptures. It soon became obvious that this statement would be imposed as a mandatory creed on all convention officers, employees, deans and professors of colleges and seminaries, and even missionaries who were striving in foreign countries. The strictness of this mandatory compliance has exceeded that of the Roman Catholic Church or within other Protestant denominations.

The new creed was troubling enough, but it was combined with other departures from historic Baptist beliefs, including in melding religion and politics, domination by all-male pastors, exclusion of traditional Baptist from convention affairs, the subservience of women, encroachment on the autonomy of local churches, and other elements of the new fundamentalism. It became increasingly obvious that our convention leaders were really in conflict with traditional mainstream Christians. After much prayer and soul searching, Rosalynn and I decided to sever our personal relationships with the Southern Baptist Convention, while retaining our time-honored Baptist customs and beliefs within our own local church.

*Carter’s highest achievement as a U.S. naval officer, was that he was given command of America’s first nuclear submarine, an indication of his intelligence and capabilities.

**Other theologians that have influenced Carter’s faith are Karl Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr (Reinhold’s brother), Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Hans Küng. But he credits Cuban-American Baptist pastor Eloy Cruz as having the greatest influence by telling Carter simply, “You need two loves in your life: for God and for the person you have in front of you at any particular time.”

Sources: Mark K. Updegrave, *Parade*, February 18, 2018 (Part I); Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis*. Simon & Schuster, 2005 (Part II).