

Sex, Sin and Salvation

To understand Clinton the president, you have to meet Bill the Baptist, a believer whose faith leaves plenty of license. BY KENNETH L. WOODWARD

WHEN THE CLASS OF 1963 GRADUATED FROM HOT Springs High School, the student chosen to give the benediction was a born-again Baptist named William Jefferson Clinton. "Dear Lord," Clinton began, "... Now we must prepare to live only by the guide of our own faith and character ... Direct us to know and care what is right and wrong so that we will be victorious in this life and rewarded in the next."

Now, 35 years later, Clinton's sense of right and wrong is very much the issue as he tries to atone both spiritually and politically for his sexual sins. In his latest step on the road to repentance, the president recently sent a letter to his Baptist church in Little Rock seeking the congregation's forgiveness. Acknowledging the letter, the Rev. Rex Horn said that Clinton "expressed repentance for his actions, sadness for the consequences of his sin on his family, friends and church family, and asked forgiveness" from the membership. Making such a request is all the Southern Baptist tradition requires of sinners whose transgressions become public. But it is probably not enough to mollify his political opponents or the conservative leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, some of whom have urged the president to resign his post. More moderate Southern Baptists, however, see Clinton as both a flawed follower of Christ and an exemplary Baptist convert. Either way, Bill Clinton—the public and the private man—cannot be fully understood without grasping the nuances of his Baptist upbringing.

Clinton's commitment came early. He was baptized on Oct. 17, 1963, when he was 11 years old. He grew up the aisle—alone—at Park Place Baptist Church in Hot Springs to accept Jesus Christ as his personal lord and savior. He was 7 years old. In his youth, he walked alone to church and Sunday school, carrying his Bible. He joined the choir and to this day weeps when singing old Baptist favorites. His best speeches are like Baptist sermons—lyrical, seductive appeals for conversion to his message. In his youth, Baptist spokesmen fiercely fought the Roman Catholic Church over aid to parochial schools—and against Catholic efforts to keep abortion illegal. As president, Clinton's most consistent policies have been to protect abortion rights, even the partial-birth variety—and to oppose vouchers for religious schools.

But Clinton's troubled personal life—and his repeated verbal evasions—also bears a distinctive Baptist stamp. Like most Baptists, Clinton was taught that because he had been born again, his salvation is ensured. Sinning—even repeatedly—would not bar his soul from heaven. "There's no way you can get right with God by doing good," explains the Rev. James Dunn, an FOB and head

of the liberal Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. "We do good, not in order to be saved, but because we have been saved."

Doing good because you are saved is the bone of belief that joins Bill the Baptist to Hillary the Methodist at the hip. But Methodists also stress growth in personal holiness as a Christian obligation. Bill attends Hillary's church because Chelsea chose to become a Methodist like her mother. As a born-again Baptist, however, the president believes that what he does in private is nobody's business but the Lord's. "When the president told the nation that his problems were between himself, his family and 'our God,' that was a very Baptist statement," says historian E. Glenn Hinson of Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va.

Bill was also schooled in the Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience—including matters of sex.

Baptists believe in "soul competency," a distinctively Baptist doctrine which emphasizes the right and ability of each believer to interpret the Bible correctly for themselves. Baptists have no creeds. "The only Baptist creed," says Dunn, "is, 'Ain't nobody but Jesus goin' to tell me what to believe.'" For full-blooded youths like the adolescent Clinton, these Baptist doctrines offered considerable room for maneuvering through the sexual revolution of the 1960s. "You went to church to meet girls," recalls Texas Baptist David Solomon, now a professor of philosophy at Notre Dame. "And with a girl you listened to Billy Graham on the car radio Sunday nights before getting around to what you really had in mind." What Jesus seemed to be telling imaginative Baptist teenagers was that they could work out their own personal rules, permitting some forms of sexual experience without feeling guilty.

Clinton's adult sexual behavior fits this adolescent pattern. Many of his coreligionists believe the president spoke Baptist truth when he testified that he did not have "sex" with Monica Lewinsky. "Our basic rule growing up Baptist was that anything short of penetration didn't count," says Steve Marini, a Wellesley College religion professor who is Clinton's age. "Some of us also drew a line at ejaculation, which is what the president tried to do with Monica. She couldn't understand that because she didn't know the Baptist rules." No sex, in short, means no adultery—a word Clinton has yet to use regarding his "inappropriate" behavior. "What he did is disgusting, but not what I would consider adultery," says Foy Valentine, who was head of the Southern Baptists' Christian Life Commission for 27 years—the years of Clinton's youth. "And I think that most Baptists would agree." The nation's First Baptist certainly seems to—and he formed his world view not in the dark of a Saturday night but in the light of a Sunday morning.



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