

# Huckabee steers clear of Baptist politics: Turned down chance to speak at Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant

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Negotiating the dicey waters of presidential diplomacy would be easier than resolving differences among Baptist groups, Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee said in a campaign appearance. This is the same Mike Huckabee who last May accepted—then rejected—an invitation to speak at a historic pan-Baptist gathering at the end of this month.

“Being president—that’ll be a heck of a lot easier job than getting all the Baptists to agree on everything,” Huckabee, a Baptist minister, said at a December 6 political event in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The former Arkansas governor said that while he’s open to discussing the basic tenets of his faith, he won’t voice his views on the highly public controversies in his own Southern Baptist Convention. Those issues are not relevant to the presidency, he said, adding that he doesn’t believe there is an absolute Baptist theology.

Huckabee’s decision not to speak at the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant followed critical comments that event organizer Jimmy Carter had made about President Bush’s foreign policy. Carter said in a May 19 interview with the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* that “as far as the adverse impact on the nation around the world, this administration has been the worst in history.”

Democratic ex-presidents Carter and Bill Clinton say the Baptist meeting in Atlanta will not be politically oriented, even though it comes during the height of the presidential primary season. Nevertheless, after “tentatively” agreeing to participate, Huckabee withdrew to avoid appearing to approve “what could be a political, rather than spiritual, agenda.”

Organizers say some 20,000 participants from large and small Baptist groups in the U.S. will unite around commitments to evangelism and social ministry. Sessions in the spirit of Luke 4:18-19 will address religious liberty, poverty, racism, AIDS, faith in public policy, stewardship of the earth, evangelism, financial stewardship and prophetic preaching.

Confirmed speakers include Nobel Peace Prize winner and former vice president Al Gore; Republican senators Lindsay Graham of South Carolina and Charles Grassley of Iowa; journalist Bill Moyers; and sociologist Tony Campolo.

The SBC, which was not invited officially to participate, has openly criticized the gathering for allegedly being politically biased toward the left. Organizers noted that the SBC had previously withdrawn from the North American Baptist Fellowship, a pan-Baptist group that includes most of the other major U.S. Baptist denominations.

*-Associated Baptist Press*