

In Bush memoir, faith a small but constant factor

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Former President George W. Bush made no secret that his politics were tinged by his religious faith, but now says he never would have made it to the White House without a fateful -- and faith-filled -- decision to quit drinking in 1986.

"I could not have quit drinking without faith," Bush writes in his memoir, "Decision Points," released Tuesday (Nov. 9). "I also don't think my faith would be as strong if I hadn't quit drinking."

Across 497 pages, Bush recounts the ways religious faith shaped his life and his politics. While religion is not a central thrust of the book, it's nonetheless a constant theme.

Attending Presbyterian and Methodist churches in Midland, Texas, Bush writes that "religion had always been a part of my life, but I really wasn't a believer."

That changed with his decision to quit drinking a year after evangelist Billy Graham visited the Bush vacation home in Maine in 1985. At that time, Bush said, he was an occasional reader of the Bible, which he viewed as "a kind of self-improvement course." During that well-known walk with Graham, the evangelist said the point of the Scriptures was to follow Christ, not just to improve himself.

"Billy had planted a seed," Bush wrote.

Months after returning to Texas, Bush joined a weekly Bible study. He soon started reading the Bible every morning, a practice he continued throughout his time at the White House.

While Graham helped Bush overcome alcohol, it was a Texas pastor who inspired him to pursue the presidency. At a service to mark his second inauguration as Texas governor, Bush heard the Rev. Mark Craig, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Austin, recount the biblical story of a once-hesitant Moses leading the Israelites into the Promised Land.

"We have the opportunity, each and every one of us, to do the right thing, and for the right reason," Bush recalled Craig preaching. At the other end of the pew, Barbara Bush mouthed to her son, "He is talking to you."

Once in the White House, Bush's faith played a role in both presidential and personal decisions. His push for global AIDS relief was fueled by his visit to a Ugandan clinic, where he left feeling challenged by the biblical admonition: "To whom much is given, much is required." When he knelt at the casket of Pope John Paul II in 2005, he prayed for ailing ABC anchorman Peter Jennings.

His moral views also contributed to his decision to ban federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. Bush revealed that as a teenager, he drove his mother to the hospital after a miscarriage as she held the fetus in a jar.

"I remember thinking: 'There was a human life, a little brother or sister,'" he writes.

In a meeting with John Paul, he told the pontiff that his church's "steadfast support of life provided a firm moral foundation on which pro-life politicians like me could take a stand."

When he decided in 2001 to ban the use of federal funds "to support the destruction of life for medical gain," Bush said he was struck by the personal nature of the criticism.

"They mocked my appearance, my accent and my religious beliefs," he wrote. "I was labeled a Nazi, a war criminal, and Satan himself," but Bush says the "shrill debate" never prompted him to second-guess his decision.

Bush also defends his Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, which he said helped more than 5,000 charities receive federal grants.

As president, his reliance on faith continued through his last day in the White House.

"I began Tuesday, January 20, 2009, the same way I had started every day for the past eight years: I read the Bible," he wrote in his epilogue.