News



Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump speaks at the National Religious Broadcasters convention at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center Thursday, Feb. 22, 2024, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP Photo/George Walker IV)

Will Weissert

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Associated Press

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Former President Donald Trump promised to use a second term in the White House to defend Christian values and even suggested he'd shield the faith's central iconography, warning a convention of religious broadcasters on Thursday night that the left wants "to tear down crosses."

"Remember, every communist regime throughout history has tried to stamp out the churches, just like every fascist regime has tried to co-opt them and control them," Trump told hundreds of cheering attendees at the National Religious Broadcasters International Christian Media Convention in Nashville. "And, in America, the radical left is trying to do both."

"They want to tear down crosses where they can, and cover them up with social justice flags," Trump added. "But no one will be touching the cross of Christ under the Trump administration, I swear to you."

Trump's comments reflect his embrace of Christian nationalism, a belief that is powerful among conservative evangelicals who say the founders of the U.S. intended the country to be a Christian nation. Some adherents believe the U.S. Constitution was inspired by God and that the federal government should declare the U.S. a Christian nation, advocate Christian values or stop enforcing the separation of church and state.

Trump is favored in a Republican primary where the once crowded field has dwindled to just him and his former ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley. The Christian media gathering, where sponsors distributed free red and white baseball caps emblazoned with "Make America Pray Again," was exceedingly friendly territory for the former president, whose address often felt more like a rally than a staid convention speech.



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"The left is trying to shame Christians," Trump said. "They're trying to shame us. I'm a very proud Christian."

Trump brought the crowd to its feet repeatedly and frequently championed his record on abortion, including appointing three conservative Supreme Court justices who helped overturn the Roe v. Wade decision. But he notably didn't mention the Alabama Supreme Court ruling that has prompted providers there to pause in vitro fertilization after justices ruled that frozen embryos could be considered children under state law.

President Joe Biden 's reelection campaign released a blank statement on the matter late Thursday, ironically calling attention to Trump's lack of reaction on the "Alabama IVF ruling he is responsible for."

Instead, Trump used his speech to boast that he had used his first term to do "more to uphold religious freedom than any administration in history."

"The enthusiasm for this election coming up in November is far greater than it was in 2016 or 2020," he said. "Far greater, it's not even a contest."

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Tennessee holds its primary on Super Tuesday, March 5, when many states around the country vote and could move Trump to the cusp of claiming the Republican nomination.

Some religious leaders were initially hesitant to get behind multi-divorcee Trump when he first ran for president in 2016, but now they are among his mostly solidly loyal "Make America Great Again" base.

That's despite a personal history that has only gotten more checkered in recent years, including Trump being indicted in New York in connection with hush money payments made to a porn actress in an attempt to suppress an extramarital affair.

"When he came onto the scene, people were skeptical," said Troy Miller, president and CEO of the National Religious Broadcasters. "But I think, as they've learned more and listened to Donald Trump speak, the one thing I hear all the time from people ... is that they really feel like Donald Trump understands them and that's the biggest connection that people make is, 'This is a guy in politics who gets us, who understands us, who doesn't talk like he's an elitist and talk down to us.'"