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Analysis



President Donald Trump bows his head during the National Prayer Breakfast, Thursday, Feb. 5, 2026, in Washington. (AP/Evan Vucci)

Jack Jenkins

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President Donald Trump, speaking to a sprawling crowd at a National Prayer Breakfast in Washington on Thursday (Feb. 5), returned to his personal tradition of using the bipartisan convening as an opportunity to attack his political enemies along religious lines.

"I don't know how a person of faith can vote for a Democrat," said Trump.

In a more than hourlong speech, the president, a self-described nondenominational Christian, highlighted faith but spent roughly as much time lauding his administration, his Cabinet and himself while heaping criticism on others. At one point, he blasted Republicans who have opposed his policies, saying of U.S. Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky, "There's something wrong with him."

The breakfast at the Washington Hilton was one of two prayer breakfasts that took place in the capital Thursday, continuing a split that began during the COVID-19 pandemic as negative reports came out about the Fellowship Foundation, the secretive evangelical Christian group that has coordinated the event for decades. Since at least 2022, the established breakfast has been held at the Hilton and another "reset" event organized by members of Congress at the U.S. Capitol. President Joe Biden tended only to address the event at the Capitol, but last year, Trump spoke at both.

On Jan. 7 of this year, the co-chairs of the Hilton event, U.S. Reps. Jonathan Jackson of Illinois and Ben Cline of Virginia, announced that there would be only one breakfast, suggesting the return to a single event had come at the urging of Trump and House Speaker Mike Johnson. But Sen. Roger Marshall, a nondenominational Christian and Kansas Republican, and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, a Catholic and New York Democrat, hosted an event at the Capitol on Thursday anyway, coordinated by a separate National Prayer Breakfast Foundation created in 2023.

The more sedate Capitol event featured Scripture readings and prayers from Gillibrand, Marshall, Senate Majority Leader John Thune and House Chaplain Margaret Kibben, with a keynote address from Senate Chaplain Barry Black.

At the Hilton, the religious politics were more obvious, with speakers offering contrasting interpretations of the president's immigration policies. In his remarks, Trump referred to a Jan. 18 incident in which protesters disrupted the Sunday service at Cities Church, a Southern Baptist church in St. Paul, Minnesota, where activists allege a local U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement official serves as a lay pastor, and the subsequent arrests of multiple protesters as well as two journalists, including onetime CNN host Don Lemon.

After Trump's remarks, Jackson led a prayer that appeared to reference the killing of Renee Good and Alex Pretti at the hands of Department of Homeland Security agents in Minnesota. "We pray that he would be mindful of the poor," Jackson said, referring to Trump. "That he would be invested in the alleviation of suffering happening on farms in the Midwest, in the families preparing to bury their loved ones in Minneapolis."

The audience at the hotel, which was largely receptive to Trump, also heard from President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador. Trump called Bukele "one of my favorite people" and praised him for allowing the U.S. to send people detained by DHS to the notorious mega-prisons in the Central American country.

Bukele, in his remarks, explained that the prisons were originally built to accommodate those imprisoned during his government's campaign to eliminate gangs from the country. The rapid incarceration of thousands has sparked widespread allegations of human rights abuses in El Salvador, but Bukele attributed the effort to divine providence. "Our experience told us that it is impossible to have such big change without the intervention of God," he said.

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Bukele likened the anti-gang campaign to a spiritual battle, saying, "We won the spiritual war first, and that reflected in our physical world."

But Trump also chastised Bukele during his remarks, saying he "sends bad people to the United States," referring to immigrants.

In his speech, Trump addressed his own spiritual future, walking back a suggestion he made last year that he might not get into heaven. The president said he had been joking, saying he actually believes he "probably should make it."

Paula White-Cain, an evangelical minister who headed the White House Faith-Based Office in Trump's first term, said in introducing the president on Thursday that "no president in modern history, or perhaps all of history, has done more structurally, substantially and sincerely to elevate and protect religious liberty."

Trump agreed, saying, "I've done more for religion than any other president."

He also seemed to take credit at one point for defending Christians in other countries from persecution, a recent focus of the White House, before he was president. He singled out a woman named Mariam Ibrahim in the audience, noting that, in 2014, she had endured imprisonment and persecution in Sudan for her Christian faith, resulting in an international outcry for her release.

"I did that. I did that with one phone call actually," Trump said of her successful release. "She had such support. It was so easy. And when I explained it to the powers that be, 'Yes, sir, we will do it right away.' I just wish I knew earlier."

He didn't make clear how he had become involved with the effort to secure Ibrahim's release, or whom he had called. According to a 2014 article published by BBC, Ibrahim was already living in the U.S. by the end of that year, two years before Trump was elected to his first term as president. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for clarification.

Political topics were not entirely absent at the Capitol event, even if they were subtler. Near the end of the service, a prayer was offered by Sen. Alex Padilla, a California Democrat who made national headlines last June when he was tackled and detained after attempting to ask a question of DHS Secretary Kristi Noem at a press conference. After praying for members of Congress and members of the judiciary, Padilla prayed for members of the military and veterans.

"We thank them for their service and sacrifice in defense of our nation and our democracy," he said. "May they recall Jeremiah Chapter 22:3, 'Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.'"

The dueling breakfasts came less than two weeks after around 100 clergy and faith leaders were arrested in Minneapolis while protesting Trump's immigration policies, part of rising religious criticism of his administration. Several pastors have been shot with pepper balls and pepper rounds by federal agents while protesting the administration, and dozens of denominations and religious organizations have filed suit against the administration over the past year, many claiming that their religious freedom has been violated by the U.S. government.

Religious groups have also sued the administration over the president's decision to virtually shut down the refugee program — including Christians fleeing religious persecution — to anyone other than white Afrikaners from South Africa, and others have alleged his administration is regularly attempting to deport asylum-seekers.

The events also came two days after House Speaker Mike Johnson weighed in on a theological debate with Pope Leo XIV. Asked during a press scrum to respond to the pontiff's public criticism of Trump's immigration policies, Johnson outlined a religious argument defending Trump's approach to immigration, and later published a lengthy post on social media further detailing his position.

Marie Griffith, a religion professor at Washington University in St. Louis and former director of the school's John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, said the dueling events, and the tensions over the mass deportation effort in Minneapolis, spoke to a "fracturing" of the U.S. religious landscape.

"You really see competing Christianities, diametrically opposed visions of what it means to be a Christian, of what is at the core of the Christian faith," Griffith said.

While both prayer breakfasts still feature "evangelicals claiming proximity to political power," she said, there appears to be division over what that looks like.

"Evangelicals attended both of those events, and so you've got people disagreeing about what this means in this moment to convey a Christian message, to call the president back to Christian values," Griffith said.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.