

Southern Baptist Mike Johnson elected House Speaker

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WASHINGTON (BP)—Rep. Mike Johnson, R-La., the newly elected Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, is a Southern Baptist who served as a trustee of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

Johnson's Southern Baptist supporters praised him as a "principled conservative" with a "Christian worldview" who "loves his church, his country, his family and his Lord." Critics called him an "extremist" who will advance a "Christian nationalist political agenda."

"It is the honor of a lifetime to have been elected the 56th Speaker of the House. Thank you to my colleagues, friends, staff, and family for the unmatched support throughout this process," Johnson posted on social media.

ERLC President Brent Leatherwood offered his congratulations to Johnson.

"Leading Congress is never an easy task, but it is especially challenging given how fractured the U.S. House of Representatives is at this moment," Leatherwood said in written comments. "Mike Johnson, a name familiar to many Southern Baptists, has been tapped to lead the chamber, and I want to offer my personal congratulations to him."

Johnson comes to the role following weeks of the House's inability to elect a speaker following the ouster of Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., on Oct. 3.

In a speech on the House floor after his election, Johnson told colleagues he is aware of the gravity of the challenges facing the nation.

"I want to say to the American people, on behalf of all of us here, we hear

you,” Johnson said. “We know the challenges you are facing. We know that there is a lot going on in our country, domestically and abroad. We are ready to get to work again to solve those problems, and we will. Our mission here is to serve you well. To restore the people’s faith in this House, in this great and essential institution.”

Johnson served as an ERLC trustee from 2004 to 2012. Leatherwood said he turned to Johnson in the early days of his role, noting “the first meeting I scheduled on Capitol Hill as ERLC president was with him in his office.”

“It was clear to me he carries an abiding devotion to our convention of churches, subscribes to the principles that are dear to so many Southern Baptists, and has a deep pride in our nation. There is no doubt this will continue in his role as Speaker of the House,” Leatherwood said.

Johnson is a member of Cypress Baptist Church in Benton, La., where John Fream is senior pastor.

“Mike is the real deal, and God’s hand is all over him and his family,” Fream told Baptist Press. “I am so excited and hopeful for our nation with this great man of God leading. Mike loves his church, his country, his family and his Lord.”

Steve Horn, executive director of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, said in comments to Baptist Press: “To have someone with Mike’s intellectual acumen, love for America, principled convictions and Christian worldview as Speaker of the House gives me great hope.

“This is an exciting day for Louisiana,” Horn continued. “This is an exciting day for Louisiana Baptists. More than anything, this is an exciting day for America.”

Both Horn and Leatherwood encourage people to pray for Johnson.

“He deserves our earnest prayers, along with all of our political leaders, as many significant decisions lie ahead about America’s future and its role in the consequential events occurring across the globe,” Leatherwood said. “Clear-eyed leadership, based in reality, that works to build consensus around these issues is needed now as much as ever from the Speaker’s chair.”

Concerns raised about Johnson

In his speech Wednesday, Johnson referred to God’s sovereignty and pledged to uphold the nation’s founding principles.

“The world is in turmoil, but a strong America is good for the entire world,” he said. “We are the beacon of freedom, and we must preserve this grand experiment in self-governance. ... We are only 247 years into this grand experiment, and we don’t know how long it will last. But we do know the founders told us to take good care of it.

“The Bible is very clear that God is the one that raises up those in authority. He raised up each of you, all of us. And I believe that God has ordained and allowed each one of us to be brought here for this specific moment and this specific time.”

Some of those sentiments raised concern for Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, president and CEO of the [Interfaith Alliance](#).

“As Speaker Johnson takes on the responsibility of leading the U.S. House of Representatives, he must remember that he was elected by the people, not by God as he appeared to be indicating in his speech in Congress today. I would remind the Speaker that he swore an oath to uphold the Constitution, not the Bible,” said Raushenbush, an ordained Baptist minister.

“Our nation includes people of diverse religions and beliefs, a wonderful mix which is the result of the promise of religious freedom found in the First Amendment. Unfortunately, America is faced with a rising tide of Christian nationalism that threatens the very foundation of our democracy, and the civil rights of our people.

“The fear that many Americans share today is that the Speaker’s worldview is ruled less by a commitment to the American people, but rather a desire to impose his narrow religious vision upon the rest of us. As a pastor and a citizen who loves this country, I am fine with the Speaker turning to his personal faith to inspire him, but he must use his leadership position to protect freedom of religion and civil rights, as well as the separation of church and state that make our nation a home to all.”

Rachel Laser, president and CEO of [Americans United for Separation of Church and State](#), posted on the [social media platform X](#), formerly known as Twitter: “Religious extremists continue to have dangerous, outsized power in our government. Rep. Mike Johnson is one of them. Reminder: WE THE PEOPLE are the majority.”

Nathan Empsall, executive director of [Faithful America](#), noted Johnson’s previous service with the [Alliance Defending Freedom](#), which the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) identifies as an extremist “hate group.”

Empsall, an Episcopal priest, referred to Johnson as “a far-right evangelical leader” and as a person who sees the government and secular law as a way to control and force religion on those different from him, advancing an anti-freedom, theocratic, Christian-nationalist political agenda.”

“It is certainly good for Christians to run for office and to let Jesus guide us in everything we do, including holding the values of love, equality, dignity and justice in public life. But that is not the same thing as using secular law to force others to adhere to our religion in their private lives, nor is it the

same as trying to punish those who are different from us by stripping away their freedoms and their right to vote,” Empsall said.

“House Republicans can take God’s name in vain by slapping the words ‘Christian’ or ‘biblical values’ on these harmful, anti-democracy values if they want, but you can also call a goose a llama if you want, and it will still be a goose.”

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp.