

# Interview: Reverend Calvin Butts, Pastor Of The Abyssinian Baptist Church In Harlem, Shares His Thoughts On The State Of The World And New York City In Particular

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**GABE PRESSMAN, Host:** -- As the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, he is a prominent, sometimes controversial leader in New York's African-American community. He is often mentioned as a possible candidate for public office. **Reverend Calvin Butts is also the president of the State University of New York College at Old Westbury.** His interest in the education of young people has led him on a crusade against negative images of women and minorities in the popular culture. Reverend Butts' other major concerns include alleviating the plight of the homeless, creating affordable housing for poor people and providing food for those who would otherwise go hungry.

Announcer: From Studio 6B in Rockefeller Center, this is a presentation from News Channel 4, Gabe Pressman's NEWS FORUM. Now your host, senior correspondent Gabe Pressman.

PRESSMAN: Good morning, Reverend Calvin Butts, and welcome. Dr. Butts, as this year comes to an end, what do you see as the major challenges for New York City and the suburbs around it?

Dr. CALVIN BUTTS (Pastor, Abyssinian Baptist Church): Well, of course, I'm always concerned about what happens to the poor. And one of the great challenges for New York City is providing housing opportunities for poor people, and that's most of us. The lack of affordable housing in New York is terrible. And we have to make sure, in order to fight homelessness and to provide safe environments for our children, that we build more housing that people can afford. Now this will take subsidy, and it will take municipal as well as state as well as federal subsidy, but we must do this, because we cannot return, particularly in an era when the safety net has been taken out from under so many of our residents who are poor and people are coming off the welfare rolls. Some are getting jobs and working, and that's good. But the salaries that they make will not allow them to afford the housing--the market-rate housing in New York.

Secondly, the main bread-and-butter issue for poor people is always and will remain education. Without an education in today's world, you cannot get a decent job and earn a decent salary. And we must make sure that the poor of our nation, state and city, our municipality, have a right to a quality education at a reasonable cost.

PRESSMAN: Let's get down to a political question. There's a national election coming up for president of the United States. Whom do you like in the Democratic field?

Dr. BUTTS: Well, I kind of like Dean. I don't think Dean served--was served well by Gore's endorsement in Harlem the other day.

PRESSMAN: Why?

Dr. BUTTS: Well, I just don't think he needed Gore. He's--that--I mean, that's just the bottom line. I mean, it didn't hurt him, I--I guess, to have a former candidate and a former vice president endorse him, but Dean was doing all right by himself.

PRESSMAN: You think that they were pandering to the African-Americans?

Dr. BUTTS: Well, obviously. They were in Harlem and, of course, I think they--but--but Gore never had a great reputation among a lot of African-Americans. He had an African-American campaign manager when he ran, but you know, people really liked Bill Clinton, and Gore just happened to pick up on some of that in the end. He ran a terrible campaign when he ran for president, and now I guess Dean was grateful for the support, but I think he ought to leave it alone and move on.

PRESSMAN: And what about the--the other people, like General Clark? He came two days later with Charlie Rangel.

Dr. BUTTS: Well, you've got to respect Charlie Rangel. He is the powerhouse. He is the long--he is the long-serving member of Congress, the dean of the delegation here in New York. And Wesley Clark may do better than I think. But right now the front-runner seems to be Dean, and Dean, in my opinion, is the kind of rough-and-tumble guy who can compete with George Bush. I think he can get in the ring with him, take off the gloves, and I think he can appeal to a certain segment of America that Bush is now assuming that he has. It's a kind of white male working-class guy who Bush thinks is in his pocket. I think Dean--and Dean's statement--you know, 'I want those guys who have the rifle racks and the Confederate flags in their trucks...'

PRESSMAN: Didn't that bother you?

Dr. BUTTS: Well, of course it did, but I think--I think I understand what he was saying. He wants to get at those guys that Bush thinks he has in his pocket. In other words, Bush says he's your president, but you guys are getting hurt because of his policy.

PRESSMAN: I think in that incident, he said something about the people who fly the Confederate flag from their pickup trucks...

Dr. BUTTS: Something like that.

PRESSMAN: ...are the people he wants to get.

Dr. BUTTS: Right.

PRESSMAN: And it caused an uproar among some black leaders.

Dr. BUTTS: Well--but look at it this way. One of the big problems in our nation has been the separation of poor people, all because of race. Poor whites and poor blacks are in the same boat. You know, we catch the same hell. We just are at each other's throat. If anybody successfully causes us to realize that education, health care, housing, you know, the care for our children hurts us all the same way, whether we're poor in Texas, poor in New York, poor in Minnesota, that person has pulled off something that will be a political miracle. And--and maybe it's not necessarily a miracle; it would be a political reality of great importance. And it--that person will succeed in really leading this country in a new direction.

PRESSMAN: The latest polls I've seen indicate that President Bush still commands a large number of the American people. What's wrong with endorsing President George W. Bush if, as it appears, he seems to meet the needs of perhaps a majority?

Dr. BUTTS: Well, just because the majority of people go along with a candidate, doesn't necessarily mean that that candidate has the right program for the nation. Bush has a lot of money, and a lot of money can buy people. A lot of money can manipulate--and pardon this, Gabe--the media. A lot of money can do a lot of things. And right now--and I'll give you one example of what a lot of money can do. It can make a person, that I believe never served in the military, look like a war hero in the midst of crisis in the world.

PRESSMAN: You mean when he landed on that aircraft carrier?

Dr. BUTTS: It's what a lot of money can do. And when you put it on the media like that, when you lay it out--What do you call it? When you spin it that way, it makes him look like this conquering hero. And only men and women who have been taught to question and think can see through that and lead others to see through it.

PRESSMAN: What do you think the major issue is in this coming campaign?

Dr. BUTTS: For me it will be several things. One, it will be ending that conflict in Iraq and getting our troops home. It's going to be major, because more and more of our young men and women are dying every day. And if we don't get them out of there--and now if it's a question of oil and control of oil, we've got to figure out some way to negotiate with the Iraqis to make sure that we have what we need to survive as a nation.

PRESSMAN: But if we get out of there, won't it invite the old regime or the followers of Saddam or Saddam himself to come back?

Dr. BUTTS: I think that the Iraqi people have a certain level of intelligence and wherewithal to figure out their own problems. We don't need to be a policer. We did a big thing by getting rid of Saddam. If that was our job to do, well, he's gone. And we've done another big thing by trying to help the country get some semblance of order. If that was our job to do, I think it's relatively done. But people must be allowed to determine for themselves the way they will go.

PRESSMAN: The war itself, do you think that African-Americans, Latinos, poor whites are assuming too much of the burden of the fighting?

Dr. BUTTS: Absolutely. The wealthy are not going. Absolutely. Poor whites--You called it--blacks and Latinos are the fodder of this war. They're being brutalized, killed, used. Now I'm not saying that whites are not there. They are. But the vast majority are in those categories: poor whites, poor men and women who don't have much choice, who deserve quality education but can't afford it, who deserve decent housing but can't get the jobs that will help them to afford it, who deserve health care...

PRESSMAN: So you think, as a clergyman and as a person who is interested in the political scene, that there's an immorality fundamentally here?

Dr. BUTTS: Absolutely. You know, I thought that we shouldn't--or we should have moved with greater caution in terms of going into Iraq in the first place. I'm not saying and I'm not trying to second-guess the president. I'm not saying that we should not have gone. I think we could have waited a little longer, analyzed it a little more. That's what I think Colin Powell represented. I think he represented a much more cautious approach, and I think that the American people should have had a greater opportunity to buy in and understand what the issues are.

Look at what we're going to have to sacrifice because of what this war costs. And so the war may have helped Saddam get out--or throw him out and helped the Iraqi people, but look at what it's doing to the American people in terms of what it's costing us.

PRESSMAN: Well, wasn't Saddam a ruthless dictator who murdered his own people?

Dr. BUTTS: But then we will let our own people die at home because they can't get decent health care; our own children go uneducated; we'll keep pushing the tuition for public education higher and higher and higher; we won't build new schools?

PRESSMAN: And when the president of the United States says that this is a moral issue from his standpoint and that it's important for America to set an example to the world and to promote democracy in the world, what do you say?

Dr. BUTTS: I'll go back to where we started. OK, now let's get out. You've done that. Let's bring these boys and girls home--these men and women home. Let's get out. Let's begin to invest that money here in the United States so that when it's time for us to really go out again, we'll--we'll be ready. Right now, atrophy is setting in. Each generation is getting weaker and weaker, poor--more--they're not as well-educated. We could do a better job with providing for the needs and health care of the poor people who have to go and fight these wars. I'm concerned about people--I know we have to have a presence. I know to whom much is given; of that one, much is expected. But we're the most powerful nation in the world, and every now and then we may have to get involved in a conflict, but let's think a little bit more carefully. If we're going to get involved, how are we going to get out? You got us over there now, Mr. President. Get us out.

PRESSMAN: In theological terms--and that's your essential business, although you're also the president of--of a college in Old Westbury. In theological terms, how would you analyze this--the world's situation in terms of America right now?

Dr. BUTTS: I think that the United States of America, particularly in this holy season, can win more friends in the world by doing what I would call the will of God. In the world, feeding hungry people; in the world, helping to heal hungry people; in the world, helping to educate the illiterate; in the world, helping to uplift the status of women and children. And I tell you, Gabe, that will cause the kind of revolution against tyranny, against hatred, bigotry that will change and revolutionize the world, but you've got to have faith enough to do it.

PRESSMAN: We'll be back after this.

(Announcements)

PRESSMAN: Back here with the Reverend Calvin Butts.

Dr. Butts, one of our great problems and so--some area--an area that I know you're very interested in, is--is the homeless problem in New York. Do you think that we're handling it well?

Dr. BUTTS: Well, I think we could always do things better, but right now, given the resources that we have, I think we're doing as good a job as perhaps can be done at the moment. It takes resources. It takes shelters. It takes--Abyssinian Development Corporation runs a homeless shelter, Tier 2 Homeless Shelter, in cooperation with the city. That's an enormous responsibility. You've got to find people to work, you've got to find people who know how to handle the residents who were homeless and now have a place to stay. It's--it's--so I don't want to criticize the people who are working hard every day to try to find solutions, but I think when we go back to talking about the war and resources--and money is not going to solve everything, but it surely will help.

PRESSMAN: Affordable housing. Are we doing enough to provide it?

Dr. BUTTS: No. No. I think that our banks, our insurance companies, our municipality and our state and federal government must do a great deal more or else we're going to continue to see the problem of homelessness, particularly in New York City and especially in Manhattan, because housing is just too expensive. We must do more, and I think that if people find--and that's why I work so hard with the Development Corporation--groups that they can trust and understand the need, that they will do more, and I'm hoping they will do more. We've got a number of mergers coming up with banks, and I hope that they will get involved more and more in homeless--in--in building affordable housing.

PRESSMAN: Now you wer--you talked--you touched on education. Right now do you think that the federal government is doing enough? What--what is--what is the--the greatest need in the--both education in general and higher education? And you are the president of a college.

Dr. BUTTS: The federal government is not doing enough. Now some would argue that the president of the United States and his No Child Left Behind legislation is saying that we want to do more, and there are some things with which I agree. First of all, I think there ought to be more accountability, greater assessment to making sh--in making sure

that what we are doing is turning out the kind of product in terms of our children's education that we need. Number two, parent involvement. We have got to empower parents. That's very important.

PRESSMAN: Well, what about the most recent stuff that's been done here in New York in terms of education, the Education Department reporting directly to the mayor?

Dr. BUTTS: Well...

PRESSMAN: Does that help? Then there's a parent appointee in each school.

Dr. BUTTS: Parent appointee in each school, but I don't think that the parents, in terms of the federal government, understand how much power they have created by this No Child Left Behind. For example, if my child is in the third grade and she or he is in a dangerous school and not learning, I have a right to have them moved to a school--or there must be something done to improve that school drastically. A building principal is the most important thing. A strong building principal can make any school work almost, with the right resources. But that's a very--so if you've got a building principal who is not producing and teachers who are not producing, that's something that ought to be addressed. They need to be moved.

And, Gabe, let me just say this. Many people have been talking about this assessment issue, and I think it's very important. We can no longer afford to move children along, and it's still happening too much, in terms of social promotion. If a child is not learning, he or she ought to be...

PRESSMAN: Social promotion, meaning you just promote the kid to...

Dr. BUTTS: Right.

PRESSMAN: ...get rid of him.

Dr. BUTTS: That's right. That's right.

PRESSMAN: Move on to the next class.

Dr. BUTTS: And as president of the State University of New York, we've changed this at Old Westbury. Old Westbury is an excellent institution. And I know of a young person who graduated for our school and wanted to go to a graduate school of journalism in this area. It just so happened that one of the professors is someone I know, and they said to me, 'You know, we see one of your students is applying to our school. Oh, yes. Good,' he said, 'but, Reverend, Dr. Butts, they are not ready for prime time.'

PRESSMAN: Mm-hmm.

Dr. BUTTS: And so I had to go back and ask, 'How in God's name did this child get moved along and couldn't even write a few paragraphs without 25 grammatical and spelling errors?' That's what social promotion does. We have to set high standards. And, Gabe, I'm telling you, it has happened at Old Westbury. When you set the standards high, the students will reach for them.

PRESSMAN: And you--you don't feel responsibility yourself for not teaching them properly in college? You say it all starts earlier?

Dr. BUTTS: It starts earlier, though it happens in college that--I mean, this young person was moved along in college...

PRESSMAN: Right.

Dr. BUTTS: ...not being able to do that, but it does start earlier.

PRESSMAN: So there was a flaw in the college, too.

Dr. BUTTS: In the college, in the educational process.

PRESSMAN: Right.

Dr. BUTTS: And that needs to be changed. The--the--the--the legislation the federal government now--No Child Left Behind is not what I believe it ought to be, and I think--it's only \$2.9 billion, but there is \$2.9 billion.

PRESSMAN: So you're saying that there ought to be more accountability built into the legislation.

Dr. BUTTS: Well, there ought to be more account--I agree with the legislation as it demands accountability...

PRESSMAN: Yes, but...

Dr. BUTTS: ...and as it asks for assessment.

PRESSMAN: But you would have federal bureaucrats supervising or what?

Dr. BUTTS: Absolutely not. I mean, that's what I don't agree with.

PRESSMAN: Uh-huh.

Dr. BUTTS: We, in terms of college presidents, must be given more autonomy to run our own campuses--public campuses. That's the same principle as the building principal. That person, that man, that woman who is in charge of that building must have authority to run that building but be held accountable.

PRESSMAN: Are you yourself interested in running for public office? You've been reportedly so interested, you've even indicated in past years. Right now?

Dr. BUTTS: Yes, absolutely.

PRESSMAN: You are?

Dr. BUTTS: Very interested.

PRESSMAN: Well, what office?

Dr. BUTTS: Well, now, Gabe, boy, you are something, I tell you. It--it wouldn't be intelligent for me to reveal what office I...

PRESSMAN: But you have thought about it.

Dr. BUTTS: I have thought about it.

PRESSMAN: What--what do you think of Mayor Bloomberg?

Dr. BUTTS: Listen, I think he's doing a good job, and I encourage him. Mike Bloomberg, work at it. You've got some issues you need to deal with, so...

PRESSMAN: Such as?

Dr. BUTTS: He's got to be more in touch with the common man and woman. He's got to listen more to what people are saying, and he's got to listen more to people who are on the street. You know, people see him as a little elitist, you know, a little aloof. Well, he--the man is a billionaire. I mean, you know, you can understand...

PRESSMAN: Have you told...

Dr. BUTTS: ...but he's--he's got to get down a little bit closer to the people.

PRESSMAN: Have you told him that?

Dr. BUTTS: I've tried to, which is one of the issues. You know, you try to tell him, and he don't really listen.

PRESSMAN: You're telling him right now in a way.

Dr. BUTTS: Well, I hope he'll listen. But listen, I think that he's not doing badly. He's come into the city at a very tough time. I love it when a person is not beholden to anybody. You know, he's got his own money. He certainly is intelligent. He's got an excellent track record with philanthropy and concern for the poor, and finally, Gabe, let me say this: I'm the pastor of a church, and I've been so for many years. I'm the president of a college. Now I'm going into my fifth year; we're doing well. I have led other organizations. I am much slower now to criticize people who are in leadership because they've got a tough job.

PRESSMAN: We'll come back after this message.

(Announcements)

PRESSMAN: Back with Dr. Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

What political office could you be interested in? I come back.

Dr. BUTTS: Gabe, I'll tell you, there's one thing, one place I'd really like to serve. It's an elite group of people. There are only 100 of them in the country.

PRESSMAN: Ah, the US Senate.

Dr. BUTTS: The United States Senate. I'd love to be in the Senate. I'd like to be the first African-American from the state of New York to serve in the United States Senate.

PRESSMAN: Well, you'd have to get Chuck Schumer to run for governor, or Hillary Clinton to become president. That's some of the...

Dr. BUTTS: I think that...

PRESSMAN: ...fantasies in politics.

Dr. BUTTS: ...both of them are very possible, you know. Some--both of them are very possible. I like Chuck. He might make a good governor.

PRESSMAN: You think so?

Dr. BUTTS: I think he'd make an excellent...

PRESSMAN: Of course, there's a fellow name Eliot Spitzer who was on this program recently, who also...

Dr. BUTTS: Eliot is sharp, too. You know, it would be good to see those two guys and see what would happen with that. But I'd like to serve in the Senate one day.

PRESSMAN: And so there's a rich fantasy life even for the pastor of an established church.

Dr. BUTTS: Just--so you don't think it's real. You called it a fantasy, Gabe.

PRESSMAN: No, I think it--fantasies become real all the time. In my--in my lifetime I've seen that happen. You have two children? Three children?

Dr. BUTTS: I have three children.

PRESSMAN: Three children.

Dr. BUTTS: Three wonderful children. I love all of my children. They're all doing well. Two are public schoolteachers. One is in advertising.

PRESSMAN: And your mother or father are still alive?

Dr. BUTTS: Still alive, the greatest people in the world. I could have not--I--nothing that I have achieved, if I've achieved anything...

PRESSMAN: Did they encourage you to go into the ministry?

Dr. BUTTS: No, I think it caught them a little by surprise, but once I was in ministry, there was no greater supporters or prayer warriors for me in the world. I love--I--I can't tell you enough how much I love my parents. They're the greatest people in the world.

PRESSMAN: They had a great influence on you as a child?

Dr. BUTTS: Yeah. They were--they--family life is extremely important to me, and it is very important because I had a good father and a good mother. I have a good mother and a good father, and they still are great salt-of-the-earth people.

PRESSMAN: What do they do for you today?

Dr. BUTTS: Today?

PRESSMAN: At this--at this time in your life, what do they do?

Dr. BUTTS: They love me. They pray for me. They chastise me. They tell me what to eat. They tell me what to wear. They tell me how to speak.

PRESSMAN: They tell you that they didn't like you last sermon?

Dr. BUTTS: They didn't like my last sermon. They'll tell me, 'We saw you on "Gabe Pressman." Why did you answer the question that way? Are you really going to run for office?' They're wonderful.

PRESSMAN: Thank you very much, Reverend Butts, for joining us this morning. I'm Gabe Pressman. Good day.