

Ala. governor off to `rocky start' with Jews, Muslims

by [Greg Garrison](#)

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(RNS) Jewish and Muslim groups want to know if they have a place in Alabama after Gov. Robert Bentley, just hours into office, said people who have not accepted Jesus as their savior are not his "brothers and sisters."

"Gov. Bentley certainly has a right to believe whatever he wants to believe religiously, and should be admired for his deep faith and convictions," said Richard Friedman, executive director of the Birmingham Jewish Federation.

"However, when elected officials make such religious remarks in their public roles, their comments tend to disenfranchise citizens who don't share those beliefs."

Bentley, a Republican who was inaugurated Monday (Jan. 17), told a large crowd at the Rev. Martin Luther King's former Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church that he intends to be "governor of all the people. I intend to live up to that. I am color blind."

The longtime deacon at First Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa then told the crowd "there may be some people here today who do not have living within them the Holy Spirit."

"But if you have been adopted in God's family like I have and like you have, if you're a Christian and if you're saved, and the Holy Spirit lives within you just like the Holy Spirit lives within me, then ... it makes you and me brother and sister."

But "if we don't have the same daddy, we're not brothers and sisters. So anybody here today who has not accepted Jesus Christ as

their savior, I'm telling you, you're not my brother and you're not my sister, and I want to be your brother."

Friedman said a delegation from the Birmingham Jewish Federation hopes to meet with Bentley to "initiate a dialogue and to begin what we hope will be a positive and productive relationship."

The Hindu American Foundation condemned the remarks as "intolerant, repulsive and wholly unacceptable," and the New York-based Anti-Defamation League asked Bentley to apologize to non-Christians.

"His comments are not only offensive, but also raise serious questions as to whether non-Christians can expect to receive equal treatment during his tenure as governor," said the ADL's regional director, Bill Nigut.

Ashfaq Taufique, president of the Birmingham Islamic Society, said he wasn't sure how to take the governor's comments.

"Does he want those of us who do not belong to the Christian faith to adopt his faith?" Taufique asked. "... We don't want evangelical politicians. They can be whatever in their private life. I don't deny his right to believe the way he believes and I hope he does not deny me the right to believe the way that I believe."

The Rev. Gil McKee, senior pastor at the Tuscaloosa church where Bentley is a deacon and Sunday School teacher, defended the governor, saying, "I know the heart of the man: Robert Bentley loves other people."

"As the committed Christian I know him to be, one of his priorities is to love his neighbors -- and that has nothing to do with whether the neighbor is Christian or not," said McKee, who attended the service in Montgomery.

Bentley's communications director, Rebekah Caldwell Mason, later said Bentley intends to be "the governor of all the people, Christians, non-Christians alike."

"We're not trying to insult anybody," she said.

Political observers chalked it up to Bentley's relative inexperience in politics. William Stewart, a retired political science professor at the University of Alabama, called it a "rocky start."

"It shows he has to be aware of most everything he says," said Stewart. "I think it's unfortunate if he did say that."

While Bentley's comments made him an overnight figure in the national media, some in Alabama shrugged their shoulders and suggested his comments weren't totally out of the mainstream in the heart of the Bible belt.

"Fortunately, he can be my governor without being my brother," said Rabbi Beth Bahar of Huntsville's Temple B'nai Sholom. " ... At least he is up-front about his world view. It's a world view the Jewish community has experience working with."

Bob Lowry and Kay Campbell of the Huntsville Times contributed to this story.