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What's behind candidate Palin's "God talk"

by Tom Roberts



News Analysis

Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin claims no denomination when asked what kind of Christian she is, confining her description to "Bible-believing."

But as the Republican campaign moves from the convention venue to less formal settings, the scrutiny of Palin that everyone says is inevitable will include a look at her religious biography. And it's a bit more complex than that simple phrase.

Palin, now governor of Alaska, was baptized a Catholic as an infant, but according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, she and her mother began attending an Assemblies of God Church, a Pentecostal denomination, when she was in her early teens. She was rebaptized as a Pentecostal, the fastest growing segment of the Christian church in the world, but in 2002, she and her family began attending a number of non-denominational evangelical churches.

If she is a "post-denominationalist" today (see the analysis earlier by *NCR* senior correspondent John Allen (**McCain's VP choice a woman -- and a post-denominationalist**)) her language at times clearly comes out of her earlier Pentecostal formation. Two examples that are making the rounds in recent days

occurred in June when she returned to the Wasilla Assembly of God, her previous church, to speak to a graduating class of commission students.

"Pray for our military men and women who are striving to do what is right," she said in a presentation that was video recorded. "Also, for this country, that our leaders, our national leaders, are sending out [troops] on a task that is from God. That's what we have to make sure that we're praying for, that there is a plan and that that plan is God's plan."

Later in her talk she turned to the subject of a \$30 billion national gas pipeline project that had been proposed for Alaska. "I think God's will has to be done in unifying people and companies to get that gas line built, so pray for that."

Many have drawn the conclusion that such lines provide an insight into how Palin would govern and assess issues, determining whether something was "a task from God," or "God's plan" or "the will of God."

It's the kind of "God talk" -- certainty that a public policy or strategy finds favor with the divine -- that can raise eyebrows beyond the church walls.

Pentecostalism as known in the United States is a young expression of Christianity, only about 100 years old, and as Grant Wacker, an expert on Pentecostalism at Duke Divinity School, explained in an interview with the Associated Press: "Though Pentecostals are diverse and rapidly mainstreaming themselves, the public still perceives them as sectarian and uncompromising, and those traits will not help Palin's image."

He even speculated that such perceptions may be why the McCain campaign has downplayed her Pentecostal past.

Cecil M. Robeck Jr., a Pentecostal and director of the David du Plessis Center for Christian Spirituality at Fuller Theological Seminary, said the language may not contain as stark an assertion as it appears.

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"Her language in these two quotations sounds very much like the language one would hear globally within the Pentecostal tradition. We teach and we are taught to seek God's will and to act upon it," said Robeck, in an e-mail response to a question from *NCR*.

"As an ecumenist, I know that most denominations do similar things, but they may not always couch their language in such graphic terms." Pentecostals, he said, "make no attempt to sound 'humble' when speaking about the will of God."

In more historic denominations, people may think the same thing and come to the same conclusions, but use different language. "They might say, 'I feel strongly about this' or 'We are seeking to follow the Bible here' or some other thing. That kind of language, I suppose, spares them from looking foolish or sounding presumptuous about knowing God's will."

He emphasized that discerning God's will within Pentecostal denominations is not a matter of "hoodoo" or some magically determined direction. Determining the will of God, he said, occurs in a variety of ways, through using Scripture, for instance, or common sense and personal feelings about a situation, or seeking direction in concert with others in the church or family.

Questions such as "Where can I make a difference or where can I do the greatest good?" are also means for discovering the will of God, he said.

"Often times, within our circles," he added, "people will say that they think something is God's will if they have a strong inner sense that something is right."

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