

Hazards for both sides when politicians court pastors

Adelle M. Banks Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Jun. 3, 2008

Mitt Romney and his Mormon faith. Mike Huckabee and his "Christian leader" ads. John McCain and John Hagee. Hillary Clinton and her "prayer warriors." Barack Obama and Jeremiah Wright.

To put it mildly, the 2008 election has featured an extraordinary emphasis on religion.

"There's been more religious ferment in this election than any since 1960," said Ralph Reed, the GOP strategist who helped build the Christian Coalition in the 1990s, "and I don't expect that to come to an end."

But the past couple of weeks have demonstrated -- to a degree not seen in previous elections -- that the intersection of religion and politics can be fraught with peril for pastors and politicians.

Obama, D-Ill., resigned from Trinity United Church of Christ, the Chicago congregation he's called home for 20 years, after fiery, racially-tinged sermons by the now-retired Rev. Jeremiah Wright and a visiting white Catholic priest, the Rev. Michael Pfleger.

On the other side of the aisle, McCain was forced to reject the endorsements of prominent Christian pastors Hagee, of San Antonio, and Rod Parsley of Columbus, Ohio, for their comments about Jews and Muslims.

In an age of unprecedented Internet scrutiny -- with incessant blogs, YouTube videos and online access to archived sermons -- pastors and politicians are facing a new era in American elections in which a pastoral endorsement can quickly go from a blessing to a curse.

And it's not just the politicians who are feeling the heat.

"I suspect if you were in my shoes it seems plausible at least that you wouldn't want your church experience to be a political circus," Obama told reporters May 31 just after he pulled his membership at Trinity. "I think most American people will understand that and wouldn't want to subject their church to that either."

Both sides have been burned by the extraordinary scrutiny in this year's election. It was too much for Hagee, who withdrew his endorsement of McCain and vowed to stay on the sidelines for the rest of the campaign. Parsley, meanwhile, decried how statements by religious leaders were "being transformed into political weapons by the politically vicious and misguided."

Observers say the religious foment may lead to fewer endorsements -- either those offered by pastors or ones sought by politicians.

"Clergy need to consider how it is they can endorse a candidate and still consider themselves to be prophetic," said the Rev. Romal J. Tune, president and CEO of the progressive Clergy Strategic Alliances. "Someone once said, 'A dog can't bark if he has a bone in his mouth.'"

The Rev. Jonathan Falwell, son of the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, predicts such endorsements may be on the way

out as "long-buried skeletons keep turning up in the endorsers' closets," he wrote in his weekly e-newsletter.

But why all the scrutiny? Why this year, and why these candidates?

Jim Wallis, the progressive evangelical activist who was host to Obama in 2006 for a prominent speech on religion and politics, said it was because Obama demonstrated more than a nominal interest in personal faith.

"If he were ... not a Christian, not a person of faith and attended church kind of casually and nominally like many politicians do, this wouldn't be an issue," he said.

Eric Sapp, whose consulting firm, Common Good Strategies, has helped to build networks between Democrats and people of faith, said the scrutiny of Obama's church demonstrates that his faith outreach is taken seriously by political opponents.

"They're terrified, so they're going to lash out in nasty ways," he said.

Shaun Casey, a faith adviser to the Obama campaign, said one result of this year's campaign may be that churches will be pressured to develop a more independent voice.

"Churches are going to be more reticent about taking public stands and making endorsements, across the board," said Casey, who also is a professor of ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington.

"It may force them to assert their independence, which is a good thing, theologically and politically."

Many religious leaders have lamented for months that politicians and pastors were a bit too cozy, and chastised the media for digging into what would normally be considered private issues of faith: favorite Bible verses, personal sins, what things candidates pray for.

The Rev. Welton Gaddy, president of the Washington-based Interfaith Alliance, said it's long past time to focus on "real issues."

"Obviously, neither Sen. McCain nor Sen. Obama wanted to move away from those religious leaders as long as their endorsements were helping them, but as soon as the endorsements started hurting them, then they scurried away," he said.

That doesn't mean the end of the debate on the appropriate role of religion in politics, or of politics in religion -- but maybe a different kind of debate, observers say.

"I don't think candidates can afford to hide from the role of faith in public life," said the Rev. Jennifer Butler, executive director of the progressive Washington think tank Faith in Public Life. "I think they're just going to have to engage it -- and engage it wisely."

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