

Presidents and Preachers

A Commentary

January 16, 2009

Of all the problems facing Presidents of the United States, one of the most peculiar is the difficulty they have with preachers. Barack Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright, was a prominent figure in the campaign because people who have little understanding of black preachers found it politically expedient to flood the internet with excerpts of some sermons. Now, Mr. Obama has invited Rick Warren to offer a prayer at the inaugural ceremonies, and that has sent people who don't know much about evangelical Christianity into a tizzy. And his invitation that Bishop Gene Robinson pray the Lincoln Memorial brings dismay to people who don't understand the breadth of ecumenical Christianity.

But these difficulties are only the most recent incidents in a long history of troubles that presidents have had with preachers.

Harry Truman once welcomed Billy Graham into the oval office. Afterward, when some reporters asked Mr. Graham for details of the discussion, he violated a basic principle of pastoral confidence by kneeling on the White House lawn to show how he had prayed with the President and what they had said in prayer.

John F. Kennedy had to explain the entire Roman Catholic Church to a wary America during his campaign. Then, he invited Richard Cardinal Cushing to offer the invocation at the inauguration. The Cardinal's prayer took longer than the poem Robert Frost had written for the day. Very likely, both God and the assembled human multitude were bored.

Jimmy Carter, who is probably the only truly evangelical Christian ever to have occupied the White House, had trouble with his congregation in Georgia over its refusal to admit African Americans to membership. He was likely the only president to be implicated in a church schism!

George H. W. Bush, on the eve of launching the attacks that became known as Desert Storm in Iraq, invited Billy Graham to pray with him. This time Mr. Graham was widely criticized for appearing to bless the President's military action instead of offering to go to Iraq as an evangelist and deliver a spiritual message the way a reluctant prophet named Jonah once did. After all, it was to Nineveh (near the Iraqi town of Mosul) that Jonah went, and a spiritual renewal occurred.

Ronald Reagan may have handled the preacher problem better than most. He accepted the support of the religious right's political lobby, but rarely bothered to go to church. It made things simpler to settle for the politics of religion than to mess with the spirituality of it.

Which brings me back to Mr. Obama. His church membership lapsed when he resigned from Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Congregations in the nation's capital have now made plans to recruit the first family to their pews. I hope that he and his wife choose a church for themselves and their children. I hope they have the wisdom to go to worship, go home and have lunch, discuss in the privacy of their home the content of the preacher's sermon, and tell the news media that it's nobody else's business what the first family thinks of the Sunday services.

And, as for Bishop Robinson's prayer on Sunday or Mr. Warren's opening prayer on inauguration day, they will be talking to God not to the American people. So, to anyone who is troubled by their presence, don't listen. Let the Lord handle it.