

The Faith of Sarah Palin

Written by Julian Lukins

Thursday, 01 January 2009 01:00 AM EST

She was vilified by the media, hated by pro-abortion activists and adored by many evangelical Christians. Her 2008 candidacy energized conservatives, broke tradition and made history.

SARAH PALIN WAS A LITTLE GIRL HOLDING on to her mom's hand when she first attended Wasilla Assembly of God (AG) Church in her hometown of Wasilla, Alaska. The church's founding pastor, Paul Riley, remembers the pigtailed second-grader—then Sarah Heath—coming with her mom, Sally. They established a pattern of faithful attendance that continued through Sarah's childhood and teenage years.

Every week, Riley recalls, Sarah attended Missionettes, the church's program for girls. During those formative years, Sarah learned about the Pentecostal tradition, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, divine healing and the importance of living out her faith in the world.

By the age of 12, Sarah showed depth in her personal faith, Riley told *Charisma*. "She began to have a strong desire for the Lord," he says.

One summer's day in 1976, 12-year-old Sarah waded into the chilly waters of Beaver Lake, a popular location for church camps. She had committed her life to Jesus and wanted to be baptized along with her mom and sister. Riley immersed Sarah in the lake, baptizing her in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. "I wish I could remember more about that moment," reminisces the retired pastor, now 78. "I know that she loved the Lord with all her heart."

At that moment, though, no one, including Riley, had any inkling of what the future held for the small-town Alaskan girl.

After her baptism, Sarah continued to attend Wasilla AG, growing in her faith and singing in the choir, Riley recalls. "I know that she did receive an experience of the Holy Spirit," he told *Charisma*,

"and that she received a calling on her life." That spiritual turning point came when Sarah's youth pastor told her: "You are called by God for a purpose." Years later, Palin confided that the

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pastor's words were etched on her mind.

Last June, Palin spoke fondly of her years growing up in Wasilla AG when she appeared at a ceremony for graduating ministry students. "It was so cool growing up in this church and getting saved here, getting baptized by Pastor Riley ... my whole family getting baptized," she told the congregation, just two months before her vice presidential nomination.

Speaking to the ministry graduates, 44-year-old Palin said: "Just be amazed ... the umbrella of this church here, where God is going to send you from this church. Believe me, I know what I am saying, where God has sent me from underneath the umbrella of this church."

As she continued, Palin spoke of a "spirit of prophecy ... a spirit of revelation" that would "bubble over." Then, she told the ministry students: "Thank you so much for dedicating your lives to Jesus Christ."

Pentecostal Underpinnings

Within hours of Palin's nomination as the Republican vice presidential candidate, the video of her 10-minute address at Wasilla AG was doing the rounds on the Internet. News reporters immediately picked up on Palin's plea to pray for those serving in the military: "Our national leaders are sending them out on a task that is from God," Palin told the congregation. "That's what we have to make sure we are praying for, that there is a plan, and that plan is God's plan."

Suddenly, in the media frenzy that followed her nomination, every church Palin had attended came under scrutiny. Eager to unearth controversy, reporters probed into the Charismatic practices at Wasilla AG, especially the experience of speaking in tongues, which commentators often presented as bizarre.

"I don't know if [Palin] has ever spoken in tongues," Riley told *Charisma*. "I know she is a very strong Christian."

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In the video, Palin quips about the Charismatic-style worship she experienced at Wasilla AG. She tells the congregation that she jokingly reassured the pastor of another church: "I grew up at Wasilla Assembly of God. ... Nothing freaks me out about [your] worship service!"

Following the vice-presidential nod, though, the McCain campaign seemed perplexed by the media attention directed at Palin's Pentecostal roots. Campaign staff told reporters that Palin—who stopped attending Wasilla AG in 2002—did not consider herself to be a Pentecostal.

In fact, since 2002, Palin has attended several different churches—nondenominational evangelical *and* Charismatic—in Wasilla and in Juneau, her base as Alaska governor. Most recently, when at home, she has attended Wasilla Bible Church, a nondenominational evangelical congregation with an emphasis on the Word, prayer and—according to the church Web site—fostering a close relationship with God.

How deep do Palin's Pentecostal convictions go?

"I think it's important to recognize how [Palin] herself answers questions like this," says Michael Leahy, author of *What Does Sarah Palin Believe?* (Harpeth River Press). "She is pretty clear in stating that she does not belong to any particular denomination but is a Bible-believing Christian. I don't think there is any evidence that she places the same emphasis on the Charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit that some members of the Pentecostal tradition do. On these matters, [Palin] is very private in her thoughts."

Former pastor Riley has no doubt about the authenticity of her spiritual walk. Asked if he feels God's hand is upon Palin's life, Riley responds: "Yes, I very definitely do."

Other church leaders in Alaska who know Palin or have known her in the past attest to the genuineness of her faith.

Ted Boatsman was a youth pastor at Wasilla AG 31 years ago and remembers Palin as a young teenager in the church. "It was a very active youth group, and she was with the junior

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high," he recalls. "I remember this very nice, impressive young lady ... one you just enjoyed being around. She had a grounded sense of God."

That "grounded" faith continues today, Boatsman says, as is evidenced by her words and actions. Boatsman, who went on to become district superintendent for the Assemblies of God in Alaska, told *Charisma* that last April Gov. Palin attended the denominational banquet.

"She shared a little bit about her faith and some of the issues she was going through," he recalls. "We were thrilled to be able to pray with her. She seemed very comfortable with that and she said, 'I could always use your prayers.' I asked the Lord to protect her and keep His hand upon her."

Boatsman says Palin's faith is real. "Her faith is very consistent, and she does not go off on tangents," he says. "She has taken her honesty and lack of arrogance and turned them into real strengths. She's the same person now as when she was Wasilla's mayor. She treats people just the same ... and she is completely comfortable around prayer."

David Pepper, pastor of the 1,500-member Church on the Rock in Wasilla, told *Charisma* that Palin was a regular attendee at the Charismatic church in 2005, before she ran for the position of Alaska's governor.

"My take is that she is a Spirit-filled believer," 41-year-old Pepper says. "She was very comfortable in the environment of our church." That environment, Pepper explains, sometimes involves dancing before the Lord and other Charismatic expressions of worship. "She still comes here occasionally," he added.

Pepper grew up in Wasilla and remembers Palin as a senior in high school when he was a freshman. "I'd say she is very genuine, very authentic, and her values resonate with so many of us," he says.

Pepper told *Charisma* that although Palin did not teach a Sunday School class or lead a Bible study, he believed she was involved in ministry "beyond being just an attender," although he did

not elaborate.

"I believe there is definitely a sense of destiny over her life," Pepper says of Palin. Taking a line from the biblical story of Esther, Pepper adds: "There's a sense that she is here for such a time as this."

A Modern-Day Esther?

Palin's sudden appearance on the national stage during the campaign excited many evangelicals who viewed her as a present-day Esther—hand-picked by God for "such a time as this." The comparison between Palin and Esther—the Old Testament queen chosen by God to save the Jews from genocide—was made by several church leaders interviewed by *Charisma*.

Prophetic minister Barbara Yoder, senior pastor of Shekinah Christian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, says: "I believe this is a time of incredible breakthrough for women. I am simple enough to believe that we don't know everything about the way God moves and that [Palin] just might be an Esther."

Mark Arnold, a Charismatic pastor in Hamilton, Ohio, would have to agree. In fact, he felt the Holy Spirit had given him a message for Palin about being an Esther, but he had no idea how he would deliver it. His opportunity came at a McCain-Palin campaign stop in Ohio last September. Incredibly, Arnold found himself just feet away from Palin and McCain at the podium after being asked to escort a group of Boy Scouts to the front—even though he was not a Boy Scout leader.

What happened next was remarkable. "[Palin] was on her knees, hugging a lady who had lost her son in Iraq," Arnold told *Charisma*. "She spun around, looking right at me, and I told her: 'God wants me to tell you that you are a present-day Esther.' She began to cry and shake my hand in an affirming way. She said, 'Yes, I receive that. ... Please keep praying for me,'" says 47-year-old Arnold.

Barbara Wentroble, founder of International Breakthrough Ministries, describes Palin as "a

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picture of what God is doing with Christian women" as He calls them to positions of influence. "We need Christian women to make a bold stand for righteousness," she says.

Others point to Palin as a woman of prayer.

Mary Glazier heads an Alaska-based prayer ministry called Windwalkers International. *Charisma* caught up with her on her way to a prayer meeting in Anchorage, the purpose of which was to pray specifically for Palin. This is nothing new, according to Glazier. "We actually began to pray for [Palin] before she became mayor of Wasilla," Glazier says. "We felt then that she was the one God had selected."

For several years, Glazier and other members of Windwalkers have prayed for Palin regularly—first when she was the mayor, then when she was the governor of Alaska, and when she was a vice presidential candidate. Last spring, Palin called Glazier and asked her to pray with her over the phone, and they met at the governor's prayer breakfast.

"She asked me to pray with her for wisdom and direction," Glazier recalls. "I sensed a real heart of surrender to the will of God in her. God often chooses the least likely people to be at the forefront, and I do believe that God has equipped [Palin] for this hour."

Glazier told *Charisma* that members of Windwalkers had received words of knowledge about Palin being "called to impact the nation." At that point, they had no idea she would be running for the office of vice president of the United States.

Palin's public prayer life in the Pentecostal arena caused a stir when a video surfaced that showed her being prayed over by a Kenyan bishop. In the video, Bishop Thomas Muthee is seen laying hands on Palin in 2004 and asking God to protect her from "every form of witchcraft." Liberal commentators and bloggers described the video as "terrifying" and claimed it made Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's controversial ex-pastor, appear "pretty mainstream" in comparison.

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The episode reinforced the fact that Palin's faith, and Pentecostalism especially, is at best misunderstood and at worst deliberately ridiculed by a large segment of the media.

A Bright Future

Palin certainly needed prayer warriors during the grueling months leading up to Election Day. She was vilified by angry abortion activists (one blogger wrote that Palin's son Trig probably wished he had been aborted), and voters criticized her for using GOP funds to buy a \$150,000 campaign wardrobe.

She was also torpedoed by journalists. The *New York Times* admitted after the election that a report of Palin's alleged ignorance of African geography was traced to a policy adviser who does not exist.

Many voters turned against Palin because of her pro-life stance, her eagerness to drill for Alaskan oil or her embarrassing interview in September with Katie Couric of CBS. Some evangelical leaders also opposed her, including theologian John Piper—who chastised Palin because he believed she neglected her domestic role.

The question in the minds of millions today is obvious: Where is Palin's political career headed? For now she will remain Alaska's governor, but her name has been floated as a possible GOP nominee for president in 2012. She had considered running in a special election to replace U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska—who was convicted of ethics violations—but he was defeated by his Democratic opponent.

Biographer Joe Hilley says Palin's faith is intertwined with every aspect of her life—so her faith will determine her future.

"[Palin's] commitment to Christ forms the core of what I refer to as her moral center," says Hilley, author of *Sarah Palin: A New Kind of Leader* (Zondervan). "Around that core are three basic beliefs: the authority of Scripture, a clear sense of justice and an unavoidable ethic of personal responsibility."

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Hilley told *Charisma* that Palin's relationship with Jesus is an integral part of who she is. "One could not adequately define her commitment to Christ without including family and politics, nor could one define her political life without including her relationship to God," he says.

Moreover, some black and Hispanic Charismatic leaders say Palin's passionate faith appeals to minorities in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.

"It's huge," says Bishop Harry Jackson, pastor of the 3,000-member Hope Christian Church near Washington, D.C. "[Palin's rise] marks the fact that Charismatics have become mainstream." And even though McCain lost the election, Palin's candidacy was "a watershed moment for our movement," Jackson adds.

California-based Sam Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, told *Charisma*: "Hispanic Pentecostals are excited about Palin. ... She resonates with us. She understands what it is to have a Charismatic experience."

Describing Palin as a "kindred spirit," Rodriguez says many Hispanics identified with the news that Palin's 17-year-old unmarried daughter was pregnant. "We understood her journey," Rodriguez says. "We identify with what she's going through."

Palin herself told journalists after the election that she's looking for divine direction. In an interview with Larry King on CNN in November, she said her life is in God's hands.

"If He's got open doors for me that I believe are in our state's best interest, the nation's best interest, I'm going to go through those doors."

Certainly, those who know Palin best believe she has the resolve—and the faith—to go as far as God ordains.

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Julian Lukins is a writer based in Sequim, Washington, and a former daily newspaper reporter in the U.K.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: To read an excerpt from the biography *Sarah Palin: A New Kind of Leader* [click here](#).

The Unborn Still Cry Out for Justice

How should pro-life Christians view the 2008 election? By Lou Engle

Many people in America, including some of my best friends, would probably not agree with what I say here. Most have been conciliatory regarding the results of the recent presidential election and have counseled unity and peace. But I stand by the words of Dutch politician, journalist and theologian Abraham Kuyper: "When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling, and peace has become sin; you must, at the price of dearest peace, lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy, with all the fire of your faith."

I have not been afforded the option of debating politics and reason around election results. Five

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years ago while I was reading the biography of British statesman William Wilberforce, God supernaturally apprehended me and called me to raise up a prayer movement for the ending of abortion, and I am under divine restraint to obey that commission.

I understand my friends' conciliatory responses, but when I consider that 50 million babies have been killed since the ruling handed down in *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion and that the incoming president plans to ensure the ongoing legality of this march of death, I cannot live in peace. It is easy to counsel peace when you are not the object of the abortionist's forceps and scalpel. But for me, peace with the legal killing of unborn children becomes sin, and battle is my calling.

So how do we wage the war against abortion in our nation?

We must follow the pattern of revolution of the prophet Elijah. First, carrying a spirit of love, not hate, we must be exceedingly zealous for the Lord. We must allow the crisis to drive us to desperation for God and His purposes. We must shake off materialistic slumber. The future of our children and our society is at stake.

Second, we must think generationally. It became obvious to me during this election that we have lost the next generation to moral relativity.

It took Elijah's revolution two generations to overthrow the reign of Baal-worshippers Ahab and Jezebel. We must actively train a new generation of leadership and not entrust the discipleship of our sons and daughters to the morally relativistic professors in our Christian universities. We must raise them in the furnaces of prayer and fasting. We must anoint a generation of Elishas.

Third, we must let this election be a call to prayer and fasting such as we have never seen. Abortion is a spiritual battle. The blood of babies is not another socio-political issue. Blood fuels the demonic realm, and before heaven it demands a day of reckoning. We must have a spiritual awakening to turn the hearts of this nation—and I believe we will have it if we pray.

As my friend Allen Hood prophesied, "Let it be said that in the days of the rule of President

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Obama, stadiums were filled with prayer and fasting." We must raise up a grass roots prayer and activism movement among the young. [Bound4LIFE](#) is a movement we launched 4 years ago that is spreading across the country carrying this youth mantle for the ending of abortion.

We must pray for President-elect Barack Obama. He is not our enemy. My heart has been going out to him in prayer because racism is raising its ugly head, and he has received many death threats.

Pray for his protection. Pray that God would give him wisdom. If God could change Nebuchadnezzar by haunting him with dreams, He can change Obama. Our mandate is not to curse but to pray for those in authority (see 1 Tim. 2).

Fourth, we must return to the basic commandments of the laws of God for society to flourish. Our pulpits must preach them and train a generation to vote according to them. God's remedy to the social decline in Malachi's time was first of all remembering the law of Moses.

Fifth, men must stretch themselves out in fasting and prayer over their "dead children" and raise them from the dead. The book of Malachi declares that Elijah will come and turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. The church must arise with an explosion of adoptions.

Today, homosexual couples are adopting thousands of children. This is their time and their moment, they believe. Who wants the babies more in America? The pro-life movement must take this on as their main mandate. Every church must adopt a Crisis Pregnancy Center. We must fuel the compassion movement with our finances by raising up pregnant mothers' homes.

Finally, we must speak out for righteousness. We must preach it, pray it, prophesy it, praise it and print it until the forces of hell cannot hold back the Word of life.

Of his God-given mandates Wilberforce declared, "God has set before me two great objectives, the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of morals."

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God has set before me two great objectives as well: "God, end abortion, and send revival to America." Let this be the battle cry of the Pro-Life Movement in America today.

Lou Engle is founder of The Cause USA and co-founder of TheCall, an international prayer movement. To read a longer version of this column online, [click here](#).