

Palin nomination offers peek at Pentecostals: Messages from pulpit not atypical

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The blogosphere was abuzz with sermon snippets from Pentecostal and charismatic churches once attended by GOP vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin. In them, pastors declare that people who die without Christ “have a horrible, horrible surprise” awaiting them and refer to America as a “Christian nation.”

Such views might strike some as offensive, even radical, but they’re not atypical for a Pentecostal congregation, experts say.

And just as coverage of Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama’s fiery former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, opened a window into some black churches, Palin’s candidacy introduces many Americans to the conservative theology of Pentecostalism.

“The idea that everyone must be saved, even Jews, that’s pretty commonly believed among Pentecostals,” said Vinson Synan, dean emeritus of Regent University School of Divinity in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Though Palin currently attends Wasilla Bible Church, a nondenominational evangelical church, and though her campaign does not identify her as a Pentecostal, she’s captured on video at a June appearance before young ministry graduates at Wasilla Assembly of God in her Alaska hometown, saying “it was so cool growing up in this church and getting saved here.”

She also said that “God’s will has to be done” in building a natural gas pipeline in the state, and that government functions won’t “do any good if the people of Alaska’s heart isn’t right with God.”

[The *New York Times* reported September 6 that the Palins left the Assembly of God congregation in 2002 because, according to a longtime friend of Sarah Palin, the

family felt the Pentecostal ministry was “too extreme.”]

Pentecostals believe in manifestations of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, healing and prophecy.

“There would be mainstream Protestants and Catholics who would be put off by speaking in tongues and healing and some radical evangelists, Jimmy Swaggart types,” said Synan. “But the Assemblies of God is a pretty straight-laced, conservative evangelical Pentecostal church. They’re not given too much to extremes. . . . The public perceptions are that Pentecostals are kind of nuts and off the wall, and yet you can see they’ve produced some leadership.”

Both former attorney general John Ashcroft and Reagan-era interior secretary James Watt have been Assemblies of God members. Leah Daughtry, the CEO of the Democratic National Convention Committee, and Joshua DuBois, the religious outreach director for Obama’s campaign, are both ministers with smaller Pentecostal churches.

Harper’s Magazine and other outlets have featured tidbits of sermons from churches that Palin has attended. *Harper’s* online edition quoted Mike Rose, pastor of Juneau Christian Center, an Assemblies of God congregation where Palin has worshiped occasionally, as saying: “Those that die without Christ have a horrible, horrible surprise.”

Rose said excerpts from his remarks miss the full picture of sermons that focus more on the love of God. “To sort of reduce that message to a couple of sound bites about hell or whatever is to mischaracterize who we are and the kind of message that we present on a daily basis,” he said in an interview.

Harper’s also quoted Pastor David Pepper of the Church on the Rock, a charismatic church that Palin attended in Wasilla before running for governor, as saying: “The purpose for the United States is . . . to glorify God. This nation is a Christian nation.”

In his defense, Pepper cited quotes from the nation’s founders that link Christian principles to U.S. government. “I think I stand in good company, and I believe that because we have been a Christian nation is the reason we have the freedom of worship and freedom of religion,” he said in an e-mailed response. -*Religion News Service*