Separation of prophet and president

By Steve Thorngate
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I attended worship this past Sunday at a racially diverse DC church with a rich history of civil rights activism. Two days before Barack Obama's inauguration, I wasn't surprised to find the service dominated by joyful anticipation.

But even with my church-and-state radar dialed down to "Oh well, it's an extraordinary occasion," I almost fell out of the pew when I heard Obama not only equated with Martin Luther King but characterized, from the pulpit, as "God's prophet."

We all know how to critique such statements: prophets and politicians are in mutually exclusive lines of work, and politicians categorically do not lead social movements. King knew this, so he never ran for public office. Obama knows it too—so he constantly reminds people to look elsewhere for such leadership. His role in concrete civil rights and social justice gains will be more like President Johnson's than King's. And his symbolic achievement follows on not King's so much as Thurgood Marshall's and Colin Powell's.

I don't think anyone I worshiped with on Sunday would disagree. What's fascinating is not that the King-Obama comparisons fall short so much as that we *know* they do but find them irresistible anyway. Sometimes this leads to unrealistic expectations, to imagining that a president might truly act like a prophet. But as for the symbolism, its logical shortcomings and our theological misgivings are hardly enough to strip it of its power.

Tuesday on the National Mall, I felt this power even as I raised an eyebrow at the spectacle. It frustrates me that we baptize such occasions via public prayers (a tradition that began with FDR, for the not-so-noble purpose of political damage control). Yet Joseph Lowery's benediction

moved me beyond words. The benediction slot in the template may be inappropriate, but the speaker and the words themselves seemed profoundly appropriate.

As for the invocation, I appreciated Rick Warren's gestures toward inclusivity. But then he launched into the Lord's Prayer, drawing explicit lines in the crowd. People naturally recited it with him, and as a Christian it felt strange to stay silent. But it also seemed rude to say the prayer among people who don't know or believe it. I ended up chiming in on every other phrase or so—the very image of ambivalence.

Though we try, it isn't actually all that easy to separate our spiritual hopes from our political ones—at least not for those of us who believe that God's kingdom is rooted in justice on earth. And it would be unimaginable to witness Obama's rise to power without thinking of King. The comparison's far from perfect, yet we know that King's leadership paved the way for the first black president. What would it mean for us to rejoice in this but somehow stop short of praising God for it? And would this be any less theologically troublesome than calling Obama "God's prophet"?

Several signs and t-shirts on the mall said, "Yes we DID," a derivation that would make Cesar Chavez squirm—because the "can" of organizing is never past-tense, the work never done (least of all after a change of state power). Yet I was encouraged at the moment just after Obama took the oath of office. Everyone went wild, clapping and cheering and raising their cameras. But they didn't focus on the Capitol steps or the video screen, looking for a distant or twice-mediated relic of God's just-annointed prophet.

Instead, people turned around to photograph the crowd behind them—the people who won this landmark election and will continue working for change, who are the fruit of our first community-organizer president's efforts. A group that includes many who seek to be Christ's hands and feet in the world.