

President Obama and the Tale of Two American Pastors

Patrick Scriven January 22, 2013 [Communications](#), [Conversation](#)



Screen capture of a Facebook post by Mark Driscoll, founding pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington.

By Patrick Scriven, Director of Communications, Young People's Ministries

One pastor offered the nation's gratitude.

The Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, delivered [words of thanks](#) to President Obama during his sermon at the National Prayer Service, a part of the inaugural celebration this week. He extended this thanks to all those serving in the administration, noting that our leaders are more often the target of our criticism than out praise.



Rev. Adam Hamilton preaching at the Inaugural Prayer Service. Click for C-SPAN video of the event

The rest of Hamilton’s sermon focused on three leadership principles he discerned from the life of Moses. He noted that Moses had humility and courageous compassion for the marginalized and oppressed, a vision that could compel the grumbling Israelites through the hard days of wandering, and a deep and compelling faith in God that could sustain him.

On this second principle of vision, Hamilton offered some words of challenge to the President, “we’re in need of a new common national vision”, suggesting that Americans struggled in part because of a lack of anything compelling and unifying. He said, “God has given you a unique [gift](#) Mr. President. Unlike any other president we’ve ever had, you have the ability to cast a vision and inspire people, you should have been a preacher.”

A second pastor offered a divisive prayer.

Mark Driscoll, the founding pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, posted these words to his Facebook fan page:

Praying for our president, who today will place his hand on a Bible he does not believe to take an oath to a God he likely does not know.(1)”

As of this writing the post has been ‘liked’ 9,000+ times with over 3,000 comments ranging from support to strong disagreement.

While one might argue against making too much out of such a small quote, it would also be a mistake to assume the post was casually offered. Driscoll and the communications team at Mars Hill Church set the standard for social media savvy in the religious community, capitalizing on their founder’s preference for strong, often polarizing, positions on a variety of issues. For example, days after the tragedy at Newtown, Driscoll took to his blog to use the shooting as an opportunity to critique the President’s position on [abortion](#) (2).

Driscoll's post is best understood as another example of the 'Obama is not a real Christian meme' that has circulated alongside the 'Obama is not a real American meme' since he first ran for office in 2008. Public comments by politicians like Rick Santorum and evangelical leaders like Franklin Graham have repeatedly suggested that the "President is not a Christian, not the right kind of Christian, or an outright Muslim (3)." Despite the well-chronicled personal and political failings of previous presidents, it is very interesting to ponder why these kind of attacks surface repeatedly from mouths like Driscoll's.

Hamilton's words and ministry truly offer an interesting contrast to those of Mark Driscoll's. Both men have been incredibly successful in building their churches and have effectively extended their ministry to others through publishing, online engagement, and leadership seminars. But they really couldn't be farther apart in temperament or in how they believe God works in people's lives.

Though a convert to the tradition, in many ways Hamilton is the consummate United Methodist expressing a moderate Wesleyan theology. Because of this, when he speaks to the President he recognizes another person on the journey, even though they may live in very different worlds. This is why the first words out of his mouth are words of gratitude and it is also why he can challenge the President on the point of vision without words of fiery condemnation.

Driscoll, in a similar fashion, is representative of his theological tradition, taken to the extreme as he has a tendency. His understanding of Calvinism makes it much easier to see others with different stands (i.e., abortion, gay rights, etc.) and render a quick judgment as to whether that person might be within his tribe or not. We might notice this same tendency in some of the political rhetoric that is lobbed from both sides of the proverbial aisle. I certainly may be wrong about this, but frankly, this is one of the more generous explanations I could imagine for his caustic post deriding the beliefs of our President.

The moral of this story? Our theology matters.

Theology has the power to both limit and open up the way we see the world and engage with others. Theology is story. On this day, I'm thankful for one pastor who portrayed a different way of being a Christian while reminding us that God's story is big enough for all.

Submitted by



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