

# 2nd Opinion: Altogether now: 1, 2, 3 ... pray

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At the first inauguration of George W. Bush as president, Franklin Graham raised eyebrows by using an edgy word in his prayer.

“May this be the beginning of a new dawn for America as we humble ourselves before you and acknowledge you alone as our Lord, our Savior and our Redeemer,” said Graham, the fiery son of evangelist Billy Graham. “We pray this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Four years later, the word showed up again.

“Now, unto you, O God, the One who always has been and always will be, the one King of kings and the true power broker, we glorify and honor you,” said Kirbyjon Caldwell of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston. “Respecting persons of all faiths, I humbly submit this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Scholars who keep watch over the rites of American civil religion took note of the firestorms caused by these prayers. Clearly, it was becoming dangerous to use the J-word—the name of Jesus—in the public square.

But it’s old hat for Republicans to use explicit God-talk. This year, Sen. Barack Obama and his team went out of the way to invite progressive and even mainstream evangelicals to the Democratic National Convention—including taking a turn at the podium. This was cutting-edge prayer in an age of theological tolerance.

One lesser-known voice backed out at the last moment—Cameron Strang,

the 32-year-old editor of Relevant magazine and son of publishing magnate Steven Strang of Charisma magazine. Nevertheless, Strang the younger was willing to arrange for a rising star to take his place—Donald Miller, author of the book *Blue Like Jazz*.

Miller ended his prayer with a call for unity within diversity, but also found a way to say “Jesus” without causing trouble.

“God, we know that you are good. Thank You for blessing us in so many ways as Americans,” Miller said. “I make these requests in the name of your Son, Jesus, who gave his own life against the forces of injustice. ... Amen.”

The key was that Miller stressed the word “I,” making sure that his listeners knew he was claiming this was his own prayer—not asking them to share his embrace of the second person of the Christian Trinity.

Still, when it comes to church-state strategy, the most groundbreaking prayer was offered by Joel Hunter of the giant Northland Church near Orlando—especially since his benediction ended the mile-high rally that included Obama’s acceptance speech.

A self-identified “pro-life Republican,” the preacher offered a conventional prayer that included appeals on behalf of infants, children, the poor, the persecuted and those who are enslaved, as well as for peace and for the environment. Then, at the end, Hunter paused to interject a unique “closing instruction.”

“I want to personalize this,” he said. “I want this to be a participatory prayer. And so, therefore, because we are in a country that is still welcoming all faiths, I would like all of us to close this prayer in the way your faith tradition would close your prayer. So, on the count of three, I want all of you to end this prayer, your prayer, the way you usually end prayer. You ready? One, two, three.”

Hunter, on his own behalf, spoke into the microphone: “In Jesus’ name, Amen.” Meanwhile, 80,000 or so other people were free to name their own God or gods.

After fielding questions about his actions, the pastor stressed that it would be “taking the Lord’s name in vain” if he created confusion in such a setting.

The goal was ensure that participants did not believe they were being asked to accept a prayer that forced them to “compromise their core beliefs.”

Thus, “I did not ask people to pray to another god; I asked them to finish a prayer according to their faith tradition,” Hunter argued on his church’s website. “This may be a small point linguistically, but it is a huge point theologically. ...

“As you may imagine, I prayed long and hard before feeling like God had given me the precise words for this prayer. I believe that he in his sovereign way will use it to bring people to himself.”

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