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## Preacher-President

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## Preacher-President

Who was the only president who had served as an ordained minister?

With all the talk about the separation of church and state, it will probably surprise many Americans to learn that there was a preacher who served as president of the United States. James Abram Garfield (1831-1881) began sermonizing when he was 21 years old, well before he became president. One of the finest orators of his day, he is sometimes regarded as America's "preacher-president."



Garfield, also known as a log cabin president, had not been reared in a particularly pious household. Although he attended a sectarian school -- the Baptist Geauga Academy -- he did not have a transformative religious experience until he was 18 years old. Dissatisfied with his life -- sensing, as he put it, that there was "sleeping thunder in my soul" -- he was drawn in the winter of 1850 to a Disciple camp meeting in Ohio, scene of one of the frontier's last Great Awakenings; the next day, March 4, 1850, he was baptised by immersion in the ice-cold waters of the Chagrin River. For a considerable time thereafter, Garfield possessed all the passion of a true believer, embracing Disciple doctrines while holding at arm's length all other Christian sects from Methodism and Presbyterianism to Roman Catholicism, which he believed was thoroughly corrupted. Like other Disciples, Garfield was wary of politics and patriotism. As biographer Allan Peskin observes, "Each July 4th, while his neighbors were celebrating with patriotic frenzy, Garfield piously withdrew into prayer, puzzled that so many could celebrate independence while still slaves to their appetites and passions."<sup>[1]</sup>

At college, one of his classmates predicted, "I suppose he will be a preacher, and if so he will be a superior one."<sup>[2]</sup> Indeed, Garfield helped pay his way through college by preaching. Here is how Allan Peskin describes the future president's forays to the front of the church:

*Preoccupied though he was with the literature of pagan antiquity, Garfield did not neglect his Christian duty. In the spring of 1853 he began to preach at neighboring churches. Garfield approached his first full-length sermon in a cold sweat of anxiety. By the end of the year, however, he was preaching almost every Sunday, and receiving a gold dollar for each sermon.<sup>[3]</sup>*

Garfield's most famous preaching came on the day after Good Friday, 1865, hours after President Abraham Lincoln had been shot. By that point in his career a Civil War general in the Union army, he was in New York City on a business trip when he heard the dreadful news of the assassination. Peskin writes:

*The city seethed with rumors and frightened crowds gathered in the streets for news and reassurance. They were in an ugly mood. According to "a distinguished public man, who was an eyewitness to the exciting scene," fifty thousand people were crammed in the Wall Street area ready to lynch suspected Southern sympathizers. The mob had just about decided to wreak its vengeance on the office of the Copperhead newspaper *The World* when a figure appeared on the balcony of the customhouse holding a small flag in his hand. "Fellow citizens!" he cried. "Clouds and darkness are round about Him! His pavilion is dark waters and thick clouds of the skies! Justice and judgment are the establishment of His throne! Mercy and truth shall go before His face! Fellow citizens! God reigns, and the Government at Washington still lives!"*

*According to the eye witness: "The effect was tremendous." The crowd was miraculously hushed, turning its thoughts at once from violence to a contemplation of God's eternal yet inscrutable will. It was the greatest triumph of eloquence the "public man" had ever seen, and he turned to a neighbor to ask who the orator was. "The answer came in a low whisper. 'It is General Garfield of Ohio!'"<sup>[4]</sup>*

The legend hovering about Garfield's "God reigns" sermon would persist into the twentieth century. In 1929 in McLean, Virginia, across the Potomac River from Washington, DC, a church was christened the Garfield Memorial Christian Church, commemorating "the only president who functioned as clergy while in office." The president's widow, Lucretia Garfield, even "donated \$150 and a picture of the former President to have an inset made for a window."<sup>[5]</sup>

It is interesting that a number of presidential candidates in recent decades have been "men of the cloth." The Rev. Jesse Jackson ran for president on the Democratic ticket in 1984 and 1988. The Rev. Pat Robertson ran on the Republican ticket in 1988. And the Rev. Al Sharpton ran on the Democratic ticket most recently, in 2004.

*(Question from Jennifer B. of Florence, Alabama)*

<sup>[1]</sup> Allan Peskin, *Garfield* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1999), pp. 17-20.

<sup>[2]</sup> Peskin, p. 23.

<sup>[3]</sup> Peskin, p. 28.

<sup>[4]</sup> Peskin, p. 250.

<sup>[5]</sup> <http://www.garfieldchurch.org/history.htm>