

Wright or Wrong?

The recent news reports concerning remarks by the Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. has caused concern as we progress towards electing the next president of the United States. Rev. Wright, the former pastor of Senator Barack Obama, has been criticized publicly for excerpts of his sermons, excerpts where he criticizes America's actions and treatment of oppressed and marginalized people.

Senator Obama in a speech Tuesday at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia said, he condemns, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that caused controversy. Senator Obama has taken actions against Rev. Wright similar to Senator Hillary Clinton, who distanced herself from former Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro after Ferraro made what were considered racist statements. From my perspective as a professor, scholar and practitioner of Christian preaching, I want to suggest we might understand, if not agree, with Wright's comments in a broader context.

These sound bites have led to an in depth discussion on religion in the public square, religious liberty and the separation of church and state even as some of the religious rhetoric from the left and the right have warranted reactions of condemnation. While we may debate, agree, or disagree with Rev. Wright's comments, where he chose to voice his sentiments is not foreign land. The African American church has a tradition of integrating social activism with religion. This tradition is at once both Evangelical and political. For those outside of this tradition, and unfortunately for some within, it is difficult to understand this dual purpose. However, those who are familiar with this tradition know that the African American church, historically, is an agent for social justice.

We are Evangelical because we understand Jesus Christ as primary and definitive for understanding God and what it means to experience transformation. We see the Christian scripture as our sole source and norm for the message of truth and redemption we preach. And, we are political because as African Americans we have lived in a religious and cultural environment where our spiritual salvation would be limited by other Christians to the hereafter only. We have lived as the family of God suited for heaven, even while black suffering and the unavailability to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness on earth were viewed as a contradiction that the country need not address. In the eyes of African Americans, who revere the prophetic tradition of the African American church, Dr. Wright was preaching truth to power and truth to the powerless. He was calling his congregation and America to open their eyes to the prevailing injustice in the world.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. issue a similar call in his Aug. 28, 1963, "I Have A Dream" speech. "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence," King said, "they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back

marked 'insufficient funds.'" Dr. King, in his own time, with rhetoric which seems mild today, was nevertheless often labeled as condemning America. Rev. Wright comes out of the same segregated era as Dr. King. If one considers this, they would view Rev. Wright's rhetoric, even the most inflammatory, in a different manner. This, of course, is not to assert that one would agree with the passion and claims Rev. Wright has made, but one would have to consider Rev. Wright's assessment of America's treatment toward others. When Rev. Wright proclaimed judgment on America, he spoke with the view that the world's poor and oppressed have a better knowledge and perception of God's truth, because of their experience and God's special concern for the oppressed. His sermonic expressions are rooted in the African American church tradition, which believes any truth proclaimed, should be proclaimed passionately.

The new generation of prophets does not possess the righteous indignation that Rev. Wright and other civil right preachers possess simply because we did not personally experience the injustices Rev. Wright's generation experienced during the Civil Rights movement. The fight, however, for equality, justice, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness remains at the forefront of ministry for this post-Civil Rights clergy. The goal, in the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights prophetic tradition is not to make Christianity into American nationalism. The goal is to proclaim a message of hope, transformation, community, and the ability to live peacefully with others within a democratic society, where people have different positions. But in the best of this tradition, we seek to challenge the powerful, raise awareness of suffering, and stand up for the marginalized and oppressed. Any attempt at respectful rhetoric is never a sufficient reason to be rendered silent to the injustices that have yet to be corrected in this society.

Rev. Wright is no longer serving on Senator Obama's African American Religious Leadership Committee. Rep. Ferraro is no longer serving on Senator Clinton's finance committee as honorary New York Leadership Council Chair. We have larger issues to consider, that affect all Americans, regardless of gender, race or religion: a war going on in Iraq, the need for broad access to healthcare, the failure of our public schools, decreasing wages and increasing job exportation. While latest events are unfortunate and point to deep issues that need to be addressed, it is time to move on in our struggle for righteousness, which will truly make America one nation, under God ... with liberty and justice for all!

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