



Preachers and Politicians

When Bill Moyers asked Reverend Jeremiah Wright what he thought when Senator Barak Obama repudiated his preaching, he said, "Obama is a politician. He will do what a politician has to do. I am a preacher, and I will do what a preacher has to do."

That response is packed with meaning and history that begs for our reflection. My guess is that millions of Americans, missing that reflection, have misunderstood Reverend Wright and his message.

First they have missed how the media coverage distorted his message. For example, the internet transcripts of his speech (www.elections.foxnews.com/2008/04/28/transcript-rev-wright-at-the-national-press-club/) and Q&A at the National Press Club make it clear that Reverend Wright did not claim the government had invented AIDS, nor did he endorse the views of Louis Farrakhan.

To be sure, the transcript shows that inflammatory questions provoked belligerent, aggressive responses. But overall the conversation must have been too subtle for the journalists to report accurately, since Wright repeatedly offered important distinctions that never made it into the coverage. He said, for example, that he believed our government capable of exploiting AIDS, and that Farrakhan is not his enemy, but is an influential public figure for the black community.

The main point of his remarks, lost in that coverage, was that he regarded the controversy as an attack, not on him, but on the black church. And here is a second opportunity for misunderstanding.

Millions of Americans have never faced the legacy of black preaching which Wright claims heir to. This is a legacy of harsh prophetic language designed to kindle hope, courage, and even righteous anger in its oppressed (originally enslaved) listeners.

In this regard, Wright is hardly unique; in fact, he is typical of hundreds and thousands of black preachers--a major point that has been widely overlooked or even denied.

For example, a commentator on National Public Radio claimed that Wright's preaching did not resemble Martin Luther King's, who supposedly delivered his message employing only the bright, upbeat, inspirational tones of his "I Have a Dream" speech.

Not so.

We need only revisit King's April, 1967 speech at Riverside church in New York City, where he made public his controversial opposition to the war in Vietnam.

From the outset, King made it clear that he feared for America's very salvation:

If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read: Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over.

Make no mistake, the alternative to being saved is being damned--and King saw us on that brink, just like Wright did. Nor did King shrink from saying why. For (just like Wright) he saw America risking its damnation by the killing of innocent life. Here is how he depicted the suffering of the Vietnamese:

They watch as we poison their water, as we kill a million acres of their crops...They wander into the hospitals with at least twenty casualties from American firepower for one Vietcong-inflicted injury. So far we may have killed a million of them, mostly children.

He even compared our behavior to the Nazis:

What do they think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe?

He claimed that America would prove "we have no honorable intentions in Vietnam" unless it repented and changed course "to atone for our sins and errors in Vietnam" rather than prolonging our "disgraceful commitment" by persisting "in its perverse ways."

Later he commented that we were "approaching spiritual death" because we continued to "worship the god of hate." He offered a dire prediction to those who remained deaf to his warnings:

If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

Memories are short, so we may forget that King's speech provoked horrified rejection even among blacks, who feared the entire civil rights movement would now be labeled "unpatriotic." But King knew that his job as preacher was to speak truth to power. I'm convinced Jeremiah Wright holds the same conviction.

Finally, people may misunderstand that even such black preaching is itself heir to an older, broader tradition: the prophetic tradition in preaching that dates from the time of Moses.

That tradition is reflected in the rhetoric of nearly all the Hebrew prophets, but for Christians the central example is Jesus himself, whose rhetoric might well have led to trouble in this era of sound bites and YouTube.

Imagine the Q&A following Jesus' speech on his new movement!

One reporter asks whether Jesus' new movement is open to all, and the sound bite is: *"None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:33).*

Then someone suggests that giving up possessions might cause family tensions, and Jesus' reply (out of context) is: *"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).*

But surely (comes the follow-up question) people must be able to provide for some security--for health care, for life insurance, for death benefits? But Jesus replies: *Leave the dead to bury their own dead (Lk 9:60a)*

But then (demands another reporter) how can such a harsh movement expect to promote peace?

Suppose you that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division: The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother. (Luke 12:51-53; also see Matthew 10:34-36)

The questions become more aggressive. There are rumors (says one reporter) of cruel and unusual physical behavior among your people. Is it true that you preach self-mutilation question? And the sound bite follows:

If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee...And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Matt. 5:29–30).

You see how quickly sound-bite reporting can distort preaching of this kind?

But we should not be surprised at this clash of language. As James Darsey argued in his book *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, we inherit two kinds of public rhetoric from the ancient world: the “Hellenistic” rhetoric of the Greco-Roman culture marked by “sweetness and light,” and “Hebraic” (mostly Biblical) tradition marked by “fire and strength.” Darsey surveys examples of both from US history, and argues that “abrasive” language has always been part of our serious public speech.

But increasingly over the last generation, our national politicians have consigned “Hebraic” rhetoric to negative campaigning while “Hellenistic” rhetoric now connotes the political “high road.”

For a politician promising a new unifying politics, the prophetic rhetoric of the black church--and of the Bible, and of Jesus, and of Martin Luther King--is taboo.

(A side note: since any Pope is, by virtue of his office, both politician and preacher, we should not be surprised to find both kinds of language coming from a Pope’s mouth. Yet John XXIII believed our times called for “the language of mercy rather than condemnation,” and Vatican II followed his lead by avoiding the traditional anathemas. So papal rhetoric since Vatican II has usually been more irenic than combative.)

G.K. Chesterton once wrote that people have spent generations breeding smaller camels and making larger needles so the Jesus' harsh words about the rich getting to heaven could be more easily digested. We should not be surprised if such camel-shrinking and needle-swelling is often the work of our politicians. But preachers must continue to do what preachers do, and speak the truth even when it offends.

So while both politicians and preachers keep doing their jobs, we should do ours: *vote* for politicians, but *listen*--and listen closely--to our preachers.

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