

Progressive Religion ... Is Not an Oxymoron

By David E. Roy

One Community Alliance reader (Bill Young) made several suggestions for possible topics for this column, including a fuller look at the "pastor problems" that both presidential candidates have had. While quite different, I believe that the issues surrounding both pastors are relevant to CA readers. For Barack Obama, the pastor is, of course, Jeremiah Wright. For John McCain, the pastor is John Hagee. This month, I will tackle Wright. Next month, I will focus on Hagee's dramatic and highly unbiblical apocalyptic scheme.

My Country, Wright or Wrong

The Rev. Jeremiah Wright caused quite a stir last May, punching the air and punching holes in mainstream America's understanding of itself. The mainstream, white for the most part, is not used to hearing this level of intense energy from a preacher nor is it used to hearing a serious, biblical condemnation of its imperialistic shortcomings.

While there were also shortcomings in the pastor's approach, attitude, and motivations, I believe one of the biggest problems with his message was that all too many Christian clergy have strenuously avoided serious prophetic preaching. As a result, many Christians do not even know what prophetic preaching means. Prophetic, in this case, does not mean a supernatural ability to predict the future. It means to lay out judgment about how current evil deeds, if not stopped, will lead to outcomes that are contrary to God's aims and disastrous as well (not because God punishes evil doers, by the way).

Arguably the most central Christian message is that God loves everybody completely and without reservation (as well as all the rest of creation). This means that God seeks to promote the well-being of all. Those actions that go against this aim of universal well-being are wrong, even evil, from this perspective.

Two Modes of Divine Influence

Underlying the principles in the preceding paragraph are two distinct modes of the divine influence on the world. On the one hand, there is unconditional acceptance and love. On the other hand, there is the sacred lure to seek the well-being of others as well as self. This sacred invitation manifests itself as justice for those who are without, who are oppressed; and simultaneously as judgment against those who have and will not share and those who oppress or participate in oppression.

Unfortunately, America's Sunday morning revelations of God's Word in many Christian churches tend to focus heavily on the first mode for those present and all too often on the second mode only as it applies to those who are seen as "the others."

God loves you and God doesn't love those other bad people. (But if you behave like those other bad people, God won't love you anymore either.)

Few Christian clergy have the courage and conviction of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German-born Lutheran pastor who, though safe in the US, felt he had to return to Germany to speak out as a prophetic witness against the Nazi regime. He was locked up and executed virtually at the end of the war.

But many could be doing more to speak out vigorously against unjust wars (for some this would be all wars), against a US-led global economic system that destroys human communities and the very earth that sustains us, against solving deep and complex social problems largely through prison sentences, against ignoring and marginalizing the citizens who have the least, against an ideological approach to the application of power that ignores all contrary opinions (including both scientific and common sense).

To do so most likely would run the risk of making the preachers unpopular with the very people to whom they are preaching. So often, instead, clergy play it safe, gently chiding, barely hinting, if at all. This, obviously, is not Rev. Wright's approach. If many more of clergy had prepared the way over the last century, his message would have made far more sense. This in turn would have made his real shortcomings more obvious.

As it is, even the more intelligent articles and commentary about his various speeches and sermons seldom comprehended the fuller meaning and purpose of his words. One article in the New York Times, for example, accused him of grandiosely using big words like "hermeneutics" and sprinkling his speeches with literary quotes as though all of this was an affectation. The implication: "He's not as smart as he makes himself out to be." I don't think that is true.

In his formal addresses, he obviously was working from a written manuscript (though he spoke as though he were delivering his remarks extemporaneously). The ideas often were supported by scholarly references – even the ones that I thought were wrong (assigning left-brain functions to all whites and right-brain to all blacks, for example).

But when he responded to questions following his speech at the National Press Club, he seemed to shift into a more contentious and defensive mode, far less thoughtful. Yet even these comments should have been held in the larger context of all that he had said.

An issue that troubled many is his unwavering allegiance to Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, who has made statements that are anti-Semitic, anti-white, anti-homosexuality, among other things. This facet of Wright's presentation, while clearly important to explore, will have to be left to another time.

Why Did Wright Do This at This Time?

Another critical question is about his timing. The moderator at the National Press Club asked him just that twice. Wright's replies were defensive and cryptic and

not to the point. He answered “why” but not “why now.” He talked about people “playing the dozens” with him, as though people would know what that meant. I suspect many of those in the audience who were black would understand the reference, but I had to research it. Playing the dozens refers to a dissing contest – the “yo mama” match up. The roots go back to slavery where the deformed and the worn-down slaves would be sold by the dozens. This meant they were at the bottom of the bottom, the ultimate “dis.”

As for some of the other objections, the fact that he is dramatic, that he loves the spotlight, that he weaves a complex pattern of expression that conveys both intellect and passion – none of these are an issue for me. Many clergy love the spotlight; would anyone really want a shy, timid preacher? The drama adds to his charisma and his intelligent use of ideas is a plus.

But why he chose this time to explain to the nation who he was and what he was really trying to say is a puzzle because his message became instantly and predictably tangled up with the election campaign. While this undoubtedly increased his audience, a possible motive, it also meant that it was automatically filtered through judgments about how it impacted Obama’s candidacy – and therefore not allowed to stand more clearly on its own.

Moreover, this set the stage for Wright’s views to be shorn easily of any context and shaped into bullets fired at Obama by Foxy journalists and by his then-political opponent, Hillary Clinton. On the one hand, it is hard to believe that Wright would want his views subject to that kind of distortion; the man passionately believes he has something important to say. On the other hand, it is impossible to believe that someone as experienced as Wright would not anticipate how much of the media would use his words. This suggests the very real possibility that he was angry at Obama for distancing himself from Wright. If so, and a number of writers have come to this conclusion, this would explain the timing and the added furor that has distracted from the truth of his underlying message.

Needed: More Prophetic Preaching

Regardless, he has had his say. I have some hope that the shock of this event can increase the possibility that the rest of us who preach will feel challenged to summon up the courage to deliver prophetic sermons that can make our listeners uneasy, that confront the status quo of our nation in those areas where it needs to be confronted.

The ideals of our nation, embedded in our founding documents, are powerful, even sacred in my view. Some of the most important of these values have been seriously compromised over the last two centuries and the rate of this degradation has gradually accelerated since the end of WWII. In the past eight years, the rate of increase has been dramatic.

In our current setting, prophetic preaching becomes both dangerous and absolutely necessary. If many more pastors were to preach in this manner, Rev. Wright would begin to look and sound more normal.

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