



NATIONAL BLACK PRESBYTERIAN CAUCUS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

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The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. and the Prophetic Black Church Tradition

The role of the prophet has never been an easy one. Over and against the prevailing order of domination and exploitation the prophet is called to announce and embody the peace and justice of God's reign. Predictably, this prophetic activity engenders hostility and fierce resistance from those who are vested in the status quo-- a status quo that often masks itself with superficial politeness and gentility.

The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. was neither polite nor genteel in the sound bites that have recently caused such a firestorm. However, Dr. Wright stands squarely within the Prophetic Black Church Tradition with an authentic passion that emanates from the reality of America's history of racism and oppression. He spoke the truth. Now, this truth may be abrasive and objectionable to some, but to others it is a validation of the point of view of many African Americans and other marginalized and oppressed peoples. This point of view was forged in the fires of slavery, segregation, and discrimination that have given rise to a multitude of dissenting voices. Consider the following excerpt from Frederick Douglass' speech "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro:"

"What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy -- a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour."

To be sure, much progress has been made. Slavery has been abolished and segregation has been legally struck down. Many African Americans now have access to opportunities for improvement and advancement that were denied to our ancestors. Nevertheless, we have not yet arrived in Canaan land. The legacies of slavery, segregation, and discrimination still hamper and hinder the ability of African Americans to fully realize the abundant life that Jesus promised. Every indicator of well-being shows a widening gap between African Americans and White Americans. Senator Barack Obama brilliantly expressed some of these indicators in his recent landmark speech on race. Hopefully, his eloquent presentation will serve as a catalyst for a more accurate assessment of America's racial past and the remedies needed to correct the debilitating consequences of that shameful legacy.

The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright's ministry has effectively served as such a catalyst. As a frequent preacher and lecturer at National Black Presbyterian Caucus conventions, Dr. Wright has inspired and enlightened us about what it means to be "unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian." He has helped many of us come to grips with the fact that being black and Presbyterian is not an either/or

proposition, it is a both/and reality. Just as Dr. Wright has stood firmly with us we now stand firmly with him and the Prophetic Black Church Tradition that will continue to bear witness until indeed justice “rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

In His Service,

The Rev. Gregory J. Bentley, President
National Black Presbyterian Caucus
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)