

Response to the following question by Michael Washington, associate pastor of New Community Covenant Church in Chicago.

*What has been most surprising to you about the recent public conversation about race instigated by excerpts of the Reverend Wright's sermons and Barack Obama's speech on race?*

David, this is a hard question.

Let me start by saying how thankful I am for the conversation. It's refreshing to continue hearing words about history, ethnicity, privilege, and spirituality in the context of this political atmosphere. Also, I'll say I'm *not* surprised by the fervent passion with which folks have responded. Race has always been at the core of much our United States of American life. I mean there are housing covenants in our recent history that preclude certain folks from purchasing in certain neighborhoods! This is something we should be excited about, alarmed about. We always should have been. I'm also *not* surprised by the first layer of resistance to Reverend Wright's sermonic discourse. People generally respond to commercials, sound bites, and YouTube videos out of their experiences. If we've never experienced life in a particular place (e.g., the south side of Chicago), we aren't really capable of responding with genuineness or personal knowledge. Certain things are psychologically implausible because there's no emotional framework for us to begin understanding things within.

Part of my surprise, though, has been the guesswork we've been up to, as we've tried to figure out whose role it is to instigate public conversations about race. Is it the Senator's role? The pastor's role?

As several smart people have commented, Senator Obama is uniquely postured to respond the way he did. His life career as a black man (with a white mother and African father), experience in public service and politics, and his platform during this presidential campaign give him an audience unlike what we've seen in the political history of the United States. As a politician and public servant, it makes sense for him to use the platform he has to teach about race, justice, and history, while he reminds us—as his campaign has worked hard to do—that elections are about more than one or two issues like race or the next hot topic. Of course, I think Reverend Wright had much more responsibility as a pastor to speak about these matters.

Leaders in the church cripple their people if they don't say something (often) about how church history intersects with current experience, how theology connects with daily life. Unfortunately, the church in this country cannot deny the ubiquitous presence of racism and all its relatives. Pastor Wright would have been irresponsible as a preacher not to call this country, its government, and its people to reflect upon what the Christian text says about injustice, racism, and abuse of power.

In the black church—a term it would take me days to define, but which gets at a *tradition* more than a *local congregation*—preachers have always been responsible for speaking the truth to people. Sometimes those truths are spoken to people with power, but preachers and prophets generally speak truth to those who are disempowered, people at society's margins. Historically black folks in the United States of America have been ripped of power, resources, and benefits that have more readily been given to non-blacks. Was it ever *not* the preacher's role to speak for black people, for example, when the government oppressed them? The interesting thing, though, is that black theologians and preachers are no different than non-black ones in the charge to tell the truth.

I'm surprised by how we've disconnected the church's role in and after the New Testament and the prophet's role in the Old Testament. Those roles have always been (in no particular order) to survey the landscape of one's context and community, to responsibly exegete the text of Scripture, and to speak. Surveying one's context relates to knowing the listener, understanding and appreciating one's social location and geography, and critically discerning how place affects power, how position relates to privilege. Responsible exegesis includes devotional life for most spiritual leaders. It includes struggling with sacred words, learning language from centuries prior, and hearing the reactions of original audiences to the best of one's ability. Speaking, you know speaking. It's what Dr. Jeremiah Wright did. It's what A.W. Tozer did, along with numberless communicators that we love in our Christian heritage. It's what Paul and Peter and Jesus did.

It seems to me that we've considered the separation of church and state the same as the silence of the church relative to the state. That's a consideration that has never worked within the black world because the church historically has been the place where one is reminded of how a new kingdom/sphere/government should and will look under a Prince of Peace and Wonderful Counselor. Further, it is role that the church have taken and lived in for its full existence. Regardless of one's opinions about the content of Dr. Wright's message—content that sounds differently when one hears the full message actually—the form of his message is criticism that every preacher should be comfortable with. Indeed, people should hear that the Christian life is not about some things but not other things. The life of a follower of Jesus is about your whole life. In other words, when you follow Jesus, all of you follows. Jesus ought to influence, shape, and change how you view issues of race and power. I'm surprised that we've not debated the result of Dr. Wright's hermeneutical work and chosen instead to debate the need for such work.

As I've heard (and closed my ears to) people talking about Dr. Wright and Senator Obama, I've listened to echoes of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness that the church is a community of the unheard. Always has been. Forgetfulness that the people who follow the Way take steps after Jesus, who was tried unfairly, sentenced unfairly, crucified unfairly, and who told his disciples to take up their

crosses. Followers of Jesus tell people the truth, tell people when their practices are wrong, and we do so inside a biblical stream with folks like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Malachi. All those first testament folks spoke about and pointed to Jesus, the One whose constitution was what Christians call the Word.

I am surprised how people suggest that the church and its leaders shouldn't be a place where people are provoked to consider their neighborhoods, the systemic presence of sin, and the role of the Holy Spirit in reminding us of that sin.

Remember, church folks of all colors have witnessed to the power of God who breaks chains of oppressed people, whether those chains were based upon race, economics, education, or some other characteristic. Whether we come to the same conclusions about power and race as a Senator Obama or a Reverend Wright, I hope that we see the continuity between biblical preachers and current prophets in calling us to consider, calling us to think, and calling us to choose.

So, where do you think we should receive reminders of our best selves, Christian or not? Who should tell us to consider hard issues? How do you understand the church's growth throughout the centuries when it comes to marginalization?