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Wright's teachings are part of African-American opposition to empire

BY ADAM CLARK

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Does the fiery rhetoric of Sen. Barack Obama's former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, undermine Obama's well-crafted narrative of national reconciliation? Is it poor judgment on Obama's part to be a 20-year member of a church that preaches such a controversial, inflammatory message?

Obama's recent speech on race and politics was an attempt to quell the moral panic introduced to his presidential campaign through the latest Willie Horton stunt - the endless repetition of sound bites and video clips that caricature the ministry of a prominent African-American minister.

For a candidate who received more votes than his Democratic and Republican rivals, speaking candidly about the toxic issue of race is an unenviable task.

The speech was strategically necessary for Obama. If he wins the presidency, his oath is to the Constitution.

Wright, however, is a preacher; his oath is not to the Constitution but to the Gospel. The statements of Wright may be out of step with the presidential politics of the Obama campaign, but they are not out of step with biblical faith. The forceful denunciations of America's invasion of Iraq, her support for the unjust practices of foreign governments as well as the invocation of God's wrath for the inhumane treatment of blacks and people of color are not the crazed anti-American ranting of an old uncle, but statements about the meaning of faith in a God who upsets the powers through identifying with the poor and marginalized.

The presidential candidacy of Obama can be assessed on its own terms. But the uproar over the rhetoric of Wright is largely a result of America's unfamiliarity with the history and language of the black church. The political character of black sermons such as Wright's are not rooted in the give and take of electoral politics, they derive from biblical faith. The black church has historically identified with the minority Jewish population of the first century. They regard the Jewish population's relationship to the Roman Empire as similar to their own relationship to the American Empire. This identification has caused black Christians to make a distinction between the biblical Jesus and the American Christ. The American Christ is a product of the American



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middle class, a deity who endorses empire and converts his followers into being pro-war, pro-death penalty and anti-abortion. The biblical Jesus reveals a God who is provocative, a God who upsets the powers and is eventually rejected and crucified by them.

The language of the black church that conveys this oppositionality does not translate well into the arena of presidential politics. It was never intended to. The black church's language is the language and worldview of a people who have been at the margins of social power - a symbolic language, not a literal language. Words seldom have a one-to-one correspondence with events. Black religious language is inherently evocative, hyperbolic and impassioned - aimed more toward devotion than debate. It is intended to convey divine ecstasy and anger to parishioners, not dialogue among pundits.

To retain credibility as a political centrist, Obama's repositioning of himself in relation to his pastor is an electoral necessity. However, if his advisers continue to persuade him to condemn and distance himself from religious leaders who champion the perspectives of the black poor, he will be doing a disservice to his message of reconciliation. There can be no genuine reconciliation at the political center as it's presently constituted. Too many white Americans are unwilling to listen to the voices of poor and marginalized African-Americans on their own terms.

Anxiety and uneasiness about the speech acts of black preachers such as Wright should be replaced by anger at the events and conditions that give rise to their fire. Instead of repeating patterns that stigmatize and disqualify these voices from a dialogue on reconciliation and democracy, such voices should be partners in finding more authentic grounds for conversation.

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