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Reverend's Words Stir Debate on His Creed

Obama's Ex-Pastor To Visit D.C. Forum On Black Church

By William Wan and Hamil R. Harris
Washington Post Staff Writers
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Bobby Henry was angry when he first saw the now-famous snippets of sermons by the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. playing over and over on television. He considered the uproar over Sen. Barack Obama's former pastor an attack on a man of faith and the black church.

But he also wondered: Who is Wright, and what is the religious movement, known as black liberation theology, that shaped his ministry?

Henry, a Bowie lawyer and member of Jericho City of Praise in Landover, got some answers watching an interview with Wright that aired Friday night on PBS. It was Wright's first lengthy public discussion of the debate that flared last month over his comments, which some labeled intolerant and unpatriotic. In addition, Wright is scheduled to speak this morning in the District as part of a two-day seminar exploring the mission of the black church.

In the controversy over Wright, Obama, who is running for the Democratic presidential nomination, found himself denouncing and defending the former pastor of Trinity United Church in Chicago. The Illinois senator and his family have attended the church for 20 years.

"I really wanted to understand the context in which those remarks were made," said Henry of Wright's sermons, adding that black liberation theology is "not something I had been extremely familiar with." But after hearing Wright talk about his religious beliefs, Henry said, "that part of it resonated with me: that different cultures come to Christianity from different backgrounds and that there has to be room for that."

Wright's appearance today at the National Press Club will begin the annual Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference. The conference, named for the noted religious scholar, will bring black religious leaders from across the country to Howard University. And at the center of the discussions will be the powerful and provocative tenets of liberation theology.

Beyond the political debate over how Wright's words have affected Obama's campaign, the spotlight on Wright's sermons has sparked a lively discussion over the theology among the Washington area's large and diverse African American church communities. Some question whether black liberation theology's focus on race and oppression is relevant anymore, whether clinging to a philosophy forged in the civil rights era means holding on to past hurts. Others think it is needed now more than ever in the face of continuing discrimination, chronic unemployment and high incarceration rates among blacks.

In Friday's interview, Wright said that the terms " 'liberation theology' or 'black liberation theology' cause more problems and red flags for people who don't understand it." At its core, black liberation theology is an interpretation of Scripture as a gospel for the oppressed, identifying God and His promise of salvation with the plight of black people throughout history. It is akin to the liberation theology movement popularized in Latin America in the 1960s by Catholic priests agitating on behalf of the poor.

Wright explained that Trinity, the church where Obama said he embraced Christianity, is a place where members come "for encouragement, to go back out and make a difference in their world. To go back out and change that world, to not just talk about heaven by and by, but to get equipped and to get to know that we are not alone in this struggle, and that the struggle can make a difference . . . that we serve a God who comes into history on the side of the oppressed."

The black church has long been a sanctuary and source of support, dating to slavery, when it was one of the few places African Americans could gather. But black liberation theology wasn't crystallized until it appeared in the writings of a young black theologian named James H. Cone.

A graduate of Northwestern University's seminary in 1960s Chicago, Cone had encountered the anger of black power and the promise of the nonviolent protest movement, and like many of his generation, he was divided between the ideologies of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

After the 1968 assassination of King, he holed up for six weeks in his brother's church office in Little Rock, pouring his thoughts into a systematic approach to black theology.

"I had to write it because I felt it was white society that had killed King," Cone, 69, who teaches liberation theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, said in a recent telephone interview. "By not addressing the plight of black people, the white church had simply fallen short."

The prevalence of the theology today can't be easily measured, but traces of the movement can be seen in the style and ministry of many

black churches across denominations. Some black church leaders, however, say its relevance is waning.

"The issues that we face today are more crisis-oriented: How am I going to keep my marriage intact? How am I going to keep my home? What school am I going to put my kids in?" said the Rev. Keith Battle, who heads Zion Church in Landover. "There might be a racial undertone to the questions, but it can't just be a movement anymore about when am I going to get my 40 acres and a mule."

Battle's church still tackles issues of poverty and social justice, member Kimberly Moore said, but on a more intimate level.

Moore, 46, is not the type to attend protests or march on the government, but for the past five years, she has run a ministry that works with youths in juvenile detention centers. "Sometimes these issues are things we can affect on an individual level. It's not always about attacking the system," the Mitchellville resident said.

Bernard L. Richardson, dean of the chapel at Howard University, said many young black pastors now come out of seminaries focused on catering to parishioners' concerns about individual well-being. He is worried about the effect of what critics call a "prosperity gospel" on the larger community.

"Some churches have abandoned issues of justice entirely," Richardson said. "But Christianity's not about your material worries or even your own salvation. It's supposed to be a concern for all God's people."

That kind of concern for the poor and willingness to get involved in the political arena is what drew Makita Haynes, 34, to Union Temple Baptist Church in Southeast Washington last year. Her pastor, the Rev. Willie F. Wilson, a strong believer in liberation theology, isn't afraid to speak out on social issues, she said. "And the church is the perfect place to talk about these things, to toss around ideas and solutions about the society we live in."

The Rev. Harry Jackson Jr., who leads the multiracial Pentecostal Hope Christian Church in Beltsville, said that liberation theology might have begun as a helpful rallying cry in the civil rights era but that what is needed now is a message of reconciliation.

"You can't keep bringing up the anger of black power or black theology without a vision or plan to address those issues," he said. "There is a desire for the first time in post-civil rights history among large white churches to integrate in cities like D.C. that are predominantly black," he said.

The Rev. Tony Lee, however, says liberation theology is misunderstood.

"People have been trying to pass it off as an angry theology, something coming from the angry older generation," said Lee, 39. "But it's not about anger; it's righteous indignation that makes you want to be used by God to bring change."

His church, Community of Hope AME, started two years ago in a Temple Hills strip club. It offers HIV testing, and its members organize prayer services in high schools struggling with gang violence. Most Sundays find Lee at the pulpit, preaching about the social issues of the day.

"It doesn't make sense for me to sit in a community like this and just talk to people about personal piety," he said. "Liberation theology is still relevant because the issues -- the racism, the disparities in education, health care, employment -- they're still relevant."