

Obama caught between pulpit and politics: A politician and a parishioner

News in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

When Senator Barack Obama faced the cameras in a nationally televised speech in mid-March, he was caught between his roles as politician and parishioner, forced to condemn his pastor's words as he tried to advance his own campaign for president.

Experts on the black church say the controversial comments of Obama's former Chicago pastor, Jeremiah Wright, put Obama in an awkward and uncomfortable position. At the same time, they have given him a chance to discuss race—including the nature of the black church—with white Americans.

"The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Rev. Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour of American life occurs on Sunday morning," Obama said in his March 18 speech at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center.

Obama, who has said he found God at Trinity United Church of Christ some 20 years ago, called some of his mentor's comments "not only wrong but divisive." But he also said he could not disown Wright—who presided at his wedding and baptized his two daughters—any more than he could reject his white grandmother for her prejudicial comments.

Though his speech focused more on race than religion, Obama took pains to explain the ethos of some black churches. Church, he said, is where congregants may speak openly about racial tensions they feel can't be addressed elsewhere, and where songs and sermons reflect much of what is felt and heard in black communities.

"Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor," Obama explained. "The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the

struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.”

Some of Wright’s words, Obama said, reflect an anger and bitterness still felt within Wright’s battle-scarred generation. And Obama said such feelings should be addressed and understood, not wished away, in an effort to heal and transcend racial divides.

“I think he took it as far as he can by contextualizing Jeremiah Wright’s comments in a history of American racism,” said Marvin McMickle, a Cleveland pastor and professor of homiletics at Ashland University in Ohio.

But McMickle, author of *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*—a book endorsed by Wright—contended that Obama can go only so far with that message and that it should be black ministers, not politicians, who explain black preaching to white America.

Said Peter Paris, professor emeritus of Christian social ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary: “So many black churches understand the role of prophetic speech alongside of pastoral speech, and I don’t think that Obama helped . . . communicate that strongly enough.

“Jeremiah Wright is seen as a major prophetic voice in the black community, and there are many people who adore him,” said Paris, an Obama supporter and a divinity school classmate of Wright’s in the 1960s.

Even before Obama spoke, some white observers who know his Chicago church said the context of Wright’s words may be lost on some Americans.

“We might like to think that racism is a thing of the past,” said John H. Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ. “But on the gritty streets of Chicago’s South Side where Trinity has planted itself, race continues to play favorites in failing urban school systems, unresponsive health care systems, crumbling infrastructure, and meager economic development.”

[Obama’s campaign rival, Senator Hillary Clinton, said: “I think that given all we have heard and seen, he would not have been my pastor”—a comment that drew a letter of rebuke from some black religious leaders. Wright canceled several speaking appearances in late March during the controversy.] —*Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*