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[Putting Rev. Wright's Preaching in Perspective \(by Diana Butler Bass\)](#)

A media flap over the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's former pastor, strikes me as nothing short of strange. Anyone who attends church on a regular basis knows how frequently congregants disagree with their ministers. To sit in a pew is not necessarily assent to a message preached on a particular day. Being a church member is not some sort of mindless cult, where individuals believe every word preached. Rather, being a church member means being part of a community of faith—a gathered people, always diverse and sometimes at odds, who constitutes Christ's body in the world.

But the attack on Rev. Wright reveals something beyond ignorance of basic dynamics of Christian community. It demonstrates the level of misunderstanding that still divides white and black Christians in the United States. Many white people find the traditions of African-American preaching offensive, especially when it comes to politics.

I know because I am one of those white people. My first sustained encounter with African-American preaching came in graduate school about twenty years ago. I had been assigned as a teaching assistant to a course in Black Church Studies. The placement surprised me, since I had no background in the subject. But the professor assured me that "anyone with experience teaching American religion" would be able to handle the load.

The subject matter was not, as the professor indicated, difficult. The emotional content, however, was. To prepare, I had to read literally thousands of pages of black preaching and theology covering the entire scope of American history. While the particulars of preaching changed through time, one thing did not. Throughout the entire corpus, black Christian leaders leveled a devastating critique against their white brothers and sisters—accusing white Christians of maintaining "ease in Zion" while allowing black people to suffer injustice and oppression.

Typical of the form used by black preachers is Frederick Douglass' address, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" first delivered on July 5, 1852. The address, a political sermon, forcefully attacks white culture. "Fellow-citizens," Douglass proclaims, "above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wails of millions! Whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, today, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them." He goes on to call American conduct "hideous and revolting" and accuses white Christians of trampling upon and disregarding both the constitution and the Bible. He concluded his sermon with the words, "For revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival."

This was very hard to take. I confess: nearly everything I read that semester pained and angered me. But four months of listening to voices that I wanted to reject made me different. I began to hear the power of the critique. I came to appreciate the prophetic nature of black preaching. I recognized that these voices emerged from a very distinct historical experience. And I admired the narrative interplay between the Bible and social justice. Over time, they taught me to hear the Gospel from an angular perspective—the angle of slaves, freed blacks, of those who feared lynching, of those who longed for Africa, those who could not attend good schools. From them, I learned that liberation through Jesus was a powerful thing. And that white Americans really did need to repent when it came to race.

Learning to listen was not easy. It took patience, historical imagination, and lots of complaining to my friends—even my African-American ones. Eventually, I figured out that even if your ancestors had been the oppressors, you could enter into the world of those who had been oppressed with generosity and a heart open to transformation.

As MSNBC, CNN, and FOX endlessly play the tape of Rev. Wright's "radical" sermons today, I do not hear the words of a "dangerous" preacher (at least any more dangerous than any preacher who takes the Gospel seriously!) No, I hear the long tradition that Jeremiah Wright has inherited from his ancestors. I hear



prophetic critique. I hear Frederick Douglass. And, mostly, I hear the Gospel slant—I hear it from an angle that is not natural to me. It is good to hear that slant.

That is not, of course, comfortable for white people. Nor is it easily understood in sound bites. It does not easily fit in a contemporary political campaign. But it is a deep spiritual river in American faith and culture, a river that—as I had to learn—flows from the throne of God.

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