

Obama and His Pastor – Is God Damning America, or Not? That is the Question.

Colleagues,

The Word of God broke out of our American churches since last we met and spilled out into the streets. It became national news. It focused, of all things, on a black preacher's sermon from long ago. You couldn't have invented this. Truth IS stranger than fiction. God must have had a hand in it. It was Barack Obama's pastor proclaiming that God is damning America. The news-creators of our nation, not daring to ask "Is it true?" presented it to us as a matter of "damage control." Damage to Obama, since it was HIS pastor. Mega-question, of course, is "damage control" for America if it should prove true that Wright is not wrong.

Before I even got thinking about this week's ThTh post, my brother Ted Schroeder, recently retired inner-city pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in St. Louis, offered a "freebee" for me to post this week. No surprise, it was about the Obama/Wright kerfuffle..

Now I should tell you: my brother Ted, though white, has thick slices of a black preacher in him by virtue of his three decades as pastor in a black congregation on St. Louis' northside. Ted's more radical than I am. Yes, he is. Throughout the years of his pastoring he often was doing his theology out on the street. I've never marched in protest parades for just causes in St. Louis. But Ted has. And one of his "humble" claims to fame is that as a result of one such public action he wound up in the same jail cell with Dick Gregory right here in our home town of

St. Louis.

After I read Ted's words, I was moved – you'll not be surprised – to compose some prose of my own. Ted goes to bat for the black preacher. My words are counsel to Obama. Obama's and Wright's denomination is the UCC, United Church of Christ. Ted and I are ELCA Lutherans. UCC and ELCA are in pulpit-and-altar fellowship with each other. So Ted and I are mostly doing shop-talk around the family table.

Ted's text comes first, mine comes second.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

***In defense of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Chicago
(by Rev. Ted Schroeder of Kansas City, Missouri)***

Sound bites from sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright of Chicago have caused a stir in the U.S. media. In one sample Pastor Wright, an African American minister in the United Church of Christ, proclaimed: "I do not say to you 'God bless America,' but God damn America." And America has reacted in anger and perhaps astonishment. His words sound vulgar, profane, and un-American in the extreme. Yet when he first spoke these words, there was no national outcry, not even a local one.

Out of probably 2,000 sermons preached by Dr. Wright to his Chicago congregation in the past thirty-seven years, these few sentences have been resurrected and broadcast across the nation and probably around the world. On CNN on March 14 one white commentator, speaking for the church, criticized Pastor Wright and said that the Church is supposed to bless America, pray for

America, not damn America. (All our politicians have the savvy to say repeatedly, "God bless America!")

Rev. Wright did not preach hate for America. To preach God's divine judgment is not the same as hate. He did not dissociate himself from his responsibilities as a citizen of America. As a prophet called by God, he proclaimed God's damnation for America's excesses of wealth, abuse of power, violence, and war, for the harm done by us to persons who are suffering, starving, and dying throughout the world. There is a huge difference between hating and pronouncing God's judgment.

If only Wright had used more polite language, who in national politics or the media would have been aroused? He might have even sounded biblical by saying, "Woe to you, United States of America, for your..." and ticked off his complaints of injustice. Who would have complained? Then again, who would have even noticed? If Jeremiah Wright had not been Sen. Barack Obama's pastor, who would have cared at all about the ranting of one black preacher in south side Chicago? I write not to defend Senator Obama but to attest to biblically sound prophetic preaching in the 21st century.

Pastor Wright did not choose his words carelessly or lightly. To hear a man of the cloth use such words as "damn you" is stressful. One might think God could not possibly approve. Yet in the eighth chapter of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, God's spokesperson St. Peter responded to a man who basically had offered him a bribe, "Your money perish with you!" (in polite English). However, the original Greek text reads: "To hell with you and your money." Peter, how dare you? But there it is.

In the Hebrew and Greek texts of The Holy Bible, the word "woe" comes often from the lips of prophets such as Jeremiah, Amos,

and Habakkuk and also Jesus. Many biblical scholars agree that the Hebrew words “oeē” and “hohee” and the Greek “ouai” should often be translated “damn you” if the translator is hoping to convey in plain English the original intent of the speaker/writer. Our modern day Jeremiah of Chicago should not be so readily condemned.

When John the Baptizer harangued the scribes and Pharisees, asking “Who warned you to flee from the wrath (‘mellousees orgees’) to come?” it is clear that he or one of his disciples had been pronouncing damnation.

But most significant of all in the biblical witness is Luke 6:20-26 where we find Jesus speaking the Beatitudes. “Happy are the poor... blessed are the weak.” Blessed and happy. How nice. God loves the poor and the weak. God smiles upon them, giving them a kindly touch.

But the word found in the original Greek text is “makarios,” a much more robust word than a tender smile or touch. A twentieth century Spanish translation of this word uses the adjective “bienaventurado,” which literally means “good adventure.” “Good adventure to you poor and weak. You are on the good adventure in which you will meet God who has ventured into this world.” Other scholars suggest that “makarios” be translated “you are where you ought to be, where you would want to be if you are thinking straight...you are with God. You will discover the joy of heaven now.”

But then abruptly Jesus speaks of WOE. “Woe to you who are rich and sated and laughing and publicly acclaimed.” Woe! The Greek word “ouai” is the exact opposite of “makarios.” You are not on God’s great adventure. You are in league with evil. You are not where you ought to be according to God’s original plan. You are in the place of damnation, but too amused, sated, and flattered

to realize it.

There is gross injustice in the world. How would we expect a passionate God to respond? What feelings must the God of boundless love have toward the tens of thousands of persons who die each and every day from preventable disease, illness, hunger or injury? Must not God's passion for "the least of these our brethren" put God in opposition to those who are part of the oppression?

Gandhi spoke of the collision between need and greed. How does a prophet for the Lord speak to this in our day? The prophet must condemn! But can one con-demn without naming damnation?

I would like to hear or read the rest of Pastor Wright's excerpted sermons. If his only message was damnation, then congregants and clergy colleagues and defenders of the USA may challenge him over the content of his homilies. But I am sure that he said much more than that God had every right to damn us for the above named sins. I've seldom heard a black preacher preach for less than thirty minutes, let alone thirty seconds.

Surely Pastor Wright also proclaimed that the kingdom of God is more powerful than our American empire and that God is able to work justice for the oppressed of the world, including justice for those oppressed by the policies and power of the USA.

I trust that he also announced God's grace and redemption...even for oppressors such as we are. He just might, however, have saved that for later in the sermon, or even for a subsequent sermon (giving the Holy Spirit more time to work true repentance in the hearts of oppressors).

Furthermore, no Christian sermon would be complete without preaching resurrection, proclaiming that God has complete power over death – the death which comes at us from every side, the

death which we deal upon one another, and even the death which our Creator has every right to bring down on us for our sin. (Though God slay us, God's promise of grace and resurrection is our only hope.)

If Pastor Wright does not preach resurrection and grace and the coming reign of God, then have at him, fire away. Judgment and hope are inseparable in biblical prophetic tradition. But do not malign him for making THE JUDGMENT OF GOD the first order of business in his sermon.

Rev. Ted Schroeder, Kansas City, MO

Here are "big brother Ed's" thoughts on the matter. [Ted's 71, I'm 77.]

I voted for Obama in the Missouri primary election a short while ago. But when he chose to diss [Webster: to find fault with, to criticize] his pastor in the past few days, it made me wonder if I'll ever do it again. I'd hoped Obama might have had his own Aha! about Jeremiah Wright's "political preaching" and practice the "change" that he himself preaches, before his big, big speech this past Tuesday in Philadelphia,. But he violated his own mantra. He did not change.

He did not change—

not merely his critique of his pastor's "political preaching," but even more, he did not change his own head and heart to see that Wright's preaching—at least as much of it as I've seen hyped in the media—that Wright's preaching is the Word of God. It must be divine whimsy that Obama's pastor is a "Jeremiah." He is doing a godly service to the people of America, just as his namesake did to the ancient people of Israel. And the reception these two Jeremiahs got was also the same. In neither

case did the audience thank them for their efforts.

Jeremiah Wright is calling for change. Change, big time. In the Bible the verb is "repent!" Turn around. It was the prophet Jeremiah's word to his people. Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, Isaiah and all the rest of them. Also John the Baptizer's word to his people. Also Jesus's word to his people. Change, change, change.

For all the change that Obama is calling for—and his chronicle of needed changes in America in that Tuesday speech was brilliant and Ciceronian in its oratory—he's blinded to the change that Jeremiah Wright is calling for. And Wright is not making this up on his own. His claim is simply that this is the change the God of the Bible is calling for. It's the change/repentance that the "Trinity" God [=the very name of Obama's congregation!] always calls for in every nation that assumes imperial pretensions and in the process fails its divine assignment to be God's care-taker for its own people. Remember the tower of Babel-builders, remember Pharaoh and Egypt, remember Goliath and the Philistines, remember Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. Remember... remember... remember.

This topic came up in a Bible class at (ugh!) 7 a.m. in our congregation this very Tuesday morning before Obama's speech. We're actually studying Matthew's Gospel. We're in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus himself moves toward a Jeremiah-mode. Comment from one: "So what Rev. Wright says may well be true, but why does he have to say it with such inflammatory language? It's just not smart. He'll lose many more folks than he'll win." "Yup," said another, "It's happened before. With the first Jeremiah, with John the Baptist whom we just studied, and with Jesus here on the mount. Can you think of a nice way to say God is damning America?"

How can you NOT rile people up when you claim that God is telling them to "Change!" And with God's call to change there is the ominous "or else." Obama "condemns" his pastor's "incendiary language" about our nation. Then he'll have to reject the equally incendiary language of the Bible about "the nations." Wright is "just" quoting the Bible. It's God who says "Burn, baby, burn" to the unrighteous five "cities on the Plain"—two of them Sodom and Gomorrah—in Genesis 19. "The LORD rained sulfur and fire on the cities of the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground." Next morning Abraham got up early and "looked toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace." Incendiary indeed, with God holding the matches.

Come on, Obama, your pastor is simply asking you to listen to "all" of God's words coming from the Holy Scriptures, not just the one "p.c." passage you quote in your Philadelphia speech, a passage that will never get anybody riled up: "that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us." Nothing incendiary there. Nor any fire therein that will move anyone to actually make it happen.

Hearts have to change before even that p.c. passage has a chance of fulfillment. Change of heart = repentance. "Change" is your mantra. Well then

That is the maxi-change that your pastor is calling for. If you can't see/hear that his words are coming from the same God you trust and worship at Trinity UCC, then at this point you are NOT for the change needed to make all the other changes you call for even imaginable. And then this too—you are sadly no different (un-changed) from the other political candidates competing with you in wooing us.

So if you, Obama, really want to "save" America, save America

from our most deadly threat, you'll have to eat crow, admit that Pastor Wright is right. He's right when he says that the "God-sized" problem confronting America is not the problems—yes, they are real, they are humongous—that you list several times in your Philadelphia speech. The God-sized problem confronting America is God. Jeremiah Wright, though he probably doesn't know this, is saying exactly what Luther said in the face of the Muslim crusade into Europe in his day. "There are two enemies now at war with Holy Roman Empire. One is the military enemy on the ground outside the gates of Vienna. The other is God. Unless our 'God-problem' gets solved, we're guaranteed losers with all the other problems." Luther's proposed solution for the God-problem is repentance, a.k.a., change. Change big time.

Here are your very words on Tuesday:

1. "Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity." Yes, they were divisive, as were Jesus' words too when he called for repentance-change. "I have come not to bring peace, but a sword." Indeed unity is needed, but what you patently do not see—and your pastor does—is what the big "disunity" is. The big disunity afflicting America, as your pastor is telling you and all of us, is the "dividing wall of hostility" as Paul calls it, between God and an errant people. Your pastor IS calling for unity at THIS divisive wall, this mega-split between God and America. At the simplest level that is what the word "damn" means—the dividing wall of hostility between God and sinners, and the inevitable consequences that follow. But you seem not to see what he sees. And Bible preacher that he is, he's saying: "If we don't get this wall torn down all the unity talk from politicians—yours included, Obama—is just baloney. The Bible says so."

2. "The reverend's voice [Reverend Wright] . . . I heard . . . at the foot of the cross . . . the story of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story."Great. But have you forgotten what David, Moses, Daniel, Ezekiel actually did and said—how they got into trouble—in these episodes of the Scriptures that gave you hope? Their words were incendiary in the ears of their opponents. But God was on their side and not on the side of Goliath, Pharaoh, et al. Obama, change! Make THAT part of the story your story too. And then tell us THAT story. At present it's unlikely that you'll have any competition from Hillary or McCain on that one. You're the one who could do it. Here's another Bible word for you: "Who knows? Perhaps you have been called to the kingdom for just such as time as this."
3. "The mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending sermons about America. . . . comments that are simply inexcusable."Come on, Obama, either David, Moses, Daniel, Ezekiel—yes, Jesus too—are your heroes, or they are not. And if they are, then Jeremiah Wright is NOT mistaken, nor are his comments "inexcusable." Instead of ancient Jeremiah, he's now Ezekiel (on your heroes list). Remember God's "threat" to Ezekiel: "I have made you a sentinel. You shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked 'You shall surely die,' [sounds pretty close to God himself saying "damn," doesn't it?] and you give them no warning . . . in order to save their life, they shall die for their iniquity, BUT their blood I will require of your hand." Mistake? Inexcusable? You've got to stop saying that.
4. One more. "Profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons

. . . is that he spoke as if our society is static . . . still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know – what we have seen – is that America can change. That is the true genius of our nation.”Again, Obama, you’re not listening to your pastor. The change he’s calling for is biblical change, mega-turnaround on the God-interface. To this date our nation always thinks of itself as sinless. We are by definition “godly.” that’s why God always (rightly) blesses America. We deserve it. Mini-boo-boos, maybe. Maybe! But major faults? No way! And surely no faults so major that God might even say: “Bless America? You’ve got to be kidding. How blind are you? Can’t you see that right now I’m NOT blessing America? Where do you think these ever-lengthening laundry lists of problems (problems you will NOT solve) are coming from? Whose hand? Read the Pharaoh story again. Pharaoh never solved any of the ten “problems” I inflicted on the Egyptians. If I am NOT blessing America, how do you have thechutzpah to promise to solve any of the plagues I’ve been sending your way? With possibly more to come, unless you . . . “Change!”‘ .

America IS indeed static, Obama. Ossified at one primal point—both primal and lethal. We never repent. That change we’ve never accomplished, although Lincoln actually got Congress to pass a resolution for national repentance in the midst of the Civil War. But after Appomattox the “true genius” of our nation returned. Our narcissistic genius at the God-interface reappeared. Like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day “We have no need for repentance.” We are God’s chosen people. The reason God blesses America is because we do NOT need to change, nor should we. And to such “no need to repent” folks Jesus rails his “Woe!” for the entire chapter 23 of Matthew’s gospel.

"Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." The words are straight from Jesus.

So, Obama, Change! Your pastor, you tell us, is the "man who brought you to the foot of the cross." Good. It's Holy Week. Good Friday is only hours away. That Christ on the cross is the grounds for all the change called for in the Christian faith. For me, for you too, to change. Change, yes, repent, turn away from this "other gospel," the Folk Religion of God Bless America, rooted as it is in our nation's blind conviction of our own sinlessness.

If the Jesus pitch is still a tad tough for you, maybe you could start with your pastor's Old Testament namesake. Read some sections of Jeremiah of Jerusalem. 'Course, you'll soon see that he's no less incendiary than Jesus is. And with all his incendiary critique of his godless nation, he (like Jesus) has words of hope (and that word "hope" peppers your prose). But this hope is REAL hope. It's specked out in Jeremiah's chapter 31, concluding in a "new covenant" where sinners get forgiven. Jesus actually quotes Jeremiah 31 in the Passion Week story that Christians will be re-enacting on Maundy Thursday, the Last Supper narrative. You know the punch-line: His own self-body and blood—"given for you for the forgiveness of sins."

But to be the beneficiary of such God-sized forgiveness of sins, you have to be a sinner. And you have to say yes to the fact that you are—not that that is a prerequisite of being forgiven, but that without repentance you'll never come to trust the sin-forgiver.

A recent quote from you, Obama, says "Reverend Wright preached the gospel of Jesus, a gospel on which I base my life." I urge you NOT to change from that confession, but to change—yes,

change indeed— to see that Reverend Wright's diagnosis of the sickness of America is precisely the malady that the gospel of Jesus heals. You base your life on it, you say. Great confession. Don't stop. But do open your eyes to the full picture. Your pastor has the flashlight needed for all of us to see what God sees in the dark corners of our dear people and country. Don't shut your eyes when he turns it on.

Sincerely yours,
Edward H. Schroeder

P.S. You might begin your next speech this way.

I've had an Aha! since that speech in Philadelphia. An Aha! to the deeper message that Rev. Wright, my pastor, has been proclaiming. Shakespeare put words into one of his character's mouth that apply to me: "Methinks I did protest too much." I suspect I've lots of company in mis-listening to what Reverend Wright's been saying. I wasn't listening deeply enough to my pastor. He is really on my side. Change is his big word,. Change is my big word. He's been calling for MEGA change in America. I've been focusing on big changes in America too, but not on the scale that Rev. Wright is calling for. Yet the two are closely connected.

Rev. Wright's been calling for change in America for all the years that I've known him. It's a MEGA change, a change addressing the God-problem confronting our nation. He's taking it right out of the Bible—both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. We couldn't be having all this trouble in our nation, all these problems, if we didn't have a God-problem. That's what he's been saying, and I think he's right. John and Hillary and I too have been debating the big changes needed down-on-the-ground in our land. We've been focusing on the down-on-the-ground problems confronting all of us—as we

should be. That's the calling of a politician.

But Rev. Wright is reminding us of another problem. America's God-problem. Not our problem with God, but God's problem with us.

It's been a long time since that got any serious attention in American politics, but it did once get national attention—from one of our greatest presidents, Abraham Lincoln. Right in the middle of the Civil War Lincoln had the courage to tell our nation that God was not pleased with America, that our self-destroying war, though willfully entered into by North and South, was God giving us our come-uppance for our past misdeeds. And the immensity of the bloodshed of that war signalled the immensity of the “sin” of the nation. So what did he do? He not only proposed repentance, but succeeded in getting Congress – imagine that!—to declare a day of national repentance in the very midst of that brother-killing-brother Civil War.

Even though Lincoln was Republican (ahem!), the first-ever Republican president of the US, I gladly call on him as precedent for this new plank in my “Change” platform. If McCain wants to appropriate his fellow Republican Lincoln too, fine. And Hillary is welcome too. We can then debate if Lincoln's repentance message then is still today's message from the “God we trust.” I think my pastor's on target. His message is a message from the “God we trust.” So we've got to pay attention to it – or else. Whether or not Hillary and John agree with that diagnosis of our national problems, I don't know. But I propose this Lincolnesque topic for conversation among the three of us and above all for our conversation with the people of America as we move toward November. It's fundamentally about our national security, security with a capital “S.”