

EDITORIAL: Race relations, pastors & grace

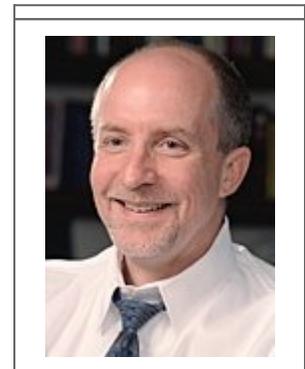
March 28, 2008

Posted: 3/28/08

EDITORIAL: Race relations, pastors & grace

Barack Obama and Jeremiah Wright have raised two issues that are both sensitive and explosive—race in America and the relationship between pastors and churches.

The last time we saw such a clear picture of our U.S. racial divide occurred more than a dozen years ago, when a jury declared O.J. Simpson not guilty. Lately, we've seen endless news clips and YouTube loops of [Wright's angry sermons](#) on white racism and Obama's response. We've watched a plethora of pundits tar Obama with Wright's brush, theorizing the presidential candidate must agree with his former pastor, or else he would have moved his church membership.



Sadly, we haven't heard from many folks who seem willing to learn from what we're seeing and hearing. Since the presidential nomination hasn't

been wrapped up, we've got Democrats bashing Democrats and Republicans exulting over an "October surprise" in March. But few voices have asked how we can parse reason from rhetoric.

Racial relationships are tenuous, and racial reconciliation is hard work. That's true even under the best of circumstances, which excludes most of what passes for racial relationships in this country.

To look at an example where all the parties are trying hard, consider the Baptist General Convention of Texas and its 27 agencies and institutions. Theologically, we agree all people are created in God's image, and people of every race are equal before God and among each other. Practically, we have stated this belief in our governing documents. Our vision embraces our diversity, and our values affirm the "worth of all persons." We stipulate that at least 30 percent of our Executive Board shall be composed of persons of color, and many of our institutions are composed of higher percentages. Relationally, we work at this. We spend time together, look for ways to minister alongside each other, and genuinely not only love but also like each other.

Still, I have watched tension rise in a room as board members, usually minorities, raise racial issues. Anglos wonder, "Must everything be about race?" And minorities muse, "Why can't they 'get it'?" When we are at our best, these episodes help us see through each others' glasses. That's what we need. Whites must understand the layers of society—economic, educational, cultural, medical and more—through the interpretive lenses of racial-minority experience. And people of color must recognize the dimensions of American history as seen by whites—particularly whites of goodwill, who inherited this scenario, just as their sisters and brothers of color inherited it. I pray our churches and denominations will lead the way.

Speaking of church: It's hard to comprehend the clamor for Obama to move his membership because his pastor said some ridiculous things from the

pulpit.

You are blessed (or you're not thinking for yourself) if you've never disagreed with your pastor. I like what Dallas Morning News columnist Steve Blow said on the subject: "I fully understand the concept of squirming in your church pew. I'm a Southern Baptist."

The Obama-should-have-fled crowd either (a) doesn't understand the dynamic of loyalty to a longtime beloved pastor, or (b) they don't care about that and are intent on making political hay out of pastoral straw.

Think about the pastors who have made an impact on your life. In Obama's case, the same person led him to faith in Christ, taught him how to live out that faith in a community marked by incredible need, performed his wedding ceremony and baptized his children.

Whatever you think of Obama's politics, a person of principle doesn't cut and run on a pastor like that, even when some of the things he says are embarrassing. He cuts him some slack.

In church, we call that grace.

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