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WASHINGTON (ABP)—While the political consequences of Sen. Barack Obama's March 18 speech on race created chatter for cable-news channels, the episode is noteworthy for another reason, according to experts in religion and politics.

For the first time in modern American history, a presidential candidate's pastor and congregation are the cause of a major campaign controversy.

Sen. Barack Obama delivers a speech on race in response to controversy over remarks by his long-time pastor, Jeremiah Wright, who recently retired at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

Also, according to experts on the African-American tradition of prophetic preaching, the division over the Illinois Democrat's former minister casts light on the difficulties black and white Americans still have in understanding each other's religious culture.

"I just can't come up with a good example—a good analogy—of one church, one pastor, even one sermon having this kind of effect on a candidate," said Laura Olson, a Clemson University professor and expert in religion and

politics.

Asked to think of a parallel situation in American presidential politics, Ouachita Baptist University political scientist Hal Bass had to reach nearly a century.

“Back in the late 19th and early part of the 20th century, when anti-Catholicism was hot and heavy in the United States … there were frequently allegations that the Catholic candidates for president—like Al Smith in ’28—were in the pocket of the pope,” he said. But comparing that to the present situation was like comparing “apples and oranges.”

Obama’s campaign has been assailed for weeks because of comments made by Jeremiah Wright, who recently retired after 36 years as senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Snippets of the messages—containing comments that some have interpreted as anti-American and anti-white—have been posted on YouTube and publicized by innumerable media outlets.

Obama has been an active member of the predominantly African-American congregation for more than 20 years and has credited Wright with helping bring him to Christ and being a spiritual mentor. The pastor married Obama and his wife, Michelle, and baptized the couple’s two daughters. His campaign autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*, is named after one of Wright’s sermon titles.

In response to the uproar over Wright’s comments, Obama delivered a speech in Philadelphia in which he denounced his pastor’s most controversial statements. But he also asked those offended by Wright to understand the context in which a black preacher raised under the oppression of segregation might feel compelled to make controversial statements about race and a United States whose founding ideals were, as Obama put it, “stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery.”

Nonetheless, the candidate added, Wright's words "expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic, that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America."

In that sense, Obama continued, "Rev. Wright's comments weren't only wrong, but divisive—divisive at a time at which we need unity."

But to African-American ears, those divisive words can ring pretty true, according to Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University Divinity School.

"In many ways, Jeremiah Wright exists in a community that both expects and needs him to wear the prophet's mantle in ways that sound very painful in the public square—to the principalities and powers that occupy the public square," said Leonard, who is white but has been an active member of historically African-American Baptist congregations for 16 years.

"And by that I mean, at least in the context of African-American preaching as I have experienced it for many years now, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Amos and Elijah and their very painful message to their culture is a living, breathing reality in African-American pulpits."

Among the most inflammatory of Wright's comments were ones taken from a 2003 sermon in which he discussed the U.S. government's historically inequitable treatment of African-American citizens.

"The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no. God damn America—that's in the Bible—for killing innocent people," Wright exclaimed. "God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme."

A message Wright preached the Sunday after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist

attacks also has drawn significant fire. In it, he noted Americans seemed shocked and bewildered that anyone would want to visit their country with violence.

“We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye,” he said in the Sept. 16, 2001, sermon. “We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America’s chickens are coming home to roost.”

Olson, the Clemson political scientist, said one has to note the ministry context in which Wright made such statements. Trinity is a large congregation—the biggest in its denomination, which is overwhelmingly white. It has a tradition of social activism and operates multiple ministries for the disadvantaged. It is located in one of the poorest and most crime-ridden parts of Chicago’s South Side.

“So, you have to think a little bit about what the target audience is,” Olson said. “In a sense, if you’re Jeremiah Wright … you’re trying to inspire and you’re trying to give people hope and you’re trying to rile people up and get them to see things in a way that they maybe wouldn’t have seen things, and that you’re maybe trying to shake people out of a cycle of hopelessness. I mean, you’re not trying to tear down white America; your comments aren’t meant for that purpose.”

Many commentators have denounced Wright’s comments as “racist” or “anti-white.” In March 18 comments on MSNBC, former GOP presidential candidate Pat Buchanan—himself no stranger to racially charged language—accused Wright of “hate speech” that is “anti-American” and “anti-Christian.”

But many African-American preachers—and a handful of their white colleagues—have defended Wright vigorously.

Alfred Smith, pastor of Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, Calif., and an early leader in the civil-rights movement, has been one of the most outspoken.

Wright's white critics, Smith said, are "living in privilege in suburbia where a suburban gospel is preached. And we're living in the inner city, where the cry of the cross is perennial. And we have to give hope to people where the hope, unborn, has died."

The main reason people are upset with some of Wright's comments, Smith added, is because he believes "America is in denial of the fragility of her humanity. America believes that she does not sin. America believes that she is saintly. Therefore, instead of saying, 'God bless the world,' we have to say, 'God bless America.'"

Critics have also denounced Obama for not leaving Trinity, saying they would have walked out on any pastor who made such comments. Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson, once President Bush's head speechwriter, asked in a March 19 column why, if Obama disagreed with Wright's more controversial comments, he remained an active member and supporter of the church for two-plus decades.

"Obama's excellent and important speech on race in America did little to address his strange tolerance for the anti-Americanism of his spiritual mentor," Gerson wrote. "Barack Obama is not a man who hates—but he chose to walk with a man who does."

But Obama said Wright is a more complex man—and Trinity a more complex congregation—than has been represented in the recent media uproar.

“I confess, if all that I knew of Rev. Wright were snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop” on TV news programs, and “if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures that have been peddled by some of the commentators, there is no doubt” that he would leave, he said.

But, Obama continued: “Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety. … 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 biases that make up the black experience in America. And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Rev. Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me.”

Leonard said that’s a common sentiment in churches—such as historically black ones—that place a strong emphasis on the value of a free pulpit.

“Jeremiah Wright won the right to talk straight with this people because he married them and buried them and was there when they were sick and hurting. And so, a great many people … because their preacher has been a pastor to them, are willing to let their pastor, in a free pulpit, let he, she say whatever … they feel led to.”

Bass and Leonard both said the Wright episode also shows that many in the mainstream news media still have a difficult time understanding Christianity in all its forms.

“In spite of all the religious conversation that has gone on, often growing out of the evangelical participation in the public square … the public media still, in general, does not know what to do with Christianity, left or right, with the rhetoric and the commitments and the contexts of Protestant preaching and culture,” Leonard said.

By comparison, Leonard noted, that two GOP presidential contenders this

campaign cycle—former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and Arizona Sen. John McCain—had closely associated themselves with controversial San Antonio preacher John Hagee.

“Hagee is on television every day talking about the need to nuke Iran as a part of his view of biblical eschatology, and nobody has raised apparently any question about” Huckabee preaching at Hagee’s Cornerstone Church or McCain seeking, and getting, Hagee’s endorsement before the Texas primary, Leonard said.

“Jeremiah Wright didn’t want to nuke anybody. And so I think there’s a great deal of rhetoric, left and right, going on that grows out of context.”

Bass said that, while he was not trying to “establish an equivalence” between Wright’s comments and those of many conservative evangelicals, when taken out of context, evangelical preachers are often misunderstood by those outside their own context in the same fashion that Wright may have been interpreted.

“I think we all are, shall we say, victims of selective perception. We hear what we want to hear, we disregard what we don’t want to hear,” Bass said. “I think, after natural disasters (and) in anticipation of natural disasters, you’ve seen prominent conservative-oriented religious leaders speak of God’s judgment on parts of America or America as a whole. And I think there was outrage expressed (by politicians) without necessarily disengagement from their support for them or appreciation for them.”

Nonetheless, he added, Wright’s “statements themselves, out of context, do sound outrageous and do need to be rejected.”

Leonard said churches also need to be aware of how such comments could be perceived in the wider public in the YouTube age.

“Pulpit rhetoric in Protestant churches, left and right of center, in the

context of most churches … sounds like prophetic conviction," he said. However, "in light of American pluralism, when it gets on CNN, it sounds like bigotry. And religious communities have to understand that."

He noted infamous comments from former Southern Baptist Convention President Bailey Smith. In 1980, the Oklahoma City-area pastor became the center of national controversy after declaring, at a highly publicized meeting, "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew."

"How many times did Bailey Smith say that across Oklahoma, and he always got an 'amen'" before getting criticized for it in a different context, Leonard asked. "That's what religious communities have to know about sound-bite theology in the public square."

To Alfred Smith, though, the criticism of Wright smarts very personally for him and other black preachers, because the African-American preaching tradition has, of necessity, been uniquely prophetic.

"My white peers who have gone to seminary and sat beside me in class go back to a church that requires them to preach a muzzled gospel—a domesticated gospel," he said. "And I believe that Jeremiah Wright is a paradigm of the liberation pulpit, the prophetic African-American church—and it was not so much an attack on him as it was an attack on all of us."

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