

**My Thoughts and Feelings about the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright's Fulminations**  
**By Toby Holleman**  
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The UCC is roughly 90% Caucasian and 10% "other"—most of that "other" being African-American. I would hazard a guess that a good number of the white pastors in our denomination (and certainly in our Conference) were surprised and felt uncomfortable with some of the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright's U-Tube comments, just like their congregants. However, I would not be surprised if a good many of the black pastors in the UCC reported feeling more positively about his strong statements—even *if* they did not necessarily agree with everything Rev. Wright said. Racial background and experience unquestionably affect one's perception about social and religious issues relating to race—this is no revelation, I'm sure!

For this reason, Euro-American Christians need to step into an African-American life-world, including its church experience, before rendering a judgment about what goes on in the name of religion in that setting. For example, it is customary in black churches for preachers to speak much more boldly than most white preachers do. Exaggeration and sharp language is a staple of their sermonic treasure chest. In preaching this way, African-American ministers are adopting the prophetic style of the Old Testament prophets—and even (at times) of Jesus himself. There is hardly a thing Rev. Wright is shown to be saying on those brief video clips that some prophet in the Bible did not say at some time in regard to his national home or its corrupt leadership (of course, the "USA" is "Israel" or "Judea" in these passages; and "damn" is analogous to "woe" in some of the biblical texts).

Having said this, and speaking admittedly as a white minister, I agree that a few of the publicized comments are so historically and factually dubious as to be ludicrous—and certainly uncalled for in this day and time. On the other hand, others of these "outrageous" statements would have been apropos back in the 1960s and earlier, before the advent of Civil Rights legislation, when *Jim Crow* policies kept blacks "in their place"—meaning: in a deplorably inferior economic, legal, and social condition. (I know about this personally because I grew up in the "Jim Crow" South; and even my wife, who grew up outside of Boston, MA, can recall instances of rank prejudice against people of color during her childhood in her home town.)

Moreover, I cannot get over the fact that our all-powerful federal law enforcement institution—the FBI—under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover, did everything in its power to discredit and defame Martin Luther King, Jr., a pacifist and a Christian who merely fought for the civil rights of those who did not have them. I suspect that if today members of the FBI did what some in the FBI did back then, they would be put in jail for abusing their authority. If their behavior *back then* wasn't "KKK-like," I don't know what is. (N.B.—many KKK members were "good God-fearing, church-going folk"; I know: some were members of my home church when I was a child; evil often masquerades as good).

I think that Obama and others who know Rev. Wright well have correctly perceived that his anger is a misplaced vestige of the harsh battles he and other blacks had to fight a generation ago. Like my uncle who fought the "Japs" hand-to-hand on Guadalcanal and who has always struggled with a deeply felt antipathy towards people from that part of the world, Rev. Wright *in the videos* seems to be suggesting that there has been no improvement in race relations since the days of MLK. This doesn't absolve Rev. Wright for making anachronistic statements that to contemporary ears sound outrageous and even insulting, but it does help us to understand where he is coming from.

Although I haven't heard Rev. Wright preach, I know others who have. And quite frankly, they are as surprised by these video clips as everyone else. It seems that the vast majority of all that Rev. Wright has preached about has been the sort of stuff that anyone—white or black—who is progressive and who wants to see the poorest in our nation lifted up to where they can be truly self-sustaining, would agree with. It is unfortunate that someone(s) went through what must have been thousands of hours of tapes and culled out about five minutes of outrageous stuff—and then suggested that this five minutes represents the lifetime achievements and "heart" of this man. All preachers say things from time to time that they later realize was "over the top." Perhaps one day Rev. Wright will come to this understanding about his most outrageous comments too. But even so, it will only be a tiny, tiny fraction of all that he said and did.

To be clear: I too am not happy with a few of the things that Rev. Wright has said. But I also know that under his leadership Trinity UCC has done more for the people in their impoverished neighborhood than probably 99% of the churches in America have done for those who are marginalized into an underclass in our society. *The church is more than its pastor*—we all know this. I can see why Obama would hesitate to leave his home church, the one that brought him to a "saving" faith in Jesus Christ and inspired him to give up the opportunity to live a life of wealth and privilege (he was a lauded graduate of Harvard Law School, after all) in favor of a life of humble service that only in the past few years has rewarded him with a measure of financial security. At the same time, I can see why he might have felt he *had* to leave if Rev. Wright had not retired. It is a difficult decision, either way.

The UCC and the PNEC do not rebuke pastors for preaching what in their hearts they believe is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If they transgress major ethical boundaries, or begin to preach consistently things that are not in any way, shape or fashion "Christian," then they will be held accountable. But no preacher is officially censured because (s)he says something from time to time that might be viewed as outrageous. Quite frankly, I came out of that kind of Christianity. And I don't want to go back. I would rather fellowship with Christians I don't always agree with, than with those who believe they know the Truth so well that they can make everyone else conform to their beliefs. I suspect, however, that some who are close to Rev. Wright have spoken personally with him about some of these matters, registering their concern about the factually unsubstantiated and racist-sounding claims. Who knows what might unfold in the coming days?