
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

April 29, 2008

(8-45)

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Jeremiah Wright culminates media blitz with feisty defense

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Sen. Barack Obama's former pastor -- at the center of one of the biggest religious controversies in presidential-campaign history -- culminated a four-day media blitz April 28 with a combination of erudition and combativeness. "This is not an attack on Jeremiah Wright; it has nothing to do with Sen. Obama," Wright said of the recent criticism he has received for provocative statements in the past. "This is an attack on the black church launched by people who know nothing about the African-American religious tradition," he said during a question-and-answer session following a speech at the National Press Club in Washington.

The retired pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago became a household name earlier this year after controversial snippets from several of his sermons were publicized on YouTube and picked up by the mainstream media. The senator is a longtime Trinity member and has credited Wright with bringing him to faith in Christ.

The sound bites contained rhetoric that some have interpreted as anti-American and anti-white, such as the declaration that God condemns America for its treatment of blacks. But many have defended Wright, saying that the comments were better understood in the context of the entire sermons in which they appeared and in the broader context of the African-American tradition of prophetic preaching that challenges the powers that be.

Wright -- who has kept an extremely low profile since the furor surrounding his sermons erupted in March -- attempted to explain that tradition to many representatives of the very "corporate-owned media," as he has described it, that fanned the furor. "The prophetic tradition of the black church has its roots in Isaiah, the 61st chapter, where God says the prophet is to preach the gospel to t6.7(h)-4.7(e.7()64(each)-4.7(t)Th)-4.7dhh

“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 sermon Wright delivered the Sunday after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks noted that 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.”

In often-fiesty responses to reporters questions at the press-club event, Wright defended those remarks. “Jesus said, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ You cannot do terrorism on other people and expect it never to come back on you. Those are biblical principles, not Jeremiah Wright ‘bombastic,’ ‘divisive’ principles,” he said.

Asked about the “God damn America” sermon, Wright said that, in context, was also biblical. “God doesn't bless everything. God condemns some things... God damns some practices and there's no excuse for the things that the government -- not the American people -- have done. That doesn't make me not like America or unpatriotic.”

Asked how he felt about being accused of a lack of patriotism, the former Marine launched a broadside at the current vice president, who managed to avoid service in the Vietnam War. “I served six years in the military. Does that make me patriotic? How many years did [Dick] Cheney serve?” Wright asked.

He also defended statements suggesting that government entities helped create the inner-city drug epidemics of the 1980s and 1990s and intentionally infected its own citizens with the virus that causes AIDS. He referred to an experiment from the 1930s when government doctors infected poor African-American men with syphilis without their knowledge. “Based on the Tuskegee Experiment, and based on what has happened to African-Americans in this country, I believe our government is capable of anything,” he said.

But many pundits, journalists and critics of Wright said his edgy question-and-answer session belied the conciliatory efforts of the speech that preceded it. “On any level, the speech was a train wreck,” wrote James Hutchins, on the blog UCCTruths (ucctruths.blogspot.com). “By deflecting the controversy as commentary against the black church, Wright has also ignited a completely manufactured racial conflict and has unfairly cast a negative view of the black church and the United Church of Christ. Wright has effectively sabotaged the black church, the United Church of Christ and Obama's candidacy to protect his own ego.”

Hutchins said it distracted from an earlier speech Obama gave in which he distanced himself from Wright's more controversial comments and called for a national dialogue on race relations. “While I personally agree with the spirit of Obama's call for a national conversation on race, it can not and should not be orchestrated as a defense of Wright's sermons,” Hutchins wrote. “The controversy is not about race; it is about Jeremiah Wright. If we are going to have a real national conversation on race, it should be done in the spirit of Obama's unifying optimism that we can overcome our shameful history.”

Whatever his effect on it, Wright may not have had Obama's candidacy in mind when he planned his recent round of appearances, which in addition to the speech and PBS interview also included a sermon at a Baptist church in Dallas the morning of April 27 and a speech to an NAACP meeting in Detroit that night.

Asked if he thought America is still damned even if it elects Obama president, Wright said his prophetic role wouldn't change. “I said to Barack Obama last year, ‘If you get elected, November the 5th I'm coming after you, because you'll be representing a government whose policies grind under people.’”

Tiptoe through the TULIP: Must the new Baptist Calvinism divide churches, denominations?

(ABP) -- Can Calvinist and non-Calvinist Baptists work and worship together? It depends, some advocates of Reformed theology say, on whether Christians on both sides are willing to tiptoe through the TULIP -- the acronym for five doctrinal specifics that mark Calvinism -- without stomping on anyone's flower bed.

TULIP stands for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints. Those five doctrines, delineated by the Synod of Dort in the 17th century, summarize distinctive elements of the theological system taught by reformer John Calvin -- particularly as distinguished from the teachings of James Jacobus Arminius, who emphasized free will over determinism.

Proponents of what often is called “five-point Calvinism” emphasize the absolute sovereignty of God, typified by the doctrine of predestination. Predestination holds that God ordains a specific and finite number of human beings to be saved -- on the basis of his good pleasure alone.

Historically, Baptists have come down on both sides of Calvinism's fence. Many prominent Baptist figures have identified themselves as Calvinists, including 19th century British pastor and evangelist Charles Haddon Spurgeon and James Petigru Boyce, founding president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

On the other hand, the fathers of the Baptist movement -- Englishmen John Smyth and Thomas Helwys -- rejected Calvinism.

Calvin's cool on campus

After a long period of disfavor, however, full five-point Calvinism is gaining in popularity in some Baptist circles today. A study by two Southern Baptist Convention agencies -- the North American Mission Board and LifeWay Christian Resources -- showed that about 30 percent of recent graduates of Southern Baptist seminaries identify themselves as Calvinists. That figure compares to 10 percent of Southern Baptist pastors overall.

Renewed interest in Reformed theology -- what Calvinists refer to as "the doctrines of grace" -- also is evident among university students, some Baptist college professors have noted. In part, observers attribute the growth of Calvinism on college campuses to the popularity of the Passion worship event-conferences, which feature prominent Calvinists like Baptist pastor-theologian John Piper.

The Passion movement and related One Day events serve as gateways into Calvinism, said Roger Olson, professor of theology at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. "My experience is that many young Christians swept up by this wave know little about the details of this kind of Calvinism," Olson said. "Many of them are simply shocked to find out that it entails belief in limited atonement" -- the belief that Christ's sacrificial death only atones for a percentage of humankind rather than its entirety.

Olson continued, "However, after a while, many of them gradually accept it lock, stock and barrel because they don't know any alternative. Southern Baptists -- and offshoots -- have not been very good at offering young people sound theology."

Hunger for theology that is "rigorously biblical and satisfies the desire to hear from God in his Word" accounts for much of Calvinism's popularity among students, said Thomas Ascol. He is the executive director of Founders Ministries, an organization that promotes Reformed theology in Southern Baptist life. "The rising generation is looking for authenticity," Ascol said. Students read biblical stories about faithful people who suffered martyrdom, and they hunger for "the radicalness of biblical Christianity," he noted. "Then they look at the slick and oftentimes superficial Christianity that dominates American evangelicalism, and they wonder why there is a difference. What did those early believers see [that] we don't see? Part of the answer is they saw the majestic supremacy of God over every sphere of life."

Dancing to Piper's tune?

To Reformed theology's Baptist advocates, Piper is, literally, a Godsend. Ascol said the pastor -- who leads a Minneapolis church affiliated with the Baptist General Conference -- has been used to "cast a vision of radically biblical Christianity" to a new generation. "There is no fluff in Piper's ministry. It is rock-solid Bible teaching that does not shy away from the hard sayings and clear calls of discipleship," he said. "It is authentic in its devotion to the text of Scripture. That resonates with many in the younger generation who are hungry for truth."

But critics of resurgent Calvinism see popular Reformed theology as appealing to the desire for clear-cut, black-and-white answers. "The present, new Calvinists claim to know way, way too much about the mind of God," Olson asserted.

The Baylor professor drew a distinction between the gentle and nuanced Calvinism held by many Christians in historically Reformed churches -- such as the Presbyterian tradition -- and the assertive new form. "My experience is that this new wave of Reformed theology -- inspired by John Piper who is inspired by Jonathan Edwards -- appeals mostly to young men who want to avoid any hint of ambiguity in their theology," he said.

Doctrine that divides

In part because its adherents hold to its teachings so tenaciously, Calvinism has divided some congregations -- particularly when Calvinist pastors have asserted their beliefs in historically non-Calvinist churches. Such division, some Calvinists say, may be inevitable. "Any given doctrine will divide. The gospel itself is a doctrine that divides," said Jonathan Leeman, director of communications for 9Marks, a ministry founded by Reformed Southern Baptist pastor Mark Dever. "There has been a renewed emphasis on the doctrines of grace, and that could lead to some level of divisiveness. That's almost necessarily so, in the same way that an emphasis on [biblical] inerrancy led to division within the Southern Baptist Convention."

In fact, Leeman said, he believes no one should be surprised by the growing interest in Calvinism among Southern Baptists. "The inerrancy debate brought a renewed interest in the careful study of the Scriptures, and that brings with it a more careful enunciation of doctrine," he said.

But some Calvinists believe they have been unjustly tagged with the divisiveness label. "What I have discovered is that Calvinism is blamed far more often for dividing churches or associations than is actually the case," Ascol said. "Closer investigation has often revealed that Calvinism is often the tail on which the donkey is pinned. I know of more cases where the real issue behind a controversy is biblical Christianity -- what is a Christian and how does a person become one -- not Calvinism."

Missions and evangelism

Ascol also believes Calvinists often have been unfairly stereotyped as anti-missionary. “Look at who has been going as [Southern Baptist] career missionaries over the last few years. A significant percentage would classify themselves as Reformed,” he said. He also pointed to historic Calvinists known for their evangelistic and missionary zeal -- George Whitefield, Andrew Fuller, William Carey and George Muller, as well as Edwards and Spurgeon.

Olson acknowledged the current wave of Baptist Calvinism -- which he calls “Piperism” -- is characterized by a fervent missionary spirit. “However, I think those who follow it out to its logical conclusion may eventually decide that there is no point in evangelism or missions,” he said. “That has certainly happened in the past with this kind of Calvinism. If you are told that your evangelism and missionary work is nothing more than a ‘foreordained means to a foreordained end,’ and it cannot alter what God has already decided, you might conclude that there is no urgency.”

But Leeman said that problem is solved by framing the evangelistic impetus in terms familiar to most evangelicals, whether Calvinist or non-Calvinist -- love and obedience. “Being that Christ is my greatest love, I will want to share him with others,” he said, adding that Jesus commanded his followers to share the gospel. “The call to repentance and obedience is not optional.”

But concern about Calvinism’s impact on fulfilling Christ’s Great Commission is a valid concern, even if it’s not well founded, Leeman added. “The primary cause of division over the issue [of Calvinism] is concern on the part of the non-Reformed crowd that it will hurt evangelism and missions, and those of us who are Reformed need to be entirely sympathetic to that concern,” he said. “At the same time, instead of debating issues with us, I would like to see the non-Reformed crowd give us the benefit of the doubt. Accept that a Reformed congregation means what it says when it affirms evangelism and missions.”

Show some grace

Ironically, the debate over the doctrines of grace often has been characterized by a lack of grace by those on both sides. Much of the division caused by Calvinism could be avoided if Christians treated each other a bit more graciously, some Calvinists and non-Calvinists agreed. “I love my Calvinist friends and students,” Olson said. “I have no quarrel with them; it is only with their theology I have a quarrel. And I do not attempt to convert my Calvinist students to non-Calvinism. I only ask them to study all the options and make sure they are thinking biblically and logically.”

In local congregations, Ascol said, shared belief about Jesus Christ and biblical authority should be sufficient ground for both sides to share the same pews peacefully. “Our church has Calvinists and non-Calvinists joyfully laboring together for the gospel, and I know of many other churches that do, too,” he said. “We do that by focusing on the gospel -- who Jesus is, what he has done and why that matters. We may not agree on every detail of how the gospel works ... but we are all committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and his supremacy over all of life. Where there is a pre-commitment to the authority of God’s written Word and a confessional and covenantal agreement [about] how we will live together, there can and should be genuine unity in Christ.”

Tiptoe through the TULIP: Floral theology delineates Calvinism, Arminianism

(ABP) -- Theologians past and present have used a bouquet of initials and analogies to describe Calvinist doctrine. Historically, the Reformed Synod of Dort in the Netherlands delineated the differences between Calvinism -- named for the Genevan reformer John Calvin -- and Arminianism, after the teachings of James Jacobus Arminius. For the sake of simplicity -- and playing on an association with the best-known Dutch flower -- those teachings have been summarized through the TULIP acronym.

TULIP stands for:

-- **Total depravity:** The belief that human beings are dead in their sins, and they stand justly condemned before God, unable to do anything to save themselves.

-- **Unconditional election:** From eternity, God in his sovereignty chose specific human beings to be saved. That salvation was entirely determined and willed by God; he didn’t simply have foreknowledge of who would freely respond to his offer of grace.

-- **Limited atonement:** Also known as “particular redemption,” the doctrine teaches that the death of Jesus Christ was intended for the remission of the sins of a finite number of elect human beings only; in other words, the intention of the atonement and its effects are the same.

-- **Irresistible grace:** Many Calvinists prefer the term “effectual calling” to express the idea that God’s call to salvation will not fail to bring about the repentance and faith of the elect.

-- **Perseverance of the saints:** This doctrine teaches that all true believers in Christ will be saved because God grants them faith to persist in their belief to the end of life.

Timothy George, founding dean of Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School, has proposed an alternative floral acronym. George, a Reformed Baptist theologian, recommended a change in terminology from TULIP to ROSES, which

denotes radical depravity, overcoming grace, sovereign election, eternal life and singular redemption.

James Leo Garrett, emeritus distinguished professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has noted Dortian Calvinists and early Arminians may not have differed on total depravity. Rather, he said, the key difference may have been whether faith and repentance were gifts from God -- as the Calvinists taught -- or, as the Arminians insisted, human duties. "That would call for FULIP [for faith] or RULIP [for repentance], not TULIP," Garrett said.

Without benefit of a floral reminder (the first letters add up to SCENA), Garrett also has delineated the five points of "Hyper-Calvinism," or Reformed theology taken to the extreme:

-- **Supralapsarianism:** God's decree to elect some human beings for salvation and to damn others eternally is logically the first of God's eternal decrees.

-- **Covenant of redemption:** An eternal covenant exists among God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the redemption of elect humans through the Son.

-- **Eternal justification:** The elect are justified in eternity whether or not they demonstrate requisite faith in earthly history.

-- **No offers of grace:** Preachers should be discouraged from offering grace indiscriminately to their hearers, who presumably would include both the elect and the damned.

-- **Antinomianism:** Christians are not obligated to obey the moral laws of the Old Testament.

Tiptoe through the TULIP: Baptist Boomer theologians show fondness for Calvinism

BROWNWOOD, Texas (ABP) -- Among Baptist Baby Boomer theologians, at least half of the major authors are committed to Calvinism, an influential Baptist theologian of an earlier generation has noted. James Leo Garrett Jr., distinguished professor of theology emeritus at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary examined 10 Baptist theologians of the Baby Boomer generation during a plenary address at Howard Payne University's recent Christian doctrines colloquy. The Baptist school is located in Brownwood, Texas.

Garrett identified three as "pronounced Calvinists" -- John Piper, Tom Nettles and Timothy George. He listed two -- Donald Carson and Wayne Grudem -- as "moderate Calvinists" and one -- David Dockery -- as "Calminian," an amalgam of Calvinist and Arminian theology.

Of the remaining theologians Garrett examined, he said three did not position themselves about Calvinism in their writing -- Paul Fiddes, Stanley Grenz and Nigel Wright. One, Roger Olson, he identified as "the principal Baptist advocate of Arminianism."

In his presentation at Howard Payne -- a condensed version of a chapter from an upcoming book -- he dealt most thoroughly with Piper and Nettles.

Jonathan Edwards -- the 18th century pastor-theologian perhaps best known for his "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon -- profoundly shaped Piper's theology, Garrett noted. Edwards was particularly influential on Piper's understanding of the doctrine of God, he said. "There is a sense in which Piper's theology consists of only one doctrine -- the doctrine of God," he said. "It's the supremacy and the glory of God, even more than his sovereignty, that is central to Piper's theology."

Garrett noted with interest the controversy that arose in 2005 when Piper advocated that his congregation, Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minn., adopt a policy of open baptism. The policy would grant full membership to Christians who gave evidence of conversion but who were sprinkled as infants. "John Piper, who has expanding and far-reaching influence as a pastor-theologian in the God-glorifying school of Edwards, has increasingly demonstrated that he is first evangelical and Reformed and, second, Baptist," Garrett said.

Nettles, who is a professor of historical theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, simultaneously advanced the causes of Biblical inerrancy and Calvinism in Southern Baptist ranks beginning in the early 1980s, Garrett noted. "Nettles laid the blame for the demise of Dortian Calvinism among Southern Baptists on E.Y. Mullins for his theological methodology in which experience overshadowed the Scriptures and on L.R. Scarborough for his evangelistic methodology centering on what Nettles called 'decisional regeneration,'" Garrett said.

Mullins was a president of Southern Seminary, and Scarborough was president of Southwestern Seminary, both in the early 20th century. "Nettles seems to embrace the 'domino theory,'" Garrett observed. "That is, if the doctrines of Dortian Calvinism should be rejected and not be allowed to be the fountainhead of all theology, then theological crises, non-evangelical positions and process theology would be the result."