

Wright misfires: Not every moment is a time for prophecy

From the Editors in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

Prophets do not always have a balanced view of reality. They are not people who have made a pragmatic adjustment to the status quo. Rather, prophets are people seized by a vision of God's justice. They speak poetically and act dramatically, trying to move people to face truths that they'd rather not face. They make hyperbolic complaints, like Isaiah's "No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly." They do outrageous things, like walk around barefoot as a sign of a coming catastrophe.

Understanding a prophet's style partially explains some of Jeremiah Wright's performance at the National Press Club on April 28. But understanding does not necessarily mean endorsing. Not every moment is a time for prophecy and not every act intended to be prophetic is wise.

A few weeks ago (April 22) we devoted several pages of the magazine to putting some of Wright's controversial comments in the context both of his impressive leadership at Trinity United Church of Christ and of the prophetic tradition in the black church. It was therefore distressing to watch Wright at the press club repeat some of his indefensible views. Wright surely knew that his defense of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and his refusal to reject the notion that AIDS was a government plot against blacks were going to be picked up by the media and used by many people to define his ministry and the presidential campaign of his parishioner, Barack Obama.

Wright's dismissal of Obama as just another politician was perhaps another instinctive prophetic gesture on his part, a way to make clear his oppositional stance toward the ruling powers regardless of who is president. Yet because it did not spring from a substantive disagreement with Obama's policy proposals, it came off as a gratuitous slap by a pastor at his own parishioner.

Wright actually did a good job of explaining black theology (“Different does not mean deficient”) in his formal speech to the press club as well as in his April 25 PBS interview with Bill Moyers. Trouble arose when he responded to the expected critical questions at the press club. He used a moment made for teaching and reaching those outside his community as a time for pronouncing judgment on the media.

The division between Wright and Obama has been agonizing for Trinity Church and for many black leaders across the country who don’t want to be forced to choose between two accomplished black leaders. It is also painful for all Christians who respect both the prophet’s vocation to provoke and the political leader’s vocation to explain and persuade.