



Reports of some Black clergy urging their followers to abstain from voting in the presidential election over President Obama's support of gay marriage should raise questions within the African-American community concerning exploitation of the pulpit. Though cloaked in biblical justification, the message of these pastors is foreign to the true message of love and compassion offered by Jesus and little more than hate fueled by ignorance, prejudice and arrogance. While these pastors are free to express their individual partisan political preference, their attempt to weight supposed sins by making homosexuality a political litmus test creates the appearance, if not the act, of standing in judgment despite the admonition in Matthew 7:1 to "judge not, lest ye be judged."

What is particularly offensive about Black ministers instructing their flock to sit out this election is the failure of many churches to engage on behalf of their own communities. While they take a stand against homosexuality, they fall short in addressing the violence that is taking our young people to an early grave, the abysmal state of public education, growing income inequality and poverty, food insecurity, the vulnerabilities of the Black elderly, and diminishing opportunity for young people in the economy. Yet, we see multi-million dollar ministries housed in multi-million dollar palaces where a "prosperity gospel" is preached by million dollar ministers right smack in the middle of extreme poverty and despair. To take a stand against gay marriage is like pulling a needle out of a haystack. The impracticality of these pastors offends the Gospel and makes the church irrelevant in the lives of most of the people on which it depends for survival.

For some time now a quiet debate has been raging in the African-American community over the relevance of the Black church in the 21st century. Historically, the Black church has played an important role as the moral conscience of the nation and an institution that sees the fight for social justice in keeping with the teachings of Jesus Christ. Long before the civil rights movement, the early Black church in America was at the forefront of the abolition movement and leaders of the day such as Frederick Douglass were empowered through their faith. Today,

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Written by Walter Fields

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we see a church estranged from the needs of its communities and disengaged from the call to true Christian discipleship. Instead, we have many Black pastors self-absorbed in materialistic ritual and captive to self-serving practices meant only to increase their personal wealth and "celebrity" standing.

The idea that a Black pastor can exhort those he has presumably been "called" to minister to recuse themselves from their civic responsibility is not only disappointing, it is shameful. No doubt, some of these pastors truly believe that they are defending God's word but if that is the case why homosexuality and not a similar stand against adultery, poverty, material greed, and the indifference to life through violence? Is not voting truly reflective of what Jesus would intend or instruct his followers to do? After all, it was Jesus who spotted the tax collector Zacchaeus, not exactly a popular figure, in a tree in Jericho and let all know he would be a guest in his house? If Jesus could love Zacchaeus, why do some Black pastors have such a tough time expressing the same love and compassion for homosexuals?

This is where politics truly does corrupt the pulpit. The righteous indignation some Black pastors vent against President Obama's stand on gay marriage reeks of political manipulation and partisan purchase. For decades the right has sought ways to crack the Democratic Party's seeming lock on the Black Christian community and have stumbled upon the church's generally conservative mores as a way to exploit church leadership for political gain. While presenting themselves as driven purely by theological concerns, many of these pastors are likely Republican partisans or partisan beneficiaries. Instead of exposing their true partisan leanings or financial stake, they are hiding behind the Bible for ulterior motive and leading many in our community down a dangerous path.

The insanity of a pulpit directive to the Black community to not vote based upon the issue of gay marriage is best framed by Rev. Otis Moss III, senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, in an open letter penned to Black clergy. Rev. Moss advised:

"For the clergy to hide from true dialogue with quick dismissive claims devised from poor biblical scholarship is as sinful as unthoughtful acceptance of a theological position. When we make biblical claims without sound interpretation we run the risk of adopting a doctrinal position of deep conviction but devoid of love."

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Let the church say Amen.

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