

Does Political Involvement on the Part of Clergy Cross the Line?

Black clergy are as diverse as the congregants they lead. But few would argue that despite differences in educational attainment, size of their edifice and congregation, overall management abilities, authenticity of their calling, and demonstrated commitment to the community, Black ministers are considered by most—Black and White—to be the most influential leadership component of the Black community. So today, how goes Black clergy is how goes the Black community.

For decades, ministers have headlined Black social advocacy initiatives, with The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., most notable among them. Few would disagree that King was the gold standard. Proof of his leadership abilities and divine calling was in the pudding. He helped orchestrate tremendous legal and social advancements, as well as authored countless writings and books that continue to inspire, motivate and direct. King led the masses with dignity in social change, artfully deploying a full arsenal of nonviolent tactics that brought results and improvements that forever changed the lives of African Americans.

While carrying out his calling, Dr. King endeavored to steer clear of the political fray. In a biography of Dr. King titled *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Marshall Frady, award-winning reporter and prolific author, writes: “Dr. King would always have the good instinct as a social evangel to keep himself at a remove from any direct political enlistment—from ever transferring what was for him a spiritual vision into, as it were, the power machineries of Caesar.” King himself communicated his stance when asked about running for president as the peace candidate in the 1968 election. King said, “I have come to think of my role as one which operates outside the realm of partisan politics . . . as a conscience of all parties and all the people.”

But many of today’s Black clergy, local and national, are very active politically. They form political action committees (PACs), seek political appointments, pursue elective office, endorse political candidates, seek government grants and contracts under the banner of faith-based initiatives and become entangled otherwise in the political affairs of men and governments. So who has it right: Dr. King or politically active clergy?

Those who support the notion of politically active clergy argue that clergy are mere men and women and they too have viewpoints, aspirations, political leanings and vulnerabilities, which they should be free to act upon. Those who oppose clergy involvement in political affairs embrace the sentiments of Dr. King and argue clergy should act upon their political viewpoints only at a private level.

The presidential campaign of 1960 illustrates the wisdom of King’s views on clergy noninvolvement in political matters, even when a political candidate is one who clearly embraces the right social viewpoints. The 1960 campaign

demonstrates also the risk clergy face when entering the political arena or when uttering the slightest remark that can remotely be construed to constitute a political endorsement.

At the outset of the presidential campaign in 1960, King announced that as the leader of the nonpartisan Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), it was not proper for him to endorse Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy or Republican candidate [Richard Nixon](#). That same year, King was imprisoned under deplorable conditions at Georgia State Prison at Reidsville for helping to stage a sit-in at an Atlanta department store while on probation for a traffic violation—a matter that slipped King’s memory. Soon after learning about the arrest, Kennedy phoned Coretta Scott King to offer encouragement, but Nixon remained silent. Subsequently, members of Kennedy’s camp contacted the judge, also a Democrat, who had ordered King jailed and succeeded in hastening King’s release. King later admitted he was shaken by the harrowing events surrounding his transport to prison and incarceration.

Following his release from prison, King told reporters he owed “a great debt of gratitude to Senator Kennedy and his family,” adding, “I’m sure that the senator did it because of his real concern and his humanitarian bent.” When reporters asked King if he was endorsing Kennedy, King declined to render an endorsement. But that did not stop Kennedy’s camp from unleashing a barrage of flyers on Black churches across the nation the Sunday before the election that read: “No Comment Nixon Versus a Candidate with a Heart.” Many, including then-President Eisenhower, credit the flyers for Kennedy’s win in one of the closest elections in U.S. history.

Some historians contemplate what might be the fate of African Americans today if Nixon had prevailed, given his professed progressive stance on civil rights and Kennedy’s tepid positions on civil rights issues during his first two years in office. While the question is not one that can be answered, the actions of Kennedy’s political team demonstrate how politicians will leverage clergy’s influence for personal gain.

Achieving the ends of a national Black agenda requires uncompromised Black leadership at all levels, including local, state and federal. A clergy member who abides by four simple rules of nonpolitical engagement can “keep himself at a remove from any direct political enlistment—from ever transferring what was for him a spiritual vision into, as it were, the power machineries of Caesar.” The four rules of nonpolitical engagement are:

Rule 1: Exit the political arena so people can easily discern who your master is.

Rule 2: Enlist your congregation in helping to support a national Black agenda, financially and through volunteerism. Encourage members of your church to exercise their political rights but do not tell them for whom to vote.

Rule 3: Take on social activism as a congregation by working to end injustices and ensure equality and financial equity. Sodom's demise was as much about mistreatment of the poor as it was about other sins. God cares about the poor.

Rule 4. Steer clear of compromising positions, including government-funded contracts and grants. There are no government funds earmarked for religious institutions. "Charitable Choice," which is the heart of the "faith-based initiatives movement," is simply a government proclamation that requires local, state and federal officials to allow religious institutions to compete on equal footing for government-funded social services contracts and grants.

Clergy will aid with the success of a national agenda by adopting a stance of political noninvolvement. Free of political ties and encumbrances, clergy can advocate fiercely to politicians and others for social reforms as part of their God-given mission to serve the poor, orphans, homeless and widows. As Dr. King so aptly stated in 1968 in response to urgings to run for president, "I need to be in the position of being my own man." Black America desperately needs clergy who are in the position of being their own men and women.

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