

R. Khari Brown, Ronald E. Brown, and James S. Jackson. *Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. 167 pages. \$70.00

In our politically divided nation, the topic of the political sermon has become perennial for many church leaders. Do Americans have an issue with politics being preached in their houses of worship? Perhaps a way to answer that question is to look at it through the lens of the race of the parishioner. In *Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics*, the authors probe four poignant issues for our times in light of racial identity:

- 1) Support for clergy/religious leaders discussing political issues and or taking a political stand.
- 2) Attending places of worship led by politically active clergy, i.e. “political congregations.”
- 3) The relationship between attending political congregations and supporting progressive public policies.
- 4) The relationship between attending political congregations and political activism in congregants. (4)

Using multiple research methods to offer holistic findings such as case studies, interviews, historical figures, sermon excerpts, national survey results, and other quantitative data, the authors weave together the story of the role that race plays in the willingness to receive the political sermon. More salient, what are the racial differences for those who are willing to hear political sermons, support politically involved clergy, who attend political congregations and therefore support public policies aimed at reducing racism poverty, war, and nativism, and who become political active as a result of the political congregations they attend (15)?

In the introduction, the authors offer the case of Central United Methodist Church as an overtly political congregation with political leadership that has spanned decades. Knowing that the church is not the norm, the authors ask their research questions, while also defining what they mean in terms of American Covenantal Civil Religion, “a duty to engage in political activities that enhance the self-governance or sovereignty of powerless peoples” (12). Allowing each question to form the basis for the corresponding chapter, the authors offer compelling research and findings suggesting that not only does race play a significant role in the reception of the political sermon, but offering reasons for why that is the case.

In chapter 1, the authors investigate if racial differences correlate with Americans’ beliefs about whether or not clergy should engage in taking political stands in the pulpit. Offering examples of politically involved clergy such as Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a sermon excerpt from Rev. Mike Morran, and data from the 2016 National Politics study as well as other regional and national study data, they conclude: “In nearly every study examined, Blacks are more likely than Whites – and, to a slightly lesser extent, Hispanics – to favor their religious leaders and institutions taking public stands on social justice issues and politically acting on their beliefs” (37).

In chapter 2, the authors examine the degree to which racial difference is observed in the political discourse heard within American houses of worship (38). Highlighting different clergy and the churches they lead, analyzing survey data, and taking into account the lived experiences that lead to expectations about what is proclaimed in houses of worship, the authors conclude that “Blacks are more likely than Whites and Hispanics to attend political congregations, many with a commitment to social justice” (62). In light of this data, the question is posed, “Does

hearing a ‘political message’ shape a person’s support or opposition for policies that aim to reduce racial inequality, poverty, war, and enhancing citizenship opportunities for immigrants?” (62). Taking into account the Exodus narrative as a Christian/biblical framework that is applied to political issues more broadly, as well as liberation theology, examples of clergy sermons, and surveys on political congregations and policy attitudes, the authors conclude that “Whites attending political congregations are more likely to hold progressive policy positions than are their White counterparts attending nonpolitical or less political worship settings” (84). A significant finding to note is that whereas Blacks and Hispanics have lived experiences that will offer them insight into American suffering and marginalization, it is meaningful for Whites to attend political congregations where privilege can be challenged, race in the American context can be scrutinized, and the barriers that minorities face to opportunities and flourishing in America can be clearly articulated.

In chapter 4, the authors ask, when a person is part of a political congregation, what impact does that have on their political activism? The evidence indicates that for both Whites and Blacks, it makes a difference. “White attendees of political congregations are more likely to act politically on their beliefs than are both White non-worshippers and attendees of non-political congregations...[and] Black attendees of political congregations are more likely than other Blacks to politically act on their convictions” (101). Thus, it appears that political congregations produce politically active congregants for both Blacks and Whites.

In the concluding chapter, the authors summarize their findings by stating, “our study provides considerable evidence that race matters in Americans’ perceptions of the degree to which religious bodies should offer critiques (of public policies) (108). Further, “Race also matters regarding who attends those congregations and the potential effect attending has on their justice-related policy attitudes and political behavior ” (108).

The book is well researched, offers detailed data, and compelling arguments for the role that race plays in the willingness to hear the “political sermon.” Gleaning from the information offered in the book, we are compelled to ask: how can faith leaders move away from discussing *whether* politics can/should be discussed in the pulpit, and move forward with *how* it should be done effectively while taking into account the race of the hearer?

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