

The Real Reason Kim Burrell Was Targeted

The recent controversy surrounding gospel artist and pastor Kim Burrell raises a number of important questions regarding religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Equally important are issues related to Christian teaching on matters of human sexuality and the complicated matter of Christian performers dealing with the secular entertainment industry.

At the center of this discussion is Christian doctrine on sexual relations. There is a theological basis for Pastor Burrell's views on non-normative human sexuality. The eminent theologian, Carl F. H. Henry, correctly accords the Holy Scriptures absolute authority in determining church doctrine on all matters of faith and practice.

He states: "The Bible is the reservoir and conduit of divine truth. The Scriptures are the authoritative written record and interpretation of God's revelatory deeds and the ongoing source of reliable knowledge concerning God's nature and ways."

This ultimate reality is the basis of the doctrines that inform Pastor Burrell's beliefs. In the gospel, Jesus teaches that "God 'made them male and female.' 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife ...'" (Mark 10:6-7).

The celebration of the essential complementary nature of male and female is central to orthodox Christian teaching on human pairing. Furthermore, the unique manner in which the reproductive capacity of each completes the other, the sole means of reproducing the species, is a key aspect of the sacred nature of humanity. Marriage between a man and a woman serves as a metaphor for the love, devotion and fidelity of

the church's relationship with the Creator.

The real target of the assault on Pastor Burrell was the freedom of the black church to teach the Word of God as the Word of God.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees every American the right to free speech and to freedom of conscience and religion. It is a precious right that ensures the black church the freedom to practice its most sacred beliefs. These beliefs were the foundation of much of the resistance to bondage mustered by enslaved people such as Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey. It fueled the victories of the Civil Rights Movement.

It powers the extensive and extremely valuable service of black churches in inner-city communities across the country. It ensured the legal victory of Muhammad Ali. As such, it is a right that must be vigorously defended by the church, and that ought to be protected by all who champion the rights of the poor. As the presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ, Charles E. Blake, stated at a recent address at Princeton Theological Seminary, religious freedom "is a founding principle of this great nation, and much more than that, the God-given right of every human being."

The swift retribution and outpouring of criticism which Pastor Burrell has endured raise concerns for all people of faith, and even for those who espouse no faith at all.

In the current climate, there is a threat to all Americans' freedom to embrace and put into practice our beliefs. Historically the limit of speech in the U.S. has been on statements that pose an immediate threat of violence.

It appears that this is no longer the standard. Our Canadian neighbors have declared that messages such as Pastor Burrell's are hate speech and therefore should be criminalized. The vilification of Christian teaching evident in this incident leads to its almost inevitably to its criminalization. It

functions to intimidate black church leaders from teaching with integrity biblical doctrine.

It undermines the very strength of the most important institution in black America, one which provides millions of dollars in unpaid services to poor each year. The message of the black church is one of justice, love, hope and struggle. It is not primarily focused on human sexuality, consistent with the emphases of biblical teaching. But every element of that teaching is divine truth, and none can stand independent of the others. To attack Christian orthodoxy on sexuality is to attack all of biblical teaching. And God's love is not license for un-biblical behavior in any sphere of life.

Despite all this, the incident with Pastor Burrell serves as a cautionary tale. One of the most vexing challenges for artists raised in the black church is crossing over into the secular entertainment industry.

It is clearly impossible for Christians to never do business with those who fall short of biblical standards, since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Furthermore, to attempt to do so would be contrary to the example of Christ himself and of the Christian teaching. However, Christian artists must be aware of the moral and spiritual risks of allying themselves with the idols of the culture. And this is all the more important when they are pursuing wealth and fame. To do so opens us up to charges of at the very least, hypocrisy.

This incident highlights the need for the black church to stand firm on the right to religious freedom. At the same time the church must exemplify biblical standards of holiness in every sphere of life. Above all, let us not fall into the trap of hypocrisy. {eo}

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