Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching

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In 1969, the Speech Communication Association released a new text, by Dr. Dewitte Holland, with the title *Preaching in American History, 1630-1967*. This 436-page volume contains 20 essays on various topics in American history and the treatment of these topics from the pulpit. In the Introduction, the author states:

American preaching, then, from a substantive point of view has never been adequately described and interpreted, nor has such an analysis ever been attempted, except from restricted sectarian points of view. . . . Preaching as a specialized form of public address has been studied in the speech field for a number of years, and a large body of research findings has accumulated. With rare exceptions, this material lies quite hidden away in university libraries [Holland, 1969: 11-12].

Most of this material, however, is concerned with White preachers and their preaching. Very little research, in comparison, is reported on the art and description of or the strategies for Black preaching. Consequently, comparatively
little material on Black preaching is on the shelves of our university libraries.

This article attempts to direct attention to this very important and significant domain within the field of Black rhetoric. Much has been said about the Black church, but much less effort has been focused on Black preaching. Traditional Black preaching is not simply preaching or sermonizing by Blacks. An attempt to identify and describe the underlying qualities of Black preaching will, therefore, be made in this article in order to distinguish Black preaching from all other forms of homiletics.

BACKGROUND

Benjamin Mays, distinguished southern educator and preacher, introduces *The Negro's Church* (Mays and Nicholson, 1969) with a graphic description of the settlement of the Negro in the World:

In this strange and somewhat hostile environment [slavery], it became necessary for the Negro to work out for himself a technique of survival. As a part of his early survival tactics, he learned to smile and dance under circumstances that would ordinarily have caused one to frown and possibly to fight. He developed a keen sense of humor, and this enabled him to release suppressed emotions in a way that did not offend, and at the same time carried him through difficult situations.

Possibly the most significant technique of survival developed during the days of slavery might well be called a "religious" technique, which is represented by the Negro spirituals and by the early efforts to establish and develop the Negro church.

Relatively early the church, and particularly the independent Negro church, furnished the one and only organized field in which the slave's suppressed emotions could be released, and the only opportunity for him to develop his own leadership. . . . He demonstrated his ability to preach; and this demonstration convinced both Negroes and Whites that he was possessed of the Spirit of God [Mays and Nicholson, 1969: 1, 3].
Several authors have suggested varying functions of the Black church and its preaching. Mays and Nicholson (1969: 58) go on to say:

The Negro church is one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest, channel through which the masses of the Negro race receive adult education. Furthermore, a goodly number of Negroes believe what their pastor tells them. He still exercises a dominant influence in the lives of many.

Joseph Washington (1964: 2, 33) notes:

The social role of Negro churches is of great importance, especially among the Baptists, the denomination of the masses, whose members are not inclined to develop a distinctive social life in sororities, fraternities, social clubs, or community organizations. No less important is the position of the Baptist minister as the news medium of the community. He is expected to gather the local news and circulate it through his sermons on Sunday. In fact, almost all ministers in southern Negro communities are looked to as the disseminators of information, and the pipeline of the community leads directly to them.


The Black preacher has always enjoyed the status of being the natural leader of the Black community. His leadership role has at times assumed a variety of forms with concomitant responsibilities: pastor or spiritual leader, political leader, social leader, and very often the leading proponent and exemplar of education.

And Washington (1964: 91) later quotes a minister as saying:

In the eyes of my people I am qualified to carry out these functions: race and civic leader, moral instructor, preacher, church builder, labor arbiter, organizational official, promoter of businesses, social and welfare agent, denominational spokesman and educator.
It is in this context that this article examines preaching within the Black church.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL BLACK PREACHING**

The analytical study or rhetorical criticism of Black sermons often proves difficult because manuscripts of these sermons are very rarely available. Five problems are immediately identifiable:

1. Most Black sermons were not and are not prepared in manuscript form.
2. Most Black sermons through the centuries were not and are not tape-recorded during delivery.
3. Some preachers are reluctant to release copies for criticism.
4. Since most Black sermons are in dialogue form, manuscripts may not satisfactorily represent what actually took place in the church.
5. Sermons in the Black tradition were not written to be read. Much of the real impact, therefore, is lost unless the critic knows how the words would have sounded, and can picture the delivery in his or her mind as he or she reads the manuscript.

In spite of these circumstances, however, a few texts and some descriptive essays are available. For example, Sir George Lyell, a British geologist who had recently returned to England from Georgia, described a Black sermon preached by the Rev. Andrew Marshall of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah. Marshall had been called to the pulpit at age 67 and served for 44 years, from 1812-1856. Sir George's description is vivid:

The singing was followed by prayers, not read, but delivered without notes by a negro of pure African blood, a gray-headed venerable-looking man, with a fine sonorous voice, named
Marshall. He, as I learned afterward, has the reputation of being one of their best preachers and he concluded by addressing to them a sermon, also without notes, in good style, and for the most part in good English; so much so, as to make me doubt whether a few ungrammatical phrases in the negro idiom might not have been purposely introduced for the sake of bringing the subject home to their family thoughts. He compared it to an eagle teaching her newly fledged offspring to fly, by carrying it up high into the air, then dropping it, and, if she sees it falling to earth, darting with the speed of lightning to save it before it reaches the ground. Whether any eagles really teach their young to fly in this manner, I leave the ornithologist to decide, but when described in animated and picturesque language, yet by no means inflated, the imagery was well calculated to keep the attention of his hearers awake. He also inculcated some good practical maxims of morality. . . . Nothing in my whole travels gave me a higher idea of the capabilities of the negroes, than the actual progress which they have made, even in a part of a slave state where they outnumber the whites, than this Baptist meeting. . . . They were listening to a good sermon, scarcely, if at all, below the average standard of the compositions of white ministers [Fishel and Quarles, 1970: 98-99].

In his text on revolutionary rhetoric, Molefi Asante comments on the preachers’ sermons that told of a heavenly reward for a good earthly life:

In this role, the black preacher perfected the art of inducing cathartic experiences for his members. Indeed after some sermons, members of the audience were prostrate on the floor with foam running out of their mouths. The business of the black preacher during slavery was the business of consolation. He consoled in life as well as in death, for life was often a living death. He also developed a strong imagination to go with his ministerial functions. It is from this imagination that the black preacher received his special "revelations" on certain scriptural themes [Smith, 1969: 45].

Ministers, therefore, sensed the great responsibility they had in preaching the Word and they seriously attempted, in spite of
their limited formal education, to communicate the message of salvation vividly and descriptively, thus making an immediate impact on the congregation. Dr. Gardner Taylor (1977: 45) in delivering the Lyman Beecher Lectureship on Preaching at Yale in 1975-1976, recalled the commitment of Black preachers to their commission:

I used to hear the old black preachers in my earliest years expatiate loftily and soar to magnificent heights of eloquence on this very notion. They would say in their picturesque way, their great voices now rolling like thunder, now whispering like the sighing of the wind in the trees: “God might have found so many other ways to spread the Gospel of the love of God. He might have written His love in the skies and in the rising sun so that men looking upward could have read the message, ‘God so loved the world.’ He might have made the ocean sing His love and nightingales to chant it. Neither of these, not even angels, could ever preach and say, however, ‘I’ve been redeemed.’ So this is a Gospel for sinners saved by Grace and only saved sinners can preach.”

SERMON TYPES

In one chapter of their text, Mays and Nicholson, (1969) report on their study of 100 sermons preached by Black ministers. Of the 100 sermons studied, they report that 26 were on life situations (that is, practical, relating religion to economic, racial, and international aspects of life); 54 were other-worldly (concerned with the hereafter); and 20 were doctrinal or theological (exposition about the Godhead, and so on) (1969: 58-59). It must be noted that over one-half of these sermons concentrated on the hereafter, and the rewards awaiting those who “overcome” in this life. It would be of particular interest if a similar survey were conducted today in order to determine if Black preaching today, as opposed to 50 years ago, is more concerned with contemporary life experiences and problems than with the world beyond.
In this study, it was not possible to arrive at a set pattern or sets of patterns of organization in traditional Black preaching. There were, however, certain styles that appeared rather consistently in the sermons. For example, one finds that Black preaching seems to require the speaker to touch the deep emotions of the audience very early in his sermon.

Some preachers chose a short statement of interest prior to presenting the text; some others told humorous stories and thereby relaxed themselves and the audience; still others used an informal style of general comments (unrelated to the prepared sermon), which provided a preliminary introduction. A few preachers invited a soloist or the choir to sing while they stood before the congregation praying, clapping, or chanting. In other cases, the minister either began with an invocation or immediately announced his text.

In all cases, there seemed to be but one purpose, namely, "to establish a situation in which the deep feelings of the preacher and the people may be expressed in a climate of acceptance and faith" (Mitchell, 1970: 186). Thus the preacher used the introduction first to present himself (establish credibility and ethos) and then to launch his text. In addition, Mitchell noted that with older traditional black audiences ministers usually cited their texts from the Bible and proceeded with authority and acceptance. In contrast, youthful and more contemporary Black audiences required some means "whereby the need for biblical insight is established. Otherwise they could hardly care less about a text," (Mitchell, 1970: 187).

Appearing quite consistently within the development of the Black sermon is the extended description or re-creation of a Bible story, usually one with which the congregation is already familiar, but which is now repeated with an additional or new insight. Early Black preachers, deprived of higher education, were forced to elaborate on Bible stories with imagination that
would make the story meaningful to their congregations. This phenomenon continues today as Black preachers update the familiar biblical materials to increase the insights of the hearers. Thus the stories have plots with conflicts and suspense, heroes and villains. There is enough action and movement to maintain keen interest and to demand attention. The story is therefore relived and experienced by the listeners. Mitchell (1970: 144-146) recalls the following excerpt from one of his sermons:

Jesus told a story of a man who had perhaps been a bookkeeper for the king, and he stole, he absconded, he misplaced a million or more dollars in today's money. I don't know whether he had expensive girlfriends, or played the horses with it or what, but it was gone—all gone! Then one day the king had his books audited and the cover was pulled off. By this time the king was pretty upset. He was hot with that bookkeeper. He called that rascal in and ordered him—his wife and the whole family—to be sold for a small part payment.

But the man stood up in front of the king and pled and cried and pled and just carried on so.... Talking 'bout, "Give me a break, I'll pay you every cent." And the king said to himself, "Well, if I did put him in jail, I'd just be feeding him. And there's no way in the world a working man could start to pay the interest, much less pay back the principal; and I could hardly miss the price they'd bring on the slave market. No man in his right mind would ever let him keep books again."

So he let him go—for gave the scoundrel! Happy now, this dude fell down before the king and thanked him and kissed his feet and all that. O happy day!

In no time the bookkeeper went out in the street and he met another servant that owed him a measly two dollars, just enough for one bet on a horse at the racetrack. And the Bible tells us that he grabbed him by the throat like this (gestures—grabbing both coat lapels with one hand near the throat) and said, "Looka here, man, I want mah money, and I want it now!" The poor fella fell down on his knees and pled for patience. He promised to pay it all just as soon as he could. But the king's ex-bookkeeper wouldn't hear to it at all. He called a sheriff and had his old friend thrown in jail.

One of the king's servants was passing in the meantime and saw the whole thing. He couldn't get to the king fast enough. "Your
majesty, you know what? You just gave that rascal a million dollars, and he's out there tryin' to throw his friend in jail for two measly bucks."

Let me tell you, the king got mad. He was furious. He said, "Send him back in here." And when he came in, the king said, "Put him under the jail and throw the key away!" Because you see, the measure that he used on his two-dollar debtor was the same measure that was used on him; only for him it was a lot harder than it was on his friend.

Whatever you use to measure your friends and fellow members, God is gonna send for you to come back and say, "Looka, here, Sister, looka here Brother, if you gonna be this rough, how will it fit on you?"

Much has been said about the climax of the traditional Black sermon and some commentators suggest that it is a mournful occasion of weeping and shouting:

The Black climax, at its best, is a kind of celebration of the goodness of God and the standing of Black people in his kingdom, as these elements have been expressed in the message.

In order to accomplish this, the Black preacher has shifted from objective fact to subjective testimony—from "he said" and "it happened" to "I feel" and "I believe." While middle-class white preachers are admonished to avoid what Henry Sloan Coffin called "ecclesiastical nudism" in the pulpit, Black preachers, in climax, lay bare their souls in symbolic and contagiously free affirmation. The achievement of complete liberty in the spirit affirms the preacher's personhood in a positive, healing catharsis. But his assertion of self in the form of unlimited praise of God is a form of fulfillment in which it benefits both vicariously and directly [Mitchell, 1970: 188-189].

Mitchell, therefore, suggests that the Black climax is truly a celebration, maybe tearful or maybe ecstatic, but it is the high point at which the audience feels the strength of the point of the sermon, embraces it and celebrates it corporately. Black religious culture is emotional, it moves people, changes lives, and is, therefore, meaningful and effective to them.

Few Americans who heard Dr. Martin Luther King's address at the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963 will ever
forget the strength and forcefulness of the conclusion of his speech. The now famous, “I Have a Dream” has etched its way into the memory, not simply because of logic and reason, but because it aroused the highest emotions and challenged the best qualities in the listeners to work for an integrated America. Such is the nobility of the climax in the traditional Black sermon climax.

OTHER QUALITIES OF BLACK PREACHING

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Black preachers represent probably every level of academic attainment in American society. Thus their language styles are varied, usually consistent with their educational training. However, the Black preacher, even the most learned, is often less inhibited than his White peer and demonstrates this by his use of contemporary Black language, figures, and experiences. He feels he must present the scriptures in the language and culture of the congregation, “the in-language,” and so it is not uncommon to hear statements delivered in the language of the community. Consequently, Black English is not only common but essential in Black preaching. Not to use it may be detrimental. As Mitchell (1970: 149-150) notes:

Consequently, those trained Blacks who are also fluent in Black English—the language of their people—are conspicuously effective and in great demand.

In fact, it has often been argued by the faithful that those preachers who deliberately tried to preach white to their Black congregations were possibly not even “saved.”

Thus linguistic flexibility is a mark of effective Black preaching. On the other hand, however, the Black congregation responds to the well-turned phrase and embellished beauty of language.
One of the very noticeable skills of the Black preacher is the use of cadence. This characteristic is probably as prevalent among highly trained Black ministers as it is among the storefront clergy. It is effective and adds a degree of credibility to the speaker. Dr. Martin Luther King's cadences were essentially Black. Despite his formal training and language, his national status and reputation, he was heard as a soul brother, as a down-home Baptist preacher.

CALL AND RESPONSE

It is not uncommon for Black preachers to pause for a breath and receive responses from their congregations. Of course, some ministers deliberately pause after an important word or phrase, thereby calling for the response. At times, they specifically call for an “Amen” or other verbal response. Usually the response is the repetition of the exact word or phrase, or it may be an affirmatory statement such as “Oh Yes,” “Praise God,” “Thank You, Jesus,” or “Have Mercy.” This custom from their African heritage provides the audience an opportunity to participate and to feed back favorably to the message of the sermon. On occasion, specifically poignant phrases or texts are restated for emphasis.

What one finds here, however, is not always feedback. In several instances, the audience participation precedes the words of the speaker, and many Black preachers admit that they actually respond in their preaching to the call of the congregation. “Thus, call-response may not be the call of the minister and the response of the congregation; it may be the exact opposite with the audience stimulating (calling) the minister to new heights of oratorical excellence and insightful sermonizing (Niles, 1980: 147).

CONCLUSION

Thus worship and the preaching are meant to be joyful. The shared experience becomes contagious and the congregation
collectively responds to the leadership and communicative skills of the preacher. Black preaching, therefore, is not simply organization and presentation of religious materials in a lecture style or format. Rather, it is the careful orchestrating of the needs of the congregation, the satisfaction of those needs through carefully selected materials related to the congregation's experiences and presented vividly and descriptively to awaken their highest intellectual ability and touch their deepest emotions as they look forward with enjoyment to a heaven free from the bigotry, pain, sorrow, and death of this world. Such is the true nature of Black preaching.

REFERENCES


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