

African-American Preaching in the Context of American Christianity

Maurice Watson, D.D.

Senior Pastor, Beulahland Bible Church, Macon, Georgia

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Sometime ago, I was sitting in a preaching class with fellow students from different racial backgrounds, engaged in a spirited and interesting dialogue on the nuances of preaching in African-American and white churches. The professor made a statement he thought was innocent and wholesome, but it did not sit well with me, and I let him know it. He said, "You black preachers need to 'whitenize' your preaching."

Whitenize our preaching? I was so offended that, in the anger of the moment, I never thought to ask what he meant by "whitenize." "No, we don't need to 'whitenize' our preaching," I retorted. "Maybe you should 'blackenize' your preaching!" I could not help thinking this guy was telling me my white colleagues' preaching is superior to that of my black colleagues, and if black preachers are to be taken seriously, we should change the way we preach. You can imagine how tense and strained the class period was after that exchange.

I may be guilty of psychologizing, which I try not to do, but maybe he was trying to say that for African-American preaching to be palatable to a broader audience, we need to take off some of the emotional and passionate edge.

Perhaps he was saying should turn down the volume. Or, perhaps he was trying to say that black preachers should not express the rhythm, musicality and ecstasy of the celebrative moment of their preaching. Could it be he was saying that black preachers are not as Aristotelian and linear in their homiletic delivery as he would like? Maybe he meant that African-American preaching needs to contain three or more alliterated points with the subpoints to the subpoints alliterated as well.

I am not sure what he meant by the "whitenization" of African-American preaching, but it does provide the launching pad for me to embark upon the topic I have been asked to address: "The Contribution of African-American Preaching to American Christianity." To refer to the subject of preaching in ethnic terms is somewhat out of the boundaries of my educational training. The preaching classes I took (notwithstanding that brief cultural exchange with the professor mentioned above) provided insights on what "preaching" is without regard to race or ethnicity. For example, in a doctrinal preaching class taught by Dr. Robert Smith, I was informed of several definitions of preaching:

- Donald M. Bailey (Scottish preacher) said, “Doctrinal preaching exists to make preaching as hard as it needs to be.”
- E. K. Bailey said, “Preaching is focusing on a portion of Scripture in order to clearly establish the precise meaning of the text, and then to poignantly and passionately motivate the hearers to adopt the action and attitude of the text.”
- William J. Carl said, “It is Christian preaching that is grounded in the biblical witness to Jesus Christ: It starts with a text, a doctrine or cultural question, but regardless of the starting point, it addresses several doctrines.”
- P. T. Forsyth said, “Doctrinal preaching is the hallelujah chorus of an ordered community.”
- Haddon Robinson said, “Preaching is the communication of an idea that is derived from Scripture and transmitted through a grammatical, historical, and literary study of a passage in its context which the Holy Spirit first applies to the life and personality of the preacher and then to the hearer.”
- Fredeidrich Schliermacher said, “It is the account of religious affection set forth in speech.”
- Robert Smith said, “Preaching is the exegetical escorting of the hearers into the presence of God for the purpose of transformation.”
- John R. W. Stott said, “Preaching is the opening up of the inspired Word with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God’s voice is heard and God’s people obey Him.
- Phillips Brooks provides for me the best definition of preaching: “Preaching is truth through personality.”

As I see it, these definitions provide ample descriptions of preaching,

regardless of one’s ethnic origin. I am tempted question why we feel the need to refer to preaching in ethnic terms. I have not heard many discussions on the preaching of other ethnicities (that’s not to say those discussions are not taking place) outside of preaching from the perspective of white people and black people. I don’t hear much about Korean-American preaching, Asian-American preaching, Hispanic-American preaching, or Native-American preaching. But I know that there is quite a bit being said about African-American preaching.

Distinctives of African-American Preaching?

When one refers to preaching by using an ethic adjective or label, is he/she suggesting that all preachers of a particular ethic persuasion preach in a certain way? Or, is one suggesting there are distinctives that are indicative of the preaching of a “people-group?” Can we stereotype preaching based on ethnicity? If one believes we can, is he/she saying that all Euro-American preachers preach the same or, at the very least, preach a certain kind of gospel? Is one saying there are distinctives that set Asian-American preaching apart from other people-groups?

Dr. Cleophus LaRue, professor of homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary, believes there are distinctives of African-American preaching. In his book, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, he wrote:

Many people—preachers, homileticians, and lay folk—praise black preaching. They admire its vitality, relevance, and

communicational effectiveness. But what is it about African American preaching that makes it so distinctive and worthy of regard? Some have pointed to the high place of scripture in the African American tradition, others to the black preacher's creative use of language and storytelling, and still others to the free play of emotion and celebration in the preaching event or to communication techniques such as call-and-response.

However, none of these traits is the exclusive property of black preachers. All of them can be found to some degree outside the African American preaching tradition, and none of them fully accounts for the extraordinary character of black preaching . . . but the reason for the distinctive power of black preaching lies in the way that African Americans have come, in the refining fires of history, to understand the character of God and the ways God works through scripture and sermon in their lives.

In essence, the distinctive power of black preaching is a matter, not merely of special techniques but of extraordinary experiences that have, among other results, forged a unique way of understanding the Bible and applying those insights in very practical ways.¹

LaRue holds that black preaching differs from traditional understandings of the faith in its interpretation of the witness of Scripture in light of black's historical and contemporary experiences.² He suggested there are three central components that must be factored into

the preparation process when attempting to preach an effective sermon in the traditional black religious experience. The first component is a belief in the God about whom blacks preach. The second component is the importance of the black sociocultural experience to the preaching event. And, the third component of the black sermon is its practicality and relevance to a broad spectrum of black existence.³ LaRue summarized his position concerning a black distinctive for preaching by writing, "Powerful black preaching has at its center a biblical hermeneutic that views God as a powerful sovereign acting mightily on behalf of dispossessed and marginalized people."⁴ In essence, LaRue said the distinctive traits that set black preaching apart are its emphasis on the fact that God is on the side of the "underdog," and that black preachers interpret the Scripture through the lenses of their historical and contemporary sociocultural experiences as the oppressed.

Perhaps he is on to something. It is impossible to consider the distinguishing factors of black preaching without considering its relationship to the history of black people and the place of the black church in America. Other theologians also assert distinctives of black preaching:

Olin Moyd claimed that distinctively African-American preaching is characterized by narrative and repetition, while the structure attends to testimony, liberation, and celebration. James Harris claims that Christology is primary among African-American preachers and that Jesus as Liberator is the characteristic of genuine

“Afrocentric” preaching. This happens when preaching is “Prototypically Black,” proud of African heritage, socially critical, liberative, and celebrative. Leontine Kelly claims that Black Preaching is narrative and affirming. Lyndrey Niles draws almost entirely on Henry Mitchell (*Black Preaching*, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1970) for the categories of sermon structure which include introduction (personal identification with preacher), imaginative retelling of the Bible story, and a celebrative climax. He follows Mitchell in terms of style characteristics, claiming that Black Preaching has linguistic flexibility, cadence, call, and response.⁵

However, L. Susan Bond, assistant professor of homiletics and liturgics at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee, is of the opinion there is no single distinctive quality that sets black preaching apart from other traditions. She wrote, “While parish ministers and theological students are apt to speak of ‘a black style’ or ‘black preaching’ as if it were monolithic, such a situation is hardly the case.”⁶ Bond observed several styles of preaching among black preachers—the “gentlemen preachers” of an older rhetorical style; Afrocentrists who argue for a particular cultural and racial difference; celebrationists who favor a cathartic structure; a growing number of pastoral care theorists; and an emerging group of womanist and black feminist homileticians.⁷

I tend to agree with Dr. Bond—there is no single distinctive of African-American preaching. Just about every kind of preaching that is practiced in America is found in the African-

American church. Certainly to take the tradition of African American preaching with due seriousness is to take account of the real diversity within it and to avoid leveling it to a static phenomenon.⁸

Contributions of the “Preaching” of African-Americans

I probably will not win any popularity contests (in the eyes of some of my colleagues) with what I am about to assert, but I feel compelled to be true to my convictions and to what I believe the Holy Spirit is leading me to say. As an African-American person whom God called as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I do not believe God wants me to preach a “black sermon” (whatever that is). Nor do I believe any people-group is responsible for preaching an “ethnically labeled” sermon. While historical, social, cultural and ethnic factors influence our proclamation, they should not define our proclamation in an ultimate sense. We are called to “Christian preaching!” It is preaching that rightly interprets the Word of God and rightly applies it to the lives of people in light of their social, cultural, ethnic and spiritual condition.

In light of my conviction, I want to share what I believe are some of the significant contributions of the preaching of African-Americans to American Christianity. One important contribution is the high level of respect and regard for the place of the preacher in the community. This is important because the postmodern view of the preacher is not very high. However, stretching back to the early slave preachers and to the beginnings of the institutional black church, preaching has held a prominent

place in the life of African-Americans. Presiding over slave baptisms, funerals and weddings was the slave preacher, leader of the slave's religious life and an influential figure in the slave community. Usually illiterate, the slave preacher often had a native wit and unusual eloquence. Licensed or unlicensed, with or without permission, black preachers held prayer meetings, preached and ministered in difficult situations. A highly visible figure in the community, the preacher occupied a position of esteem and authority. On one hand, the slave preacher was criticized by former slaves as the "mouthpiece of the masters." On the other, some slave preachers preached and spoke of freedom in secret. The weight of slave testimony suggests the restrictions under which the slave preacher labored and his authority was accepted because it came from God, not from the master. They respected him because he was the messenger of the gospel, one who preached the word of God with power and authority, indeed with a power which sometimes humbled white folk and frequently uplifted slaves.⁹

Even today, black people continue to have a high regard for the place of the preacher in the community. The preacher is looked to for leadership.

Contemporary black Christians look to the preacher to provide a word of hope and healing in the sermon, and they expect him/her to speak on behalf of God in light of their sociocultural, political and spiritual situation.

Another contribution of African-American preachers to the tapestry of Christianity in America has been the power of "telling the story." While I do not believe that all African-American

preachers preach in the narrative form, many (as in other people-groups) are masters at captivating an audience with story.

There is a great push these days among homileticians for narrative preaching. The idea is that since we live in a narrative world, effective preaching has to become more narrative. Haddon Robinson wrote:

Inductive sermons have a special appeal to inhabitants of a culture dominated by television and motion pictures. We have become a storied culture. Whether it is a mystery drama, a comedy or even a sports contest, there is a large element of induction. The drama isn't solved until the end of the last act, and the joke leads up to the punch line, and the sports event moves toward the final score. Inductive sermons fit that way of thinking. This is particularly true of a specific type of inductive sermon—a story told. You connect with a modern audience when you tell a biblical story with insight and imagination... Anyone who loves the Bible must value the story, for whatever else the Bible is, it is a book of stories. Old Testament theology comes packaged in narratives of men and women who go running off to set up their handmade gods, and of others who take God seriously enough to bet their lives on Him. When Jesus appeared, He came telling stories, and most of them have entered the world's folklore.¹⁰

Eugene L. Lowry, in his book, *The Homiletical Plot*, contends that sermons often fall short of being effective

because too many modern preachers are slaves of a deductive, logical and linear style of sermonizing. Lowry points out that great preaching should feel more like a story than a lecture.¹¹

Calvin Miller agrees with Robinson and Lowry in the call for the narrative approach to sermonizing. He suggests that preaching that is solely propositional, deductive and analytical often falls short of holding and galvanizing the modern listener's attention. Miller calls on preachers to consider changing from the predictable three-point "running commentary" style of exposition to an image-driven expositional approach.¹²

To these and other homileticians who are now calling for more narrative preaching, many African-American preachers can say, "Welcome back!" Historically many black preachers have been adept at "telling the story" in gospel preaching. Whether it is the story of the Exodus, Daniel in the lion's den, the Hebrew boys in the fiery furnace, the parable of the prodigal son, Paul and Silas in a Roman jail or a story about

justification or sanctification, they carry a deep and rich meaning to African Americans in light of our historical status as oppressed people in America. They provide hope and solace amid the injustice and despair. They are signal reminders that just as God delivered his people then, he is able and willing to deliver his people now.

Finally, I believe that black preachers, from the days of slavery until now, have been a part of the great preaching tradition in America. Some people are saying that most truly great preaching today is taking place in the black church. L. Susan Bond wrote, "The African American Christian tradition has produced a lion's share of America's great preachers. In fact many Americans consider the African American pulpit the pinnacle of religious oratory . . . If you want to learn from the best preachers, you might well focus on African American preachers."¹³ Dr. Joel Gregory, a professor of preaching at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University, contends that most great preaching today is taking place in African-American churches.¹⁴

¹ Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, (Louisville/London: Westminster John Know Press, 2000), 1.

² Ibid. p, 2

³ Ibid. p, 5, 6

⁴ Ibid. p, 6

⁵ L. Susan Bond, *Contemporary African American Preaching: Diversity in Theory and Style*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003) p, 2.

⁶ Ibid, (Preface) p. xi.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 231f.

¹⁰ Taken from *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. by Haddon W. Robinson, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), cited in “The Professional Journal for Preachers,” July-August, 2001, Vol. 17, p. 20f

¹¹ Eugene. L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000).

¹² Calvin Miller, *The Sermon Maker*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

¹³ L. Susan Bond, (preface), p xi.

¹⁴ From personal conversations with Dr. Gregory and with his permission.