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This material is taken from the book Black Preaching (Harper and Row 1979) written by Henry H. Mitchell. It provides a brief history of Black Preaching.

### **A Brief History of Black Preaching**

Fifty years ago, the African American (or Black) preaching tradition was looked down upon, even scorned by Western (or White) culture, and indeed by many Black intellectuals and self-styled radicals young and old. Today, among many (not all) of these same types, attitudes are considerably changed for the good. These changes have been brought about by a far greater understanding of the true character and strengths of the tradition. These have been brought to light by fifty years of fruitful excellence in scholarship from within the Black Church and the Black Academy.

This greater understanding of the roots and strengths of Black preaching has wrought marvelous correction in three major areas of thought: 1) Facts, truth, and the unbiased reporting of history; 2) Improved Black self-esteem, especially healthy spiritual self-esteem before God; and 3) Marvelous improvement in communication skills, as African Traditional Religion's (A.T.R.'s) highly developed rhetoric and oratory have been accepted and effectively adapted into Christian worship.

First, the facts.

Virtually all previous study of Black American Religion in general, and the Black pulpit in particular, was designed to justify and support slavery, as appropriate for the supposedly limited gifts of the enslaved African "savages." In the absence of irrefutable rebuttal in any form, and in the presence of a milder form of slavery in African society, it was possible to manipulate some slaves into nearly hopeless subjection to their chains. Even the conscience of many White Christians was anesthetized by this biased misreading of reality. Little wonder that Quakers spent so much labor on the *facts* of the U. S. Census, in strenuous but futile efforts to prove that Blacks were actually worthy of the vote in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was widely known that truth would set slaves free, so the truth was carefully repressed, and avoided almost everywhere. And the formerly few records about Black preaching and worship were delayed to a half century after freedom before beginning to come to common knowledge.

The arrival of truth about preaching and worship in the Black churches and communities has brought about huge improvement in Black spiritual self-esteem. Most Blacks have ceased to be ashamed of deep and healthy emotion in worship, and they are keenly aware of its beauty and healing qualities. This freedom of expression in pulpit and pew has permitted an integrity of identity that not only healed; it has empowered. It stood believers on their feet. One can no longer hate oneself as Black in color and culture, and at the same time truly love the God who made the self, Black. I have heard the thanks of numberless Black preachers for receiving a new self-confidence in spiritual gifts once expressed only in “stooping” to the cultural taste of the crowd. Of course, there were and are crowd manipulators who exploit emotionalism, but there are also spiritual preachers whose word is all about faith, hope and love, all three of which are *high emotions*, without which there can be no true worship. As “Aunt Jane an’ ‘em” used to say, “If you ain’t felt nothin’, you ain’t got nothin’.” The history of Black Preaching has yielded this deep insight known well already among those close to culture (A.T.R.) and kin.

The third major contribution is the most obvious now: an immense contribution to pulpit communication and excellence in preaching among all ethnic and national cultures.

Beyond the striking impact of the contribution to the excellence of preaching and worship in the Black church in the USA is the contribution to all the Christian pulpits on the planet. That is to say nothing of the contribution to Black survival under oppression, which is another essay and/or volume altogether.

Today, the homiletic values and resources of the Black tradition are no longer the sole possession of the Black Church. They never were (as we shall see). Their recovery is sought widely, even though it is far easier to affirm these values than to revive and reculturate pastors and whole congregations into the historic practice. However, every major movement has to begin somewhere, and there is no better time to start than now. This may indeed be the time and means for Christendom to be saved from terminal pulpit decline. To understand and teach the cultural/homiletic values at stake, it is necessary to understand its beginning and development.

### ***The Beginnings of Black Preaching<sup>1</sup>***

The preaching tradition of the Black ancestors did not spring into existence suddenly. It was developed during a long and often quite disconnected series of contacts between the Christian gospel, variously interpreted, and African men and women caught up in the Black experience of slavery and oppression. To this experience and this gospel, they brought their own culture and folkways. In a manner more unusual and powerful than they, or we dreamed—until recent decades—they devised a Black preaching tradition. This preaching tradition consisted of the ways Blacks delivered and responded to sermons. An attempt is made here to piece together the way in which this essentially oral tradition began and evolved. The records from which I have had to work are understandably very sketchy, and it was a pleasant surprise that even as much is presented here could be put together from the scarce reprints of books and from other documents that become available—mostly in the past fifty years.

Catholics and Puritans were among the first to evangelize American Blacks. Early efforts to make Christians of Blacks were dominated, however, by Anglican missionaries. Factions within

all of these church bodies, however, opposed these efforts. The most united group in both evangelization and emancipation of Blacks from the beginning were the Quakers. However, the very rapid growth of two sects in the late eighteenth century, the Methodists and the Baptists, brought a worship style and doctrine much more suited to Black temperaments and culture. Furthermore, the Methodists and Baptists were much less prone to get stuck on technicalities related to apostolic succession or the education of the clergy, than were the more formal church bodies. It is easy to see how it was from the ranks of the Methodists and Baptists that there rose up the first Black preachers of which we have any record.

### *Early Black Preaching<sup>2</sup>*

It is ironic that many of the first Black preachers may have preached to more Whites than Blacks (which may be why we have the record). This can be explained by several factors. One was that, in the early days of slavery, the number of Blacks who were permitted to hear Christian preaching was relatively limited. Many of the slave masters still held the humanity of Blacks under convenient suspicion. Masters were not willing to raise slaves above the level of animal property and thus concede that they were selling souls worthy of saving. Owing to the acceptance of the theory that Blacks were not human, Blacks were prohibited from attendance at worship or instruction. Even Thomas Jefferson, an enlightened architect of American democracy, raised serious objections to the human qualities of Black people, notwithstanding his own now widely known Black offspring. We know this about the third President because David Walker, a Black Methodist layman of Boston, pointedly and passionately refuted Jefferson in the widely circulated pamphlet *An Appeal*.<sup>3</sup> All of this affected the history of Black preaching because it worked against the establishment of large congregations of Blacks. The only place where the rare preaching gifts of some of the first Black converts could be exercised was in the predominantly White (and tolerant) congregations.

Another factor was that from the very beginning of slavery, many slaveholders had latent misgiving about how unchristian the slave system was. So, when many masters finally did permit the unfortunate Blacks to hear the Word, the portions selected for them were distorted passages from Paul, intended to sell slavery to the *slaves* as “the will of God” rather than the avarice of Whites. Even with this propaganda prepared by White preachers, the slaveholders feared that the slaves who became their brothers and sisters in Christ might somehow arrive at the notion that enslavement was scandalous. Some truth, however inadvertently, might be discovered.<sup>4</sup> At this early stage of slavery, a visible *Black* congregation was thus unthinkable.

Early in the slave experience, a great many masters required seven days of work a week, instead of six.<sup>5</sup> Little by little, the influence of new denominations prompted the giving of a day of rest, which, according to the Ten Commandments, was to be given even to animals. But the earlier denial of a day of rest was surely a factor in the lack of Black gatherings in which Black preachers could communicate the Word.

Furthermore, preaching was not the most rewarding endeavor, or respected calling in early colonial times, especially in the South. Hence, to allow a Black preacher to speak to a White audience as a mere functionary under their control was one thing, but to set one loose (with more freedom) among the slaves, saying what he really thought, was quite another.

A final factor that explains why Black preachers preached to White audiences may be that the Black preachers offered not only novelty, but also real talent and power. Thus, some Whites—especially in the new denominations already short of preachers—heard Blacks gladly because they were very often the best preachers available in a given locality.

Perhaps the best-known and most widely traveled Black preacher was the Reverend Harry Hoosier, better known as Black Harry, who preached from 1784 up to his death in 1810. He was the servant and companion of Bishop Asbury, and reputed by some to be the greatest orator in America.<sup>6</sup> He preached in both the North and the South, and he was capable of drawing large numbers of Whites. The Southern Methodist Bishop Coke records in his journal of a preaching tour of eastern Maryland, dated November 29, 1784, the following comment: “I have now had the pleasure of hearing Harry preach several times. I sometimes give notice immediately after preaching, that in a little while he will preach to the blacks; but the whites always stay to hear him.”<sup>7</sup>

Richard Allen, father of the African Methodist Episcopal church, did his earliest preaching to primarily White audiences. In fact, he indicates that he spent more than two years lay preaching and odd jobbing among Whites before he turned to his Black brothers and sisters. This was after he moved to Philadelphia, in 1786<sup>8</sup>

The Reverend Lemuel Haynes, who fought in the Revolution, was licensed to preach in the Congregational Church in 1780 and was later ordained. After that, he held only White pastorates in Connecticut, Vermont, and New York.<sup>9</sup> W.E. B. DuBois, brilliant Black scholar and social activist, suggests that the Reverend Haynes received his M.A. at Middlebury College in 1804.<sup>10</sup> All of the Reverend Haynes’ chroniclers indicate there was a good response among those he served.<sup>11</sup>

Dubois and Carter G. Woodson, father of Black History Week, also list numerous other early Black preachers who preached for Whites: John Stewart, who preached also among Native Americans in his Ohio ministry; Uncle Jack, a Baptist pastor in Nottoway Count, Virginia; John Chaves, a Princeton-trained Presbyterian in Virginia and North Carolina (also a schoolmaster in a private school for White aristocrats); Josiah Bishop of Portsmouth, Virginia who ably led Whites who were willing to free him but not call him as permanent pastor (he later served Black churches in Baltimore and New York City); Henry Evans, who started the White Methodist Church at Fayetteville, North Carolina, despite being ordered out of town; and Ralph Freeman, a Baptists of Anson County, North Carolina.

The Reverend Andrew Marshall had the distinction of being the missionary for the largely White Sunbury Baptist Association of Georgia before being called to First African Baptist Church at Savannah, where he served as pastor from 1812 to 1856. He was able to draw large congregations of Whites as well as Blacks.<sup>12</sup>

The first pastor of First African Baptist church, George Leile, was converted at Kiokee, Georgia, in 1773, while still a slave. Leile began immediately to preach, both to slaves and to Whites, at Matthew Moore’s Baptist church, of which he was a member. He was soon freed by his master

to devote his time exclusively to his preaching along the Savannah River. He was ordained in 1775 and was instrumental in founding or at least continuing the First African Baptist Church of Savannah, which may have been meeting much earlier.<sup>13</sup> In 1778, the members of Leile's first Black church at Silver Bluff, Aiken, South Carolina (in the vicinity of Augusta), are thought to have migrated or escaped to Savannah to join the British, who promised them freedom. When the British finally evacuated Savannah in 1782, Leile went with them to Jamaica, to protect himself from a return to slavery, and thus became the first "foreign missionary" from the United States.<sup>14</sup>

That Leile and Marshall were effective and well received among Blacks seems beyond question. But around the turn of the nineteenth century, Methodists and Baptists, North and South, had similar ingatherings. Charismatic Black preachers were to be found in many of the emerging Black churches. Before the day of great choirs and other attractions, these Black churches grew by leaps and bounds because they offered a warm fellowship in a cold, hostile world, and because there had already matured in the early churches a powerful Black preaching tradition.

As one ponders the rapid growth of the early Black church and the other evidences of the effective leadership of the early Black preacher, two significant questions arise: 1) what was their preaching like? and 2) where did they get their preaching style or tradition?

### *The Style and Content of Early Black Preaching<sup>15</sup>*

In answer to the first question, there are hints of Black style recorded here and there, but it is to be expected that the chief characteristics of Black style are not likely to be treated as important in such accounts. This certainty was true of records from the early years of Black preaching. One word often used by Whites to describe Black preaching was "sonorous" or tonal. There is good reason to believe that African culture influenced all Black preachers in their use of tonally pleasing voice, with or without intentional "moaning" or chanting. (Three-tone African drums could say anything a person could say. So tone had deep nostalgic appeal, even without English words.) This aspect is taken for granted by Blacks, but many Whites report being impressed by the pleasing speaking tones of Black preachers as well. The White Separatist Baptists in the South devised their own preaching tone; they called it the "holy whine."<sup>16</sup> Decades of African American seminary students have been surprised and delighted to learn that what they know as a "whoop" had—and still has, in a few areas—parallels in some White pulpits.

One person who used the word "sonorous" to describe Black preaching was the celebrated British geologist Sir Charles Lyell, who reported on a visit to the First African Baptist church at Savannah some time during Marshall's pastorate. Marshall was sixty-seven years old when he was first called to the church; therefore, Lyell's visit apparently occurred early in Marshall's forty-four year pastorate. Lyell's report read thus:

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 sonorous voice, named Marshall. He...concluded by addressing to them a sermon, also without notes, in good style, and for the most part in 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 speed of lightning to save it before it reaches the ground...described in animated and picturesque language, yet by no means inflated, the imagery was well calculated to keep the attention of his hearers awaked. He also inculcated some good practical maxims of morality.... Nothing in my whole travels gave 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...than this Baptist meeting...they were listening to a good sermon, scarcely, if at all, below the average standard of compositions of White ministers.<sup>17</sup>

The imagery Lyell refers to was intentional. The theme of the eagle stirring her nest is typical of the African-culture use of animal figures to teach great truths. The Black imagination Marshall brought to bear on the Bible text was mature, and part of a tradition doubtless centuries old. His skill was not a fresh miracle, but the result of a combination of cultures new to the English visitor but old to the preacher.

This much is certain: Marshall's synthesis of African culture and English Bible was not taught to him in any kind of formal school. Marshall partly learned the Bible at the feet of his predecessor and uncle, the Reverend Andrew Bryan. Marshall's use of Standard English must have been a combination of native skill and exposure to "standard" speech and literature. Schools open to Blacks were most unusual, even in the North. And most churches were unable to pay for a Black preacher's food, much less his training. Bishop Allen was quite typical in that he had progressed to the ownership of a shoe business, so that he could be independently secure. In his fifteen years as a bishop, he received only eighty dollars for all of his services. In other words, early Black preachers had to make it without formal school or support for their ministries, and with little time for study. Black preachers acquired the skillful use of English mentioned so prominently in early writing about them, in spite of being denied education and not having time to attend school—even if there had been a school open to them.

The majority of these preachers, of whose utterances we have almost no record whatsoever, were still slaves or only recently freed. In many cases, they were not even free to preach, and certainly not to study. In reflecting on the hazards of preaching as a slave, Moses Grandy of Boston tells of a brother-in-law who apparently died in North Carolina some time after the Nat Turner rebellion:

After the insurrection...they were forbidden to meet even for worship. Often they are flogged if they are found singing or praying at home.... My wife's brother Isaac was a colored preacher. A number of slaves went privately into a wood to hold meetings; when they were found out, they were flogged, and each was forced to tell who else was there. Three were shot, two of whom were killed...for preaching to them, Isaac was flogged and his back pickled; when it was nearly well, he was flogged again and pickled, and so on for some months; then his back was suffered to get well, and he was sold. A while before this, his wife was sold away with an infant at her breast;...on the way with his buyers, he dropped down dead; his heart was broken.<sup>18</sup>

Accounts such as this leave little doubt about the sincerity and dedication of the great majority of those whose preaching was prohibited and underground.

Under such pressures and limitations it is only natural that at least a few preachers should not be as saintly and sound as this martyr and as Pastor Marshall. Miles Mark Fisher quotes Frances Trollope's description of a service in a tent in an 1829 "camp meeting" in Indiana: "One of these, a youth of coal-black comeliness, was preaching with the most violent gesticulations, frequently springing high from the ground, and clapping his hands over his head. Could our missionary societies have heard the trash he uttered, by way of an address to the Deity, they might perhaps have doubted whether his conversion had much enlightened his mind."<sup>19</sup>

Trollope's evaluation may have been slanted because he was limited to English culture, and thus was unfamiliar with African culture; nevertheless, it is quite clear that not all of the first untrained Black preachers were so impressive as the first two mentioned. Undoubtedly, there were then, as there are now, some shallow, insincere manipulators. It must be said, however, that for the most part there is far more positive than negative evidence. The concern here is to record and preserve as much as possible of the *best* of the Black preaching tradition.

### *How the Black Homiletic Evolved<sup>20</sup>*

We turn now to the questions of whence and how the patterns and content of early Black preaching came, and how the tradition has grown from there. Black preaching and Black religion were greatly influenced by the confluence of two streams of culture, one West African and the other Euro-American.

#### *West African Traditional Religion*

The primary stream was African. Indeed, the Black church was an attempt, born of a cultural and religious nostalgia, to reestablish on American soil the worship practices and to extend the family society of A.T.R. Their former humane, communal patterns were a kind of prefabricated *koinonia*, which emerged first as a form of indigenous underground Black church. As DuBois said in 1903, this first church was "not by any means Christian," but "gradually, after two centuries, the church became Christian." He added, "It is this historic fact that the Negro church of today bases itself upon the sole surviving social institution of the African Fatherland that accounts for its extraordinary growth and vitality."<sup>21</sup> DuBois went on to suggest that the preacher was also a cultural survival, and Woodson agreed, adding, "The Negro ministry is still the largest factor in the life of this race."<sup>22</sup>

It is altogether natural, then, that the Black homiletic should reflect these same African roots. The languages of Africa are manifestly tonal, and all speaking includes such linguistic features. When Marshall preached with sonority, he was carrying on a traditional African musicality. Yes, he preached in English with impressive polish and dignity, but African rhetorical style is always dignified as well as sophisticated. Sonority is not a sign of primitivism, as is so often assumed even today.

Marshall dealt with the eagle stirring her nest, but this, too, was quite African. *Aesop's Fables* (learned in his childhood in Africa) and *The Tales of Uncle Remus* (heard from an African in slavery) are classic examples of the African custom of teaching coping skills and moral values by way of tales of animals. "The Tortoise and the Hare" taught patience and persistence. In the evolution into Christianity, the slaves simply substituted the Bible's story collection for their original repertoire of tales. Marshall's congregation responded because it was highly conditioned by familiarity with and love for this preaching style.

Black preaching is inherently dependent on call and response. African music and oral communication are characterized by considerable audience participation. The audience is deeply involved in the tale, which is presented in picturesque language and great animation. Even today, congregations of the Black masses feel cheated if no place for their response is provided. Black music is full of this antiphonal element, as well.

Generally speaking, picturesque language and animated delivery are part of a larger pattern of concreteness and liveliness. The former requires a word of further explanation. At no point did the African rhetorical tradition permit emphasis on abstractness, even though Yoruba professional philosophers can be downright mind-boggling. The Yoruba of Nigeria insist that ideas be expressed in images common people can visualize. The Old Testament is full of the same approach. Similarly, Jesus of Nazareth did all of his teaching in parables. The point is that the African insistence on images and action, tales and pictures with meaning, is no figment of a primitive imagination. It is a sophisticated principle of communication.

How, then, did all of this get baptized into the African American *Christian* preaching tradition? How did the fusion take place?

### *The Formation of Black Preaching Style*

When a people are considered insignificant, the powers that be do not bother to chronicle their development. Thus, the understanding proposed here is made of bits and pieces, as we have said. But these are validated by the strength of their coherence, and the internal witness of the Black of today, whose worship and preaching have not moved in any substantive way from their roots and beginnings.

The emergence of Black preaching dates back to 1732, according to William H. Pipes.<sup>23</sup> His very convincing theory is that the style of the great English revival preacher, George Whitefield, was the bridge between Black religious sentiments and selected aspects of the faith of the colonial White. Until the First Great Awakening (1726-1750s), White religion had been formal, cold, and unattractive. Suddenly, with the preaching of Whitefield (as well as Jonathan Edwards, the Tennents, and others), the response to preaching became very fervent and dramatic, with extreme physical manifestations.

A marvelously objective account of Whitefield was written by Benjamin Franklin, who was Deist, not a convention Christian and church member. Franklin said that Whitefield "might well be heard by more than thirty thousand." About Whitefield's preaching Franklin said, "his delivery...was so improved by frequent repetitions that every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of voice, was so perfectly well turned...that, without being interested in the subject,

one could not help being pleased with the discourse; a pleasure of much the same kind with that received from an excellent piece of music."<sup>24</sup> (It should be noted that Whitefield's Oxford degree was in drama.) The instant attraction of African slaves in the North and South to Whitefield's preaching can readily be seen.

Vernon Loggins has said, "The emotional preaching of Whitefield brought to the Negro a religion he could understand and which could stir him to self-expression. He responded to it with enthusiasm, allowed his imagination to run riot with it, love it passionately."<sup>25</sup> This interpretation of the African response to Whitefield is documented by the autobiography of an ex-slave named Gustavus Vass, who attended one of the services at Philadelphia. Vassa was by this time free, having spent many years as a seaman. He reported, "I saw this pious man exhorting the people with the greatest fervor and earnestness, and sweating as much as I ever did while in slavery...I was very much struck and impressed with this; I thought it strange I had never seen divines exert themselves in this manner before, and was no longer at a loss to account for the thin congregations they preached to."<sup>26</sup>

One direct channel of transmission of this "emotional" preaching can be traced from Whitefield's ministry in Massachusetts all the way to Andrew C. Marshall at the First African Baptist Church at Savanna. It started with Shubal Stearns (1706-1771, converted under Whitefield on his second visit to Boston in 1745) and Daniel Marshall, Stearns' brother-in-law from Connecticut (1706-1784; also converted in 1745). Both withdrew from the Congregational Church (1851 and 1852 respectively) under conviction as Baptists. Ordained as missionaries, they worked their way from New England to Winchester, Virginia, to Sandy Creek, North Carolina, to Kiokee, Georgia, where Daniel Marshall settled in 1771. There he was responsible for strengthening a small congregation and leading in the development of many other churches. One of these churches was the Black congregation at Silver Bluff, Aiken, South Carolina, which was started by George Leile.

Sydney Ahlstrom says, "Stearns and Marshall were passionate evangelists, incredibly energetic, not a little eccentric, and rather extreme in their employment of emotional appeals...They inspired many converts to do likewise."<sup>27</sup> It was in connection with this very revivalism that Ahlstrom uses the term "holy whine." It hardly seems coincidental that Lyell should report that the preaching of Andrew Marshall was sonorous. The emotional fire and pleasing tonality of the First Great Awakening were thus providentially used by God to affirm and employ the worshipways of Africans in the previously frozen wastes of the original Thirteen Colonies.

It is generally accepted that the church at Silver Bluff was the first African Baptist church of America, but whether or not this is true, African Methodists apparently heard Whitefield in Philadelphia in far larger numbers than Baptists. Whitefield preached up and down the Atlantic seaboard, starting in Savannah, where he both preached and founded an orphanage. In the crowds that swarmed his often-outdoor meetings, there were sure to be many Blacks. It is well known that Whitefield's style influenced thousands, in a movement that greatly democratized the pulpits and platforms of the colonies. It included the previously rejected White males without education, White women, and all Africans. Furthermore, the other great revivalists were similar in style and impact. Their effectiveness was so great that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Baptists and Methodists outnumbered established churches in New England (Congregational) and Virginia (Episcopal).

It would be hard to overestimate the influence of George Whitefield, for it was he more than any other who gave the once isolated colonies something, which bound them together enough to throw off the British yoke. It was Whitefield more than any other who not only revived a dying Protestantism but also built the bridge over which it could travel to a spiritually hungry and brutally oppressed people from Africa.

### *The Power of Black Preaching Through the Years*<sup>28</sup>

The final aspect of the history of Black preaching deals with the effectiveness and power of its communication, and how this may have increased or decreased through the years.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of the power of Black preaching is that the Black belief system of folk Christianity has kept its believers alive and coping—even when in an oppressed condition that would have crushed many. Slave narratives by the dozens recall sermon stories and pictures with *astounding accuracy*. It is clear that these sermons were so meaningfully memorable because the storytelling and picture painting arts were excellent, because the issue at hand was so relevant, and because the hearers were not mere spectators, but were real participants in the experience. There can be no doubt of the providential blessing of the Holy Spirit through this story.

One of the most relevant, vivid, and creative gospel messages I have ever heard of came from a collection of slave narratives compiled in 1936. Ned Walker, the layperson whose memory served so amazingly well, had heard the sermon *seventy* years earlier (c. 1866 or 1867) and was recounting it to a W.P.A. collector of oral history in South Caroline. This is my rendering of Ned Walker's account:

Now 'bout Uncle Wash's funeral. You know Uncle Wash was the blacksmith in the fork of the road, across the railroad from Concord church. He had been a mighty powerful man. He used the hammer and the tongs on behalf of *all* the people for miles and miles around.

Uncle Wash joined the Springvale A.M.E. Church, but he kind a' fell from grace, I guess. Somehow, he was 'cused of stealing Marse Walter Brice's pig, and I guess he was guilty. At any rate, he was convicted and sent to the penitentiary. While he was down there, he contracted consumption and had to come home. His chest was all sunk in, and his ribs was full of rheumatism. He soon went to bed and died. He was buried on top of the hill, in the pines just north of Woodward.

Uncle Pompey preached the funeral. Lots of White folks was there. Marse William was there, and so was his nephew—the attorney general from Arizona. The biggest of the crowd was our folks, and Uncle Pompey really knowed how to preach a funeral. I never will forget that one.

Uncle Pompey took his text from that place in the Bible where Paul and Silas was a-layin' up in jail. He dwelt on Uncle Wash's life of hard work and bravery—how he tackled kickin' horses and mules, so's crops could be cultivated and harvested and hauled. He talked 'bout how he sharpened dull plow points, to make the corn and cotton grow, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. He told what a good-hearted man Uncle Wash was, and then he 'llowed as how his goin' to jail didn't necessarily mean he didn't

go to heaven. He declared it wasn't eternally against a church member to get put in jail. If it hadda been, Paul and Silas wouldn't 'a made it to heaven, and he *knowed* they was there. In fact, they was lot a people in heaven what had been arrested.

Then he went to talkin' 'bout a vision of Jacob's ladder. "I see Jacob's ladder. An' I see brother Wash. He's climbin' Jacob's ladder. Look like he's half way up. I want y'all to pray with me that he enter the pearly gates, Brothers and Sisters. He's still climbin'. I see the pearly gates. They is swingin' open. An' I see brother Wash. He done reached the topmost round of de ladder. Let us sing with all our hearts that blessed hymn, "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood."

When they sang the second verse, 'bout the dyin' thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day, Uncle Pompey cried out over the crowd, "I see Brother Wash as he enters in, an' that dyin' thief is there to welcome him in. Thank God! Thank God! He's made it into Paradise. His sins has been washed away, an' he has landed safe forever more."

Well Sir, I don't need to tell you that the women started to shout on the first verse, an' when they got to singin' 'bout the dyin' thief in heaven, an' they seen the 'surance of grace that was in it, they liked to never quit praisin' God.<sup>29</sup>

It hardly needs to be said that such a message as this (perhaps without the dialect) would be powerful today. I gave a dramatic reading of this message at the end of a lecture at a great university several years ago, and to my surprise, the mixed audience was suddenly a congregation, with Blacks and Whites responding in their typical ways. There were twelve trusties from a prison some twelve miles away, and they were the most responsive of all. In fact, they were determined to have me "preach" that sermon in their facility before I left the state. As members of a closed society, they—more than any others—knew the meaning of that message more than a *hundred years later*—despite the fact that Uncle Pompey's words were third hand!

When one sees the impact of such preaching, one wonders again if anything we do today will be remembered so well. In a sense, there is little room for improvement; the real challenge is to recover the authentic power and biblical integrity of a Black tradition that evolved when preachers had few, if any, of today's advantages. The resources of education and travel must be integrated into a gospel presentation that is still basically visual rather than abstract. And the sermon, which must have a sound theological message, must also be made to come alive in a meaningful experience for the hearer.

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## Notes

1. Mitchell, Henry H. *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 23-24.
2. Taken largely from *Black Preaching*, 24-27
3. Walker, David. *An Appeal* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1829, 1969), 27, 38, 39.
4. Woodson, Carter G. *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921), 17 – 20.
5. Mitchell, Henry H. *Black Belief* (New York; Harper & Row, 1975), 99-101.
6. Dubois, W. E. B. *The Gift of Black Folk* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1924, 1968), 332.
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