



The late Olin P. Moyd was the author of two books, numerous articles and pastor of Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in Baltimore, MD for forty years.

This excerpt is taken from his book The Sacred Art: Preaching & Theology in the African American Tradition (Judson Press, 1995). In this material Moyd addresses the theology of preaching in the African American faith tradition, preaching to empower people, and concludes with remarks on style in the African American preaching tradition.

From the Introduction

A THEOLOGY OF PREACHING

A theology of preaching in African American thought is not to be equated with preaching theology. Yet this is not to say that we are not engaged in theological preaching. For example, we do engage in doctrinal, exegetical, and hermeneutical preaching.

A theology of preaching is the acknowledgment and affirmation that preaching is the primary, divine mandate and medium for communicating, elucidating, and illuminating God's revelation for God's people. A theology of preaching affirms the sacred authority of the preacher to preach the whole counsel of God— to interpret God's revelations in the Scriptures, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and in the living church, and to proclaim God's revelation about the world to come. Paul Tillich declared:

A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation. Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received.¹

The theology that has been explicit in African American preaching has never been abstract and esoteric. It has always responded to the questions raised in life circumstances. Like King Zedekiah, African Americans, in their plight, have continued to ask, "Is there any word from the Lord" (Jeremiah 37:17, KJV) that addresses our particular conditions, needs, and aspirations? Practical theology responds in the affirmative through the preached Word.

Practical theology is just one of the fields in Christian theology. It stands alongside foundational or historical theology—the study of past theological systems; philosophical theology—the use of philosophy to rethink the creed of a particular religion; biblical theology—the Bible being the center of the theological discourse; systematic

theology—the systematic organization and discussion of the Christian faith; and so forth.

The tendency to give systematic theology some higher status on the theological totem pole is an error. In response to this, Tillich declared that exegesis and homiletics can be just as theological as systematics and that it is unfortunate that the name "theology" has been reserved for systematics, particularly when systematics may fail to be theological as well as the others.”...

Chapter 3

Practical Theology and Practical Preaching

I think we ought to just tell the story. And one of the things that older preachers did, they could tell the Bible story. And many of our great churches were built up, not on theology really, and we need theology, of course, but they were built up largely on preachers that could tell the Bible story.²

Affirming the Practical

The statement above from the late Reverend Dr. Sandy F. Ray, a nationally renowned African American Baptist preacher, is a telling testimony. It attests to the fact that African American churches and African American denominations have a tradition of humble birth and grandiose development with a practical theology communicated through the practical preaching of ministers who simply told the Bible story.

Ray not only affirmed the importance of storytelling in African American preaching, his preaching was *par excellence* in story preaching. He was, for many African American preachers, a model mentor. His preaching provided the stimulus for my master of divinity dissertation, titled "Black Preaching: The Style and Design of Dr. Sandy E Ray."³ We shall return to the discussion of storytelling in African American preaching later in this chapter.

Practical Theology

As stated in chapter 1, practical theology is just one of the fields in Christian theology. Although, historically and contemporarily, systematic theology is elevated as the norm for all fields of theology, there have always been those who have held different views on this matter. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher praised practical theology as the crown of theology. For Schleiermacher, practical theology was not a third part of theology in addition to historical and systematic theology but rather the technical theory through which the other two parts, the historical and the systematic, were to be applied in the life of the church.⁴

Practical theology reflects upon the divine mandate for ministries through the church. It examines both the biblical mandate and the present human condition and attempts to correlate the two, giving divine sanction to the mission and ministries of the church in every current world situation.

Practical theology in the African American perspective does not study the history of the meaning of God as understood by the church down through the years. This is the task of historical theology. Practical theology does not attempt to explain the attributes of God in technical, theological, and theoretical terms. This is the task of systematic theology. However, practical theology, as revealed in African American preaching, affirms the God of history. Practical theology also affirms the attributes of God. In history, God is the One who, according to his own plan of redemption, redeemed the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. God is the One who redeemed the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace. Thus, God is the One who has ordained a plan of redemption and is in the process of redeeming the dispossessed from human-caused suffering now.

God's attributes are summed up in the oral folk sermons— not in puzzling, esoterical, or mystical terms, such as "omnipotent," "omniscient," and "omnipresent," but as "so high, you can't get over him, so wide you can't get around him, and so low that you can't get under him." This practical theology is a theology of affirmation rather than a theology of *explanation*. This practical theology provides biblical and divine answers to the questions implied or raised by those living on the underside of an unjust society. It also provides the bridge between the eternal Christian message of hope and the human situation, both generally and specifically. It gives directions for the church to be involved in ministries in the world.

In African American religion practical theology is not a theory that was pondered in the theological laboratory and then presented and tested in the factories of real-life situations. Practical theology is a theology put together on the assembly line of existence in the experience of a pilgrim people. Its genesis, its beginning and development, was in orthopraxis rather than in orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is concerned with right beliefs and right doctrines, while orthopraxis is concerned with right action and right involvement in God's plan of redemption. Practical theology is concerned with right practice in human situations as revealed in the Word of God, in addition to right doctrine or theory about the will of God.

I am not suggesting that there was any conscious attempt on the part of African American church persons and theologians to initiate and to develop a practical theology. Like African American theology in general, practical theology is the product of the biblically based preaching and teaching of a people whose backs were and still are against the wall. When the oppressors were free to deliberate and to engage in debate about who God was in the world, the oppressed were forced by circumstances to construct a theological answer to what God was doing in the world—in the real world of their present and continuing plight.

For African Americans, the idea of social justice, human dignity, self-respect, and redemption as God-ordained birthrights did not emerge in the proverbial theological "ivory towers." It surfaced and developed among the people as they journeyed through the jungle of inhumanity in America. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was exposed to the great thinkers on civil rights and human justice in Morehouse College in Atlanta and to the great theological minds in Crozer and Boston Theological Seminaries. However, when King spoke for himself about the shaping of his ideas, he drew upon the teachings of his family and his community during his developing years. His training in

the graduate schools helped him to articulate his theology, but his foundational theological premises came from his church and family tradition. King told of his upbringing:

As far back as I could remember, I had resented segregation, and had asked my parents questions about it.... My mother took me on her lap and began by telling me about slavery and how it had ended with the Civil War.... Then she said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: "You are as good as anyone." I remember a trip to a downtown shoestore with Father when I was still small. We had sat down in the first empty seats at the front of the store. A young white clerk came up and murmured politely: "I'll be happy to wait on you if you'll just move to those seats in the rear."

My father answered, "There's nothing wrong with these seats. We're quite comfortable here."

"Sorry," said the clerk, "but you'll have to move."

"We'll either buy shoes sitting here," my father retorted, "or we won't buy shoes at all." Then he took me by the hand and walked out of the store. This was the first time I had ever seen my father so angry. I still remember walking down the street beside him as he muttered, "I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it."⁵

Those experiences shaped the practical theological thinking and preaching of King in particular, and those experiences shaped the practical theological preaching in the African American churches in general. A practical theology of redemption provided the theological foundation for practical preaching, and practical preaching transmitted and perpetuated those practical, theological truths of redemption to the heads and hearts of the hearers.

Redemption for African Americans meant salvation from states and circumstances as well as salvation from sin, guilt, the consequence thereof. Redemption meant liberation from oppression, and it also meant confederation, or the developing of a community of God.⁶

Chapter 6

Practical Preaching: Empowering the People

"Transformed nonconformist" is the title of one of the sermons in King's book *Strength to Love*.⁷ The biblical text was not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind ..." (Romans 12:2, KJV). In this practical sermon, the preacher challenged the listeners to live as nonconformists to the social system of injustice. He preached:

*"Do NOT CONFORM" is difficult advice in a generation when crowd pressures have unconsciously conditioned our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo. Many voices and forces urge us to choose the path of least resistance, and bid us never to fight for an unpopular cause and never to be found in a pathetic minority of two or three.*⁸

King continued by noting that certain intellectual disciplines would persuade them to conform to get along and that, in the modern world, "everyone seems to crave the anesthetizing security of being identified with the majority."⁹ But, in the face of all of these pressures and tendencies to conform, as Christians, he declared, we have the mandate to be nonconformists.

This was a practical sermon since it did not address some esoteric and cognitive idea of what it meant to be Christian. Rather, it addressed the listeners where they were amid all the complexities of injustice. It pointed out that to be Christians, really Christians, means to be nonconformists to the ideologies of the majority, even when it means fighting for the unpopular causes of the minority numbering as little as two or three. He declared that the cause of freedom is the Christian calling.

King was influenced by his family and his church. He was inspired by Walter Rauschenbush's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. He was indelibly impressed by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi:

*... I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.*¹⁰

Thus, though his practical theology focused on concerns for the oppressed, he engaged in practical preaching that inspired and impelled people from all walks of life—the rich, the poor, the educated, the illiterate, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews—to engage in the greatest nonviolent protest movement in the history of this nation. Remember,

however, that the preaching of King was just one of the high-water marks in the preaching tradition of the African American churches. The multitudes that acted on the challenges in his preaching attracted international media attention and their voices resounded around the world.

His theological conviction was that, to strive toward social justice, even if it led to making the ultimate sacrifice, is a Christian mandate. It led to the sermonic speech that he delivered in the Ebenezer Baptist Church in February 1968 titled "Then My Living Will Not Be in Vain." In it he talked about the day when he would become victimized by that common denominator we call death. At his funeral, he maintained, he would not wish to be remembered by the speakers for his Nobel Peace Prize, his awards, nor his academic achievements, but rather for his commitment to social and economic justice for the oppressed. He said, "Yes, if you want to, say that I was a drum major. Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness."¹¹

In contrast and yet in similarity to the preaching of King was the preaching of the late Reverend Dr. James H. Jackson, who served as president of the National Baptist Convention, USA for twenty-nine years.¹² When King flashed upon the scene and was catapulted into the leadership role of what was to become the greatest civil rights movement in this nation's history, Jackson had already made his mark on the national scene as an African American leader, a preacher, and an excellent orator.

Both King and Jackson were African American Baptist preachers. Both were great orators. Before 1961 they were members of the same National Baptist Convention. Both King and Jackson wanted to achieve social justice for African Americans. King believed that the way to do so was to disrupt the existing social order through massive nonviolent protests, which would bring about rapid and radical social change. Jackson believed that the way to achieve social justice was through cooperation with the existing social system, which would lead to gradual liberty and justice for all. This led to conflict between the two leaders.

It was widely held that the tension between them was heightened by the emerging popularity of King as a national and international leader of the "Negro" community, which detracted from the popularity of Jackson's leadership.

I discuss the practical theology and practical preaching of these two men because of their leadership, visibility, and massive following during that era. Their beliefs and proclamations are indelible in the annals of African American history.

From the beginning of the civil rights movement, with the massive bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, and the massive nonviolent protests that spread like wildfire across the nation, there emerged a contrast in the preaching of King and Jackson.¹³ The preaching of both was based on and articulated a practical theology of redemption for the oppressed. The goal was the same—equal rights for the Negroes in America. But, these two men preached diametrically opposed approaches to achieving deliverance for the captives, liberation for the bound, and healing for those who were bruised by the brutality

of the oppressors.

In his sermon on his annual address of September 1965, Jackson condemned King's method of public, nonviolent, massive protest.¹⁴ He discussed the matter of method:

*We cannot and we must not adopt any methods in our quest for civil rights that may also be used by saboteurs to weaken the nation's life and lower its morale. We must not use those methods that can be employed to carry on un-American activities in the name of freedom or that may be used to overthrow the nation itself or that are in strict violation of the just laws of the land.... We must not employ methods that can ruin the lives of those who use them, create more problems than they solve, engender more ill-will than goodwill, and do more to harm our social order than to help it.*¹⁵

(King's detractors had labeled him a Communist or a Communist sympathizer, which was a damaging indictment in those troubled days.)

Throughout his continued career as president of the National Baptist Convention, Jackson maintained that the weapon of nonviolent protest employed by King was not the way to achieve the goal of self-respect and dignity for African Americans. A subsection of his annual address of September 1977 was titled: "From Protest to Production."¹⁶ By then, Jackson had accepted the need as well as the right to protest the evils that would deny any American the "God-given" rights to which all citizens were entitled. But he preached that protest was not enough and he continued his argument that blacks must move from protest to production.

In an earlier sermon, however, we see the same theological background and mandate that we find in King's preaching. Jackson drew inspiration from and made application of the words of Caleb of the Old Testament: "Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it" (Numbers 13:30, KJV). He edified the audience:

*We are able to cope with the moral requirements of freedom as we at the same time struggle to make our nation more just and more free.... We are able to live while we are dying, to sing while we are suffering, and to trust while we are threatened and tortured by tormentors and by those who would destroy us. We are able to break the old chains of servitude, to drop the shackles of superstition, and to free our minds and souls from the dark shadows of oppression and discrimination.*¹⁷

The similarity in the preaching of King and Jackson was a similarity of goal—redemption for the Negroes in America. In 1971 Jackson said: "We must now embrace the fact of our ability and employ it for self-fulfillment, self-growth, and the moral and spiritual redemption of our social order."¹⁸ Both King and Jackson accepted redemption as a divine mandate.

The contrast of the preaching of King and Jackson was a contrast of method to be employed in achieving the desired God-ordained goal. The contrast in views concerning the method to be employed represents the two extreme philosophical poles of the

spectrum. All preaching on methods of deliverance of the captives in the African American community has fallen somewhere between these two poles.

There have always been some fundamentalists among the African American pastor-theologians whose preaching focused on personal salvation, spiritualizing, otherworldliness, and noninvolvement in the struggle for human rights in this world. They were so otherworldly focused that they were no this-worldly good. However, this group has always been in the minority, and I have opted to reserve discussion of its theological and preaching tradition for some future time.

Two conclusions are drawn from the King/Jackson theology and preaching. First, freedom from oppression and equal justice for all African Americans as well as for whites are birthrights bestowed by the Creator. When these rights are taken away from one group by another group of individuals who traffic in greed and power, the victims have not only the right but also the responsibility to become involved in activities to rid themselves of the burdens of oppression.

For King, this meant public civil disobedience and nonviolently breaking the unjust laws of segregation supported by city, state, and national legislators, executives, and courts. King's method did prick the nation's conscience, and the walls of physical segregation and separation did come tumbling down.

For Jackson, the way to throw off oppression was to affirm the elusive "American Dream" of achieving civil rights by engaging in economic self-help programs and entrepreneurship, which would evolve into economic parity of blacks with whites. Organizing self-help institutions and engaging in "production" did have some positive results for African Americans after the Civil War and at other periods in African American history. While some African Americans did attempt to achieve redemption by Jackson's method, from the beginning of the civil rights movement clearly the majority of African Americans knew that this approach was inadequate, so they elected to follow the more comprehensive approach preached by King.

Jackson failed to recognize the systemic and structural racism that was inherent in the American economic system, which renders his method ineffective even to this day. A study conducted by the Baltimore Unemployment Council targeted six local banks to determine their compliance with the Community Reinvestment Act. The study confirmed the conclusion reached earlier by the Federal Reserve System that banks in Baltimore rejected black mortgage applicants twice as often as whites.¹⁹ This is just one current example of the inequity that is inherent in the economic system. African Americans have not been able to move ahead meaningfully in the arena of production because of the systematic denial of capital. Preaching must inspire people to become productive, but it must also expose and challenge the unjust system that denies access to the means that make production possible.

A second conclusion to be drawn from the King/Jackson theology and preaching has to do with the methodological approaches followed by the two. The different

approaches show that, like other groups in America, African Americans have not been monolithic in their approach to solving the problems of social injustices. But out of the richness of diversity, African Americans have made steady progress toward the achievement of their divine birthrights in America. There are still setbacks after setbacks, but the tide of divine justice and righteousness still flows in the direction of freedom and justice for all.

While other institutions have come and gone, many of which have served as major catalysts leading the fight for the civil rights of exploited African Americans, the church has been the one institution that has been in the forefront of the movement and must continue to be in the days ahead. The pastor-theologians have been the prime movers in the church and must be the primary drum majors in the future.

It is well known in the African American religious community that a strained relationship existed between King and Jackson. The reasons are many and varied. Both of these men were giants as pastor-theologians. Both achieved national and international attention. In general, King was supported by the white "liberals" while Jackson was supported by the white "conservatives." This had the effect of a "divide and conquer" tactic by those in power. It worked to the degree that some energy was wasted in the attacks and counterattacks by these two factions. This energy could have been used in the redemption movement against the real enemy of social justice.

Two manifestations of the strained relationship of these men were: One, when the Progressive National Baptist Convention was formed in 1961, King, with others, left the National Baptist Convention and became a member of the Progressive Convention. Two, after the assassination of King in April 1968, when the National Baptist Convention met in Atlanta, Georgia, that same year, Jackson did not program a memorial service for King, even though we met in the city of his birth.

In spite of the difference in philosophies of these two men, both espoused a practical theology through their practical preaching. Both used the narrative/storytelling approach in their preaching. This was the approach used by most African American preachers.

Telling the Story

The homileticians have divided sermons into several categories: (1) the textual sermon, in which the text is the theme and the various parts of the text form the main divisions of the sermon; (2) the topical sermon, in which the text suggest the subject and several other texts are used to support the topic; (3) the expository sermon, in which the text is the theme and the whole sermon is an exposition of that theme; and (4) the inferential sermon, in which the theme is inferred in the text but not specifically stated.

James Earl Massey, in his classic book *Designing the Sermon*, advanced three categories of sermon designs: the narrative/story sermon; the textual/expositional sermon; and the doctrinal/topical sermon.²⁰

All of these approaches are used in African American preaching, but the narrative/story form has been the one most used in the African American preaching tradition. The question most asked by laypersons when they make inquiries about the ability of a preacher is not whether he or she can explain the propositions implied in the various biblical texts but rather, "Can the preacher tell the story?" That is, can the preacher make plain the truths contained in the text in such a story form that the hearers may be helped, healed, and empowered?

It was this sincere and dramatic way of preaching that led Ray to declare that the black churches were built largely upon preachers who could tell the Bible story. He said in 1970 that some preachers were calling their congregations together for dialogue "because the crowd was falling off" and this was a "method to try to get the crowd out so that the people could participate in the dialogue. But when you tell a story, a true story, there is no dialogue in the story."²¹ The characters in the story are involved in dialogue, but the audience does not become engaged in critiquing and evaluating the validity of the story; they are to become involved in the truth of the story.

The African American preaching tradition had its genesis in an oral tradition—preaching from memory and generally without notes. The earliest preachers among African Americans were successors to the griots and storytellers of their African ancestors. For our African ancestors, storytelling was the equivalent of a Western fine art. In some instances, our society equates illiterature—the absence of the written source—with illiteracy, and illiteracy is equated with inferiority. To the contrary, the ability of the griots, the tribal chiefs, and the storytellers displayed superior intelligence on the part of our ancestors. This cultural survival of the African tradition was manifested in the employment of memorized, metrically composed phrases and stories that recalled their history."²² The preachers recalled the stories of God's intervention in human history in the Old Testament and related those stories to their own slavery, emancipation, and pilgrimage. In many cases, other lines and phrases that directly addressed certain conditions at hand were spontaneously inserted in the stories. This oral tradition is no indication of mediocrity.

A word of caution to the readers and to the preachers of today: There is no attempt here to elevate oral preaching—preaching without a manuscript—over manuscript preaching, or to elevate manuscript preaching over oral preaching. There is a real danger of a lack of cohesion and comprehensiveness in oral preaching, as is exhibited in too many pulpits Sunday after Sunday in the African American churches today. Thus, the practical theological truths contained in the text are not communicated to the hearts of the hearers. On the other hand, too many manuscripts are just written and read rather than preached and heard. When there is a lack of involvement of the preacher in the story, there is a concomitant lack of involvement of the hearers in the story.

Preaching is serious business, and preachers must intensely, with much prayer, seek to discover their best preaching style and spend the rest of their career developing and embellishing that style. There is no easy way to becoming an oral preacher. There is no *easy* way to become a manuscript preacher. Many preachers will find themselves

combining some oral and some manuscript in their preaching style. Preaching is the vehicle of theology, transporting to the hearts of the hearers transcendent truths in the social context of existence.

In my own preaching, I use an outline so that I can move through the story progressively and yet have the freedom to orally proclaim the story without reading from a prepared script. As I have found a method that works for me, each serious searcher for the method that is appropriate for him or her will find one. (I am still refining my style and practicing.)

Those who will be effective preachers in the African American pulpits in the 1990s and on into the twenty-first century must study the methods of the masters. Success in transmitting theological truths will not be dependent upon whether one is an oral preacher or a manuscript preacher or some combination of both. Success will depend on whether the preacher has internalized the truths of the story. It will depend on whether the story has practical theological significance for the hearers. It will depend on whether the story deals with the eternal truth of the Christian message and with the life situation of a people struggling for survival and searching for meaning in a secularized, urbanized, and ghettoized condition.

The African American communities of the past survived and had meaning because their preachers could tell the Bible story in such a way that lives were transformed and spirits were lifted.

Object and Effect of the Practical

The object of practical theology and practical preaching in the African American churches is to provide the faithful with the strength to endure and to survive. It is to give them the courage to act—to participate in God's plan of redemption from human-caused woes in this world—as well as eternal salvation. Practical theology and practical preaching are technical, theological, and homiletical terms, but *they* contain measurable objectives in the arena of the faithful. Again, it is through practical preaching that this message of hope and redemption is communicated in the marketplace of existence.

An illustration of practical preaching based on practical theology is that of Sandy Ray. This nation was being blown in every direction from the racial unrest of the 1960s. Ray was preaching to preachers who would return to their pulpits to address matters of life and death with those who were caught in the turbulence of the civil rights struggle and the "Black Power" movement. This sermon, "Spiritual Counsel in Carnal Crises," was the story of the shipwreck Paul experienced as a prisoner on his way to Rome to appeal his case before Caesar.

Paul had advised the shipmasters against traveling; they ignored his advice, launched forth, and found themselves in the midst of a terrible storm. Paul, this preacher-prisoner, now became the "pilot," giving orders that provide salvation for the crew and passengers, as the story was dramatized by this master African American preacher:

This storm represents the shape of our culture. The masters and pilots have ignored the prophets and left "Fair Havens" at their own risk. They have depended upon their skill, and their science, and their computers, and their technology, and their money, and their armies, and their bombs, and their diplomacy, etc. They are insensitive to "The rumor of angels." The preacher is a star gazer, they say. His message is from another world and has no relevance or word to deal with this storm.²³

Ray gave counsel then to the preachers:

Before our culture crashes in this turbulence, preachers, you must prepare to become pilots. Because the captains and the pilots and the centurions don't know what to do now. Our ship of state is in serious distress. You may have boarded the ship as a prisoner, but the crisis demands that you move to the helm... You must speak to the panic-stricken masters and hopeless people on this ill-fated ship. You, preachers, must see the glimmers of hope amid the gloom of the crisis. You, preachers, must see this mysterious hand of the Almighty God, guiding gales and stabbing these storms. ...²⁴

The object of this practical sermon that Ray delivered to pastor-theologians who would then duplicate it for their parishioners was to sustain, to encourage, and to motivate them to become active participants in the movement of redemption in their local settings.

Was this practical theology and practical preaching effective? The answer might lie in a series of questions: Have the masses of African Americans survived and maintained their sanity in spite of the cruelty of segregation and dehumanization? Have they maintained and enhanced a sense of pride and dignity? Have they been guided to make right choices among alternatives in life-threatening and life-enhancing situations while their backs were against the wall? Have they been inspired to rise up against every form of oppression that robbed them of their person- hood and undermined their human dignity? Are they being continually reconciled to God, to themselves, and to others?

The affirmative answer to these questions would reveal the effectiveness of practical theology and practical preaching in the African American church.

This preaching was not narrow and sectarian; the masses of African American preachers tried to proclaim the whole counsel of God. This is the focus of my discussion in the next two chapters.

The Preaching Style

What are some of the unique identifying features of African American practical preaching that conveyed the redemption theme in such a positive way that the preaching empowered the people? The response to this question leads to the discussion of the matter of style. However, this book does not focus on the development of a meaningful

preaching style. It presents excerpts from the rich traditional preaching style or styles in the African American church.

Style is the vehicle that conveys the message of eternal salvation and earthly deliverance in the usual context of worship of a people conditioned by a stride toward freedom in their particular time and place, usually by the preacher. Style is the way in which manner, method, word, tone, and feeling are appropriated in African American preaching. J. Alfred Smith put it this way:

*Style is the manner in which a speaker uses language in expressing thought. . Style is the uniqueness of the preacher's way of communication. Style is the mirror of the thought and thought forms of the preacher. The personality, natural mental gifts, training, and cultural tastes are components which constitute style.*²⁵

Style is a part of the immaterial context of African American preaching, since the preacher is a part of the preaching context as well as the audience. The dialogical symphony between the preacher and the audience form the grand preaching context. Personal style and variation in individual style are distinguishing features in African American preaching.

Rhetoric, repetition, rhythm, rest, spontaneity, tone, chant, cadence, melody, drama, and epic are distinguishing elements in the African American preaching style.²⁶ Of course, not all of these elements are used in each sermon. The audience context has great influence on the preacher context. The word *rhetoric* can have a negative connotation if it is used to mean the skillful and crafty manipulation of language in order to hold attention, to induce, and to persuade persons for the sole purpose of advancing the personal cause of the speaker.

In an article titled "The Rhetoric of Malcolm X," John Illo argued:

*In a nation of images without substance, of rehearsed emotions, in a politic of consensus, where platitudes replaces belief or belief is fashioned by consensus, genuine rhetoric, like authentic prose, must be rare. For rhetoric, like any verbal art, is correlative with a pristine idea of reason and justice....*²⁷

If rhetoric is merely rehearsed emotions used in order to evoke consensus, irrespective of truth and value, this is not genuine rhetoric. Rhetoric in African American preaching is genuine. It is a nonmaterial cultural survival of the African tradition. It is the natural way of being responsive to the divine mandate of interpretation and proclamation. It is an elucidation of faith and reason flowing out of the honesty of the heart, mind, and soul. Most of the early African American preachers had little or no formal education and even less training in rhetoric. However, along with developing charisma, they also developed an unusual ability to preach rhetorically, using language to make statements and to ask questions, to make assertions and to imply conclusions, emoting reason, faith, and feelings.

In "Spiritual Counsel in Carnal Crises," Sandy Ray asserted that preachers ought to have a personal story of an encounter with God and that they ought to include their personal stories in their preaching. To make that point, Ray used the rhetorical method as follows: "I wonder if Paul ever related his experience to the priesthood? I often wonder if he ever got a chance to tell his Damascus road experience to the priesthood?"²⁸

It is not by mistake that Ray raised the question twice. This was deliberate. Between the first and second stating of the question, there was rest—pause—before the repetition. The rest was intentional; it gave the audience time to think, to feel, and to respond with, "Yes," "That's right," or "Amen." However, all audience responses and feedback are not audible. There are other affirmations of the heart that may or may not be observable to onlookers. It might be a feeling heard and understood by a community of soul sisters and brothers.

After profoundly raising the question and observing the rest and repetition involving the audience, which is characteristic of good African American preaching, Ray responded to the rhetorical question and made an assertion: "Every time he [Paul] got in a close place, he would relate the Damascus road experience."²⁹ The response of the audience was verbal and thunderous. Ray continued:

And whenever there were situations in which he was involved that he couldn't quite explain what was happening to him, he would say, "When I was on the road to Damascus."

And whenever he told this story, it had something very, very thrilling to do with the life of people. Might I just drop here, I think preachers ought to tell this experience. When we are talking about firstly, and secondly, and thirdly, and in the first place, and in the second place, I think every once in a while we ought to tell about our Damascus road.³⁰

This was good rhetoric, rest, repetition, and feedback characteristic of good African American preaching. Spontaneity is another element in the African American preaching style. The preceding paragraph was not included in the original manuscript. As a master preacher, Ray spontaneously added that section to the sermon and at the same time maintained coherence, continuity, and integrity. When asked about these insertions into the preached sermons that were not found in the circulated manuscript, Ray responded: "I prepare my sermons like a newscaster prepares the news report. I use all of the information available at that time, but often, when the newscaster gets on the set, some 'late-breaking' news always comes in over the wires." So, like a newscaster, Ray spontaneously inserted "late-breaking" divine announcements into his prepared manuscript. This led Henry Mitchell to rightly conclude that sermons "in the Black tradition, were preached and *heard*, not written to be read."³¹

The African American's sermon is not prepared, like a meal, frozen and then thawed in the microwave of the worship setting for serving. The sermonic meal is always in preparation even while being served. There is freedom of expression in the pulpit. There is plenty of room for the intervention of the Holy Spirit. This ingenuity of including

spontaneity and adding rhetoric and rest in a rhythmic fashion in the preached sermon gives it a vitality that not only inspires but also invigorates and empowers the listeners.

Other powerful and pronounced elements in African American preaching include tone or melody—the African nonmaterial cultural survival that gives the sermon a kind of singing quality. That tone—"tuning up"—or melodic quantity in African American preaching gives the sermon a congregational dimension. It is a type of "tuning" that gets the congregation involved, and the sermon is no longer the presentation of the preacher. It is the song of the congregation, and the preacher is the soloist or the lead singer. The sermon is responsorial—the preacher assumes the lead part and the congregation responds in a variety of ways—audibly, with bodily movements, or simply by countenance affirmation. Thus, we have a congregational preaching choir. The venerable Caesar Clark is the epitome of the tonal and melodic African American preacher today.

Another highlighting element in preaching that electrifies and empowers the mass African American congregations is chanting or cadence. This is not too different from tone and melody, except that chanting and cadence in African American preaching has to do with intentional timing in the use of words, phrases, and sentences. The sermons of Sandy Ray were not so much tonal and melodic as those of Caesar Clark, but Ray's sermons were replete with chanting and cadence. , In "Spiritual Counsel," Ray had Paul addressing the captains and the pilots on the apparently ill-fated ship in Acts 27:13-44:

*"The angel of the Lord, (rest and audience response)
whose I am and whom I serve,
stood by me this night.
While thunder was rolling,
while lightning was flashing,
while winds were blowing,
the angel of the Lord,
whose I am and whom I serve,
stood by me this night. Be of good cheer."
Sounds just like a preacher. "Everything's going to be all right."
Winds are blowing, ship leaking,
storm raging,
but the preacher says,
"Everything is going to be all right."³²*

Martin Luther King Jr. was also known for the use of cadence in his preaching. Louis Lomax noted that when King arrived at a church in an Alabama town on Friday, December 6, 1955, the church had been packed with people since five o'clock that afternoon, and now three thousand people were standing outside waiting to hear what turned out to be the call for an all-out bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. After a list of other speakers, King approached the rostrum and began his empowering and enabling speech this way:

King (K): "There comes a time when people get tired."

Audience (A): "Yes, Lord."

(K): "We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us for so

long that we are tired—"
(A): "Help him, Jesus!"
(K): "—we are tired of being segregated and humiliated."
(A): "Amen."
(K): "... *tired!* ... did you hear me when I said '*tired*'?"
(A): "Yes, Lord!"³³

People were motivated and empowered by that sermon. They acted and transformed an oppressive social system.

Remember, good African American preaching is preached and heard, not written to be read. And the reader would have to hear the preaching of the successors to the preaching tradition of Ray and King in order to appreciate the value in the chant and the cadence, the timing and the rests that are imbedded in this motivating and empowering kind of preaching.

Familiar epics in the African American tradition/religion are regularly employed as salient elements in preaching. Epics are citations, roll calling, lines, brief sayings, narratives, and stories regularly employed in preaching to drive home a point or to clinch the theological truth of God's action in creation or in human history and/or God's eschatological promises. These epics begin with familiar, condensed Bible stories, or roll calling, such as the roll call of the hall of faith found in Hebrews 11. It could be Psalm 23, Psalm 121, or Isaiah 53:5: "He was wounded for our transgressions ... ," or Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ..." (NRSV). Listeners identify with the redemption stories of the hall of faith and others, and they are empowered to hold on and to move forward.

These and other biblical epics tend to spontaneously creep into the sermon, although the preacher has used a totally different text as the foundation. In "Spiritual Counsel," Ray had Paul warning the crew, passengers, and prisoners on the ship:

There is a competent pilot on board.
He is the "Lily of the Valley,"....
He is the "Rose of Sharon,"....
He is the "Stone cut out of
mountains without hands,"....
He is a "battle ax,"....
He is the "Rock of Ages,"....
He is Wonderful, Counselor, Everlasting Father, Mighty God, and Prince of
*Peace.*³⁴

Epics also include nonbiblical sayings. Lines from the hymns, spirituals, and gospel songs are also regularly employed in African American preaching. For example: "I don't believe he brought me this far to leave me." Many preachers regularly end their sermons with such lines or those from some other familiar source. Others regularly end their sermons with familiar biblical passages.

The importance of climax is also special in African American preaching. Generally, the seasoned preachers would begin the sermon in a moderate conversational voice and gradually intensify the tempo, climaxing in a crescendo. However, many great African American sermons do not follow this pattern. While climax—or making the main point on a profound note with gusto—is present in the preacher context, many good African American sermons have several high points and several low points and still make the primary point at the end. Thus, preachers and people might say that he or she "really had a good climax." Climax generally means ending, "how you bring it home—make the major salvific point."Climax in good African American preaching is often internal as well as at the end.

Notes

- ¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Book I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 3.
- ² Sandy F. Ray, "The Church Responds to the Seventies," *Spiritual Counsel in Carnal Crises*, sermon lecture delivered in the ministers' seminar of the National Baptist Congress of Christian Education, National Baptist Convention, USA, Omaha Nebraska, June 1970. Reprinted in appendix.
- ³ Olin P. Moyd, "Black Preaching: The Style and Design of Dr. Sandy F. Ray" unpublished dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the master of divinity degree, School of Divinity, Howard University, Washington, D.C., 1972.
- ⁴ Tillich, p. 32.
- ⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., *Biography of Martin Luther King* (Cambridge: Social Studies Curriculum Program, Education Development Center, 1968), pp. 3-4.
- ⁶ Moyd, *Redemption*, pp. 23-24.
- ⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 8-15.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.
- ¹¹ *Martin Luther King Jr., 1929-1988: An Ebony Picture Biography* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 8-9.
- ¹² The National Baptist Convention, USA is the largest African American denomination in this country, numbering eight million communicants.
- ¹³ The Reverend Dr. T. J. Jemison led the first major bus boycott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1953. He was a consultant to Dr. King. See *Stride Toward Freedom* by Martin Luther King Jr. (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1958), pp. 75-76. Jemison was elected president of the National Baptist Convention, USA in Miami, Florida, on September 10, 1982.
- ¹⁴ Joseph H. Jackson, annual address delivered at the eighty-fifth annual session of the National Baptist Convention, USA in Jacksonville, Florida, on September 9, 1965.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
- ¹⁶ Joseph H. Jackson, annual address delivered at the ninety-seventh annual session of the National Baptist Convention, USA on September 6, 1977, pp. 12-13.
- ¹⁷ Joseph H. Jackson, annual address delivered at the ninety-first annual session of the National Baptist Convention, USA on September 9, 1971, pp. 20-21.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ¹⁹ Al Rutledge, "Six major city banks unfairly deny blacks loans," *Baltimore Times*, August 17-23, 1992, pp. 1-2.
- ²⁰ James Earl Massey. *Designing the Sermon: Order And Movement In Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980)
- ²¹ Ray, *Spiritual Counsel*.
- ²² Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 96.

²³ Ray, *Spiritual Counsel*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ J. Alfred Smith, *Preach On!* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 15.

²⁶ I first discussed these elements of black preaching in my unpublished dissertation for my master of divinity degree. See note 2, chapter 3.

²⁷ John Illo, "The Rhetoric of Malcolm X" *The Columbia University Forum* 59, no. 2 (1966), pp. 5-12.

²⁸ Ray, *Spiritual Counsel*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, p. 15.

³² Ray, *Spiritual Counsel*.

³³ Louis E. Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 90-91.

³⁴ Ray, *Spiritual Counsel*.