

# ***African American Preaching***

By Tim Sensing

*One does not wish to romanticize the state of black preaching. When it is good it is very, very good. And when it is bad ... well, that too is true. An important aspect of equality is to remember that our black sisters and brothers are equal, and sometimes more equal than others, in manifesting the sins to which we are all heir. But the best of black preaching today puts together self and language in a way that can be instructive for all of us. Obviously it should not be imitated, but key aspects of it might well be emulated. Black preaching was born in and is carried by a particular cultural experience. But the principles that make it great, when it is great, are not that different from those specified by St. Augustine more than fifteen hundred years ago and observed by the worthier practitioners of the art ever since.<sup>1</sup>*

John Neuhaus argues that Augustine's advice about rhetoric's need to engage the audience is demonstrated in the black church. Although some may argue that Augustine's connection to Africa and the origins of black preaching today accounts for the similarity in styles, it is clear that Augustine considered his principles universally applicable.<sup>2</sup> So too, I propose, are the principles that can be garnered from the following analysis that examines the historical context of African American preaching and selected uses of rhetoric within that context. Whenever appropriate, I have limited the study to my own discourse community, namely, churches of Christ. The analysis concludes by reviewing the respective research on the preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr.

## **The Historical Context of African American Preaching**

The point of entry into the story of African American preaching might begin by noticing the slaves' pews in the gallery that encircles the sanctuary of many colonial churches. Many good slave-holding Christian folk brought their chattels to hear "the gospel" and learn the lessons of obedience in the manner of Onesimus. George Whitefield rationalized the owning of slaves in 1751 when he wrote John Wesley:

*...though liberty is a sweet thing to those who are born free, yet to those who may never know the sweets of it, slavery perhaps may not be so irksome ... I should think myself highly favored if I could purchase a good number of them, in order to make their lives comfortable, and lay a foundation for breeding up their posterity in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.<sup>3</sup>*

Although some preachers urged slaves not to believe that slave ownership was for their own spiritual good, Whitefield justified his practice on economic and evangelistic grounds. Many preachers believed the evangelization of the slaves would not only bring salvation but also a better social condition. Slave masters would respect peaceful and hard working Christian slaves as they entered into fellowship.

Nevertheless, many abolitionists and missionaries to slaves believed that preaching to slaves to obey their masters would drive slaves from the church. They were convinced such preaching was a mere sham in order to soften the wills of blacks while salving the conscience of the whites. Furthermore, they advocated that it was wrong to provide a theological justification for the legitimacy of the institution of slavery.<sup>4</sup> Throughout this heated religious debate, blacks, nevertheless, heard and responded to the gospel.

The history of preaching in the African-American community is connected to two contexts: the religious tradition of West Africa and the institution of slavery. As slaves were converted to Christianity, a blending of cultures occurred. Syncretism of Christianity and the slave experience gave birth to a rich new heritage of preaching. Often legally prohibited from learning to read and write, illiterate slaves developed robust oral traditions, passing down spirituals, sermons, and folk tales from generation to generation. Without such a rhetorical process, African Americans may not have survived as a people.

C. F. Stewart identifies the black church as the center of freedom that most influenced the praxis of African American spirituality. It became a safe place where blacks gathered to embrace their collective concerns as a community of faith. Stewart states, “It has been the only institution in the African American experience that has maintained relative autonomy from the domesticating influence of white oppressors and overlords.”<sup>5</sup> It is such a context that allows Calvin Bowers to argue that some black churches may be the last place to see integration due to the desire to maintain a power base not available to them elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> After reviewing several aspects of worship as the context for spiritual and cultural freedom, Stewart notes that black preaching in and out of the black church is “one of the most powerful idioms of freedom for black people in America.”<sup>7</sup>

Bowers reviews the development of the black church in American history.<sup>8</sup> The black response to segregation manifested itself in two distinct ways. First, there was an acceptance of Jim Crow as seen in the writings of Booker T. Washington and other “Sustainers.” Speaking to white northerners about abolition, many like Frederick Douglass, used Standard English style and delivery in order to secure a hearing. Equality was being demonstrated to white audiences who needed to see that blacks were able to use the language. Douglass, on the one hand, reluctantly chose to be a showcase of the intellectual ability of a black man for the white establishment. On the other hand, Douglass used the rhetorical techniques of the establishment to defend and advance his cause.<sup>9</sup>

The “Sustainers” preached to the needs of enslaved and segregated people but never attempted to revolutionize the conditions under which they lived. Their hope rested in the conviction that the gospel of love would gradually transform the hearts of slave owners and subsequent racists. The rhetoric of inclusion continually uses “we” and not “you” or “them.” Some of the gradualistic convictions were rooted in the early evangelism done by white preachers. Christianity was thought to bring submission to slaves. A more docile slave would somehow maintain the status quo. Gradualism was sure to fail due to its misconception of the nature of slavery as an institution and the lack of recognition of the power of the gospel to transform a nation. In similar fashion, the Civil Rights Movement itself moved rhetorically over time from a gradualistic approach to a “shattered dream” understanding of an America that was never a free America.

W. E. B. DuBois, opposed the stance of the “Sustainers,” and would not give racism even a hint of being acceptable arguing against gradualism. DuBois and the “Reformers” were willing to risk life for the freedom of the race. They sought to translate the power base of the black church into political clout.

Churches of Christ advocated both positions. Although many of the white leaders in the Movement taught their slaves the gospel, allowed them to worship in segregated balconies, and eventually freed them, they were slow in doing so.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, most blacks did not accept the doctrine of gradualism. G. P. Bowser was raised in the AME church, the oldest exclusively African-American denomination in the United States. The AME church was founded in 1816, a few years after Richard Allen had been expelled from the “white” St. George’s Church in Philadelphia. Bowser left the AME church in 1897 and became a member of the Jackson St. Church of Christ in Nashville working with Marshall Keeble. Bowser eventually broke away from the white supported Keeble. His preaching was a synthesis of a rational discourse and traditional black preaching and is exemplified by his protégé R. N. Hogan. Bowser was instrumental in opening Southwestern Christian College in Terrel Texas.

R. N. Hogan opposed the segregation of such schools as Pepperdine. His sermons were topical, logical, and rational patterns that appealed to the intellect. Hogan had a high view of education and literacy. He challenged congregations to read the Bible for themselves and not accept blindly what any pastor said. He allowed open questions and investigations during his sermons.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, an example of gradualism is seen in Marshall Keeble (1878-1968), who appealed to blacks and whites.<sup>12</sup> Keeble’s gospel of accommodation stated, “The way out for us is to exaggerate our

dependence.” He trusted the white congregations for financial support throughout his long career. Although Keeble spoke on race relations, he used “double-speak” or “signification” to convey his message. His preaching style was similar to Hogan’s, yet without the direct judgment against racism and other offensive topics to whites.

The debate between “Sustainers” and “Reformers” continues today. “Sustainers” argue that culture is the reason for the differences seen in people. One prominent African American preacher noted, “Everybody considers their own culture as superior. Indians think their culture is superior. That’s natural. It’s not the red man, yellow man, black man. It’s culture. I couldn’t go live in Africa. ... Or marry an African. We are not going to mix. ... She is as black as I am, but it’s the culture. That’s it, it’s the culture.”<sup>13</sup> This preacher defends gradualism as the most Christian approach but also the most pragmatic approach.

*When you take for example Keeble, he was slower than Bowser. Over time, this proved more successful. Keeble came up in severe Jim Crowe age and well acquainted with the attitude of the Caucasian and when you look back, he had the best approach. Maybe not the acceptable approach but the best approach. Many preachers wouldn’t tell you that. ... I always could understand what the old man was doing. I couldn’t of done it, not like that, I couldn’t be like Jackie Robinson. ... There are certain men who were ready fit for the position. A man for the time. Keeble was man for the time. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the man for the time. Jackie Robinson was the man for the time. You got to admit, his [Keeble] approach was the best approach.*

However, another preacher who began his career in the tradition of Keeble reflects on this as though it were the wrong course. He attacks the argument of culture asking about other religious groups that are integrated even in the midst of two or more cultures. His voice mourns and his eyes fall as he retells stories of accommodation as though he and others were weak and fearful.

### **The Rhetoric of African American Preaching**

C. J. LaRue summarizes various analytical approaches. Scholars have examined sermon content, language, emotional appeals, ministerial authority, and so on. He moves beyond these approaches by examining the interpretive process itself as the key to unlock the distinctive nature of African American preaching.<sup>14</sup>

The following analysis will describe African American preaching under the categories of signification, hermeneutics, community, and the use of language. These modes of oral communication

symbolize “the capacity to think intelligently, act decisively, and express creatively and courageously the feelings black people harbor about life in America.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Signification**

Among the many analyses for the development of African American rhetoric, the concept of “double consciousness” is explained. W. E. B. DuBois defines the term as looking at one’s self through the eyes of oppressors and thereby devaluing the self as inferior to them. However, double consciousness has led to alternative ways of viewing and acting in the world. By viewing the world through their own as well as through other’s eyes, a creative ability to adapt and escape the limitations imposed upon them led to their survival.<sup>16</sup>

Peterson explores the double voicedness of Black American writing and demonstrates how the utterances of this cultural group exhibit Bakhtin’s dialogic framework.<sup>17</sup> Language, discourses, and narratives are culturally produced. Many voices share with each other the common story of a people. Furthermore, the community contextually interprets the story. Meaning can neither be created, understood, nor presented except within community. African-American rhetoric uses meta-confrontation within the structure of a sign in order to speak two messages at the same time, namely, a message of acceptance and a message of liberation.

Hale uses DuBois as an example of dialogic discourse in the African-American setting.<sup>18</sup> He maintains you cannot abstract language from the social matrix that produced the utterance. Language exhibits a double consciousness that is socially constructed. Bakhtin parallels a social constructionist view where knowledge is socially constructed. Discourse communities (e.g., African-Americans) will, in Bakhtin’s sphere, construct a reality and knowledge system that is their own. Groups will draw upon the linguistic resources available with their culture in order to constitute localized realities. Because all discourse is rhetorical in nature, the way we validate statements resides in the persuasiveness of statements within a particular community (opposed to individuals who claim to encounter the world directly and use language to describe their encounter). Therefore, reality is not seen in the correspondence of ideas to objects and events, or in the faculties of the mind, or in some set of natural laws. Therefore, language displays a socialized ambivalence. Knowledge, therefore, is intersubjective.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., combines rhetoric and sociolinguistic analyses in his discussions of “black English.”<sup>19</sup> Although not acknowledged by Henry Mitchell, one of homiletics foremost authorities on black preaching, Gates terminology and descriptions overlap Mitchell’s understanding of a unique black dialect.<sup>20</sup> Bizzell and Herzberg reinforce this idea by stating that “black English” is linguistically a melding of several African languages and English.<sup>21</sup> Black dialect must be examined lexically, grammatically, and syntactically through a lens of these African languages. Gates uses the term “tropes” (a turn of words away from their literal meaning to a metaphorical meaning) to identify a large number of black rhetorical strategies. Many of these forms, like repetition, rhyming, and hyperbole, are similar to ancient tropes understood for centuries. Gates, however, identifies “signifying” as the “master trope” of black rhetoric.<sup>22</sup> “Signifying . . . is the general term for several forms of persuasion, insult, boasting, or lying, all by innuendo or indirection.”<sup>23</sup> Twelve speech genres and fourteen representative signifying tropes are identified common to the black dialect in everyday discourse. Other non-verbal categories are prevalent as well. Some of the genres and tropes are equally shared by white rhetoric. Gates states that signifying works through indirection, a “linguistic masking, the verbal sign of the mask of blackness that demarcates the boundary between the white linguistic realm and the black, two domains that exist side by side in a homonymic relation signified by the very concept of signification.”<sup>24</sup>

Gates argues that “black English” is primarily learned in the home and on the streets. He quotes Richard Lanham’s depiction of the black child passing through the “rhetorical paideia” of everyday life as a training ground in language so that the student can master the figures of black signification. Lanham states,

*Start your student young. Teach him a minute concentration on the word, how to write it, speak it, remember it. . . . From the beginning, stress behavior as performance, reading aloud, speaking with gesture, a full range of histrionic adornment. . . . Develop elaborate memory schemes to keep them readily at hand. Teach, as theory of personality, a corresponding set of accepted personality types, a taxonomy of impersonation. . . . Nourish an acute sense of social situation. . . . Stress, too, the need for improvisation, ad-lib quickness, the coaxing of chance. Hold always before the student rhetoric’s practical purpose: to win, to persuade. But train for this purpose with continual verbal play, rehearsal for the sake of rehearsal.*

*Use the “case” method. . . . Practice this recreation always in an agnostic context. The aim is scoring. Urge the student to go into the world and observe its doings from this perspective. And urge him to continue his rehearsal method all his life, forever rehearsing a spontaneous real life. . . . Training in the word thus becomes a badge, as well as a diversion, of the leisure class.<sup>25</sup>*

Gates sees signification functioning as a “trick” being played on the audience. The word “trick” recalls the myth of the “signifying monkey,” which originates in Africa. The monkey specializes in

playing off superior forces against one another to his own advantage. In the jungle he shuttles between the fierce lion (the white racists?) and the powerful elephant (the white liberal?), tricking each to do his will.

Lischer notes that signifying was the only mode of communication, other than suicidal confrontation, that was available to an oppressed people.<sup>26</sup> Referring to Mezzrow, Gates notes that it is not specifically what is said, but how. The hearer of signification needs to distinguish between “manner and matter.” “Decoding” of the metaphorical message depends upon shared knowledge.

### **Hermeneutics**

When speaking to black audiences directly, black speakers use a dialect and rhetoric that is consistent with their heritage and culture<sup>27</sup> because there is a recognition that people hear the good news in their own idiom, images, and cultural communication styles.<sup>28</sup> Many of these styles are not recognized much less appreciated by those who are anticipating conformity to what they consider to be a more “correct” approach.

Spontaneity is prevalent in black preaching. Black preachers are able to move with the moment and express deep feeling without shame. However, much of the perceived spontaneity is a result of the use of “set-pieces” (Aristotle’s “topoi”). These “proofs” are “sure things” that have been field tested to have the desired rhetorical effect. Set-pieces come from a variety of sources and are often familiar to the audience. The same set-piece often is used in a variety of sermons functioning differently each time. The audience recognizes the set-piece almost immediately. Instead of being interpreted as boring repetition, the set-piece affirms community, gathers the audience attention, and brings them together to the next stage of the sermon or to a decision. Set-pieces are often the building blocks of the logical movement of the sermon.

Black sermons are often structured around the imaginative use of narrative. The most prevalent narrative (master story) found throughout the history of the black church is the story of the Exodus. The telling of the story is not a reflecting back or remembering examples of old, but an actual participation with those who have gone on before. The narrative has direct transference and immediate relevance. Scripture is seen as being written by oppressed people for oppressed people. Besides the Exodus motif, two other themes utilized in Black theology are biblical references to black nations, and Jesus’ stance toward the oppressed. These paradigms become the lens to see all other texts.

Historical-critical exegetes often label a direct transference of a historical context to another context as a historical fallacy or presentism. Presentism is found often in Black narrative hermeneutics. The discontinuity between “then” and “now” becomes lost. The dynamic analogy created in the sermon assumes historical continuity between Israel and the community today. This experiential encounter with the Word is a holistic experience of the cognitive, intuitive, and emotional aspects of the hearer. Therefore, when the preacher speaks of Pharaoh as a white task master that lives on the hill who has a brass knocker on his door that the Israelites are not able to use, the modern critic should not dismiss easily the anachronistic typology found in African-American hermeneutics which did not pass through the hallowed halls of the disinterested Enlightenment. The presentism assumed by the speaker functions to create identification in such a way that the response desired is achieved.

Presentism, by black hermeneutical standards, is not a historical fallacy but an outgrowth of a different kind of logic, namely, associational logic. Hatch argues against the following thesis: The persuasive strategy behind black preaching is to appeal to the emotions so that the audience can escape from an impossible world. Hatch offers a case study of C. L. Franklin to show how logic and reason are used and embedded in narratives, examples, comparisons, and biblical references. Franklin used associational logic to establish a relationship with the intellect, imagination, and the emotions. Hatch calls this a type of poetic logic that is neither inductive nor deductive in nature but analogical. Sermons proceed from particular instances of the same relationship.<sup>29</sup>

Hatch analyzes the black sermon by looking for associational logic. He also sees elliptical sentence structure used throughout. He recognizes that metaphor is more than a stylistic ornament, it is an example of poetic logic and a type of concrete reasoning. That is why there is such a high use of figurative language. Most sermons are organized around a central image that is often criticized as a digression.<sup>30</sup>

Hatch offers a matrix of correspondence as a method of analysis.<sup>31</sup> The matrix demonstrates parallel instances of the same relationship between diverse sections of the sermon. The successive points are not digressions designed to hold the attention of the audience. Each point of the sermon is designed to parallel the biblical narrative and establish a set of correspondences that advance the argument.

Samuel Proctor argues in favor of a Hegelian model of dialectic as appropriate for African-American preaching.<sup>32</sup> Proctor develops the dialectical method of preaching common among many trained

at Crozier prior to the Civil Rights Movement. He argues that meeting the various crisis situations in the congregation demands that the preacher begin where they are. Real needs of people's broken lives become the beginning point for every sermon. Healing or resolution of people's needs comes in the form of a proposition that can originate from experience or from the Word of God. This proposition or "ideal" that the preacher desires to communicate must be examined in relationship with the "real" of people's lives (antithesis). A relevant question is asked to reconcile the real and the ideal. The message, the resolution, and the answer to the relevant question create the synthesis. This answer may be presented in two to six points. Each point needs to be developed from several perspectives to bring clarity. The preacher may develop these points from the biblical record, history, literature, and experience, but they will always contain the good news. Usually, the points of the resolution are structured as a deductive topical lesson. Proctor readily acknowledges his dependence upon Harry Emerson Fosdick.

LaRue argues that the distinctive aspect of black preaching is the hermeneutic derived from experience. His examination of several nineteenth and twentieth century African American preachers and their published sermons supports the existence of a common black hermeneutic that cuts across social, political, and denominational lines. He states, "the distinctive power of black preaching is derived from a way of perceiving God that both affects and is affected by their particular reading of Scripture based on their experiences."<sup>33</sup> This distinct understanding of God sees him as a sovereign acting "mightily on behalf of dispossessed and marginalized people."<sup>34</sup> Critical interpretive dynamics at work in the stages of sermon development are discussed under the domains of personal piety, care of the soul, social justice, corporate concern, and maintenance of the institutional church.

Set-pieces, narratives, associational logic, and dialectical logic are just some of the ways sermons are constructed by black preachers. Although sometimes criticized for not conforming to many standard methods for sermon organization, an appreciation for black preaching is finding resurgence among the new homiletic circles because of their sophistic and experiential concerns for audience impact. Preaching as a communal word takes center stage.

### **Community**

Stewart states that a significant part of African American spirituality relies upon people belonging to a larger social group that fosters a collective strength and vitality.<sup>35</sup> Worship is a primary place for the

gathering of the black community to affirm each other's presence. Call and response is not only a dialogical interaction due to the content of the sermon, but also a catalyst for solidarity. The community rallies around specific concerns. Stewart offers the following example of call and response noting its primary role in socialization:

*Speaker: "And there will come a time when we will see another day."*

*Audience: "That's right. We will!"*

*Speaker: "And nobody will turn us 'round when that day comes!"*

*Audience: "That's right, say it!"*

*Speaker: "Whatever we want to say, we got to say that God is in charge of this thing and can't no person, mind, nor mule stand in God's way when god decides to do something!"*

*Audience: "You know you right. That's right. Go 'head. Say it!"*

*Speaker: "So let's stand up and take action! Let's stand up to those drug dealers and run them out of town because this is God's place and we are God's people. If we take two steps, God will take ten on our behalf!"*

*Audience: "That's it! Let's do it! Let's go. God is with us!"*

*... Not only did words quicken responses from the audience, but the process of call and response itself has ritual significance in simulating unity and solidarity among people whose basic strength is in unified belief and action.<sup>36</sup>*

Preaching and hearing go together. A person listening is vital to good preaching because the pulpit and pew are engaged in a common work. No where is this more evident than in the black church where the people are actually helping the preacher to preach. If the congregation fails to hold up their end of the congregation, the preacher may even stop and remonstrate with the members of the "amen corner." "Preach it, preacher!" "Praise the Lord!" "Ain't it true!" "Amen, brother!" Shouts of acclamation for the preacher are likewise intercessions.<sup>37</sup> Call and response affirms each other's presence. The notion of collective unity in the midst of diversity is exemplified.<sup>38</sup>

The relationship between the speaker and the audience is vastly different than the traditional communication theory of "sender-receiver." In the black church the audience responds almost constantly with set responses, encouragements, suggestions, and nonverbal signals.<sup>39</sup> "Thus a regular feature of black rhetoric on most occasions is the effort of the speaker to stir the audience to verbal response. ... Beyond the introduction, though, the sermon's purpose is both to exhort and to create solidarity, and participation is a sign that its purposes are being achieved."<sup>40</sup> One preacher states, "blacks are just more verbal than whites although there seems to be a coming together on that too. We use more repetition because black churches will accept it more."

C. J. P. Barbour at Crozier Seminary would drill his students every Sunday afternoon in black homiletics. Martin Luther King, Jr., learned early that audience reaction was essential. Lischer comments on Barbour's homiletic stating, "The science of 'audience reaction' reinforced Aristotle's pragmatics of rhetoric: there is no truth unless an audience counts it true."<sup>41</sup>

D. McKim connects black hermeneutics with liberation theology. He speaks about black preaching being concerned with anthropological poverty (a denial of black culture and a subsequent denial of humanity). The themes of suffering, oppression, and powerlessness point to liberation and salvation. Such salvation is not to be left to the end of history but is to be played out in our present day struggles. Freedom equals self-determination.<sup>42</sup>

Preaching, therefore, has functioned as the voice for community in the political world. Congregations have been moved to act because the black preacher has brought the world of the Bible directly to bear upon their present concerns. The preacher's word has voiced the community's heart.

### Language

Henry Mitchell knows that the word is central for the black speaker and that how the preacher chooses to employ sound on that word is as much a matter of invention as the choosing of the word itself.<sup>43</sup> The creative interplay between sound, rhythm, cadence, and harmony may be as important as the precise message.<sup>44</sup> Some black preachers depend more on the voice than they do the precision of the message.

*One comes upon real love for the English tongue .... Gardner Taylor begins by picking up a word, such as reconciliation, or communion, or sisterhood. First he just says it, but then you can see him warming up to it. Clearly he loves that word, and he's going to do wonderful things for it and to it. He tries just rolling it out of his mouth; then, staccato-like, he bounces it around a bit; then he starts to take it apart, piece by piece, and then put it together in different ways. And pretty soon you have a whole lot of people engaged in wondering and puzzling with Dr. Taylor, trying to figure out what this word and this idea or reconciliation is all about. They walk around the word, looking at it from different angles. Taylor gets on top of it and looks down, then he lifts up a corner and peeks underneath; you can see this is going to be a difficult word to get to know. He whispers it and then he shouts it; he pats, pinches, and probes it; and then he pronounces himself unsatisfied, and all the people agree. "It's time to look at what the great Apostle Paul has to say about this here word reconciliation." And all the people agree.<sup>45</sup>*

Primarily, the use of language is intended to bring an emotional release at the end of the sermon. A true understanding of good news climaxes in celebration.<sup>46</sup> This occurs through what Mitchell terms "transconsciousness" defined as: the result of immemorial existential situations.<sup>47</sup> Proclamation will lead to

celebration. The genius of black preaching is the capacity to generate praise or joy in the hardest of circumstances. Joy is a deep feeling that draws people into community by transcending tragedies.

Stewart sees rap, signify, and testify as three modes of language that were creatively innovated as a response to the more socially accepted modes of the surrounding society. Rap encourages black people to make sense, to adopt and adapt, to transform reality through a creative use and mixing of words and sounds. Signification, discussed above, arrives at “direction through indirection.” It maintains an advantage over adversaries by the use of mixed messages or “double speak.” Its purpose is to manipulate the hegemonic powers. Finally, testifying is simply an active and faithful witnessing to God’s work in the world in order to understand the world from a different perspective. The common affirmation of God’s reality establishes strength and power to their collective identity. To talk about what God has done, is doing, and will do despite oppression is transforming and liberating for the mind, body, and soul.<sup>48</sup>

African-American preaching is rooted in metaphor and metonymy [tools of signification]. The startling juxtapositions of two unfamiliar entities provoke puzzlement, denial, and response. Metonymy associates the image with idea in a more logical and suitable manner. The poetic nature of African-American rhetoric garners a favorable hearing.

Lischer lists the following repetition devices in King’s sermons which are common to the black sermon genre: alliteration, assonance, anaphora, epistrophe, leitmotif, amplification (copiousness, intensification), sacred association, and parataxis.<sup>49</sup> All of these devices have their ancient roots and are described by Aristotle. Lischer also notes that there is a “sound track” of style also common among black preachers. Rhythms, pitch, sounds, stress on syllables, volume, etc. all contribute to the sermon’s rhetorical effect. Phrases ascend by degrees to peaks of accented words that the speaker not only stresses but also plays or bends in a tonal curve. These sound tracks, stammers, syncopations, enjambments, glissandos, the pathos in the voice, etc. cannot be duplicated on the printed page and transcends cognitive analysis. Vocal inflections typically used by black preachers also include the bending and lowering of pitches (blue note), sliding from tone to tone (glissando), grace notes, fall-offs, and tremolo, which are all representative of a jazz soloists. The same word may have different meaning and consequently different audience reaction just by the variety of tonal inflections given it by the preacher. Whooping is the most stereotypical element in

black preaching. It is far from universal and on the decline. It is used only when welcomed by the congregation and done by those who can do it sincerely and with cultural integrity.<sup>50</sup>

The characteristic use of the voice is one of the most identifiable characteristics of black preaching. One preacher comments on this fact when talking about an invitation he received from a “white” congregation. “Now, why do they want me for. Is it because I can preach the gospel better than other folk? Is it because there will be those in the audience I can reach that others can’t? Noooo! I was invited to be an entertainer. I was invited because I can thrill their fancy. Maybe, I was invited to pacify the sins of their fathers. ‘Now there’s a liberal church. They don’t discriminate based on sex, creed, or color.’ Well, at least not color.”<sup>51</sup>

One preacher describes how he went to a different school than his mentor. “He taught me the gospel. He gave me the opportunity and encouragement to preach. He garnered financial support for me. But I chose to go to a different college. It was if I betrayed him. Ever since, I feel as though he undermines my ministry here and tarnishes my reputation whenever possible. He is an effective soul-winner, but I could not follow him morally. I had to make my own path.”

He goes on to tell about being trained at a “white” school which causes him other problems. Due to the lack of dependence upon emotional appeals, associational logic, and voice, other black preachers see him as less effective. This factor is not as important within his congregation as it is when visitors come from other traditions. He relates being considered “white” in his preaching. He tells about how his own congregation sometimes feels inferior because he “can’t whoop it up like the preachers of our religious neighbors.” “But I wasn’t trained to preach like that. I was trained to preach the Word. And I was trained to preach the Word using appropriate critical methods and logical presentation.”<sup>52</sup>

#### **A Case Study: Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Niles offers three limitations in analyzing black sermons. These sermons were not prepared in manuscript form. Most sermons are in dialogue form and the manuscripts that do exist do not satisfactorily represent what actually took place in the church. Furthermore, sermons in the black tradition were not written to be read. Much of the impact, therefore, is lost unless the critic knows how the words would have sounded, and can picture the delivery in his or her mind as he or she reads the manuscript.<sup>53</sup>

Sanders identifies seven different types of transcripts among black preachers: poetic, literary, musical, structural, hermeneutical, ethical, and political. The poetic and literary types recognize preacher

as artist and are rooted in a living oral tradition of the black church. Sanders notes how difficult it is to analyze written and edited sermons. The printed sermon loses the qualities of the oral event. How do you reproduce the oral word in a written form?<sup>54</sup>

Lischer states that King's voice is lost in the published materials that are decontextualized because of the editorial process. The published sermons of King lack the themes that struck the chords in the black church. For example, the fatigue in his voice was often overwhelmed by his awakened urgency in his own message. King often found his voice in the pulpit.<sup>55</sup> Published sermons lose the sense of style ("the how of the what"). The distinctions between what is said and how it is said are lost. Lischer states, "the style is the message."<sup>56</sup> Under the heading of style, Lischer also notes King's fascination with words and phrases, his force of repetition, and set-pieces.<sup>57</sup>

R. Lischer notes how Martin Luther King, Jr., was true to both the Sustainer and Reformer traditions.<sup>58</sup> He appealed often to the Sustainer's emphasis on "personal dignity" by reminding the nation that God created all humanity in his own image. He learned with skill the "double voice" of the Sustainer who could speak one word that addressed the oppressed and the oppressor differently. King maintained the rhetoric of gradualism in using imperative sentences 2.5% of the time compared to using declarative sentences nearly 90% of the time. Yet, as his later life bore witness, King stood squarely in the midst of the Reformers like Allen, Garnet, Tubman, Turner, Walker, and Douglass.

In comparison to others who use signification and "double voice" to a greater extent, King used restraint in using playful put-downs and double entendres. Yet, Lischer notes, "His entire rhetorical strategy of identification can be interpreted as a form of signifying."<sup>59</sup> He depended upon his own unique black voice to maintain the balance needed between the white liberals, the black militants, and the moderates of both races, all of whom he depended upon for the success of the cause.

There is great debate about the source of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s philosophy. Miller opts to support that his philosophy comes from African-American folk religion.<sup>60</sup> Lischer reviews the traditional understanding of King's background being firmly influenced by his liberal education at Boston University. "The figures and ideas he engaged in his graduate study gave him a vocabulary with which he rationalized a more original black response to the events of his day."<sup>61</sup> The word does not function as a theoretical base for action. Rather, the word is a kind of action that cannot legitimately be separated from the struggles,

temptations, sufferings, and hopes of the people who live by the word. Lischer concludes that King found his authority in the black church pulpit.

Although King is heavily criticized for plagiarism, Miller argues that King understood oral language as public language. No one can own or have private language. Oral language is passed down and shared from generation to generation. Miller states, "In the folk pulpit, one gains an authoritative voice by adopting the persona of previous speakers as one adapts the sermons and formulaic expressions of a sanctified tradition."<sup>62</sup> Miller calls this "voice-merging." The process of voice-merging results in "self-making." Massey supports the use of others' sermons when making general suggestions to preachers.<sup>63</sup> He suggests exploring the design of sermons by the "masters" as an effective resource for improving sermons.

Augustine counseled less gifted preachers to memorize and deliver the words of others. Gregory the Great often quoted verbatim the words of the Fathers. Anglican preachers read the sermons of Tillotson; Methodists recite Wesley; Puritans quote Mather and Barnard. Preachers who use the tradition of their religious heritage allow it to make a difference in their personal preaching style.

Miller also notes that a secondary feature of voice-merging occurs when the preacher's voice, the familiar set-pieces, and the formulaic expressions merge with the congregational consciousness.<sup>64</sup> The merging enables churchgoers to participate more freely through speaking, clapping, gesturing, or dancing. King's agenda was to merge all voices in America so a resultant brotherhood would result (identity convergence). King had a communal hermeneutic.<sup>65</sup> The congregational dialogue that occurred every Sunday was an establishment of a connection between the text and the audience. Certain passages, phrases, or set-pieces signal many internal meanings shared by the preacher and the congregation. The text is then experienced presently. Some of the same sermons were preached in white congregations yet without the same rhetorical effect. Lischer notes how the same messages and words are used but without the fire. "The black audience allowed him [King] to cook."

The above analysis of the social context, rhetoric, hermeneutic, and the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., has confirmed the rich and diverse nature of African American preaching. It is no wonder that recent homiletical materials have resonated with black preaching. The response from the pew confirms the universal application of these principles. The Word is fulfilled in their hearing.

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<sup>1</sup> John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979, 176.

- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 179.
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted by Deane A. Kemper, "The Sermon As Story: Telling the Whole Truth," (Academy of Homiletics, 1979).
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> C. F. Stewart, Soul Survivors: An African American Spirituality (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997): 146.
- <sup>6</sup> Calvin Bowers, "Creating the Black Church," Gospel Advocate (January, 1990): 17-18.
- <sup>7</sup> Stewart, Soul Survivors, 129.
- <sup>8</sup> Bowers, "Creating," 17.
- <sup>9</sup> P. Bizzell and B. Herzberg, The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings From Classical Times to the Present (Boston: Bedford Books, 1990): 1185-1186. Using language to accomplish a dual function, exemplified by Douglass, is what Bakhtin calls "double voicedness, Louis Gates calls, "signification," or W.E.B. DuBois terms "double consciousness."
- <sup>10</sup> J. Maxwell, "Restoration Movement," Gospel Advocate (1990), 15-16.
- <sup>11</sup> M. W. Casey, Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace: A History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1995): 141-147.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 147.
- <sup>13</sup> T. Sensing, unpublished interviews of several prominent African-American preachers in Churches of Christ, 1997. My interest in the rhetoric of African-American preaching began in 1994 while a student at Duke University. Two of my professors were Peter Gomes, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard, and the late Samuel Proctor, former pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, NY, Martin Luther King Professor Emeritus of Rutgers University, and homiletics professor at Duke University. This particular project was part of a pilot study in narrative research methodologies while a student at University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Future quotes and references to this project will not be footnoted to protect the confidentiality of the participants.
- <sup>14</sup> C. J. LaRue, The Heart of Black Preaching. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000): 11-12.
- <sup>15</sup> Stewart, Soul Survivors, 55.
- <sup>16</sup> Stewart, Soul Survivors, 13 referring to DuBois's work, The Souls of Black Folks.
- <sup>17</sup> D. E. Peterson, "Response and Call? The African-American Dialogue with Bakhtin," American Literature 65 (1993): 761-775.
- <sup>18</sup> D. J. Hale, "Bakhtin in African-American Literary Theory. ELH 61 (1994): 445-471.
- <sup>19</sup> H. L. Gates, Jr., "The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning," in The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings From Classical Times to the Present, eds., P. Bizzell and B. Herzberg. (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995): 1193-1223.
- <sup>20</sup> H. H. Mitchell, Black Preaching (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1990): 56-57.
- <sup>21</sup> Bizzell and Herzberg, Rhetorical Tradition, 1186-1187.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1193.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1189.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1213.
- <sup>25</sup> Gates quoting Richard A. Lanham, The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976): 2-3.
- <sup>26</sup> R. Lischer, The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Word that Moved America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 32, 39, 59.
- <sup>27</sup> Bizzell and Herzberg, Rhetorical Tradition, 1189-1191.
- <sup>28</sup> H. H. Mitchell, "African-American Preaching," in Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching, 2-9.
- <sup>29</sup> G. L. Hatch, "Logic in the Black Folk Sermon: The Sermons of Rev. C. L. Franklin," Journal of Black Studies 26 (1996): 227-244.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> S. D. Procter, "How Shall They Hear?" Effective Preaching for Vital Faith (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1992); and Preaching About Crisis in the Community (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988).
- <sup>33</sup> LaRue, Heart of Black Preaching, 2.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6.

- <sup>35</sup> Stewart, Soul Survivors, 53.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 66.
- <sup>37</sup> Neuhaus, Freedom for Ministry, 175.
- <sup>38</sup> Stewart, Soul Survivors, 65.
- <sup>39</sup> Bizzell and Herzberg, Rhetorical Tradition, 1188.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Lischer, King, 70.
- <sup>42</sup> D. K. McKim, The Bible in Theology and Preaching: How Preachers Use Scripture (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994): 150-158. For a critique of the liberation theology approach in preaching, see T. Sensing, "A Call to Prophetic Preaching," .
- <sup>43</sup> Mitchell, Black Preaching, 88.
- <sup>44</sup> B. A. Rosenberg, The Art of the American Folk Preacher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- <sup>45</sup> Neuhaus, Freedom for Ministry, 177.
- <sup>46</sup> H. H. Mitchell, "Preaching as Celebration," in Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition, ed., R. Lischer (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1987); 128-134; L. A. Niles, "Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching," Journal of Black Studies 15 (1984): 41-52; W. H. Pipes, "Say Amen Brother!" Old Time Negro Preaching: A Study in American Frustration (Westport, CN: Negro Universities Press of Greenwood Press, 1970).
- <sup>47</sup> Mitchell, "Preaching as Celebration," 129.
- <sup>48</sup> Stewart, Soul Survivors, 55-65.
- <sup>49</sup> Lischer, King, 128-130.
- <sup>50</sup> Mitchell, Black Preaching, 92.
- <sup>51</sup> Narrative interview.
- <sup>52</sup> Narrative interview.
- <sup>53</sup> L. A. Niles, "Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching." Journal of Black Studies 15 (1984): 41-52.
- <sup>54</sup> C. J. Sanders, "God's trombones: Voices in African-American Folk Preaching," in Sharing Heaven's Music: The Heart of Christian Preaching: Essays in Honor of James Earl Massey, B. L. Callen ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 151-164.
- <sup>55</sup> R. Lischer, Class Notes, Duke University, 1994.
- <sup>56</sup> Lischer, Preacher King, 179.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Lischer, Preacher King, 28-38.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 156.
- <sup>60</sup> K. D. Miller, "Voice Merging and Self-Making: The Epistemology of 'I Have a Dream,'" Rhetoric Society Quarterly 19 (1991): 23-31; Mitchell, Black Preaching, 13, 56-57.
- <sup>61</sup> R. Lischer, "The Word That Moves: The Preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Theology Today 46 (1989):169-182.
- <sup>62</sup> Miller, "Voice Merging," 121.
- <sup>63</sup> J. E. Massey, Designing the Sermon: Order and Movement in Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).
- <sup>64</sup> Miller, "Voice Merging."
- <sup>65</sup> Lischer, "Word," 170.