

Rethinking Celebration

From Rhetoric to Praise
in African American Preaching

Cleophus J. LaRue

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To Lori Ann

Contents

Introduction	ix
1. The Celebratory Impulse in African American Preaching	1
2. A Review of Henry Mitchell's and Frank Thomas's Celebration Homiletic	7
3. The Problem with Celebration as an Evocative Rhetorical Tool	19
4. Festivity Theory and the Origins of Celebration	31
5. A Theology of Praise in Its Multiple Expressions	47
Conclusion	69
Appendix: Sermons	73
Cleophus J. LaRue: "The Necessity of the Wilderness" (Mark 1:12–13)	73
Cleophus J. LaRue: "Why Bother?" (Acts 17:16–23)	75
Paschal Sampson Wilkinson Sr.: "Traveling toward the Sunrise" (Numbers 21:10–11)	79
Brian K. Blount: "Rise!" (Mark 5:21–24, 35–43)	83
Claudette Anderson Copeland: "Tamar's Torn Robe" (2 Samuel 13:1–20)	92
Cleophus J. LaRue: "It Will Surely Come" (Habakkuk 2:1–4)	98
Notes	103
Bibliography	117

Introduction

This book is a clarion call for African American preachers to think more deeply about the aims and ends of their preaching—namely, to stop putting so much emphasis on celebratory endings *to* our sermons and focus more on the substantive content *in* our sermons. Our so-called celebratory preaching, designed to excite the congregation into action through a highly emotional closing of the sermon, has had the opposite effect. Rather than inducing action, it has lulled generations of black congregants to sleep. While we are jumping up and down, shouting, and waving our hands in the air every Sunday during the worship hour, we seem not to notice the growing number of churched and unchurched alike who are becoming powerfully alienated from any form of institutional religion.¹ The rising category of the “nones”—Americans who are unaffiliated with brand-name religion—is on the rise in black churches as well as mainline congregations.² Our black communities are changing right before our eyes. They, like the rest of America, are becoming more secular, less knowledgeable about the Bible, and less spiritual.

In the face of this nationwide numerical decline in organized religion and amidst a growing biblical illiteracy, our emotional rejoicing in worship grows stronger and stronger while our understanding of Scripture and theology seems to grow weaker and weaker. We are emphasizing emotional rejoicing too much and substantive content in our sermons too little. Not only have we diluted the gospel through our lack of solid preparation for preaching, but all too many black preachers have privatized the faith, removed it from the public square, bought into some version of the prosperity gospel, and turned preaching into little more than motivational speech for the privatized longings of a consumer-oriented clientele.³

Even as I critique black preaching for its lack of prophetic witness, I am aware of the fact that there are untold numbers of black churches who continue to hold high the banner of prophetic witness even in the face of the many who have walked away. The prophetic preaching of the

late Rev. Clementa Pinckney and the Charleston 9 is proof that all black ministers have not squandered the heritage passed on to them by Alexander Crummell, Francis Grimke, and others. But for every preacher like Charleston 9's Pinckney, who upheld the black tradition of preaching prophetic justice, there are a dozen black preachers who preach prosperity and flaunt their own lifestyle of conspicuous consumption

The church's traditional theological teachings are heard less and less in their traditional understandings, and what passes for good preaching is a mere echo chamber to the siren calls of our hedonistic culture with its endless appetite for material gain and self-advancement. The black church is unabashedly awash in the pursuit of material things and has been for some time.⁴ And black preachers are leading the way. Thirty years ago Neal Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* noted that television was making us "sillier by the minute":

The decline of a print-based epistemology and the accompanying rise of a television-based epistemology has had grave consequences for public life, that we are getting sillier by the minute. . . . As typography moves to the periphery of our culture and television takes its place at the center, the seriousness, clarity, and above all, value of public discourse dangerously declines.⁵

No truer words were spoken as we witness the growing number of shameless black preachers joining the ranks of the reality TV crowd, displaying for the entire world to see the foibles and failures of black religious culture. The vulgarity and insipid tomfoolery exhibited by the reality TV preachers would put the *Amos 'n' Andy* sitcom of yesteryear to shame.⁶

In all too many pulpits, God has become little more than an "errand boy or girl" who gives us all we desire. Performance has replaced proclamation; in other words, more preachers focus on *how* they say something as opposed to *what* they say. Being known for having a "sweet whoop"⁷ in one's preaching style is much preferred to having a sound message. So much that happens in black worship today is a form of emotional exercise that ultimately has little effect on what goes on in a person's life during the rest of the week.⁸ In our YouTube age of instant entertainment, people also expect to be constantly entertained in matters religious. And all too many preachers are willing to oblige them in these opening years of the twenty-first century. Without a sound exegetical process and a theological tradition to guide us, ministers do "what [is] right in their own eyes" (Judg. 17:6). We preach as if we

are no longer conscious of our surroundings and the great challenges before us.

Our black communities are stressed, and the people who populate them are, in many instances, broken and struggling to survive from day to day. Youth suicides are up; teenage pregnancies are an ongoing concern; high school dropout rates are disproportionately high; black-on-black homicides are through the roof; at least one-third of the black male population has had a negative encounter with law enforcement; and black net worth is sinking while debt is increasing.⁹ Yet in all too many black churches our preaching does not even attempt to address these realities because we have aimed beyond the “hills of relevance” for all the wrong reasons. Like a laser beam, so much of our preaching today focuses, to the exclusion of all else, on that much ballyhooed celebratory ending. Our overemphasis on the manner in which we close out sermons and our burning desire to slay the crowd every Sunday have caused us to lose sight of the importance of the clear enunciation of the word of God in our preaching. The desire to navigate successfully that much sought-after celebratory, emotional high at the close of the black sermon is negatively affecting the ways in which preaching should strengthen the church and impact its wider witness to the world.

Black churches have traditionally pitched their tents where the needs were greatest, but today a great many of those tents, even when pitched in proximity to the black masses, no longer seem to house pulpits that speak *to* or *for* the black masses. Our ministers, young and old alike, seem more concerned with making a “rhetorical hit” in the pulpit than in preaching the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ. I wish I could say that the black church of today would not be recognized by prophets on the order of Martin Luther King Jr., Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Gardner Taylor, Nannie Helen Burrows, and other great voices from our past, but the truth of the matter is that they would immediately recognize it, for it is the same church they railed against in their day for its lethargy and inertia. King made no effort to hide his contempt for black churches and black preachers who would not commit themselves to the movement for justice and equality:

I'm sick and tired of seeing [black] preachers riding around in big cars and living in big houses and not concerned about the problems of the people who made it possible for them to get these things. . . . It seems that I can hear the almighty God say, 'Stop preaching your loud sermons and whooping your irrelevant mess in my face, for

your hands are full of tar. For the people that I sent you to serve are in need, and you are doing nothing but being concerned about yourselves.’ Seems that I can hear God saying that it’s time to rise up now and make it clear that the evils of the universe must be removed. And that God isn’t going to do it by himself. The church that overlooks this is a dangerously irrelevant church.¹⁰

So many black churches today, even in their multifaceted forms and dimensions, are indeed bordering on being irrelevant. Princeton University professor Eddie Glaude pronounced the black church dead and no longer central to black life as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation. He chided the venerable institution for its lack of prophetic energy in a time of great need in black communities across America. According to Glaude,

We have witnessed *the routinization of black prophetic witness*. Too often the prophetic energies of black churches are represented as something inherent to the institution, and we need only point to past deeds for evidence of this fact. Sentences like, “The black church has always stood for . . .” “The black church was our rock . . .” “Without the black church, we would have not. . .” In each instance, a backward glance defines the content of the church’s stance in the present—justifying its continued relevance and authorizing its voice. Its task, because it has become alienated from the moment in which it lives, is to make us venerate and conform to it.¹¹

While I’m not prepared to declare the black church dead, I do believe that it is in the ecclesial intensive care unit and that its survival will depend, in part, on a revival of the quality of its proclamation on Sundays.

Black homileticians are also failing the church, for we have spent too much time talking about what is wrong with the preaching tradition of others and not enough time on how our knowledge of homiletics could be used to strengthen black preaching in our day. Some of our engagement with and critique of white homiletical theory has been necessary and helpful, for while there are some rudimentary skills that all preachers need to learn irrespective of race, class, or ethnicity, at some point, context does affect the form, content, and aims of our preaching. Consequently, blacks, like many other groups, have sought to participate in the nuancing that must take place when homiletical theory crosses into various contextual realities. For this reason black homileticians have rightly pointed out those places where white homileticians come

up short in their theories about what makes for effective preaching. Given the lack of acknowledgment of black preaching's contribution to the homiletical enterprise, it is understandable that blacks would try to carve out an identity and name their unique contributions to the history of preaching over against the dominant stream of white homiletics. Such critiques benefit all parties concerned. What we gained in that period and through that literature of critique and challenge is an acknowledgment that there is a coherent, intellectually astute black homiletical tradition. But an endless engagement of contrasts and comparisons with white homiletics precludes the breaking of new ground in our own black tradition.

We cannot deepen our understanding of the particulars of black homiletical theory simply by contrasting and comparing ourselves to approaches to preaching espoused by those from another culture. What is obscured in such an exchange is the rich diversity within black religious circles. In our disagreement with white homileticians, we have failed to acknowledge the great diversity and nuancing that has always been a part of the black preaching tradition. *Rethinking Celebration* offers a corrective to current understandings of the celebratory impulse in black preaching and seeks to build on that earlier black homiletical literature as it relates to celebration in African American preaching and worship. Henry H. Mitchell, James Earl Massey, William McClain, James Forbes, and other black homileticians of their generation are to be commended for their work in advancing scholarship in African American religion, especially black preaching and worship. In *Rethinking Celebration* I seek to advance the argument by lifting to visibility some of the inner conversations and critiques within the black religious tradition.

Foremost among such conversations would be a new look at the importance and effectiveness of celebration in black preaching, long regarded as one of the most identifiable features of African American preaching. I will argue that effective preaching, by which I mean preaching that speaks powerfully to this present age while at the same time remaining true to sound scriptural/theological traditions, is being overshadowed by a misunderstanding of the place and theological significance of celebration. To suggest, as Henry Mitchell, Frank Thomas, and others have done, that the only way for African American congregants to remember and do something they've heard in a sermon is by engaging in some form of emotional rejoicing (celebration) at the close of the sermon strains credulity, and it tempts the preacher into placing too much firepower at the end of the sermon. Yet that is the

gist of the celebratory argument being advanced by Mitchell and other pro-celebrationists. They maintain that if you want to convince black congregants to act on what they've heard in the sermon, you must get them up on their feet, clapping their hands and celebrating (i.e., engaging in emotional rejoicing) in worship. I will argue that the facts simply do not bear out their claim. We have the people up on their feet clapping and celebrating in our black churches, but when they are done with their celebration, there is very little to show in terms of redemptive acts of love, justice, and service to and for the world (*kosmos*) that God so loves (John 3:16). The binary quality of worshipful praise as adoration and action is often missing in our celebratory rituals. This has to change if we are going to speak in meaningful ways across the generational divides and to the many challenges facing black communities across America.

Chapter 1 outlines the development of celebration in the contemporary African American religious experience and the ways in which it has been understood to work most effectively in black sermon forms. Although the word *celebration* has a long history in the church's life, it has come to characterize what many believe to be a defining feature of African American preaching: a deliberately evoked, emotional rejoicing at the climax of the sermon. Henry Mitchell and Frank Thomas have been the major proponents of the development of this term in black homiletical circles in recent years. *Celebration* as defined by these two men has become the cornerstone of their homiletic. In chapter 2 I will review and critique Mitchell's and Thomas's works on celebration over the past forty years as well as their recently revised editions on the subject. In this review I will seek to show how their homiletic has been harmed by their quasi-theological definition of *celebration* and the misplaced importance they attach to evocative rhetoric.

Chapter 3 defines and describes the problematic understandings inherent in a merely rhetorical understanding of celebratory preaching. Mitchell's and Thomas's heavy rhetorical emphasis on celebration causes black preachers to work much harder than they should have to on the end of their sermons as opposed to the substantive beginning and middle of their sermons. This aiming for a celebratory close each Sunday often leaves many black preachers feeling crestfallen and dispirited if the sermon has not lived up to their expectations or received the kind of vocal affirmation from the congregation that they had hoped it would. Mitchell's and Thomas's misguided rhetorical emphasis on celebration overshadows its theological importance and relegates the

word of God to an inferior status in much of black preaching where moralizing is often confused with proclamation. While exhortation (*paranaesis*) clearly has a place in Scripture, some blacks make it the be-all and end-all of their preaching, sensing that the exhortatory emphasis has great appeal among black congregants; an appeal that is more conducive to a celebratory close.

Chapter 4 outlines the origins of celebration in festivity theory and argues that what is happening in much of black preaching today is more akin to ancient understandings of festivity as revelry rather than the worshipful praise of God. The word *celebration* comes to us from historical understandings of festivity with an emphasis on exceptionality, excess, frivolity, and good times. However, according to some philosophers of virtue, it has always had a deeper spiritual meaning that ultimately points to the Creator God. Blacks are indeed having a *good time* in their worship and preaching experiences, but I contend that these emotional highs do not necessarily translate into praise. Having argued for a nuanced theological understanding of celebration as worshipful praise and not mere joy and revelry as defined by historical understandings of festivity, I will then address Mitchell's and Thomas's claims about the functional purposes of celebration: that emotional rejoicing helps us to remember and do what is heard in the sermon. Finally, chapter 4 addresses the bivalent nature of adoration and action as a way of demonstrating how the sermon works its way into praxis in other ways than the mere emotional rejoicing espoused by Mitchell and Thomas.

Chapter 5 outlines a theology of praise based on Scripture, offers a more nuanced definition of *doxology*, and suggests ways to enhance black preaching by introducing wider dimensions of praise that are equally legitimate in the preaching moment as well as in the congregational response to the preaching of the word of God. Having outlined different forms of doxological praise, I examine sermons from a representative sampling of American preaching styles that show how different types of doxological praise can be effectively incorporated into the sermon. I argue that true celebratory praise is not always determined by levels of excitement or exaggerated animation. I'm not arguing *against* celebratory praise, but I am arguing *for* the free flow of praise in its many and varied expressions and a proper understanding of its rightful place in the sermon. What I am opposed to is contrived rhetoric, purposely structured into our sermons in an effort to guarantee emotional rejoicing at the end—rejoicing that according to Mitchell and Thomas

should help us to remember and do what we heard proclaimed in the sermon. Everything that has breath is instructed to praise the Lord, but that praise cannot be manufactured and must come from the depths of our hearts. Its manifestations are not always in the more demonstrative, exaggerated forms of praise that usually come to mind when we think of celebration.