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Who's Searching for the Soul of Black Preaching? History Proves It's Never Been Lost

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Abstract

The 2023 Black Theology and Leadership Initiative convened around the theme, "Searching for the Soul of Black Preaching." Rather than focusing on the performative aspects of Black preaching, as an art form, the convening looked substantively at the soul of Black preaching, that is, its very essence. What does it mean to provide hope to a people who have historically been marginalized, as part of the Black experience in America? In relying on some of America's most respected scholars, as well as some of my own previously published works, I argue that the soul of Black preaching includes four fundamental elements. First, with the centrality of Scripture, Black preaching is based on a fundamental belief that God's providence meets the Black lived experience. Second, as a natural extension of the first element, I argue there is a biblical hermeneutic that sees Scripture as "biased," because God is not neutral. Instead, God is on the side of the oppressed. Third, in recognizing that the Black preacher's work is incomplete without divine intervention, I discuss the transcendence of the Holy Spirit for "participant proclamation" as part of the Black worship experience. Finally, in looking at the social justice nature of Black preaching, in speaking to a marginalized class, I argue that in addition to focusing on piety, Black preaching is often prophetic and/or political. In answering the rhetorical question of who is searching for the "soul" of Black preaching, I therefore argue that based on the four elements listed above, and the way Black preaching has been a rallying call for the Black community from the period of enslavement onward, the soul of Black preaching has never been lost.

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Introduction

> Theology at its best must be an elaboration of the Word that is revered because it gives life, serves needs, and heals minds and bodies by way of a powerful core belief or trust in God.[1]

I am an African American pastor who delights in serving God's people. I habitually preach God's liberating word, predictably on Sundays, but also during midweek and weekend revivals. Should one conclude that, since I self-identity as "Black,"[2] I am engaged in *Black* preaching? Should one assume that more popular Black preachers who share my outward appearance, like televangelists Fred Price and Juanita Bynum, or prosperity preacher Creflo Dollar, are engaged in *Black* preaching?

I argue that to identify what is commonly called "Black preaching," one must first understand the sociocultural experience of Black people, as a socially marginalized group in America, to understand how Black preaching was birthed in response to social circumstances. With that foundation, one can then understand how the *soul* of Black preaching has remained present—from the pre-emancipation institution of enslavement through the current-day post-Obama presidency and birth of the "Make America Great Again" narrative.[3]

Is Black preaching *exodus preaching*, or meditational speech that is God-summoned, while simultaneously being rooted in cultural particularity?[4] Is Black preaching *prophetic*

1. Nicholas Cooper Lewter and Henry H. Mitchell, *Soul Theology: The Heart of African American Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 6.
2. "Black" is a cultural identifier associated with the social construct of race. See, e.g., Willie Dwayne Francois III, *Silencing White Noise: Six Practices to Overcome Our Inaction on Race* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022), 42. The term "race" was initially used in referring to hunting dogs, but later came to denote the immutable characteristics of different classes or people. See, e.g., Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type, 2016), 36. My use of the term, consistent with the social construct of race, references those with whom I not only share physical characteristics, as an African American, but those who come from familial lineages of enslaved Africans and are a cultural part of America's freedom struggle. Further, I also join other progressive scholars and intentionally capitalize "Black," as a proper noun. Similar to Asian and Latino, Black denotes a specific cultural group. See, e.g., Jonathan C. Augustine, "The Fiery Furnace, Civil Disobedience, & the Civil Rights Movement: A Biblical Exegesis on Daniel 3 & the Letter from Birmingham Jail," *Richmond Public Interest Law Review* 21:3 (2018): 243–62.
3. Although the slogan "Make America Great Again" was associated with the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns of Donald Trump, it cannot be limited to any single political candidate. Instead, it represents a regressive alliance that sees the last half-century's post-civil rights movement changes as negative. It has also manifest in a xenophobic cultural "whitelash" that is anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and anti-Black. I argue the slogan expresses a collective desire to return America to a time when working-class Whites had greater social control. Jonathan C. Augustine, *Called to Reconciliation: How the Church Can Model Justice, Diversity, and Inclusion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 72–74.
4. Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons about Justice and Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), x.

preaching, or preaching that is designed to provoke a social justice-oriented response, while providing hope for humanity and rebuking forms of marginalization?[5] While Black preaching is indeed those things, in terms of its descriptiveness and its performative nature, I agree with Cleophus J. LaRue that "the term 'black preaching' describes a rich and varied tradition, covering a broad configuration of motivations, theological points of view, art forms, structures, and styles of delivery."[6] I also argue Black preaching is biblically based spirit speech that is based on four primary elements.

First, Black preaching begins with a foundational belief that God's providence is connected to the Black lived experience, as expressed through Scripture. The Bible has been a foundational part of Black culture. Further, in building on and directly related to the Black lived experience, Black preaching is also based on a liberating hermeneutic that views Scripture as "biased," wherein God *is not* neutral. Instead, God sides with the oppressed who are socially and politically marginalized in their lived experiences.

Third, and related to the centrality of Scripture in Black culture, is the expectation of a transcendence wherein a power greater than the *mortal* preacher is present in the preaching moment. Stated otherwise, Black preaching is expected to include the power of the *immortal*—the Holy Spirit—as an active part of sermonic delivery. Finally, although Black preaching most certainly centers on matters of personal piety and salvation in the "kingdom-to-come," it also addresses social injustices in the "kingdom-at-hand." In other words, Black preaching is also *prophetic preaching* and *prophetic preaching* is often *political preaching* because it often makes a political appeal, in the name of social justice, calling for the equal treatment of all God's children.[7]

Inasmuch as Black preaching originated prior to emancipation, when the Black church was still an *invisible* institution,[8] the art form LaRue describes only publicly emerged during the nineteenth century's Reconstruction era.[9] Black preaching remained culturally relevant during the twentieth-century period of Jim Crow, providing hope and liberation for a continually marginalized people, and its salience remains during the current twenty-first century rise of White Christian nationalism.[10] My structural exploration of the four

5. Jonathan C. Augustine, *When Prophets Preach: Leadership and the Politics of the Pulpit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2023), 5.
6. Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 9.
7. I greatly acknowledge LaRue's scholarly contribution in arguing the four essentials that come together for the best Black preaching include: God, Scripture, the preacher, and the Black lived experience. Cleophus J. LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 58. Although my argument of included elements is slightly different, it is derived from LaRue's list of essentials.
8. See, generally, Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford, 2004).
9. For an excellent critique of Black preaching during enslavement and prior to emancipation, see, generally, Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas (eds.), *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 15–222.
10. Anthea Butler describes this phenomenon of Christian nationalism, and specifically *White* Christian nationalism, as, "the belief that America's founding is based on Christian principles [and that], white [P]rotestant Christianity is the operational religion of the land, and that Christianity should be the foundation of how the nation develops its laws, principles, and policies." Anthea Butler, "What Is White Christian Nationalism?,"

elements I believe to be the *soul* of Black preaching follows, as those elements are the very essence of what Black preaching has always been and, from all indications, will always be.

The Soul of Black Preaching: Four Elements Present in the Black Cultural and Worship Experiences

The Providence of God and the Lived Black Experience

Understanding Black culture, and the corresponding Black theology that Black preaching represents, means also understanding that all things "Black" begin with the Black lived experience in America. In other words, to paraphrase James H. Cone, the father of Black liberation theology, there is no Black theology that does not begin with the Black experience as its starting point.[11]

The "African American understanding of God grows out of the unique social situation in which [B]lacks find themselves in America. This assertion must not be understated and is crucial to understanding what prompts, motivates, shapes, and gives life to [B]lack preaching."[12] At its core, therefore, there is a foundational belief in the fact that God's providence is directly connected to the Black experience insofar as, there "is no truth for and about [B]lack people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience."[13] The Scripture best embodying this understanding is arguably, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).

In highlighting God's providence in the Black lived experience, Cooper-Lewter and Mitchell write, "for every evil perpetrated against the believer God has either a counterbalancing good or else will squeeze from the evil itself a literal blessing."[14] Stated otherwise, if you wait on God, God *will* move. This assurance is the heart of the Black preacher's message.

Because Scripture holds such a central place in Black culture, the Bible is the single most important source of language, imagery, and story for the Black preacher's message.[15] LaRue argues that "Any preacher who seeks to be heard … in the [B]lack church must learn some method of engaging the scriptural text and drawing from that encounter some sense of the Word of God revealed *to* and acting *on* the present-day human situation of the [B]lack listener."[16] Consider the example of Martin Luther King Jr.

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in *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection* (Feb. 9, 2022), 4, available at https://bjconline.org/jan6report.

11. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 16.
12. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, 5.
13. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 16.
14. Cooper-Lewter and Mitchell, *Soul Theology*, 15.
15. LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify*, 61.
16. Ibid., 57 (emphasis in original).

King perfectly illustrated the centrality of Scripture and God's providence in the lives of Black Americans who were denied the right to vote, because of bigotry and discrimination. Prior to passage of the Voting Rights Act, on March 25, 1965, in Montgomery, Alabama, and only weeks after the infamous Bloody Sunday march from Selma failed to reach Montgomery because of bloodshed, King used repetition (anaphora) in expounding on Psalm 13 and applying it to the way in which Blacks were continually marginalized. King rhetorically asked:

> How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow. How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long, "cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."[17]

King's performative technique of "plea and praise" underscores this key aspect of Black preaching: God's providence is directly connected to the Black lived experience, through the centrality of Scripture.

God Sides with the Oppressed

Just as Jesus' preaching was shaped by his social station as a marginalized ethnic minority,[18] Black preaching begins through the sociocultural experiences of marginalized Black people. LaRue argues, "Depicted in the Bible are the experiences of many Black people from slavery to contemporary times. Consequentially, knowledge of the Bible, along with the ability to apply Bible verses to every phase of life, are regarded by many African American preachers as crucial ingredients in effective preaching."[19] Directly stemming from the premise that Scripture is so central *in* the Black lived experience, I go a step further and argue that knowledge and effective application of Scripture *to* the Black lived experience shows that God is on the side of the oppressed!

In building on the foundational belief that God's providence is connected to Black life, Black preaching embraces a hopefulness that sees God's penchant for the oppressed, beginning with exodus deliverance, as God's presence is revealed through Scripture.[20] In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone wrote:

> In the Exodus-Sinai tradition Yahweh is disclosed as the God of history, whose revelation is identical with God's power to liberate the oppressed. There is no knowledge of Yahweh

17. Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word That Moved America* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 128.
18. Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York: Three Leaves, 2006), 7–8 (describing Jesus as an ethnically marginalized Jew and contextualizing his politically revolutionary and radical inaugural sermon, detailed in Luke 4:18–19).
19. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, 10 (internal citation omitted).
20. Cooper-Lewter and Mitchell, *Soul Theology*, 18.

> except through God's political activity on behalf of the weak and oppressed of the land .... The biblical writer wishes to emphasize that Israel's liberation came not from its own strength but solely from the power of Yahweh, who completely controls history.[21]

Eddie S. Glaude Jr. notes the prominence of the Exodus motif in Black hopefulness, as the Black community formed a distinctive sense of a peoplehood who were empowered by the liberating God.[22]

Further, through the power of lament, God is not only a liberator, but also a conqueror. Luke Powery, my colleague at Duke University, writes, "The Holy Spirit is integrally connected with expressions of suffering and hope, crucifixion and resurrection, and lament and celebration."[23] In other words, God's power is revealed through the most harrowing circumstances. Cone also highlights this perspective, as present in both the Exodus deliverance and resurrection narrative:

> Yahweh is known and worshiped as the One who brought Israel out of Egypt, and who raised Jesus from the dead. God is the political God, the Protector of the poor and the Establisher of the right for those who are oppressed. To know God is to experience the acts of God in the concrete affairs and relationships of people, liberating the weak and the helpless from pain and humiliation.[24]

Stated otherwise, God sides with the oppressed and God's penchant, as manifest through Scripture, is made evident in Black preaching.

The Power of the Holy Spirit in the Preaching Moment

The Black preaching tradition recognizes a dependence on God, a *transcendence* of the Holy Spirit, that moves hearts and minds in the preaching moment. This too is part of the soul of Black preaching. In describing this reliance on the Holy Spirit to move among congregants, Simmons and Thomas write, "It can be called transcendence, divine beneficence, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost, or the Spirit. Preachers believe that beyond their best abilities and preparation, their sermons are controlled, enriched, and guided by the Spirit."[25] This spirit-speech can engage a congregation in the melodious call and response of a "talk back" homiletical moment.

Evans E. Crawford described this as "participant proclamation" where the Spirit moves among congregants such that the Black preacher no longer holds a hierarchical monopoly on the sermon; it belongs to the congregation, too. "It strengthens and

21. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 59.
22. See, generally, Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2000), 44–56.
23. Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 35.
24. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 57.
25. Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 8.

manifests one of the central principles of the Protestant heritage: 'the priesthood of all believers'"[26] (1 Pet. 2:5–9). It's *not* the preacher; it's the Holy Spirit, moving *through* the preacher and throughout the congregation. In its truest sense, this shared emotive feeling that is often typical in Black preaching cannot exist without the Black worshiping community.[27] Only the Holy Spirit can engage congregants in "participant proclamation."

Catholic priest Maurice J. Nutt also highlights the Black preacher's dependence on God as changing the preaching moment, transforming it into a conduit for liberation that allows the body of believers to *feel* the Holy Spirit. Nutt Writes:

> When somebody says "amen," shouts, claps the hands, or stomps the feet with rhythmic cadence and perfect timing, he or she is responding to the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of the voice of God. Unquestionably, it is a voice heard through the Black preacher.
>
> The ability to excite the emotions with the eloquence of the spoken word remains a characteristic of the preacher who ministers to the masses of Black people. Black people want to "feel something" when the preacher preaches …. They want to feel that God hears their cries, and despite their sins, they are accepted; despite the doom and gloom of oppressive life situations, they want to be assured that "there is a bright side somewhere." They want the preacher's message to touch them, to help them understand, and to fight against poverty, oppression, racism, sexism, and all forms of hatred and injustice. Not only that, they want the preacher to speak to their individual needs, troubles, desires, and frailties.[28]

No human can independently do all those things in the preaching moment. They are all successfully done, however, because of the Black preacher's dependence on God, in the form of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual transcendence goes to the soul of Black preaching.

The Political Call for Human Equality

Inasmuch as Black preaching embraces both a belief that God's providence is directly connected to the Black lived experience and a recognition of God's penchant for the oppressed, Black preaching is also political (prophetic), or what Simmons and Thomas categorize as *social activist preaching*, in that it calls for human equality. Black preaching assures listeners that God is active in their situation, and, despite circumstance, *justice* is what God intends.[29] This assurance—in the face if *injustice*—is often political.

26. Evans E. Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 39.
27. Cleophus J. LaRue (ed.), "Introduction," in *Power in the Pulpit: How America's Most Effective Black Preachers Prepare Their Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 5.
28. Maurice J. Nutt, *Down Deep in My Soul: An African American Catholic Theology of Preaching* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2022), 34.
29. Nutt, *Down Deep in My Soul*, 36.

As an initial matter, there is a difference between being *political* and being *partisan*. The word *politics*, translated from the Greek word *polis*, means "affairs of the cities." The Bible becomes political when the Exodus moves from individualism to a communal deliverance, making it a *political* event.[30] Moses was *political* when he told Pharaoh that God said, "Let my people go!" (Exod 5:1; 9:1). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendigo were *political* when they used civil disobedience rather than give in to Nebuchadnezzar's dictates (Dan 3). As already intimated, Jesus was also *political*, as his public ministry began in addressing Israel's social marginalization (Luke 4:18–19). In addressing the Black lived experience, therefore, Black preaching must likewise be *political*, to address issues of fairness and human equality.

In describing what they categorize as *social activist preaching*—what I call *political preaching* or *prophetic preaching*—Simmons and Thomas write as follows:

> Social activist preaching aims to induce social activism by providing the spiritual, political, and cultural underpinnings for liberation struggles, including the prophetic voice of social critique and redress. It is principally projected to a wider American culture and world, but also serves as an inner critique of the [B]lack church and [B]lack culture. The social activist preaching agenda includes poverty alleviation, racial and gender equality, and all peace, justice, and economic struggles.[31]

To paraphrase Marvin A. McMickle, political preaching is prophetic preaching because it speaks to the issues that are the root causes of the social problems faced by the Black community.[32]

In *When Prophets Preach*, I highlight Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership, in bringing the Black church into secular politics and allowing the church universal to follow. "As an ordained minister, King preached about salvation in the afterlife. Moreover, as a prophetic leader who was also a member of a marginalized social class, he also preached about social injustices in this life."[33] King's political preaching—now widely associated with Black preaching—is consistent with Scripture's political undertones and the realization that prophetic preachers *do not* treat social justice issues as independent of God, but as emanating from God's Word.[34] Stated otherwise, "Prophetic preaching is designed to motivate people to move beyond lifting up holy hands and begin to extend helping hands to those Jesus describes in Matthew 25 as 'the least of these.'"[35]

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30. Cooper-Lewter and Mitchell, *Soul Theology*, 19.
31. Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 10.
32. Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 17.
33. Augustine, *When Prophets Preach*, 15–16.
34. Gilbert, *Exodus Preaching*, ix.
35. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*, 85.

The question of whether the Black church should be involved in politics has long been an issue of debate.[36] By necessity, *not convenience*, the Black church was birthed in politics,[37] and became immersed therein again, in the nineteenth century, when David Walker, an anti-slavery advocate and member of the AME Church, published his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens*, excoriating White Christians for their role in the slave trade.[38] If Black theology is shaped by the Black experience and Black preaching is reflective of the two, Black preaching must address the political injustices faced by marginalized Black people in America.

Twentieth-century Black preachers were political when they spoke out against lynching, Jim Crow segregation, and police violence, along with other moral ills in America.[39] It was King, however, who squarely brought the Black church and then the church universal into politics with his activism in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In King's first book, *Stride toward Freedom*, he shares a political theology that undergirds Black preachers' political activism:

> But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man's social conditions. Religion deals with both earth and heaven and, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself. This means, at bottom, that the Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand, it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand[,] it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls on men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.[40]

Such political engagement, addressing both salvation in the "kingdom-to-come" *and* social injustices in the "kingdom-at-hand," was historically associated with Black preaching in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Political engagement also continues to shape Black preaching in the current-day twenty-first century, still because of necessity, as made evident by exemplars like: William J. Barber II, president of Repairers of the Breach and co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, as well founding director of

36. See, generally, Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety & Public Witness* (New York: New York University, 2014); see also Augustine, *Called to Reconciliation*, 59–62.
37. See, generally, Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University, 2008); see also Jonathan C. Augustine, "And When Does the Black Church Get Political? Responding in the Era of Trump and Making the Black Church Great Again," *Hastings Race & Poverty Law Journal* 17:1 (2020): 87–132.
38. Anthea Butler, "Church," in Nikole Hannah-Jones et al. (eds.), *The 1619 Project* (New York: One World, 2021), 338.
39. Ibid., 339.
40. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001; previously published by HarperCollins, 1958), 36.

the Center for Public Theology & Public Policy at Yale Divinity School; Frederick D. Haynes III, pastor of Friendship West Baptist Church, in Dallas, and president of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition; and Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, in Chicago, and professor of homiletics at Mercer University's McAfee's School of Theology. They are prophetic preachers who speak to the soul of Black preaching by demanding the equal treatment of all God's children.

Conclusion

Although there is no one style that characterizes Black preaching, its *soul*—that is, its very essence of being—has manifested through spirit speech centered on the connection between God's providence and the Black experience, along with a scripturally based perspective that sees God as on the side of the oppressed.

Further, the performative nature of Black preaching that is often emotive, with participant proclamation, is only made possible by the Black preacher's dependence on God, in the form of the Holy Spirit. This type of preaching—when it touches the core of the Black lived experience—may also be through a political ethic that sees social justice issues as emanating from God's word.

These core elements emerged as historically characteristic of Black preaching, and they remain present today. That means, if anyone is searching for the *soul* of Black preaching, history tells us it's never been lost.[41]

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