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PREACHING AS PERFORMANCE

(A Preliminary Analytical Model)

Written by
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Over the past thirty years, a group of scholars, led by Richard Schechner of New York University's Graduate Center, began exploring the intersections between what had been known as traditional theatre (or "aesthetic drama" as Schechner called it) and the rituals of everyday life (what Schechner dubbed "social drama").¹ The theoretical issues raised by Schechner and his colleagues have been used to theorize about a number of life activities such as the interplay of office workers, the interactions of people shopping, and the roles people tend to play in their personal lives. The field of study that developed from this research became known as performance studies.

This paper will attempt to formulate a basic analysis of Christian preaching as a first step to the development of a model for Christian preaching as performance. This study will have as its immediate context Christian preaching as it exists within the African American Christian community with its rituals and societal contexts. As such, the methodological approach will be analytical and phenomenological rather than deconstructive or post-structuralist in nature. The African American preacher holds a unique position within the Black community: a socio-politico-activist position unshared in most other sub-cultures of the American experience. As such, the position offers a unique opportunity for rich study. This paper will attempt to analyze

¹ See Richard Schechner's, *Essays on Performance Theory: 1970-1976* (NY: Drama Books, 1978) originally published as *Kinesics and Performance* (1973). The discipline which Schechner and others eventually developed has come to be called Performance Studies.

the preaching phenomenon in this unique community and attempt to draw an analytical model of the performance aspects of preaching.

I believe that a new look at Black preaching from a performance studies viewpoint can be pivotal for the development of a communicative/performative model of preaching; a model which I will propose within the context of this study. I will begin by offering a model of the Performing Preacher based on performance studies theories. I will then discuss the preacher as a performer whose presentations have a deeper meaning than the performance of an actor in the theatre and perhaps similar in nature to the presentations of a politician "running" for office. I will include a discussion of the Black preacher as a paradigm for communicating a particular culture and a specific religion. I will utilize the works of James Peacock and Miles Richardson in a book edited by Richard Schechner (1990) along with the writings of Gardner C. Taylor and Victor Turner to formulate the performative aspects of the model. Then I will appeal to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Sacvan Bercovitch, and M. M. Bakhtin in support of the textual aspects of this model. I will conclude with a final reference to the model to offer a few conclusions as to the problems with the model as a way of offering grounds for further discussion.

A Model for Preaching

The diagram at Figure 1 (on the following page) illustrates just how the various aspects of preaching and performance intersect and interact with one another and move to create a cohesive whole. In the discussion that follows, I will explain the various elements and their relationships. Although this diagram is only preliminary, it is intended to offer a starting point for discussion on preaching as performance.

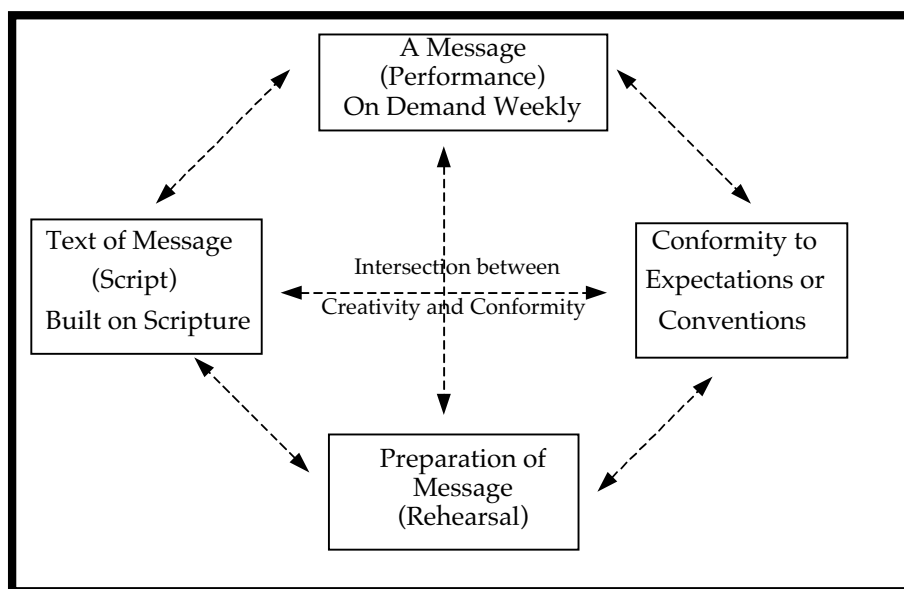


Figure 1 Model of Christian Preaching as Performance Art

The Christian preacher prepares for the message to be presented on Sunday (or Saturday in some traditions). Although the preparation varies with various traditions, the preacher is rehearsing for the performance on demand weekly. The message prepared is usually based upon a biblical truth or text from the Bible. That message becomes the script of the performance on demand. That message is then preached (or performed) at the appointed time and place (just like a play is presented at specific times and places). The performance conforms to predetermined conventions or expectations of the specific Christian community (tradition) in which it is presented. The sermon is performed in the crucible of conformity and creativity, between preparation and spontaneity. Thus, the preacher is a performer --is a prophet --is a preparer --is a conformer --is a preacher. The circle of performativity allows the preacher to be

genuine and unique yet fully in compliance with the traditions of the community in which he/she works. The preacher is a performer. In the discussion that follows, I will illustrate and prove that this model offers a good place to begin discussion and hopefully lead to an orthodox understandings of the place that performance has in the Christian church and that preaching has in performance studies.

The Preacher as Performer

Using the term "performer" may be considered a heretical by some in the Christian tradition who hold that the preacher is one who has been called of God to speak a *Word* from the Lord, then sent out from the congregation to carry out this charge. Karl Barth, one of the twentieth century's great theological philosophers, wrote that the people in the congregation come together on Sunday with "a passionate longing to have the *word* spoken, *the word* [which] promises grace and *judgement*, life in *death*, and [the presence of] the beyond in the *here and now*, *God's word*" [author's italics].² Preaching is a special "calling" in and of the church. The preacher must never simply a performer in the sense of one who performs before a crowd in expectation of praise and applause. However, it is my contention that the concept of performer can and does apply to preaching.

A possible problem in the use of the word "performer" lies in its association with the theatre and the performance of an actor. The Greek word for "actor," *hypocrites*, means "one who wears a mask." This particular Greek word has been translated "actor" in most classical literature. However, in Christian literature it has been transliterated into the English word "hypocrite," a term used to refer to a "pretender" within a congregation. Referring to a

² Karl Barthe, *The Word of God and The Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper, 1928) 109.

performance by a preacher could be interpreted as calling that person an "actor," which may imply that this one sent by God is merely pretending to be God's spokesman. Tradition holds that there is no room for pretense in the pulpit. However, I am convinced that there are too many parallels between preaching and performance to be overlooked or ignored and that the original understandings of "actor" should not interfere with the performative aspects of preaching.

Several elements of performance appear in the sacred event of worship. James L. Peacock wrote about a study that he conducted among primitive Baptists in the hills of Virginia. He concluded that the people in his study believed that "a sacred performance is not *simply* a performance."³ He argued that among the primitives of the community, the preacher is highly respected because of his leadership and station. The lives of the ministers are closely interwoven with the daily lives of the people. There is a certain expectation of "performance" in his actions both in and out of the pulpit. The ministers are expected to work hard during the week at a secular job, then during off hours they are to spend time in study, prayer and meditation. The preacher is regarded as always performing, always in view, always before the public served. Thus, what was done in everyday life is as important as that done in the pulpit on Sunday morning. The preacher's performance is reflective of and just as important as the other.

These primitive Baptists did not expect the preacher to write a prepared sermon in the common understanding of sermon preparation. Instead, he was expected to have his life so completely ordered in the things of God that when he mounted the pulpit, the "Spirit" of God would take over his body and mind in such a way as to use him to deliver a *word* from God. Peacock's conclusions point to the symbolic struggle of the performer who must be a part of the

³ Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (New York: Cambridge, 1990) 218.

community at large and yet perform on cue for the audience--an integrating of form, meaning, and context. In this sense, the preacher is a performer; albeit not in the sense of a stage actor, still a performer.

One of America's greatest African American preachers is Gardner C. Taylor. In his Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, Dr. Taylor made an interesting comparison between the preacher and the actor. He spoke of a performance he witnessed of a production of *Othello* on Broadway featuring Jose Ferrer, Paul Robeson, and Uta Hagen. Taylor had an opportunity to speak to Ferrer about how he was able to tackle such an imposing task as playing Iago opposite Robeson's *Othello*. Taylor recounted the following:

Ferrer said that when his part called for him to appear to be *Othello's* friend, he actually became his friend. When he was to appear as enemy, he actually became an enemy. This is empathy and for the preacher empathy must occur at a much deeper level since he or she is truly and crucially participant in the grandeur and sordidness of human experience.⁴

The performer and the preacher share a responsibility to understand and address the issues of humanness--those aspects of being human that are shared by all in the preacher's congregation. What Taylor refers to as "empathy" is what theatre semioticians would speak of as mimesis. The actor finds the truth within the reality of life and presents that truth through his performance on the stage. In like manner, the preacher must be a student of human nature with an eye to discovering a truth of life in humanity which can then be shared with his congregation. That truth is first refracted through the preacher's understandings of the *word* received from God, then presented to the congregation in the form of a sermon presented before

⁴ Gardner C. Taylor, *How Shall They Preach* (Chicago: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1977) 35.

the congregation. The actual presentation of the *word* must be faithful both to the traditions and teachings of the church (the sermon must be "orthodox") and to the truths he has discovered about the people he serves (the sermon must be "practical").

The similarities between a Baptist worship service and the theatre are noted by Miles Richardson in an article entitled, "The Spatial Sense of the Sacred in Spanish America and the American South and its tie with Performance." In this well researched piece, Richardson referred to several points of interest. "The worshiper must perform as himself," he states, because "the sacred lies within him, all else, save the Bible, is 'symbolic.'"⁵ The Baptist church tradition, of which many Black Churches are a part, stresses the internal nature of religion over the externals – yet the externals allow for the release of the internal emotions.

Richardson finds some interesting similarities between the theatre and Baptist worship. He points out that people have to get ready and purposely go to worship as well as to the theatre, they are both occasions that are different from everyday; they require a certain attire, both have signs in front of the building announcing the play or sermon, they both have ushers and programs for the people, and they both start on time. Richardson sees a distinct break at this point. He continues by saying that the actor on stage performs, but "... on his platform, behind the pulpit, the minister preachers. During his preaching, he may be and frequently is, theatrical, but what he must be is be sincere."⁶

Here I think Richardson missed an important element. I believe that even the actor must be sincere in his efforts to faithfully recreate the depth of human emotion and inner truth. It seems to me in reading his article that performance, especially on the theatrical stage, has a

⁵ Schechner, *By Means of Performance* 234.

⁶ Schechner, *By Means of Performance* 234.

mission to transcend the mundane into a deeper understanding of the meaning and emotion of life. The playwright takes a common moment from life and then exposes hidden elements that may or may not have been in the original but are now part of the fictionalized moment on stage. As the members of the audience watch the action taking place, they are drawn together as one to explore and enjoy the moment portrayed. The truthfulness in the moment allows for the identification by the audience with that moment. If that understanding be true, then preaching can be tied to the action of performance. Richardson comes close to this idea as he concludes his article with a similar observation. He stated,

At its best, like the performing arts, religion creates a sense of reality that transforms the profane self into a sacred self, a self that transcends the loneliness of being human. Like performance, too ... so strong is the urge to transcend, break through the barriers of solitude, that the worshipers, like actors, gather for another effort, an effort seemingly futile, but genuinely heroic.⁷

The preacher constantly struggles with the line between true sincerity and acting sincere. I cannot help but to wonder about those times when the preacher fails to actually achieve the goal of being himself (being real, being sincere) and simply *works up* an emotional state and *appears* to be sincere to the congregation. If the congregation believes that what they are witnessing is real, is it any less effective or any less valuable to the worshipers? Who is to say that the preacher is *not* being true to himself and to his congregation? What of the preacher whose acting skills are such that he can portray a power and sincerity undetectable even to the most sensitive congregant even though the people may not know that at that particular moment the preacher would rather be somewhere else?

⁷ Schechner, *By Means of Performance* 234.

These questions lay open the possibility that a preacher may be performing. And if the preacher is performing, and the product of his performance is so close to truth that it is received as truth, then is this a deception? If the *word* is received, then what more can be expected? I believe that these questions lead to the inevitable answer that preaching is a "performance" in the most positive sense of the term.

The objectified reality of an actor is to be found in the words of the text that he has memorized and rehearsed to the point of perfection. In like manner, the objectified reality of the preacher is the *word* which becomes for him the *text*, a result of the intersection of the text of the Christian Bible and the minister's study, prayer and meditation with his contact on a daily basis with the people in the community. The preacher spends hours of preparation and (dare I say it?) *rehearsal* as he readies himself for the task at hand. The portrayal of the objectified reality is performance--whether that performance be from the stage or from the pulpit. The preacher is a performer in a deep, rich, and transcendent sense.

Another aspect of performance on stage that seems to be similar to that done in the Christian pulpit is to be found in the preparation of the sermon and the possible rehearsal for the sermon.⁸ Clyde T. Fant, former professor of preaching at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, addressed the issue and problem of sermon preparation for presentation with a method he called the "oral manuscript."⁹ The theory behind his method was that the sermon should be written to be spoken rather than read. Of course, the playwright knows this theory all too well because the text of a play contains words that are to sound as if they were being spoken by someone for the first time. Fant showed in his book that the preacher's text is a

⁸ I have discussed this concept in greater depth in chapter 10 of my book: Herbert Sennett *Religion and Dramatics* (Lanham, MD: University Press, 1994).

⁹ Clyde T. Fant, *Preaching for Today* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 118.

spoken word and should be rehearsed and prepared as such. Not all preachers spend time practicing the performance in the pulpit, yet others do. No matter what method the preacher uses, the preparation work is done in order to prepare for the expected performance Sunday after Sunday. As an actor performs on cue at every performance, so must the preacher preach on cue week after week. And as the actor must present a fresh performance for each paid audience, so must the preacher present a fresh word from God Sunday after Sunday—on cue.

The Preacher as Paradigm

To understand the power of the preacher in the Black Church, one must understand the dynamics at work in the African American community. Eric Lincoln, in his treatise on the Black Churches of America, has offered some clarification for this study. He stated that the Black Church is an expression of the Black community itself. When studying the power of the church in the Black community, one can see the close interweaving of the two. "The church is the spiritual face of the Black community, and whether one is a 'church member' or not is beside the point."¹⁰ This interweaving is imperative to understand when realizing or speaking of the importance of the preacher in the Black community. Lincoln continues:

Black people have always taken their religion seriously. For them, religion is personal--almost tangible; it is never an abstraction disassociated with the here-and-now, the experiences that shape the life situations of real people who are suffering and dying and struggling against forces they don't understand. Christians in the Black community have never learned to

¹⁰ C. Erik Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken, 1974) 115.

rationalize God; rather they *personalize* Him and include Him in their life situations.¹¹

The African American preacher has a deep responsibility to be true to his calling and to his task of preaching faithfully to the people. He does this because of the power of the church in the community and because of the power of the message of the God of the church. The preacher becomes for the community (as well as the church) a *sign* for all to see and hear.

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure wrote of the two parts of a sign: the *signifier* and the *signified*. For the Black Church, the *signifier* is the preacher and the *signified* is a *logocentric* ultimate *word* from God. Although philosophical linguists and literary critics such as Derrida, Foucault and Husserl believe that an ultimate *signified* cannot be truly known, in the Black Church, there is no question about what the *signifiers* of their community mean. The preacher in the Black community is himself the central *signifier* representing the presence and power of God who is the ultimate *Signified* among the people.

The preacher acts out his signification in his daily life as well as in his role on Sundays as the proclaimer of the *word* of God. M. M Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic and philosopher, has pointed out the importance of intended action in any given circumstance. He writes, "We *act* confidently only when we do so not as ourselves, but as those possessed by the immanent necessity of the meaning of some domain of culture."¹² The African American preacher finds his significance in the community of faith and in the community in which he lives. Within these structures, he knows who he is and why he is. With that confidence, he acts as he ought and as he is guided by the *word* of God.

¹¹ Lincoln 149.

¹² M. M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: Univ. Of Texas Press, 1993) 21.

For the Black community, there are several special elements involved. One is the unique nature of the language spoken within the community. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has posited a theory of communication for the Black community called "signifyin(g)."¹³ He traces his theory to the ancient traditions of Sub-Saharan African tribes brought to America by way of the slave ships. Signifyin(g) became a method of speaking that the slaves could use that the "masters" would not comprehend. In essence, signifyin(g) is a way of saying one thing yet meaning another. It is the use of modified metaphors and similes with which persons from outside the community would be unfamiliar.

Signifyin(g) became not a second language but a way of speaking for the Africans who had quickly lost their tribal identity and original languages. The preacher is often a master of signifyin(g) from the pulpit for in the community he is both signifier and signifyin(g)er. Often his messages will carry dual meanings and double innuendos. This duality is rooted in the alienation that Blacks in American have felt. Their Blackness (with all of the signified meanings of badness, evil, unknown, darkness) became a symbol of their dual place: in the society and yet not of the society. The African American preachers have utilized this dual-ness to their advantage to communicate a message that would resonate with their experiences rather than those of the "white man's religion," a reference used by many Blacks during the early days of the civil rights movement.

For the African American preacher, the act of presenting the message he has received from God is a sharing of a personal experience. His movement from experience with the written *word* of God to the expression of that experience is for him the totality of truth and

¹³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Critical Inquiry*: 9.4 (June 1983): 685-724. See also the longer discussion in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1988).

reality. Bakhtin has made an observation about the truthfulness of an action that supports this.

He writes:

It would be a mistake to assume that this concrete truth [the Russian word, *Pravda*] of the event that the performer of the act sees and hears and experiences and understands in the single act of an answerable deed is something ineffable, i.e., that it can only be livingly experienced in some way at the moment of performing the act, but cannot be uttered clearly and distinctly. I think that language is much more adapted to giving utterance precisely to that truth, and not to the abstract moment of the logical in its purity ... The expression of a performed act from within and the expression of once-occurrent Being-as-event in which that act is performed require the entire fullness of the word: its content/sense aspect (the word as concept) as well as its palpable-aspect (the word as image) and its emotional-volitional aspect (the intonation of the word) in their unity. And in all these moments the unitary full word can be answerably valid, i.e., can be the truth rather than something subjectively fortuitous.¹⁴

For the preacher, the phenomenon of the speaking of his encounter with God is the same as the actual act itself for the congregation. The power of the words which the preacher chooses to use, the method of preaching style he chooses to present (or perform) those words, and the metaphors he uses all work together to become both spoken and embodied message (*signifier*). And the meanings (*signified*) are not missed by the members of both the congregation and the community surrounding the congregation.

Another communicative modality at work in the preaching of the African American minister is the use of a style of preaching called the *Jeremiad*. This methodology is based on the preaching that is recorded in the Biblical book of Jeremiah. This method of sermon presentation

can be defined as a call by the preacher to the people to repent because of their corporate or individual sin. The Jeremiad stresses the negative results of one's actions and then calls for a return to a "standard" that is fixed by God. This type of preaching was developed on the European continent in the 15th century and brought to America by way of the Puritans who had adopted the Jeremiad as their major style. In America, the Jeremiad became a political form of speaking from the pulpit and eventually became identified with American nationalism.

After the slaves had been converted to Christianity and African American preachers began to rise to prominence, many of their ministers found a suitable model for their preaching in the Jeremiad. The fact that the prophet Jeremiah was also known as "the weeping prophet" simply added to the appeal of the methodology in the pulpit. As the rumblings of the civil rights movement started, the Jeremiad was taken on by preachers in the Black community through the use of heavily political rhetoric. The sin of the nation became racial segregation and the answer to the evil caused by that sin was for the White community to repent. This preaching did not excuse sin in the Black community. The responsibility of the congregation was to keep themselves pure so that they could speak the word of conviction to the white community. This type of preaching was further refined by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "non-violent" revolution rhetoric. The African American preacher became a spokesman for the ills of the society as a whole, not just the sins of the Black church community.

Preachers such as King, William Holmes Borders, Hosea Williams, and Jesse Jackson became national leaders of the Civil Rights movement through the use of the Jeremiad. And thousands of lesser known African American preachers became involved in proclaiming the faith and presenting a message of social power and political empowerment. Their acts of

¹⁴ Bakhtin 31.

defiant preaching spilled over into their actions of defiance against what they saw was a segregationist government. The power of the *word* from God mingled with the word of man demonstrated its power in the very act of preaching. The theatre of the worship service moved into the streets and became the theatre of civil rights and social revolution. At the center of the civil rights movement was the preacher: paradigm of everything that was right in the African American community—their preachers. And these preachers would become the major leaders of a movement that spread nation wide.

The Preacher as Performer

I will now draw four conclusions that should pull together the arguments made above and the model of the performing preacher. First, the preacher is a performer, albeit not in the exact sense that an actor performs, yet a performer nonetheless. He is expected to perform on cue on Sunday morning and /or Sunday night week in and week out. And he is expected to have a fresh message from God to present through the performance. Just as the actor must face his audience day in and day out with a fresh performance, so must the preacher face the relentless return of the Sabbath with a fresh message from God.

Second, the preacher must prepare and, in some cases, rehearse the presentation prior to the worship service. He must have his message so in mind that he can present it extempore, or he will memorize a text that he has prepared. He is no different from an actor in the sense of following a prescribed text (or script) for the performance. Third, the preacher must remember the centrality of the Text of the Bible in his preparation of the sermon. The Christian church has as one of its main tenets the ultimate authority of the Scriptures. Although a sermon may have many ideas from the preacher's own mind, the basic theme and subject of the sermon must be

firmly grounded in the text of the Bible. There is a faithfulness here not unlike the faithfulness of the director and actors to the text written by the playwright.

Fourth, the congregation has a measure of expectation as to what they should expect. Their expectations surround the worship experience as a whole, the place where they worship, the content of the service, and (for Protestant churches in particular) the presentation (performance) of a sermon by the preacher. When an audience gathers at a theatre expecting to see a performance of *Othello*, the substitution of another play, or of another form of theatre, would cause a great deal of confusion and disappointment. The preacher must perform according to the expectations of the congregation and according to the traditions of the particular denomination.

With these four issues in mind, one can refer to Figure 1 to see a series of interactions between the four elements. The preaching performance is repeatable weekly, it demands an expectant audience, it centers on a definitive text, and requires rehearsal and preparation. The weekly demand of the congregation that the preacher have a fresh new word from God requires rehearsal, or perhaps I should use the term "preparation" to be more true to the language of proclamation. The text of the Bible and the text of the sermon gives context to the preached, or spoken, words. The sermon conforms to the expectations of the congregation by being a presentation of the *word* received during the preparation period. The rehearsal, or preparation, that the preacher does week after week offers stability for congregational expectations. And the preparation and constant rehearsal demand constant interaction with the Biblical text. The creative aspect of preaching, or communicating, the *word* is in constant tension with the performative acts of presenting that *word* to the congregation. And through the whole process, the preacher presents his "theatrical" performance: an art form in the purest and probably "heavenly" sense possible.