

# The Reason Why We Sing

## *Understanding Traditional African American Worship*

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*Someone ask the question,  
Why do we sing?  
When we lift our hands to Jesus,  
What do we really mean?*

—FRANKLIN (1993)

Growing up in the South, I fondly remember Sunday morning worship services at my predominately African American church. Regardless of what kind of week the worshipers had experienced, they entered the church immaculately dressed, heads held high, all in search of spiritual renewal and the comfort of each other's company. The service would begin when the pastor stood and read the scripture, "This is the day which the Lord hath made. We will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalms 118:24). Then he would say, "Let us stand to receive the choir." And the choir would come down the aisle, swaying from side to side, in step with the music from the organ. Sometimes there would be drums and tambourines. The voices were melodious and filled with excitement and praise. Some members of the congregation would clap their hands in time with the music and others would wave their hands over their heads. Once the choir reached the choir stand, the singing would drop to a whisper while the pastor prayed. Afterward, the choir and congregation would sing the morning hymn. Sunday morning worship was now in progress.

When finally the last song had been sung, testimonies given, announcements read, tithes and offerings taken up, the pastor would approach the pulpit where his great Bible awaited him and a spirit-filled aura was about him as if there was no doubt in his mind that God had placed him there. A hush would fall over the congregation as the preacher "took his text." What followed was a strong sermon, which was never less than an hour, punctuated by a great deal of animation and "talk-back" from worshipers.

Even as I began to visit other African American churches, I came to accept without question that what I was experiencing was religious culture, a universal phenomenon shared by all cultural groups. It was an experience that I took for granted. It was not until I became an adult and began to visit churches outside of my culture that I began to realize that there is something distinct about African American worship. The purpose of this essay is to explain this distinction.

## African American Worship

At the onset, it is important to note that it is often difficult for a visitor outside of the culture to understand what is going on in a traditional African American worship service. However, one cannot approach this experience as an outsider intending to simply observe and take notes on how "black folks" behave in church. Visitors should also not come expecting to see stereotypical notions of the African American church played out based on mediated comedic portrayals. One must come as a participant, willing to be transformed by the presence of the "spirit." African American congregations have literally claimed God's promise whereby, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). It is this belief that creates the distinctive style of the traditional African American worship service.

In her work on black language, Geneva Smitherman (1986) notes that to speak of the traditional black church is to speak of the holy-rolling, bench-walking, spirit-getting, tongue-speaking, vision-receiving, intuition-directing, Amen-saying, sing-song preaching, holy-dancing, and God-sending church. This church might be defined as one in which the cognitive content has been borrowed from Western Judeo-Christian tradition, but the communication of that content has remained essentially African, deriving from the traditional African worldview. This worldview assumes a fundamental unity between spiritual and material aspects of existence. Although both are necessary, the spiritual domain assumes priority.

The heart of traditional African religions is the emotional experience of being filled with the power of the spiritual. Its legacy thrives in traditional African American church and culture. African American worshipers believe that soul, feeling, emotions, and spirit serve as guidelines to understanding life and others. All people are moved by spirit forces, and there is no attempt to deny or intellectualize this fact (Smitherman, 1986, p. 92). This convergence of Judeo-Christian content and African delivery is found in Protestant denominations, particularly Baptist, Methodist, and Holiness, where the worship patterns are characterized by a spontaneous preacher-congregation relationship, intense emotional singing, spirit possession, and extemporaneous testimonials to the power of the Holy Spirit (Smitherman, 1986, p. 90).

A major aspect of African American Christian belief is found in the symbolic importance given to the word *freedom*. Throughout African American history the term freedom has had significance although its meaning has changed depending on the time period. For example, during slavery, freedom meant release from bondage. After slavery, it meant the right to opportunities, and to move about as respectable human beings.

Freedom also manifests itself in the structure of worship services. African American worship is a collective experience wherein the worshipers experience the truth about their lives as a people in the struggle for freedom and held together by "God's spirit." It is this presence of the spirit that accounts for the intensity in which African Americans engage in worship. Spirit is essential and phenomenal in the worship service. There is no understanding of African American worship apart from the presence of the spirit who descends on worshipers.

One way in which freedom manifests itself is in the unpredictable, oftentimes uncontrollable length of worship services. One Sunday the service might end at 12:30 p.m. (but don't count on it); on another Sunday, the service could last as long as 1:30 p.m., 2:00 p.m., or 3:00 p.m. This unpredictability might be irritating to an outsider, but African American worshipers believe "you can't hurry God," so it is an acceptable characteristic of the traditional African American worship service.

In the act of worship itself, the experience of freedom becomes a component of the community's being. Worshipers come prepared to be uplifted and to become a part of a sacred community. They also come prepared to be healed from the pains caused by racism, sexism, and other evils that exist in their lives. This healing might come from the sermon, the songs, from the choir, someone's testimony, or the power of the spirit alone. And like their oppressed ancestors, who created "hush harbors" where they could, out of the sight of their oppressors, enjoy the warmth of their commonness and give vent to their emotions, by speaking, singing, crying, or shouting, African American worshipers experience a catharsis through the freedom in which they are allowed to express themselves in church. The "hush harbors" of the enslaved Africans were the forerunners

of the African American church service. Because African Americans know that they are more than what has been defined for them by the dominant culture, they struggle to achieve in society the freedom they experience in their worship service. And they celebrate life and give praise to the creator for making it through another week. This is why it is often hard to sit still in an African American worship service. African American worship demands involvement. For the people claim that "if you don't put anything into the service you won't get anything out of it."

### Role Behaviors

Both past and present, the African American church provides a structured religious and social life in which African American worshipers can give expression to their deepest feelings and at the same time achieve status and find a meaningful existence. In addition to serving as a buffer and source of release against oppression, what is also significant is the way African Americans are treated in their churches. A school janitor in the dominant culture could be a deacon in the African American religious culture. A domestic worker in the dominant culture could be the assistant pastor in the African American religious culture. In other words, the "invisible people" who are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and often rejected by the larger culture, receive status, recognition, and appreciation in the African American religious culture. Equally significant, worshipers are shown respect. They are known as "brother" and "sister" or "Mr. and Mrs." Even children are given responsibilities and respect as members of the church. And one can see the worshiper's pride in their new identities exemplified by the way they walk and talk and dress and their whole demeanor.

This transformation is found not only in the titles members have and the roles they perform, but also in the culture of the worship service.

Some critics have argued that this practice has kept African Americans down as an inferior race. Others (Hamilton, 1972) have pointed out that African American churches have been the only places where they could see the potential of what they could become.

### The African American Preaching Style

Finally, because African American worshipers believe that no worship service can exist without the presence of "the spirit," a high premium is placed on the role of the pastor, most importantly his (or her) preaching ability. Throughout the history of the African American church, the sermon has served a wide variety of functions and purposes. Its primary purpose had been to "win souls" for God, but it has also served as theological education, cultural education, ritual drama, and therapy—all rolled up into one.

To be considered a good preacher in the African American religious culture does not necessarily mean that the preacher is grounded in critical reasoning or systematic theology, but that he or she has the ability to communicate within the cultural milieu of the people. Through the use of dramatic storytelling, identification of heroes (both biblical and from within the culture), and use of repetition poetic diction, and rhythm, the organizational culture of the African American church develops into a symbolic world where identification with the scripture as well as cultural history is enhanced and celebrated and creates a way for people to make sense out of what is going on around them and within their lives. Each one of these component will be briefly discussed.

### Dramatic Storytelling

Although African Americans believe that academic degrees in theology, philosophy, and so forth are commendable credentials for their preachers, the dominant criterion in accepting a pastor has been "Can he or she preach?" This simply means "Can he or she tell the story?" Hermeneutics is an essential tool for telling the story. As it relates to religion, hermeneutics can be defined as the process through which the Bible is read, examined, interpreted, understood, translated, and proclaimed (Stewart 1984, p. 30).

In the following excerpt from the sermon "Rejoice for Racial Greatness," African American preacher Dr. Manuel Scott paraphrases the story told in Joshua 17:14-15. Through application of the hermeneutic process, the story of the children of Israel is told. The preacher argues that African Americans should use the Israelites' lifestyle as a role model.

They would not permit four hundred years of bondage, biological distinctiveness, material meanness, educational retardation, and exaggerations by their enemies to strip them of a sense of worth and dignity. Without apology or ambiguity, they affirmed to Joshua: "We are great people." This was another way of saying that they liked themselves without being ashamed. They were not inclined to mimic, mindlessly, other people. They had a sense of being somebody. They comprehended in themselves usefulness and a capacity to meet meaningful needs. They included in their self-image the idea of equality with the rest of mankind. They were not cringing and crawling and bowing and blushing before anyone. (Scott, 1973, p. 93)

The preacher took the bare facts of God's story and wove them into the structure of the audience's own lives.

### Identification of Heroes

Illustrations from within the culture and the Bible are effective because they are down to earth and deal with the issues of African American existence. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from a sermon entitled, "When You Have Had Enough."

Joe Louis, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Elijah, and even Jesus Christ—all faced discouragement, but each felt his work was so important that he refused to be defeated. With the faith and knowledge that God the Father would see them through, they accomplished what they had to do. With this same faith, we can do it too. (Gillespie, 1977, p. 20)

Through repetition, the preacher ensures that the gist of what he or she is saying is not lost in the emotionalism of the audience. An example of repetition can be noted in the following excerpt from the Rev. Jesse Jackson's celebrated "I Am Somebody" message:

I am somebody.  
I may be poor.  
But I am somebody.  
Respect me.  
Protect me.  
Never neglect me.  
I am somebody.

—Jackson (1987, p. 205)

### Poetic Diction and Rhythm

African American preachers have always understood that poetry is the language of emotion and imagination, and their sermons have appealed to both of these as well as to reason. Poetic diction uses symbolic and presentative words and sets up a musical structure of alliterative expression. In utilizing poetic diction, sentences are short, crisp, and clear. Verbs are filled with energy. Sentences build to climax.

An equally significant feature of this preaching style is rhythm. The voice is considered the preacher's trumpet for proclaiming the gospel. It can challenge, convince, comfort, and charm. An example of the use of poetic diction and rhythm is illustrated in the following sermon excerpt.

It's not the color of your skin, brother. It's  
what you have in your heart and in your  
mind that makes you a man or a woman.  
Remember that. And if you will stand  
together, there's nobody in this world that  
can stop a united mass of people moving  
as one. . . .

Standing together  
Working together  
Picketing together  
Loving together  
Worshipping together  
You'll win together  
Walk together children, don't you get weary.  
There's great camp meeting in the  
Promised Land.

—Powell (1990)

### Call and Response

The African American preacher is also a performer of sorts. The preacher's job is to transform the congregation into an actively participating group. As described by Richards (1985), there is no passive audience. Calling the spirits correctly implies total involvement. For the ritual to be successful, the preacher must move the congregation to the point that they come outside of their ordinary selves.

He speaks, but it is not so much the meaning of the words which is important, it is their sounds which make the magic. He punctuates them, putting them together in musical phrases which have

tonal variation. The phrases rise and fall. He pauses, he hesitates, he whispers, he moans and grunts. He repeats and he listens for our responses. We have begun to participate, because his words have touched something in us and so we say "Amen" ... and then we say it again. (p. 220)

This passage vividly captures the interactive experience between the preacher and congregation that gives worshipers the opportunity to release pent-up frustrations and achieve a catharsis, an escape from the harshness of their daily realities.

This interactive experience commonly referred to as call-response is an African-derived process between speaker and listener. It is not uncommon for African American preachers to receive responses from their congregations during their sermons. Some preachers might call out for a specific response, such as "Can I get a witness?" or "Somebody ought to say Amen," thereby soliciting responses. The responses might also come voluntarily from members of the congregation as an affirmation of the presence of "the spirit" and/or encouragement to the preacher. Such responses as "Amen," "Preach!" "Tell it," or "Go on pastor," are compliance and essential in traditional African American worship. Whether solicited or unsolicited, this participatory technique makes the listeners believe that they are experiencing God's presence in their midst.

If the people do not say "Amen" or some other passionate response (and they don't always respond), it could mean that the spirit has chosen not to speak through the preacher at that time. The absence of the spirit could also mean that the preacher was too dependent on his own word instead of the spiritual word, or that the congregation was too involved in its own personal quarrels to receive the word. Whatever the case, the absence of feedback is typically uncharacteristic of traditional African American worship, for African American worshipers believe that if you don't put anything into the service, you won't get anything out of it.

African American preaching is not simply a religious presentation. It is the careful orchestration of the Biblical scriptures interpreted in the context of a people's culture and experiences. It is presented with logic blended with creative modes of expression, and tonal and physical behaviors from a tradition that emphasizes emotionalism, interaction, spirituality, and the power of the spoken word.

## Summary

The African American church has been and will continue to be a very dominant institution in America. That which began as a weapon to combat human degradation has become a successful means of sustaining a people.

Sunday after Sunday, African American preachers have breathed new life into a downtrodden people. They have interpreted the Bible in view of their historical, cultural, and daily experiences. Their tones are powerful, their gestures natural, and their words keep audiences spellbound.

Every culture attempts to create a universe of discourse for its members, a way in which people can interpret their experiences and convey it to one another. We tend to take this interplay between communication and culture for granted without exploring its effect within the culture and on other cultures. Although this essay has focused on the former, hopefully it has enlightened those of other cultures as to the reason "why we sing."

And when the song is over  
We've all said Amen.  
In your heart just keep on singing  
And the song will never end.  
And if Somebody asks you,  
Was it just a show?  
Lift your hands and be a witness  
And tell the whole world NO!

—Franklin (1993)

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