SACRED RHETORIC AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CIVIC SERMON

Joseph Evans

Introduction

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., author of *Loose Canons: Notes on the Cultural Wars*, has pointed to the importance of literacy in African-American oratory and letters. Gates informs his readers of an event that took place near the United States Capitol in 1833 or 1834. Senator John C. Calhoun, of South Carolina, met with a group of men including Samuel E. Sewell and David Lee Child, two prominent Boston lawyers, and either Edward Livingston, of New York, who served as Secretary of State from 1833 to 1834 or John Forsyth, of Virginia, who held the position from 1834 to 1841. He writes,

It was a period of great ferment upon the question of Slavery, States Rights, and Nullification; and consequently the Negro was the topic of conversation at the table. One of the utterances of Mr. Calhoun was to this effect, “That if he could find a Negro who knew Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man”.1

This passage is significant for at least two reasons. First, it illustrates the climate and conditions that African-Americans endured in their struggle to be considered human and equal to all others regardless of race and status. Second, it aids our understanding of the role literacy played, and continues to play, for all racial groups to achieve equality in the public square. Such a role, in fact, has been a primary concern of African-American orators since the 19th century. The “traditional black church”, for example, “expects and appreciates rhetorical flair and highly poetic language in the preaching of the gospel”;2

---


There is little fear in black pulpits of being accused of “pretty preaching.” In fact, seasoned pastors from an earlier generation could often be heard admonishing younger ministers not to be afraid “to preach a little.” Such encouragements were intended to free the poet in the preacher and allow the presence of God through the power of language to lift the sermon to higher heights. To this end, the employment of literary devices such as antiphonality, repetition, alliteration, syncopation, oral formulas, thematic imagery, voice merging, and sacred time continues to be a compelling concern of the African-American preacher. Such rhetorical tools in the hands of a skillful black preacher can evoke a sense of God’s awe and mystery in the listening congregation … Unlike many European and mainline American denominations, where architecture and classical music inspire a sense of the holy, blacks seek to accomplish this act through well-crafted rhetoric. The listening ear becomes the privileged sensual organ as the preacher attempts through careful and precise rhetoric to embody the Word. For this reason, the rhythm, cadence, and sound of words, as well as their ability to “paint a picture” in the minds of the hearers, are very important in the African-American sermon. The black preacher’s careful search for the precise words and phrases are continuing evidence of the importance of rhetoric and the modest circumstances that originally gave it a place of primacy in the black sermon.3

These preachers, in turn, used the power of words to seek freedom and equality for their people. As William G. Allen, an African-American professor at New York Central College in McGrawville, New York put it in 1852,

*Orators worthy of the name must have for their subject personal liberty, and orators worthy of the name must necessarily originate in the nation that is on the eve of passing from a state of slavery into freedom, or from a state of freedom into slavery. How could this be otherwise? Where there is no pressure, the highest efforts of genius must lie underdeveloped.*4

Jacqueline Bacon has added a poignant comment to Allen’s words. “The most powerful oratory”, she writes, “arises from oppression … and is fundamentally connected to the transition from slavery to freedom”5

This transition involved not only preaching the gospel, but engaging the secular culture as well. As Harryette Mullen has noted,

*An African-American tradition of literacy as secular technology and tool for political empowerment, through appropriation of public symbols, and participation in mainstream cultural discourse, coexists with*

---

3 Ibid., p. 9
5 Ibid., p. 14.