

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE HEART OF BLACK PREACHING by Cleophus J. LaRue. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000. 255 pages.

All preachers can benefit from reading *The Heart of Black Preaching*. While the topic of the book describes and analyzes a particular hermeneutic, that of the African American preacher, the argument of the book makes broader claims about effective and powerful preaching. To understand how black preaching is focused on God who acts, intervenes, and liberates, is to understand better how all preaching can be more centrally focused on the text and relevant to the listening community. According to Cleophus LaRue, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary, black preaching is strong because God is central in the Word proclaimed, even as God is the central focus of the biblical text.

LaRue begins by dispelling a myth. Acknowledging the sheer power of traditional African American preaching, he claims that its essential characteristic comes not from rhetorical style, rhythm, cadence, or delivery, but rather from a distinctive biblical hermeneutic that affirms the centrality of God in the lives of the downtrodden. Rather than technique and form, belief and theological content distinguish black preaching. LaRue defines the heart of black preaching as the belief in God who acts in the daily existence of marginalized and oppressed people.

Beginning with a core testimony of what black Americans believe, LaRue characterizes the African American hermeneutic as strong in biblical content and drawing from the history and life experience of black people. He draws from David Kelsey's work on biblical hermeneutics, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, to show how varieties of communities construe particular patterns or theological meanings, which make sense of their experience. Those communities then apply that normative understanding to the whole of scripture. LaRue uses this sociological and theological insight to describe a communal black reading of scripture that proclaims a sovereign God who acts in concrete ways on behalf of the oppressed and powerless.

LaRue argues,

Blacks have long believed that it is the Creator God who works mightily in human history to accomplish God's purposes. Their enduring emphasis on the might and majesty of God has been a persistent theme in black religious thought. The demonstration of God's power is the fundamental key to understanding what drives, motivates, and gives shape and life to the creation and organization of the black sermon. Time and again in countless sermons from blacks who span the centuries and hail from different denominational, educational, and geographical backgrounds, one finds this foundational hermeneutic at work. It is the distinctive factor in black preaching. (112)

With that central, characteristic understanding of God in African American theology and experience, LaRue offers what he calls the “domains of experience” that are present in black preaching: personal piety, care of the soul, social justice, corporate concerns, and maintenance of the institutional church. These domains of experience become the means by which the preacher unfolds the text for the listener in the context of real life situations.

The domains of experience for the African American community are instructive for all believers. LaRue writes, “Though black Christians bring a different perspective to the hermeneutical table because of their sociocultural experiences, they can never forget that they too are part of a larger whole” (118). For a contemporary culture that idolizes individualism, builds gated communities, and is ever widening the gap between rich and poor, the African American hermeneutic offers a much-needed corrective. It confronts the church’s inclinations toward seekers who want to be comfortable with what we say we believe. This book offers the wisdom of black preaching which has long known and clung tenaciously to the truth that God loves all the world and is particularly on the side of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

LaRue includes the stories of preachers and uses a collection of their sermons to explicate his biblical hermeneutic; these form one of the treasures of this book. He presents the biographical and historical milieu of five nineteenth century preachers who represent various kinds of backgrounds, slaves and free, educated and uneducated, from different regions of the country. He describes the content and theology of sample sermons to illustrate his points, then moves to a study of six contemporary African American preachers and their sermons. With these modern preachers he delves deeper in analysis and critique according to more contemporary homiletical theory. All of the sermons LaRue discusses are appended in full, offering a wonderful collection of exemplary black preaching.

Although LaRue includes the work of three contemporary women preachers, he does not comment on feminist or womanist perspectives, which often critique theologies emphasizing power and might as subordinating women. Though their sample sermons demonstrate variations in content and style between the women and men he includes, I would have welcomed his observations about distinct theological dimensions of the black hermeneutic for men and women preachers. LaRue’s inclusion of African American women preachers, however, does enable the reader of their sermons to make such comparisons.

This text is more than a compelling study of African American preaching and sound explanation of the power of the uniquely black hermeneutic. LaRue’s precision in analyzing black preaching and its theological focus urges any reader to think about the core theological tenets that so succinctly characterize one’s own preaching and the domains of experience for any community of faith. At a time when many books on preaching concern the art of homiletics and concentrate on form, movement, technique, and rhetorical style, this book reminds us preachers of the essential truth that the heart of all preaching is the God whom we proclaim, who acts mightily in the world, in human history, and even as we preach.