

TOWARD A WOMANIST HOMILETIC: KATIE CANNON, ALICE WALKER AND
EMANCIPATORY PROCLAMATION

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INTRODUCTION

Womanist thought emerged in 1985 as a methodological perspective used by African-American women scholars in religion. Dr. Katie G. Cannon appropriated Alice Walker's womanist¹ concept in relation to Black women's tradition of biblical interpretation in "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," a chapter in the anthology *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*.²

In womanist scholarship, the major sources for understanding the religious consciousness of African-American women include biographies, journals, narratives, novels, prayers, and similar references by African-American women that reflect Black women's faith experiences. Although womanist scholars interpret these sources with attention to race, class and gender, their review of these sources is not collective or critically analytical based upon these issues. Rather, this scholarly approach is constructive of a new paradigm for examining the religious experience and rhetoric of African-American women. The goal outlined in the work of womanist scholars is to shape the practices and

¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi Womanist **1**. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "you trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. **2**. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black? Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." **3**. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. **4**. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

² Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1985), 40.

values of the African-American faith community based on an understanding of the ways in which the experiences of Black women have shaped African-American sacred rhetoric.³

A critical analysis of the sacred rhetoric in the sermons of African-American female preachers will be a significant contribution to achieving the goals of womanist scholarship. This project builds on the work of Cannon and Walker to offer a womanist paradigm for analyzing the sermons of Black women. This paradigm is a minimal construct to consider when examining the complexity of African-American women's sacred rhetoric in preaching because preaching is an integral part of the Black church tradition.

From the historic field church of slaves—the invisible institution—to the contemporary institutional Black church, Black preachers are common and highly visible in Black communities. “The sermon or, more accurately, preaching is the focal point of worship in the Black church, and all other activities find their place in some subsidiary relationship.”⁴ More specifically, through the preaching event, the Black church has fashioned a distinctive sacred rhetoric, which is a key starting place of Black theology.

Contrary to the thought of some, black theology may be first and foremost found in the folklore and literature of the black church; and in the pronouncement, philosophy, of the spokespersons of the black church. That is, black preaching may be the major source of black theology. It is the preached word that contains the content of the black people's thought in an effort to appropriate the Christian faith in a racist white society in America.⁵

³ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 57-76.

⁴ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 346.

⁵ William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 59.

The sermon is a major theological voice in the Black church; it carries enormous influence and is traditionally and predominantly a Christian-based theo-ethical construct. Through the sermon, the preacher negotiates the contours of African-American sacred and secular culture. The congregation is invited to examine social morals and values according to the faith claims of the sermon. Furthermore, the sermon, as a vehicle of ongoing divine revelation to an oppressed people, houses the hope that the revolutionary fire of our faith can blaze new paths of liberation for the entire race. Yet, a survey of the literature of the Black preaching tradition reveals a significant void concerning the contributions of African-American female preachers.

The Black Preacher in America, by Charles V. Hamilton, is a groundbreaking historical perspective on Black preaching. In his work, Hamilton examines Black preaching from slavery to the mid-1970s. He conducts extensive interviews of African-American preachers from diverse geographic, demographic, and denominational affiliations. Through his research, Hamilton discovers that frequently when one is talking about the Black preacher, one is talking about the Black church. Very often, the two are inseparable for analytical purposes.⁶ Surprisingly, Hamilton does not examine the contributions of any Black female preachers; even though, women are the majority of the Black church membership.⁷

Many homiletic scholars consider the books *Black Preaching* and *The Recovery of Preaching* by Henry H. Mitchell to be the principal works on the history, style, delivery, context, and content of Black preaching. Some scholars consider Mitchell to be the “Dean of Black Preaching.” Although these principle works by Mitchell on the

⁶ Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1972), 5.

⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 140-141.

subject of Black preaching draw on years of research and experience, neither book includes sermons by female preachers. Nevertheless, Mitchell offers substantive observations about Black preaching and refers to the preacher as he or she without addressing the subject of female preachers.

Images of the Black Preacher, a book by H. Beecher Hicks Jr., is a candid and comprehensive look at both historical and contemporary images of Black preachers in literature, drama, and media. In his work, Hicks challenges many stereotypes as he “examines the self-perception and public image of the Black preacher.”⁸ Furthermore, he identifies the influence of racism on the images of the Black preacher and links the survival of the Black church with the need for a new image of the Black preacher. Hicks calls for a “rethinking of roles, goals, and priorities . . . [as] a part of the making of perspectives of the new Black preacher.”⁹ Through his examination of the images of Black preachers in literature, however, Hicks does not include any of the literary sources that have images of Black female preachers. The depiction of female ministers in Black literature is not complementary, “but stereotypes of the worst that is in religious ministry.”¹⁰ Regardless, Hicks fails to include any perspective of the female preachers—not even a critique of the prejudicial images.

The lack of analysis and interpretation of sermons by Black female preachers in theoretical discourse on Black preaching necessitates the construction of a paradigm for critically examining the sermons of Black women. This methodology would enable an

⁸ H. Beecher Hicks, *Images of the Black Preacher* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977), 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰ Betty J. Overton, “Black Women Preachers: A Literary View,” in *The Southern Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3 (Spring 1985), 165.

appreciation of the rich contribution of Black women to the American church preaching tradition.

Cannon has made significant strides toward defining a paradigm for critical examination of sermons in the Black preaching tradition. Arguably, Cannon's dialogue between Black preaching and womanist thought was not intended to create a paradigm for examining sermons exclusively by Black female preachers. Rather, her goal is to give those who listen to Black preaching a method of critical analysis. Cannon wants to give listeners a tool by which to determine what constitutes a good sermon.¹¹ Cannon argues that if the sermons of the Black church tradition are exclusively in the interest of men, it gives credence to androcentric theo-ethical concepts.¹² "It is therefore important to analyze sermonic texts in terms of their socioecclesial locations and theological interests, with special attention to their gender dimension."¹³ For Cannon, such analysis is the agenda of a womanist interpretation of Black preaching. The purpose of this work is to build on Cannon's groundbreaking scholarship and move toward the construction of a paradigm for assessing sermons by Black female preachers.

Cannon's work considers the Black preaching tradition in general terms and focuses on sermons by African-American men. More specifically, Cannon's work provides a critical analysis of sermonic content focusing on linguistics to "elucidate and delegitimize patriarchal teachings" in Black preaching.¹⁴ This project presents a paradigm for analyzing sermons by African-American womanist preachers to unmask the themes of womanist thought in the performance and content of their preaching as we

¹¹ Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 113.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid.

move toward a womanist homiletic. Ultimately, this discourse will contribute to our understanding of the Black preaching tradition through an examination of womanist preaching.

Chapter I is an examination of Cannon's contribution to a womanist critique of the rhetorical "logos" of Black preaching. Cannon, who is a Christian Ethicist, is a founding scholar of womanist religious discourse. In Cannon's womanist analysis of Black preaching, she employs an "adaptation of the feminist Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's integrative heuristic"¹⁵ method of ethical assessment to examine the theo-ethical content of Black preaching. Cannon argues that a womanist interpretation of Black preaching will examine the following elements of the *logos* or discursive dimension in African-American sermonizing:

- Sexist derogatory images of women
- The impact of negative images on the identity of women
- The social impact of a plethora of negative female images in comparison to few positive female images
- The praxis of resistance
- The impact of a womanist hermeneutic.¹⁶

Cannon's womanist analysis of Black preaching focuses primarily on linguistics. She examines words, images, and the impact of language on the faith community. She is concerned about the prevalence of derogatory language about women in the sacred rhetoric of Black preaching and its impact on the faith community. In this chapter, several key elements for a womanist homiletic are identified based upon her discursive critique of Black preaching.

¹⁵ Katie G. Cannon, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall 1989), 115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114-121.

Chapter II is a furthering of Cannon's womanist critique of Black preaching to construct a womanist homiletic that includes more than a womanist critique of the logos of preaching. Cannon's emphasis on the linguistic element of Black preaching, and its emancipatory praxis as a discursive resistance, is both a contribution and a limitation for a critical analysis of womanist preaching. Cannon's critique of Black preaching does not include an explicit examination of theological language or insights on the 'trans-rational' nature of preaching. Preaching is more than a rational means of communication with words; it is also an act of embodiment and performed identity. Aristotle's final two means of persuasion: *pathos* and *ethos*, along with the more full-some extension of *ethos* to include forms of *embodiment*, invites us to return to Walker's definition of womanist to consider themes that address the trans-rational nature of preaching.

Chapter III is an examination of sermons by a womanist theologian, which can best be appreciated using a womanist homiletic. Cannon's categories of a womanist critique of Black preaching, and additional homiletic points from Walker's definition of womanist, define this womanist homiletic, which forms a groundwork paradigm for both critique and construction of womanist preaching. A womanist homiletic is helpful for understanding the preaching by womanist preachers because it enables one to appreciate what a womanist is doing in her sermonizing.

The sermons for analysis are by Rev. Dr. Prathia Hall, an accomplished leader in the Black church and a nationally acclaimed preacher. Rev. Hall has a M.Div., a Th.M., and a Ph.D. in Religion and Society from Princeton Theological Seminary. She is an appropriate subject for this project because she was an African-American female preacher influenced by the Black preaching tradition and womanist discourse.

CHAPTER I

MOVING TOWARD A WOMANIST HOMILETIC

Katie Cannon's womanist critique of Black preaching is foundational for developing the discursive aspects (or what Aristotle calls the rhetorical *logos*) of a womanist homiletic. Logos is concerned with the words, the content, and the line of reasoning in proclamation. Beyond logos, however, exists *pathos* (the emotional identifications wrought in preaching) and *ethos* (the embodied communication that devolves from the very person and presence of the preacher). For this reason, it is important in Chapter II to return to Alice Walker's definition of womanist to consider additional categories for exploring the trans-rational nature of preaching. This project does not apply an Aristotelian analysis; rather, the categories themselves offer a constructive rhetorical stance that underscores the need to move beyond the good start toward a womanist homiletic begun in Cannon's work. Before considering the rhetorical stance of logos in Cannon's womanist examination of Black preaching and Walker's definition of womanist, it is helpful to state how rhetorical criticism is significant in furthering Cannon's womanist agenda in a critique of Black sacred rhetoric as we move toward a womanist homiletic.

Rhetorical Criticism and a Womanist Homiletic

Rhetoric refers to the “actions humans perform when they use symbols for the purpose of communicating with one another.”¹⁷ The scope of rhetoric is extensive and pervasive throughout most cultures and societies. Rhetoric includes intuitive or nonverbal symbols as well as rational verbal symbols.¹⁸ Sermons, music, poetry, dance, films, art, and architecture are all forms of rhetoric.¹⁹ In this project sacred rhetoric refers to the actions humans perform when they use verbal and nonverbal symbols for the purpose of communicating with one another about God.

In *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice*, Sonja K. Foss, a scholar in communications studies and feminist rhetorical theories, emphasizes that rhetoric “is the process by which our reality or our world comes into being; reality or knowledge is the result of communicating about it.”²⁰ Similarly, our reality or knowledge about God is the result of communication about God. When we communicate, what we understand as ‘real’ or as ‘knowledge’ depends on how we choose to label and talk about it.²¹ The symbols or labels we use to express our knowledge indicate a particular way of believing, behaving, and knowing.²² Labels express our knowledge and affect our experience. “The labels focus our attention on certain features, exhibit an evaluation or attitude toward those features, and thus encourage us to experience the concept in a particular way.”²³ Similarly our theological labels focus our attention, exhibit an attitude, and shape our

¹⁷ Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice*, Second Edition (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc, 1996), 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

experience of God. The ultimate goals of rhetorical criticism are to help us understand our use of labels and improve the communication skills of both audience and speaker.

Cannon's womanist critique of Black sacred rhetoric is an attempt to understand and improve the use of labels in the Black preaching tradition. Her work is, in fact, a work in womanist rhetorical criticism, focusing primarily on the discursive aspects of Black preaching. Rhetorical criticism is the systematic process used to explain our use of rhetoric in communication.²⁴ Foss suggests that when we communicate, we are creating a common world of reality that is not fixed but rather changes according to the symbols or labels we use to talk about it.²⁵ In Cannon's womanist critique of Black preaching, she analyzes sermons to "provide a means of ethical assessment that can help the Black church community look at the practices and habits, assumptions and problems, values and hopes embedded in its Christian cultural mind-set."²⁶ Cannon's womanist critique of Black sacred rhetoric is an attempt to get the Black church community to participate in shaping Black sacred rhetoric and faith praxis in such a way that it no longer accepts patriarchal teachings and the demeaning of women. In Cannon's examination of preaching in the Black church, she observes that there is no valid communal method of sermonic analysis that addresses the derogatory rhetoric about women in Black preaching. Cannon writes:

While the majority of these churchgoers have little trouble testifying that a good sermon is a many-splendored art form, the articulation of an analysis by which we elucidate and delegitimize patriarchal teachings is not as easily arrived at. When sermons are written and presented in the interest of men, the categorical definitions of theoethical concepts lend an evidently weighty authority to androcentric conclusions about male preachers and

²⁴ Ibid, 4.

²⁵ Ibid, 6.

²⁶ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York, New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 114-115.

masculine-centered culture. It is therefore important to analyze sermonic texts in terms of their socioecclesial locations and theological interests, with special attention to their gender dimension. Such methodological analysis of sermonic texts needs to be the task of womanist interpretation.²⁷

In essence, Cannon's womanist critique of Black preaching is a rhetorical criticism of Black preaching and a valid means of attaining her goal of getting the Black church community to participate in changing Black sacred rhetoric to eliminate derogatory images of women and patriarchal teachings, and to engage in emancipatory praxis.

Foss supports Cannon's premise that an audience critically attuned to the rhetoric of a message is more likely to participate in shaping the community praxis and future rhetoric. Foss emphasizes that an audience familiar with even the basic techniques of rhetoric is more likely to critically engage the message.²⁸ The rhetorically astute audience raises critical questions about the content of the message, especially when it is in conflict with their lived experience as opposed to receiving the message without substantive critique. Foss notes that when we "understand the various options available to rhetors in the construction of messages and how they work together to create the effects they produce, we are able to question the choices made in the construction of rhetorical artifacts because we see possibilities other than those selected."²⁹ The ability to perceive other possibilities and question the speaker's choices is the type of engagement of Black sacred rhetoric that Cannon seeks. This kind of rhetorical criticism is at the heart of what a womanist homiletician both does and promotes in congregational life.

Foss also supports Cannon's premise that a more engaged audience is more likely to participate in shaping their community. Foss argues that when we have knowledge of

²⁷ Ibid., 113.

²⁸ Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 4.

²⁹ Ibid.

rhetorical operations, we are more inclined to respond critically to existing rhetorical practices, and as a result, our participation in the shaping of our culture is less reactive and more proactive.³⁰ However, Cannon does not propose a methodology for equipping the audience with knowledge of rhetorical operations or a context for such engagement. Cannon seems to conclude that ultimately preachers are responsible for the content of their sermons. She calls on African-American female preachers to challenge existing rhetorical practices and model a new paradigm. Cannon raises some interesting questions:

As clergywomen committed to the well-being of the African American community how are we refuting gender stereotypes that are dehumanizing, debilitating, and prejudicial to African American women? Can we change male supremacist attitudes by prescribing alternatives to discriminatory word usage? What are the essential liberating strategies that African American clergywomen use in our own sacred rhetoric that will continue to encourage an ethic of resistance? What are we doing that will allow a womanist interpretation to emerge, an analysis that shows how Black women underneath patriarchal teachings and relations of domination are complex, life-affirming moral agents?³¹

Cannon's critical questions to African-American female preachers are challenging and compelling.

Expounding upon Cannon's womanist agenda elucidates a communal approach that is also a valuable contribution to improving Black sacred rhetoric. To that end, a womanist homiletic would include rhetorical criticism as a necessary part of the womanist preaching event. This means that listeners would be equipped with a systematic process to critically engage the rhetoric of the sermon. The congregation's understanding would have ramifications beyond the preaching event, as rhetorically astute listeners (without formal instigation) would critically engage the sacred rhetoric from the pew, Bible study, Sunday school, workshops, and choir stands. Widening the net of critical

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

³¹ Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 120.

examination of our sacred rhetoric is germane to advancing the theo-ethical faith praxis of the Black church community. This idea has some concepts in common with John S. McClure's "collaborative preaching"³² and Lucy Atkinson Rose's "conversational preaching."³³

In *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*, McClure explores collaborative preaching and its relationship to leadership. McClure also offers a sermonic form and proposes what the collaborative conversation between preacher and congregation will look like. He refers to collaborative preaching as "rhetoric of listening,"³⁴ which allows for the biblical interpretation and theological insights of the congregation to be expressed in the sermon. McClure asserts: "My goal is simply to move closer to a model of single-party preaching that includes the actual language and dynamics of the collaborative conversation on biblical texts, theology, and life."³⁵ Rose proposes a similar goal in conversational preaching. Both McClure and Rose embrace the idea that because "the Word of God is communal it emerges in the process of dialogue that takes place within the community. The Word is brought forth in the give-and-take of conversations in which meaning and purpose of the gospel is being sought. This Word is not an individual *mandate* or *insight*."³⁶

In the introductory notes to *Preaching in the Roundtable Church: Sharing the Word*, Rose identifies what distinguishes her work from McClure's:

At least two differences distinguish my conversational preaching from McClure's collaborative preaching. One is that he envisions the relationship between the

³² Johns S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 48-51.

³³ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 4-10.

³⁴ McClure, *The Roundtable*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

preacher and the worshippers as that of “beloved strangers” who work out together how the community is to live. In conversational preaching, their relationship is more like that of “cohorts.” . . . A second difference is that McClure focuses on a sermonic form by which the sermon reflects the journey of the pre-sermon discussion group.³⁷

McClure and Rose focus on conversational or collaborative dialogue with the faith community to inform—perhaps even to determine—the content of the sermon prior to the preaching event.

Cannon’s strong emphasis on rhetorical criticism implies that a critical conversation or collaboration is needed today in the Black churches. Therefore, it is necessary for the preacher and congregation to develop an understanding that part of the preaching event is communal reflection. The intent of this approach is to create opportunity for conversation among listeners and preachers, so the rhetoric of the sermon is examined and the emancipatory praxis is determined in response to the Word proclaimed. Listeners from pulpit and pew, together, shape the faith praxis and sacred rhetoric of the community. These critical conversations could occur during preaching through critical and emancipatory call-and-response dynamics, or in the context of worship immediately after the sermon as the continuing worship fashions the sermon toward an emancipatory praxis. By such means, inconsistency in the rhetoric and lived experience of the faith community would be unmasked, and such disclosure would advance Black church theology. In these conversations, all participants must be willing to learn new skills of dialogue, analysis and theology, and be willing to engage critically the rhetoric of the sermon. This process will make the audience and the preacher more attentive to the fact that “preaching a sermon is, by definition, a mutual rhetorical act. Preaching is an art predicated on a set of skills that can be learned, and these skills are

³⁷ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 132.

learned by preachers and listeners alike.”³⁸ In the Black preaching tradition, the preaching event is a dialogue with the audience and therefore a communal art form wherein all the artists (meaning the preacher and congregation) can fine tune their skills. A womanist homiletic along lines suggested by Cannon’s work takes seriously the rhetorical act of preaching and makes good use of the communicative resources of rhetorical criticism and rhetoric for effective homiletic practice. In Cannon’s criteria for homiletics, it is clear that words, language, and the linguistic elements of preaching are central.

³⁸ Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art of Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1999), 20.

A Hermeneutic of Rhetorical Analysis

Cannon's fundamental womanist concern, as it relates to logos in preaching, is biblical interpretation. She proposes that a womanist hermeneutic would both reveal and challenge patriarchal teaching of biblical interpretation in Black preaching. Cannon's goal is to offer an ethical assessment of sermon content with the purpose of unveiling and, thereby, "delegitimizing patriarchal teachings" in Black preaching.³⁹ Cannon's womanist hermeneutic is an adaptation of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's integrative heuristic model of rhetorical analysis. By adapting Fiorenza's method of ethical assessment to examine the theo-ethical content of Black preaching as it relates to the interpretation of Scripture, Cannon can show how sermonic interpretation within the Black church is applied to its community's culture, traditions, perceptions, values, behaviors, and relationships. Before considering the results of Cannon's examination, let us consider Fiorenza's methodology.

Through Fiorenza's rhetorical analysis of biblical interpretation, she observes that historical-critical commentaries, by design, minimize issues of theological interpretation and proclamation. According to Fiorenza, historical-critical commentaries assert, "that a given interpretation of the text represents an objective scientific reading that is able to comprehend the definitive meaning intended by the author."⁴⁰ This assertion is misleading in its contribution to the proclamation of the text in faith formation for Fiorenza. She notes that the typical format of commentary is an introduction followed by a detailed interpretation of the text and its historical context. This format "restrains

³⁹ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York, New York: Continuum, 1995), 115.

⁴⁰ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Revelation Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 1.

rhetorical argument and obscures the power relations” in the text and the interpretation.⁴¹ As a result, the format of historical-critical commentaries distorts issues of theological interpretation, which “appear in the form of an excursus on theological themes and motifs that either interrupts the historical commentary on the text or they emerge in discrete references to subtle correlations with present-day questions and situations.”⁴²

Exegetical commentary certainly is not free from rhetorical argument, but such argument must be restricted to showing how competing interpretations have misread the text. Such a discursive suppression of present-day theological socioecclesial locations and theological interests is due largely to the prevailing assumption that the form of exegetical commentary demands scientific objectivity and disinterestedness in contrast to theological readings that are engaged and perspectival.⁴³

Fiorenza argues for a rhetorical analysis of texts as a better avenue for producing meaning that is interactive with the socio-ecclesial context of the text and the present-day faith community when seeking meaning from the text for faith formation. This shift is away from being preoccupied with facts about the text; because knowing facts about the text does not equate to understanding or faith formation.

Rhetorical analysis asserts that in the act of interpretation one does not just understand and comprehend texts and symbols (hermeneutics), but one also produces new meanings by interacting with them. Biblical scholarship as a rhetorical or a communicative practice seeks to display how biblical texts and their contemporary interpretations are political and religious discursive practices.⁴⁴

Fiorenza argues further that in interpreting the Bible for faith formation, one should not separate rhetorical practices from the interpretation of the Scripture.

Authorial aims, point of view, narrative strategies, persuasive means, and closure, as well as audience perceptions and constructions, are rhetorical practices that

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2.

have determined not only the production of Revelation {the text} but also its subsequent interpretations.⁴⁵

Attention to the rhetorical practices of biblical interpretation is a significant tool for advancing Cannon's concerns about biblical interpretation in Black preaching and how one produces new meanings of text in Black sacred rhetoric.

On the surface, the idea of "producing new meanings" from the text might not be attractive to faith communities. In traditions influenced by the Enlightenment, there is a stress on the objectivity of interpretation, which suggests there is a single correct interpretation. In the Black preaching tradition, however, preachers have significant latitude for creative elaboration of the text, which creates opportunity for new meaning. In fact, this elaboration can be impromptu during the preaching event. In many cases, this occurs during call and response—when during the sermon the congregation talks back to the preacher, usually responding to a particular idea, thus creating a dialogue. In this dialogue, the congregation helps to create and shape the content of the sermon, including its biblical interpretation. If the congregation agrees with what they are hearing, they encourage the preacher to continue; if not, they encourage the preacher to stop preaching or, perhaps, to change the general idea being proposed in the sermon. The dynamic of call and response in Black preaching can produce new meaning in the sermon as the content of the text interacts with the faith community. If we take seriously the critical potential of call and response suggested by a womanist homiletic, this dialogue can produce emancipatory results. This critical potential begins, however, during the preacher's sermon preparation, in the interpretation of scripture.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Fiorenza proposes that a rhetorical analysis of Scripture underscores the fact that one is creating new meanings in the act of biblical interpretation. Rhetorical analysis is a “means to analyze how biblical texts and interpretations participate in creating or sustaining oppressive or liberating theo-ethical values and sociopolitical practices.”⁴⁶

Cannon uses Fiorenza’s methodology to scrutinize the sacred rhetoric of Black preaching and to consider the hermeneutical method and “religious consciousness” of the interpreter. Fiorenza notes there are clear consequences for a “distinction between hermeneutic and rhetoric for the theo-ethical practice of proclamation.”⁴⁷

I do not mean just preaching but all theo-ethical inquiry that is concerned with the uses and effects of biblical texts in contemporary society, culture, and churches. Such a broad understanding of theological biblical interpretation is necessary because biblical texts . . . affect not only the perceptions, values, and imaginations of Christians but also those of Western cultures and societies on the whole.⁴⁸

Fiorenza’s concern about the theo-ethical practice of proclamation is central to Cannon’s womanist investigation of Black preaching because Cannon is concerned about the real-life *ethical* consequences of biblical interpretation in Black sacred rhetoric that espouse derogatory images of women. Therefore, Cannon offers a critical analysis of biblical interpretation and language in Black preaching in order to unmask what she refers to as “linguistic violence.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 113.

Womanist Hermeneutics

According to Cannon, a womanist analysis is a discursive analysis that includes the “elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts and their interpretation in their historical, as well as in their contemporary, sociopolitical contexts. . . . Such a discursive ethic does not just evaluate the ideas or propositions of a work, but it also seeks to determine whether its very language and composition promote stereotypical images and linguistic violence.”⁵⁰ Based upon this premise, Cannon examines the ethical implications of the language of the text and the application of the text in the faith community:

What does the language of a biblical text do to a reader who submits to its world of vision? In order to answer this question, the careful reading of biblical texts and the appropriate reconstruction of their historical worlds and of their symbolic universe need to be complemented by a theo-ethical discussion of the contemporary religious functions of biblical texts that claim scriptural authority today in biblical communities of faith. An ethics of accountability calls for an open forum in which biblical texts and interpretations can be problematized, interrogated, and re-visioned.⁵¹

Regarding such matters, Fiorenza’s method has strong implications for assessing gender in preaching.

According to Fiorenza, biblical interpreters must learn to “analyze sermonic texts in terms of their socio-ecclesial locations and theological interests, with special attention to their gender dimension.”⁵² Accordingly, Cannon appropriates this method for understanding a womanist hermeneutic of preaching when she writes:

A Womanist hermeneutic identifies the frame of sexist-racist social contradictions housed in sacred rhetoric that gives women a zero-image of ourselves. This analysis deconstructs biblically based sermons that portray female subjects as

⁵⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁵¹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 28-29.

⁵² Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 115.

bleeding, crippled, disempowered, objectified, purified, or mad. It enables us to ask hard questions about the responsibility of Black preachers to satisfy the whole congregation's spiritual hunger with their intellectual grasp, mastery of Scripture, social analysis, and constructive homiletical skill.⁵³

Cannon's womanist hermeneutic is used to analyze biblically based sermons in the Black preaching tradition. This womanist-critical evaluation of Black preaching, which she refers to as the womanist queries, is a praxis-oriented examination of the sacred rhetoric of the Black church.⁵⁴ The following list identifies the central homiletic concerns of Cannon's womanist analysis of Black preaching:

1. Eliminate "negative and derogatory female" images. Identify and refute the "androcentric, phallogocentric . . . stereotypes that are dehumanizing, debilitating, and prejudicial to African-American women."
2. Address the marginalization of women in the biblical text and context. "A Womanist hermeneutic seeks to place sermonic texts in the real-life context of the culture that produced them. . . . Images used throughout the sermon can invite the congregation to share in dismantling patriarchy," and create an emancipatory response.
3. Eliminate discriminatory language and the marginalizing of women characters in the sermon that in the biblical text are central figures. To challenge the sermonic retelling of the biblical story in such a manner that women are inferior to men. "What happens to the African-American female children when Black preachers use the Bible to attribute marvelous happenings and unusual circumstances to an all-male cast of characters?"
4. Monitor the impact of images to empower women and create "an ethic of resistance" to oppression. "As Womanist theologians, what can we do to counter the negative real-world consequences of sexist wording that brothers and sisters propagate in the guise of Christian piety and virtue?"
5. Womanist hermeneutic considers the socio-cultural context of the preaching event. Examine the words of the preacher and the context of the community. What are the leadership roles of women within the church community? "This practice removes men from the normative center and women from the margins."
6. African-American clergywomen must have praxis of resistance. The faith communities' response to the "proclaimed word" is the emancipatory praxis.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid., 115-116.

⁵⁴ Katie Cannon's work examines sermons in the Black church tradition that do not include the work of womanist preachers.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 114-121.

Cannon's womanist analysis of Black preaching focuses on the use of images and illustrations in sermonic language and challenges the way in which sermons often typify African-American women through sexist images. She writes:

A Womanist critique of homiletics challenges conventional biblical interpretations that characterize African-American women as "sin-bringing Eve," "wilderness-whimpering Hagar," "henpecking Jezebel," "whoring Gomer," "prostituting Mary-Magdalene," and "conspiring Sapphira."⁵⁶

Cannon focus in biblical interpretation is a womanist hermeneutic that would expose and challenge derogatory images of women in biblically based sermons. The work of Clarice Martin, a womanist biblical scholar, expands on Cannon's hermeneutic. Martin analyzes biblical interpretations that exclude women. Martin examines what she refers to as linguistic sexism in biblical interpretation, which is a translation or interpretation of Scripture that *removes* women from the text. Martin illustrates linguistic sexism in biblical interpretation through the translation of the New Testament Greek term *anthropōs*:

One of the more debated translation issues is the translation of the Greek term *anthropōs*. Translators have regularly rendered *anthropōs* as "man," concealing women or rendering them invisible under a blanket of male linguistic hegemony. Like blacks who must constantly, "imagine" themselves as represented in so-called generic representations of Americans by all white groupings . . . women must constantly "imagine" themselves as represented in so-called generic representations of all humanity in biblical traditions that are punctuated by the almost exclusive usage of male gendered pronouns. The real point of course, is that *anthropōs* does not always mean "man" or "men." As has been amply demonstrated. . . ,⁵⁷ *anthropōs* does have a more generic meaning. It can mean "human, person, or humanity."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the translation, see William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 67-68.

⁵⁸ Clarice J. Martin, "Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation" in *Black Theology a Documentary History, Volume 2: 1980-1992*, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 227.

The following are examples of linguistic sexism in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible in translation of the term *anthropōs*. I Timothy 4:10 reads, “We have our hope set on the living God who is the Savior of all *men*, especially of those who believe.” Titus 2:22 reads: “the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all *men*.”⁵⁹ The English translation of *anthropōs* in these texts is not consistent with what the Greek texts intend.⁶⁰ The theology of these translations “does not offer much hope for . . . women!”⁶¹ The combination of Cannon and Martin’s concerns creates a rigorous critique of biblical interpretation in the Black preaching tradition as it relates to images of humanity (particularly women) and interpretations of humanity that exclude women.

Cannon’s examination of sermons from the Black preaching tradition reveals that androcentric interests and perspectives are evident in images of women in Black sacred rhetoric. These derogatory images of women are not consistent with the historical contributions of African-American women in the life of the church.⁶² Cannon is hopeful that by excising prejudicial images of women and celebrating authentic images of women based on their real-life witness to the church, the entire community will find liberation from patriarchy.⁶³

Emancipatory Praxis

Beyond her focus on images in Black sacred rhetoric and her focus on biblical interpretation lies Cannon’s call for emancipatory praxis. Perhaps the best illustration is in the very creation of the term womanist and the formation of womanist thought.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 114.

⁶³ Ibid., 115.

For Cannon, Alice Walker's creation of the term womanist as a description for what it means to be African American and female is an act of resistance or an emancipatory praxis through language. Walker's creation of a term highlights the reality that terms such as feminist or Black feminist do not fully depict for Walker, what it means to be African American and female. Walker's definition is the theoretical curative for Cannon's context of oppression as an African-American female negotiating race, sex, and class constructions. On this subject, Cannon writes:

My grandmother, Rosa Cornelia White Lytle, was the gatekeeper in the land of "counterpain." She was always available with salves, hot towels, and liniments to cure physical aches and spiritual ills. As a charismatic healer, Grandma Rosie's practice consisted of diagnosis, treatment, and prevention in the maintenance of overall wholeness. Many days my soul struggled with whether to go to school or stay home and be healed from the injuries the world inflicted unknowingly. In 1983, "Womanism" became the new gatekeeper in my land of counterpain. Early that spring, an African American woman poet, novelist, essayist and short story writer, Alice Walker, coined the term "womanist." Walker's expertise lay in literature, not in etymology or theology. And yet her symbolic crafting of an all-encompassing definition was philosophically medicinal.⁶⁴

Cannon goes on to describe the significance of this emancipatory praxis for her scholarship, and as she perceives it for African-American religious scholars including the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.⁶⁵ She proclaims that it is her intention through critically reflective work with the term womanist to "recast the very terms and terrain of religious scholarship."⁶⁶

For Cannon and the purview of this project, the use of the terms womanism or womanist function as an emancipatory praxis and a methodological framework for examining the sacred rhetoric of Black preaching. Cannon explains it well:

⁶⁴ Ibid, 23.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The chief function of womanism is not merely to replace one set of elitist, hegemonic texts that have traditionally ignored, dismissed, or flat-out misunderstood the existential realities of women of the African Diaspora with another set of Afrocentric texts that had gotten short shrift and pushed to the margins of the learned societies. Rather our objective is to use Walker's four-part definition as a critical, methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion.⁶⁷

Cannon's appropriation of the term womanist as a 'methodological framework' is a furthering of Walker's emancipatory praxis through words. It is emancipatory to identify what is unique and particular, and to create expression through language that empowers and embraces lived experience. For Cannon, womanist expression lends itself to a methodology to critique, unravel, and overcome oppressive language in Black sacred rhetoric.

Language Regarding Human Sexuality

As mentioned previously, Cannon's critique of oppressive language in Black sacred rhetoric focuses on negative, derogatory, and discriminative language as it relates to women. Although she does not assert that her womanist critique is exhaustive, in this critique she does not comment on derogatory images of same-gender loving women in Black sacred rhetoric. However, Walker's definition of womanist includes women "who love other women sexually/and or nonsexually" and Cannon has addressed human sexuality in her defense of the use of Walker in womanist theological discourse.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Part 2 of Walker's definition: See footnote 1 in Introduction of this dissertation for Alice Walker's complete definition of womanist.

There is debate among womanist scholars, however, about the appropriateness of this aspect of Walker's definition for womanist theological discourse.

In her work "Who Are We for Each Other: Sexism, Sexuality and Womanist Theology," Renee L. Hill, a Black feminist theologian, criticizes womanist theology for its silence on sexuality.⁶⁹ Hill argues that womanist theology is called to "resist multidimensional oppression" and to "confront the homophobia and heterosexism that exist in the African American communities."⁷⁰ Hill proposes that sexuality is a fundamental theological issue that is important to the survival of the whole community:

Sexuality *is* an issue for Christian womanist theologians. It is not any less or any more important than community or survival. It simply is a part of the community and survival. Sexuality (and male dominance) must be discussed in the Black community. . . . Sexuality is also an issue for Christian womanist because it is a fundamental part of life, God-given life, the life that Christ as incarnate in Jesus, shared with humanity; it is a profound theological issue. Sexuality is a part of human nature, the human nature that God created and called good.⁷¹

Hill believes that the limited dialogue about sexuality in African-American Christian theology contributes to the silence of the lesbian voice in Christian womanist discourse.⁷²

On the other end of the debate Cheryl Sanders, a pastor and professor of Christian Ethics disapproves of embracing this aspect of Walker's definition for womanist discourse precisely because it affirms women loving women.

Sanders contends that such an affirmation of same-sex relations is inconsistent with Christian lifestyle and would be detrimental to the Black church. She writes:

The Womanist concept sets forth a variety of criteria that convey specific moral values, character traits and behavior, especially with regard to sexuality. One

⁶⁹ Renee L. Hill, "Who Are We for Each Other?: Sexism, Sexuality and Womanist Theology" in *Black Theology a Documentary History, Volume 2: 1980-1992*, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 346.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 346.

important question to raise is whether or not the sexual ethics implied by the Womanist concept can serve the best interest of the black family, church, and community. Part of Walker's original intent was to devise a spiritual, concrete, organic, characteristic word, consistent with black cultural values that would describe black women who prefer women sexually, but are connected to the entire community. Womanist is a preferred alternative to *lesbian* because it connotes connectedness and not isolation, and a Womanist is one who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually, and who appreciates and prefers women's culture. Clearly in Walker's view, sexual preference is not a morally or ethically significant factor in determining whether or not one is "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female." But the affirmation of the connectedness of all persons within the black community regardless of sexual preference is not the only issue at stake with respect to the well-being of black people. In my view there is a fundamental discrepancy between the Womanist criteria that would affirm and/or advocate homosexual practice, and the ethical norms the black church might employ to promote the survival and wholeness of black families. . . . There is a great need for the black churches to promote positive sexual ethics within the black community as one means of responding to the growing normalization of the single-parent family, and the attendant increases in poverty, welfare dependency, and a host of other problems. Moreover, it is indisputably in the best interest of black children for the church not only to strengthen and support existing families, but also to educate them ethically for marriage and parenthood. The Womanist nomenclature, however, conveys a sexual ethics that is ambivalent at best with respect to the values of heterosexual monogamy within the black community.⁷³

In response to Sanders calls for a 'feminist re-visioning' of what constitutes positive sexual ethics, feminist author Bell Hooks writes:

If the Black church experience is to survive and sustain its revolutionary theological mission, feminist re-visioning is essential. It would enable the Black church to acknowledge that families vary, that they are not all heterosexually based or centered on couples. Single-parent households are as in need of support and affirmation as dual-parent families.⁷⁴

Sanders make families synonymous with heterosexual coupling. More inclusively, feminist thinking enables us to imagine new church traditions that can affirm heterosexual marriage and, as Sanders suggests, to "promote positive sexual ethics"

⁷³ Cheryl J. Sanders, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 5 (Fall 1989), 89-90.

⁷⁴ Bell Hooks, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," 104.

without promoting homophobia or prescribing heterosexism as the only spiritually acceptable relational choice.

Cannon observes that Sanders' concern about the status of the Black family is a genuine ethical point of reflection and that it does not set in opposition heterosexual and homosexual discourse. Cannon also notes that the role of preaching in the Black church is to question how power is ascribed to ethical questions of sexuality:

Why are particular images of Black church women included and promoted in sermons and others excluded? What effect does the objectification, degradation, and subjection of the female in Black preaching have on women's social relations? How disruptive are androcentric sermons for the Black family? What are the ideological and theological forces, the "specific determinations" that equate Black feminism and lesbianism? Whom does this equation serve? A Womanist theological ethic rejects heuristic concepts such as "heteropatriarchal familialist ideology" and "compulsory heterosexism" but seeks instead heuristic models that explore sacred power and benevolent co-humanity.⁷⁵

Cannon suggests that a womanist hermeneutic challenges heterosexism in the sacred rhetoric of the sermon, and it addresses the religious, socio-political, and ethical constructs that inform our understanding of human sexuality. The sacred rhetoric of womanist preaching must analyze and dismantle heterosexism and homophobia, as well as celebrate same-gender loving people.

Theological Language: A Caveat in Cannon's Work

Cannon's examination of Black preaching does not explicitly critique theological language. By furthering Cannon's womanist attention to logos in preaching, however, a womanist homiletic would also address theological language and the use of non-gendered or gender-inclusive language as preferential in our God talk. To this end a womanist homiletic supports language about God that is more expansive than exclusively

⁷⁵ Ibid., 93.

masculine language and therefore inclusive of diverse images and ways of knowing God.

Theological language makes use of metaphor and analogy as we seek to define and articulate the meaning of God, in addition to differentiating and establishing our relationship with God. It is commonplace for many of us to perceive God like a father, mother, or friend, etc., based on our experience and/or relationship with God. Clarice Martin, a womanist biblical scholar, addresses our language about God as an appeal to widen the margins of our perceptions of God to include the diversity of images of God in Scripture, as the Bible has already set the precedent. She argues:

We must “widen the margins” of the language and imagery that we use for God. This means that we must consciously incorporate the whole range of imagery and metaphor for God available to us in scripture, including feminine and masculine imagery, and the imagery for God that is not gender related. The impetus for this conscious “readjustment” of the margins or limits of our theological discourse about God is prompted not only by major societal shifts toward more inclusive language usage for females and males in the public and private spheres. . . . More important, the use of inclusive language is rooted in the biblical witness itself. The church is called to be faithful to all of scripture used to talk to God and about God.⁷⁶

God is more than images can fully capture. “God is Spirit, with qualities that we humans have sometimes understood as either masculine or feminine.”⁷⁷ We must be careful with our theological language because it has implications for faith experiences which are a significant concern in preaching. A preponderance of exclusively male images of God causes an attenuation of our experiences of God for both men and women. Martin points out that there is something particularly exclusionary in the religious and social experience of women when God is referred to in exclusively masculine language.

⁷⁶ Jacquelyn Grant, “The Power of Language and the Language of (Em)power(ment)” in *What Does It Mean To Be Black and Christian?: Pulpit, Pew, and Academy in Dialogue* (Nashville, Tennessee: Townsend Press, 1995), 134.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

When a woman tries to pattern herself after the highest and the best that she knows, she discovers a deep schism that cuts her off from her God, a God who is totally other than she. Not only is there the basic difference between the Creator and the creature that all humans experience, but there is also the difference between male and female. This sense of otherness does not exist as completely for most males, for when they look to God they experience a oneness with God at the point of their masculinity. In striving to be like Christ, they share with him not only the human experience but the masculine experience as well. For a woman there is no such shared sexuality.⁷⁸

Words create images, shape our identity, and define our relationships. Therefore, a womanist homiletic will embrace and advocate diversity in our theological language and as such, refuse to use exclusively male pronouns in God talk because of the myriad of limitations and biases they evoke. To use exclusively male pronouns with respect to God is to participate in the masking of misogynistic ideals in the naming of God. Talk about God will incorporate diverse language and images of God, including language about God in the Trinitarian formulae.

Trinitarian doctrine teaches that “God as three in one is experienced by humans as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three persons of the Trinity share the same essence and relate to each other in love.”⁷⁹ Used exclusively and without interpretation, the Trinitarian formula clearly emphasizes Jesus’ maleness and an exclusively male image of God to the exclusion of any “female” expression of God’s nature. The representation of the nature of God in a masculine familial paradigm is experienced differently by men and women. The image of God’s relationship with Jesus depicts in a father-son relationship is not similarly accessible to women, who are neither a father nor a son. Likewise, the familial relationship experienced by women of mother-daughter does not readily translate to images of Jesus, who is neither mother nor daughter.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁹ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 288.

The masculine emphasis of God is further heightened by what Kellie Delanie Brown, a womanist theologian, describes as the collapsing of any distinction in the persons of God and Jesus in Black sacred rhetoric. Brown argues that the lack of distinction between Jesus and God in Black church sacred rhetoric creates an association of God with a male image that hinders women from experiencing God within their selves and in female language.⁸⁰ Not only are there consequences for women and their experience of God, but also for their opportunity in ministry. “Emphasis on Jesus’ maleness has certainly contributed to the refusal by many Black male preachers to ordain Black women. They have often reasoned that as God chose the male Jesus to reflect ‘His’ presence in the world; ordained clergy must also be male.”⁸¹ The womanist homiletic challenge is to affirm the humanity of Christ while not focusing on the gender. This is consistent with Black women’s experiences of Jesus filling a void in their lives, which is defined by the action of Jesus in their lives, not his gender.⁸²

If we apply to Trinitarian language Brown’s invitation to focus on the action of Jesus and not gender, we embrace alternative Trinitarian language. For example, we could use terms like ‘Creator’, ‘Redeemer’, ‘Sustainer’, ‘Savior’, or ‘Healer’; there is a myriad of options.⁸³ Indeed, the alternative language is more descriptive and invites listeners to experience God in a different reality—an “action-oriented” perspective. However, this is both the point and the problem. Non-gendered descriptive words actually tend to limit our view of God and do not create the same experience or

⁸⁰ Kelly Delaine Brown, “God Is As Christ Does: Toward a Womanist Theology,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 46., No. 1 (Summer-Fall 1989), 7-16.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Sharon Neuffer Emswiler and Thomas Neuffer Emswiler, *Women & Worship: A Guide to Nonsexist Hymns, Prayers, and Liturgies* (San Francisco, California: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), 93.

understanding of God as gendered terms, such as 'King', 'Father', 'Lord', or 'Master'.⁸⁴ Truth exists in the argument that the term 'Father', for example, includes a different descriptive reality of God than the term 'Creator'. There is familiarity, if you will, in the term 'Father' that will probably not be evoked in alternative language, and that is precisely the point. Alternative language for God, such as 'Creator', is not intended to truncate one's experience of God; rather, it is intended to create new possibilities for experiencing God to the fullest extent possible. A womanist homiletic is attuned to logos so that our God talk will reflect more inclusive alternative language for God, use experiential images of Jesus that do not focus on gender, and consider exclusively male-gendered theological terminology as erroneous or discriminatory teaching.

Conclusion

There are numerous examples of linguistic violence against women in Black sacred rhetoric. In Cannon's examination of the sacred rhetoric of Black preaching she revealed the use of derogatory language about women. Grant and Brown's theological critique of Black sacred rhetoric exposed Christological language that prioritizes the masculine identity of Jesus over the actions of Christ and reduces God talk to predominantly male images. In Hill's critique of womanist discourse she noted the silence regarding sexuality particularly in womanist rhetoric that alleges to examine the religious experience of African American women that does not include African American lesbians. In Martin's critique of biblical interpretation she identified biblical translations in the English language that use terminology for Scriptural references of humanity that exclude women. The ethical implication of linguistic violence in any form is that it

⁸⁴ Ibid.

destroys the self-image of women and undermines the liberation praxis of the Black church. For this reason, Cannon professes that a womanist homiletic necessitates a womanist hermeneutic. A womanist hermeneutic is a method of assessment of the theo-ethical content of Black preaching. Such an assessment critiques the interpretation of Scripture in Black preaching and how sermonic interpretation within the Black church is applied to its community's culture, traditions, perceptions, values, behaviors, and relationships. Because the preaching event is so influential (particularly when examining its impact within the Black community), Cannon encourages womanist homileticians to reject linguistic violence in theological language and to critique sacred rhetoric that marginalizes or oppresses any part of humanity.

It is crucial that a womanist homiletic attend carefully to the intersection between rhetoric as it relates to gender identity and human sexuality and the faith praxis of the Black church. In a womanist homiletic, rhetorical criticism is an investigative and constructive paradigm for equipping the preacher and the audience to critically engage the rhetoric of sermons and formulate an emancipatory response. In a womanist homiletic, the preaching event includes a dialogue about the rhetoric of the sermon where not only is linguistic violence exposed, but from this dialogue the theo-ethical praxis and language of the faith community is shaped. In a womanist homiletic attention to rhetoric is an emancipatory praxis that creates a milieu for dynamic collaborative faith formation and liberation praxis.

CHAPTER II

PATHOS, ETHOS, AND EMBODIMENT

Effective preaching is more than the well-chosen words of the preacher. “Good speakers shape how listeners view them as speakers (*ethos*), and involve listeners emotionally (*pathos*), in the preaching event.”⁸⁵ In moving toward a womanist homiletic, it is helpful to revisit Walker’s definition of womanist to move beyond logos and examine pathos and ethos and their implications for a womanist homiletic.

The Rhetorical Stance of Pathos

Pathos is an appeal to the emotions of the audience. Pathos in rhetoric refers to understanding how to create a particular mood or feeling in order to solicit a specific response. Developing pathos in a sermon requires creating presence.⁸⁶ Hogan and Reid cite what homiletic scholar David Buttrick describes as the three intentions of Christian rhetoric, which form “the task of creating presence.”⁸⁷ For Buttrick, the three intentions of Christian rhetoric are a bringing out, associating, and disassociating:

Christian preaching involves a “*bringing out*” or a “*bringing into view*” of convictional understandings—understandings of God, of God’s mysterious purposes, and of unseen wonders of grace in human lives. . . . Christian rhetoric also *associates*. In preaching, we put together Christian understandings with images of lived experience. . . . Christian preaching will also *disassociate*. We are

⁸⁵ Hogan and Reid, *Connecting*, 95.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

being-saved-in the-world and, . . . Thus, again and again, preaching will distinguish Christian understandings from our common social attitudes—the “isms,” “ologies,” popular slogans, and tacit assumptions which may be fashionable.⁸⁸

In each component of Buttrick’s Christian rhetoric, he identifies the specific rhetorical means to achieve the desired intention:

“*Bringing out and into view*” will be accomplished by . . . analogy, metaphor, explanation, analysis, and creedal explorations. . . . The rhetoric of association is a language of imagery, illustration, example, testimony, and the like. . . . Disassociation employs familiar rhetorical systems, such as dialectic, antithesis, opposition, and, at times, perhaps even a charitable giggling.⁸⁹

In Walker’s definition of womanist, each of the three intentions of Christian rhetoric as described by Buttrick is evident; although, they are not expressed in a Christian framework. The rhetorical devices are nevertheless employed, and, as such, Walker creates pathos by creating presence in her definition of womanist:

From *womanish*. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another Black folk expression: “you trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.⁹⁰

Walker’s reference to a cultural etymology of Black folk expression serves to evoke the imagination of the reader and begins to *bring into view* a scenario of a Black mother and female child in conversation. The rhetoric of *association* is the language of imagery as depicted in the dialogue between the mother and the child who wants to “know grown folk’s business.” Through the use of dialogue, Walker helps the reader to identify with the mother and child as one imagines a situation in which a child is “acting grown up” or

⁸⁸ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 41-42.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983), xi.

“being grown up,” and an adult responds to the child’s behavior by saying “you trying to be grown.” This dialogue continues in part two of Walker’s definition; it reads:

“Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” . . . “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”⁹¹

In her definition, Walker uses the rhetorical language of analogy and metaphor to create presence with the rhetorical device of *bringing into view*. For example, she applies analogy and metaphor in likening African Americans to flowers in a garden regarding the diversity of their skin color and the testimony of the child’s intention to take a ‘bunch’ of slaves to Canada, representing their freedom from slavery. Walker also creates presence by *disassociating* the definition of womanist through the rhetorical device of antithesis, opposition, and humor. For example, a womanist is the opposite of “girlish.” A womanist is the opposite of being “frivolous or irresponsible.” A womanist is the opposite of “not serious.” In part four of Walker’s definition, she uses the rhetorical device of examples, which function to create presence through *association*. Walker writes that a womanist “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*”⁹² Through her definition of womanist, Walker creates pathos by bringing into view, disassociation, and association. These rhetorical devices function similarly in preaching to create pathos.

Another method of creating pathos in preaching is through performance. The preacher evokes an emotional response in the audience through a creative use of gestures, dance and movement to act out or embody the sermon. The preacher may on occasion

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., xii.

invite the audience to join in the sermonic performance by giving them instructions to carry out various actions. An example of sermonic pathos through performance is in Toni Morrison's image of a preacher in the novel *Beloved*. The character named Baby Suggs, holy who Morrison describes as an "unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it" gathers former slaves in the "Clearing-a wide-open place cut deep in the woods" and performs her sermon with audience participation.⁹³ Morrison depicts Baby Suggs holy directing the audience to gather and embody in movement and performance the sermonic theme. Morrison writes:

"Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees towards her. "Let your mothers hear you laugh," she told them. And the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then "Let the grown men come," she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. "Let your wives and your children see you dance," she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet. Finally she called the women to her. "Cry," she told them. "For the living and the dead. Just cry." And without covering their eyes the women let loose.⁹⁴

As the sermon continues Baby Suggs holy, instructs the audience to perform additional movements that embody the sermon theme. Morrison continues:

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face' cause they don't love that either.

Effective pathos in preaching has an emotional impact on the listeners, so they cannot resist connecting with the sermonic event. The addition of movement in a verbal construct that appeals to the emotions heightens the audience's engagement with the sermon. Pathos is not emotionalism for the sake of emoting. In a womanist homiletic

⁹³ Toni Morrison *Beloved*, (New York, Vintage International, 2004), 103.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

creating pathos through verbal and embodied performance is part of a rhetorical balance that ultimately leads to an emancipatory response to the Word proclaimed.

The Rhetorical Stance of Ethos

Ethos refers to the persona a preacher creates both within the sermon and external to the sermon. Ethos is accomplished through a preacher's sermon context as well as his or her credentials, character, reputation, gestures, tone, and movement—including everything from running the isles to walking the pews. Hogan and Reid observe that ethos is heightened for preachers more so than other professions because preachers are viewed as spiritual guides who help their followers connect with God. Integrity and moral character are expected and required of anyone fulfilling a pastoral position. If church members have misgivings about their preacher's private actions, then it becomes difficult to trust what their preacher says, as well as his or her leadership.⁹⁵ Even before the preacher delivers the sermon, his or her worth as a spiritual leader is gauged by the congregation or community according to things that contribute to the external ethos of the sermon, such as how well the preacher models virtuous behavior, nurtures a life of reflection, prepares for an appearance, and introduces guests or topics for discussion.⁹⁶ Worship service itself is an illustration of ethos external to the sermon.

Thomas G. Long, a scholar of preaching, in *The Senses of Preaching*, discusses how our behavior in worship is an indicator of our awareness of the occasion. As participants, we embody “in voice, in posture, and in gesture, one's sense of the true

⁹⁵ Hogan and Reid, *Connecting*, 49.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

nature of the occasion. . . . Our manner gives away our awareness of occasion and place.”⁹⁷ As such, we share a consciousness of the event’s authority wherein the gathered community expresses an understanding that we are in the presence of God and that we anticipate hearing a Word from God through the preacher. In this context of worship, the robed preacher merely standing in the pulpit is the beneficiary of the ethos of the occasion. Along with this external sense of ethos in the preaching event, ethos is also established within the sermon.

Establishing ethos within the sermon requires the preacher to focus on rhetorical elements, such as the structure of an argument and its tone, as well as the preacher’s spiritual embodiment through body language, facial expressions, and gestures.⁹⁸ The preacher creates an impression on the audience that disposes them to listening and agreeing with the message or sermon content.⁹⁹ Listeners can be drawn by their feelings into a performance and into community, all of which influence their assessment of the speaker. In this vein, ethos and pathos overlap. For instance, a preacher’s voice can evoke emotions that contribute to believability. “And though it is over-simple to dub sound as the special vehicle of the emotion, there is no doubt of the affective impact of a skillful musician’s or orator’s acoustic artistry; Jesse Jackson’s political oratory drew its hearers into a kind of total engagement and emotional identification where they “felt” he must be “telling the truth.””¹⁰⁰ The pathos in Jackson’s oratory, during his 1984 run for the Democratic Nomination for President, contributed to the ethos in such a way that the audience was favorably disposed to believing him.

⁹⁷ Thomas G. Long, *The Senses of Preaching* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1988), 88-89.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁹⁹ Hogan and Reid, *Connecting*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ Ruth Finnegan, *Communicating: The Multiple Modes of Human Interconnection* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 90.

Ethos in Walker's definition of womanist is evident at two levels. The first is in her actual definition of womanist, and the second is the person, Alice Walker. These two levels of ethos are interconnected and inseparable. The persona of a womanist in Walker's definition is a "black feminist or feminist of color" who has moral integrity and is "committed to the survival and wholeness of people, male and female." It is notable that we receive this description from a credentialed Pulitzer Prize winning author. So if we are impressed by the author, Alice Walker, we are more likely to believe and accept that what she has written is true.¹⁰¹ Similarly, in regard to a womanist homiletic, attention to ethos—both external and internal to the sermon—improves the likelihood that the audience will believe what the preacher says.

In the definition of womanist, several characteristics of the persona of a womanist describe movement; for example, a womanist "loves dance."¹⁰² This nonverbal descriptive is a form of embodiment and it also contributes to ethos. Through Black preaching, ethos is frequently communicated through movement, or kinesthesia, and is linked to identity formation. In an examination of the preaching of African-American women, kinesthesia or embodiment is a focal point that merits extended examination because there are theological implications related to the exploitation of her body.

Embodiment and Communication as Performed Identity

In her work, *Communicating: The Multiple Modes of Human Interconnection*, Ruth Finnegan, a scholar of anthropology and communication, explores the diverse

¹⁰¹ Walker, *In Search of*, xi-xii.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

modes of communication and the multisensory resources that human beings use to communicate. Finnegan invites us to consider the five senses and “bodily faculties like balance, pain, hunger, [and] weight,”¹⁰³ because they extend our analysis of communication beyond the audio-visual, helping us to avoid over-emphasizing cognition and language.¹⁰⁴ “Words do not just have meaning—they are breath and vibrations of air, constituted and shaped by the body and motives of the speaker, physically contacting and influencing the addressee.”¹⁰⁵ Kinesthesia, “perception through movement”¹⁰⁶ refers to the bodily component in our communication.¹⁰⁷ All people orient their body with kinesthesia, but it is often not discussed because kinesthetic knowledge usually occurs at an unconscious level.¹⁰⁸ Kinesthesia is involved in a society’s epistemology and development of its cultural identity.¹⁰⁹ To understand the performed identity of African-American female preachers, it is helpful to consider Theophus H. Smith’s, a scholar of religion and culture, analysis of the oratory style and sermonic content of Sojourner Truth. Before reviewing Smith’s analysis of Truth’s sermonic content and style, a little background information about her is helpful.

Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797-1883) was born a slave in Ulster County, New York, on a Dutch plantation. Her birth name was Isabella. She was sold away from her parents at a young age. In New York State, the law required emancipation of a slave after thirty years of servitude as a slave. The year of Truth’s emancipation, her owner refused to let her go and insisted she remain for an additional year. She refused and ran away. In 1843,

¹⁰³ Finnegan, *Communicating*, 35.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing an African Community* (Berkeley, and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2002), 70.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰⁷ Finnegan, *Communicating*, 35.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Geurts, *Culture and the Senses*, 3.

she accepted her call to preach and asked God for a new name befitting her new vocation.

Truth explains:

And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up and down the land, showing the people their sins, and being a sign unto them. Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, because everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people.¹¹⁰

She was unable to read or write and she spoke extemporaneously. Her words were recorded by friends and stenographic reporters. Truth was a tall woman with a powerful voice and flair for the dramatic. She had a significant reputation as a gifted orator. Her visit with President Lincoln in 1864 illustrates her mental agility and boldness.

Recounting her visit in a letter dictated to a friend, Truth writes:

I told him I had never heard of him before he was talked of for president. He smilingly replied, "I had heard of you many times before that." He then showed me the Bible presented to him by the colored people of Baltimore, of which you have no doubt seen a description. After I had looked it over, I said to him, "This is beautiful indeed; the colored people have given this to the head of the government, and that government once sanctioned laws that would not permit its people to learn enough to enable them to read this book"¹¹¹

In an analysis of Truth's oratory style, Smith observed that Truth was a shaman and a conjurer; both of which make use of the body and audiovocal artistry to resolve conflict and communicate healing, identity, and value. The conjurer is part of the "magical folk tradition of Black North Americans. . . . It is a magical means of transforming reality . . . the magic is ritual speech and action intended to perform what it expresses."¹¹² The shaman represents "human dilemmas in bodily gesture."¹¹³ As in the

¹¹⁰ Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 164.

¹¹¹ Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 237.

¹¹² Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 4.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 161.

case of a preacher, they have the “ability to dramatically embody the emotional problems and social tensions besetting their patrons.”¹¹⁴

In Truth’s oratory, she embodied the oppression of her social location and through acts and language of resistance transformed the reality of race, class, and gender oppression. The following impromptu speech is illustrative of Truth’s shamanistic and conjuring rhetoric. In 1851, Truth attended a Woman’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. Truth was not scheduled to speak but requested to address the audience. Her request was granted. She spoke about the oppression she had experienced as a poor Black woman. She confronted the predominantly white audience’s resistance to her equality with white women and “insisted on her identity as both black and female.”¹¹⁵ The following is an excerpt of her message.

(1)That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman?
(2)Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman?
(3)I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?¹¹⁶

Smith’s rhetorical analysis of Truth’s speech reveals why he labels her a shaman and a conjurer. He explains:

This feat of discourse has been preserved, and is still celebrated among feminists because it powerfully addressed the interrelated issues of ethnicity, gender, and class for nineteenth century women activists. As a tour de force of signifying speech it marks a moment of solidarity for black, white, and poor women in the face of social forces that continue to divide them . . . this fragile moment was achieved by signifying, through images of her marginalized womanhood,

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 168.

¹¹⁶ Lowenberg and Bogin, *Black Women*, 235-236.

Sojourner's equality as a woman among white women. The very images that worked certain negative cognitive perceptions, because of which her peers discounted her womanhood, were employed in a rhetorical framework that reinstated or re-cognized her womanhood. This was a homeopathic performance therefore, because it mimicked the "diseased situation" of racist cognitive perceptions, precisely in order to counter those perceptions and to cure that disease. The following is a simple schema suggesting how this rhetorical performance achieved its effect.

- (1) image-----nobody helps me into carriages, over ditches, in best places
 perception-----this is not a 'woman of quality'
 re-cognition-----"And ain't I a woman?"

- (2) image-----I have worked like a man, ploughing, planting, harvesting,
 hearty eating
 perception-----this is not a 'woman of property'
 re-cognition-----"And ain't I a woman?"

- (3) image-----I have lived a slave's life with lashings, imposed slave (child)
 breeding, forced unions and separations
 perception-----this is not a free/white/virtuous woman
 re-cognition-----"And ain't I a woman?"¹¹⁷

Truth's words performed and reinforced her identity as a woman of equal worth to a white woman and homeopathically challenged the resistance of white men and women to embrace her as equal. "Deciphering and interpreting the personal, social, and historical signs of existence was a key concept in Sojourner's self-understanding of her shamanic ability."¹¹⁸In her oratory Truth offers herself as God's agent to speak a transformative truth to people. She interprets the oppression of the community and juxtaposes it with her understanding of the will of God for humanity. As the person authorized by God to speak, her speech has the power to transform circumstances, and she calls for a different reality—one consistent with her understanding of Divine order.

Another illustration of Truth's understanding and use of her identity occurred in the late 1850s when she was conducting an antislavery tour through Indiana. During one

¹¹⁷ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 168-169.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

of her speeches, a proslavery white male doctor in the audience accused her of being a man. He noted her voice as that of a man and demanded that she prove that she was a woman by exposing her breast to the women present.¹¹⁹ His intent seemed to be to discredit and humiliate her. Consequently, Truth performs and exudes her identity by baring her breast to the entire audience. Smith's rhetorical analysis and deciphering of her shamanic and conjurer role is insightful. He writes:

Sojourner proceeded, homeopathically, to submit to humiliation precisely in order to countermand humiliation. She did not however turn aside to the other women. She refused to draw them into the doctor's net of her humiliation by forcing them to become accomplices of another woman's public exposure. . . . Instead, she took the shame solely to herself and countered it by a manifestly free act. Acceding to the man's demand but contrary to his directive, she insisted on baring her breast to the entire audience. Thereby Sojourner used her own ostensible humiliation to humiliate even more substantially her antagonist. . . . [she spoke to the doctor] "It is not my shame but yours that I do this."¹²⁰

Ostensibly, through her rhetorical command and performance, Truth was a conjurer and shaman. She embodied spoken word, performed identity, and homeopathically transformed reality. The far-reaching and sustaining impact of Truth's conjurer and shamanic rhetoric is evidence of the power of embodiment and performed identity in oratory. The implication of shamanistic and conjuring rhetoric for a womanist homiletic is the conscious use of the body and audiovocal artistry to resolve conflict and communicate healing, identity, and values in preaching. An auditory, visual, and embodied performance in preaching also enhances community formation.

In her observation of the West African practice of communicating through drums, Finnegan notes that 'drum languages' "exploit the capacity of the human ear to hear fluctuations of pitch and/or rhythm. . . . In West and Central Africa drums sound out

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 169-170.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 170.

patterns of contrasting pitches which are heard as speech tones; . . .”¹²¹ A sonic or auditory, visual, and embodied performance can unite people as a community through a common experience of a sonic-somatic enactment.¹²² “Communicating human beings have long exploited and created the myriad forms of . . . sonic action and experience, and sound continues to provide a rich complex of resources through which (for good or ill) people interact, sound out their experiences, join together and in profound ways reach out to one another as individuals and groups.”¹²³ Command of the role of sound in human communication and community formation is a helpful rhetorical tool for preaching. It can enhance the preacher’s ability to gather people into a shared communion.¹²⁴ A shared sonic experience is created through a vocalized and embodied interaction. This is a sonic resource through which participants (because the audience is not merely listening) are drawn into community and interact with one another.¹²⁵

A sonic-somatic enactment through a womanist homiletic would be helpful in gathering participants to engage in rhetorical criticism as part of the preaching event. Dialogue within the audience would be enhanced if there was a sense of a critically womanist community. By creating a shared sonic-somatic enactment during the sermon (such as a repeated slogan, or chant in call and response), the preacher has a sonic vehicle to use again after preaching the sermon to quickly recreate a sense of community. As a result, the preacher has the ability to motivate or persuade the audience to remain together and engage in a common act, namely rhetorical criticism of the sermon and determination of emancipatory praxis. Bodily multisensory communication such as

¹²¹ Finnegan, *Communicating*, 35.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 73-74.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

kinesthesia, shamanism, and conjuring all require that one use one's body to gain some benefit. On the contrary, the act of exploiting the body—even if voluntarily—has particular implications for African-American women due to a historical experience of forced sexual exploitation and surrogacy of their bodies.

Implications of Sexual Exploitation and Forced Surrogacy for Embodiment in Womanist Homiletics

African-American women have a historical experience of surrogacy associated with the exploitation of their bodies. According to Delores S. Williams, a womanist theologian, in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, African-American women have a history of being forced to function in roles that ordinarily would have been filled by someone else. For instance, “Black female slaves were forced to substitute for the slave-owner’s wife in nurturing roles involving white children. Black women were forced to take the place of men in work roles that, according to the larger society’s understanding of male and female roles, belonged to men.”¹²⁶ In these and other experiences of surrogacy, African-American women’s bodies were terrorized and exploited. Williams notes, “Slavery in the United States demanded that slave women surrender their bodies to their owners against their wills. Thus African-American slave women . . . were bound to a system that had no respect for their bodies, their dignities or their motherhood.”¹²⁷ The demoralization of African-American women by exploiting their bodies was an established custom and an accepted part of the structure of slave society. During slavery, African-American women, like men, were subjected to physical, mental, and sexual abuse. It was not unusual for a female slave to be stripped of her clothing and raped in the presence of other slaves. She was forced to endure the physical

¹²⁶ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 61-71.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71

toll of heavy labors, poor diet, and received no medical care, not even during pregnancy.¹²⁸

“White male slaveowners wanted enslaved black women to passively accept sexual exploitation as the right and privilege of those in power. . . . The black female slave who . . . resisted sexual exploitation directly challenged the system; their refusal to submit passively to rape was a denouncement of the slaveowner’s right to their persons. They were brutally punished.”¹²⁹ Black feminist and activist Angela Davis argues that in confronting the Black woman who resisted sexual exploitation, the white slaveowner subjected “her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctly suited for the female: rape.”¹³⁰ Davis contends that the rape of Black female slaves was an institutionalized method of terrorism, which had as its objective the dehumanization of Black women.¹³¹ The systemic forced surrogacy and sexual exploitation of African-American women “raises serious questions about the way many Christians, including Black women, have been taught to image redemption.”¹³²

Williams maintains that most mainline Protestant churches teach that we have been redeemed by Jesus’ death on the cross where Jesus took sin upon himself in the place of humankind.¹³³ Jesus becomes the ultimate sacred surrogate. Williams suggests that an image of a surrogate-God as salvific supports and reinforces the forced surrogacy that African-American women have experienced.¹³⁴ Further, the defilement of Jesus’ body on the cross and the sexual humiliation and exploitation in exposing his private

¹²⁸ Bell Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1981), 27.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 161.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

parts refocuses a similar critique of the African-American woman's historical experience of sexual exploitation and defilement of her body. Can the image of the defilement of a human body be salvific for African-American women, or does it reinforce the exploitation of African-American women's bodies? Does embodiment in Black preaching and the persona of shaman and conjurer of African-American female preachers function as a type of surrogacy for the community? Is the embodiment of performed identity and homeopathic transformation of a social disease by the shaman and the conjurer reinforcing the exploitation of African-American women's bodies?

Williams is clear that the African-American woman's historical experience of acts of sexual terrorism and forced surrogacy against her body renders traditional theology of atonement unacceptable. For Williams, Jesus does not conquer sin on the cross but rather in the wilderness; she therefore proposes:

Jesus, then, does not conquer sin through death on the cross. Rather, Jesus conquers the sin of temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) by resistance—by resisting the temptation to value the material over the spiritual (“Man shall not live by bread alone”); by resisting death (not attempting suicide that tests God: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down”); by resisting the greedy urge of monopolistic ownership (“He showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, all these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me”). Jesus therefore conquered sin in life, not in death. In the wilderness he refused to allow evil forces to defile the balanced relation between the material and the spiritual, between life and death, between power and the exertion of it.¹³⁵

In the wilderness, Jesus' rhetoric of resistance conquers sin. Arguably, a womanist homiletic, which conveys a theology of atonement and salvation—wherein God does not condone the defilement or utilitarian exploitation of human bodies as redemptive—is preferential. Williams contends that Jesus' ministerial vision alone is the means of redemption:

¹³⁵ Ibid., 166.

The resurrection of Jesus and the kingdom of God theme in Jesus' ministerial vision provide Black women with the knowledge that God has, through Jesus, shown humankind how to live peacefully, productively and abundantly in relationship. Jesus showed humankind a vision of righting relations between body, mind and spirit *through an ethical ministry of words* (such as the beatitudes, the parables, the moral directions and reprimands); *through a healing ministry of touch and being touched* (for example healing the leper through touch; being touched by the woman with the issue of blood); *through a militant ministry of expelling evil forces* (such as exorcising the demoniacs, whipping the moneychangers out of the temple); *through a ministry grounded in the power of faith* (in the work of healing); *through a ministry of prayer* (he often withdrew from the crowd to pray); *through a ministry of compassion and love*.¹³⁶

In Jesus' rhetoric of resistance and ministerial vision, he illustrated life with God. It is a life of struggle against evil that does not condone suffering and exploitation. Life with God is not the posture of a victim but rather a victor who engages in liberation praxis with Divine authority.

To consider further the implications for a womanist homiletic, particularly in regard to thwarting oppression and abuse, it is helpful to revisit Walker's definition of womanist. In part three of her definition, she describes a womanist as one who "loves struggle."¹³⁷ Walker's description refers to one's embracing the struggle and hope in resisting oppression. She does not suggest that a womanist loves suffering. Rather, to love struggle is to emphasize the love of combating sin as in Jesus' rhetoric of resistance and ministerial vision. One's love of struggle is a commitment to liberation praxis. Oppression will not be allowed to advance unabated if we are collectively committed to retaliate with the intent to annihilate all injustice through unrelenting revolutionary struggle. A revelation of God occurs in the struggle. Similarly, the homeopathic and affective nature of embodiment in preaching, such as shaman or conjurer, entails struggle that is not an offering of the body in a utilitarian manner or as a substitute for the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 167.

¹³⁷ Walker, *In Search of*, xii.

community. Embodiment in preaching is a demonstration of God as a transformative presence. In womanist preaching embodiment *is* revelation. It is the manifestation of God's presence with the oppressed in the wilderness engaged in redemptive struggle and rhetoric of resistance. A womanist homiletic resists sermonizing that glorifies suffering. A womanist loves struggle, not surrogacy, not suffering.

Conclusion

This chapter moves further along toward a womanist homiletic by adding to Cannon's logocentric womanist critique of Black preaching through a return to Walker's definition of womanist. When considered conjointly, Walker's womanist definition and Cannon's womanist critique encourage a stronger assessment of pathos and ethos to examine womanist implications for preaching. In summary, a womanist homiletic considers the following in sermonizing:

- Listeners equipped with a systematic process to critically engage the rhetoric of the sermon to shape sacred rhetoric and emancipatory praxis in response to the Word of God proclaimed;
- The use of non-gendered or gender-inclusive language in our God talk;
- A non-gendered language for traditional Trinitarian language;
- An emphasis on the humanity of Christ while not focusing on the gender of Jesus;
- Effective Christian rhetoric that creates pathos and ethos;
- The effective use of multisensory and kinesthetic communication;

- The Divine presence manifested in shamanism;
- Conjuring that is performed identity, conflict resolution, and homeopathic;
and
- An atonement theology that takes seriously an African-American historical experience of sexual exploitation and forced surrogacy, thereby affirming the ministerial vision of Jesus' life as redemptive and not his surrogacy in crucifixion.

These themes, along with Cannon's critique of Black preaching, form the criteria by which we can understand the sacred rhetoric of an African-American womanist preacher.

CHAPTER III

AN EXAMINATION OF A WOMANIST PREACHER'S SERMONIZING

The Reverend Prathia Laura Ann Hall identified herself as a womanist preacher, and she intentionally applied a womanist methodology in her sermonizing. In the process of naming and defining womanist preaching through the examination of sermons, it is important that the preacher have some understanding of womanist thought. Clearly, one “is not free to name others as womanist if this is not a term they claim for themselves.”¹³⁸ Therefore, Rev. Prathia Hall’s exegesis of sacred rhetoric and her womanist homiletic style provide an excellent subject for critical analysis in discovering the definitive, and speculative, impact of Black female preachers according to the development and application of Black theology.

Reverend Prathia Hall

Rev. Dr. Hall was an accomplished leader in the Black church and a nationally acclaimed preacher. She was a visible leader in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and served as a coordinator for the freedom rides and the southwest Georgia and Selma, Alabama, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Hall was watchful and actively involved in the causes and movements for social justice and described her origins in “freedom faith” as follows:

¹³⁸ Emilie M. Townes, “Ethics As an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, Christie Cozad Neuger ed., (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 144.

Well it sounds presumptuous to say you were born with a mission, but I have always had a deep passion for justice. I was raised by my parents in what I believe to be the central dynamic in the African-American religious tradition. That is an integration of the religious and the political. It is a belief that God intends us to be free, and [he] assists us and empowers us in the struggle for freedom. So the stories of our history helped me to understand that we were called to be activists in this struggle for justice.¹³⁹

Hall took a nonviolent, yet defiant, position. During a time when racist, sexist, religious, and political agendas tore at the fabric of American unity, people voiced their opinions and exercised their consciences through various protests. In the swell of this polarizing momentum, violence frequently erupted as a precursor to change.

For example, setting fire to Black churches was a common terrorist tactic during the Civil Rights Movement. In 1962, Hall led the community in prayer at a commemoration service held at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Terrell County, Georgia (one of the fire-bombed churches). Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his aide, Rev. James Bevel, attended the service. In the face of violence, Hall prayed. She chose words to capture the essence of the nonviolent movement, speaking to the hope of the gathered freedom fighters. With power and inspiration she repeated the phrase “I have a dream.” “King remembered Hall’s phrase and the powerful response it evoked in him and the congregation that night. He immediately absorbed its gleaming and moral hope into his oratorical repertoire. He transformed it into the most memorable line uttered by the most renowned Black leader of the twentieth century in his most famous speech [“I Have a Dream”].”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ *Prathia Hall: Witness to Faith in Episode 4: Freedom Faith*, is part of the *This Far by Faith: African American Spiritual Journeys* series and is a co-production of Blackside Inc. (Eyes on the Prize, America’s War on Poverty, and Malcolm X: Make it Plain) and The Faith Project, Inc. in association with the Independent Television Service. It is presented on PBS by WGBH and ITVS (2003). Videocassette and DVD of *Episode 4: Freedom Faith* was produced, written, and directed by Alice Markowitz.

¹⁴⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, “Freedom Was Foremost for Philly Activist,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 20 August 2002, Obituary.

In 1977, Hall was ordained to the Christian ministry and was called to pastor the Mt. Sharon Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1982, Hall was the first woman to become a member of the Baptist Ministers Conference of Philadelphia and Vicinity. She had a long and distinguished tenure as a renowned religious leader and church organizer both nationally and abroad. She was Chair of the Program Committee of the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) and a member of the PNBC delegation to the World Council of Churches Seventh Assembly in Canberra, Australia. Hall also was a preacher for American Baptist Churches (ABC), USA, Biennial in Portland, Oregon, in June 1985; and a Steering Committee member of the American Baptist Conference on the Partnership of Women and Men in the Community of Faith. Additionally, she served on the Advisory Council of the Women in Ministry Project of the ABC, USA, and was Co-Chairperson of the Association of Black Seminaries-Princeton Chapter. Hall was as a member of the Roosevelt, New York, Board of Education for six years, where she served as President from 1973 to 1976. In 1977, *Ebony Magazine* named Hall as one of the greatest Black women preachers in America.¹⁴¹ Her powerful preaching has been recognized with diverse honors, including being selected to occupy the Charles A. Tinley Chair on Preaching in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the historic Tinley Temple United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She received the Jagow Preaching Award from Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, and was inducted into Morehouse College's Martin Luther King Jr. College of Preachers and Scholars in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition, Hall also won numerous Elks and Prince Hall Masons Oratorical Contest

¹⁴¹ Joy Bennett Kinnon, "Fifteen Greatest Black Women Preachers," *Ebony Magazine*, November 1997, 102.

Scholarship Awards.

Hall holds many degrees, including a Bachelor of Science degree from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where her major area of study was pre-law with a concentration in political science and a minor in religion. She also attained a Master of Theology degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, during which time she authored her master's thesis: "African-American Hermeneutic in Conversation with the Philosophical Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer." Subsequently, Hall attained a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary after writing her master's thesis entitled, "African-American Faith and Struggle: Historical Dimensions and Current Problems." By continuing her studies at the Princeton Theological Seminary, Hall got her Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Religion and Society Program, where she concentrated on Christian Social Ethics and the African-American Church, and graduated Magna Cum Laude. Her dissertation topic was "Religious and Social Consciousness of African-American Baptist Women, 1916-1961." Later, Hall served as the Dean of African-American Ministries and a lecturer in Christian Ethics at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. At the time of her death in August 2002, she served as pastor of the Mt. Sharon Baptist Church and held the prestigious Martin Luther King Jr. Chair in Social Ethics at Boston University's School of Theology, where she taught courses in Womanist Theology, Ethics, and Church History.

Hall's preaching can best be appreciated using a womanist homiletic paradigm. For Hall, womanist preaching is a matter of justice. Hall states, "My womanist consciousness is so much a part of me that I bring it to the text. God has put this burden

on me of justice-justice as an inclusive metaphor for preaching.”¹⁴² Until now, we have not had adequate language to talk about womanist preaching. Cannon’s categories of a womanist critique of Black preaching, combined with additional homiletic points derived from Walker’s definition of womanist, define a womanist homiletic that is helpful for our understanding of what someone like Hall is doing in her sermonizing. This womanist homiletic is a paradigm for both critique and construction of womanist preaching. Before presenting a womanist analysis of Hall’s sermons, we should consider the following general overview of Hall’s preaching.

Hall understands the preacher as one called and equipped by God. The Divine call on most preachers’ life is so intense that they are not merely pursued, but are possessed by God. Like many preachers, Hall initially ran from her calling but eventually acquiesced to God’s claim on her life:

I feel that preaching is a claim of God by which we are possessed. We talk about and use the language of ‘my call’, but it is not our call. God has chosen us. This is a vocation by which I was not even pursued but I was possessed. What I finally realized about my own call was that, all that time I thought I was running from God, God was holding me while I ran. I was running no where but into the hand of God. God was using all my experiences to prepare me for ministry. I feel that it is this claim of God by which we are possessed. I have known since my childhood that my life was not my own to pick and choose what I wanted to do. God had a claim on my life.¹⁴³

In Hall’s description of her call to preach, there are aspects of her identity as preacher that contribute to her ethos. For example, the idea that God has a purpose for ones life that entails a surrender of self for the sake of the community’s transformation is consistent with that of a conjurer and shaman. In addition, Hall’s authority as a preacher is in her Divine call which is a significant component of ethos in the Black preaching

¹⁴² Interview with Dr. Prathia Hall by Donna Allen, audio cassette recording in Princeton, New Jersey, 18 November 1997.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

tradition. Hall believed God called her to preach the “Good News” to the world from a young age. When she considered being silent or working for justice in some other venue, she was not at peace.

For Hall, the Good News she must preach is a radical message of justice and hope. She understands the Gospel to be both personal and social, and she contends that anything less is unacceptable:

God leads us, and all our gifts and energy and skills that we develop to declare the Good News of God in people and in the social world. For me, both of those are critical. If it is only the personal, it is not the Gospel. If it is only the social, it is not the Gospel. But it must be an integrated personal and social order where God is at work for justice and righteousness and salvation. The Good News is Christ. The Good News is Christ—that which stands in stark contrast [and] graphic opposition to bad conditions in human lives and in the social order. The Good News is possibilities where there have been dead ends. The Good News is life where there is death. The Good News is the Word of life which opposes death.

For Hall, in order to perform and proclaim this Good News in a sermon, the preacher is dependent upon God. Hall’s understanding of the role of God in the preaching event, particularly in the delivery of the sermon, is resonant in the pathos of her preaching. For example, Hall suggests that the emotion and enthusiasm with which she delivers the sermon is a reflection of the presence of God within her.

When homiletic preparation is completed—which Hall says is “sometimes just taking dictation from God”¹⁴⁴—the preacher needs the presence of God to preach the sermon. For Hall, delivering a sermon is an act of faith and obedience to the movement of God. She explains that her aim is to surrender the preaching event to God and simply be completely obedient:

A sermon is never a finished product. It is always what I have in the moment. When we have done our best exegetical work, our best homiletic work, we bring it to the pulpit as an offering to Christ before the people. But it doesn’t preach

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

until the preacher comes, and that preacher is the Holy Spirit. I will often say in my devotion in the pulpit, “God if you don’t give it wings, it won’t fly.” There is a vulnerability in that, a surrendering the task. We’ve done the best we can do, but now we, ourselves, are not in charge. There is a distinct difference when the preacher is in charge in the pulpit and when the preacher is vulnerable and at the disposal of God in the pulpit. My aim is to be at God’s disposal.¹⁴⁵

Hall’s Sermonic Paradigm

Hall’s sermonizing has characteristics of traditional Black preaching. She begins slowly, deliberately enunciating each word and punctuating each sentence with gestures. The slow beginning and steady increase in the pace and energy of her homily as she approaches her conclusion is climatic. Similar to much of Black preaching in general, the overall structure of the womanist preacher’s sermon, which includes persuasion and emotion, builds to a point where her conclusion invites the congregation to participate in an explosively cathartic celebration of her central theme. In addition to this sermonic crescendo, Hall uses call and response, repetition, alliteration, and African-American colloquialisms throughout the delivery of her religious discourse.

Hall does not, however, use the traditional Black preaching format of narrative style. Her style is most often a dialogue with the text and the audience, emphasizing womanist hermeneutical insights. From a rhetorical perspective, the audience’s point of view is usually as listener-participants of the dialogue Hall is having with the text. When she speaks directly to the audience, it is through insight that she has gleaned from her dialogue with the text. Hall’s sermons express her understanding of the biblical implications regarding society and morality, which she imparts to help guide or direct the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

faith-based life of the listener. This is her call to action or praxis of the ideology of the Scriptures as she has interpreted them.

The primary rhetorical device in Hall's sermonizing is an appeal to logic. Her sermonic format is a demonstrative statement about "what the text says" and how the audience, therefore, rationally concludes with her that they should believe and be persuaded of this truth. In making this argument, she appeals to a mixture of pathos and ethos: a mixture of personal and communal testimony laced with common communal convictions and heavy emotions. Emotions are stirred through Hall's religious exegesis as well as her performance. Hall's preaching style raises her audience's level of anticipation and brings them to an "aha" moment. Primarily, the build is a slow, steady mound of evidence, loosely connecting ideas about her sermonic theme. The audience is drawn into the preaching event by her eloquence and delivery. She connects with her listeners and sustains their interest in the message largely through her personality and humor. Hall says, "I connect with the people through the Bible."¹⁴⁶ Her persona fundamentally and significantly shapes the audience's response.

Hall has a reputation within the Black church as a civil rights leader and a womanist theologian able to address difficult social issues.¹⁴⁷ She believes that a preacher "is one who must be willing to speak truth to power."¹⁴⁸ Her religious persona is that of an authoritative messenger, wherein she understands herself to be sent by God to reveal to the masses what God demands of humanity. The concrete manner in which she articulates the theological implications of the Scriptures also adds to her recognition as an authority. She speaks as an insider. Part of this insider authority extends from her

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

understanding of the role of the preacher. Her theology of the location of the authority of the preacher is illustrated in the prayer she offers before each sermon. She prays as God's spokesperson, in a manner that articulates an understanding of her role as messenger. The following is an excerpt from one of Hall's prayers:

Ever-living God, we are now still in thy holy presence, needing a word from you—a living word. Let there be no word, not a word, save Your Word. And the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.¹⁴⁹

While she speaks convincingly and authoritatively, she also speaks with humility. Her delivery is confident and polished. She maintains good eye contact with the audience. She effectively uses pauses and crescendos as she performs the words she is proclaiming. At times she may speak slightly above a whisper; other times she may shout or whoop. Her theology of preaching is well illustrated in these opening remarks to the audience just before she begins to speak:

It is an [pause] awesome task [pause] this assignment, which God has given to us. Stand between the living and the dead [pause] and declare that word [pause] which has life in it. [pause] You know, I [pause] stopped for a few minutes of reflecting this afternoon. [pause] And you know, Pastor Chaplain, I was overcome with a sense of the awesome privilege [pause] that this is. How is it [pause] that the God who is high and holy would condescend to allow this dust [pause] to bare this word? [whisper] Thanks be to God.¹⁵⁰

As is the case with most seasoned preachers, Hall's sermon structure varies slightly depending on its context and content. Even with her intentional altering of each sermon's overall structure, Hall's religious exhortation has a discernable format and an identifiable style. Her sermons flow logically through three units: two introductions, a body, and a conclusion.

¹⁴⁹ Prathia Hall, "Beyond Eden," a sermon preached at Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, Illinois, 21 May 1989.

¹⁵⁰ Idem, "Building Between Heritage and Hope," a sermon preached at Pleasant Green Baptist Church Nashville, Tennessee, June 1992.

Hall's Preliminary Introduction

Hall's sermonic discourse typically starts with two introductions. One introduction is designed to connect her with the congregation and the event. The second introduces the sermonic theme and Scripture, and also establishes a connection of the sermonic theme to the real-life experiences of the congregation. Hall offers words of appreciation to persons who have invited her to preach. She thanks the congregation and visitors. When preaching in the church where she served as pastor, she mentions some relevant event in the life of the congregation or celebrates being in her home church. She assures the audience that she is appreciative of the opportunity and the occasion to worship with them. During this time, she establishes some personal point of contact and identification with the audience. She calls individuals in the congregation by name or speaks of recent events within the life of the community. She is the guest who has taken time to know something about her audience, speaking from a place of intimacy by demonstrating a level of concern and familiarity with the community.

Hall establishes a connection with her audience, overcoming what Henry Mitchell, a scholar of Black preaching, refers to as social distance.¹⁵¹ Mitchell argues that the effective Black preacher has to be able to establish a close identity connection with the congregation. The relationship between the pulpit and the pew can be negatively impacted if the preacher does not establish a "personal" connection with the people. For instance, if there is a distancing between the preacher, the people, and their experiences, then the dialogue critical to "receiving" the sermon is compromised. According to Mitchell, the Black preacher must be ear deep in the condition of the people, and out of this comes the easy dialogue between the preacher and the people. Their lives are intimately connected; in fact, so closely connected that themes invading the consciousness of one, also invade the consciousness of the other.¹⁵² In her sermons, Hall effectively applies Mitchell's technique to close the gap of social distancing by

¹⁵¹ Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990), 106.

¹⁵² Ibid.

acknowledging individuals and the community in the form of humor, usually directed at self.

In her first introduction, she also establishes an understanding of the position of the preacher as a prophet—a spokesperson for God. She asks God to preach through her and tells the audience that she is expecting and praying for God to speak through her. She asks God to affirm her call and consecration as a prophet to the particular people gathered on this occasion. She interprets the particulars of each preaching event and reinforces the idea that the preaching moment is always hopeful with expectation of Divine presence and human response. The following is an example of one of Hall's preliminary introductions. On this occasion, she was having some difficulties with her voice because she had a cold. Notably, she establishes herself as God's mouthpiece, while simultaneously establishing familiarity with the congregation by naming individuals in the congregation and utilizing humor throughout:

Rev. Robinson was with me all afternoon at the doctor. And it just may be [that] he [the doctor] gave me something that will bring some relief. But we'll all be in bed by the time it works. [Audience response: mild laughter—Hall pauses] But I know a healer. [Audience response: "Amen"—Hall pauses] I also know a voice. And this one is not the one that I like. [Audience response: mild laughter—Hall pauses] But my call is not to have a pretty voice. It's to be a voice. To be God's voice. And whatever God chooses to use, that will give God praise.¹⁵³

While still in the first introduction, she reads the sermonic theme, or title, and the Scripture. She reads the text with non-gendered language when it refers to humankind, regardless of the language in the written version. The audience notes the difference between her language and what is written because often before she begins reading, Hall states that she will read the text with inclusive language.

Hall's Secondary Introduction

In Hall's second introduction, she raises difficult questions about the text, including the author's intent, text usage, and its contextual relevance to contemporary interpretation. She demonstrates a hermeneutic of suspicion (i.e., not fully developing the challenge to the text at this stage, but merely introducing it to the audience). By using African-American experiences as illustrated in hymns, songs, poems, and historic or

¹⁵³ Prathia Hall, "A Church Under Construction," a sermon preached at Trinity UCC, Chicago, Illinois, 18 May 1990.

recent community events, Hall's connection with the audience grows. She reviews the experience or describes the poem, etc., and its value to the congregation. Using a series of questions to direct her reflection, her description is detailed and poignant. Her message appeals to listeners' ears because each word is carefully selected for rhythm and flow. Her sermon content is communal yet personal. The communal nature of her speech is evident in her references to the Black church, Black community, and Black people. She speaks as if there is a collective Black consciousness. This includes a rhetorical refrain that allows for references to "our struggle" and/or "we know what it is to overcome hard times" when she is referring to racism. The audience responds in gestures and words as an indication that they understand what she is referring to without her ever having to offer an extended interpretation.

Hall's biblical interpretation identifies background information on the text including: context, important historical figures, geography, and socio-cultural insights. Hall's womanist interpretation of the Scripture includes asking the following questions: Was the Scripture written in a context of sexism, classism, or racism? What was the author attempting to address in the life of the community? Do the words of Scripture represent God's will or human agency masquerading as God's will? Has the Scripture been used to condone oppression? Hall describes her engagement with the text as an interrogatory conversation:

I take the text very seriously. I dialogue with the text in an interrogatory conversation with the congregation and the text. I walk around in the text. I cannot take a verse out of context. We come to the text with our baggage. We cannot become neutral—we bring our social location, concerns, and presuppositions to the text. We need to knowingly be up front about that. So we interrogate the text. Sometimes the text is absurd. I believe that the Word of God is in the text and is not imprisoned in the paper. It is in the text. And in the process, the prayerful preacher is assisted by the Holy Spirit in dialogue with the

text. And if you question the text long enough, it will begin to interrogate you. Then this is the stuff that preaching is made of.¹⁵⁴

Hall expounds on the interrogation of the text in the body of her sermon. She also expands the conversation and includes the audience in the dialogue.

Hall's Sermonic Body

The bodies of Hall's sermons vary in length, but they typically consist of a discernable pattern of weaving contemporary and historical illustrations with the Scripture. The rhetorical structure of the body of Hall's sermons is to repeatedly ask the audience to take a closer look at the text or the life circumstance she is unfolding with the text. A review of a number of Hall's sermons reveals that when Hall challenges the audience to embrace an idea that addresses sexism (vs. racism), she refers to the text more frequently and uses larger portions of Scripture. This difference may be attributed to Hall's tendency to overtly challenge sexism in the Black church, particularly as it relates to patriarchal interpretation of Scriptures that are used to condone sexist practices. Hall's homiletic practices may also result from the notion that, although racism is a more widely recognized wrong, or sin, sexism is equally wrong. Yet, it is not as often referred to as a sin in Black preaching.

In the bodies of Hall's homilies, she identifies ways in which the sermonic theme is relevant to her audiences' experiences. She uses repetition sparingly, only repeating the sermonic theme once or twice, and she does not use repeating refrains. Throughout her delivery of her sermon's body, she most often introduces content that speaks to a local and global worldview, moving from one to the other to demonstrate a connection. She

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

addresses common lived experiences in broad themes, such as the universality of human suffering and the way in which the Gospel speaks to the world, as well as the local church. Hall's references are not well developed; they are most often examples provided in a brief list as follows:

It is almost cliché for me to say that we are living in terrible times. Trying times. Just the prayer list is a testimony to the terrors in these times. Domestic violence has turned bedrooms into battlegrounds. Children and parents are strangers to each other and intentionally prey on each other. Terrible times. And yet, as Trinity Church knows, it is *kairos*. That moment, this moment [is] pregnant with divinely granted human opportunity—whether we struggle against oppression here, in Nicaragua, or El Salvador, or South Africa, or anywhere in the world.¹⁵⁵

When delivering the body of her sermons, Hall does not use points or a narrative style. The body does not have a plot. Her rhetorical strategy is a series of questions and a “this, therefore that” structure. The content is both pragmatic and intellectual, and it conveys a theme of challenge and hope. It is in the body of Hall's sermons that her womanist hermeneutic is disclosed to the audience, as she addresses issues of race, class, and gender. She appeals to common-sense logic. Her goal is to develop a single idea in each homily. Commenting on her own preaching style, Hall states, “I once heard a great preacher say that if you can just give the people one well-thought thought, you will have done well, better than if you poorly develop three points and a poem. So that's what I try to do—one well-thought thought.”¹⁵⁶

The logical progression connecting Hall's messages is worth examining. She begins with questions about the Scripture and/or how the text is to be, or has been, interpreted in the Black church. This series of questions is followed by a “what if” or “how is” the current audience's circumstances similar to the characters' circumstances in

¹⁵⁵ Idem, “Beyond Eden.”

¹⁵⁶ Hall interview by Allen.

the text. Hall's next questions form a response to what the Gospel requires of the congregation. This is followed by a motivational message for the listeners to live out the Gospel mandate. She sparingly and subtly references her sermonic theme in the body of her sermon, but Hall makes an explicit connection between her message's homiletic theme and conclusion.

Hall's Sermonic Conclusion

Hall's sermonic conclusions are typically a climactic celebration of the central call to action or, in womanist terminology, an emancipatory praxis. They are emotional, poetic, and filled with call and response. Hall's conclusions often include lyrics of hymns delivered in a rhythmic chant, which culminate in a singsong celebration of the central theological theme of Hall's interpretation of the text. Herein, she repeats the sermonic theme and reiterates the key idea expressed in the body of her message. Many of her sermons conclude with an image of life after death, eternal reward, or an image of salvation. The following example is illustrative of Hall's typical conclusion. Again, it is in the first person; it is poetic, repetitive, and includes verses of a familiar hymn. Hall's voice builds in intensity and passion as she performs the following words with rhythm:

But, oh, isn't it wonderful to know that God is not through with you yet? Trinity, I can't speak for you. But as I speak to you, I can't choose for you, but I declare to you that what I want for me, I want for you. I want Jesus to work in me. Work in me Jesus. Work on me Jesus. Work through me Jesus. And, while you work on me, I'll be working on a building. I'm working on a building; it's a sure foundation. I am holding up the bloodstained banner for my Lord. Hey, but one day—not until that day, when I get through working on the building—hey—I am going up to heaven. I am going up to heaven. I say I am going up to heaven. I say I am going. Hallelujah! I am going up to heaven and get my reward. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Hall, "Church Under Construction."

Rich with content and meticulously crafted with introductions, a body, and a conclusion, Hall's hermeneutic sermonizing draws the audience into the preaching event. The audience responds with "amen," "yes," "well," and "say it preacher." Once fully engaged, the audience is "caught up" in the preaching event, experiencing—and not merely listening—to the sermon. Such preachers realize that the performance of the Word is as critical as its content and rhetorical framework. Hall weaves the story of her audience and Scripture together such that the audience's life experiences—the African-American experience—become a narrative of a people with God.

An Analysis of Hall's Sermons Using Katie Cannon's Womanist Query of Black Preaching

Cannon's womanist query of Black preaching revealed derogatory and prejudicial images of women and patriarchal teachings in Black sacred rhetoric. Cannon argues that a womanist hermeneutic is necessary to elucidate and eradicate derogatory rhetoric in Black preaching and patriarchal teachings. One would, therefore, expect that the biblical interpretation and sermonizing of a womanist preacher would yield a Black sacred rhetoric free of derogatory images, yet imbued with the evidence necessary to repudiate patriarchal teachings. Such is the case for Hall's rhetorical sermonizing when interrogated by Cannon's womanist queries. Cannon's questions provide an appropriate and effective paradigm for examining the womanist character of Hall's sermons.

(1) Sexist, Derogatory Images of Women

Hall's sermon language includes male and female images. She does not use

sexist or derogatory language when referring to either gender. Rather, she emphasizes the importance of diversity and equality as an affirmation of the Divine within the human.

Hall's favorite affirming image of women is the Bible band women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵⁸ She states:

Christian women, missionaries with a mission. They had Bible bands. They were on fire for God and they were filled with love for our people . . . and they took their bags with medicine, and soap, and detergent, and other necessities, and their Bibles and their hymn books, and they went door to door. And they took their grammar books and they taught lessons. People learned . . . we didn't turn that literacy rate around by magic! Door to door, they took the lessons door to door. They took the Bible door to door. They took food and medicine door to door. And they knew that they were about a mighty work for God.¹⁵⁹

This positive and affirming historical image of women is developed in Hall's sermonic exhortation and is lifted as a standard for Christian men and women. A detailed discussion of Hall's use of female biblical characters follows, so the brevity of reflection on this the first tenet simply shows of the absence of prejudicial language about women or men in Hall's religious discourse.

(2) Marginalization of Women in the Biblical Text and Context and a Call To Share in Dismantling Patriarchy

In Hall's sermonizing, she often challenges the way women are portrayed in Scripture. She skillfully interprets Scripture to challenge patriarchal teachings of biblical text and its contemporary application. She examines the context of the text to scrutinize the status of women in the historical setting of the Scripture in her dismantling of patriarchal teaching of the text. In the following example, Hall discusses the information that was available to the disciples about Jesus and what they 'knew' versus what they

¹⁵⁸ Hall interview by Allen.

¹⁵⁹ Prathia Hall, "A Victory and a Mystery," a sermon preached at Allen AME Church, Jamaica Queens, New York, 25 April 1993.

believed. To do this, she challenges sexism within the text and identifies the limitations that sexism creates regarding what the disciples ‘knew’ or understood about Jesus. Hall’s premise is that the practice of sexism is indicative of a lack of knowledge about Jesus.

Following Jesus’ crucifixion, if the disciples had believed the report of the women on their way from the tomb, the disciples would have known more about Jesus’ fate. According to Hall, the disciples did not believe the women because they were *merely* women. The disciples were trained to believe that women were inferior to men and had nothing of value to teach or report to men. Being a strategic exegete, Hall reveals the patriarchal dogma that lies in the context of the text and renounces it because such bigotry and sexism are too costly. In her rhetorical strategy, Hall challenges one’s true knowledge of Jesus and associates that knowledge with one’s beliefs and behavior. She then explains that understanding Jesus means abandoning one’s prejudices, particularly, as they relate to women. In other words, people who really know Jesus abandon their patriarchal and discriminatory views. To this rationale, Hall connects the text with the lived experience of women clergy in the Black church by saying:

Well, there were some things that these disciples of Jesus did know. They did know Jesus. Oh [pause] they knew Jesus. They could have known “the shepherd will be taken and the sheep will be scattered.” They could have known “destroy this body and in three days I’ll rise again.” They could have known, yet they did not know. They could not see; they did not understand. They could have known the report of the women. My friend Renita Weems says that because it [the message] came from women, they thought it was gossip. When, in fact, it was Gospel. They could have known the report of the women, “He is not here, He is risen as He said.” . . . Perhaps if they would have received the report of the women, perhaps they would have known the Lord is risen. He is risen, indeed. Prejudice and pain left them broken, blinded and ignorant. The report of the women disturbed them, but it could have delivered them. But, they were blinded by bigotry. . . . And my sisters and my brothers this was not to be the last time that the Gospel would be missed. . . . and many of us . . . are still missing the Gospel, because God chooses a messenger who is woman.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Idem, “A Journey with Jesus,” a sermon preached at Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, Illinois,

Likewise, in the next excerpt from one of Hall's sermons, she uses a familiar Bible story and offers an unfamiliar interpretation of the female character. The female character is marginalized in the text, but in Hall's sermonizing, she focuses on the female character, thus, bringing her into view. Through her womanist technique, a marginalized character becomes central. Hall's hermeneutic essentially challenges the values that listeners traditionally bring to the text, which have shaped their understanding of the female character. Her message is clear:

Then came Mrs. Job. She is familiar to us. We have been beating up Mrs. Job for as long as this story has been told. Perhaps we condemn her so vicariously because she reminds us so much of ourselves. But you won't mind, will you, if this preacher has a word to say for Sister Job? Let us walk a mile in Mrs. Job's shoes. Everything that Job lost, she lost. A woman had no property of her own. She had no identity of her own. She was the servant of her family—the servant of her husband. The sons and daughters, which Job lost, she lost. She bore those children. They were her children, too. She brought them into the world. She nursed them and nurtured them and guided them and now, grieved for them! Sister Job hurt. And is there any hurt more grievous—God knows, I know of what I speak—standing by the bedside of a loved one in unrelieved pain? Watching and knowing the helplessness of your watching. Willing even to exchange places with them and knowing that even that is impossible. And how many of us on that same bed of affliction have said to God, “I have had enough, God! Take my life and get it over with!”? I am simply suggesting that Sister Job did not regard God lightly. She knew that the living God would always vindicate the Holy Name. She took God very seriously. Sister Job was desperate because her hurt would not heal.¹⁶¹

Hall's womanist sermonizing exposes patriarchal views in the socio-cultural context of the text and in the traditional denigration of the female character in contemporary biblical interpretation. Job's wife is often portrayed as evil in Black sacred rhetoric because in the biblical story, she suggests that Job curse God and die. Hall, however, brings the audience on a journey that exposes this type of prejudice by presenting a novel interpretation of the female character that creates an atmosphere wherein the audience may empathize with Job's wife. By inviting the audience to consider a different perspective or interpretation, Hall also brings this marginalized female biblical character to the center.

15 May 1990.

¹⁶¹ Idem, “When the Hurts Do Not Heal,” a sermon preached at Trinity UCC, Chicago, Illinois, 21 May 1989.

3) Marginalization of Female Biblical Characters in the Sermon Who Are Central Figures in Scripture

When Hall preaches from Scripture that includes a female biblical character who is central to the text, she often challenges traditional Black church interpretations that portray the woman as insignificant. Her womanist sermonic style challenges and dismantles the traditional patriarchal preaching of the biblical text. One example can be found in the biblical narrative about the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Typically, Black sacred rhetoric portrays her as a "sinner." Interestingly enough, Hall does not attack the validity of such an interpretation; she subtly offers another perspective of the woman based on Jesus' interaction with her. Hall states, "Look at Jesus by Jacob's well, holding high-level theological discussion in his itinerant seminary, with a woman about whom God really is, and what true worship is really all about."¹⁶² Through her womanist perspective and preaching, Hall portrays the woman as capable of theological discourse with Jesus, thereby countering the patriarchal interpretation that renders her as a sinner and insignificant.

4) Images that Empower Women and Create an Ethic of Resistance and Counter Sexism

Cannon argues that the portrayal of predominantly negative images of women in preaching has "negative real-world consequences for social relations within the African-American family."¹⁶³ Perhaps sharing this understanding, Hall often weaves biblical images of women and men together throughout her sermons to create a more gender-balanced portrayal of the biblical faith community, because all the faithful in the Bible

¹⁶² Idem, "A Journey with Jesus."

¹⁶³ Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 119-120.

are not men. Hall's womanist sermonizing also offers a critical retelling of traditional Black church text that counters its sexist or subversive interpretation by meticulously dissecting Scripture and its traditional translations. She is thoughtful to invite and involve the audience in her "conversational interrogation of Scripture" by telling listeners that they will closely examine the text together. As Hall interrogates the Scripture, she explains how others have misinterpreted the text through superficial and gender-biased translations. She then reclaims the text by exploring with the audience what a more "accurate" interpretation reveals—especially one that is more affirming of women. Eloquently and persuasively, Hall's rhetorical strategy demonstrates that just as Scripture has been used to oppress women, Scripture can be used to liberate women.

Hall uses humor as well as call and response to keep the audience engaged. In the following excerpt from one of Hall's sermons, she provides insight into her examination of what she considers to be traditional Black sacred rhetoric about creation, specifically in regard to the supposition that the role of the male has domination over the female. Hall begins by reading the Scripture and then goes on to interrogate the text, Genesis 1:27:

So God created man in His own image. In the image of God, He created him—male and female—He created them. Does that say anything about messing up? Does it say anything about hierarchy and domination and subordination? Does it say anything about man being created first as the glory of God, and woman, a divine afterthought of the glory of man? So God created—created man in His own image. In the image of God, he created him male and female; He created them. That's harmony, togetherness. . . . Where did all of the order and the role business come from? Well, let's take a closer look at this text that we just read.

Hall refers to Hebrew and talks about English translations of words to support her interpretation. She tries to persuade the audience that they are engaging in a careful scrutiny of the text. Using the creation stories in Genesis in the above illustration, Hall's interpretation does not suggest that the creation stories are myths, nor does she dissuade

the audience from biblical literalism. As in the previous segment from one of her sermons, Hall does not change the male pronoun for God as she continues:

Let us look first at this word that is translated in the English text ‘m-a-n’, man. . . . It is used actually in the original Hebrew in this Genesis account in three ways. It is used lastly as the name of the first human male person. It is secondarily used as the name that will describe maleness, manhood, the male human being in general. But, it is first used as the Adam, the earth creature—the human one, the one of the earth. Not a man. Not male. Not female. But earth creature. . . . Now I know that we are most familiar with that translation that describes this creation [female] as the helpmeet. . . . Let us look at this thing in the original language. These words that have been called helpmeet are ‘ezer ke-negdo’. These words do not imply anything that is separate or alien or subordinate. Indeed, they connote sameness, one like him. . . . Indeed, we are so connected that whatever you do to me, you do to yourself. . . . And this word which has been translated “help” does not mean an assistant. It is the same word that is used in the expression, “God, my help.” Is that, God my assistant?

Hall concludes by turning again to the way negative female images are applied in the community. She argues that social practices of male domination are not consistent with Scripture. Hall continues, “So those theories and rationalizations that regard priority and hierarchy and order and domination have got to come from somewhere else. Did you see it anywhere in the text? [The audience responds, “No!”] She therefore challenges listeners in the audience to change their understanding of the text. Once the audience is open to challenging their understanding of the text, Hall persuades them to challenge the application of the text by saying:

So, when we come now to this third chapter of Genesis, we read this part of the text, which the old tapes have called the curse. We are not to understand that God is somehow prescribing what is to be our relationship—not describing the way that we are to get along with and to regard each other. Oh no! God’s prescription was over here in chapter one. Male and female together in the image of God!¹⁶⁴

As Hall continues to preach, she repudiates a sexist interpretation of the text and then introduces the concept of sin. Eventually, as her message progresses, she exercises the

¹⁶⁴ Hall, “Beyond Eden.”

rhetorical device of association by relating sin to a sexist interpretation of the text, and to sexism within society:

No, God is not prescribing. God is simply describing the consequences of sin. Sin is what sin does. You know what sin is. Sin alienates. Sin separates. Sin destroys. Sin dominates. Sin has us not liking each other. Sin has us using each other. Sin has us abusing each other.¹⁶⁵

Through Hall's conversational interrogation of the Scripture and the rhetorical device of association, she uses a biblical image of male/female relationships, which is traditionally interpreted from a patriarchal perspective, to empower women and men and create an ethic of resistance.

(5) The Socio-Cultural Context of Preaching Wherein Men Are Removed from the Normative Center and Women from the Margins

Hall's sermonic discourse often addresses the way Black church traditions have restricted the rolls of women and the way the church has used Scripture to support these actions. Hall has a stock set of female biblical characters that she uses frequently to exemplify women of faith and purpose, such as: Deborah, portrayed as God's victorious leader; Lydia, portrayed as a Christian convert and businesswoman; and Esther, portrayed as a woman of courage. In the recasting of these female characters, Hall in effect takes female biblical characters that are not necessarily central figures in the text and makes them normative witnesses of the faith. As a result, women are removed from the margins and men are removed from normative. For instance, in a sermon in which she calls people to action, she uses historical images of missionary women who were marginalized in their leadership in the church, but nevertheless they organized and found ways to do ministry; even though, they were prohibited from ordination. When Hall calls for the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

contemporary praxis, she calls on men and women to emulate the work of these women. One may be more accustomed to hearing historic illustrations of men admonishing social inequality and fighting for justice, like Dr. King, or calls to press on at all costs with the “by any means necessary” tenacity of Malcolm X. On the contrary, Hall uses the image of woman as the desirable figure to emulate:

Christian women, missionaries with a mission. They had Bible bands. They were on fire for God and they were filled with love for our people . . . They took the Bible door to door. They took food and medicine door to door. And they knew that they were about a mighty work for God. So my sisters and my brothers, we cannot afford to be so high and holy that we are no earthly good. . . . When Satan is wiping our children out (and it’s not just poor children, it’s our children). Oh just as many of my college educated, important friends got children wiped out on crack as any welfare mother on the street. . . . Our forefathers. Our foremothers. They cared! They cared! They cared! They didn’t even make a dollar a week, but they cared. They postponed their personal gratification and built schools, built institutions, built churches for us. For us!¹⁶⁶

The inclusive illustration of women as normative, with references to men and women, is an effective way of creating a non-gender-specific religious hermeneutic and social perspective.

(6) Emancipatory Praxis

Emancipatory praxis is the action, or praxis, that the sermon demands as a response to the Word of God proclaimed. It is the audience’s action in response to the lesson. Hall is very critical of biblical interpretations that overlook the radical liberation ethic of the Gospel. She believes, that as a witness of Scripture, the preacher is supposed to “help the people see their own possibilities for action.” In Hall’s sermons, her desired emancipatory praxis is clearly identified and articulated to her audience. In the following example, Hall calls the church to spread the hope of the Gospel message to those who

¹⁶⁶ Idem, “A Victory and a Mystery.”

need to hear it most. The emancipatory praxis is to tell the good news and not be silenced by life's circumstances. Hall instructs the congregation to:

Tell it. Tell it, and let all voices swell it. I tell you tonight, if I was dying and I had one word to say, I'd speak it for Jesus. Then, I'd breathe my life away. So tell it. Tell it. Tell the story. Tell the story. Tell it. Tell it, and let all voices swell it. Tell it; the Lord is risen. Death has no victory. The grave has no victory. Tell it. We are not the church hiding in dark corners behind stained glass windows. There's a battle for justice to be won in the earth, and the Scripture said, "He will not fail; he will not stop until justice comes on earth." And brother pastor, to me, that feels like heaven. That feels like heaven. I'm tired of seeing hungry babies. I'm tired of seeing human bodies curled up in miserable, filthy, vermin-infested cardboard on the streets, trying to warm the human body by the alien hardness and harshness of building heating grates. I'm tired of seeing little babies with great big distended bellies where the body has been feeding on its own juices and continues to, until innocent babies drop down dead. If we are journeying with Jesus, then we got to put our feet in the road and make the journey and tell the story.¹⁶⁷

In the next example, Hall calls for an emancipatory praxis of resisting sexism. She instructs the congregation to refuse to embrace and perpetuate sexism—as well as to have the courage to name it as a 'lie' and, thereby, exposing sexism as a sin:

Sexism is a liar, is a demon from hell and is a liar. Sisters we know about the lie it tells on us. It says that we are not who we are. And anything that says that you are not who you are, is a lie. And some of us have believed the lie. And it has destroyed us. And you know, that is not the worst lie this demon tells. No, the lie it tells on us is not the worst lie. Brothers, it tells a lie worse than that on you! Oh yes, this demon lies on you. You know what it says? It says that you are so weak and so insecure that you cannot handle us as God made us—that you cannot deal with who God made us to be. You cannot handle our mind, our spirit, our souls, our strengths. It says that in order for you to get up, you gotta push me down. And brothers, that's a lie! Yes, it's a lie! You're better than that. I know you are better than that. Don't you let this demon lie on you!¹⁶⁸

Hall's emancipatory praxis often includes a denouncement of oppression and injustice, and she frequently calls on the church to live out its faith in the world. The womanist preacher does not often expound on what constitutes justice work, at least not in detail within her sermons. Perhaps her background as a freedom movement organizer

¹⁶⁷ Idem, "A Journey with Jesus."

¹⁶⁸ Idem, "Beyond Eden."

leads her to believe the audience knows concretely what to do to live out their faith, and perhaps they do. Nonetheless, it is evident that when she references justice work, she is talking about personal and social community organizing and political action, as well as social services, such as a feeding ministry or clothes pantry, etc.

Hall's sermons illustrate the content Cannon calls for in her womanist critique of Black preaching. As a womanist preacher, Hall articulates an ethic of resistance to oppression and counters the negative real-world consequences of sexist language and ideology, particularly that which is propagated in the guise of Christian piety and virtue. She considers the socio-cultural context of the preaching event and speaks to the specific challenges of the community. Hall uses images of men and women such that she removes men from the normative center and women from the margins of desirable virtues. Furthermore, Hall frequently calls for the faith community to respond to the truth they have heard with action befitting of the Divine within humanity such as engaging in emancipatory praxis.

An Analysis of Hall's Sermons Using Additional Categories for Examining a Womanist Preacher's Sermons

Cannon's womanist critique of Black sacred rhetoric is a foundation for understanding the sermons of a womanist preacher. Chapter two explored some additional categories helpful to consider when examining the sermons of a womanist preacher. An examination of Hall's sermons with these additional categories enhances our appreciation of this womanist preacher's sermonizing. These categories include: (1) the use of non-gendered or gender-inclusive language in our God talk, a non-gendered language for traditional Trinitarian language; (2) an emphasis on the humanity of Christ while not focusing on the gender of Jesus; (3) effective Christian rhetoric that creates pathos and ethos; (4) the effective use of multisensory and kinesthetic communication; (5) the Divine presence manifested in shamanistic and conjuring oratory that is performed identity, conflict resolution, and homeopathic; (6) an atonement theology that takes seriously an African-

American historical experience of sexual exploitation and forced surrogacy that, therefore, affirms the ministerial vision of Jesus' life as redemptive and not his surrogacy in crucifixion; and (7) an analysis and dismantling of heterosexism and homophobia inclusive of an affirmation of same-gender loving people.

(1) The Use of Non-Gendered or Gender-Inclusive Language in Our God Talk, a Non-Gendered Language for Traditional Trinitarian Language, and Diverse Images of God

Hall is very intentional about her language with reference to God. She states, "If you cannot use inclusive imagery for the Divine, then you are not taking the Imago Dei seriously."¹⁶⁹ In Hall's sermons, she rarely uses a male pronoun when referring to God. Any inconsistencies in her preaching are unintentional. On this subject Hall admits, "I understand the necessity of inclusive language and even though I slip every now and then, I work at it."¹⁷⁰ When reading Scripture, she usually changes the male pronoun reference for God and replaces it with the word, 'God'. In her sermonic body, she occasionally uses male pronouns in reference to God when quoting Scripture. Hall uses diverse language and images when referring to God, most of which are non-gendered. The following is a summary of all her references to God in one sermon: "God is our wilderness Guard and Guide"; "God is our witness"; "God is my Lord"; "God is on the throne"; "God is my helper"; and "God is shelter in the time of storm."¹⁷¹ Hall is also attentive to use gender-inclusive language in extra biblical resources, such as hymns, poems, and other expressions of Black sacred rhetoric. The following is an example of

¹⁶⁹ Hall interview by Allen.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Prathia Hall, "The Increase in the Decrease," a sermon preached at Evergreen Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, 15 April 1992.

Hall changing the language of a hymn. In the original wording of the hymn, it refers only to brothers:

I have a message from the Lord. Hallelujah! And His message unto you, I give. It's recorded in God's Word. Hallelujah! It is only that you look and live. Sister, look and live! Brother, look and live! If you would be healed, see Jesus. Look and live. Look and live! Look and live! And live! And live! And live! And live! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!¹⁷²

In a lecture addressing sexism in the Black church, Hall comments about inclusive theological language:

The message of freedom cannot be communicated in the language of oppression. That certainly means that we must work on our language. We have used every excuse in the book for failing to deal with inclusive language relating to the human family and to the Divine life. I say to you, as long as we refuse to deal with the violation that involves the use of exclusively male-gendered language in our imagery of God, we are refusing to take Genesis 1:27-28 seriously. If God created male and female in the image of God, then the images that we use to talk about God, to the extent that we need these human-type images, must be both male and female.¹⁷³

A womanist homiletic reveals that Hall uses inclusive language with respect to Divinity and humanity, and does not use derogatory and prejudicial images of women.

(2) An Emphasis on the Humanity of Christ While Not Focusing on the Gender of Jesus and Extolling the Actions of Jesus

Hall also uses diverse metaphors for Jesus Christ, many of which are non-gendered. Again, Hall is intentional in her language about Jesus. She explains, "I think that for Black women, the gender of Jesus has not been such an issue as it has been for some White women. Jesus' role as fellow sufferer is more important to Black women than gender. I believe that the historical Jesus was a man and that the risen Christ is

¹⁷² Idem, "When the Hurts Don't Heal,"

¹⁷³ *What Does It Mean To Be Black and Christian? Pulpit, Pew, and Academy in Dialogue* (Nashville, Tennessee: Townsend Press, 1995), 122.

Divine. I try to use gender neutral language as it relates to the ascended Christ.” The following excerpt from another of Hall’s sermons includes her terminology for talking about Jesus:

Who do you have? You got Jesus Christ, the visible expression of the invisible God. Jesus Christ, the Anointed One, the Risen One, the Ascended One, the Soon-Coming One. Jesus Christ, the Hope of Earth, the Joy of Heaven. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. Jesus Christ, Lord of the Universe, Lord of the Church, King of Heaven, Lord of the Harvest, Bishop of Our Souls. Jesus Christ, fairest of ten thousand, Rose of Sharon, Lily of the Valley. Jesus Christ, Dayspring from on High, Bright and Morning Star. Jesus Christ, my hope when I am hopeless, my help when I am helpless, my healer when I am hurting. Jesus Christ, my prophet, my priest, my king.¹⁷⁴

A womanist homiletic examination reveals that Hall’s sermonic language about Jesus is reflective of how Jesus relates to humanity, and does not focus on his gender.

(3) An Effective Christian Rhetoric that Creates Pathos and Ethos

Hall is clear about the necessity of establishing her persona or authority in the preaching moment. Her authority is in her Divine call and her conviction that God is speaking through her. In her first introduction, Hall establishes her role as God’s spokesperson. Halls’ reputation as a preacher and civil rights leader also adds to her ethos. As mentioned earlier, Hall describes her method of biblical interpretation as a conversational interrogation of the text in which she invites the audience to join in the interrogation. She uses call and response and informs the audience that, along with her, they will unravel the text.

In this format, Hall also creates ethos through her interrogation of the text with audience participation. She invites the audience to keep their Bibles open for a ready reference to read with her as they participate in interpreting the Scripture together. The

¹⁷⁴ Idem, “Church Under Construction.”

audience has a written reference to go along with her spoken words. The audience is more likely to believe what she says because they have gone on a journey with her to interrogate the text. She asks the questions they might ask, but she clearly raises the questions that advance her interpretation. She assures them that her questions are their questions as well. In a sermon using the Genesis narratives of creation, Hall challenges the idea that women were created as helpers for men and, therefore, are inferior to men. Hall invites the audience to a conversational interrogation of the text around one word—helpmeet. Hall also uses the rhetorical device of humor as she challenges the audience to embrace a new perspective of the text:

So God created man in His own image. In the image of God, He created him—male and female, He created them. . . . Now I know that we are most familiar with that translation that describes this creation [of the female] as the helpmeet. I don't know what that is. One preacher told me that it means, "Help me meet these bills!" [pause] It has come to mean something that is secondary, something that is not quite equal. But, let's go back. Remember our sleeves are rolled up. We can work a while.

The last statement, "We can work a while," is spoken with an inflection in her voice because she is really requesting permission from the audience to continue. The audience responds enthusiastically, "Take your time." Hall's use of call and response adds to the audience's experience of examining the Scripture with her. This is a joint effort, and whatever is discovered in the inquiry, the audience and preacher will have discovered together. This use of ethos contributes to the believability of Hall's insights about the text.

In the next example of Hall's religious discourse, she makes use of the rhetorical devices of association, disassociation, and bringing into view to create presence and therefore pathos. Hall preaches:

And sisters and brothers, the worst lie this demon tells is the lie it tells on God. For it exalts the genital fixations of a sinful culture and dares to absolutize that mess and blame that bigotry on God. Hey, but I hear the Living God this morning saying, “Preacher, I’m tired of folks lying on me!” The Living God is not a bigot. Sexism has men believing that they must rule their homes by any means necessary. It has boys sitting on girls and saying to them, “If you are going to be my woman, you gonna do what I say do.” That lie, that damnable lie, is part of the “babies-having-babies” problem. For it has destroyed the sacredness of our togetherness and turned it into games and mess and abuse, and has brothers believing that they are bees and butterflies roaming from flower to flower to flower to flower! Has women believing that they are nothing, nobody, just a piece of meat, got to go along to get along.¹⁷⁵

According to the sermonic account above, Hall associates sexism with a lie from Satan, such that if one is sexist, then one has bought into Satan’s lie. She disassociates the cultural fixation on gender, which she refers to as “genital fixation” and bigotry from God. It is culture—not God—that has “dared to absolutize” gender differences. Finally, Hall brings into view an image of sexism as the work of Satan who is lying to us, and an angry God who has been lied on. She also appeals to her audience’s emotions by using repetition, dialogue, testimony, and embodiment. Hall’s sermonic performance includes vocal fluctuations, intermittent pauses, and syllabic emphasis of particular words to create a rhythmic delivery of her message. Her voice thunders, “Blame that bigotry on God?” And then it softens, almost to a whisper, as if she has a secret. When she says, “Hey, but I hear the Living God this morning,” followed by a brief pause before her voice slowly crescendos and blares, “Preacher, I’m tired of folks lying on me!”

A womanist homiletic clearly shows that in her sermonizing, Hall intentionally adopts a certain rhetorical position and effectively employs ethos and pathos to influence her listeners’ way of thinking about traditional biblical interpretation, social injustice and inequality, as well as the moral and religious implications relative to their thoughts and

¹⁷⁵ Idem, “Beyond Eden.”

behavior.

(4) The Use of Multisensory and Kinesthetic Communication

Music and rhythm are apparent in Hall's preaching. She uses rhymes, alliterations, poignant phrases, strategic pauses, colloquial expressions, lists, and precise repetition to create rhythm in her sermons. Not only is there movement in her words, but in her performance. She may clap her hands, extend outstretched arms to the audience, look upward, look downward, rock her upper torso gently side-to-side, stand on tiptoe, or slightly pace the pulpit as she preaches with passion. Hall's preaching is a performance of the sermon. This is well demonstrated in the following excerpt from one of Hall's sermons in which she uses the Negro National Anthem as an illustration of hope that comes from a community's collective struggle against—and periodic victories over—oppression. Included in the excerpt is a description of her homiletic performance. She begins with a slow pace, almost singing the opening words of the anthem:

“Sing a song [pause] full of the faith that the dark past has taught us. Sing a song [pause] full of the hope that the present has brought us. Out of the gloomy past till now we stand at last where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.” [pause] We sing James Weldon Johnson's immortal imperative in many different ways. [pause] In 1993, [pause, with emphasis on the “3” in 1993] some sing it mechanically [slight emphasis on the “ly” in mechanically] as words learned [emphasis on learned] but not digested. [pause] Some scramble for the words they never learned. Others mouth the words, written on the paper but not in their hearts. [pause while glancing at the audience] And yet from time to time, on one of those occasions when we are called to remember who we are and from whence we have come, it is possible to glance around a room, in which we are singing this sacred anthem and see a tear [pause—gesture] gliding down the face of some of us, old or young or in between. [pause, while glancing at the audience]. Occasionally you may hear a cough, which escapes, as the singer attempts to contain the myriad emotions, which well up on the inside. Emotions so powerfully profound that words of neither orator, nor philosopher, nor psychologist can accurately describe them. We can only clear our throats and sing on. [extended pause] What is it about these words of *Lift Every Voice* that grabs or grips some of us in ways we cannot express? [pause, looking upward] It would be arrogant and presumptuous of me to claim to know. But whatever it is I believe it has something to do with the dialectical tension, which these words contain. When we give ourselves to Johnson's anthem, our anthem, [pause, she then delivers the list with rhythm and drama] we experience the strength, the rhythm, the joys, the tears, the pains, the problems, the progress, the possibilities, the defiant determination that streams forth from our ancestral sources. And we experience in the same moment, the pregnant promise of our future. And we know again, in spite of all our doubts, all our fears, all our tears, we shall do it again! [pause, with raised hand and slight rocking] We shall vindicate the sufferings and the struggles and the sacrifices of our fathers and our mothers. We shall do it. [pause] We shall cease this moment with all of its contradictions and forge from it a future, for ourselves, and our generations yet unborn.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Idem, “Between Heritage and Hope.”

She is thoughtful and careful in how she uses her voice, breath, and syllables to create rhythm and music with her words. Halls' preaching is an auditory, visual, and somatically embodied performance. She attributes the source of her passion to the Spirit of God. Commenting on her own preaching style, Hall professes: "There is a higher level in preaching that comes when the Holy Spirit takes over and lifts the sermon from the pages and preachers. That's the real preacher. It is what some folk call, 'I feel my help coming!'"¹⁷⁷

(5) The Divine Presence Manifested in Shamanistic and Conjuring Oratory that Is Performed Identity, Conflict Resolution, and Homeopathic

Although Hall does not use the terms shaman or conjurer to describe herself, they are fitting titles for her. She understands herself as a preacher in service to people by Divine assignment. She states, "In preaching you offer yourself up. You offer or use yourself for service, and God puts it to work." Hall's language about God directing the work of the preacher is similar to Sojourner Truth's understanding of herself as appointed by God to "travel up and down the land, showing the people their sins, and being a sign unto them . . . I was to declare the truth to the people."¹⁷⁸ In the preaching event—through a hermeneutic lens of liberation and communal response of emancipatory action and reaction—Hall would invite the audience to experience being civil rights warriors by using herself as a "God proxy," or a shaman. She witnesses to the Gospel through her spiritual illustrations by using her life experience in her religious discourse. Her homily is not merely a personal testimony but, rather, a communal testimony, ritualistic speech, and

¹⁷⁷ Hall interview by Allen.

¹⁷⁸ Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 164.

shared action intended to perform what it expresses, which is an embodiment of the social condition—exactly like a conjurer would do. In the following sampling of Hall’s sermon, she expresses her anguish over the message that she has received from God to deliver to the people. It is a message that she must preach and act on, even against her own fears, because God demands that she do so:

I’ve been having some sleepless nights. The Spirit is saying to me, “Preacher, it doesn’t have to be this way, and I hold preachers and my people named by my name responsible.” And then, the Lord showed me something. [extended pause] Recently, I said “Lord I want to tell the people. I want to tell the people what you tell me, but Lord it’s so dangerous. The streets are so dangerous.” You know what the Lord said to me? The Lord said, “Preacher in the 1960s, you risked the clans bullets. In the 1990s, you can risk the gangs’ bullets. If that’s what it takes! If that’s what it takes!”¹⁷⁹

Hall’s words create a climate of healing for the audience. She repeatedly tells the audience they have victory in Christ Jesus as part of her sermonic conclusion. She tells them they are called to do the hard work of the faith, such as dealing with drug abuse and the devastation it causes in the community and in their families. Concluding her religious discourse, Hall gives an account of an audience responding to a preacher’s call for healing from drug abuse:

I know a preacher who, one morning, followed the Spirits leading and just asked all the people in the church who were either on drugs, or had a family member on drugs, or were somehow involved in drugs, to come on to the altar. And he almost passed out when about half the church—they couldn’t get to the altar—they were just streaming all down the aisles, all down the aisles. That’s the work, that’s the work, and God will not have us singing and shouting, and feeling good, and turning our back on the work!

Hall then comes out of the pulpit as if she is responding to an invitation; however, she does not face the audience with her arms extended. Instead, she faces the alter with her

¹⁷⁹ Hall “Between Heritage and Hope”.

arms extended upward. She stands silent for a moment. Then, she addresses the audience and extends an invitation to the congregation to respond to the Word of God proclaimed:

There's somebody here today living without victory. There's somebody here today living without joy, but you don't have to. . . . If you're here today and you have never accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of your life, you are living beneath your privilege. You're living on the crumbs while the feast of the Lord is going on, but you can come to the table. The feast is prepared for you. Just believe in your heart, the Christ about whom we preach loves you, died for you, rose for you, is forgiving you, and will receive you unto himself. Believe it by faith. Come to Jesus. Is there one? Now is the time. Now is the day of Salvation. Oh come to Jesus. . . . Won't you come? Oh come, somebody needs to come to Jesus today. . . . Don't go home without Christ in your life. Bless the Lord. Bless the Lord, there's another who will come. Don't go home without Christ and without the church.¹⁸⁰

The audience joins in the invitation and sings as Hall continues to call people forward.

Some come forward to join the church; a significant number come forward for prayer for healing from drug abuse. For some the healing journey from the disease and devastation of drug abuse began right then. As Hall continued to call people forward, and they continued to respond, eventually there were a number of people standing at the front of the church. Throughout the congregation, there was an atmosphere of hope and celebration. A womanist homiletic reveals Hall's use of embodiment and dramatization to create a homeopathic communal transformation.

¹⁸⁰ Idem, "A Mystery and a Victory."

(6) An Atonement Theology that Takes Seriously an African-American Historical Experience of Sexual Exploitation and Forced Surrogacy and Therefore Affirms the Ministerial Vision of Jesus' Life as Redemptive and Not His Surrogacy in Crucifixion

In her sermonizing, Hall clearly promotes an understanding of salvation that focuses on Jesus' death on the cross. She frequently describes a Divine promise of eternal life for those who believe in the events of the cross. In her paraphrasing of Isaiah 42:1-4 that follows, Hall interprets the text as a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus and informs the listeners based upon her biblical exegesis:

Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights—I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice unto the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street. A bruised reed, he will not break and a dimly wick, he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice. Oh, isn't that good news? Isn't that good news? Jesus will bring forth justice that for which we long, and we will be the instruments of his justice. He will not fail or be discouraged until he has established justice in the earth.¹⁸¹

Hall's focuses on Jesus as an instrument of God's justice working through us. In the work of justice, we—who are “instruments of justice”—are part of God's historic act of redemption. Hall begins to emphasize Jesus' justice ministry at this point of her religious discourse, but not the role of Jesus as surrogate. As she continues to interpret and paraphrase the Isaiah text, she exalts Jesus as the promised Messiah who suffered for the sins of the world:

Who has believed the report and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Surely, he has born our grief and carried our sorrows; yet, we esteemed him not. Smitten by God and afflicted. But, he was wounded, wounded, for our transgressions and he was bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole. And with his stripes, with his stripes and with his stripes, we are healed. Healed. He was oppressed and he was afflicted; yet, he opened not his mouth like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before it's shearer is dumb. So he opened not his mouth. Look at him. Who is this coming down from glory with garments red as they had been died in the wine vats, treading the wine press alone?¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Idem, “A Journey with Jesus.”

Hall's image of Jesus as the suffering passive servant is vivid and graphic. Her conceptualization of atonement is not demonstrable of the womanist homiletic agenda of redemption that focuses on the ministry vision of Jesus instead of affirming his surrogacy and passion. Hall's comments about personal salvation shed some additional light on her theology of atonement, but her sentiments do not negate her understanding of the necessity of Jesus' surrogacy and suffering for salvation. Hall's understanding of salvation includes the womanist homiletic agenda of focusing on the ministry vision of Jesus. Through her sermonic discourse, Hall warns against a preoccupation with personal salvation as if it is a possession that one controls, rather than being controlled by the love ethic of Christ. As explained by Hall, preoccupation with personal salvation diminishes our work of justice and genuine discipleship:

We live in a possession-oriented society. This personal salvation you can pick up when you want to and put down when you please. But the reality of Christ is what possesses us. That is a very different quality of life. A very different character of life. That makes you hear the call of Christ when it is the inconvenient call. Makes you hear the call of Christ when it is exactly what you do not want to do. Makes you hear the call of Christ when it is going to cost you.¹⁸³

Her comments clearly convey her understanding of the ministerial commitment that a relationship with Christ demands. This perspective is a helpful for countering or refocusing traditional biblical interpretations that merely concentrate on Jesus' suffering as salvific. A womanist homiletic reveals Hall's atonement theology, soteriology, and the role of surrogacy and suffering in her biblical interpretation of redemption.

¹⁸³ Hall interview by Allen.

(7) An Analysis and Dismantling of Heterosexism and Homophobia Inclusive of an Affirmation of Same-Gender Loving People

An examination of Hall's sermons using womanist homiletic shows that she challenges the church's bigotry regarding homosexuality. She uses the liberation praxis of naming the problem—not solely as homophobia—but also as heterosexism, which strikes at the privileged position of heterosexuals and institutionalized oppression, and begins to unmask systemic injustice. On the subject of bigotry against homosexuality and other discriminatory practices, Hall says:

Bondage doctrine that puts everybody in little biology boxes. Because my biology is this way, then I can do this, and this. [Pause] And because your biology is this way, you can't do this. Oh Bless the Lord! [Pause] Sometimes the bondage in our churches is heterosexism. [Pause] Yeah, I said that! Racism, classism, colorism, ageism, and the myriad of idolatry that we indulge. Bondage. Bondage.¹⁸⁴

In another sermon, Hall invites the audience to reflect critically on church traditions and scrutinize if they are authentic to the values of Christian faith or, rather, if these beliefs and actions are more so reflective of societal standards:

We are human beings and we live in a Christ-less culture. We are human beings in danger of confusing our values and distorting our priorities. And when we do, the blessed break the body and spill the blood of our Christ. My brother and my sister, you better watch how you step on the cross; your foot might slip and your soul be lost. [Pause] Paul says rightly, our traditions must be put to the Christ test. If your traditions do not make it through the Christ test, discard them, destroy them. Do away with them right now. When we allow our bigotry of class, race, or denomination or sexuality to make us oppressors, we are stepping on the cross, stepping on Christ.¹⁸⁵

Applying a womanist homiletic to Hall's exegetical sermonizing lends credence to her belief that homophobia and heterosexism are inconsistent with the message of Christ.

¹⁸⁴ Prathia Hall, "Captivities Capture," a sermon preached at Alfred Street Baptist Church, Alexandria, Virginia, 7 February 1990.

¹⁸⁵ Idem, "Broken by the Blessed," a sermon based on I Corinthians 11, preached at Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, California, 12 March 1999.

Though she does not go so far as to honor a non-heterosexual identity or relationships, she denounces oppression based on sexual orientation.

Conclusion

Hall's sermons exemplify the content called for in the additional categories for analyzing the homilies of a womanist preacher, with the exception of two: (1) Through her sermonizing, she does not affirm and celebrate non-heterosexual identities, although her messages serve to repudiate heterosexism and homophobia; and (2) Hall's theology of redemption does not exclude surrogacy and suffering, but it is more so an affirmation of the salvific nature of a ministry based on Jesus' teachings during his life, as well as his crucifixion. The additional categories for examining womanist preaching are helpful in understanding Hall's womanist hermeneutic preaching style. She is attentive to logos and uses non-gendered or gender-inclusive language in reference to God (to conjure more diverse and inclusive images of God and Christ), as well as emphasizing the Divinity and work of Christ. She effectively uses pathos and ethos in addition to multisensory and kinesthetic communication. Furthermore, Hall's self-understanding as a preacher and the preaching event is reflective of the Divine presence manifested in the shamanism and conjuring apparent in her embodied performed identity and homeopathic sermonizing.

The content and performance of Hall's sermons is best appreciated through a womanist homiletic because it reveals the complexity of Hall's biblical interpretation as she challenges oppression (i.e., racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia). Indeed, Hall's preaching was an emancipatory praxis. She preached the

justice message of a gender-inclusive Gospel during a period of time in Black church history when such words were not welcome. She dared to preach about sexism and misogyny in the Black church and unmasked the scar of linguistic violence and patriarchal teachings to affect healing in the faith community. When Hall was asked why she preaches. She responded, “I preach because I can’t help myself. If I do not preach, I will die.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Hall interview by Allen.

CONCLUSION

Womanist thought provides a vehicle by which we can examine the religious experience and sacred rhetoric of African-American women. The womanist orientation in preaching is a critical homiletic framework; it is reflective, as well as a catalyst for change. A womanist orientation is reflective because it challenges the inherent oppression in our traditions (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism). Womanist orientation is a catalyst for change because it pushes us toward overcoming oppression through emancipatory praxis.

Cannon's womanist-critical evaluation of Black preaching is a praxis-oriented examination that exposes inconsistencies between the rhetorical and lived experiences of the Black church community. It calls for elimination of linguistic violence in sermonic images, such as negative and derogatory images that dehumanize African-American women. A womanist hermeneutic also gives rise to a more gender-inclusive social and religious order that challenges biblical interpretation, which marginalizes women or reinforces patriarchal teachings of the text—making this praxis a potentially empowering, liberating, and motivating force for unity and revitalization within the Black community, as well as for other oppressed peoples.

Additionally, the analysis of sermons by Prathia Hall, using Katie Cannon's womanist queries for Black preaching, reveals an emancipatory praxis embedded within Hall's sermons. Hall, like other African-American womanist preachers, employs a sacred rhetoric that challenges and expands the Black preaching tradition. Furthering Cannon's womanist critique through a return to Alice Walker's definition of womanist (with a

rhetorical stance of logos, pathos and ethos) enables us to consider additional emancipatory praxes in womanist preaching such as:

- Equipping listeners with a systematic process to critically engage the rhetoric of the sermon;
- The use of non-gendered or gender-inclusive language in our God talk;
- A non-gendered language for traditional Trinitarian language;
- An emphasis on the humanity of Christ while not focusing on the gender of Jesus;
- The adopting of a rhetorical stance to make an effective use of Christian rhetoric;
- The effective use of multisensory and kinesthetic communication;
- The Divine presence manifested in shamanism and conjuring that is performed identity, conflict resolution, and homeopathic;
- An atonement theology that takes seriously an African-American historical experience of sexual exploitation and forced surrogacy, therefore, affirming the ministerial vision of Jesus' life as redemptive, and not solely his surrogacy in crucifixion; and
- The dismantling of heterosexism and homophobia inclusive of an affirmation of the diversity of human sexuality.

These themes combined with Cannon's critique of Black preaching form a womanist homiletic by which we can understand the sacred rhetoric of African-American womanist preachers.

Additionally, a womanist homiletic enables us to form an appreciation of the way in which the African-American woman's experience (i.e., her protracted struggle for ordination and her survival of diverse exploitations and oppression) has informed her sacred rhetoric, thus, enabling her to develop a theo-ethical assessment of Scripture, tradition, and culture to proclaim a theology for "the survival and wholeness of an entire people."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Alice Walker, Part I definition of Womanist.

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