

Several years ago in a minister's meeting, Bishop Blake brought up the issue of "whooping" in black preaching. According to Bishop Blake, the purpose of preaching is to persuade people to conform to God's plan for their lives. Because of this purpose, we need to consider whether "whooping" or "tuning" always aids us in our objective of communicating the Gospel.

Whooping should not be done indiscriminately. The preacher must determine (as s/he is led by the Holy Spirit) what it is that s/he wishes the audience to do (i.e., what are the desired results of the sermon?) Does s/he intend to evoke repentance or bring conviction or does s/he intend to motivate? The answers to such questions should drive the presentation of the message. For example, on Good Friday, we should focus on the solemnity of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ rather than the celebratory nature of the resurrection. Thus, whooping may be of little value in a Good Friday message at a time when we should be more subdued.

Also, the occasion should determine the type of delivery. One would not expect a preacher to "sing" his/her sermon before the Senate or before the President. Bishop Blake noted that in mixed congregations, sometimes people may be turned off by whooping because they prefer simple, clear, and direct speech rather than perceived performance. Thus, preachers must learn to read their audiences and the direction that the Holy Spirit wants to lead the sermon.

Whooping is not necessarily an essential aspect of communication. Our doctors do not whoop when they give us a diagnosis. Our spouses do not have to whoop to tell us what is on their minds. Whooping is usually and primarily a matter of style.

But what is of utmost importance in a sermon is content over style. Therefore, we need to spend more time doing research, receiving training, preparing outlines, and even writing manuscripts. According to Bishop Blake, a **well-prepared** sermon will succeed no matter what we do. We can either tell it or whoop it. If we do whoop though, we need to say something before we do so. Whooping is not the same thing as anointing. Neither does whooping replace the clear articulation of the Gospel. Style can add an important dimension to preaching, but preachers must impart Biblical knowledge.

A positive aspect of whooping is the cultural one. The art of whooping comes straight from the African continent and reminds us of a particular kind of communication (see, Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching*). Indeed, it is a tribute to an African heritage. Secondly, whooping is a type of dramatization that draws the audience into the message. Sometimes preachers need to do what they are saying in order to bring people to a new level of praise and worship.

Yet, black preachers must not feel obligated to whoop. We can project, enunciate, emphasize, and even dramatize without necessarily "singing." What is of utmost importance is that the preacher should become comfortable with his/her own style. People will generally receive someone who is being himself/herself. We can stretch ourselves by diversifying our styles, but temperance is paramount. We need to avoid excess and walk a middle ground that maximizes communication effectiveness. Some other last minute comments were:

- Don't whoop if you can't whoop.
- Don't "celebrate" after every point of a multiple-point sermon.
- Don't overuse clichés (Touch your neighbor!)

On a different occasion, I talked with the late Elder Marion Green, the former assistant pastor of West Angeles Church, about the subject of whooping. He said that it is often better to develop a lecture style (what has come to be called “teaching”). Such a style puts less strain on the body and preserves the voice for longer periods of time. Elder Green said that some people don’t respond until the whooping segment of a sermon; however, if we train people from the beginning, they will appreciate a more relaxed style. Says Elder Green, “All we are doing is telling a story. A story can be told in many different ways.”

Elder Green believes in solid preparation. Yet, Elder Green cautions against rigidity. He says that preachers must learn to let the Spirit lead in both preparation and delivery. Many times the Holy Spirit will allow us to follow what we have prepared, but at other times he may lead us to depart from a manuscript so that he can speak a fresh Word to the people. I call these times “prophetic moments.”

Elder Green mentioned a time when he missed the Spirit of the Lord and grieved him by being too rigid and following his prepared notes to the letter. The next week, when he spoke to the same group of people, he allowed the Holy Spirit to have his way and the Spirit moved mightily (like a hurricane). There was a marked difference in the two ministry times. The first, although good, was not as fresh and as relevant as the second.

I have learned to cultivate my own style and to prepare thoroughly, but also to give the Spirit license to take over any specific ministry time. The key is to use wisdom. How does the Spirit want a particular point communicated for maximum effectiveness?