

Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. \$20.

In his first book, Kenyatta R. Gilbert, assistant professor of homiletics at the Howard University School of Divinity, traces the development of homiletic theory and practice in the African American traditions. Gilbert claims a “simple” argument, “African American preaching, at all times, absconds its character and charge to the church and the public unless it recovers its elemental prophetic, priestly, and sagely voice.”(11). Resourcing the folk pedagogy of his grandfather’s front porch-turned-homiletic classroom, combined with detailed historical and practical theological work, Gilbert aims to recover what he calls a “venerable but vanishing tradition” of “trivocal” preaching.

Chapter one examines the theoretical and pedagogical assumptions undergirding the education of black clergy. Here, Gilbert lifts up and affirms both Henry H. Mitchell’s early vernacular theory of black preaching, as well as Cleophus J. LaRue’s later hermeneutical approach. More critically, Gilbert challenges essentialist claims inherent in both scholars’ understanding of culture and “blackness” and the homiletic implications of those claims. Moreover, Gilbert argues that neither scholar adequately addresses, “what Black preaching must now do to overcome its apparent irrelevance in today’s society” (27). Prior to offering this future “promise” of black preaching, however, Gilbert first traces its historical “journey.”

The second chapter is a fascinating account of black preaching, stretching from its African roots, through its early syncretistic manifestations in America and culminating in the preaching of the Civil-Rights Era. While the periods of revival and Civil-Rights may seem a review to many scholars, Gilbert’s most valuable work, in this chapter, is his account of black preaching in the Reconstruction and Migration Eras. For instance, he masterfully explores the sometimes complimentary, sometimes contradictory and always complex voices of an array of migration era preachers. Some exhorted blacks to “cast down their buckets” in the South, while others prophesied deliverance to northern urban centers such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York. Geographical and class tensions, however, led to the emergence of quite diverse black preaching and worship traditions in the urban North. This detailed historical account provides a solid backdrop against which Gilbert develops his more constructive work of recovering a “trivocal voice” for contemporary black preaching in chapters three and four.

While the call for a justice-seeking, “prophetic,” and a healing, “priestly” voice breaks little new ground in contemporary homiletics, it is the intertwining of these voices with a third, “sagely” voice that makes Gilbert’s work most interesting. This voice, in his estimation, is a much-neglected voice of wisdom that draws from the deep wells of community experience in life together with God and collective struggle in the world. While no preaching ministry can or at least *should* be characterized by only one of these voices, it is their integration and mutual reinforcement that Gilbert sees as holding out the potential to stave off death dealing forces in contemporary black communities.

Chapter four provides pragmatic steps and helpful example sermons for students and working pastors seeking to implement Gilbert’s theoretical work. The fifth chapter supplements the second by focusing upon manifestations of this trivocal voice in the sermons of three exemplary African American ministers: Martin Luther King Jr., Prathia Hall, and Gardner C. Taylor. The final chapter addresses the character and identity of contemporary black preachers, offering a quite helpful reflection upon several “personas” that ministers often perform. This informative and insightful book ends with a reiteration of the call to preachers and teachers of

preaching to recover a trivocal voice for the sake of addressing the crises facing the African American “village.”

Despite its brevity, this slim volume is filled with valuable homiletical insights. It is not, however, without its limitations. While Gilbert rightly criticizes contemporary African American homileticians for not adequately addressing the irrelevance of much contemporary black preaching, this text stops short of providing a detailed account of how a “trivocal” voice might, in fact, engage concrete and complex issues facing black communities. How, for instance, might an integrated prophetic, priestly and sagely voice address a concrete issue such as HIV/AIDS, which has exposed the woeful silence and inadequacy of each of these voices in black churches? Second, Gilbert gives little sustained attention to the presence and contribution of more marginal voices within and surrounding African American preaching traditions. How might attention to womanist theories and practices, for instance, alter the narration of the “journey” and “promise” of black preaching? What of those alienated from the pulpit by gender, age, sexuality or any other marker of difference, but who have nevertheless found their voices as “[brother and] sistah proclaimers,” (to use Teresa Fry-Brown’s helpful term) bearing witness *outside* the of pulpit? Addressing the “crises in the village” will require African American ministers, in the postmodern context, to find our voices in the midst of and in solidarity with a diverse range of prophetic, priestly and sagely voices speaking on behalf of God and our communities.

In *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching*, Kenyatta Gilbert, a self-described grandson, son and teacher of preachers has drawn from deep wells to offer a valuable contribution to the field of homiletics. Despite the above-mentioned limitations, Gilbert has indeed offered a gift to scholars, ministers and students of homiletics. This text will no doubt be used in homiletic classrooms and churches across the nation for the foreseeable future. All students of African American preaching traditions should welcome this new book and the “promise” that it holds for the future!

M. Brandon McCormack, Vanderbilt University