

Article

Defending the Call to Preach in Shirley Caesar's Gospel Autobiography

Angela Marie Nelson 

School of Cultural and Critical Studies, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403, USA; anelson@bgsu.edu

Abstract: Shirley Caesar, a celebrated, multiple award-winning gospel singer and preacher, used and retold stories about three transformative spiritual experiences to build a case for defending her call to preach. These ritualistic spiritual events included chronicling her conversion, spirit baptism, and call experiences. In this discussion, I examine the contexts of Caesar's familial and religious backgrounds, Christian Protestant preaching culture and gender, Caesar's "parable" and "prolegomenon" of purpose, and Caesar's defense of her call to preach. I conclude by exploring the ways in which, as an "outsider within," Caesar's "defense case story" negotiated and dissented from theological narratives about the place of women in Black Holiness-Pentecostal preaching culture. Journeying on her own path, inspired and led by God, Caesar crossed the borders and boundaries of traditional gender roles, standing within (and outside) the margins of gospel singing and gospel preaching.

Keywords: Shirley Caesar; autobiography; gospel music; preaching culture



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1. Introduction: Gospelwoman Shirley Ann Caesar Williams

Shirley Caesar, a celebrated, multiple award-winning gospel singer and preacher, opened the first chapter of her 1998 autobiography, *The Lady, the Melody, and the Word: The Inspirational Story of the First Lady of Gospel*, describing a violent anti-Black incident that occurred in 1954 while traveling to a concert destination in the South.¹ Caesar could have opened her gospel autobiography with any number of details about her personal life, but she instead chose an incident where she feared that she would die at the hands of white men. Caesar emphatically declared that "God delivered" her that day because "He had a destiny and divine purpose" for her to "proclaim the good news of the gospel" in "melody and the Word" (Caesar 1998, p. 10).

Caesar's relating this violent anti-Black incident was primarily a declaration of her Kingdom purpose rather than a retelling of, yet another example of postwar Jim and Jane Crow violence based on a southern Black gospelwoman's social identities of region, sex, and race.² Caesar's story was her testimony of deliverance from potential death to abundant life imbued with a God-given purpose and plan. Caesar uses the incident and a bold declaration naming herself a "prophet unto the nations" as a launchpad upon which to defend her call to preach. Caesar outlined three transformative spiritual experiences to build her case: (1) conversion/salvation; (2) spirit baptism; (3) call to preach. Even though Caesar grew up in and continues to participate in a Black Holiness-Pentecostal denomination—Mount Calvary Holy Church of America—that holds a general egalitarian stance regarding women and preaching, this stance is not as stable, visible, and supportive of women as one would suppose. For example, websites for the United Holy Church of America and its sister denominations, Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, and Mount Calvary Holy Church of America, include a page of the denomination's leadership and looping videos of upcoming events with women represented in them (United Holy Church of America 2021; Mount Calvary Holy Church of America n.d.; Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, Incorporated 2022). Nevertheless, men outnumber

the women in all leadership positions and events displayed. Alternatively, conflicting theological doctrines, narratives, and viewpoints regarding women preaching, being ordained, and holding leadership positions across Christian denominations in general affect the numbers of women in these roles in Black Holiness-Pentecostal denominations.

In this article, I consider Shirley Caesar's use and retelling of stories about three transformative spiritual events as a case upon which to build a defense for her calling to preach. In this discussion, I will examine the contexts of Caesar's familial and religious backgrounds, Christian Protestant preaching culture and gender, Caesar's "parable" and "prolegomenon" of purpose, and Caesar's defense of her call to preach. I conclude by exploring the ways in which, as an "outsider within," Caesar's "defense case story" negotiates and dissents from theological narratives about the place of women in Black Holiness-Pentecostal preaching culture (Collins 1986, pp. S14–S15). I have chosen to focus only on Caesar's gospel preaching rather than on her gospel singing since the general act of women singing in the Black Holiness-Pentecostal church is not controversial.

2. Caesar's Family and Church Background

Caesar was born on 13 October 1938, to James "Big Jim" Caesar and Hallie Martin Caesar in their home on 2209 Chataqua Street in Durham, North Carolina, the tenth of thirteen children (Caesar 1998, p. 33; Caesar n.d.). By the time of the publication of her gospel autobiography, Pastor Shirley Caesar had been singing gospel music for over 50 years—since she was eight years old—"I was the little girl with the enormous voice" (Caesar 1998, pp. 3, 36). Better known as "Shirley Caesar" to her listeners over the last several decades, Caesar sang in organized musical groups at a young age. These groups included ones composed of her family members and non-family members—local groups such as the Charity Singers of Durham and Thelma Bumpass and the Royalties. Caesar's gift for singing brought her to the attention of the popular Black women's gospel group, The Caravans. Caesar joined and performed with The Caravans in August 1958, just a few months before her twentieth birthday (Nelson 2022, p. 1). Caesar left The Caravans and went solo, forming The Shirley Caesar Singers in 1966 (Caesar 1998, p. 88). She continues to preach and to sing to this day at her church, Mount Calvary Word of Faith Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, and on her Facebook page and YouTube channel's "One Hour with Pastor Shirley Caesar" on Sunday afternoons.

All of Caesar's training and opportunities for singing began with her family and her church. Darlene Graves beautifully describes the coexistence of family and church when referring to white Southern gospel family matriarchs. It is in these locations that gospelwomen are taught and trained to be gospelwomen. "Their natural musical talents were discovered early during family singing, were nurtured in the home, and also validated in their local church. They began singing in church at an early age and often with siblings or a parent. Since most grew up in their small towns, they were encouraged in their teens, recognized for their talents, and given many opportunities to perform publicly" (Graves 2004, p. 97).

Caesar's home church was Mount Calvary Holy Church, and the pastor was Bishop Frizelle Yelverton (Caesar 1998, p. 23). Before that church, Caesar's family attended Fisher Memorial United Holy Church (Caesar 1998, p. 23). Fisher Memorial was affiliated with the United Holy Church of America, the oldest Black Holiness-Pentecostal denomination founded by several men and women circa 1886 in Method, North Carolina (Turner 1984; Sanders 1996, p. 20). The United Holy Church of America and other churches of the sanctified movement in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States are noted for the involvement of Blacks, women, and the poor at all levels of their ministry. The sanctified, or Holiness-Pentecostal, church was more accepting of women preaching than mainline Protestant churches (such as Baptist and Methodist denominations) because of the sanctified church's reliance on an "egalitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit" (Sanders 1996, p. 17) that valued the expression of the gifts of the Spirit and the leadership regarding the administration and management of those gifts in the

church operating in any person, no matter their social identity. The Holiness-Pentecostal, or sanctified, church comprises the Holiness, Pentecostal, and Apostolic churches, which emphasize the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit and living a life of holiness.

Factions broke off from the United Holy Church of America into denominations, forming Mount Sinai Holy Church of America in 1924 and Mount Calvary Holy Church of America in 1929 (Sanders 1996, p. 33; Gilkes 2001, p. 128; Butler 2007, p. 38). Mount Calvary Holy Church in Durham, North Carolina, Caesar's church during her pre-adolescent years, was affiliated with the Mount Calvary Holy Church of America.

Caesar discusses how her church prepared her for singing and preaching in Chapter Two, "The Foundation for Life." Indeed, church was very important within Caesar's family. The "only reason you weren't at church every time the door opened was that something catastrophic had occurred to prevent you from being there" (Caesar 1998, pp. 41–42). Caesar credited Bishop Frizelle Yelverton for his "anointed, inspired messages." She believed that as a "result of his preaching and teaching," her "knowledge of God increased" and that she "grew spiritually" (Caesar 1998, p. 24). Caesar's family and church inculcated "Christian beliefs" in her: "Of all the factors that held our neighborhood and our lives together, none was more influential than the church. From the very beginning, I was immersed in the gospel tradition in both my family and church. We prayed together, worshiped together, and lived out our Christian beliefs in our daily lives" (Caesar 1998, p. 23). The church taught Caesar the "basics" of her faith, and the "truths" she learned "became the foundation" of her life and her music (Caesar 1998, p. 25). "The church played a key role not only in preparing me for the proclamation of the Word but also for the melody of the Word" (Caesar 1998, p. 25).

Caesar gravitated towards singing in church because she had a gift, because her father and mother sang, and because it was a way to raise income for her family. Caesar also sang in the church because there it was "acceptable" for her to sing. Jonathan L. Walton and Lerone A. Martin interpret the different gender expectations required of Black men and Black women on religious race recordings from 1925 to 1941. These religious race recordings were on such leading labels as Columbia, Paramount, and RCA-Victor. During this time, Black blueswomen and Black preachers were among the most popular personas of the race recordings. However, the term preacher is encoded as male; of the approximately one hundred black ministers who used phonograph recordings, only seven women ministers recorded their "sermons on wax" (Martin 2014, pp. 116, 124).

Martin notes that while consumers and the phonograph industry "embraced and lauded blues women and later black female gospel singers," "black women preaching on wax did not receive the same reception" (Martin 2014, p. 120). Martin concludes that "singing was acceptable, perhaps even expected of women. Preaching, however, was largely seen as a man's role" (Martin 2014, p. 121). Furthermore, the Black women able to "resist being reduced to songsters in the studio—forced only to sing as opposed to preach—all represented the Pentecostal tradition" (Walton 2010, p. 209). Singing was a safe and gender-appropriate activity for Black churchwomen and girls because singing was not preaching.

3. Preaching Culture, Gender, and Authority

The American Christian Church, including the Black Holiness-Pentecostal Church, is an institution organized by gender. Therefore, to examine the Black Holiness-Pentecostal Church is to examine unequal gendered power dynamics. Within the Black Holiness-Pentecostal Church, a preaching culture exists. Preaching culture privileges maleness, which then creates an environment for inequities between women and men. The gendered inequities do not stop there. Inequities exist regarding dress codes. One longstanding issue is the specific ways Black women and girls are surveilled, policed, and scrutinized in connection to their bodies. Surveillance and policing require that Black women and girls cover their bodies so as not to tempt Black men and boys. Anthea D. Butler, examining the women in the Church of God in Christ, the largest Holiness-Pentecostal

denomination in the United States, notes that choosing “appropriate” clothing was about “cleansing one’s spiritual community of sexual desire. It was COGIC women’s responsibility to control men’s sexual behavior by controlling their own dress” (Butler 2007, p. 80). COGIC men and boys have no such requirement in relationship to COGIC women and girls (Butler 2007, pp. 77–86; Moultrie 2017, pp. 21–28; Lomax 2018, pp. x–xii).

Caesar’s stressing the purposes of God for her life was her way of negotiating and resisting theological narratives about the place of women in Black Holiness-Pentecostal preaching culture. Preaching and pastoring are typically mutually exclusive experiences for Black gospelwomen, whereas these same experiences or activities are typically mutually inclusive for Black gospelmen. Operating as a unique culture (with its own artistic and social beliefs and values, artifacts, practices, production-dissemination systems, controls, and regulations), Black Holiness-Pentecostal preaching culture in particular and American Christian preaching culture in general cultivate resistance to change (Gerbner 1978, p. 47). It functions to reinforce theological ordering and the divinely endorsed superiority of males; fixed gender roles; the male-dominated social order; the perceptions of God (and the male minister) as asexual males; and the traditional model of gender relations as a component of the goal of assimilation in Black civil society (Lawless 1994, pp. 57–61; Gilkes 2001, p. 60).

Preaching and the call to preach involve and mean more than an individual receiving a revelation or delivering a sermon. The preacher and preaching symbolize theology, tradition, structure, religiosity, authority, leadership, hierarchy, status, ethics, and, above all, gender. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes bluntly labels preaching as the “most masculine aspect of black religious ritual” (Gilkes 2001, p. 129). Preaching and the call to preach involve ordination, pastoring a church, and embodying authority. Preaching and the call to preach exist in a mostly male homosocial, or same-sex, and patriarchal culture that identifies governing authority, or the right to hold office, with one’s male identity (Stephenson 2011, p. 411). As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes reminds us, however, the “politics of sexism in the Sanctified Church are the politics of incomplete male domination, and the politics of feminism are the politics of cooperative protest, collective enterprise, and assertive autonomy” (Gilkes 2001, p. 58). Males at an early age are given a pathway, groomed, nurtured, and expected to select preaching as a vocation. While females can be singers in the church choir or become pastors’ wives.

Women’s insistence upon preaching has been one of the persistent struggles that women, both Black and white, have experienced in the United States for decades prior to Caesar (Stephenson 2011, p. 411). In short, preaching in the Christian church has historically been a man’s role. If it essentially belongs to men, then it is not surprising that preaching is a type of “authoritative discourse” (Andrews 1994, p. 118). This is not simply because preaching “invites no analysis, admits no challenge, and grants no ‘free appropriation’ or ‘assimilation’ of itself” (Andrews 1994, p. 118). “Preaching evokes its authority by citing ‘the authoritative word,’ namely *the Word*, whose privileged status is reinforced by its assumed historical priority and by its traditional legalistic recognition as ‘the word of the fathers’ (handed down, in the case of Christian authoritative discourse, from *the Father*)” (Andrews 1994, p. 118).

Recognizing the authoritative, or ruling, characteristic of preaching culture then illuminates one primary point of conflict between the sexes in the church. Preachers preach. Singers sing. The preacher is a man. A singer can be either female or male. Due to a complementarian theological view, men are leaders and women are supporters. If men are designated leaders, then there is no room for women to be leaders. If women are not leaders, then they cannot be preachers.

4. Anti-Black Violence on Caesar’s “Gospel Highway”

The practice of traveling and touring, or being on the “gospel highway,” established a mechanism by Black church members for disseminating Black gospel music and for advertising Black gospel singers (Heilbut 1985, p. xxix). The “gospel highway” involved (a) a circuit of highway and railway routes and cities, (b) a network of churches, radio sta-

tions, pastors, singers, musicians, preachers, publishers, promoters, deejays, and audiences, (c) a repertoire of songs and sermons, and (d) the currency of money and the “Spirit” of God. By the time the attack occurred, Caesar had logged many hours of traveling by car on the gospel highway. “I was traveling locally on the weekends to churches in Raleigh, Greensboro, Chapel Hill, Winston-Salem, and other surrounding North and South Carolina cities” (Caesar 1998, p. 3).

Caesar depended on the income from “love offerings” she received after ministering and singing in a church to help with her family’s financial needs. “Whenever I received an offering from singing in churches, I brought every penny home and put the money in Mama’s hand, telling her, ‘This is what the people in Greensboro (or Winston-Salem or wherever I sang) sent to you this week, Mama.’ Many times it was just a small amount, but she would always smile at me and give thanks to the Lord” (Caesar 1998, p. 53). Furthermore, later, during her tenure with The Caravans, “one of the best-known black female gospel groups” (Caesar 1998, p. 62) from 1958 to 1966, Caesar says: “Those years with the Caravans weren’t always easy ones. The schedules we kept and the conditions under which we traveled were very trying. We would pack our bags and all six of us would pile into our Cadillac, sometimes traveling all day to get to a concert that night. Once we arrived, we only had time to get a bite to eat, get dressed, and go onstage. Often, we sang in churches. At other times we sang in auditoriums” (Caesar 1998, p. 73).

Within the Acknowledgments section and Chapter One of her autobiography—her parable and prolegomenon—Caesar described an incident of anti-Black violence that she encountered in 1954 when she was 15 or 16 years old, traveling as “Baby Shirley Caesar” along with Leroy Johnson, a gospel announcer and gospel singer. Johnson and Caesar began working together because her previous appearance on his radio program was “so phenomenal” (Caesar 1998, p. 3). The others traveling with Caesar and Johnson included “Reverend and Mrs. Jackson, and another missionary and her seventeen-year-old nephew” (Caesar 1998, p. 3). Caesar and her travel partners were traveling around 3:00 a.m. in the morning to their next concert destination at a church in Columbia, South Carolina.

Caesar recounted this experience based on both her eyewitness reporting and that of what was told to her by Leroy Johnson (Caesar 1998, p. 4). The group stopped at a service, or gasoline, station near Bennettsville, South Carolina, to fill the car’s gas tank and to “refresh” themselves before driving onto their concert destination (Caesar 1998, p. 4). Caesar witnessed Reverend Jackson driving up to the gas pump and the attendant filling the car’s tank with gasoline. However, Caesar remained in the car to “try to take a nap” while everyone else went into the store (Caesar 1998, p. 4). Caesar soon learned that something went horribly wrong inside the gas station store.

The traumatic events began with the missionary’s nephew. His “sleepy response” to a white male store clerk evoked a hostile response from the store clerk. The triggering action? The young Black teen responded inappropriately to the white male store clerk with a “uh-huh” regarding a piece of peppermint candy that he wanted rather than responding with a “yes, sir” (Caesar 1998, p. 5). The clerk, disapproving of the teen’s response, then used the “n word and slapped the young man so hard that it turned his whole body around” (Caesar 1998, p. 5). The clerk then went behind the counter and came up “waving a steel hammer and simultaneously” yelled to the other white men in the store who had been playing checkers, “Let’s kill them all.” The teen “instantly” ran out of the store with two of the white men in “hot pursuit of him.” Leroy Johnson, an observer up to that point, had one leg (after an accident years prior that required that his leg be amputated) and used crutches that hindered his ability to leave the store quickly. As Johnson stumbled to the back door to leave the store, an older white man grabbed him and hit Johnson in the face. Johnson calmly stated to the older man who hit him that they “hadn’t done anything wrong,” and that they “didn’t start this” (Caesar 1998, p. 5). The elderly man apologized to Johnson and unlatched the screen door. Furthermore, ironically, the same man who hit Johnson in the mouth told Johnson to “watch out for the bottom step” because the step was broken (Caesar 1998, p. 6).

Although Caesar did not see the events between the teenager and the clerk, she witnessed the beating up of Reverend Jackson at the gas pump. “Two men had cornered him and were beating him unmercifully. Blood poured down his face and to his shirt” (Caesar 1998, p. 6). Caesar “couldn’t believe” her eyes: “Why were those white men beating Reverend Jackson? Where was everybody else? What in the world had transpired from the time they went in the store up to now? I couldn’t figure it out, but I didn’t waste time contemplating it either” (Caesar 1998, p. 6). Although Caesar wanted to help, she was torn. “Instinctively,” she wanted to “run away from there,” but her “common sense” told her that they “needed to stay together. But then she noticed everyone else was running” (Caesar 1998, p. 6). Caesar finally realized that the “time for fighting was over.” Considering that there were several white men fighting with them and pursuing them, Caesar reasoned that if they “didn’t get out of there,” they would “all probably be killed” (Caesar 1998, p. 7).

At that point, Caesar jumped out of the car and ran. Across the highway, she saw Reverend Jackson’s wife near a ditch. Mrs. Jackson fell into the ditch when from “out of nowhere a soda bottle flew through the air and hit Mrs. Jackson on the hip, knocking her into the ditch” (Caesar 1998, p. 7). Caesar saw coming directly toward her two white men, one with a pitchfork and the other with a garden hoe. Caesar “raced from that awful place.” Fearing that the white men were coming after her, Caesar “forced” herself to run even faster. Johnson and Reverend Jackson (even after being hit with an oil drum) made it back into the car and caught up with Caesar on the road. At first, she “breathed a sigh of relief that at least they were okay” (Caesar 1998, p. 7). But then Caesar saw something else: The two white men from the store were in the backseat “hitting and pulling” on Johnson and Reverend Jackson.

Fortunately, the missionary’s nephew came to safety first. From the gas station, he ran into the field and then ran to an “old house” where a Black man in the yard was raking leaves (Caesar 1998, p. 8). The homeowner listened to his story, “grabbed a gun from the house,” and then took the teen to the state highway patrol office. Furthermore, the others came to safety: “Somehow Leroy and Reverend Jackson had been able fight the white men off in the backseat of the car and had picked up the other women” (Caesar 1998, p. 8).

Everyone except Caesar ended up at the state highway patrol office. Alone, Caesar began to wonder, “what would those men do” if they caught her. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to escape because I was too tired. Where was everybody else? How would my friends know where to find me? Where could I go” (Caesar 1998, p. 9). Although she became fearful, as Caesar prayed, “calmness and peace hovered over” her. Now, after prayer, Caesar knew that she was “going to be all right” (Caesar 1998, p. 9). “Within moments,” a highway patrol officer, who had searched for her, pulled up into the “vacant lot” where Caesar was “sitting on a tree stump . . . scared and worn-out,” and drove her to the state highway patrol office (Caesar 1998, pp. 8–9).

Caesar and her traveling partners could have pressed charges, but they decided against it, reckoning that it was “ludicrous for a group of black strangers even to think about filing charges against a group of white citizens” (Caesar 1998, p. 9). The white men at the service station told the patrol officers that Caesar and her traveling partners “had come into their store, causing trouble and throwing bottles all over the place” (Caesar 1998, p. 9).

Caesar privileged her religion over her race (and gender and citizenship) to describe this horrific, racially inspired incident. The incident was indicative of the palpable existence of institutional racism and segregation in the South, as Caesar made clear in the second paragraph in Chapter One: “I grew up during an era when racism, sexism, and prejudice were very prevalent” (Caesar 1998, p. 2). Caesar would revisit the theme of anti-Black violence in Chapter Seven when she recalled her activities on the day of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Caesar described that time as one where “violence and bloodshed on almost every hand marked that era” in the United States (Caesar 1998, p. 97). Caesar’s retelling of this incident in such detail in the very first part of her book served to engage the readers not only with Caesar’s fear as she experienced racism, violence, and

bloodshed but also, especially, to emphasize the value that she now placed on her life because of the value *God* had placed on her life.

5. Caesar's "Parable" and "Prolegomenon" of Purpose

The Acknowledgments and Chapter One of Shirley Caesar's gospel autobiography form a prolegomenon introducing the defense of her call to preach. Caesar made it clear in the Acknowledgments that preaching was a destiny for her life that God determined, comparing her call to God's call on Jeremiah's life. "The Scripture says in Jeremiah 1:5: 'Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations'" (*The King James Bible*) (Caesar 1998, p. vii). Furthermore, in Chapter One, Caesar recounted a violent anti-Black incident in order to present it not only as a moment of racial awareness but also, primarily, as a powerful and transformative declaration of her Kingdom purpose. Caesar reckoned the incident to be, in "many respects" a "parable" of her "being" (Caesar 1998, p. 10). The reader is drawn into her parable by two intriguing questions: "Have you ever been in a predicament where you knew your very life was in jeopardy? I mean, a situation or an incident that caused you to see your whole life flash in front of your eyes and made you keenly aware that without divine intervention, your days, hours, minutes, even seconds remaining on this earth were limited?" (Caesar 1998, p. 2). Caesar saw herself as saved from harm and her future life ordained by God.

The incident vividly described the contexts and conditions of the times and region that she and African Americans experienced. By privileging this particular incident, Caesar demonstrated to the reader that she was a socially conscious Black gospelwoman and one who was in touch with the "ordinary people" who kept the "world running" such as "blue-collar workers, hairdressers, carpenters, schoolteachers, grocery store clerks, nurses, [and] housewives" (Caesar 1998, p. 159). Through her life and by recounting this incident, Caesar demonstrated that Black Holiness-Pentecostal believers were aware of the oppression, discrimination, and surveillance that they faced in the Jim and Jane Crow South and that they did not sugarcoat it with religious clichés and platitudes. However, what Caesar ultimately wanted the reader to know was that her kingdom purpose was more significant than the racist goal of those white men to "kill them all." With this declaration, she set the stage for the preferred reading of her gospel autobiography as the "First Lady of Gospel"; a "lady" convinced that God's commission to her was to spread the gospel of Jesus "in melody and in Word" (Caesar 1998, p. 43).

The purpose of recounting the racial attack was not a cause for lifelong anger. Her narration of the attack was a story of redemption, and the attack itself was a redemptive moment. "In many respects that experience is a parable of my being" (Caesar 1998, p. 10). Caesar surviving this attack reaffirmed her life, justified her life, legitimized her life, and validated her life. A life that had so much "working against her" (Caesar 1998, p. 10).

With so much working against me—a semi-invalid mother, a deceased father, low self-esteem resulting from having been called degrading names as a child, and living in a society plagued by race, sexism, and segregation—I wasn't [supposed] to make it. I should never have escaped the impoverishment that surrounded me. But by God's great mercy, I did. (Caesar 1998, p. 10)

Caesar highlighted her gender, race, class, and residential settlement in Durham, North Carolina, as factors making her unfit to be used by God. That is, allowing herself to be an instrument, conduit, and vessel of God's thoughts, feelings, actions, and words. Emerging out of the incident, considering themselves to be "blessed" because they were "all alive," Caesar was certain, that by the "grace of God" she "made it through the ordeal" and that her "life was spared" (Caesar 1998, p. 10). She saw the racially provoked incident as a moment that gave purpose to her life and to her ministry.

I am convinced that God delivered me that day in South Carolina because he had a destiny and a divine purpose for me. I will always believe that I escaped

because there was a calling upon my life, a God-commission to fulfill, and that was to go into all the world to proclaim the good news of the gospel, not just in spoken words, but also in melodious lyrics. Yes, the melody and the Word! The Lord had chosen me, Baby Shirley Caesar, an underprivileged black girl from what some might consider the wrong side of the tracks in Durham, North Carolina, to be His servant, a vessel of honor. I didn't die that day simply because God said, *Live*. (Caesar 1998, p. 10)

6. Building Blocks of Caesar's "Preaching Defense" Case

Caesar first developed her prolegomenon of purpose with the statement in Chapter One that God's commission to her was to deliver His Gospel in melody and in word. Next, she presented a parable detailing how her involvement in an incident of anti-Black violence illustrated the fact that God had a purpose for her life. Caesar meticulously chronicled her conversion/salvation, spirit baptism, and call experiences in chapters 2 and 3. All three transformative experiences build upon the others, establishing her spiritual charisma, relationship with, and wisdom in the Lord.

6.1. Conversion/Salvation Experience

Caesar discussed her salvation, or conversion, experience in Chapter Two, "The Foundation for Life." Caesar's conversion experience occurred while in the midst of "playing church" with her siblings (Caesar 1998, pp. 27–28).

The single most important event of my life happened at age twelve. I was in the backyard with my brother Solomon and my sister Anne. We were getting ready to play church. Solomon had a Bible in his hand and a handkerchief to wipe his face, as he had seen other preachers do as they preached and sweated. We also had an empty soda case that served as his podium. (Caesar 1998, p. 27)

Although she was playing church, Caesar experienced something different when she jumped to her feet the "third time." The "most amazing thing happened. Right there in the backyard, my skinny little body suspended in midair, the word Jesus hanging on my lips, the power of the Holy Ghost exploded within me. . . . As I looked toward heaven, I felt the powerful presence of the Lord. It was as if the hand of God reached down and touched me. I felt warm and tingly all over, energized by a bolt of holy electricity" (Caesar 1998, p. 28).

Caesar called her conversion the "single most important event" of her life. This is a typical testimony spoken by Black Holiness-Pentecostals believers because they view "being saved," or now being in "right relationship" with God, as the most important first step to living a good life and to living a holy life. "By the time I landed on the ground, tears were streaming down my cheeks . . . I raised my face toward the sun, and it was as though God stood right beside me" (Caesar 1998, p. 28).

Caesar's mother, Hallie Caesar, knew that (Shirley) Caesar truly had an encounter with God. "Surprised by my tears and my behavior, Anne ran into the house, calling Mama. We had already been warned not to play church. Anne kept shouting, 'Mama, come out here. Shirley is playing with the Lord again.' She led Mama to the window and pointed out to me. 'Look at her,' she said. [Mama said] 'Shirley ain't playing this time'" (Caesar 1998, p. 28). Caesar acknowledged what the Lord had done for her: "The Lord had reached down His blessed hand and touched me from the top of my head to the tip of my toes" (Caesar 1998, p. 28). "Top of my head" (or "crown of my head") to the "tip of my toes" (or "soles of my feet") is an oft-repeated phrase in the Black Holiness-Pentecostal church. This prayer request or declaration symbolizes the complete work, or total blessing, on one's soul, body, and spirit that the pray-er believes that God can do for them or for others.

Of importance in the Black Holiness-Pentecostal church is seriousness about your relationship with God. You must not "play church" even though that is exactly what Caesar, and her siblings were doing: playing church. Caesar declared that the Holy Spirit had "transformed" their play time into a "genuine spiritual experience" (Caesar 1998, p. 41). Convinced of the importance of conversion/salvation, Caesar further declared that after

her conversion, her music ministry “became more and more in demand to minister in churches and render concerts” (Caesar 1998, p. 28).

While detailing her conversion experience as partial evidence defending her call to preach, Caesar was also connecting her conversion experience to validating and legitimating her recognition of and relationship to God. This is an important first step for any call from God. For how can God call one, if one does not recognize God and intentionally choose to develop a relationship with God? This motif—“narrative signposts” of God’s directives to Caesar—is a critical component of Caesar’s gospel autobiography. Elaine J. Lawless found in her ethnographic research on white women preachers in central Missouri that they often used the name of God to justify their actions and to legitimize their work (Lawless 1988, p. xx). In a similar manner, Caesar uses the name of God frequently throughout her gospel autobiography for validation and legitimation.

Chanta Haywood notes that by placing the conversion experience at or near the beginning of the texts so that the nineteenth-century African American women spiritual autobiographers could state that they were born again, they dispelled the notion that “women could not prophesy, by suggesting that God—in selecting and interfacing with them through conversion—apparently did not have a gender bias. Social constructs, not divine ones, limit women” (Haywood 2003, p. 50). Caesar used the same pivotal point and narrative pattern as did the Black preaching women of the nineteenth-century.

6.2. Spirit Baptism Experience

Caesar recounted her baptism in the Holy Spirit experience in Chapter Three, “Born to Sing.” “I shall never forget the night I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit” (Caesar 1998, p. 41). Caesar, born after the 1906 Azusa Street Revival that engendered the international Pentecostal movement that embraced speaking in tongues (glossolalia) as the physical evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit, and being a member of the oldest Black Holiness-Pentecostal denomination, the United Holy Church of America, explains why Caesar included an account of her baptism in the Holy Spirit (Sanders 1996, pp. 27–32). Her spirit baptism—in Caesar’s words, “God moving in”—experience occurred after her conversion or salvation experience (Caesar 1998, p. 41).

Still “feeling “exhilarated” from her “backyard experience with the Lord”—that is, the moment of her conversion or salvation—Caesar wanted more of God. Caesar wanted to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” and to “speak with other tongues” (Caesar 1998, p. 42). A visit with Mother House two nights after Pastor Dorothy Elam Keith’s two-week revival at Caesar’s church ushered in this next transformative experience for Caesar.³ “I was baptized in the Holy Spirit, and I began to speak in a heavenly language. I’ll never forget that night. I felt that the Lord had given me a greater desire to tell others about Jesus in melody and in Word” (Caesar 1998, p. 43).

Although Caesar spent the least amount of time describing her spirit baptism, it was clearly important to her preaching defense case because the Holy Spirit, who embodied the “fullness of Christ,” which she now embodied, gave her the confidence to believe that she was “ready for the next step” in her “life’s journey with the Lord” (Caesar 1998, p. 43). Having decided to “live according to His divine will,” Caesar also related the need for this power in relationship to temptation (Caesar 1998, p. 42). “I felt that the Lord had given me the power to withstand any temptation that came my way, the courage to say no to sin and evil, and the strength to walk through the fiery furnaces of life” (Caesar 1998, p. 43).

The need to understand Caesar’s concern about temptations (and why she mentioned it at this point in her autobiography) relates to church- and self-policing of Black women’s and girls’ sexual purity. Sexual purity in Black Holiness-Pentecostal churches is defined as avoiding sexual intimacy outside of heterosexual marriage (Moultrie 2017, p. 24). This was of great (and grave) importance to Caesar because, beginning when she was a child, Caesar traveled to sing most days in a week, many times without family members, away from home and church. Caesar’s being on the road exposed her to the possibility of sexually motivated attacks (Nelson 2022, pp. 2–4). Monique Moultrie notes that “pure living” gave

Black Holiness-Pentecostal churchwomen (and gospelwomen) “more credibility as [they] continued teaching and preaching” (Moultrie 2017, p. 25). Likewise, Caesar desired “pure living” because of her love for God.

When Caesar encountered a Black gospelman who knocked at her hotel room in 1958 while on tour with The Caravans, requesting that she “bless his cross,” she viewed it as an “attack”—rhetoric connecting to the “work of the devil” or “attacks of the enemy.” “Blessing” the gospelman’s cross invited the possibility of sexual seduction and intercourse, interactions that Caesar could not afford to participate in. Perhaps, Caesar was thinking of the hotel incident and the possibility of such occurrences when she declared that “But for the grace of God, I could have become . . . an unwed mother . . . The power of the Holy Spirit threw a protective shield of spiritual armor around me and gave me strength to resist temptation” (Caesar 1998, p. 41). For Caesar, only baptism in the Holy Spirit gave her this kind of power. Caesar’s final assessment of the hotel incident was that surviving attacks similar to the gospelman’s request established the “fact among the groups on the road” that she was “serious” about her “commitment to Christ” (Caesar 1998, p. 68).

6.3. Call Experience

Caesar’s prolegomenon and parable were an introduction to Caesar defending her call to preach. Before her call, each transformative experience—conversion/salvation and spirit baptism—led to and prepared Caesar for the next transformative experience. Caesar recounted her call experience in Chapter Two, “The Foundation for Life.” Although she had been traveling and singing since she was eight years old (Caesar 1998, p. 3), Caesar noted that her call to preach occurred when she was 17 years old (Caesar 1998, pp. 10, 29–31, 84, 174, 178, 184). Caesar describes in detail her call experience, similar to the way that biblical accounts report the calls of Moses, Gideon, Samuel, Elisha, and the Apostle Paul (Barfoot and Sheppard 1980, p. 5; Guyette 2015, pp. 55–57). Interpreted as a personal, spiritual experience, “a call” is of particular importance in Black Holiness-Pentecostal churches, denominations, and congregations such as the one in which gospelwoman Shirley Caesar grew up. Within this context, a calling refers to receiving an assignment or commission from God to preach the Word of God (Barfoot and Sheppard 1980, p. 4). This “call” to preach (preaching is interpreted as a type of “ministering” or “prophetic authority”) often assumes that pastoring or leading a church (pastoring is interpreted as a type of “governing” or “priestly authority”) will follow. The “call” experience has yielded different outcomes for men and women as it relates to church headship and leadership.

While Caesar’s call was a personal one, and it was not private in the sense of her being physically isolated from others. Caesar’s call experience occurred while she was in a college classroom! “My actual call to the gospel ministry happened in 1957, five years after my salvation. Vividly, I remember sitting in a class at North Carolina Central University taking a typing test . . . It wasn’t exactly what most folks think of as a spiritual moment. It did not occur while I was in church. It did not happen while I read the Bible or prayed. It did not even happen while I was singing. It happened right there in a typing class” (Caesar 1998, pp. 29–30).⁴

Caesar heard the “voice of the Lord” (Caesar 1998, p. 30). Thinking that the “voice” was that of her classmate seated next to her, Caesar asked her classmate what she said. Caesar’s classmate replied that she “didn’t say anything.” Caesar was confused, but she finished the typing test and “went straight home” because she “didn’t feel well” (Caesar 1998, p. 30). Lying on her bed at home, she heard the voice again. “This time it was more pronounced, and the reality hit me. ‘God was trying to tell me something.’ I listened closer, and the words came quite clearly to me. “Behold I have called you, and I have ordained you from your mother’s womb to preach the gospel” (Caesar 1998, p. 30). Here, Caesar paraphrases Jeremiah 1.5, the same scripture with which she opened her Acknowledgements section. Repeating this scripture was demonstrative of Caesar reminding the reader of her calling. It also, as a type of ritual or narrative signpost, demonstrated that what Caesar was doing—singing and preaching—was what God had called her to do. Caesar admitted that she “did not fully

understand what those words meant at that moment,” but she interpreted what she heard to mean that God was calling her to preach as well as sing (Caesar 1998, pp. 30–31).

7. Conclusions: Caesar as an “Outsider Within” Preaching Culture

Black gospelwoman Shirley Caesar opened her gospel autobiography by describing her escape from anti-Black violence in 1954. She framed the escape as a deliverance provided by God. More specifically, she declared that God delivered her from that incident because God had a purpose and plan for her life. Caesar was peculiar and unique in that she began her ministry and career as a gospel singer but soon made herself known as a gospel preacher. “The Lord called me to the melody of song and the ministry of the Word; He called me to use music to preach . . . [T]his is what I do: I sing a sermon and I preach a song. I’m a singing evangelist” (Caesar 1998, p. 29). In fact, no other gospelwoman in American Christianity of any race has accomplished what Caesar has accomplished. It is precisely this practice and Caesar’s familial and religious background that made Caesar an “insider” of the Black Holiness-Pentecostal preaching culture. She knew the practices, rituals, and traditions of the church, where preaching is most prominent in the central ritual event occurring within the church—the worship service (Caesar 1998, p. 23; Gilkes 2001, p. 133). Caesar valorized the preacher (for his “powerful ministry”) and the church building (“we were taught to reverence the house of the Lord”) (Caesar 1998, p. 24). Caesar, in this position of building her “preaching defense” case, suggests an “outsider” status (Thompson 2022). An outsider because the “ambivalent nature of black male sexism” within the Black Holiness-Pentecostal church persisted at that time. As noted earlier, while Caesar’s religious denomination was more accepting of Black women preaching, even there, the overwhelming majority of members were women, and the overwhelming majority of leaders were men.

An “outsider within,” Caesar, in the first three chapters of her autobiography, built a defense case for her call to preach. First, she described her conversion/salvation experience, followed by her baptism in the Holy Spirit experience. Caesar then ended with a description of her call experience. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes notes one curious characteristic of Black American religion: the “black religious experience is heavily female, but the Sanctified Church is overwhelmingly female” (Gilkes 2001, p. 77). Considering this context of women comprising the overwhelming majority of Holiness-Pentecostal church members, why did Caesar feel it necessary to direct any of her energy towards defending her calling to preach? If Caesar indeed was defending her call to preach in the first three chapters of her gospel autobiography, the question then becomes, why? Caesar and her family had been affiliated with the first and oldest Black Holiness-Pentecostal denomination in the nation that was more favorable to women in its structural and doctrinal tenets. Since this denomination was supportive of women as ordained pastors, then why would Caesar feel the need to defend her call to preach?

I offer four reasons. First, women in the pulpit continues to be a highly contested issue amongst Christian denominations in the United States of America. Most mainline Protestant denominations do not permit women to serve as pastors or preachers. Caesar follows an extensive line of women using their life stories and autobiographies to validate and justify their call to preach. Black and white women preachers repeatedly interpreted and voiced their perspectives on the place of women in American Christian preaching culture. Second, the subjugation of women in general in American society is prevalent, and its practices are often invisible and unnoticed by males who benefit from this subjugation. Third, the importance of the male as father and patriarch is entrenched in American culture and society. Related to patriarchy, interestingly (but not surprisingly), Caesar further authenticated her call to preach by naming two men from whom she received “mantles” to sing and to preach. The “Lord laid upon me the mantle of my dad to sing and the mantle of my pastor, Bishop Frizelle Yelverton, to preach” (Caesar 1998, p. 31).

Fourth, Caesar could not be silent about the microaggressions and macroaggressions that she experienced. In raising her voice, Caesar spoke explicitly about sexism in Chapter

12, “Ministry as a Pastor,” of her gospel autobiography (Caesar 1998, pp. 174–86). Although on “more than one occasion” she encountered situations where she was “discriminated against as a female minister,” Caesar focused on two instances of not being allowed to “preach from the pulpit as male preachers were allowed to do” (Caesar 1998, pp. 175–76). The object, or icon, of the pulpit is key in American Christian preaching culture, thus making Caesar’s mention of it significant. The masculinization of the identity of “preacher” is matched with the masculinization of “pulpit.” Being denied entrance into the “space” of the pulpit took two forms: (1) denial of sitting on the platform with the male preachers and (2) denial of preaching from behind the lectern (Caesar 1998, p. 176). Blocked from these male-enshrined spaces, Caesar sat on a pew with the congregants and “spoke from the floor” when it was time for her to preach (Caesar 1998, p. 176). While these macroaggressive practices reinforced Caesar’s “outsider within” status and effectively prevented her from becoming a “space invader,” Caesar did not retaliate because she wanted to “epitomize” what she preached, which was practicing forgiveness (Caesar 1998, p. 177; Puwar 2004). Undeterred, Caesar forgave the pastors who discriminated against her—an act that modeled the heart of God. Before detailing her activities as a pastor, Caesar ended her discussion about sexism with hope. “Although the resistance against women preachers and pastors is still prevalent among some denominations, the situation is improving every day. Today, because of the pioneers who blazed trails along the way, there are now a number of women evangelists who are sweeping the country with the gospel of Jesus Christ . . . The church is blessed in that we’ve progressed beyond tradition and have focused on the real issue, winning souls for the kingdom” (Caesar 1998, p. 179). Caesar declared to her readers beginning with the title of her autobiography, *The Lady, the Melody, and the Word*, and throughout her autobiography that she was called to “minister in word and song” (Caesar 1998, pp. 10, 29, 49, 84, 104, 105, 117, 118, 159, 178, 199, 210, 212). Building a preaching defense case consisting of the retelling of her conversion/salvation, spirit baptism, and call experiences served to validate and legitimize her actions and ministry. One of the outcomes of blocking Black women from preaching is the likelihood that they are not invited to the table when discussions about the Black communities in which they live occur. As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes argues, “When ministers call meetings of ministers, the absence of black women from pulpits means an absence of female leadership in certain confrontations with white society. Since the dominant culture recognizes the role of the black preacher in the politics of the black community, white-initiated contacts with the black community overlook female leaders and inadvertently (or perhaps not) reinforce those aspects of sex-role organization most like that of the dominant culture” (Gilkes 2001, p. 74). Being a pivotal link between sex and race, examining Black women’s life writings generally and Black gospelwomen’s life writings in particular will reveal that they have valuable experience that could assist in the transformation of a sexist and racist society. Caesar’s gospel autobiography explained how she stood at the intersection of the gender-coded traditions of gospel singing and gospel preaching and what she experienced as she lived it. Journeying on her own path, inspired and led by God, Shirley Caesar crossed the borders and boundaries of traditional gender roles, standing within (and outside) the margins of gospel singing and gospel preaching.

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Notes

- ¹ I first learned of Shirley Caesar's autobiography when a reviewer of a paper I had submitted to a scholarly journal about Mahalia Jackson and CeCe Winans mentioned it in their report (by the way, the paper was not accepted). This unnamed reviewer suggested that examining Black celebrity autobiographies would be a more fruitful investigation. Because of and based on that feedback, I bought Caesar's autobiography and from the beginning, approached Caesar's autobiography with the question of how it fit within Black popular culture and within American culture. As I read her autobiography (and re-read many passages and sections of it over the last four years), I realized that Caesar's autobiography was a unique type of African American women's life writing. Naming it a "gospel autobiography," I think that this genre of life writing is a cross between the celebrity autobiography and the religious, or spiritual, autobiography. Since Black gospelwomen would never, because of their reverence for God, promote themselves as stars, they would not consider their autobiographies to be celebrity autobiographies (Nelson 2018, pp. 481–84). Yet, as nationally (and in most cases, internationally) known and renowned musicians, Black gospelwomen embody many of the characteristics that define stars in American secular culture. For example, Black gospelwomen are known for their extraordinary talent for singing. On the other hand, because of their reverence for God, Black gospelwomen would consider their life stories to be much like, or even identical to, testimonies—those short, extemporaneous oral narratives expressed in Black Holiness-Pentecostal churches. Testimonies tell of the moment of conversion and convey "one's story of divine encounter in strictly personal terms, with or without biblical or cultural texts," which includes telling of the goodness and greatness of God in a believer's life, just as Black gospelwomen are doing in their gospel autobiographies (Sanders 1996, pp. 51, 83–84). Black gospelwomen Mahalia Jackson, *Movin' on Up*, 1966; CeCe Winans, *On a Positive Note*, 1999; MaryMary, *Transparent*, 2003; and Tasha Page-Lockhart, *And the Winner Is . . .*, 2017, wrote gospel autobiographies. The life writings of Shirley Caesar and these Black gospelwomen share four narrative themes: (1) influences of family and church upbringing; (2) generational and spiritual destiny to be a singer; (3) start as a child singer; (4) intense love for God and strong desire to do God's Will. The key element, however, that makes these life writings "gospel" autobiographies (rather than simply spiritual or Christian autobiographies) is that these women's autobiographies focus on spreading the gospel, or the "good news," of Jesus Christ in their personal and professional lives. In other words, these consciously constructed testimonials intertwine the gospel of Jesus Christ and its direct application to their personal, religious, and professional lives.
- ² Gospelwomen are twentieth- and twenty-first-century Christian African American women primarily from the Holiness-Pentecostal (or Sanctified) and Baptist denominations notable for being paid for singing gospel music full-time and who have devoted themselves to singing a gospel music repertoire exclusively for the entirety of their careers.
- ³ "The most distinctive aspect of dual-sex politics is the Church Mother. While most black churches in the Baptist, Methodist, or 'Sanctified' (Pentecostal, Holiness, Apostolic) denominations have a woman to whom members refer as the 'Church Mother,' her position varies. In almost all cases, she is an older woman, often elderly, who is considered an example of spiritual maturity and morality to the rest of her congregation. Her career as a Christian is usually exemplary and long, and most members know of her various activities in the missionary unit or on the deaconess board. Perhaps she is the widow of a pastor or a bishop or a deacon, but not necessarily . . . Most important, she is publicly addressed by the pastor, the bishops, and the members of the congregation as 'Mother'" (Gilkes 2001, p. 103).
- ⁴ Here, Caesar claims that she was called to preach "five years after" her salvation experience. She was saved at 12 years old in 1950 but she highlights 1957 as when she was called to preach. If the call occurred in 1957, then Caesar was 18 or 19 years old. At face value, one can assume that there was a mistake in the years listed. If we maintain Caesar's timetable of there being five years between her salvation experience and her call experience, then she was saved at 13 or 14 in 1952 and called to preach at 18 or 19 in 1957. By doing this, we are changing her salvation timeframe. Since the age of 12 years old holds significance in the Black Church as well as in the Catholic Church and other Protestant church denominations (for, among other things, traditionally being called a child's "age of accountability" and an age at which children are encouraged to be baptized), Caesar might be clear and resolute on indicating that age. If one maintains that Caesar's salvation was when she was 12 years old in 1950, then there must have been a seven year space between Caesar's salvation and call experiences in 1957, rather than a five year space between the experiences.

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