

# **Evangelization and Social Justice**

**In the Tradition of**

**The**

**National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.**

*Luke 4:18, 19*

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

The National Baptist Convention is a predominantly Black denomination comprised of mostly Black Churches. The Black Church has viewed and practiced evangelism through the hermeneutical prism of the experience of African Americans with racism and injustice in the United States. The Black Church is a unique product of American racism. Born and bred as a response to the sin of slavery and racism, the ecclesiology of Christians of African descent is rooted in a history of protesting social injustice and evil. In the Black Church salvation and liberation have historically been united in holy wedlock and have given birth to spiritual empowerment and social progress. Dr. Robert Franklin reminds us that we should “remember that the black church in America came into existence because of the nation’s serious race problem. I believe that the birth of the black church was a gift from God to a nation in denial of its own sins.” These sins were both individual and institutional in scope. The survival and progress of African Americans in an adversarial climate of slavery, Jim Crow oppression and racism has much to do with the social activism and creative protest of a spiritually empowered church.

The roots of a spiritual social activism that rebelled against dehumanizing oppression and injustice can be traced to the evolution of the Black Church during slavery. Gayraud Wilmore is insightful as he chronicles and interprets the rise of the Black Church in *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*. He points out that:

Despite the deliberate distortion of Christian doctrine and stringent restrictions upon religious activity, a distinctive form of Christianity – actually the new religion of an oppressed people—slowly took root in the black community. This

black folk religion contained a definite moral judgment against slavery and a clear legitimization of resistance to injustice. White antislavery radicals...contributed to the militancy of some black Christians and to the spirit that created the independent black churches.

Joseph R. Washington, Jr. highlights the revolutionary nature and necessity of the black church when he observes:

Born in slavery, weaned in segregation and reared in discrimination, the religion of the Negro folk was chosen to bear the roles of both protest and relief. Thus, the uniqueness of black religion is the racial bond, which seeks to risk life for the elusive but ultimate goal of freedom and equality by means of protest and action. It does so through the only avenues to which its members have always been permitted a measure of access, religious convocations in the fields or in houses of worship.

Resistance, redemption and relief form the thematic thread woven through the fabric of the mission of the Black Church during its development and expansion in spite of the enemy environment that it has often operated in. Resistance to injustice energized three ministers, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser to organize, in the name of faith and freedom, insurrections against slavery and oppression. All three of these African American ministers were slaves who refused to accept American bondage. The developing Black Church was the incubator for insurrections and revolts. Wilmore commenting on a planned insurrection quotes Joseph Carroll:

Sunday was a favorite day on which the slaves often planned outbreaks, because it was easy to get together on Sunday... The slaves were given a deal of liberty in assembling for religious worship. Hence the religious services were the great incubators where Slave insurrections were hatched.

The National Baptist Convention is an heir of this legacy of social activism that is rooted in the Evangel. Many pastors and members of the Convention were active in the

Civil Rights Movement in their respective communities and have fought to break down racial and social barriers. Many spoke “truth to power” as they denounced Jim Crow Apartheid in the South and Institutional racism in the North. Those who have served as President of the Convention have often mobilized the church constituency to take stands against injustice while proclaiming the Good News.

The current President of the National Baptist Convention, USA, inc., Dr. William J. Shaw ushered in a new era of Christ-centered ministry that characterizes the mission and work of the Convention. The Convention has operated under the umbrella of VISA, an acronym for Vision, Integrity, Structure and Accountability. The Vision speaks of the focus of the Convention on Christ by affirming that we are Christ’s people commissioned to do His work in the world.

The mission and ministry of Evangelism in the National Baptist Convention is Christ-centered and contextually conscious. Jesus is our model and, like Jesus, we proclaim the Good News with compassion and a consciousness of the contextual challenges that oppressed and poor people are confronted with.

Jesus, the Christ, after being baptized by John the Baptist is driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, for contemplation and confirmation of His mission. He is tempted in the wilderness by Satan and emerges victorious. After winning the “war in the wilderness,” He returns to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. When he returns home to Nazareth, He makes His way to the synagogue on the Sabbath as the guest preacher. Nazareth is notorious as a “ghetto” of dysfunction and symbol of the results of social oppression. One even asked, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Jesus stands to read the scripture and unrolled the scroll to Isaiah chapter 61 and used as His

inauguration text in his home church: “The Spirit of Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus had arrested the attention of everyone when He said that the scripture that He had just read had been fulfilled that day in Him! What an audacious affirmation with social implications.

The text read by Jesus is supposed to be fulfilled in the messianic era. Craig Keener points out, “the inhabitants of Nazareth saw neither Messiah nor messianic era before them. Because they lived only four miles from Sepphoris, they were well aware of how the Romans had destroyed that Galilean capital after a messianic-style revolt in A.D. 6.” Jesus was speaking to disinherited, downtrodden people with their “backs against the wall.” His message was radically revolutionary. His ministry and message were to be scripturally based and spiritually empowered with socially liberating consequences. In the preaching of Jesus salvation and liberation were redemptive tag team partners. Jesus was aware of the socio-political context of the people to whom he ministered.

The good news (euangelion) that Jesus proclaimed was to people trapped in oppressive circumstances. The Evangel and social, political, and economic emancipation are partners in the ministry and mission of the Messiah. There is no dichotomy between spiritual salvation and social liberation. The redemption of individuals is not divorced from the fight for social justice.

The Egyptians of antiquity built fires on the top of high hills in order to guide their ships at night. As water traffic increased and their technological sophistication advanced they built stone towers to serve as lighthouses. Priests were responsible for tending the flames that burned all night in the tall towers. Both the priests and the guiding fires were considered holy by ancient African mariners. The priests in the lighthouses were seen as performing a spiritual ministry that had social ramifications. The priests and the lighthouses were responsible for saving lives, bringing light into a dangerous darkness and making a difference. This illustrates the mission and work of the National Baptist Convention in evangelization and the fight for social justice. The Convention has a tradition of bringing the light of the Gospel into the darkness of neglected communities, saving the lost through sharing the Gospel and making a difference by fighting for social justice.

## **THE NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION MAJORS IN MINISTRY TO THE MARGINALIZED**

As a Christ-centered body of believers the National Baptist Convention has sought to keep our focus on those who received the most redemptive attention from Jesus. In the ministry and message of Jesus, it is evident that He has a prioritized passion for the “least of these.” He even illustrates that one’s evidence of commitment to Him will be how we treat the hungry, those who thirst, those who are imprisoned and those who are outcast (Matthew 25:31-46).

The Convention has a tradition of using its’ resources in Home and Foreign Missions for the advantage of those who are disadvantaged. The Good News of the Gospel has been carried in a tangible, need meeting form to those victimized by Hurricane Katrina and the tragic response of the Federal Government and to those suffering from strife and famine in many countries on the African continent. This evangelistic ministry is not limited to emergencies, but is on going and a part of the programmatic thrust of the Convention. The Convention is structured to meet the needs of the disinherited and dispossessed.

**EVANGELIZATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ARE UNITED IN THE  
NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION WORK AS THE MESSAGE  
COMES THRU OUR MINISTRY AND MINISTRY GIVES US AN  
OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE OUR MESSAGE**

Jesus is our model, again, for during a season of ministry depicted in Matthew 9:35-38, He engages in exhortation, edification, and emancipation. He modeled a ministry of evangelism as He preached taught and healed those who were afflicted and imprisoned by disease and dysfunction. It is not a coincidence that many who have benefited from the ministries of the Convention and its' church constituency have subsequently received Christ as their Savior and Lord. During our Annual Sessions the Evangelism Department has worked with local churches in the host city to minister in prisons and minister to the poor. The fruit of these efforts has been manifest during the Baptismal Ceremony in the concluding worship of the Annual Session of the Convention. The opportunity to share the Gospel has been made possible by addressing the needs of those who have been neglected and are hurting.

**THE NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION DOES NOT SEPARATE  
SEEKING LOST SHEEP FROM FIGHTING THE WOLVES**

A pastor in the National Baptist Convention dared to run for public office in San Francisco in the 1940s. His campaign was unprecedented, in that no African American had run for County Supervisor prior to his historic race. One who was unhappy with the pastor's daring campaign said to a member of the pastor's church, "shouldn't your pastor

be at home feeding the flock?” The wise deacon remarked, “He’s a good shepherd. He not only feeds the flock, he fights the wolves.” The wolves are the unjust institutions that enrich the greedy while exploiting the needy. The wolves are responsible for disparate funding in public education so schools fail disadvantaged children. The wolves economically isolate and paralyze impoverished communities through “redlining.”

The late Judge A. Leon Higginbotham in a speech told of his experience with injustice perpetrated by “wolves.” He testified about an experience he had as a student at Purdue University in Indiana in the 1940s. The president of Purdue passed a racist policy segregating the campus dormitories. African American students were forced to live in dormitories that were structurally deficient and without heat. The challenge of matriculating in a white institution of higher learning was magnified for African Americans by an unjust policy that made for an unlevelled academic and social playing field.

An exegesis of the existential predicament of the students of African descent at Purdue reveals that they were the victims of systemic sin and institutionalized iniquity. The social and academic climate was unjust. The unjust climate was the product of a racist policy. It would be sinfully insensitive for a preacher preaching to the black students, in particular, in that setting to limit his or her message to inspiring the students to pursue academic excellence and “claim” their education while ignoring the social conditions that conspire to contradict and abort their efforts. Biblical integrity and spiritual consciousness would forbid the preacher to preach a text while ignoring the social context of the collegiate congregation. It would be inhumane for a church to have a campus ministry to those African American students that shared the Gospel with them

but did not encourage, empower and work with them to create structural change. The pursuit for justice would be a spiritual outgrowth of evangelization.

The National Baptist Convention ministers with a prophetic social consciousness and seeks and struggles for justice locally and globally. The Convention recognizes what Art Van Seters expressed in a paper entitled, “Social Hermeneutics Toward a Revolution in Preaching.” He boldly asserted that there is a relationship between racism, classism, sexism and the greed induced exploitation of nature that all contribute to oppression and dehumanization. He said that Governments, big business and even Christian churches have rationalized and legitimized oppression. This subtle conspiracy has made it difficult to hear “the gospel in all its liberating power.” He concludes that too many churches are comfortable with the social status quo and their self-satisfaction and lack of social action is “hardly consistent with the Jesus who identified with the poor, with women, and with the outcasts of society against the religious establishment of his day, and ended up on a cross.”

As a Christ-centered body, the National Baptist Convention, USA, inc. refuses to “get in bed” with the custodians of the status quo for that contradicts the Good News of Jesus that calls for Christians to follow Him in identifying with those who are forsaken, forgotten, oppressed and downtrodden. In the tradition of the Convention emancipation of the oppressed from social, political and economic injustice is connected to evangelization. The Gospel that saves souls is also concerned about the bodies that house those souls as “temples of the Holy Spirit” and the communities that are home or do harm to those soul and bodies and their families.

The National Baptist Convention does not limit its' concept of ministry to benevolence for individuals but pursues social justice. Dr. Zan Wesley Holmes has often illustrated the importance of never substituting individual acts of charity "for collective acts of justice" with a story told by Ron Sider. A group of devout Christians lived in a town located at the foot of a mountain. The mountain was notorious for its winding, slippery road that meandered through it. The roads, with hairpin curves had no guardrails. Consequently the mountain was the scene of many tragic car accidents. Some of the accidents were fatal. The caring Christians were saddened and decided to purchase an ambulance so that they could do their part in "rescuing the perishing and caring for the dying." The three churches in the area pooled their resources and a state of the art ambulance was now available to help in the case of emergencies. Many lives were saved, though some of the accident victims were paralyzed for life.

One day a young visitor came to town and was perplexed because he felt that the town could build a tunnel through the mountain, close the road and save lives. He made this recommendation to the churches. They were offended and told him that though the approach was technically possible, it was not realistic. The road had been there for a long time, so why should they change it. Moreover, the mayor owned a large restaurant and gas station halfway up the mountain and he would oppose the idea because of the economic repercussions that he and the community would suffer.

The young visitor was shocked at the response of the people. He then suggested that perhaps they should approach the mayor about the idea of closing the road and constructing a tunnel in order to save lives. He suggested that if the mayor was against it, they should elect someone who was open to making the changes necessary to make a life

saving difference. The citizens were outraged that this young newcomer would want them as Christians to become involved in politics. They told him that the church is called just to “preach the gospel and give a cup of cold water to the thirsty. Its mission, they said is not to dabble in worldly things like social and political structures.

The young stranger left disappointed and disheartened. As he left the village he could not help asking himself: Is it really more spiritual to operate the ambulance that picks up the bloody victims of destructive social structures than to try to change the structures themselves?

The National Baptist Convention has a rich history of confronting injustice through the leadership of its’ Presidents and community and National involvement of it’s’ pastors and churches. The current President has consistently and courageously challenged the military aggression of the current National Administration, while pleading the case for addressing the plight of the poor, those without health care insurance and the criminality of the criminal justice system that disproportionately incarcerates African American males. He has mobilized the ministers of the Convention to address the AIDS pandemic in Africa and African American communities. The Evangel has been expressed in the fight for social justice.

The National Baptist Convention recognizes the need to struggle and mobilize to remove and replace destructive social structures. The Convention attempts to be an evangelizing “Lighthouse” with a prophetic social consciousness that effects transformation in our church communities and around the globe. This is a synopsis of the understanding and work of evangelization and the fight for social justice in the tradition of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.