

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

Becoming a People of God: Theological Reflections on the National Baptist Convention

David Emmanuel Goatley.

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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Becoming a People of God: Theological Reflections on the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

David Emmanuel Goatley

The story of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBC), is fundamentally a theological story. It is theological because it tells about striving to become a people of God. This saga is about the formation of community, the configuration of family, and the affirmation of humanity. The constellation of community, family, and humanity is “trinitarian” in its mutuality, reciprocity, and perichoretic nature. Each emphasis is interdependent and flows into the next. The story is essentially anthropological. What is humanity? Furthermore, what does it mean to be human — created in the image and likeness of God — in a context where the dominant culture questions, challenges, discredits, or attempts to annihilate one’s community? How do you affirm your humanity when your context seeks to deny it? In a real sense, this is what the history of the NBC has been addressing since its formation in 1895. What does it mean to be “African,” “colored,” “Negro,” “black,” “African American,” and Christian in the United States?¹

A Tedious Journey

The NBC story is richly textured with peaks and valleys, straight and crooked places, successes and setbacks. The narrative is one in the making without a definitive narrator. This story has been told, is being told, and will be told by millions of voices across multiple generations that blend together as the saga

1. Each of these terms reflects an emerging consciousness of identity in the historical movement of people of African history and heritage born in America. The evolution of ethnic identity points to the ongoing self-identification of a people against the background of opposition for self-determination by majority and dominating cultures in America.

unfolds. The story is like a song in African form. It is a complex blend of polyrhythmic and polyharmonic beats and sounds that produce compositions that inspire laughter and tears, hopes and fears.

The NBC story is complex, in part, because of the heterogeneity of African American people. While some argue for the clear preservation of Africanisms in contemporary African American culture, one cannot argue convincingly for any sense of homogeneity among the African Diaspora, African Americans, or African American Baptists. In spite of the many shades and hues of sentiment and sensibilities among people who share African heritages, however, the large gathering of African American Baptists who identify themselves with the NBC does share a certain core of experiences and values that produce a sense of siblinghood — a sense of family.

In the words of the spiritual song “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me,” the NBC story is that of a “tedious journey.” Becoming a people of God is not something National Baptists take for granted. This identity is considered a gift from God, but it is a gift that requires something of the giver. They typically believe that when God offers a gift, the receiver has some obligation to “live into” that gift. National Baptists do not hold an attitude of manifest destiny that is prearranged by the omnipotence of God. It is not inevitable that they will become a special people. God may desire that they become a people with an essential identity, but they must participate and cooperate with God in bringing their identity to fruition. In other words, National Baptists do not consider God to be an “interventionist” when it comes to their peoplehood. The songs, sermons, and prayers of National Baptists do speak of God directly intervening in lives and circumstances (usually personal crises). They do not, however, assume that God is going to create an African American Baptist people of God *ex nihilo*. National Baptists know that God is an “intentionalist” when it comes to their identity as a community of faith. God intends for them to be a special people that is useful to God and helpful in the world. God even invites them to join God as workers together to redeem the world. National Baptists know, however, they are required to participate actively with God if their identity is to emerge. The struggle to give birth to an identity in which the full humanity of African American people is affirmed is fundamental to the NBC experience.

Emerging African American Christianity

African American Christianity in the United States was forged in a crucible where three powerful forces converged. One of those forces was the survival of traditional African religious concepts. Certain beliefs provided a sense of com-

monality among the various religious and cultural expressions of enslaved African people and their descendants in America. Among them are:

- Believing in one Supreme Creative Being;
- Understanding the role of beings in the spirit world who serve as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and humanity;
- Discerning the holistic integration of all of life vis-à-vis the bifurcation of alleged sacred and secular aspects of reality; and
- Affirming the essential humanity of all people.

Traditional religious conceptualizations were not obliterated by the horrors of chattel slavery despite inevitable modifications in their understandings. The minds of early Africans in America were not devoid of theological discernment, nor were previous religious conceptualizations annihilated by the dreadfulness of chattel slavery.

Chattel slavery was the second force in the formation of African American Christian consciousness. The brutalities and traumatic physical, psychological, spiritual, and relational horrors have made impacts on the collective psyche of African Americans that are still not fully understood. To be treated as property — inventoried with tools and animals, stripped of inherent and historical identities and languages, and subjected to dehumanizing manipulations and abuse — created cultural realities that informed the emerging identities of African Americans.

Southern evangelicalism as evidenced in the great evangelical awakenings was the third force that helped produce African American Christianity. Elements of evangelicalism like the openness to emotive response to the movement of the Holy Spirit, an emphasis on personal relationships with Jesus, and the opportunity to “testify” — to communicate in public what one’s experience with God has done in one’s life — were all among new expressions of affirmation. To the contrary, however, manipulating Christian doctrines to justify slavery and to validate it among the slavocracy worked to oppress Africans and their descendants spiritually, mentally, and physically.

These three elements helped birth African American Christianity. African American Christians were particularly attracted to Methodism and the Baptist faith. Among other things, both groups were major players in the evangelical revivals, and both took seriously “heartfelt religion.” Today, the majority of American Pentecostalism has roots in African American Baptist life. Further, those who identify themselves as nondenominational today possess essential elements of these two historical denominational streams. The Baptist faith, however, took on a special attraction to enslaved and marginalized Africans in America.

Essential African American Baptist Distinctions

Among the strongest attractions in Baptist life were qualifications for ordination and church polity. The historical qualifications for ordination among Baptists in the South normally consisted of evidence of a call to ministry demonstrated by the gift of preaching and a call by a congregation to pastoral service. Although local geographic associations of Baptists would often organize councils to facilitate the ordination of individuals, local congregations also had the power to ordain persons independently if they chose to do so. This latter freedom speaks to another attractive element of Baptist life for the enslaved and oppressed. Local congregations of believers or churches were autonomous. They believed themselves to be competent to manage their own affairs as they felt led by the Spirit of God in their particular contexts. The criteria for ordination and the autonomy of the local church gave to enslaved and oppressed African American Christians a sense of empowerment and affirmation as people created in the image and likeness of God. The emergence of African American Baptist churches and the eventual evolution of their associations and conventions find root in these two fundamentals of Baptist experience.

The earliest African American Baptist churches developed out of separations from previously integrated Baptist churches. On rare occasions the preacher for the integrated church would be African American. The newly segregated African American churches would sometimes have European American pastors/preachers and at other times African American pastors/preachers. The separations were sometimes considered mutually beneficial, giving African Americans their space to function as they desired while giving European Americans much desired distance from their African American "sisters and brothers." At other times the separations were in protest of the unequal participatory opportunities of African Americans in matters of leadership, governance, and representation on denominational levels.

The emergence of African American Baptist churches happened in a dialectical tension. On one hand, these Christians were seeking to actualize their identities as people of God being called forth by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to Jesus Christ in their own cultural contexts. Consequently, they were seeking to become what they were being called to be. Those who were not a people (not Africans by birth and not Americans by right) were becoming a people through the call and power of God. On the other hand, they were asserting their identities as human beings created in the image of God. They were unwilling and unable to function effectively in a context of oppression and racism that denied their full humanity and rejected their gifts for ministry. Hence, the African American Baptist church came forward as an expression of call and confronta-

tion. They were accepting God's will for them to be a people of God as well as asserting their rights as creations of God to help make their own destiny.

These two concepts that helped parent the African American Baptist church are also related to traditional theological concepts of grace and faithfulness. God's call to be a people in spite of the efforts to nullify one's existence is, as mentioned above, a gift indeed. It is not a call that is sought or requested. It is undeserved. Therefore, it is especially cherished. It was not inevitable that they would become a people of faith and a community of service. This is the place where the idea of faithfulness applies. One must cooperate with God for God's will to be fully experienced in one's life. The idea that people can do nothing but receive God's will is foreign to historic and authentic African American Baptist life. People must collaborate with God if they are to realize all that God has in store for them. Knowing God's will for one's life is not inevitable. God will call, but people must answer. Hence, this back and forth, this ebb and flow, this receiving and resisting are two critical components of African American theology that helped produce an identity in congregational and consequently denominational life.

The historic experience of the NBC is a story of the making of a people who are responding to God's call upon their lives and rejecting the racism that sought to deny the dignity of African American Baptists. As the organization began to emerge, they sensed that God was calling them to have a unified public witness and platform to facilitate the liberation of their people (advocacy); that God would enable them to develop institutions to develop the heads, hands, and hearts of their constituents (education); and that God was sending them forth as missionaries with the gospel of Jesus Christ (missions).

National Baptist Theological Essentials

Relationships are the ground on which the NBC is built. Using the concept of relationships doctrinally is to honor and emphasize the historical weight given to "family" in African American life generally and in National Baptist life specifically. While National Baptists may not consciously articulate a doctrine of family as their theological ground, it is contextually the place on which they stand and build in practice.

To say that family is the theological ground of National Baptist life connects contemporary National Baptists to their African and African American cultural lineage. Generally, African concepts of family are not limited biologically. Consequently, it is unnecessary for Africans to contrast their family and their extended family. To distinguish the two assumes biology or marriages as

normative for determining familial relationships. A more natural way of African articulation of family is to contrast family and constricted family. This language communicates that the normative definition of family is relational, so that a qualifier is needed only when speaking of the narrower constellations more akin to Western concepts.

Defining family based on relationships (which does not, however, exclude biological or marital bonds) continued for Africans in America and their descendants because of the historical, cultural norm as well as the horrors of chattel slavery. The demonic separation of biological families by selling enslaved family members to different buyers necessitated the constituting of family in ways not limited by biology. What would have happened to a child who was "sold" to a different slaveholder than the one who "owned" his or her parent if other enslaved people did not accept and embrace that child? The same concept of family defined by relationship continued through days of segregation and discrimination. People often became siblings, cousins, parents, and children not by biology or marriage or legal adoption. They often became family by relating as family. This way of family life continues today, although perhaps with less frequency.

National Baptist churches, like many African American churches, can be considered families. Relating to each other, encouraging each other, helping each other advance, and even frustrating each other are dynamics of African American church life. They are not like families. They are families. The same is true of NBC life. The glue that holds together the NBC is not programmatic potency, structural sophistication, or adherence to propositions about God. It is not conformity to concepts about modernity versus postmodernity or common assumptions about issues like the immutability of God based on Greco-Roman philosophical constructs. It is not a denomination-specific creed or principles to which one must adhere. The bond that holds the NBC together is a sense of family, of belonging together on a journey through difficult terrain that threatens one's very existence if traveled in isolation. National Baptists are part of the family of God, gathered because of their common response to the salvific work of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit sometimes to thrive and at other times to survive. If the family manages to stay together, it can successfully achieve its goal of actualizing God's will to be a people of God.

Classic evidence of this theological embrace of family is seen in the denomination's annual meetings. They are not primarily forums for voting on budgets, articulating resolutions, and engaging programmatic strategy. These things are done, but they are not the principal foci of the event. The annual gathering of the NBC is a family reunion. It is a collection of African American Baptists from around the nation that assembles to offer a collective witness to

the testimony of God's provision and protection through the years in the face of threatened eradication at the hands of evil and enemies. It generates an aura of confidence and self-respect of a magnitude rarely matched in other African American venues. When National Baptists gather, they gather for worship, for fellowship, and for networking. They plant and water seeds of collaboration among leaders and churches around areas of interests and strengths.

The family focus of the NBC produces both liability and asset. A liability of this structure is that it fails to facilitate the substantive engagement of issues around polity, politics, and program by the body at large. This approach to denomination life also makes it difficult to function efficiently as an organization, as will be seen later. A benefit to this approach, however, is that it can create a large table that has places for many different voices. This doctrine of family upon which the NBC stands makes it possible for so-called liberals, progressives, moderates, conservatives, and fundamentalists to belong together. This does not suggest that the NBC has perfected the concept of family and no fault lines appear. What family has? The family is sometimes functional and at other times dysfunctional. While divisions do occur, however, those who align themselves on either side of difficult social and theological issues generally can find a place to be welcome among the family at the National Baptist table.

In sum, the NBC is more about relations than resolutions. It is more about people than polity. The larger impact of this family dynamic, however, is seen in the implications concerning being related to the larger family of God. The fight for human dignity is related to finding a place at the table of humanity in spite of those who would deny that place.

Upon the doctrinal foundation of family of God are built three core theological pillars. The theological core for National Baptist churches consists of worship, nurture, and missions. These elements are also intertextual, mutual, and reciprocal. They nourish each other.

Worship

The worship experience is widely appreciated in African American churches. Non-African American cultural groups now embrace elements of worship that have historically characterized African American worship. Praise songs, emotiveness, and narrative preaching have gone "mainstream" in vibrant and growing contemporary American churches. Worship has been a hallmark of healthy National Baptist churches. Worship has been the arena in which people have been able to praise God honestly. When the everyday work world humiliates, abuses, and dishonors African American people, the world of worship is the

place where God accepts, honors, and affirms them. They can be honest with God about their joys and pains. They can find healing for their hurts. They can gain strength for the next set of struggles they must face. Worship is essential to National Baptist life.

Song and sermon are at the heart of National Baptist worship. Vibrant National Baptist churches are characterized by music and message. Songs belong to the people and convey the range of emotions that connect with life. Just as the Psalms show the pain and praise of the Hebrew people, African American church music reflects depths of grief and heights of joy. Preaching is almost always understood as the climactic moment of worship. While other Christian traditions place different expressions at the center of worship (e.g., the Eucharist), National Baptists normally see the preaching of the gospel as the high point of the worship experience. The preacher is expected to draw the people into the text and bring the text into the experience of the people. The preacher is expected to communicate the gospel in ways that have a real transforming power in the lives of the hearers. National Baptists have historically honored the strong preacher and lifted the preacher to privileged places in the denomination and in the community.

Nurture

The second element at the theological core of National Baptist life is nurture. African American churches create space for affirmation of personhood and preparation for leadership. The African American church has "mothered" people who have held membership as well as many who have had no official connection with the church. It has been a place of rescue and refuge in innumerable ways. The church has provided more than psychological support. It has done that, but it has also provided the family context that affirms and accepts. It consoles and gives confidence. In many cases the African American church has been family in the best definition of the word: not grounded in biology but grounded in relationship. Family members do not have the luxury of choosing only the best. We are brought into family by the actions of others, not by our own actions. And for the church, we are brought into the family by the invitation of God. Like many biological families, the church has had good and bad, successes and failures. National Baptist churches, when at their best, have welcomed the sibling and stranger.

No matter the socioeconomic stratification African Americans may know in the so-called secular world, many have been able to find dignity and respect in the church. African American Baptist churches have historically been places

where custodians could be chairpersons of boards, laborers could be leaders, and domestics could be dignitaries. The dominant culture's categories and valuations were modified in the church culture. While churches have never been perfect places and have been influenced by dominant cultures in which they exist, they have improvised and invented new rules and worlds wherein those who were denied dignity on the outside could be honored on the inside. Historically, African American entertainers, politicians, and community leaders have been nurtured and given opportunity for leadership development in the context of the African American church. Nurture has been a hallmark of National Baptist life.

Missions

The third element at the theological center of National Baptist churches is missions. Missiology in African American churches has traditionally been more expansive than many approaches of their European American counterparts. Missions — being sent into the world to touch lives that transform the world — is traditionally integral to the theological core of National Baptist churches. National Baptists have historically understood their responsibility as transforming their communities for good. This explains the historic role of the church in the development of African American businesses during the days of segregation. Banks, insurance companies, funeral homes, schools, and any number of small businesses launched during segregation were supported and strengthened by their ties to the church. Today, progressive African American congregations have regained or retained the historic role of supporting the transformation of lives through for-profit businesses and nonprofit community development corporations. The first national African American denominational entity was the Baptist Foreign Mission Board, founded in 1880 to engage in foreign missions in Africa. Today, National Baptist churches collectively and individually continue to engage in missions in Africa or in countries with substantial African heritage.

This concept of missions is much broader than that in many contemporary American churches. Too often Christians talk about missions in narrow terms of evangelism that “leads the sinner along the Roman road” or that is a means to the ends of church membership. Some mission ministries and agencies appear to make decisions based upon the number of “baptisms per buck.” This narrow concept of missions can be found in some National Baptist contexts. The historically normative and currently vibrant National Baptist churches, however, have an expanded concept of missions that reaches to communities in ways that are holistic and transformative, both spiritually and physically.

Theological Tensions

Paradoxically, while National Baptist churches embrace (some more rhetorically than realistically) the essential nature of working in communities (locally and/or globally), many stand accused of being otherworldly. Churches live in a tension of otherworldliness and this-worldliness. Numbers of churches are accused of being “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.” This charge is made because of an emphasis on heaven and rewards in an afterlife for injustices in this life. While some are extreme in their emphasis on the afterlife, others have moved the pendulum in the opposite direction. A growing number of National Baptist churches are joining other churches of various ethnic backgrounds in the prosperity gospel movement. Proponents of this health-wealth orientation emphasize the accumulation of material goods and physical well-being as signs of God’s favor upon faithfulness. This message is being embraced enthusiastically among consumer-oriented classes in the United States and in other countries where Western cultural and economic influence abounds.

Extreme emphases on the temporal as well as the eternal exist in National Baptist life. Most National Baptists, however, live somewhere inside the tension. On one hand, there are times to emphasize the eternal. “This world is not my home” is a sentiment shared by many. On the other hand, there are times to emphasize the temporal. Poverty that is imposed on people because of injustice and exploitation is not piety. Churches must not be duped into believing that accumulation is more important than distribution. A better approach is to embrace the reality that a robust eschatology — a vision of God’s goal for creation — is a powerful motivator for an aggressive missiology — radically applying the gospel in ways that transform lives and move creation toward the best.

Another tension in National Baptist life relates to the pastor’s role. The principal role of National Baptist pastors is to lead the congregational worship, nurture, and missions. Pastors seek to work effectively in their various contexts through the interdependency of worship, nurture, and missions. The image of the superpastor of the megachurch is an exception to the rule. Most pastors serve fewer than three hundred congregants and are able to relate closely with families and communities in accessible and meaningful ways. Myths abound, however, about the nature of the National Baptist pastor. Some believe that, in general, the pastor presides over his or her own little kingdom. They believe that the pastor can get away with just about anything, that the pastor’s power is absolute and that he or she has total freedom to do whatever he or she pleases. Certainly, some pastors seem to avoid any discipline for errors and even near-demonic behavior, but to assume that pastors have *carte blanche* as the norm seems naive.

National Baptist pastors enjoy a great deal of freedom and authority because the congregations they serve give it to them. Further, just as the congregation gives authority, it can take it away. However, all persons in leadership positions in any organization have the potential to consolidate their power through charisma and/or performance. Consequently, as pastors demonstrate certain relative competencies in the core areas of the church's life (i.e., worship, nurture, missions), they secure more support for their leadership.

The journey toward being a people of God is long and complex. The NBC, however, has a strong theological heart with which to continue its pilgrimage. In order "to serve this present age," the NBC will have to use its strong theological foundation creatively and intentionally to respond to current and future challenges.

National Baptist Challenges: Power, Sex, and Money (Racism, Sexism, Classism)

What are National Baptists trying to become today? National Baptist constituents have participated in Pan-African, nationalist, separatist, and integrationist movements. They are conservatives, moderates, and progressives. It is absolutely clear, however, that the NBC has not essentially sought to become a sociologically, politically, or economically organized unit, although sociology, politics, and economics have informed and influenced their beliefs and behaviors. The challenges of the twenty-first century demand that the NBC reclaim its commitment to a theological anthropology that works to reconstitute, strengthen, and nurture community, family, and humanity. A new, robust, and relevant theological orientation and application will lead the NBC and its churches to engage relevantly the issues of race, gender, and class.

Race

National Baptists have sought to challenge racism and the power questions surrounding it. The most noted civil rights leader of the twentieth century, Martin Luther King, Jr., was a member and prominent leader in the NBC until his meteoric rise in the denomination was thwarted by the then president, J. H. Jackson. King and Jackson represented diverging approaches to the problem of racism in the United States. King was more "progressive" while Jackson was more "conservative." King was more closely aligned with the Democratic Party while Jackson was more closely aligned with the Republican Party. African American

clergy in general and National Baptists in particular engineered many of the gains realized through the Civil Rights era. It is regrettable that King and Jackson, as well as other proponents of their respective approaches to a racially just society, could not find ways to collaborate with a "both/and" approach rather than an "either/or" method. To their credit, however, they were seriously engaging the issues of race and justice on the national stage. The NBC has no coherent strategy or policy related to the problems of racism and the distribution of power in society today. Individual National Baptists are often active in their communities and states, but there is no comparable vision for a collective political platform or voice as compared to the vision of the leaders who formed the NBC.

Given the historical role of race in the formation and identity of National Baptist life, one might ask why no comprehensive approach exists today. The heterogeneity of National Baptists works against the development of one approach to race questions. There are regional cultural dynamics such as Southerners versus Northerners or rural communities versus urban dwellers that challenge strategy development. Generational tensions between older or more traditional leaders of the civil rights establishment and younger or more innovative advocates for economic empowerment offer another set of challenges. While not making it impossible, these kinds of differences impede the articulation and execution of a contemporary, compelling vision and strategy to address the problems of racial discrimination today. Finally, the complexities inherent in racism and the contemporary sophistication of its expressions suggest that there probably cannot be one universal strategy for its eradication. A multiplicity of approaches and a decentralized line of attack are likely necessary to deal effectively with the twenty-first-century dynamics of the color line(s).

Sex

National Baptists have failed to deal effectively with gender discrimination. The NBC historically has been very attentive to issues of racism while being virtually silent on issues of sexism. Women rarely are affirmed and embraced as preachers and/or pastors. The ordination of women as clergy or deacons is still not the norm in contemporary National Baptist churches. The autonomy principle of Baptist life holds that denominations have no right to interfere in the practices of local congregations. This theological commitment to the autonomy of the local church, however, is no excuse for not challenging the sexism that is rampant in many NBC congregations and the denomination proper. Failure to challenge sexism is to support it. One doubts that those who claim to

respect the autonomy of the local church in this matter would choose to be silent about congregations that supported human slavery. In fact, many National Baptists openly criticize European American congregations and denominations that have failed assertively and liberatingly to address racism in their ranks.

Another place many National Baptists turn in their support of sexism in the church is to the New Testament household codes that relegate women to second-class citizenship. Those who turn to Scripture for support of male dominance over females claim that this approach is biblical. They argue that there is no pattern, for example, for women in pastoral leadership in the Bible. This rather literal approach is rife with inconsistency. Again, those who believe that women should be subject to their husbands and/or deny that women should function as preachers and pastors do not believe that slaves ought to obey their masters. A thorough study of how National Baptist clergy use Scripture seems to indicate that the hermeneutic approach of many actually values narrative more than inerrancy. African American preachers seize upon the fictive quality of texts and understand the aesthetic theological approach of entering the text and having the text enter the reader in such a way that neither the reader nor the text can leave the encounter unchanged. The allegation of biblical literalism and conservatism among National Baptists is true for some, but the language used to categorize theological orientations does not always fit neatly in African American life. Theological language is related to the cultural identities of those codifying the language. The language normally used in American theological discussions is primarily born out of and speaks into non-African American cultures and contexts. As a result, African American culture and conscience are not normally considered in the definitions and connotations of the language. Hence, uncritically embracing theological categories crafted without engagement in African American communities is analogous to David trying to wear Saul's armor. It does not fit and it will not work.

Further, some argue that the principal pragmatic reason for blocking women from the pastorate is that the church is the last institution where African American men enjoy the privilege of leadership. The argument alleges that men have been penalized with the loss of opportunities in corporate America and the labor force because of affirmative action preferences for women of color. Therefore, women have been barred from accessing the pulpits and pastors' studies.

Denying women preaching and pastoral opportunities in the local church also denies them access to denominational leadership in the NBC. This is true because the leadership of the denomination is chosen from among pastors. The rationale holds that if the denomination is an association of churches and pastors lead churches, then a pastor should lead the denomination. As a result, un-

til women are welcomed as pastors of local churches on a large scale, the denomination will continue to lose potentially talented and transformative leadership from among its ranks.

Leadership is a crucial dynamic in all communities and organizations today. National Baptist churches need to be more open to all the gifts of the Spirit given to whomever the Spirit has chosen. As more opportunities open on local levels, denominational leaders will do well to be intentional about creating opportunities on national and international levels rather than waiting for a large number of women to move through the ranks in traditional ways. African American men have criticized this ploy in white corporate America for years. More importantly, affirming the full participation of women in ministry is essential to a mature theological anthropology that recognizes the value and gifts of all human beings. Hence, both pragmatically and theologically, the NBC and its churches need to create mechanisms that ensure equality for women as well as men.

Class

One can justifiably criticize the NBC as well as most American churches for a seemingly uncritical adoption of free market, American-style capitalism that disenfranchises the masses of African American people. The efforts to advance social justice for those who are oppressed and to be prophetic on behalf of the marginalized have given more sophisticated analysis to problems of race than those of class. National Baptist churches, which are predominantly socioeconomically working-class to middle-class, are challenged to cross the class divide in order to reach the masses of African Americans who are poor as well as other marginalized groups. Many African American churches have facilities in poor urban neighborhoods but have minimal success in reaching and integrating the poor into the fabric of the leadership and fellowship of the churches. Further, more and more churches are choosing to relocate to suburban areas because of their need for larger facilities to accommodate their growing ministries and memberships. This trend has substantial implications for the urban poor, many of whom are African American.

Charles Wesley's "A Charge to Keep I Have," a familiar hymn in National Baptist life, includes the phrase "To serve this present age, my calling to fulfill." Serving the present age calls for the NBC to help its churches respond theologically and missionally to contemporary challenges of this century. There is a sufficient theological reservoir to support and nourish this phase of the journey. The question is whether there is sufficient will among the leadership to guide the organization to take action for internal change and global impact.

The Call of a Crisis

The final years of the twentieth century were challenging times for the NBC. The largest denomination of African American heritage and tradition was faced with a leadership crisis that focused on its president, Henry J. Lyons. He was convicted and sentenced to prison for activity surrounding fiscal misappropriation in a plan to partner with a corporation that wanted to increase its business with constituents of the convention. The company was to supply funds to the convention in exchange for access to its constituency and affirmation of its business strategy. Lyons deflected large amounts of cash for personal use, claiming they were consulting fees rather than payments to the convention. The period of negative publicity severely damaged the reputation of the organization, the image of pastors, and the witness for Christ.

Many people have criticized the convention for not dealing with its president in some disciplinary fashion early on. Suggested options ranged from reprimand to suspension of duties to removal from office. Media accounts reported that the convention supported its president in spite of the mounting evidence that the allegations of misappropriating funds might be true. While the official actions of the convention or its board of directors did not include disciplinary responses, it is not demonstrable that the convention, as a body, was supportive of Lyons during this tumultuous period. At least three realities must be understood.

First, a majority of members of the convention's board of directors were appointed by the president. Consequently, many of them had political and/or personal reservations about dealing with him harshly. Some trusted their colleague and friend despite growing amounts of evidence. Some tried unsuccessfully to rally support for reprimanding or removing him from office. Further, some argued — true to American-style jurisprudence — that one is innocent until proven guilty, and that since African Americans have had more than their share of experiences with the law that presumed their guilt, potentially premature punitive processes were not warranted. Thus, the board did not bring disciplinary action.

Second, African American Baptists often vote with their money. They give money to support an organization's causes and the visions of their leaders when they are supportive of leadership. The financial condition of the convention during the Lyons years indicates the lack of support given to him as news of alleged misappropriations began to leak. Further adverse fiscal effects were realized as the legal proceedings continued.

Third, many constituents of the NBC reflected a posture that is embraced by large numbers of African Americans. Although media accounts seemed to

paint a bleak picture about Lyons's innocence almost from the beginning of the emerging story, numbers of the constituency were determined not to allow the media to dictate the convention's response to one of its own members and especially its chief elected officer. The dominant media in the United States are more often than not hostile to African Americans. Good news is ignored. Bizarre behavior receives excessive attention far beyond proportionate significance. Hints of impropriety are aggressively pursued. Remedies that theoretically may be taken in non-African American communities are proposed as commonsense approaches. What is ignored is that these hegemonic or so-called commonsense responses are supposed to be applied to African Americans with swiftness and severity, while members of dominant communities are often able to escape prompt and unsympathetic punishment, either openly or through confidential negotiations. Consequently, some constituents of the convention took the position that they would allow the justice system to proceed rather than seek remedy within their organizational structures. If Lyons were convicted, then the convention would remove him should he not resign. If he were exonerated, then the convention would have avoided rushing to conclusions based on unfair or inaccurate reporting of alleged facts.

It is important to note that certain issues related to the crisis that arose during the Lyons presidency are not isolated to his tenure. There are structural weaknesses in the convention's governance (such as the presidential appointment of a disproportionate number of board members, the presidents of auxiliaries, and the executive leadership of agencies) that give the office of the president exceptional powers without appropriate checks and balances for accountability. This concept grows from the understanding that a pastor is ultimately accountable to the church body and God rather than to a board or committee writ large.

The latter half of the twentieth century has seen patterns of presidential prerogatives that, when implemented, were accepted or tolerated but not necessarily embraced by the masses of members. The presidency of J. H. Jackson (1953-82) saw the use of power to defeat efforts to enact presidential tenure, promote conservative political and ideological alliances, and block the increasingly popular civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., from denominational leadership. These events all helped precipitate the formulation of the Progressive National Baptist Convention in 1961. The tenure of T. J. Jemison (1982-94) saw the erection of a new headquarters building (the Baptist World Center) in Nashville, Tennessee, that, among other problems, ignored certain Afrocentric aesthetic sensitivities (e.g., a prominently displayed Eurocentric image of Jesus) at a time when this mood was making substantial impact among churches and culture. This emphasis on a massive building project took place on property ad-

jaacent to land that held a dilapidated facility for the struggling American Baptist College (the NBC's college). This project demonstrated a lack of sustained programmatic focus on Christian higher education. The Lyons presidency (1994-98) was consumed with debt elimination and economic empowerment schemes. In 1999 the current president, William J. Shaw, began his tenure engulfed in the need to liquidate the mortgage on the Baptist World Center and to resolve numerous outstanding debts and legal issues. Shaw's presidency also began with sweeping leadership changes and organizational adjustments that occurred by decree with the convention being informed of substantial modifications at later dates.

The crises that erupted during the Lyons presidency are symptomatic of other issues in the organization. While the scope of recent problems seems unprecedented, their roots were present long before. The above examples of the privileges of the presidency result from structural vulnerabilities in the governance of the organization that will continue to produce crises unless remedied. More important than structural considerations of the NBC, however, are theological issues that need to receive renewed focus and priority in the denomination's life. Coming to grips with the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the convention, critiquing them, and refining the convention's theology and practice will help transform the organization from one with great potential to a denominational force that helps congregations recognize, internalize, and actualize a truly liberating praxis to which Christians are called.

The two realities that ground the birth of the NBC (seeking to become a people of God despite the opposition of its dominating culture) still operate today, albeit in sometimes unrecognizable or distorted ways. The effort to become a liberated people through God's call and with human collaboration influenced Henry Lyons to seek economic partnerships for the convention. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s resulted in liberation in terms of legal statutes. The realization of liberation, however, is still a work very much in process. While African Americans have certain legal rights, they are substantially disenfranchised in terms of economic vitality. While more African Americans arguably have greater assets today than ever before, it is also true that substantial gaps separate comparably qualified and experienced African Americans from European Americans, and more African Americans are in poverty than before. As mentioned above, one could argue that the critical test of relevance for the African American church of the twenty-first century will be whether the working-class and middle-class church can effectively minister to and struggle for liberation with the majority impoverished class community among African Americans and throughout the world.

Regrettably, far too many African American churches are primarily con-

cerned with their own institutional survival, thus rendering them irrelevant and endangered. Encouragingly, however, a growing number of African American churches have sought to make economic empowerment an integral part of their mission and ministry. These churches have begun to be more creative and assertive in accessing the capital that others have kept and coveted for too long. Henry Lyons was in touch with the need to utilize the strength and influence of the nation's largest African American organization to leverage cooperation from business communities. It is commonly held that, for too long, European American businesses have profited from African American consumerism and loyalty without African Americans reaping wealth-building benefits of their economic relationships. Lyons saw an opportunity to capitalize on the tremendous economic power of the African American church by negotiating reciprocal investment relationships with corporations. Lyons was not the only denominational leader to seek this path. Almost all the leaders of the historic African American churches collaborated in a business venture during the 1990s in which collective coordinated buying by the denominations' constituencies would allegedly provide economic benefits for pastors of churches as well as the congregations they serve. Many have deemed this effort a pyramid scheme that has produced questionable benefits at best.

Lyons's problems were twofold, one pragmatic and the other theological. First, the kinds of business negotiations required to make large-scale joint ventures successful demand the involvement of people with appropriate business experience, financial acumen, legal counsel, and the like. Even then, deals can and do go wrong. It is the unusual pastor who is equally equipped to shepherd a flock, preside over a large and unwieldy denomination, and successfully negotiate a multimillion-dollar partnership deal with national and international corporations without substantial mechanisms for accountability. Even so, Lyons's failures should not erase the point that he displayed a certain courage and creativity in his willingness to risk a novel and potentially beneficial project for the NBC. Leadership requires taking risks that produce rewards. Unfortunately, Lyons failed personally and professionally.

The second problem that contributed to the NBC public catastrophe was sin. National Baptists take sin seriously. Although they believe in the supreme power of God, they also recognize the significant power of Satan. The result of sin is that we are broken people in need of the continual healing and helping power of God. It is obvious that the wealth, privilege, and entangled relationships that accompany unchecked power overcame Henry Lyons. A thread of sobriety that would surface from time to time during the publicity surrounding the Lyons affair was that all of us are sinners — even those who are saved by grace. Further, there was always the implication that all people have weaknesses.

The temptations that unraveled the presidency of Henry Lyons may not unravel another person's professional practice or divine call. One point must be made emphatically, however: all of us are vulnerable to failure because of our fallenness. The smug self-righteousness of some of Lyons's critics sometimes seemed to be safe because of their inaccessibility to the kind of power and privilege that accompanies the presidency of the NBC. The old adage is probably true: power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This perspective in no way lessens the unacceptability of Lyons's actions nor excuses his full responsibility for his behavior. To the contrary, this position challenges the notion that one should demonize a person who obviously was overtaken by a fault.

The theological dimension of sin in the recent difficulties in the life of the NBC naturally introduces another theological issue: forgiveness. Human appropriation of forgiveness is often messy and slippery and is sometimes sloppily handled. Yet the love of God so lavishly poured upon humanity in the atoning event embodied in Jesus Christ demands that we respond positively to the challenge of forgiveness. Here, however, one often has more questions than answers.

- At what point does one graciously and lovingly forgive?
- What are the prerequisites for forgiveness?
- Does saying "I'm sorry" adequately prepare the way for forgiveness?
- What sort of confession is required?
- Is there a need for restitution?
- What does forgiveness look like when given to a leader who has violated trust?
- Can a fallen yet forgiven leader be given the opportunity to lead again, or has the privilege of leadership been forever forfeited?
- What about God's redeeming love?
- Can a leopard change its spots?
- Can Jesus' atoning work melt a heart of stone?

These questions about forgiveness, grounded firmly in the nurturing nature of National Baptist theology, may be the hardest theological questions of all. This may be the case not just because of Henry Lyons's actions as the president of the NBC, but because forgiveness goes straight to the heart of what it means to be part of the family of God that is infected and affected by sin. The quality of the life of the church is at hand in our responding appropriately and faithfully to those among us who have fallen, especially those entrusted with the privileged mantle of leadership. What will the church become if it cannot grow in its ability to relate constructively to those who have sinned? If family is a

valid conceptualization of being a people of God, the church's very existence is bound up in its proper execution of forgiveness toward the fallen in the family and the world.

One cannot know in advance how the answers to the questions of sin and forgiveness will play out in relationship to Henry Lyons and the NBC. Neither can one know how the story should unfold. One can be certain, however, that the way the denomination handles this delicate crisis will serve as a model, for good or ill, for its thousands of churches, millions of constituents, and tens of millions of observers, Christian and not. The convention must seek discernment and proceed prayerfully because the matter of sin and forgiveness is crucial for the church. It is at the theological center of what it means to be children of God, disciples of Christ, and people of the Spirit. The NBC has significant theological resources for this phase of its journey. Perhaps, by God's grace, it will discover and utilize these resources to see it through. Hopefully, the NBC will provide constructive models and useful leadership for other denominations with the lessons it learns.