

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

How Firm a Foundation? The Institutional Origins of the National Baptist Convention

Quinton Hosford Dixie

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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How Firm a Foundation? The Institutional Origins of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

Quinton Hosford Dixie

You will permit me here to repeat what I have said on former occasions: that the conditions in this country have forced the Negroes to be separate in their churches, associations, and conventions, from their white brethren, and these smaller organizations have, by reason of the same conditions, been forced to form this national society and since we have this National Baptist convention, it is imperative that it have a high and noble object. . . . The National Baptist Convention, in this connection, stands for the complete development of the Negro as a man along all lines, beginning first with his religious life, and ending with the material, or business life.

Elias Camp Morris, founding president,
National Baptist Convention, Inc.

When Elias Camp Morris, president of the National Baptist Convention (NBC), uttered the preceding passage at the 1900 annual meeting in Richmond, Virginia, he was convinced that while the problem of the twentieth century might be the color line, the triumph of the next one hundred years would be the unmatched blessings of Negro achievement. After all, it would be the first century since their arrival in the New World in which African Americans would not be bought and sold as chattel, and even as Jim and Jane Crow gained strength throughout the South, Morris and countless others believed “separate but equal” at least afforded blacks the opportunity to create, develop, and govern their own institutions.

Indeed, the NBC stood as a shining beacon illuminating the way toward Negro progress. After only five short years in existence, this fledgling federation comprised hundreds of congregations from coast to coast and could boast of

missionary stations in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. Moreover, its Publishing Board operated a publishing facility that provided literature to nearly nine thousand Sunday schools across the nation, not to mention the numerous normal schools and colleges supported by local and state associations. Morris seemingly had good reason to be optimistic about the future. However, despite all the NBC's potential for growth and advancement, from its origins it possessed a formula for failure which led one historian to call the group a "frustrated fellowship." Deeply buried in its bosom were contradictory objectives that kept the organization at odds with itself and prevented it from ever becoming what James M. Washington called "the church with the soul of a nation." The purpose of this brief introduction is to chart the history of several of the conflicting ideas behind the formation of the NBC which have led to the present organizational challenges elaborated upon in the following organizational case study and theological essay.

Many of the organizational challenges faced by the NBC are rooted in the tension between Baptist polity and its practical application. Often what seemed to make good theological sense was not the wisest organizational or political course of action. From the onset, the NBC possessed institutional logics¹ that prevented both efficiency and harmony within the ranks. At the core of Baptist polity is the belief that power resides at the base of the pyramid with individual members, and those that govern at the top do so only by the mandate of the people. On the basis of their theological interpretation of church order, Baptists assert that political and theological authority resides at the local level with each congregation, its representatives (deacons and trustees), and its pastor. So, in many ways the establishment of a national denominational organization is futile in that national leadership has no power to enforce measures passed by the corporate body. Neither standards of morality nor standards of accounting may be mandated upon any congregation that belongs to the national organization, regardless what national delegates determine in annual session. By the same token, the national organization is duty-bound to follow the dictates of the delegates, regardless of whether or not it seems to be the most prudent decision.

The tension between congregational autonomy and centralized authority was present from the outset of the NBC. At the NBC's 1896 meeting in St. Louis, just one year after the body was organized, the delegates voted to start a pub-

1. By institutional logics, I mean those ideas which provide meaning to institutions. Harry S. Stout and D. Scott Cormode note, "An institutional structure can no more function without an institutional logic than a subject without an object, or a government without a governed." Stout and Cormode, "Institutions and the Story of American Religion," in *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations*, ed. N. J. Demerath et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 71.

lishing concern and chose Elias Camp Morris and Richard Henry Boyd to establish the venture. Morris, the NBC president, was the founding editor of the *Baptist Vanguard*, a black newspaper published in his home state of Arkansas. As an advocate for the publication of black Sunday school literature, Boyd also was no stranger to religious publishing. Both men knew it would take more than force of will to create and maintain a competitive venture, and the idea of a black-controlled publishing concern came under immediate attack from black Baptists who wanted to maintain their institutional relationship with the white-controlled American Baptist Publication Society. Boyd doubted they could garner sufficient support from local congregations to be successful, and suggested to Morris that they delay the production of Sunday school literature until they were in a better position to gauge the business's viability. While he agreed with Boyd, Morris felt that denominational polity left them no room to disregard the dictates of the convention. "Our duty is plain," he replied to Boyd, "it is to get out a Sunday School matter by January 1, 1897. This duty has been imposed by the National Baptist Convention, and cannot be set aside by us."² Clearly, Morris felt that the authority of the NBC superseded the directives of the organizational leadership and that the wishes of the larger body must be heeded. On the other hand, Boyd saw how useless national mandates were without the support of local congregations. Baptist polity seemed to require their obedience rather than their leadership.

There are many examples from the NBC's recent history that demonstrate the way congregational autonomy often renders the leadership of the convention's president ineffective. In the late 1980s T. J. Jemison, then president of the NBC, USA, Inc., had a vision to create a single headquarters for the denomination. The organization's various boards had a long history of conducting business from the home base (local congregations) of their respective corresponding secretaries. Jemison hoped that once a national headquarters was built, all the various entities that make up the NBC would move operations to Nashville. Rumors ran through the organization that Jemison merely sought to leave a legacy in brick and mortar that might balance his otherwise uneventful tenure. Regardless of Jemison's motives, the establishment of a national office would have some positive unintended consequences. The move would indirectly professionalize denomination administration, for denominational administrators would have been forced to give up the local pastorate in order to conduct the business of their respective constituencies (foreign missions, education, etc.). Moreover, theoretically the denominational entities could be held

2. E. C. Morris, *Sermons, Addresses, and Reminiscences and Important Correspondence* (reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1980), p. 169.

more accountable by the NBC president. In 1989 Jemison opened the \$10 million Baptist World Center, but was unable to persuade any of the boards to occupy the facility.³ Regardless of whether or not the center made sound organizational sense, many people in the NBC believed Jemison overstepped his authority as president and acted on his own accord, because he knew there was no support amongst the membership for such a thing. For in the end, local congregations would be required to pay for the facility. Hence, the institutional conflict over congregational autonomy and centralized authority prevented the NBC from taking the next step in organizational development.

At the heart of Baptist polity's commitment to congregational autonomy is the voluntary principle. Baptists believe that individuals and congregations involved in the formation, development, and maintenance of religious bodies should do so as an exercise of free will and not by coercion or compulsion. Granted, such a democratic principle is noble, but when carried out to its logical extreme, it makes funding a national agenda a rather precarious affair. Throughout most of the NBC's history, a board's ability to meet its annual goals and mandates has been predicated solely on the ability of the corresponding secretary to raise funds. Not only was he or she responsible for raising the entire operating budget for his or her respective board, the corresponding secretary was also responsible for getting the money for his or her own salary and expenses.

Few people were more acutely aware of the fiscal shortage that the NBC ran from one session to another than its first president, E. C. Morris. He never received enough money from the national body to cover all the expenses of his office and often used his personal resources to cover denominational expenditures. At the same time, he consistently made recommendations to the convention that did not seem to take into account the limited resources of the boards and the churches that supported them. As if the expenditures associated with a weeklong trip to the annual meeting were not enough, all five of Morris's recommendations to the delegates in 1912 had substantial price tags attached to them. For example, he advised that the NBC send two messengers to the Second European Baptist Congress in Stockholm; that a committee of three be sent around the world to study "the condition of black people in Africa, India, and the Isles of the sea," and to let the world know the "real condition of the American Negro"; that a committee meet, research, and draft a report on the suffrage rights of blacks for the purpose of pressuring the federal government into either enforcing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments or reducing the con-

3. Charles L. Sanders, "\$10 Million Headquarters Signals New Course for National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.," *Ebony*, October 1989, p. 69.

gressional representation of "those states which have, by proscriptive legislation, nullified those amendments"; and that the 1913 session include a special semicentennial celebration of the black emancipation.⁴ Morris had no power to compel churches to meet the expenses for these measures, even if the convention delegates representing these congregations endorsed his initiatives.

Most often, individuals called upon to do work for the NBC did so out of their own (or their congregation's) pockets with the promise that the convention would raise the funds necessary to reimburse them. More often than not, it was difficult to get people to spend money to achieve the goals agreed upon at the annual session. While pastors and NBC laypersons claimed to understand the necessity of a strong national body that could represent their interests in ecumenical and political circles, their financial priorities were usually at the local level. At the same time, asking denominational representatives to raise money to cover their own salary led to a host of financial irregularities. While Morris and most of the corresponding secretaries consistently covered organizational expenses first and paid themselves only on those extremely rare occasions when funds remained, some denominational representatives were known to do the opposite. Hence, the voluntary principle coupled with congregational autonomy and a low level of centralized authority has produced a century's worth of financial problems and mistrust on the part of the laity.

Throughout the NBC's history there has been considerable organizational tension regarding the very nature of the convention itself. Just what exactly was the National Baptist Convention? Was it a traditional denomination that represented a particular cultural interpretation about God's dealings with God's people, or was it simply an annual weeklong church service? Regardless of one's theological or social position on the matter, it was clear that the convention had year-round business that yielded both profit and debt. The question of whose responsibility it was to keep the organization solvent remained, however. Within fifteen years of the denomination's founding, it became clear how badly the NBC needed some system of accountability. The convention was a loose confederation of single-issue organizations called boards which acted on behalf of their own national interests. Membership in the individual boards and the convention overlapped, but each board was responsible to its own board of directors. By the end of 1910 the boards were incorporated indepen-

4. *Journal of the Thirty-Second Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention*, held with the Baptist churches, Houston, Texas, September 11-16, 1912, pp. 46-47. It is interesting to note that just minutes after announcing it was unfair for the National Baptist Publishing Board, the only solvent entity within the convention, continually to pay more than its share of denominational expenses, Morris proclaimed that he expected the Publishing Board to raise the funds for the worldwide investigation of the condition of the black race.

dently of the National Baptist Convention, with the sole exception of the Home Mission Board. One response to the convention's seeming powerlessness over the boards was to incorporate the parent body. Changes in state and federal policies governing incorporation reshaped the organizational molds of both businesses and religious bodies. Between 1886 and 1898 a large number of states, following the lead of states like New York, New Jersey, and Delaware, made it easier for corporations to own real estate and other assets, both inside and outside the chartering state. The appearance of state general incorporation laws also made it easier for one company to hold stock in another company, and corporate entities gained some of the same rights as individual citizens. One historian notes, "In sum, state legislation and both federal and state judicial construction, from the late 1880s onward, increasingly gave to corporations stronger standing as 'natural entities' with contractual and due process rights of persons."⁵

Although incorporating the parent body seemed like the most logical solution to the problem of accountability and control, the task proved to be far more difficult than it originally appeared. To many members of the NBC, their organization simply was an annual meeting that moved from state to state, held no property, and had no business outside of one week each year. Additionally, the NBC could not order the boards to meet at the annual session, since they were separate bodies operating under separate charters. Most of those charters required the annual meeting of the incorporated bodies to be held in the state in which they were chartered. Therefore, meeting at the NBC annual session was merely a gesture done out of convenience, but not out of obligation.⁶ If this was the case, and it certainly appeared to be so, then it meant that the convention could legally exercise no authority or control over the boards.

Moreover, opponents of incorporation of the NBC objected on the grounds that to do so would require straying from New Testament models for church order and organization. They believed there was no formal organizational structure beyond the local community of believers in ancient Christian communities, and as Baptists they were duty-bound to follow that model. For some this was the most cogent argument, for they believed the denomination overstepped its organizational boundaries when it sought refuge in the laws of man rather than God. After all, to many of the delegates and members the annual sessions were little more than a weeklong revival with hymns sung, Scripture read, sermons preached, souls touched, and offerings raised. Yet for others

5. Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 51.

6. *National Baptist Review*, May 21, 1910, p. 8.

the convention was not church, but an entity whose mission went beyond the bounds of individual congregations to speak in various arenas — both secular and sacred — on behalf of black Baptists.

Another institutional irony that historically has been a part of the NBC and is featured quite prominently in the following essay, is the role of women within the denomination. In 1900, National Baptist women proposed that they organize the Woman's National Baptist Convention. Just as the NBC as a whole felt the need to take a stronger stance against the paternalism of whites, black Baptist women felt that having their own convention would ease some of the patriarchal control so apparent in the organizational structure of the denomination. This was not the first time they sought autonomy from the men in the denomination. They made similar proposals at the organizing sessions of the Foreign Mission Board and the National Baptist Convention in 1880 and 1895 respectively, only to be relegated to the organizational margins of the denomination.

Two ideas prevailed among the brethren as to why the women should not have their own organization. One group seemingly was concerned about the implications it raised for governance, efficiency, and accountability, while another group of men explicitly was more interested in women remaining in their place. While the majority of the men opposed the formation of an independent women's organization, they did so on the grounds that the denomination's organizational logic dictated that the women should organize as a board and thereby be kept under the control of the denominational leadership.⁷ Nevertheless, the result was the same. Both groups pressed for the women to organize as a board under the control of the NBC. In the end, the women settled on something of a compromise. They organized as the Woman's Auxiliary Convention of the NBC yet functioned in a similar fashion to the other boards. Their work was not limited to their traditional domain of foreign missions, and yet much of what they did remained safely in the realm of "women's work." Although they met in separate sessions during the week the NBC held its annual meeting, they always met in the same city as the convention in the same manner as the convention's boards. This practice remains today. Instead of being integrated into the power structure of the convention, they exercise control over their own separate sphere which has no substantive organizational influence on the denomination as a whole.

Hesitance about the full equality of women is also evident in the NBC's reluctance to adopt an official stance on the ordination of women. Despite decades of dissension in the organization, the churches of the NBC have been in

7. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 152-54.

agreement historically in their opposition to the ordination of women. There have been no meaningful debates on the convention floor about the topic, nor any leadership initiatives pushing the denomination toward the inclusion of women in the ministry. Instead, it has been far more convenient to hide behind the bars of biblical precedence and claim that the lack of representation of women as pastors and preachers in the biblical canon prevents twenty-first-century Christians from thinking outside the box. As a result, those women most interested in ordained ministry have fled the NBC for religious organizations that were more supportive of their vocational interests. An additional consequence of women being blocked from most NBC pulpits is that they have no genuine access to leadership positions within the denomination. The organization's upper echelon has been the exclusive domain of pastors, and since most NBC women interested in ministry find it difficult even to get their call to ministry recognized, it is virtually impossible for them to break into and through the old boys' network.

Conclusion

On the surface, it would appear that the NBC's competing institutional logics not only have prevented organizational development, but also have produced a culture of comfort with instability and confusion. I submit, however, that such a surface reading of the NBC's history fails to broaden our understanding of this organization's purposes and how its structure has both helped and hindered its achievements. Therefore, instead of seeing the denominational schisms of 1897, 1915, 1961, and the near split of 1998 as examples of black Baptist disunity and the inability to "get it together," we might learn more by inverting our interpretation. Why is it that black Baptists place such a high premium on dissent? How is this institutional logic built into the organization's structure? To what extent is it unique to this organization? Instead of wondering aloud why the male leadership is patriarchal, perhaps we might question why the women continue to choose their own auxiliary organization over fighting for full participation in the organizational life of the NBC. Of course, I do not claim to have the answers to these questions. It is my role only to provide a historical perspective for some of the organizational challenges facing the NBC in the twenty-first century that will be analyzed sociologically and theologically in the following case study and essay. However, it is my hope that in doing so I have given a description thick enough to muddle any simple conclusions.

One of the true blessings of American democracy is the room it makes for dissent. Individual members of the collective are permitted to vote their own

conscience, and are not duty-bound to follow what is popular or what others perceive to be right. By the same token, there is something frightening about majority rule which may disempower those with one less vote. The key to a healthy democracy is not demanding immediate resolution between these ideals, but recognizing that both exist and are, perhaps, necessary to provide some semblance of balance to the political structure. As I have shown, the NBC rests on a foundation of polarized positions constantly in a state of motion. But it rests in the knowledge that its foundation has withstood past tremors, and it can weather future storms so long as its quest for unity is tempered with a healthy dose of respect for dissent.