



# THE NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION AN EXPRESSION OF THE BLACK'S FREEDOM

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*Abstract: The history of blacks in America is miserable. Their ancestors coming from West Africa were taken to America through the South to become slaves. Their human rights were banned for centuries. They lived in a democratic country, America, but they had no right to live properly. They dreamt to have a life as the whites had. In the nineteenth century, it happened that a great development in Protestant Christendom opened the opportunity for the establishment of black churches. The National Baptist Convention, whose major followers were blacks, was a denomination that existed in America. This denomination accommodated the aspiration of freedom for the blacks in America.*

*Key words: blacks, nineteenth century, the National Baptist Convention*

## INTRODUCTION

Religion is believed to give the comfort and peace that individuals seek for. This is supported by Albanese who sees that "religion supplies the ideologies and prescriptive norms that form a kind of cultural cement of society" (1992:395). Therefore, it makes religion difficult to define because it encompasses all of human life's social and spiritual boundaries.

America applies a secular government and as a democracy country, the government does not interfere with religion's affairs. As long as the religion is not a fraud and it does not disturb the society, the government lets religion live and develop naturally. As a consequence, many denominations and sects emerged. According to Hornby (1985:230) a denomination is a name given to a class of religious group or a community of believers that is called by the same name, for example: Presbyterians form one denomination of Christians. Whereas, sect (Hornby, 1985:770) is "a group of people united by beliefs that differ from those of the more generally accepted". Thus, within an

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organized religion there are those whose adherents recognize a special set of teaching or practices, for example: The Pharises have been called a sect within Judaism. In the case of the National Baptist Convention, it is regarded as a denomination not a sect.

In America, the freedom of religion does not result chaos in the society but it makes the society more creative and sensitive. This phenomenon is for the sake of betterment because American religious dissent is not a social disease but is an outlet.

### **DISSENT AS A PART OF RELIGION**

Denominations and sects emerge in bountiful in America because some religion fails to accommodate a congregation's aspirations. Besides the society requires a mechanism for change, there is a different point of view about how God's mes-sages are delivered to human beings; consequently as a result, it raises dissent.

Dissent makes democracy meaningful and it is this beauty of plu-ralism that has become the American way of life. The liberality to express is the main instrument of progress and change and it becomes a means of gaining accommodation and consent. In *Dissent in American Religion*, Gaustad (1973:1-7, 142-154) says that dissenters are against (1) the structure and authority of ecclesiasticism, (2) the rigidity of religious idea, and (3) the hopes and the hypocrisy in society. Not all Americans believe in predestination but dissent-ers are trying to get something new that will give them alternatives.

There are new directions in religious dissent, i.e. there many ways for dissenters to get goodness because it is an endeavor to humanize religion. All is equal for God. So, the church is not only a symbol and religion is not a threat. Those who follow a certain religious dissent should enjoy it. Dissenters will not bring about revival of religion but they offer the re-creation of religion. In other words, all religions have the same source but the way to glorify God is different from each other.

### **EVANGELISM**

American protestantism emerged in the sixteenth century. There has been, however, a reformation of religion in the American protestant, which among others is that the Bible is read in the language of the followers. Based on the New Testament of the *Good News Bible* where it states, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father,

and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthews 28:19), the Protestants believe it is their duty to deliver God's message to human beings by doing the mission. The verse "Jesus Appears to His Disciples" (Matthews 28:16-20) is often interpreted by priests as the promulgation of reconciliation and love from Jesus Christ to make people all over the world know and trust God's works. So, for the American protestant it can literally mean that he is created to convert people.

Individuals who convert people are called evangelists. The evangelical protestant emphasizes the teaching of the Gospel based on the New Testament. Besides they believe, they teach people that only having faith in Jesus Christ can save the soul. To glorify God's message, men and women are willing to be evangelists by using many influential ways, such as building schools and hospitals to realize their mission. Albanese (1992:153-154) says that to evangelize means to literally convey the biblical material to the people and bring the words of the *New Testament* to people who need it. Evangelists try to create a community between God and the sinner and a community of the saved sinner with one another. They believe that their mission would keep their doctrine pure and help keep away from the evil doings of the world.

An evangelist is very active in promulgating the Bible. He would go door to door to realize his mission of ascertaining that the Bible is the only sure guide to heaven (Smith, 1991:360) and is called the circuit preacher. His mission is to make American Protestant the religion of the nation. This is why the circuit rider, or circuit preacher has become a national symbol of the frontier's religion (Albanese, 1992:163).

## **THE EVANGELICAL/ NON-EVANGELICAL DIVISION**

In 1843 Robert Baird published his book entitled *Religion in America*. He divides religion in America into two: namely evangelical and non-evangelical (Gaustad, 1973:22-27). Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist, Methodist, Dutch Reform Moravians, Quakers and Episcopalians are the evangelicals. Whereas; Roman Catholics, Unitarians, Universal-ists, Swedenborgians, Jews, Mormons, deists, and others are the non-evangelicals. As described in the previous paragraphs, the evangelicals emphasize primarily the Bible and the salvation of the soul by convert-ing people. They reject to conform to the non-evangelicals because the latter emphasizes more on the message of reconcilia-tion in the world.

Catholics as one type of the non-evangelicals, is of the opinion that Christ is a humanized message of God. In the concept of Trinity - Jesus Christ is not only the Son, the Father, but also the Holy Spirit of God. In the Jew's paternalistic society; the intimate relation between God and message, is symbolized in the Father and the Son's kinship relation. The Holy Spirit, as the Almighty - is the guideline for human beings' lives. Therefore, Christ is a source of virtue and love and a good example of intimacy in the world. For the sake of love to human beings He was willing to die to redeem the human sin.

Baird (cited in Gaustad, 1973:22) says about the non-evangelicals who above all else truly believe that Christianity is a message of Christ's atoning death - "a message that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Him". Baird also explains that unlike the evangelicals, the non-evangelicals do not convert people because they honor tradition more than the scripture, so they can introduce another "Gospel". For the evangelicals, however, they are reluctant to introduce new gospels, instead they just want to show how strict they are in interpreting the Bible.

### **THE BLACKS AND THE BAPTIST MISSION**

In the nineteenth century there was a remarkable development of missionary life and activity among young men and young women in the Protestant Christendom. They went from North America to Europe (Gaustad, 1983:157) as protestant missionaries who would evangelize every nation they decided to pass by.

The American Baptists is one type of the evangelical denomination of the Southern area of America whose church is considered prosperous, although the followers are mainly poor white citizens. To reach their mission, the Baptist formed its society through fulfilling the needs for better education, philanthropy, publishing houses and reform. To develop quickly, they feel they need no priest or reverend to lead the congregation. To become a priest, one needed no special training. The most important criteria as a leader is that one is willing to be a priest and has the capability of leading the congregation. The Baptist denomination believes that to be a leader is a call from God. Baptists believe that God speaks through the leader's body. So, the Baptists are ready to ordain people who experienced what seemed to be a genuine "call", hence this explains for why these people needed no special training (Carroll et. al., 1979:54). The Baptists have no target number of



recruiting its mass. Yet, in addition to recruiting the whites, the Baptist offers their hands to the black slaves who came from Africa.

Baptists are very enthusiastic to promulgate the Bible to any kind of people. They persuade the blacks to come into their churches with their dramatic ritual of baptism, i.e. total immersion in the holy water and in teaching their egalitarian spirit (Albanese, 1992:180). Blacks readily accept the offer as they see this as an opportunity to obtain equality, so the Baptist's mission to recruit as many followers did not experience any difficulty.

The mission worked well in the beginning, but the good cooperation among Baptists was disturbed by the restorations. As a result, in the Southern area there emerged the Southern Baptist Convention, whereas in the northern area the Baptist developed the American Baptist Church.

The Southern Baptist Convention was very dominant in comparison to the American Baptist Church. The reason was because the majority of the American Baptist Church's adherents are whites. The majority blacks preferred the Southern Baptist Convention more although it was rather rigid, conservative and aggressive to recruit masses. According to Albanese (1992:180) there were a lot more of blacks in number than the whites living in the South before the Civil War era, so the Southern Baptist Convention managed to develop more successfully.

The black slaves who were followers of Islam and general practitioners of traditional African religions, felt they could conform comfortably to the Baptist teachings because the ritual of the church was almost similar with their traditional African Religion. As slaves, they worked hard and lead an uneasy life, yet they never forget their traditional religion of glorifying their Gods by playing music and dancing as a form of communication with their Gods. Whenever a person wanted to contact the Gods, he danced all out until he was in a trance. In such a condition he can deliver the messages from the Gods, to his people. Thus, this was similar to the Baptist requirement that someone who has been especially "called by God" can be readily accepted as the leader of the congregation. This supernatural belief was an emphasis of the reliance and place of a high value on human's interpersonal relationships (Bennett, 1987:35).

The similarity of the ritual between the Baptist and African traditional religion made blacks interested in the Baptist denomination. What attracted them most was the fact that the Southern Baptist Convention also offered human equality. The blacks had been suffering too long from being predestined

as the white's slaves who were ugly and dirty; thus, converting into a Baptist was seen as the best change in their lives from the gloomy condition (Stuckey, 1986: vii and 275).

## **BLACK ASPIRATION AND HOPE: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH**

Albanese (1992:207) says that nearly two-thirds of blacks as church members counted themselves as Baptists, and almost a quarter identified with Methodism. The majority of blacks living in the South are remarkable; that the Southern Baptist Churches are sometimes identified with the Black Baptists.

Considering the role of whites as the dominant masters of the black slaves most black Baptists created their own society by having a church or churches without any formal priests, official meeting places nor ceremonies. By doing this they feel they exist in the nation, because they can express their rituals freely. This freedom of expressing equality in building one's own church is triggered by Richard Allen's experience in 1787, who formed an African Methodist Society in Philadelphia. His unpleasant treatment by whites when he was praying in the church became his basis of forming a new church. This also becomes the reason why the meaning of freedom for the blacks consequently means building separate black Baptist churches. In America, the separate black Baptist churches throughout the Southern area go as far as Kentucky and Louisiana in the Western area (Albanese, 1992:205).

Triggered off by racism, after the Civil War the black churches flourishes in great number almost everywhere. In 1895 representatives of three Negro Baptist organizations met in Atlanta, Georgia, to form a single national body for all black Baptists. The result was the National Baptist Convention, which differed from the parent body in neither theology nor policy - only in race (Gaustad, 1973:32). Albanese (1992:215) reports that the National Baptist Convention received 7.1 million members. In relation to the separation of the Baptists in the North and Southern area of America, according to Gaustad in *A Documentary History of Religion in America* (1983:169) E.C. Morris once criticized that as a Christian he did not want the Baptist to separate, but the schism caused by the white's racial attitude towards the blacks, i.e. the abuse of slavery by colonialism caused the separation.

The supremacy of whites is apparent in the South and it makes a dilemma for the government. To prevent the racism, America created a strong government to control the society, but the strong government became a threat of liberty. Washington Jr. says in *The Politics of God* that the emergence of the racist race is the failure of democracy (1967:xii). Actually, it is a universal want for individuals to require the freedom to decide their own lives. So, it is logical if the blacks want the three conditions of existence: (1) being or identity, (2) doing and (3) havingness (Hubbard, 1956:26). The first entails that blacks should have a chance to play an important role in America. Second, "doing" for blacks means that whatever they do is a form of their attainment of goals or the fulfilling of purpose. Lastly, by "havingness", blacks can own the power to command, have a position and take charge of objects. Because of this desire, the government let blacks express their freedom through the formal institution known as the National Baptist Convention.

The phenomenon of the white versus black society in the Southern area of America was not merely a history of racism in America but also of a great historical social change. As stated by Vago in *Social Change* (1971:120 - 121) the conflict America had should not be viewed as having negative connotations. The conflict, in fact, played an important role in making the government to do something. The emergence and the existence of black churches in the American society have made the application of democracy more meaningful.

The church as a formal institution accommodates the blacks' aspirations, so that blacks regard themselves as God's Humanizing Agents who deliver hope, promise and politics to the society for peace (Joseph, 1967:153). The mainstream of Christianity is reconciliation, and the blacks, which believe in predestination, conform to this basic concept of Christianity. Reconciliation, which is the mainstream of Christianity, is also the primary element in the genuine religion of the Negro black folk, which show the democratic creed of freedom and equality.

The blacks regard themselves as "the chosen people", not as the lucky people but as the suffer-ing servant. This notion, however, does not make the blacks pessimistic, because the blacks accept it as the blessing in disguise from God. Blacks identify themselves with the "salt" in America. Henceforth, because the mission of the blacks is to unify mankind through acceptance of being black as a blessing rather punishment, they can quickly

adapt to Christianity's teaching that God calls blacks to redeem mankind from war, nationalism, pride and other human weaknesses.

Regardless of the black exclusiveness that may happen to the society, the blacks hope that all mankind can become the witness of God who will not leave mankind. They also hope that the black's churches play an important role in the society as God's agent for reconciliation. Through the church's ministers, the blacks hope to have powerful political communities, which can initiate and direct the change. Thus, this powerful political community should not only respond positively to federal, state, and local forces deghettoizing, but from the point of view of effective business organization, black churchmen and churches can contribute to the making of both black and white groups of superior quality.

The black church is a center of organized legal black community from all classes. Thus, the black church have the functions of (1) as a means of gathering the black community; (2) having an important role in the process of fundamental social change and (3) having the commitment for blacks in politics who fight for their civil rights.

The function of the black church is not to be deluded by but in-crease the broad base of political unity to unite the black through economic well-being and prevent them from being satisfied. Because the black church is the voice of the people, it must be heard loud, and clear (Joseph, 1967:227).

Regardless of whether the blacks win or not, the primary motivation of the blacks is to demolish the supremacy of the whites. The blacks see the church as the Kingdom of God, which conforms to the mainstream of Christianity, namely the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, so reconciliation and peace in the world can be realized. In brief, by means of the black church's emergence, the National Baptist Convention of the blacks have become a tool for equality and democracy for the American society.

## **CONCLUSION**

Not all blacks are congregations of the National Baptist Convention; some of them are congregations of the Episcopal Church or Methodist church. However, through the description above, the National Baptist Convention is a "pot" for black aspirations and a means of showing the existence of blacks in America. It becomes the proof of how the American black is capable of taking part in the system of politics.



The hopes of the blacks support the black politics. Thanks to the black churches, the statement of white supremacy and black inferiority are minimized. It is through the National Baptist Convention that the blacks can realize their freedom.

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