

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF NBEA

The history of anything is the understanding of the circumstances, conditions, and milieu from which it arises, takes basic shape, and sets itself to interact fruitfully with those circumstances in as positive a manner as its self-chosen priorities determine. The ability to continue to carry on this creative interaction through time, regardless of duration, determines in great measure its contemporary viability. NBEA, at this critical juncture of its history, vigorously reasserts its continuing contemporary relevance. This reassertion is in response to critical questions raised in some quarters as to the continued viability and reason for existence of NBEA. Because of the sincerity of these questions, NBEA cannot avoid giving anything less than an honest and effective answer. In doing so, it stands in good company, for along with all other basic human organizations (even the institutional form of the Church), it must justify its continuous claims upon the loyalties of men. It must do this, not only in terms of the historical conditions from which it arose, but even more so at the bar of contemporary human existence. Modern secularism-dominated experience dictates that such should be so; and since this generation is the one all Christian and non-Christian groups are vying with for a serious hearing, it is a situation which cannot be piously ignored or side-stepped. We cannot pretend in any way that we do not owe present-day humanity answers that really answer the questions they so freely ask.

To truly understand NBEA, one would have to relive the times that brought it into existence. We will not, at this point, enter into such reliving (the details of which can be found in earlier works by this author). It is of equal importance, however, to understand that those times - in great measure unchanged - still dictate the life situation that Black Americans presently live under and, accordingly, set the very bounds which conditioned that reality. Although there has been some very real progress, much of it is more apparent than real. It must be clearly recognized that such progress is largely for individuals. The position of the Black group remains relatively unchanged from where it was prior to the 1960's - except for the extension of voting rights, rights to public accommodations, and inter- and intra-state travel. The acknowledged increase of Black Americans trained in college or technical institutions has had little measurable effect upon the masses of that group. A larger number and proportion of these masses languish in underemployment and unemployment than at any time in American history since the Great Depression of 1929, the 1930's, and most of the 1940's (World War II gave us jobs which peacetime in the 1950's and early 1960's took away). It is, at least, an open question whether or not the intensifying unemployment situation of the Black underclasses may be as severe as it has ever been at any time in American history since the days immediately following the repeal of slavery.

In my book on NBEA's History, **The Evolution of A Concept of Ministry**, I expressed the fear, admittedly my own opinion (though garnered from a wide reading of United States history), whether we, both as a nation and as a peculiar part of that nation, were not heading back to a past from which all of us thought we had cleaned escaped. What gives NBEA consistent and persistent relevance is its unerring ability to recognize and address its best energies to assisting Black Americans, and any true allies, in the discovery and use of resources with which:

1. to understand the times in which we contemporarily live;
2. to read with accuracy where we as Black Americans are in the midst of those times;
3. to assess our ever contemporary position with regard to the powers that be who heed that society, and finally,
4. to demonstrate committed, dedicated leadership geared toward creating and developing strategies tailor-made to maximize our continuous, creative adjustment.

This means changing the times by changing ourselves! It no longer means, "Get Whitey!," but it most consistently means, "Assist holistically and in every way, Blackie!" It means making a major contribution to the dynamic development of our own individual and group identity. And it means using that group unity as a viable bargaining instrument in persuading the larger, controlling community to address the basic issues that relate to a truly open society, for American political and cultural history has shown that the individual enters the open society in direct proportion to the prestige and political power of the group that he is a part of. NBEA recognizes that until Black people, as a group, come to terms with this, and begin to seriously address itself to the intra-group unitive forces which lead to a healthy group self-concept, it will always have to discuss progress in terms solely of favored individuals while the Devil takes the Black masses.

Individualistic thinking of this sort denies to Blacks, as a group, a basic right which all other American subgroups practice as a deliberate matter of course. Mexicans refer to themselves as La Raza, "the Race," and no one takes exception to this or denies them the right to do so. Puerto Ricans have their annual festivals (to which they have

every right), and no one is particularly offended. Irish expect everyone to be Irish on St. Patrick's Day, and all of us go along with it good-naturedly. Polish have their National Alliances, and we are forever-and-a-day reminded how hard-working Italian immigrants (along with the Mafia) helped make this country what it is. However, when the least powerful group in historical American society mentions "Black power," the whole country, including the Polish, Irish, Italians, Jews and everyone else feels threatened. There are no reasons why this should be so. The threat, however, behind the concept of "Black power" must be either suspicioned or much more clearly perceived by whites than by Blacks, for up to the present time the great masses of Black Americans seem to have less taste for the inherent promises of the concept than do their white counterparts. It is only at the rarest of times and in partial degree that Black Americans have accepted the concept as viable for themselves.

This raises a question with which we conclude this mini-exploration. The question is: "Why then give time to a concept (i.e. group identity) which the masses of Black people have, with rare exceptions, failed to embrace?" A partial response would be to pose an answer along theological lines. It begins by doing as Jesus our Lord often did – answering a question by rhetorically asking another. When dealing with the question of the possession and use of absolute power, as given in Scripture, we use with reservation the theological term, "monergism." This is altogether fitting and proper since God alone is sovereign, and no external force can share this quality of being with Him. Thus, when we look at the decrees as they come solely from God, to talk of man's part is completely extraneous. When it comes, however, to the execution of those decrees in time and space, God graciously provides a place for man's contribution; and under these circumstances, it is both wholly proper and wholly necessary to use the term, "synergism." Man graciously cooperates with God, and in this way the circle of salvation is complete!

It is in this derivative sense that human-conceived organizations, such as NBEA and all other para-church organizations subsist. Their viability is in the broadest terms set according to the measure with which they both consciously and unconsciously flesh out particular aspects of the will of God within restricted circumstances. Thus, dedication to the carrying out of the dictates of the Gospel, with priorities centered on a specific group, need not be divisive of the unity of the One Body! Two truths must be clearly and simultaneously held in mind: One, that restriction to a specific group must be recognized as valid, and Two, that the alternative truth of the universality of the body must be maintained with equal force. The prioritizing of one part does not in any manner deny nor detract from the universality of the whole. We unconditionally, therefore, accept the fact that God may well work in a particularizing situation, but at all times, His unerring and unswerving purpose is the salvation of all parts of mankind. If this is continually recognized by the particularists, such as NBEA (and especially by the National Black Christian Students Conference), its continued viability will be informed forever by the knowledge that no matter how bad the situation, there cannot always continue to exist enemies within the body of Christ.

In light of the above, NBEA conceives of its present place within unfolding history according to the prospectus of the following principles and the action models which grow naturally from acceptance of them:

1. The reading aright of the national situation, and the particular position of Black Americans within the national priorities.
2. The study, creation and continuous development of a national Black American strategy of action responses to national priorities in as many areas of human experience as capabilities will allow us to penetrate.
3. The building of the above upon a healthy self-concept of identity which recognizes the inseparability of Black individual identity from Black group identity. We recognize that this cannot, and will not, be accomplished upon uncritical assumptions based merely upon Black racial chauvinism – which is as wide of the mark as white, or Asian or Hispanic chauvinism!
4. Finally, (and this is the penetrating principle), the ruling predisposition of it all, from start to finish – the interpenetration at every level, and at all times, consciously and unconsciously, with the determination to make all things obedient to the will of Christ as revealed in God's Word, and most clearly in the demands of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. As it is said of Christ, that as He surrenders up the Messianic kingdom to His Father, "that all may be all in all," even so will we at any time, and all times, surrender up, with joyous devotion and adoration, our peculiar priorities, so that at all times Christ may be all in all.

Rev. Dr. William H. Bentley, 1988