

1987 ANNUAL PRESIDENTIAL REPORT

The National Black Evangelical Association has in its twenty-four year history stood as a beacon of indigenous Black evangelical ministry. It has represented excellence in the arenas of scholarship, ministry, and leadership. It has given birth to a multiplicity of organizations and contributed to the launching of the ministries of several now-prominent Black evangelical leaders.

The National Black Evangelical Association has a theological heritage that is rooted in the soil of evangelical theology, though contextualized to social, economic and cultural values and struggles of Black Americans. In its contextualized evangelical theology, the NBEA is, and has been, historically committed to the fundamentals of the faith. Yet, the NBEA is an umbrella organization in its scope and focus as it pertains to both its philosophy of ministry and organizational sophistication. This means that apart from the fundamentals of the faith there is room for differences in theological persuasions. Thus, among the NBEA family, there are many different denominations and independents, but there is a common binding thread regardless of the differences, namely, the fundamentals of the faith. There are no cults among the NBEA members today, nor have there ever been.

To be sure, the foundation of the NBEA rests upon a sound spiritual and biblical theological foundation. This position must needs be affirmed frequently and publicly due to the obvious propensity of NBEA constituency, both friend and foe, to identify and define the theological position of NBEA by the theology of its most vocal or visible board member, which may or may not be a true reflection of the organization's theology.

To be sure, the NBEA is larger than any single person or group of people. This fact is clearly reflected in its history. Yet, the question must be posed to this Board and its membership: "What of the future of the NBEA?" The focus of this question is not on whether or not NBEA can survive. This question focuses on whether the NBEA will survive. The answer to this question is, in my opinion, an emphatic "yes." The reason the NBEA will survive and succeed is because we, the Board and members of NBEA, want it to survive and succeed. We realize that this organization is too important to the future of evangelical Christianity to fail and too essential to be considered irrelevant.

It seems to me that the NBEA, more than any other predominantly Black evangelical association, represents in both its scope and focus contextualized Black evangelical Christianity. Perhaps, it is this fact more than anything else that contributes to our struggle to survive in the area of economics. As an organization, we are broke; but then, we do have a rich heritage. It also seems to me that to be a Black evangelical association that is contextualized in its message and ministry means that we must develop a supporting constituency that understands where we are coming from as Black evangelicals in our message and ministry. Let's face it – we are not, as an organization, on the cutting edge of issues and ideas that affect the Black community today. As a national organization, we are no longer leading in, nor invited to participate in, meetings that are dealing with the major moral, social and spiritual issues today that affect our country in general and our community in particular. This is not to suggest that some other organization is on the cutting edge of issues that impact Black America socially and spiritually. I do not believe this is the case. There is an increasing number of individuals that are meeting across this country about such issues, but there seems to be no organized movement or organization leading at this point.

The fact that NBEA has fallen behind in its role as an organization leading on the cutting edge of Black evangelicals has left a vacuum in the role of Black evangelism. We must not allow ourselves to live under the illusion that it is possible to be an effective Black leader apart from spiritual, social, economic autonomy, which we know is impossible. This vacuum will not remain unfulfilled much longer; it will be filled by some organization. I believe we are that organization; today is our opportunity. Let us rise to the challenge of a growing vacuum and crisis at the top of organized Black evangelicalism.

To rise to this challenge in spite of our current economic plight, we must sharpen our focus and narrow our scope. I believe that NBEA must focus more specifically on developing a constituency that needs what we offer as an organization.

What exactly do we offer our constituency?

1. Expertise in the areas of: the family, theology, social action, Christian education, the other Commissions., etc.
2. Fellowship with other believers, both lay and clergy.
3. Leadership development.

It seems to me that not everybody needs these things from the NBEA because they get them from other sources. There are, however, no small number of clergy and lay people who have a serious recognized need for these things from the NBEA because they have no access to such evangelical resources.

There is in the history of NBEA evidence of an organization that developed natural leaders from unknown leaders (the little people). In those days, I suppose, the reason this was the case was because there were no big people around to call on. Today, we seem to be promoting the big people at the expense of the little people. It seems to me that an increasing number of our keynote speakers are not counted among the supporting and identifiable NBEA membership. I think we need to change our focus from the big people to the little people again. I believe that the time has come for the NBEA to narrow its scope in terms of who we are trying to reach and what it is we are trying to do. To this end, I suggest we set out to develop a profile of a Black evangelical. Such a profile, in my opinion, must be broad enough to encompass the umbrella concept and yet narrow enough to screen individuals through the grid of the fundamentals of the faith as set forth in the Constitution of the NBEA.

Having sharpened our focus and narrowed our scope, we must begin to rebuild a national constituency among the little people who are the lay followers of the little (unknown) leaders. To rebuild a national constituency, we must return again to the local chapter concept, perhaps, with a new name and a specific agenda. In my opinion, the chapter chairperson, along with chapter members, should make up the Board of Directors and Commission heads. With a few carefully determined exceptions, the national convention program should be made up from these chapter people.

In the words of Nehemiah, "Let us arise and build." These are days of serious opportunity for the Black evangelical. For like the decade of the sixties, Black Americans are under serious assault – racism, discrimination, and oppression are loose in our world. The moral wall has fallen, and the fence of the family has been breached by the enemy. Christian leaders, both Black and White are under seige; and the Church of Jesus Christ seems to be increasingly powerless. For such as time as this, God has raised up the National Black Evangelical Association.

Our theme this year is "A Call to Righteousness." In this, our day, there seems to be a church on every corner; and more people are going to church than ever before. And yet, in my hometown, Dallas, Texas, in which there are three major seminaries, we have the dubious distinction of being both the divorce capital and the murder capital of America.

The NBEA has come together to call America to righteousness in a day in which the ruling party in the White House is supported by the largest number of evangelical Christians in the history of this country, and yet there is increasing evidence of corruption and deceit from the Oval Office on down. And what is frightening is that the Church is silent about it!

Yes, these are days of serious opportunity for NBEA, for we may well be the last bastion of hope for producing Black male and female leadership that truly understands the meaning of leadership. For, you see, to be a true leader, one must have more than money, and even some things that money cannot buy.

Listen! Why is it that Ebony Magazine and the National Negro College Fund leaders are silently supportive of a disproportionate amount of advertising of cigarettes in the Black community? Especially in view of the prevalence of cancer, hypertension, and alcoholism in the Black community? Perhaps, they cannot afford to speak out against these things, but the Church can and must.

In John 6:67 and following, having been deserted by 5,000 parishioners in a little more than a moment's time, Jesus turned to His twelve disciples and posed this question: "Will you also go away?" I take this question to mean, "Why did you stay?" Thus, Jesus' real question to His disciples was, "What is your motive for staying?" He wanted them to think about that. Were they staying for the good that Jesus could do for them, or was there a more noble reason?

Peter's response is more than profound. Peter said, "Lord, we stayed because of You; for You see, we know both who You are and what You have to offer. You are," said Peter, "God's Christ, and You have the only hope any man can have that means anything – You have eternal life." The very core of the focus of our theme, "A Call to Righteousness," is the motive behind the behavior of leaders, both sacred and secular, in this, our day.

We who are Black Americans need to rediscover the meaning of servanthood. For when you are privileged of God to have the opportunity to lead among a people who are accustomed to being exploited and ripped off, you must also have the compassion to give rather than take, and the humility to exalt rather than be exalted. You must also have both the courage and the autonomy to plead their case even when it hurts where it hurts most, namely, in the pocketbook.

(This presidential address was delivered by **Rev. Eddie B. Lane** on April 23, 1987, in Philadelphia, during NBEA's 24th Annual Convention. It is reproduced here because of its obvious relevance to the strategizing we must continue to do in this 21st century).