

Section: PREACHING AND CHURCH POLITICS

CHEAP GRACE

Why did you all vote to forgive Henry Lyons?" was the first question I faced after returning from the September meeting of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. But the more troubling subsequent question was: "How could you all vote to keep him in office in the face of such charges?" These were the same questions that were troubling me, so much so that I left Denver with a mile-deep depression, not sure how to make sense of what had happened. And they have bothered others as well. The convention's actions have been a major source of concern within the black community, from barber and beauty shops to corporation office suites.

Lyons's supporters left Denver believing that they had defended God's honor by forgiving and retaining the embattled president of the 8.2-million-member denomination. They repeatedly invoked Jesus' admonition to forgive our brothers as many as 70 times seven. Another scriptural passage they offered was, "Let those who are without sin cast the first stone."

The controversy about Lyons centered on issues of financial accountability--issues that were publicly broached when reports surfaced about his relationship with Bernice Edwards, a church official with whom he reportedly bought a \$700,000 house and other luxury items, and about various other financial irregularities. Prior to the convention a number of pastors were calling for Lyons to step down and were asking the denomination to institute new measures to ensure responsible handling of its financial affairs. But the church's executive board quickly exonerated Lyons, a decision that was ratified by the 1,200 delegates.

To understand the actions of the convention it helps to consider five elements in the life of the NBCUSA: 1) its political tradition, 2) the role of preaching, 3) the absence of professional ethics, 4) its political use of forgiveness and 5) its exploitation of women.

The convention has a dark history of politics. Political infighting and self-serving opportunism have often seemed more central to the convention than serving God. The primary source of its questionable politics continues to be the status and behavior of the convention president. Perhaps nothing better reveals the trophy this office has become than the millions of dollars spent on the president's election.

The late James Washington, a black church historian, once characterized the convention as a "frustrated fellowship." (Washington's sadly neglected work constitutes a rare critical interpretation of black Baptist history.) Given the value placed on the denomination's highest office, it's not surprising that the autocratic role of the convention president is one key source of the frustration Washington wrote about. For 50 years convention leaders have fostered the idea that the president is bigger than life and beyond reproach. Many followers of the president firmly believe that they are to "touch not the Lord's anointed."

The president is the only person who is elected to any convention office, consequently his voice has a unique--if not an exclusive--authority in the convention. He not only freely chooses the members of his cabinet but directs the use of convention money without any checks and balances. He and his political allies are allowed to handle the money without submitting records of how the funds are used. Progressive-minded lay-people in the NBC do not tolerate that kind of unchecked power over funds in the local church; in convention affairs, however, traditional practice is more powerful than constitutional safeguards.

Lyons was the protege of the previous president, Joseph H. Jackson, who held office for more than 30 years and who personified an ethos of autocratic leadership and power. Physical fighting and even, on one occasion, a killing earned NBCUSA pastors in the early 1960s the reputation of being anointed hoodlums. Word circulated at the recent Denver meeting that a large number of pastors had appealed to the black mayor for permits to carry their guns.

Decades of authoritarian rule in the NBC have accustomed its members to the power politics of its leaders. But the president's position is also enhanced by his control of the convention's pulpit. Frequently NBC presidents use their role as high-profile preacher to further their political ambitions and maintain office.

Traditionally, the president's sermon is the high point of the annual convention. Conventioneers prepare for it like football fanatics preparing for the Super Bowl. Though the event takes place in the afternoon, women dress up for the event in their most formal attire. The intensity of the sermon depends on the volatility of the convention's politics. Intense political infighting is to the president's preaching moment what the fermentation process is to good wine.

Jackson used his preaching gifts for self-aggrandizement and to maintain tight control over the convention. This native of Rudyard, Mississippi, was an overpowering voice in the denomination. Referred to by some of his followers as "preaching Black Jack," Jackson would preach his followers into a frenzy. His supporters would often brag that "Jackson preached us crazy!"

Jackson's homiletic technique was to portray an apocalyptic war between God's good guys and the devil's bad ones. Jackson and his followers were, of course, on God's team. Jackson preached that God was always blessing those who blessed him as leader and cursing those who cursed him. Jackson taught through example that it was all right to compromise morality for political expediency.

Lyons has used preaching in the same way. He did it well in Denver, drawing on the biblical narrative to show that just as God blessed Jacob, a trickster, God was blessing him. Lyons's identification with Jacob gave him hero status among his supporters. It would have been a better healing moment had he manfully admitted his wrongdoings. Unfortunately, Lyons used the preaching moment to celebrate his victory--his retention of his office--rather than to confess his sins.

But Lyons was not alone in his triumphalism. Nowhere in the service did any of Lyons's followers, such as E. V. Hill, chairman of the ethics commission, call the denomination together to seek forgiveness before God for its corporate sins. Hill was perceived by those opposed to Lyons as playing the power game to the hilt. Like Lyons, Hill reveled in the victory that Lyons's supporters claimed God had delivered to them. The triumph celebrated in the pulpit, though, was a victory largely won in the denomination's ethics committee, which was charged with investigating the charges against Lyons.

The ethics commission's investigation of Lyons trivialized the concept of professional ethics. Even before the Denver meeting, word went out among Baptists that the convention's board of directors had handpicked an ethics commission to look into the charges. The committee was chaired by Hill, a Lyons associate who is well known for his close ties to conservative white religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell. Speaking with the confidence of the fundamentalist preacher that he is, Hill announced that he "found no fault in the man." Case closed.

Pastors who questioned the process that the committee used to investigate Lyons were seen as troublemakers and charged with holding up the committee's work and being motivated by political ambitions of their own. Pastors Franklyn Richardson of New York and William Shaw of Philadelphia were targets of such charges. Followers of Lyons contended that Lyons had done no more than any other president. Hill appeared even more absurd to many when he sought to cover up for his committee's failings by saying that the racist white press was the source of Lyons's problems.

The committee's actions set the stage for the politicizing of forgiveness that climaxed the Denver convention. Biblically, forgiveness means that the violator has the power to "give for" the violator what he cannot "give for" himself. God's transformative power humbles both violator and violated to the point that neither desires to be lord over the other. But the convention's forgiveness of Lyons was a political rather than a spiritual act. It also tended to sentimentalize forgiveness and ignore the connection between forgiveness, on the one hand, and justice, love and power, on the other. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between cheap and costly grace is instructive here. According to Bonhoeffer, those who prefer an easy, painless kind of discipleship are the advocates of a cheap grace. The NBC's forgiveness of Lyons was an exercise in cheap grace.

Lyons was clearly requesting forgiveness for political, not theological purposes. He never said, and his supporters never asked him to say, "I have sinned against you and God." He was unable to see that he has done great harm to the convention and himself. He merely spoke of what this incident has cost him and his family emotionally. Here the sentimentalization of forgiveness was most in evidence. Lyons's "need" to feel forgiven took precedence over the need to create right structures and relationships within a denomination that had suffered abuses of leadership.

Lyons's supporters actually extended the cycle of abuse by bringing out Lyons's wife, who spoke to the convention on his behalf and tearfully confessed to bouts with alcoholism. Clearly, this display of Deborah Lyons as the contrite and weeping wife--an

Eve who had embarrassed her husband before the world--helped Lyons win his vote of forgiveness and retain office. How could the opposition counter this? Here was a classic lesson in how women can be exploited.

The convention's decision to forgive and retain Henry Lyons as president reflects its organizational problems and the serious problems in its theology of leadership. The decision also damages black America's collective moral striving to overcome stereotypes of black preachers. Prior to the civil rights movement, black preachers were frequently characterized by whites as ignorant and immoral charlatans who preyed upon their race. Generations of black religious educators, such as Benjamin Elijah Mays and Howard Thurman, devoted their lives to trying to eradicate such images. By precept and example, they sought to make visible a type of self-sacrificing Christian leader who would minister to the whole person and contribute to the liberation and uplift of black people. Henry Lyons and his supporters did a great disservice to this tradition in their uncompromising determination to keep him in office.

The NBC has become captive to its dark tradition of politics, its unethical use of the power of preaching, its trivialization of ethical concerns, and its exploitation of women. Under such conditions, it may have no future. But apparently its leaders would rather fight than change.

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