

# Certified Black Evangelicals

**“We Are ‘Evangelical’ and Political, But Not Whitenized.”**

**Rev. Dr. Walter Arthur McCray, *Gospelizer***

***President, National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA)***

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As an inheritor of intentional Black evangelicalism embodied in NBEA—its premier institution—I serve as its current president.<sup>1</sup> Being so, I am compelled in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior and Liberator, to lift my voice on behalf of the Black Evangelical collective in these times of political tumult and turmoil.

Quiet as it is kept, there is a collective of genuinely Black Evangelical voters. Though the image of this important political entity of African-descended Christians is often whitewashed in the media, they have not been whitenized by the white Evangelical world. These culturally authentic African-American believers are “certified” Black Evangelicals. The group has certain distinctive qualities which affirm their identity. An intensive meaning of this essential description comes later.

Once again the political climate and landscape covered by the media has raised the public consciousness about “Evangelical” voters, and which candidates court and win their support. Of course, the “Evangelicals” cited by the media are overwhelmingly white voters. Consequently, the strange religious-social hybrid of “Black Evangelicals” is neglected or viewed with a

cross-eyed perspective. With a broad brush, political pundits and practitioners incorrectly paint authentic Black Evangelicals in the image of their white counterparts. How the media portray them results in image-whitewashing of their unique Black Christian identity in the eyes of the public.

In contrast, there are other “non-certified” Evangelicals of dark hue. Many of them promote “color blindness” in Christian, cultural and political circles, and act accordingly. They tend to fit in comfortably with their white Evangelical assimilators. Sadly, these Evangelicals of black color are reaping from the whitewashing pundits and leaders the very invisibility they desire, or duly deserve. They have been whitenized by the brand of white evangelicalism they practice.

Unfortunately, in the media’s mix, some socially and politically progressive white Evangelicals are also painted pale in embarrassment.<sup>2</sup> Though these compassionate white believers may be “certified” (i.e., culturally sensitized) according to cultural and biblical criteria of Black believers, the media also whitewash them. Various commentators associate and subsume them under the ideologies and voting patterns of their often toxic Evangelical white brethren. This broad and unfair association causes them much discomfort.

When warranted and appropriate, political commentators and social pundits would do everyone a favor by at least making a distinction between “white” Evangelicals versus “Black” Evangelicals, especially those who are “certified.” And there are also other beneficial distinctions that may be identified in the collective of each Evangelical racial group.

The media, however, are not primarily at fault in the whitewashing. They usually follow the lead of white Christian candidates and leaders. Black Evangelicals have a primary bone of contention with skewed proponents of white Evangelical ideas and their groups. They have hijacked the “Evangelical” name, and are not faithfully true to its essential biblical values and historical roots.

In the thought patterns of many white Evangelical leaders, ministers and their followers, they often sell to the media their “Evangelical” bill of goods—their “conservative” white party line—when identifying their voting group as “Evangelical.” In doing so, they blindly heap blacks who associate with them into the white melting pot of notions that profess “we all are one,” irrespective of germane black ethno-cultural and political distinctions.

Certified Black Evangelicals strenuously oppose this type of assimilationist white Evangelical thinking, behavior and labeling. To the contrary of such mental and spiritual denigration of the Black psyche by white believers, Dr. Ruth L. Bentley, an executive and co-founder of the NBEA, and a Black psychologist, states: “We may be one, but we are certainly not the same!”

The “certified” adjective was applied to the Black Evangelical collective by the great African-American Evangelical statesman and scholar, the late Rev. Dr. William Hiram Bentley. He was a co-founder and “Father” of the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA), formed in 1963 for ministry to Black people as its intentional focus.<sup>3</sup> Here is Bentley’s quote:

America can never become the America that it is possible for it to be until America satisfactorily resolves her Afro-American problem. **Certified** Black evangelicals cannot retreat from this and are committed by the very dynamics of American reality to follow it to its logical end—whatever that is. As committed believers, we feel that it can be resolved under God, with liberty and justice for all!<sup>4</sup>

In context, Bentley challenged Black Evangelicals to courageously struggle for freedom and justice in America for all people. Black Evangelicals who commit themselves to achieving the ideal of rectifying the nation’s African-American problem are the ones who are “certified.”

This is to say, **the biblical blackness practiced by Evangelical believers of African descent speaks as their affirming witness, and qualifies them to authentically represent both the Evangelical message and Black American people. They are “certified” by virtue of having been “vetted” by standards of being consciously and culturally Black and in Christ.**

The metaphor of certified Black Evangelicals has relevance in American politics.

Bentley is probably turning over in his grave about the developing presidential political tone in 2016, and the relationship of political Evangelicals to the cultural, social and economic condition of Black Americans in the US. Most likely, he is twisting in anguish over the wide disparity existing between certain sectors of Evangelical whites and their relation to the masses of Black people. These white believers claim to be followers of the righteous God revealed in the Bible. But their

affections for racial rectification in things political and social are not very favorable to the needs and aspirations of the Black group. Sometimes particular white Evangelicals are separated from major Black Christian organizations as the night is from the day.

So what of these so-called “certified Black Evangelicals”?

The issue raises crucial questions about Black Evangelical identity. *Who and what constitutes genuine Black evangelicalism? And how does this identity relate to the political milieu in this presidential election year?* These key questions demand clarity in political and social arenas.

When I once identified myself as an explicit “Black Evangelical” to a group of African-American pastors, the first question they posed to me from their provocative lips was: “What do you mean by “Evangelical”? By raising this question, they were drawing a clear implication, and raising my own level of discomfort.

These God-fearing ministers were making it known that they refuse to have much of anything to do with Christians who are identified as “Evangelicals” in and by major media outlets. Of course, the “Evangelicals” whom they see most often and are labeled in the media belong to the white group. More so, neither did these particular Black preachers and servants of God care much for the “black-in-color-only” Evangelicals who are prominent in the public arena. In the matter of politics and social progress, being black-in-color is certainly not enough for these African-American pastors or their people.

I have written a major publication that describes the relationship of “Black” and “Evangelical” as a “contentious union,” which makes Black Evangelicals an “anomaly,” especially to those in many traditional Black Christian circles.<sup>5</sup> “Black Evangelical” is quite a contentious anomaly, and is true on both the sides of their identity: biblical and theological, and cultural and social. In the area of stated beliefs held by blacks, and pertaining to the cultural identity and mandates of the black historical experience in America, to be a true-to-color-and-consciousness Black Evangelical is to be a strange creature.

By and large, members of black churches, and wider black religious circles, seldom use the term “evangelical.” Yet, if the truth be told—by virtue of personal Christian beliefs and relationship to traditional black churches—the African-American group is predominantly more “evangelical” than any other ethnic group in the nation.<sup>6</sup> They are ‘born again,’ believe all the Bible is God’s Word, consider themselves “*Gospelizers*”—“**Good News messengers**’ of the resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ”—and adhere to other essential tenets that help to define evangelical faith.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that many of them are not adept at discussing certain theological nuances of intra-faith beliefs, these Black believers are *incipient* or *implied* “evangelical.” As such, they are identified in contrast to their *intentional* and *explicitly labeled* “Evangelical” Black brothers and sisters.

Most African-American Christian voters are “evangelical” by Bible standards. More often than not, and traditionally, these Christian blacks do their “caucusing” and voting in “blocks” that are informally generated in African-American churches and their affiliated structures. To say the

least, when the final votes for an election are cast and tallied, there is usually a vast difference (or chasm!) between those chosen by the majority of white Evangelical voters and those by voters in African-American congregations.

Are Black believers monolithic in voting patterns? No. Is their social and political impetus theological and spiritual? Evangelical and cultural? Yes. Assuredly yes. To the glory of God, they vote for the best interest of their cultural group, in whatever way they may perceive or interpret the meaning of “best interest.”

Beneath the issue of correctly making a distinction between identifying white and Black Evangelicals lies substantive differences that shape the conversation. Though those who are “evangelical” share some common traits, certain differences in their perspectives place Black Evangelicals at odds or in confrontation with many of their white counterparts.

At the core of their essence, genuine Black Evangelicals are *pro-Christ*. Black Evangelicals are *pro-Black*. Black Evangelicals are *pro-Cross*.

One aspect of Black Evangelical identity is ***pro-Christ***.

**Pro-Christ does not equate to being pro-American without reservation.** Christ as God is not America. Neither does the position of pro-Christ blanketly or blandly accept the moral and spiritual values for which many white Christians in the nation have historically stood. Recall

historically that many “Christian” whites in this nation once stood for the legal and chattel slavery of African-descended people.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, not a few white Evangelical believers are presently ardent supporters of the mass incarceration of Black males in the legalized form of criminalized slavery known as the “New Jim Crow.”<sup>9</sup> They love and welcome the prison system, its prisoners and its profits for their small towns and communities!

In stark contrast, the Black American Christian experience views Jesus the Messiah differently. He is far greater than a God who is localized and enveloped in American values and ideology. In the perspective of certified Black Evangelicals, Jesus is both humanity’s Sacrifice from sin and the Savior-Deliverer of the entire world.<sup>10</sup> **Jesus is the Deliverer of Black people from social oppression in all its forms, including the MAAFA—African enslavement, white supremacy and cultural hegemony.**<sup>11</sup> Our understanding of the Jesus of Scripture comes through the eyes and experience of a Black people who long for the acceptance of personhood and dignity, for freedom, justice, equality, vindication, and racial rectification from social ills that are personally and systemically afflicted by racist and oppressive white people, including white *Christian* persons, on black humanity.

Jesus came to “**set the captives free**” and to usher in **the era of Jubilee**. Jesus said,

*“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to the poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,*



***To proclaim liberty to the captives***

*And recovery of sight to the blind,*

***To set at liberty those who are oppressed;***

<sup>19</sup>*To proclaim **the acceptable year of the LORD.***"

Luke 4:18-19 (NKJV, *emphasis added*)

Jesus gave His life a ransom to redeem our blessed but fallen, desecrated, and downtrodden humanity.<sup>12</sup> According to a good understanding of biblical truth, Black Evangelicals are in support of a Messiah after the fashion and mission of the Christ mentioned above. This eternally justifying and socially liberating Jesus is the God of our highest affections.

Being **pro-Black** is another dimension that characterizes genuine Black Evangelicals.

Immediately let's dismiss the idea that "blackness" is bad. We do not subscribe to a view that blackness should be inextricably associated with the vilest forms of negative behavior manifested in our communities, or with those anti-social patterns portrayed in the media across the nation and the world. **The sins of some in the black group do not define the identity of the group as a whole.** Let's also dismiss the idea that to be pro-Black is to be necessarily anti-white, or anti- any other people or group of humanity. **Blacks can certainly love themselves without hating others.**

**The very Incarnation of the Lord into the world consecrates the idea of African blackness.** Jesus identified Himself with all humanity by coming in physical form as **Immanuel**— "God with us."<sup>13</sup>

The eternal God came in the form of black and African humanity. The physical type chosen by Him was that of a humanity whose eyes are like a “flame of fire,” whose hair is textured like “wool,” and whose feet are like fine brass “refined in a furnace.”<sup>14</sup> The physical resemblance to the African type is obvious.

Based on sound biblical beliefs, and contrary to the ideas of many white Evangelical proponents of a God of the Bible Who is “color-blind,” blackness as created and formed by God should be viewed in a positive manner. In its essence, blackness is the ethno-color of a people who are created beautiful and are redeemed by God. Thus, being pro-Black is an affirmation of the inherent color goodness and value of a person in a group of African descent.

The pro-black dimension of Evangelicals of African descent has as its starting point the acceptance and respect of individual Black personhood. Let’s make an application of this truth for a people whose lives are threatened by the murderous and criminal behavior of some intentionally errant law enforcement officers, or by the gang warfare and violence that is prevalent in black communities. Black Evangelicals proclaim that **Black lives matter because each and every person of black color matters in the eyes of God their Creator and Redeemer.**

The group dimension of pro-blackness is integrally related to its starting point of individual personhood. Black Evangelicals are pro-the-Black-*group*. Being pro-Black for the people-group of those who are of African descent continually interfaces with dynamics that occur in the political arena.

The politics of America is a politics of the *group*. Groups exercise power in the political affairs of the nation. The group-ness of political behavior is obvious in the electoral process, if not in the governing process. Witness the undue economic power and influence of both Political Action Committees (PACs) and lobbyists.

Despite the group dimension of the political equation, some Black Evangelicals operate very individualistically in the political arena. Apparently, they operate and vote independently, apart from any significant connections to any sizable or historical Black group. In doing so, these Black believers minimize their potential for making a substantial contribution toward improving the quality of life for the masses of Black Americans as a whole.

Why do some self-identified Black Evangelicals espouse more pro-white American values and ideology than they advocate for issues that directly impact or are germane to Black people? Why do they endorse and identify more with the values of the white establishment than with their own African-descended flesh and blood?

Certified Black Evangelicals operate otherwise. In the spirit of the prophet Isaiah, Black Evangelicals do not “forget their own flesh”; they do not neglect the humanity of their own kindred; **they remember to compassionately care for their own Black group** (Isaiah 58:7).<sup>15</sup>

Genuine Black Evangelicals certainly want America to progress, to progress righteously and justly. Yet, the measure of that progress must readily address the advancement of Black people. National progress must also especially work for the poor and afflicted, and for other minorities who likewise suffer in the nation.

African-American believers in Christ fight for political issues. They struggle for cultural and social causes related to the likes of Black freedom, unity, peoplehood, equal access, systemic reformation, anti-racism, reversal of mass incarceration, educational advancement, economic opportunity, and reparations. Being pro-Black in Christ, these believers advocate for their people in the best spirit of Black Evangelicalism. African-American believers who identify evangelically should adopt such activist positions, and are divinely called to do more.

All Evangelical believers must grapple with the Cross.

Black Evangelicals are **pro-Cross**. They believe in the atoning blood of Jesus through His crucifixion for a fallen humanity. The sacrifice given by the Messiah some 2,000 years ago accomplished the work of salvation that leads all who believe into complete reconciliation with God, the Most High. The Cross of Jesus also is the basis for a diverse humanity to become reconciled as “one new humanity” in Christ.<sup>16</sup> Here is the genuine ideal of “peace,” and of true racial and cultural reconciliation.

According to Isaiah the prophet, the Cross of Christ relates to political governance. Isaiah envisioned a future when the Messiah would bear the “government” upon His “shoulder.” Jesus literally shouldered the cross-beam to which He was impaled, and He hung from that cross in His crucifixion on Mount Calvary.

*“For unto us a Child is born,*

*Unto us a Son is given;*

***And the government will be upon His shoulder.***

*And His name will be called*

*Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,*

*Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

(Isaiah 9:6, NKJV, emphasis added)

Isaiah’s prophetic reference has a political nature,<sup>17</sup> and speaks of Jesus Who governs through bearing the Cross. **Governing through Cross-bearing is the work of Christ**, an insight raised hundreds of years ago by the black African Church Father, Cyril of Alexandria.<sup>18</sup> Thus, based on the lead of Jesus, it is God’s will for Evangelical politicians—for all who aspire to govern in our nation—to take up their cross. Cross-bearing must bespeak the nature of all Evangelicals who govern as followers of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

In the present political climate, in what ways are white Evangelical political candidates and leaders prepared to bear the cross, to suffer and “die” for the redemption of those who are “the least” in American life? In what ways should they deny themselves and lay down their lives to

effect true racial and ethnic reconciliation—**peace**—in the nation? How is it possible for them to personally divest themselves in ministry for the holistic well-being of others throughout the land?

Cross-bearing may take many forms. **Not all cross-bearing is economic, but much of it is in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America, and in the world.** The economic moral mandate of our day calls for a redistribution of the resources and wealth of those who are the most financially well-to-do in the nation and the world. Individuals and groups should voluntarily redirect their collective wealth to aid those who are poor and afflicted. Political creatures who would lead in the governance of the nation are called to stand up front in this economic cross-bearing and resource sharing.

**In America, how many so-identified Evangelical millionaires and billionaires in the land would divest themselves of half their wealth to invest in the nation’s major and poor metropolitan and rural areas?** Virtually overnight, such economic investments could drastically improve the quality of life for the poor. The economic infusion could become the catalyst for and effect a lasting systemic change and social reformation for millions of Americans—Black lives inclusive. Which financially fortunate Evangelical politicians and leaders would be willing to divest themselves in such a manner to achieve these lofty ideals?<sup>20</sup>

In the Cross there is suffering and death. In the Cross there is redemption and glory. Followers of Jesus also suffer and die, that others may receive the redeeming grace and glory of God.<sup>21</sup> Remember that the Jesus Who is the Pioneer of our faith—He Who was “rich”—became “poor,”

so that through His poverty humanity might become rich.<sup>22</sup> This “Black Evangelical” Jesus divested Himself of divine glory and privilege to save a lost world.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to the responsibilities of white Evangelicals before God, Black Evangelicals are called by the Crucified Christ to make their own crucial sacrifices for their own people, and for other poor folks throughout the nation. In this regard, the compassionate cross-bearing of the African Simon of Cyrene becomes the guiding paradigm. This black man helped Jesus to bear His Cross, even as he followed the Savior to the summit of Calvary where Jesus was crucified.<sup>24</sup>

In the pattern of Simon of Cyrene, in the pattern of Jesus the Christ, true Black Evangelicals are demonstrable cross-bearers. These are they who bridge the social and economic gap between our churches (including mega-churches) and the masses of black people. Those of us in black churches, we who are incipient Black Evangelicals, must in the pattern of our Lord divest ourselves for the masses in our own communities. Obeying the call of Jesus to bear the Cross is the prophetic voice and actions of certified Black Evangelicals.

Whether economic or otherwise, the call of the Cross often demands a radical suffering and sacrifice for the sake of redeeming *and governing* others. This spiritual, social and political posture should become the genuine response and position especially of white Evangelicals who govern, if their evangelicalism is authentically biblical.

In the meantime, when we hear commentators, white Christians or politicians use the term “Evangelical,” make note that their reference is probably to those who are of the white group. Keep in mind that out there in the body politic there are other ethnic groups of non-white Evangelicals, and a great number of these are of African descent, a collective espousing black cultural integrity and empowerment. These certified Black Evangelicals are not the same as their white counterparts. The two groups often widely differ in their racial-ethno cultural aspirations and how these play out in the politics of America. And sometimes these white Evangelicals are miles apart from Black Evangelicals in how each collective views particular biblical beliefs, or envisions the holistic saving work of their Lord and Liberator Jesus Christ.

Many of these white Evangelicals would do well to strengthen themselves and the nation by humbly submitting and following the leadership of their certified Black brethren.

# # #

The 53<sup>rd</sup>-year convention of the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA) will be held April 20-23, 2016 at the Chicago Marriott Midway. The theme is **“Cush Cries Out! Christ Answers!”** The Word says, *“Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say: Here Am I”* (Isaiah 58:9, NIV). In the spirit of Christ, admission to the NBEA meeting is free and open to all. By the grace of God, the NBEA is pro-Christ, pro-Black, and pro-Cross.

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[www.The-NBEA.Org](http://www.The-NBEA.Org)

Rev. Dr. Walter Arthur McCray - [wamccray@sbcglobal.net](mailto:wamccray@sbcglobal.net)



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- <sup>1</sup> I have served in the office of NBEA president since 1999, and have been affiliated with the association since 1972.
- <sup>2</sup> Wallis, Jim. "It's Embarrassing to Be an Evangelical This Election." <https://sojo.net/articles/it-s-embarrassing-be-evangelical-election> [accessed 3-14-2016]
- <sup>3</sup> See [www.The-NBEA.Org](http://www.The-NBEA.Org); National Black Evangelical Association.
- <sup>4</sup> Bentley, William H., "Reflections on the Scope and Function of a Black Evangelical Black Theology." Chicago: unpublished, 1989 (emphasis added).
- <sup>5</sup> McCray, Walter Arthur. *Pro-Black, Pro-Christ, and Pro-Cross: African-descended Evangelical Identity* (Black Light Fellowship, 2012.) Much of what I write here may be explored in depth in the work cited, and its chapter 6. The title itself begins to communicate the essence of true Black evangelicalism.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. The Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals states that certain estimates of the number of U.S. Evangelicals "tend to separate out nearly all of the nation's African American Protestant population (roughly 8-9% of the U. S. population), which is overwhelmingly evangelical in theology and orientation (**for example, 61% of blacks—the highest of any racial group, by far—described themselves as 'born-again' in the 2001 Gallup poll**)" (emphasis added). <http://www.wheaton.edu/ISAE/Defining-Evangelicalism/How-Many-Are-There> [accessed 3-14-2016]. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/may/pew-evangelicals-stay-strong-us-religious-landscape-study.html> [accessed 3-19-16]
- <sup>7</sup> That is to say, they adhere to certain basic Bible beliefs. *Pro-Black, Pro-Christ, Pro-Cross* identifies eight essential tenets of Black evangelicalism: 1) Glorifying in the Cross; 2) Becoming "Born Again" by God's Spirit; 3) Exalting the Lord Jesus Christ; 4) Consecrating Scripture; 5) *Koinonia*-izing Believers; 6) Loving Our Own Kindred People Naturally; 7) Gospelizing the Poor; 8) Prophecy in the Name of Jesus Christ.
- <sup>8</sup> As recently as November 2014 and February 2016, a sizable number of white voters (inclusive of some Evangelical voters) have opposed the Emancipation Proclamation, and wish the South had won the Civil War. <http://www.snopes.com/trump-supporters-pro-slavery/> [accessed 2-19-2016]
- <sup>9</sup> Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> Acts 4:12.
- <sup>11</sup> MAAFA is a Kiswahili term for "disaster" or "terrible occurrence." It signifies the "African Holocaust" and its aftermath.
- <sup>12</sup> "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45, NKJV)
- <sup>13</sup> Matthew 1:23
- <sup>14</sup> John 1:1-3, 14. Revelation 1:14-15 (NKJV)
- <sup>15</sup> See Isaiah 58:6-10ff.
- <sup>16</sup> McCray, *Pro-Black*. pp. 314-315. See Ephesians 2:15-16 (ISV) "<sup>15</sup> He rendered the law inoperative, along with its commandments and regulations, thus creating in himself **one new humanity** from the two, thereby making peace, <sup>16</sup>and reconciling both groups to God in one body through the cross, on which he eliminated the hostility." (emphasis added)
- <sup>17</sup> See Isaiah 9:7ff.
- <sup>18</sup> Thomas C. Oden notes the black African Church Father, Cyril of Alexandria (370-444), who comments on Isaiah 9:6 in reference to Jesus: "Now the cross has become the means by which he governs." See: *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering A North African Tradition*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011, pp.80-81.
- <sup>19</sup> See Luke 9:23; 14:27.
- <sup>20</sup> Though not believing in wealth redistribution, some believers give 90% of their income to charity. See <http://rickwarren.org/about> [accessed 3-19-2016]
- <sup>21</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:11-12
- <sup>22</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9
- <sup>23</sup> Philippians 2:5-11
- <sup>24</sup> Mark 15:21