"Righteous Discontent": *Mary Virginia Cook Parrish and Black Baptist Women*

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In 2007, the issue of women preaching continues to be a hot topic among black Baptists, especially in the state of Kentucky.

Within the past decade, a number of Louisville-area ministers have licensed and ordained women ministers. While taking a bold stance favoring women in ministry, the action of the ministers has resulted in the dismissals of their churches from the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky, the black Baptist state convention.[1]

Those ministers in opposition to women preachers, undoubtedly, see their position as holding to the faith as passed to them from their forefathers. For Kentucky Baptists have had a long history of being theologically conservative and "orthodox." This "Baptist orthodoxy" or "Simmons theology," as it is also called, can be traced to Marshall B. Lanier, a former Simmons University (now Simmons College of Kentucky) professor and president who served the school for fifty-one years.[2]

In an effort to understand the position that black Baptist churches will assume in relation to women in the new millennium, looking to the past is helpful, especially looking back at the roles played by black Baptist women—the mothers and foremothers—in the last decades of the

nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth. The life of one woman is particularly instructive; Mary Virginia Cook Parrish was the wife of Charles H. Parrish, president of Simmons University (1918-1931). This article is based primarily upon Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's groundbreaking book on black Baptist women, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, and the Charles H. Parrish, Jr., Papers, located in the University of Louisville Historical Archives.

Parrish's Early Life, Education, and Career

Mary Virginia Cook Parrish was born a slave in Bowling Green, Kentucky, on August 8, 1862. With the help of William J. Simmons and the white American Baptist Woman's Hope Society of Boston, she enrolled at State University in Louisville in 1881. Later, State University would be renamed in Simmons's honor.[3] Northern white Baptist women paid her tuition, and she graduated as valedictorian of the Normal Department in 1883 and the College Department in 1887.[4] According to Higginbotham, Parrish was the most scholarly of three black women who were aided by northern white women. The other two women were Lucy Wilmot Smith, also a graduate of State University, and Virginia Broughton, a member of Fisk University's first graduating class and a missionary in Tennessee. Women like Parrish, Broughton, and Smith were, in Higginbotham's words, examples of the "high quality of women's national powers." They were "widely read" and represented an educated "female elite" that "challenged" those who "assigned intellect to men and emotionalism to women."[5]

In two 1885 letters to the New England women who supported her education, Parrish wrote of parallels between the missionary societies of black women and that of white women. According to Higginbotham, Parrish addressed two different themes: (1) the "racial self-help during a time of disfranchisement and [when] pervasive violence [was] readily apparent," and (2) "interracial cooperation."[6] After finishing school, Parrish wrote articles in black newspapers, produced an anthology, and gave speeches before various organizations, including the all-black American National Baptist Convention (ANBC), 1886-1896, the precursor to the National Baptist Convention. She was a member of the executive

board of the ANBC and wrote a statement on black Baptist doctrine that appeared in *Negro Baptist Pulpit* (1890).[7]

Parrish held many prominent positions in black Baptist life. Along with twenty men, she was a member of the executive board of the National Baptist Educational Convention. She served as editor of the women's column of the Louisville *American Baptist* and as education editor of a new journal, *Our Women and Children*.[8] Parrish also wrote articles for *Hope*, a magazine edited by Joanna P. Moore, a white northern missionary. The magazine was an important link between black Baptist women's state conventions.[9]

Parrish was not silent in publicly voicing civil rights violations before whites. In 1892, when lynching had reached an all-time high in the country, Parrish wrote to the white Kennebec Association in Maine, voicing "despondency and outrage!" With the "death toll" at 155 lynched blacks, she "questioned" the nature of "black progress," and the reasons blacks continued to be staunch Christians.[10]

Writing in the *National Baptist Magazine* in 1895, Parrish recognized the importance of the work of the convention, especially in the South. She viewed the new convention as being responsible for "land acquisition, school construction, the founding of organizations for the aged and infirmed." She criticized the period's materialism, encouraged black women to "rally around [their] men, and prove by their culture's dignified bearing that human rights are . . . more worthy of protection than American industry."[11]

Parrish and the Women's Convention

The National Baptist Convention (NBC) was extremely important to black men and women, like Parrish and her husband. E. Franklin Frazier noted that the convention was a "nation within a nation."[12] Higginbotham asserted that it is "difficult" to overstate the importance of the NBC and the Women's Convention to African Americans in the twentieth century, especially if one views the convention from the perspective of the masses. The people attending the annual sessions were primarily "common people" with "limited" finances. In spite of "low income, transportation, and housing difficulties posed by segregation laws, thousands of blacks traveled to annual sessions to share experiences and friendships."[13] The

annual sessions brought about a "group identity" based upon "denominational and racial affiliation." The strength in numbers of the convention was seen as a "source of pride." By 1906, the NBC consisted of 2,354,789 members representing 61.4 percent of all black church members in the United States. By 1916, the membership had grown to 2,938,579.[14]

The Women's Convention (WC), an auxiliary to the NBC, was founded in 1900.[15] The first decade showed a "continuation" of a nineteenth-century agenda that included making home visits, organizing Bible reading, setting up mothers' classes, collecting clothes for the needy, organizing old folks' homes and orphanages, establishing nurseries and kindergartens, and helping finance educational institutions. In 1908, Parrish was elected as the WC treasurer.[16] The WC, however, was not in favor of women who joined the organization as "a fad and for social prestige," but instead valued what Parrish called "ordinary women."[17]

Perhaps one of the greatest efforts of the convention was the founding of the National Training School for Women and Girls in 1909, of which Parrish was chair of the board of trustees.[18] The school, located in Washington, D.C., was the dream of Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879-1961), who, although younger than Parrish, was much better known.[19] In its first twenty-five years, the school, which included a high school and junior college, had enrolled over 2,000 students, taught domestic science philosophy, trained missionaries, and taught secretarial skills and black history. By 1938, the school was worth $200,000.[20]

Regardless of work by women like Burroughs and Parrish, the WC remained only an auxiliary of the NBC, and the women had no voting privileges in the NBC. The situation led to a battle between the male-dominated NBC and the women-led WC and its National Training School. The struggle between religious organizations within the NBC was related to sexism.[21] This controversy serves as an excellent example of the NBC leaders' attitudes toward women at the turn of the century. By 1916, the school had become the focus of attention, and the men attempted to take over the school. Related to this was a controversy over the ownership of the NBC publishing house. Eventually, these controversies resulted in a lawsuit and the splintering of the NBC in 1915. Calling for consolidation of all its boards, including the WC and the National Training School, the NBC filed for incorporation.[22]

During the struggle, Burroughs was much more assertive and confrontational than either Broughton or Parrish,[23] and Higginbotham has argued that the rise of the youthful Burroughs in the early years of the twentieth century represented the "coming of age of the black Baptist sisterhood."[24] Burroughs was a part of a continuum that dated back to her predecessors, Parrish and Broughton, from whom Burroughs learned feminist theology.

Black Women's Theology and the Women's Movement

Higginbotham argued that black women's theology was prevalent among black Baptist women like Parrish and her peers. Historically, the development of this black women's theology began during the days of the old ANBC, when women started to question the "illusionary unity of the convention as the voice of all its people."[25] According to Higginbotham, Parrish, Lucy Wilmot Smith, and Virginia Broughton led the charge for women's rights.

Using Gordon Kaufman's definition of theologizing as a point of departure, Higginbotham further contended that "the act of theologizing was not limited to formally-trained male clergy. Nor did it extend only to college-educated women such as Broughton, Smith and Cook [Parrish]. [Instead] scriptural interpretation figured significantly in the meeting of ordinary black women's local and state organizations."[26] Yet, Parrish was a significant force in the development of a new theology. Using scripture, she argued that "the image of woman as loyal, comforting spouse transcended the husband-wife relationships to embrace that of Jesus and women."[27] Like other female theologians, Parrish emphasized that it was not a woman, but a man, Judas, who betrayed Jesus, and she noted that "a woman had bathed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, while Mary and Martha had soothed him in their home after his long tiring journey."[28] In interpreting passages that traditionally limited women's roles, especially Paul's statement that women be silent in church, Parrish said that Paul's words were addressed specifically "to a few Grecian and Asiatic women who were wholly given to idolatry and to the fashion of the day." Her reinterpretation denied the universal implication of the text. Both Parrish and Broughton argued that Paul had high praises for women and even "depended on them."[29]

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, in "The Politics of Silence," noted that, historically among black Baptists, the women's roles proved to be extremely problematic. From 1880 to 1900, "an intensive struggle surrounding women's roles occurred, with issues centering in leadership and conformity to dominate the group's patriarchy." Consequently, Gilkes asserted that "black feminism and organizational autonomy was established."[30] Contributing to the tension was the fact that "black women educators were . . . educated in the same settings as black men, [and] they were quite competent to argue theology and biblical interpretation in public. Like African-Americans during the time of slavery, they saw the Bible as their instrument of liberation."[31]

Higginbotham contended that unlike their white contemporaries, Susan B. Anthony and Frances Willard, Parrish, Broughton, and Smith claimed that the entire Bible was the true foundation for religious life. Consequently, their arguments centered in biblical interpretation and were actualized in the founding of the WC in 1900.[32] Both Parrish and Smith, like Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Ida Wells Barnett, were prolific writers in the black press.[33]

By the end of the nineteenth century, the black women's movement served as an alternative "to fighting black preachers over their monopoly of congregational leadership. [Instead] the club movement was an alternative to public leadership."[34] Thus, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was founded in 1896 at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., and Parrish was a member. The activities of the NACW were reported at the WC's annual session.[35] According to Wilson J. Moses, "a civilizationist element" was evident in the work of the NACW. The organization was interested "in the uplift of [black] peasant women and the improvement of family life." The NACW was also interested in "introducing standards of genteel Victorian domesticity into the cabins of . . . peasant women." For Moses, domestic feminism included settlement house work and also embraced the culturally disadvantaged. The NACW's motto was "lifting as [we] climb."[36]

An organization of local women's clubs, the NACW was primarily an urban middle-class endeavor, and Margaret Murray Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington, served as the national president.[37] Moses contended that African American organizations such as the NACW prepared the black

"masses for life in the 20th century." But recently, several scholars have interpreted the organization as a "romanticizing the culture of the folk," which is extremely "disturbing."[38]

Until her death on October 14, 1945, Parrish played a leading role in the NACW and the WC. To be sure, black women like Mary Virginia Cook Parrish and Nannie Helen Burroughs were pioneers of the black feminist movement in Baptist life. They surely did not fit the stereotype of passive and unassertive women. Living in a time of racism and sexism, especially on the part of black males, these women would today be considered to be ministers of the gospel. BH&H

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1. Louisville *Courier Journal*, August 19, 1994.

2. Ibid., March 18, 1950; Louisville *Courier Journal*, August 2, 1961. "Simmons theology" or "orthodoxy" can be traced to a theology among white Kentucky Baptists known as Landmarkism. See Lawrence H. Williams, "Black Landmarkism: Sectarian Theology among the National Baptists," *Baptist History and Heritage*, 28, no. 4 (October, 1993): 45-54.

3. Charles H. Parrish, Jr., Papers, University of Louisville Historical Archives. See also Alice A. Dunningan, *The Fascinating Story of Black Kentuckians* (Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1982), 230.

4. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 88-90; *The Home Mission Monthly*, 9 (August 1887): 207; Parrish Papers; Charles H. Parrish, ed., *Golden Jubilee of the General Association of Colored Baptists in Kentucky* (Louisville: Mayes Printing Company, 1915), 171-73.

5. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 144-145.

6. Ibid., 88-90, 116, 119. Also see Mary V. Cook, "The Work for Baptist Women," in *Negro Baptist Pulpit*, Edward Brawley, ed. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, reprint 1971), 271-86.

7. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 69, 125.

8. Ibid., 64, 78.

9. Ibid., 99-100.

10. Ibid., 103, 110.

11. Ibid., 79.

12. E. Franklin Frazier, *Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 49.

13. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 164-65.

14. Ibid., 166.

15. Ibid., 167-69.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 208.

18. Ibid.,179. See also "Parrish Papers," in *Encyclopedia of Religious Controversies in the United States*, George Shriver and Bill J. Leonard, eds. (London: Greenwood Press), 82

19. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 163.

20. Lawrence H. Williams, "Nannie Helen Burroughs," in *Encyclopedia of Religious Controversies in the United States*, 82.

21. Ibid.

22 Ibid
23 Ibid , 83
24 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent,* 150-51
25 Ibid , 124
26 Ibid , 126
27 Ibid , 131
28 Ibid
29 Ibid , 132
30 Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Politics of Silence," in *African-American Christianity,* Paul E Johnson, ed (Berkeley University of California Press, 1994), 102
31 Ibid , 100
32 Ibid , 101
33 Ibid
34 Ibid , 102
35 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent, 181-83*
36 Wilson J Moses, The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925 (London Oxford University Press, 1988), 103-04
37 Ibid , 105, 111-12
38 Ibid , 126