**CHRISTIAN SPEECH**

**FOR**

**WILLIE BURKE**

Hello everyone! As always, it’s a great blessing to see another year greet us, and it’s a privilege to see so many familiar, committed, friends attending this convention and sharing our purpose. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge our President and leader, Dr. Jerry Brown. (**If there are other leaders that need acknowledgement, please do that here**) I would also like to acknowledge \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_for their dedication, guidance, and wisdom as we work together to guide our programs and outreach to even further success in the coming year. It is as a direct result of strong, compassionate leadership that we are able to stand together, share our ideas and plans, and even our considerations, and to formulate the steps we will take to make the National Baptist Convention USA Inc even stronger, more effective, and more impactful than ever before.

A wise man once said, “Every man is guilty of all the good he **did not** do.” We come together as true brothers in search of the means and strategies to do good in the name of God. And every year we are given new chances to show the world, our communities, and, of course, our **SELVES** just how good we are and just how determined we are to make a difference in our homes, families, businesses, and in this world. Each one of us sits here, looking for the moment of inspiration... finding the words that confirm our call to action.... and this year, more than ever, we must come together to build our collective strength. It’s also been said, “Appreciation is a wonderful thing. It makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well.” I know that I am here thanks to the heartfelt commitment and demonstrations of excellence and compassion that I have seen in others. I know that I am here because we share and spread a valuable message, and I know that as a powerful and influential group, our collective dedication can move mountains. I also know that with more voices, more hearts, and more hands supporting our causes, we can do **so much more**. With renewed enthusiasm and zeal, together we will find those new partners with whom we will share our considerable legacy.

None of us ... that I **KNOW OF**... has been given a free pass in life...(**If you want to make a little joke, you can say**) ... of course if you **HAVE** been given a free pass.... come and find me... I’ll be in the back of the room... I’d **LOVE** to know **HOW YOU DID IT! (And wait for the laugh**). There are so many circumstances that exist in life.... both here in this country and all over the world, that pose challenges and threats to our existence and well being, as individuals and as a society. Our only hope for the future... as we have shown, is in building our strengths and partnerships **now**. We really have no time to lose. In the past one hundred and thirty eight years of our existence, we have seen that as a caring, united, team of dedicated men have the potential to move mountains and make important and enduring changes.... for the better... to those communities both here and around the world that need our guidance and brotherhood.

Booker T. Washington said, “I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has had to overcome while trying to succeed.” It is through the vast network, mutual cooperation and dedication of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc, that we have

the greatest chance to have our voices heard and our actions felt...to come together, to work as a team, to learn about each other and about life itself, and to identify the problems and find the solutions to the crises and issues that threaten so many aspects of our existence... Of course, the first place I would naturally turn to find partnership and brotherhood, is to the men of our communities. We’re building a legacy. We have a history. We have so much work to be done.

I also know that if something bothers me... if there’s a notion in my head that won’t go away... whether it’s one of moral or social inequity, I recall my connection to my faith and I “go back to the well.” It never hurts... in fact we know it always inspires to be reminded that our relationships with God are what give us purpose, motivate us to act, and bring us solace when we question what we are doing. Since I also know “there are no coincidences in this world,” and I also know we all get a lot of email, sometimes we get reminders that guide us in our mission. The other day, I received this. It was a meditation from 2 Corinthians 5 and was sent as an opportunity to pause, regroup, and consider where we are in our lives, and how to proceed.... how do we maintain our patience and focus in the midst of so much chaos in the world? How and where do we find the strength and resolve to regenerate so that we can continue to build and act upon our personal and communal legacy.... where and how do we find and build peace? We do it all, as ever and always, by going back to the word of God. Let’s take a moment to realign our purpose as we strengthen our resolve to begin anew...

“Let me pray that you remember to be careful not to judge people. You belong to Christ and are a new person. The past is forgotten, and everything is new. Remember that God sent Christ to make peace between himself and you, and he has given you the work of making peace between himself and others. The hopeful message is that God was in Christ, offering peace and forgiveness to the people of this world. Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Amen.”

Let’s find strength in that passage and let’s work together to make a plan for even deeper understanding... even greater outreach... even more motivation to be of service to everyone in our lives. Think about what your goals are as we start this new year and new session... think about what you want to accomplish as an individual, as part of a family, as a brotherhood... in this community, and as a member of a bigger global picture... one in which people need our helping hand, our enthusiasm, and our wisdom and faith.

As we take stock of who we are and what we accomplish in the present, I also have to say, I naturally think about the future... I think about how we’ve learned over the years. I think about how long some of us have known each other and have worked side by side.... I think about what it was like when I first joined the National Baptist Convention USA Inc, and what it was like on our journey, how this organization has grown, and how we’ve met the challenges that faced us and continue to do so. I was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ years old when I first became involved. It was 19\_\_.... it was a different world, but my involvement has been nothing but positive and supportive. All my thoughts lead me to wonder.... where does our future lie? In whose hands will we place the torch of leadership? How do we nurture and minister to younger men so that they see the incredible value in building on our legacy and taking our mission and message to future generations?

It’s clear that positive African American role models have made a tremendous difference in the lives of our young boys and men. Frederick Douglass said, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall had this to day, “None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps. We got here because somebody— a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony or a few nuns — bent down and helped us pick up our boots.” So... my question is.... is our next frontier... our next crisis to conquer... the nurturing and participation of the young men in our communities? I think the answer is clear.

Remember it was Barack Obama who said, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. **WE** are the ones we’ve been waiting for. **WE** are the change that we seek.” As with most important things in life, we have to look to the future and plan ahead, or that future will sneak up on us and we will be woefully unprepared.

A group called Measure of America was created and for the past five years, they have been analyzing the growing crisis of what is referred to as “disconnected youth.” The age range in question is from sixteen to approximately twenty four. The term is described as those young people that fall into that age bracket and are neither in school nor working. In 2016 the rate was almost 12 percent or about 4.6 MILLION people. That number might have gone down somewhat over the past couple of years, but it is still alarming. Those young adults are our future.... they need to be motivated, inspired, and urged to find a positive place in which to contribute and learn their value... to themselves and to society. Our youth needs to learn to roll up their sleeves, pitch in, and make a difference through contribution, focus, compassion, and good old work.

Even the millennial that are working or are in school have demonstrated a shocking level of apathy in recent years. Right after the 2016 presidential elections the Center for Information and research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University did a study. The good news is that about 24 million young people voted. The bad news? That was **ONLY** around **HALF** of the eligible population ages 18-34. I use this only as an example of the apathy that is found in our youth culture these days. I believe, and I think you might agree, that steps must be taken to encourage young African Americans to claim their stake in their own futures, the future of this country, and the present and future well being of our church system, our vital missions, and our commitment to those that need us.

Jeremiah 1:6 teaches us, “‘Ah, Sovereign LORD,’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am too young.’” We cannot allow our younger brothers to continue to feel disenfranchised, cast aside.... less than. It is **OUR** responsibility to show the way for our youth, and while I am certain that for our young members in our community, even with school, and even with having the responsibilities of employment, there’s a missing piece.... somehow we must support the young men who will inherit our future to see the value in faith, service, participation, and mentorship.

Jeremiah 1:7 goes on to say, “But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, ‘I am **only a youth**;’ for all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.” In this day and age, young adults can no longer use the excuse, “I am **ONLY A YOUTH**.” Now is the time for our young people to explore how they will find their way and where they will make their mark in the church and in this organization in particular. Our society is in crisis... that is clear, and we, as concerned, committed men of faith must come together to find the way to organize, encourage and stand simple by side with our young people in service to God and our faith. The time to **take action** is **NOW**.

We have our stated purpose as an organization, and in that purpose, we are reminded a few important points:

* To promote **HOME** and foreign mission efforts
* To encourage and support Christian education
* To engage in any other endeavors deemed fitting and proper in order to advance the cause of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

Isn’t caring for our youth the most vital and important endeavor we can think of? I believe we must take care of our own houses before we can minister to others. Once we achieve that, we will be able to broaden our scope to heal and help so much more.

We have enormous potential and considerable power..... we just have to know how to access it and use it for the benefit of all. (**Please adjust these numbers as needed**). It’s estimated that we have about **THIRTY ONE THOUSAND** participating congregations comprising almost **SEVEN AND A HALF MILLION MEMBERS**! (**If you want to make a joke you can say**) I know we’ve all heard how millennial are “set in their ways,” but **REALLY**, with these numbers and this kind of unity, we ought to be able to come together and inspire a couple of million young people.... don’t you think ?? (**And wait for the laugh**).

It’s time to come together and formulate and institute some initiatives that encourage and inspire our youth to join us. Whether it’s going into schools and churches and businesses finding those already committed young people to form advisory boards, setting up fellowships to study youth engagement, or forming stake-related programs... maybe for school credit, social services, and the like, we must carefully examine and institute options that appeal to, and motivate the young people in our communities.

The very real prospect of teaching and learning from today’s young people, to me, is exciting, enriching, and filled with purpose. Supporting our youth is the best and most lasting concept I can imagine. With intention and focus, we can build a new generation of “mountain movers,” “shape shifters,” and “difference makers,” and I am eager to build new foundations of hope, caring, and brotherhood.

Thank you all!!