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## Ben Chavis: At Peace With Himself An Interview

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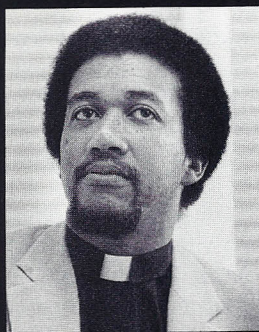
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# BEN CHAVIS

## At Peace With Himself

### An Interview

"Free The Wilmington Ten" was a cry sounded at countless demonstrations and a slogan affixed to countless posters and petitions during the past decade—both in the U. S. and abroad.

The Wilmington Ten—The Rev. Ben Chavis and nine other civil rights activists—were arrested, tried and convicted on conspiracy and arson charges in a 1971 fire-bombing of a white-owned grocery store in Wilmington, N.C. during a period of racial tension and violence. Their convictions stood even after the prosecution's three key witnesses admitted they had lied, and even after the Justice Department filed an unprecedented brief asking a federal judge to overturn the 1972 state court decision.

The Wilmington Ten case became a *cause celebre*, with many seeing it as a clearcut example of civil rights activists—"radicals"—being persecuted for their beliefs. Amnesty International, the London-based human rights organization which in 1978 received the Nobel Peace Prize, adopted The Wilmington Ten as "prisoners of conscience." A broadbased coalition of civil rights, church, student, labor, liberal and left groups rallied to their support. The public pressure finally succeeded in having their sentences reduced.

Chavis' was the longest—originally 28-34 years, reduced to 17-21 years. He also served the longest prison sentence—4½ years—before being released on parole last December 14.

Today, Chavis serves as director of the Washington field office of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. (It was the Commission that in 1971 originally sent him to Wilmington to help defuse racial tension when a white minister in the Black community appealed for help.) He is also enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program of the Howard University Divinity School. (Topic of his thesis: "Black Liberation Theology.")

In an exclusive interview in his office last July with staff writer Harriet Jackson Scarupa, the 32-year-old minister-activist

discussed The Wilmington Ten case, his present work and concerns, the theological basis for his activism and what he sees as the outlook for Black America as it enters the '80s. Prominently displayed on his office walls were numerous human rights awards, a photograph of Malcolm X and an artistic rendition of a brown-skinned Christ.

**When you first came out of prison you spoke at a welcome home rally at All Souls (Unitarian) Church in Washington, D. C., and you said that the oppression of Black people in the 1980s is worse than it was in the 1960s. Could you elaborate on this?**

I think, the next 20 years will present the greatest challenge that Black America has witnessed since slavery. The reason is that the United States of America in the next 20 years is going through a reprioritizing process, and if Black America is not vigilant about what is happening we will be prioritized out of existence. There are several reasons that make me reach this conclusion. Number one is socioeconomic. The majority of Black people are in worse shape in 1980 than in 1960. There are more Blacks poor today than there were in 1960. Now it is true that we have a larger Black middle class now, which shows we have made some progress, but over the years the problems of Blacks as a whole have gotten greater and greater. Health care in many Black homes is non-existent. Unemployment for Black youth is 50, 60 in some places 70 percent and those Black youth who do not have jobs are going to wind up in prison. It's like a vicious cycle that becomes more and more vicious every year. If we do not do anything to halt it, I think we can project what the future will be. I'm not talking fatalistically or pessimistically. I'm just saying, "Look, this is the handwriting on the wall. We have to organize ourselves in such a way as to prevent our genocide." Because, I believe, a logical conclusion of racism is genocide.



16 **You speak of impending genocide and then you say you are not being pessimistic or fatalistic. Please explain.**

The reason I'm optimistic is that I see the handwriting on the wall and I understand it and I plan to alert Black people, "Hey look, this is what's happening. Let us organize our communities to prevent this from happening." Because I believe that one of the problems of Black America is the state of disorganization. In 1980 we have more organizations than we had in 1960. But Black people are more *disorganized* as a people than we were in 1960. I'm not talking about forming another organization but about getting our people organized.

**Could you be more specific? Organized for what?**

Organized for our liberation. What I mean by that is to have our communities become self-determinative. Take Black-on-Black crime. We can solve that problem in our communities to the extent that we have the will to solve it and to the extent that we organize mechanisms to stop it ourselves through education, through providing kinds of employment, through raising the consciousness of our people to where we can love one another again—which we do not now.

There used to be a time when we called our brothers and sisters "brothers and sisters" and understood what that was all about. And I think that the church can play a part in giving Black America the kind of value system that it needs. One of the objectives is to raise a national consciousness among Black Americans. I don't mean it in a strict nationalistic sense, to say we're gonna rise up and pay the white folks back for what they did to us. Naw. I'm saying that we should rise up as a proud people, as an organized people, as a loving people where we care for one another and where we share all of our resources with one another, where we help educate one another, where we transmit the legacy of our history and struggle to one another.

**But if the whole power structure is controlled by others, how will Black life really be improved?**

First of all, millions of dollars go through Black hands. The problem is we are the mass consumers and not the mass producers. Again, through the Black church, we need to begin to pool our resources economically and not only within the context of the United States of America. We need to begin to link up with our brothers and sisters in the Third World. We do not necessarily, and we should not necessarily, depend on our economic power from those who oppress us. There's a lot of potential power in Black America if it would invest its resources in other places.

And so part of having a liberation theology is to provide answers to our economics, is to provide answers to our politics, is to provide answers to our culture. And I'm saying those answers don't necessarily come from a conference table; they come out of struggle. They come out of communities confronting on a day-to-day basis their problems and through that confronting process comes solutions, comes answers, comes the knowledge that winning small victories, winning small campaigns can lead to bigger ones.

When I go back down to many of the communities that struggled for the freedom of The Wilmington Ten, it shows that it was worthwhile for them to march, that it was worthwhile signing those petitions, writing those letters, that, in fact, the power of the people is effective if it's organized, that our oppressor is not invincible and that even the economic power as it is presently constituted in a very capitalistic, monopolistic sense is not invincible either. But we have to, as a first base, have cohesion within our community in a loving sense.

**What do you see as the role of a Black educational institution like Howard in trying to enhance the life of Black people—and all people?**

An institution like Howard, I think, can continue to push for Black intellectual de-

velopment which is important in all fields of study and endeavor. Howard has done that. And I think it has to continue to do that.

I hope Howard will never let itself become diverted from its historic role of being that special place where Afro-Americans can go and get not only a quality education but the best. Black law students get something at Howard that they cannot get at Harvard. Black students of religion get something at Howard that they cannot get at Yale. And that's very important. I think Howard has the responsibility of providing the future leadership for Black America and that leadership has to be activist, that leadership has to be intellectually developed. But the bottom line is that leadership has to be committed. So many Blacks today get an education but are not committed to anything but themselves. And I think that's a tragedy.

**Let's look at the country as a whole as it exists today. Where do you see it headed?**

Presently, I believe, the United States of America is in its final stage in terms of its development—intellectually and scientifically—if it does not change its present course. Right now we live in a society where property is worth more than human life, where profit is the overriding issue, where material acquisition becomes the ultimate. And I see a parallel between this present stage of America's development and, say, where Rome was right before it fell or where Babylon was right before it fell. Most of our national governmental decisions—on both domestic and foreign policy—are based on what we [the U. S. government] perceive as our military superiority in the world or to enhance the material acquisitions of multinational corporations. America is being run now by corporate power and the truth of the matter is that the Christian church has become almost silent.

Therefore, I believe that unless this present picture is not radically changed we will come to see how the rest of the world will eventually rise up against



America's arrogance, America's racism, America's imperialism. Based on that I feel that the Christian church in America—Black and white—has a profound responsibility not only to alert the citizens of the country to this possible eventuality but to reform and transform America into the kind of country it should be and that it can be, i.e. a society where all citizens are treated justly irregardless of race, a society where the wealth is equitably distributed, a society in which love is the norm, Christian love, Christian charity. You see, I think, that's all possible. I'm not saying it in some utopian sense. It *is* possible. But it is possible only through struggle. Frederick Douglass once said: "There is no progress without struggle." And that's true.

**Speaking of struggle, what do you think is the ultimate significance of The Wilmington Ten case and the struggle to free you?**

You know, the Lord works in mysterious ways. We were put into prison to put fear in people. We were put into prison as a part of a repression campaign to wipe out the civil rights movement after Martin Luther King was killed in '68. Nixon came to the throne, J. Edgar Hoover was in his last days and there was a systematic national campaign to wipe out the civil rights movement, to make people feel that they shouldn't take the risks to struggle for their civil rights because if you take the risks you're going to wind up assassinated or you might go to jail like The Wilmington Ten so it just ain't worth it. A lot of people, in fact, did resign or didn't get involved in the '70s because—particularly in the early '70s—it was plain dangerous to be out there organizing and marching because the government took a very oppressive attitude toward that kind of activity.

I say the Lord works in mysterious ways. As we were incarcerated and people found out there were 10 innocent people in North Carolina who were only put there because they were actively involved in a non-violent civil rights movement, many

brothers and sisters got back involved in the struggle. Wilmington Ten defense committees were set up all over the country and in France, Germany, and many African nations. So as a result of The Wilmington Ten case, people who were active in the '60s got involved in the struggle and some new people came into the struggle.

I have to acknowledge that The Wilmington Ten case provided a bridge for Blacks and whites to work together like they hadn't since the '60s because we went through a whole kind of separatist attitude and the white liberals were liberal to a point and then when they saw Blacks were really serious about their freedom, they kind of backed out. But during The Wilmington Ten case, they [white liberals] got reinvolved. The United Church of Christ, for example, is a predominantly-white church; Blacks are only five percent of the membership of the denomination. But yet this predominantly-white denomination spent over a million dollars in legal fees for The Wilmington Ten and I think it's because they also saw concretely an opportunity around the case to exhibit their Christian faith. And so there has been some good to come out of The Wilmington Ten. It helped to keep the civil rights movement alive.

Secondly, the case of The Wilmington Ten has exposed the gross contradiction in the United States human rights policy. You might remember President Carter wrote letters to Soviet dissidents; he sent Rosalynn Carter to meet with the wife of [Anatoly] Scharansky; and he had audiences at the White House with dissidents from the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries. So as an American citizen who was likewise victimized, I wrote the President and asked him to say something about human rights violations in this country, specifically about The Wilmington Ten and other political prisoners. He never answered any of my letters. And so, the human rights thing boomeranged on the United States around The Wilmington Ten because people around the world began

to point the finger back at the United States.

**What is the status of the case today?**

The Wilmington Ten case is not over even though I'm out on parole. Our case presently is in the Fourth Circuit U. S. Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va. The federal courts have an opportunity to free us totally, to reverse our convictions and to clear our records. Now whether they will or not remains to be seen. I'm hopeful and I think that eventually we will win. We will keep it in the courts for the next 20 years if necessary because we feel that it is important not only to gain one's physical freedom from behind bars but it is important to right a previous wrong.

Actually, as we do this interview, I'm still a prisoner. I'm serving a 17-21-year prison sentence. I'm just out on parole. Every week I see my parole officer. I had to see my parole officer this morning. Every time I leave the District of Columbia I have to get permission, which is quite often because my work takes me around the country. It's sort of like walking a tightrope. Any minor violation—even a speeding ticket—can be a violation of parole and could mean I could go back to prison. So I have to be very, very careful.

**At any point during the whole ordeal did you wish you had never gone to Wilmington?**

No. See, my denomination sent me to Wilmington. A call from the Black community for help came from Wilmington to our church and because I was the southern organizer for the United Church of Christ I was sent. And in 1980, if the brothers and sisters in Wilmington ask for me to come I would go.

**Even if it meant facing another possible prison term?**

Yeah, 'cause, look, we must take risks. If we don't take risks for our own freedom no one else will and therefore, yes, if asked I would readily go. I have no regrets about going to Wilmington. I felt I was doing

18 right. I think that's what the Lord would have me to do and I've seen now that even though there were many periods of personal suffering in prison I can see the good that has come out of it.

**You were in prison 4½ years, convicted on the basis of testimony that was later recanted, and you speak of "the good that has come out of it." How can you not feel bitter?**

Imprisonment for me was a strengthening process rather than a weakening experience. There were attempts to break down my spirit; they do that to all prisoners. But knowing the fact that we were innocent and knowing the fact that millions of people around the world were supporting us and then having faith in God, we knew that ultimately we would come out of those prison cells. Only thing we had to do was stay strong and keep the faith.

**You often speak of your faith in God. Yet in the campaign to free you, a lot of your supporters were atheists or agnostics. Do you feel this was ironic or a contradiction?**

No. I think it shows the power of the Christian gospel as a magnetic force that draws people. You show me where someone is struggling for freedom from a state of oppression and I'll show you a place where God is active.

**Your work with the Commission, your drive to win a full pardon for The Wilmington Ten, your involvement in such groups as the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, the speeches you give across the country on the need for Black America to organize to confront racism and oppression. . . . What is the theological rationale for all this? What is the intellectual underpinning for your activism?**

I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I see Jesus Christ as not only a savior, one who comes to provide one with a way to repent for one's sins, but I also see Jesus Christ as a liberator who is about liberat-

ing the oppressed—not just Blacks but all oppressed people. Therefore, my faith in God, my faith in Jesus Christ, pushes me to be involved in the community, to be involved in the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King used to say that one of the reasons he built the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which I used to work with, was to, in fact, practice the faith. I don't think you're going to have a religious faith if you don't practice it in your life and so part of what I do between my sermons on Sunday is to try to live out in my life what I preach.

**For you, then, religion must do more than just comfort people.**

Right. It's got to involve them, to challenge them, to motivate them, to inspire them, to get them to be proud of their creation, not to accept a state of slavery, a state of exploitation, a state of oppression but to struggle for their God-given human rights. I think that God didn't intend for Black people to be enslaved and on the bottom rung of the ladder all the time. And I don't think we should stay there.

**Obviously, then, you consider yourself a proponent of Black liberation theology.**

Yes. Yes. Black theology for Black people has to be the theological and religious experience of Afro-Americans struggling for freedom. I think that the language of a legitimate Black theology has to be rooted in the Black church experience. Historically, the Black church was born in struggle. It came to formation because of the kind of institutionalized racism that was in the white church. And I think that Black theologians now are bold enough to declare their theological independence of white theology and to see the viability and the legitimacy of Blacks constructing their own theological formulations in behalf of Black people.

Part of the responsibility of Black Christian liberation theology, I believe, is to go back to the authentic roots of Christianity. Christianity itself is very closely related

to traditional African religions. Some of us have been told that Christianity is the white man's religion. It's not true. He would have it to be his religion if we would let him so he can manipulate the world in the name of Jesus. But the truth of the matter is, Christianity belongs to no one particular race. White folks ain't got no monopoly on God or Jesus. Sure, they would have us to believe they do by the way they paint the pictures and the way they write the theology. But it's not true.

**Where does education come in? Why do you feel the need to earn an advanced academic degree and how does this mesh with your activism?**

To me, education and activism are one and the same. [W.E.B.] DuBois was an activist and a scholar. So was Martin [Luther King, Jr.] Most people don't know that Martin had a Ph.D. in theology. I think one's academic preparation enhances one's ability to serve one's people in an active role. The nature of our oppression is very complex and I don't think one can deal with the complexity of the plight of Black people today without education. Ironically, some people see getting an academic degree as a way to take you away from the struggle. I see it as a way to put me right into the struggle. My education is for a purpose. It's not just to get a degree and set it up on a wall.

**Why did you select Howard?**

The School of Religion at Howard is the leading Black seminary in the country. There's no question about it. And the School of Religion at Howard has had a long history and tradition of providing the Black church across denominational lines with effective leadership. So I selected Howard, first, because of its high academic rating, and secondly, because of its tradition of providing the Black church with effective leadership.

**How has the Howard community—teachers, students, alumni—helped to shape your own ideas?**

Dr. Charles E. Cobb [executive director

of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice and a 1944 graduate of Howard's School of Religion] has had a tremendous effect on my life. In fact, he is the reason I joined the United Church of Christ. He's been like my mentor. He has taught me the importance of effective organizing in the Black community and he's taught me how to work within a predominantly-white denomination to move that denomination to where it ought to be. In essence, what I'm saying is that he's taught me how to be on the front lines and how to sustain the battle on the front lines and to move on.

Another Howard person who's had a tremendous effect on me is Dr. J. Deotis Roberts [former professor of Christian theology who is now president of the Interdenominational Theological Center]—the way he integrated Christian theology with the struggle of Black people to be free, his ideas on the responsibility of the church to not only articulate issues but to provide some strategies to eliminate oppression and his belief that one cannot really be a practicing Christian without helping uplift the downtrodden, feed the hungry, clothe the unclothed. . . .

**Don't you think, though, that so many people who are associated with the church or who say they are good Christians have forgotten about this responsibility?**

That's true. So much of Christianity has been perverted by the kind of society we live in. It's highly materialistic, highly capitalistic. There are a lot of people, too, who use the Christian language and the Christian symbols to manipulate for unchristian motives. White racist fundamentalists try to use the Bible—they did it during slavery and they do it now—to justify racism. White South Africans go to church every Sunday yet they keep our brothers enslaved. All this is a perversion of Christianity.

**What type of things are you doing today with the Commission?**

I direct the Washington office. We have several programs. One is the criminal justice program. We work very closely with Lorton prison. I go out to Lorton offering them a prison ministry where we try to provide alternatives for incarceration, where we actually try to get the inmates out of prison because we don't believe actual rehabilitation can take place in a confined setting. We have a legislative and congressional office which we've established on Capitol Hill where we try to increase the flow of legislative information back to the Black community.

We have a summer youth employment program. We have a program dealing with Black-on-Black crime because we maintain that the solution to Black-on-Black crime has to be found within the Black community. And we serve in the community in a number of other ways. If somebody has a police brutality complaint, he calls here. If somebody's been discriminated against in employment, he calls here. Basically we're a civil rights agency that serves the D.C. Black community.

Also, we deal with priorities set by the national office. One of our priorities for the next six months, for example, deals with mentally retarded inmates. This is a class of people who always get ignored. We've found that a lot of people who are mentally retarded end up going to prison not because they have committed some heinous crime but because they're mentally retarded. There's no special program to deal with this so we are addressing this issue.

**What are your future plans?**

Right now I'm here statutorily because I'm on parole here but I will continue to direct the Washington office of the Commission and I will continue to work with Dr. Cobb. He may assign me to go someplace else in a couple of years, but for the immediate future I will remain here, working in the D.C. Black community and working at Howard. I hope to get the D.M. [doctor of ministry] degree sometime in 1981. Then I plan to go and seek a Ph.D. in another

field or I may go to law school. I don't know. I have several options.

**Would you say that right now you feel at peace with yourself?**

Yes, I do. But I also feel that I have a lot of hard work to do.