



Reverend Kevin R. Johnson, Ed. D.  
Senior Pastor

VIA EMAIL (jswilson@morehouse.edu)

April 17, 2013

Dr. John S. Wilson, Jr.  
President  
Morehouse College  
830 Westview Drive, S.W.  
Atlanta, Georgia 30314

Re: May 18, 2013 Baccalaureate Service

My Dear Fellow Clergyman, Dr. Wilson:

After speaking with you late last night, on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," I decided to respond in writing to what I believe to be your disinviting me to be the 2013 Baccalaureate speaker at Morehouse College simply because I penned an article, "A President for Everyone, Except Black People."

Since Monday, April 15<sup>th</sup>, we have had multiple conversations and there has been a single thread in our discussions—that is you believe that my article is "untimely," possibly provocative, and may have been motivated by your offering me the opportunity to be the Baccalaureate speaker and my acceptance of that offer. While I recognize your and others' belief about this matter, please permit me to clarify the misconceptions and to express how disheartening this view is to a Morehouse alumnus deeply rooted in the College's tradition.

In March 2011, Mr. Robert Bogle, President and Chairman of *The Philadelphia Tribune*, asked me and two other Philadelphia ministers to write monthly columns for the oldest, continuously published African-American newspaper in the United States. I welcomed this opportunity because I saw it as a medium to use the intellect and analytic capacity I have gained since my freshman years at Morehouse through my graduate work at Columbia University. More importantly, I welcomed the opportunity to write for the *Tribune* because I saw it as a way to engage an African-American community and inspire our community to return to reading and thinking critically about social, religious, educational, economic, and political issues affecting people who are disenfranchised, voiceless, and disengaged.

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I have written on a variety of subjects over the last two years, and I have written numerous articles that have challenged the positions and actions of public servants including Superintendents, Mayors, Governors, Congressional leaders, Justices of the United States Supreme Court, the Black Church, and, yes, the President of the United States of America. Where the issue dictated, I have voiced overwhelming support for the President as well as others, and where there were valid criticisms I have provided voice to those concerns as well. In fact, if you peruse the articles I have written, you will notice a consistent aim in all of them—to advocate for the advancement of the masses of African-American and other disenfranchised people socially, politically, economically, and educationally.

While a student at Morehouse, I was trained and am deeply rooted in the prophetic, social-gospel ministry, just as Dr. King was and my mentors Drs. Otis Moss, Jr. '56, Calvin O. Butts, III '71, Joseph C. Parker, Jr. '74, and Dean Lawrence E. Carter, Sr. My ability to speak was harnessed by Dr. Anne Watts, and my writing was sharpened by Dr. Linda Zatlin. Hence, I am honored to continue the Morehouse tradition of critical thinking, social-analysis, and prophetic, social-gospel ministry. In a world in which the prosperity gospel dominates the spiritual nexus of our people and some, like Dr. Marvin McMickle are asking, "*Where have all the prophets gone?*" I have been taught to be a prophetic voice from the pulpit, the boardroom, the public square, or the pen. In my opinion, Morehouse is one of the last bastions for training young men in this tradition, and I have pledged my life to these ideals.

Moreover, the irony in all of this, Dr. Wilson is the "timing." Not the timing of my article, but rather the timing of this discussion. To be quite honest with you, this is not about an article I have written or even the President of the United States being this year's Commencement speaker (Mr. Obama will only be the President for the next three and half years). Rather this is about the type of institution Morehouse College will be during your presidency and beyond.

Indeed, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays prophetically said, "**A college must be judged not only by excellent teachers, but by the *spirit and philosophy* which permeates it from *top to bottom*.**" Long after the speeches are given at this year's Commencement, the question is: ***What will the spirit and philosophy be at Dear Old Morehouse?*** And more poignantly, what is the *spirit and philosophy* at the *top*?

President Wilson, I raise these questions not to offend but honestly because I know you were inspired by Dr. Mays' book, *Disturbed about Man*, which led to your writing and penning your own article, "Disturbed about Morehouse." Well, President Wilson, when you called me on Monday, April 15<sup>th</sup> and indirectly suggested that I should withdraw from being this year's Baccalaureate speaker because of a well-thought, crafted, and soundly documented article, I too became disturbed about Morehouse.

I am disturbed not because you called, but I am disturbed because of the reason for your calling. Your call was not to congratulate me for upholding the Morehouse tradition of critical thinking, analysis, and writing, but rather to scorn me for the use of it. For me, your call is greatly contrasted against Dr. Mays who said: "We want Morehouse men to develop keen minds, steel girded character, a social conscience, and above all, we want Morehouse men to be *free*."

Dr. Wilson, it is incredibly disheartening, in my view, that Morehouse College appears to be deviating from its 146-year-old proud tradition of promoting well-articulated, analytical, and thoughtful leaders who have changed the world for the better and who have a heart for those that do not have the means or the tools to speak for themselves.

Quite honestly, I was surprised and disappointed when I received a phone call from you, expressing your personal displeasure with my Op-Ed in the *Tribune*. The Op-Ed, which was written weeks before you extended the offer to me to speak, addresses what I believe to be an obvious and fair criticism that has been voiced by many across the country—that our current President’s Executive Cabinet is not diverse and is not representative of African-Americans, Hispanics, women, or other minorities. The substance is fair, grounded in facts and, frankly, an issue that the President himself is well aware of. Moreover, upon receiving your invitation to speak, I was not asked to provide a listing of any and all of my articles, sermons, speeches, etc. for “preclearance” and, frankly, had I been asked to do so that would have also been telling about an institution which, I thought was committed to upholding democratic ideals (including freedom of speech and expression) and liberal arts education.

Rather, on April 2, 2013 I received a call from you, and you asked me to speak on May 18, 2013 as Morehouse College’s Baccalaureate speaker. I was humbled and honored to receive this invitation, and I accepted your offer. You then informed me that someone from Dean Carter’s office would be in contact with me to make the necessary logistical arrangements. The next day, on April 3, 2013, I was contacted by Ms. Candice Wilcox from Dean Carter’s office who asked for my bio for the Baccalaureate program, which I provided. On April 4, 2013 I traveled to Morehouse for a preplanned trip with clergy to participate in Morehouse Research Institute (MRI) and Religious Emphasis Week. While there, on April 5, 2013, I attended an event for MRI, and you publicly acknowledged me, asked me to stand, and introduced me to all of those in attendance as the Baccalaureate speaker. Shortly thereafter, Dean Carter, who was also in attendance, approached me and stated that he had been consumed with the Religious Emphasis Week events, but would be in contact soon. On April 11, 2013, I received an email from the Office of Alumni Affairs that listed me as the Baccalaureate speaker (see attached). This correspondence was sent to the entire National Alumni Association and I immediately began receiving words of congratulations and encouragement from fellow alumni from around the country.

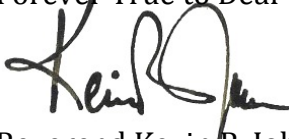
As you know, I am the Senior Pastor of the Bright Hope Baptist Church, and upon receiving your offer and, *at your instruction*, I informed my congregation that I would be Morehouse’s Baccalaureate speaker on May 18<sup>th</sup>. You asked that I make arrangements for another clergy to preach in my absence on May 19<sup>th</sup>, as you also invited me to stay over on Sunday to be present when the President delivered his Commencement address. Given that it is April and the Baccalaureate is next month, I secured airline tickets for my wife and three children to attend and witness what I expect would be a memorable moment—my addressing, inspiring and motivating young Morehouse men sitting where I once sat to soar to new heights.

Nonetheless, it seems that you and the executive team at Morehouse College find my Op-Ed article so offensive and “untimely” that you no longer wish for me to remain the Baccalaureate speaker. Your counterproposal from yesterday, April 16, 2013, that I preach alongside two other preachers in a “trifecta of preaching” is a clear departure from Morehouse’ previous Baccalaureates Services, a departure from all of the representations that had been made to me, and contradicts the express public announcements made to date.

President Wilson, this was not the offer presented to me when I accepted your offer on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. All that I ask is that you either allow the Baccalaureate to proceed as announced and that you kindly send me a letter of invitation (without further attention to an article that has no bearing on this beloved institution or its students); or, that you send me a letter of disinvitation that articulates the College’s newly-held position that well-reasoned, critical dialogue that advocates for the plight of the masses of African-American people is suddenly regrettable and no longer the tradition of Morehouse. Should you elect to disinvite me as Morehouse’s Baccalaureate speaker, which is certainly your prerogative, I request that the College reimburse me for the costs that I have assumed for my family’s travel.

In closing, I look forward to hearing your decision by the end of the day, April 17<sup>th</sup> and to receiving the appropriate letter thereafter. ***If my crime is that I am guilty of critical thinking, then please call in the jury because I am ready to be sentenced.***

Forever True to Dear Old Morehouse,



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