

LCRD Day One (December 2, 1999)  
**Rep. Tony Hall's Apology**

President Kérékou and President Rawlings,  
Distinguished Ministers and Guests,  
My friends from Dayton, Ohio, The Home of Peace, the Dayton Peace Accords,  
Senator Inhofe and my friend, Congressman Frank Wolf,  
Brothers and Sisters:

It's wonderful to be with you. Thank you, President Kérékou for your vision and for your strength and for your courage in putting this conference together.

This place is full of politicians today. Everybody seems afraid to admit that they're a politician.  
[Audience laughter]

Reverend Perrin said that he was not a politician or son of politician. Well, I was not a minister or a son of a minister. [Laughter] But I am a politician and a son of a politician. I'm also a Christian. As a matter of fact, when I told a group of friends one time about twenty years ago, my friend got up and introduced me. And he said, now I want to introduce Tony Hall. He's a US Congressman and he's a Christian. And it got real quiet and people started to laugh. An old man down front said "Make up your mind, buddy, you can't be both." [Laughter]

I want to read to you the text of the resolution that I introduced into the Congress of the United States two years ago to apologize for slavery. This is all it says:

"Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring) that the Congress apologizes to African Americans, whose ancestors suffered as slaves, under the Constitution and the laws of the United States until 1865."

That's all it said. [Applause] It has not passed yet. It hasn't been taken up for debate. I don't know if it will pass while I'm a member of Congress, but someday it will. Someday our government, our Congress, will apologize for this terrible, terrible act.

These thirty words, they don't seem like much, but I want to share with all of you a few thoughts on why I think we're here, and why I introduced the apology. Those of us who have come here to the Republic of Benin, we carry a special burden. Our hearts are heavy with the need for repentance and reconciliation. Our minds understand the many problems related to slavery. Our souls are in tune with the will of God and that God's children should not be divided. We are all here, as President Kérékou has stated, "to surrender to forgiveness in order to start afresh." And we want the coming millennium to be one of love and reconciliation, not hatred and division. And we pray that God will look upon us today and this week and what we do in the next few days with grace and mercy.

A few years ago, I saw a television program where a black minister and a white minister were on television together, and it was on Martin Luther King holiday in the United States. And they were talking about that the United States government has never apologized for slavery.

I had never heard that before. I couldn't believe it, so I asked the Library of Congress if they would research this and find out if it's true. Did the Congress or did the President, any of our presidents, ever apologize for slavery to African Americans? And they couldn't find anything. And I still found it hard to believe, and I myself personally went to the Library of Congress and I asked for as many books as I could find. I did as much research as I could on my own to find out have we ever apologized for slavery. And I found out that we had not.

So without worrying about political consequences, I set out to correct this glaring omission in history. So, in June of 1997, I introduced this very simple resolution. What happened next was a complete surprise to me. It exploded on the political scene at about the same time President Clinton was conducting his "National Dialogue on Race." And both conservatives and liberals, black and white dismissed it as "a meaningless gesture" or "an avoidance of trying to solve the problem."

I received hundreds of letters and phone calls about the apology. Most of the people I heard from opposed the idea; some were blatantly racist and hateful; very few people stood by my side and defended the idea or the necessity for it. At times, I felt very alone in this struggle.

I know that my resolution will not fix the lingering injustice resulting from slavery. But reconciliation does begin with an apology. Most of my time and energy in Congress, outside of trying to take care of my district, I'm involved mostly with hunger and famine and drought and working with the poor and human rights. And I've traveled throughout my country and the world trying to learn about the problems of hunger and some of the solutions. I'm not an expert on the issue of race. In fact, I know very little about all the dimensions of the issue. I only see the racial division in my country. And I know about the poverty that infests the black community in the US. I know about the plight of Africa and her starving children. But I do not claim to know a great deal about slavery and its legacy of racism.

My faith in Jesus leads me to have a clear purpose in my life. I hope that I can be a man that loves God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, and loves others as we love ourselves. I hope I can be that person. I know that I would not want my children sold as slaves. I know that it would tear me apart if my wife was taken from me. I know that I would be angry if I was beaten or whipped simply because of the color of my skin. We have tried to fix this problem in the United States. As we try to fix problems, sometimes politicians, you know how we try to fix problems? This is the same all over the world. We get together, we talk, we say, "Well let's [. . .] [tape breaks off here for a few minutes; the following is from Rep. Hall's speech manuscript]. *We have tried to fix the problem before, but in the wrong ways. We have started new programs, given money away, or written useless reports. But that is not enough.*

*Why we still need to apologize*

*Many of the opponents to the apology argued that slavery had been abolished over a century ago and no one alive in the United States today had been a slave or a slave owner. But that ignores the fact that slavery's effects are still with us. Just one of the many examples of slavery's legacy is in terms of assets.*

*Slaves, of course, were not able to earn any money or pass on an inheritance to their children. When African-Americans were freed after the Civil War, they started at a distinct disadvantage. Then they were shackled with Jim Crow laws and segregation that prevented them from truly entering into society. It has only been in the last two generations that descendants of slaves have been legally able to join American society, not to mention all of the discrimination that still exists today. Not only is it not a level playing field, the whole rules of the game were stacked against people of color.*

*On the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the richest nation in the world, Blacks control only 1.3 percent of the nations financial assets, while they are around 12 percent of the population. Whites possess a staggering 95 percent. Almost two-thirds of black households have no net financial assets. Blacks and whites with equal incomes possess very unequal shares of wealth.*

### *Personal Reasons*

*There are numerous reasons why we should apologize, on the personal, historical, and [here the cassette recording resumes] biblical levels. The first is simply that it's the right thing to do. If you offend your spouse or your friend, if you get in a fight with your best friend or your wife, if you don't say, "I'm sorry," it's never going to be resolved. And it lingers and it lingers. An apology is a necessary first step in repairing what has been broken. "I am sorry" is the first step of any person in trying to right a wrong. The words are a foundation, a part of the price for restoring lost trust.*

One woman wrote me when I had introduced this bill, and she said, "An apology would show that my government and the president believe the enslavement of Africans for national gain was a grave and revolting wrong. It will document in stone for years to come the country's repentance for a tremendous crime. It is the right thing to do." And another wrote that, "The fact that you want to apologize says to me personally that you recognize and accept my pain, the pain of my ancestors, and that you care about it. On the national level, in my lifetime, no one has ever done that."

The apology will not solve all the problems, and more will be necessary, but it will begin the process for something long overdue.

The second main reason to apologize is in historical precedent. There have been numerous examples in the United States and elsewhere of public apologies in recent years, both political and religious. Congress itself apologized in 1988 to Japanese Americans for imprisoning them in concentration camps during World War II. We even paid each survivor or their descendants something like \$20,000 in reparations. In 1993, Congress offered a formal apology to native Hawaiians for the role the United States and US citizens played in the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii one hundred years earlier. A couple of years ago, President Clinton apologized to a number of groups of African Americans who had been wronged by the government having to do with, I believe, some health experiments or research.

Other countries have done the same. British Prime Minister Tony Blair apologized to the Irish for his country's failure to respond to the one million people who died during the potato famine. The East German legislature issued an apology for the atrocities committed against the Jews during the Holocaust, after forty years of denying the need.

The third set of reasons to apologize are biblical. One of my favorite stories in the Bible is about Joseph. In the book of Genesis, Joseph is sold into slavery by his own brothers. What was intended for evil, God means for good. Joseph used his power to save his family from starvation. But his brothers needed to ask him for forgiveness before true reconciliation could occur.

And Jesus of Nazareth emphasized the need for reconciliation, forgiveness and love throughout his ministry. In the Sermon on the Mount he commanded his followers to turn the other cheek, to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, and to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

The Bible is a mandate for reconciliation, and Paul says in his letter to Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus." Then Peter came to the same conclusion in the book of Acts and said, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in any nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Every Wednesday morning in Washington, I convene a prayer group that meets. We meet at 7:00 in the Martin Luther King Library. We pray for our leaders in the City of Washington. We pray for the president, the vice president. We pray for Republicans and Democrats. We don't do it because they're better. We do it because God says to pray for our leaders. He says to pray for our leaders so that the people, which is us and you, "can live peaceful and tranquil lives in all godliness and dignity."

You have a great saying in Africa. I've heard it many times. It says that when the elephants fight, the grass dies. It's very interesting. When the leaders fight, the people perish. So we come together and we pray. We pray for the leaders that they can reconcile and be together.

I believe that if I would have experienced slavery and racial discrimination, I would be a lot more angry than most of my black friends. I am amazed at the depth of faith and forgiveness that I have witnessed among African Americans. Two close friends of mine, the late Reverends Tom Skinner and Sam Hines, taught me a great deal about reconciliation. And they accepted God's calling to be reconcilers, despite the discrimination they faced from whites and hostility they faced from blacks.

As I said, I'm not an expert on these matters. I am here to listen and to learn. I am excited to unite with all of you in healing the wounds of slavery through repentance and reconciliation. No one can do this alone.

I would like to conclude with two prayers from *Conversations with God—Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*. It's called "A Slave Woman's Prayer" and a "Prayer for Freedom from Race Prejudice." And it says, and I quote this:

Lord, bless my master. When he calls upon Thee to damn his soul, do not hear him. Do not hear him, but hear me to save him. Make him know he is wicked, and he will pray to Thee. I am afraid, O Lord, I have wished him bad wishes in my heart—keep me from wishing him bad—though he whips and beats me sore, tell me of my sins, and make me pray more to Thee—make me more glad for what Thou has done for me.

And then:

God, who has made man in Thine own likeness, and who doth love all whom Thou has made, suffer us not because of difference of races, color, or condition to separate ourselves from others and thereby from Thee; but teach us the unity of Thy family and the universality of Thy love. Teach us, also, while loving and serving our own, to enter into the communion of the whole family; and forbid that from pride of birth, color, achievement, and hardness of heart, we should despise any for whom Christ died, or injure or grieve any in whom He lives. We pray in Jesus' precious name.

So in conclusion, I can't pass a law. I don't have the authority without my colleagues in the Congress to apologize to African Americans. But as a person and a citizen of my country, and a US Congressman, I can apologize. I can say to you that I feel very [voice breaks, overcome with emotion] inadequate to stand up here and say that. I don't have the words. I haven't experienced the suffering. I feel it in my bones that it's right. I'm very sorry for what's happened. I hope that you'll forgive me because it's easy to pray, "Well, it's those other people that did it." No, I'm part of it, too. Forgive me. Forgive me for my sins. Forgive me for my ancestors, and [Applause] . . . This is just a start. It's not the end. It's the beginning. And maybe God, hopefully God, will take this conference, take these apologies and start to heal, start to close this wound that's there. Amen.