

LCRD Day Three (December 4, 1999)
Bishop Perrin's Response to Benin's Apology

Mr. President,
To the honorable members of the Diaspora,
To those who are assembled:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to respond to this great apology. I am very sorry that the world and the mass media of the world has not covered what has taken place here this weekend, namely because what we do here today is no small thing. The apology that is extended here today is no small thing. The forgiveness that is extended here today is no small thing.

I have a confession to make, Mr. President: in the back of our minds, in the back of every African American, in the back of our minds has been a terrible, haunting thought, an unthinkable thought, a thought that we would not allow ourselves to think for centuries, a thought that actually our African brothers and sisters, deliberately by an act of their will, for the purposes of greed and self-advantage, would dare to sell their sisters and brothers into slavery.

The honest fact is, Mr. President, that we have always blamed white people. As African Americans, we have always pointed the finger at white people. The reason is because we live with white people and the nastiness and the meanness and the selfishness and the ugliness and the prejudice and the bigotry and the hatred and the hard looks we have faced all of our lives. Prejudice in the marketplace, racism in the schools, always having worse, always being denied the best, always having to strive harder at the hands of those you sold us to. We have faced this all of our lives. And there is being this haunting thought: "Would a brother—could a brother, could a father, could a sister—sell their very brother, allow white people to do this to us? Is it possible that they did not know?" We have never allowed ourselves to think that thought.

But Mr. President, we went to Ouidah, and we walked the slave road. We'd begun at the Tree of Whipping, and we saw our brothers and our sisters being whipped, and we felt the open sores on their backs, and we walked around the Tree of Forgetfulness with them, and we entered into the Zomai with them, and we stood in darkness with our brothers and sisters, gagged with chains in their mouths, in the place of utter darkness, where the light dare not shine in, and then we went from there to a Tree of No Return—those that had not been previously buried in an open grave—and then we took a long walk down a road to the Gate of No Return. When we got there, Mr. President—I am afraid that Africa still does not know, I am afraid that my brothers and sisters in Africa still do not sense the pain—there was a desire to rush us, and we had witnessed the greatest holocaust that the world has ever seen and ever known, and nobody could move, everybody was still and quiet.

I thought about one of the most vivid conversations I've ever had with my grandmother. My grandmother wasn't born into slavery. She was right at that point where slavery ended. Standing in our kitchen, she said, "David, I'll tell you a story about slavery." She said, "White folks used to take the girls and put them in a shed with their dogs so that the dogs could mate with them." She said it is not possible for dogs to mate with people, but she said it was sport, it was fun, because they considered us animals, and animals should mate with animals. I looked in the faces

of my brothers and sisters, and seated right in this room are those would could not eat at lunch counters, those who were beaten and whipped and denied restaurants and hotels and places that their relatives had built with the blood of their sweat.

I thought of my wife, whose mother in the civil right movements in Danville, Virginia, were beaten by police with a billy club. They whipped the women until their breasts burst; men attacked by dogs; and we ask ourselves, “Could Africans do this to Africans? Would Africans, would black people, could a man sell his own and then forget about it and turn his back? Could a man do this?” Some say it is not true; I have said in my heart, “It is not true.” I have said, like Nazis who lived through Hitler’s terror, “*It never happened!*”

But the reason we love you is that you have said what no one else has been willing to say: that “we as Africans [applause] have had a role and have had a part. Without a seller, there could be no buyers.” You have stood, when no one has asked you, when no one has requested of you to come forward and take responsibility. How many of us, when something has happened, and no one knows we did it, would dare to stand and say, “I am accountable.”

This, Mr. President, is noble. [Applause]

What we do today, I would say to you, is no small thing. The apology that is extended is no small apology, considering the atrocities. And the forgiveness that is extended is no small forgiveness.

But you ask, how did we get over, how did we survive? How did our women endure the most degrading hatred, bigotry, violence? How did we survive? We survived through our faith, we survived through grabbing a hold of God. We sang a song which epitomizes how we got over. When we come here, you say, “You are filled with praise. You are filled with Hallelujah! You continue to talk about God!” We have to talk about God, we have to talk about Jesus. Before there was—Mr. President, while we love Islam, and we love our Islamic brothers—before Islam, we were with Jesus. Jesus came to us before there was a Muslim that ever shared with us about Allah; there was Jesus. And we sang a song: “Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.”

We have been doing that, and we are still doing that, and we cannot come here without doing that. If you want to understand us, you have to understand our Jesus, you have to understand the forgiveness. Because it is only through what he has taught us, it is only through what he has shown us, it is only through what he has modeled for us that we have been able to forgive nasty white people, mean white people, racist white people, prejudiced white people, bigoted white people. And now, it is by his grace, and it is by his power that we are able to reach out to our African brothers and to our African sisters and to say to you, that because of the love of God and the faith that we have in Christ, we forgive it all. We forgive it all. *We forgive it all!* [Applause]

And Mr. President, we want to remind everyone, there are several things that will make us suspect. If there is solely a focus upon blacks who have migrated to America, then we will suspect your apology, because we are a people who have been spread all over the world: to France, to all parts of Europe, to all of the Caribbean. We are a people, and we must all be brought back, we must all be embraced. Without that, we will be afraid that the same greed, the

same selfishness, the same desire to get ahead, the same desire to use people is the motivation of your apology. I say this to white people [knocks something out of companion's hand]: in our country, if a man has something knocked out of his hand by someone else—by instinct, he [companion] was moved to help me pick it up. He did not understand that I intended to knock it over, but by instinct, by sheer humanity, he is moved to say, “It is not enough to knock it out, walk on you, spit on you, step on you, and then say, ‘I apologize’ but make no effort [reaches to pick up what he knocked down]. [Applause]

This must be true of Africa and Europeans and the Americans and all of those that have been involved in this triangle. It is natural and it is right, if you knock someone down, to help them up, to pick them up. Is it not natural? Is it not natural?

So we say to you, if you say that I am a son of Africa, then where is the honor that is due to a son? We cannot do it all in one day, but we must begin to do it. Let me give you a small example of what I mean.

If I am a son, why is it so difficult for me to come home? Why do I have to fight to have a passport and a visa to my home [applause]? Why do I go to the Benin Embassy and ask them, every time I come, to give me another ninety days to go “home”; and when I come home, why is it I have no land, no place to call my own? Where is my name? Where is my Joseph garment?

In Nigeria, my name is Omowalé [applause], which means that “a son comes home in honor,” because the people of Nigeria, taking responsibility, have said, “You are a son. If you are a son, you must have a name like our names.” So my name is Omowalé and my wife's name is Aboola. In Nigeria, I have land where I've built a home. They said, “When you come home [. . .] [incomprehensible] you can go to your home.”

[Recording briefly garbled]

In Kenya I have a home. They have built a home for me in Kenya. Is these—are these—your brothers and sisters? Do not wait! Mr. President, Mr. President, If I am your son, then treat me as a son, then treat me as your son, then receive me as a son, then hold me as a son. . . . Because, Mr. President, I love my father. I love my mother. I love my father! Do you understand? Do you understand? Do you understand? Mr. President, we receive you as our father.

I am going to ask all of the delegates from America, black and white: would you stand? we are one in Christ, in Christ we have transcended. We receive you, we thank you, we accept your apology, we accept your apology, and we love you, our father.