

America and the Race Problem  
Speech Delivered at Guilford College, Greensboro, NC  
by  
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Any great movement requiring the grace of tolerance and earnest thought is advantaged by the circumstance that it takes its start in, such an atmosphere as that which invests Guilford College. Here, more than will be found anywhere else in North Carolina, do we hear that great hymn of John Greenleaf Whittier:

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
Forgive our feverish [foolish] ways!  
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,  
In purer lives thy service find,  
In deeper reverence praise.

*One of the greatest of the world's preachers, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, thinking historically about great movements in America, has found that the Quakers have been right on them oftener than any other religious body. If those great issues were war, temperance, slavery, domestic relationship, regard for the rights of the minority, and championship of the right of free speech and free worship, without exception these Quakers have stood first among the organizations which promoted such causes. So, we are fortunate today to begin the contemplation of our great task in the serene and quiet surroundings of the Society of Friends. It is not too much, I am sure, to hope that in all our deliberations we may have that serenity ever present.*

*I have been asked to speak on "America and the Race Problem." I recognize that racial problems in America extend beyond that of white and Negro, and that other minority groups can properly be included under such a subject as has been assigned to me, but I have chosen to limit my remarks to the race problem as it affects Negro and white relations in this country.\**

Some things, by this time, should tolerably well fixed in the consciousness of every thoughtful person among us, and should call for no lengthy argument. By now, we have all come to conclude

\*Italicized passages here and on the following pages are those which were crossed through with a large X in the copy in the North Carolina Central University Department of Archives and History. Perhaps Shepard sought to shorten his address.

that the welfare of the Negro or that of any other minority group in our democracy is not a question of philanthropy or of expediency, but of life or death. *That in itself is a great gain, and particularly for us in the South which, holding itself proudly aloof from the ferments of the old world so long, went its own individual way and created its own educational, dramatic, militant and social forms with the blending of splendid virtues with fatal weaknesses. Competent historians tell us that nowhere outside Scotland were there better schools for the few. But these took no thought of the value and dignity of the common man, the single individual, to society. We might have gone along, and in fact did, many more years without any adequate system of education for our democracy, but two world wars have precipitated the issue.* We in the South have had to take to heart the conviction that the chief problem of any society is to realize its highest self in life and law, not by the personal courage and the raw individualism of our fellows. Much of our efforts has been crippled by poverty and by the mania for multiplication of colleges. But out of it has come the conviction that no civilization can grow great in poverty.

I venture, therefore, to suggest that in proposing any remedial measures for the Negro, there are basic ethical conditions which must be met. The Negro wishes only to be an American citizen and to receive such benefits from such citizenship as the laws of the land and his personal excellences entitle him. Similarly, if he does not receive them, we who believe in him should like to feel that he falls by the weight of his demerits, rather than by the tyranny of other men. And saying that, I should like to make yet another observation: It will be vain to talk about any post-war world welfare unless we realize that the foundations of such a fortunate economy are laid deep in the oral attitudes of men. *And I very greatly fear that there never can be a purely economic solution of our problems so long as we forget that they are primarily rooted in righteousness. For unless our preaching is vain, unless our faith is vain, ethical questions precede, underlie, and dominate economic questions. When we chant the creed of Micah that the Lord requires of us only that we do*

*justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God, we are not merely signing about beautiful graces and lovely sentiments, we are arraying the conditions to our basic well-being.*

*Norman Thomas, perpetual presidential candidate of the Socialists, was many years a Protestant preacher. He has said many times since he left the ministry for leadership of his party that the more he pondered the New Testament the more literally true he came to regard the dictum of Jesus, "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness; and all things shall be added unto you." One does not have to direct the department of political economy in one of our great universities to know this. Every Sunday afternoon we hear forums in which our economic way out is splendidly and eloquently presented. I should be outside my competence if I undertook to provide the techniques which belong alone to the experts. But no teacher is playing offside who undertakes to lay down the ethical conditions for our prosperity.*

Every nation, race and generation has its own special and peculiar problems. Each group of people in each period of its existence is likely to feel and argue that its difficulties are the most trying and serious. We often forget that if one generation could settle all of the difficulties, there would be little left for the succeeding one to do. For three hundred years and more[,] one of the questions that has interested, permeated and disturbed every section of American life has had to do with the presence and influence of the black people in America.

Upon many vital points affecting the Negro the nation has been divided from the first. As far back as the seventeenth century there was a part of the people who felt that the black man could be better Christianized and improved if brought to this country and made to contribute his labor to its development. At the same time there were those who felt that it was best for the African and for America that he remain away. Later, when slavery grew into a strongly entrenched institution, the division of American sentiment was still more evident. One portion of the country said that slavery was righteous and best for the Negro and the nation; another said it was sinful and hurtful to the Negro and the nation. Still later came freedom, and another division appears. One element said the

Negro could not be educated; another said he was capable of education; there were those who claimed that whenever a mulatto exhibited qualities of intellect, or executive ability, or organization, it was the white blood that should have the credit; while still another element just as emphatically claimed that the mixing of the races tended to weaken the Negro. A portion of the white people, both North and South said the salvation of the South could come only when the Negro departed from its fields and factories, but the emigration agent who has tried to induce Negro labor to more has had a rough time in the South, and the Negroes who did migrate to the North have often found the “not welcome” sign hanging on the doors of Northern industry.

One element argued that the future hope of the Negro consisted in keeping in close touch with the white man; another said it was the part of wisdom to keep the two races as completely separated as possible. These are some of the points upon which some of the most intelligent and influential white people have differed in the past. These most bewildering contentions and differences prove that nobody, either white or black, has had the certain and final solution to the problem. It should be pointed out also that the Negro deserves the greatest of credit for having kept his head and courage in the midst of such confusing contentions and differences. The Negro has withstood the tremendous strain of these contending forces during a long period and, notwithstanding them, has continued to grow in prosperity, intelligence, [C]hristian character, and numbers.

Today, we are faced with the same confusion and differences of opinion on problems that affect the Negro. The differences, of course, are sharpest in the South. In the South[,] opinion is still divided on whether the ballot would mean salvation or damnation for the Negro. Today, there is an element that believes that the solution of the race problem lies in the integration of the races, whereas another element believes that separation and segregation is the only way to maintain the purity and integrity of the two groups. There are those who believe that the Negro should have full and equal economic opportunities, and there, on the other hand, are those who feel that it is better to limit him to certain types of occupations and jobs. There are those who believe that certain aspects

of the race problem can best be solved by the intervention of the Federal Government; and some who believe that the Federal intervention will only retard the progress of the individual states toward working out satisfactory solutions to the problems. One element believes that the best solution to the problem will come from gradual, co-operative, and educational processes; another element believes in immediate, direct, and legislative processes.

In the midst of the uncertainties and perplexities, a few strong, definite, and undebatable facts stand clearly and convincingly, and these should strengthen our faith and our efforts in the future. It is obvious that there are no ready-made or patent solutions for the race problem in America. It is clear that any substantial progress toward a solution of the problem can be made only by patient and combined efforts of the best people of both the white and Negro groups. It stands above argument that the steps and approaches that are the most Christianlike, that are the most democratic, that are most in keeping with our ideas of the worth of human personality are the steps and approaches that should be taken; while those that are narrow, bigoted and based on prejudice and unjust discrimination should always be rejected.

Since the days of Reconstruction, there has not been a single forward-looking Christian democratic approach to the solution of the problem that has met with failure. There has been no opportunity for progress offered to the Negroes of which the majority has not seized and made good on. And although many laws passed in favor of the Negro—for the protection and guarantee of his rights as a citizen—have been more often honored in the breach than in the observance, it can be said to the credit of the deep rooted and fundamental democratic spirit of the white people of America, that no such law passed in favor of the Negro, and held to be constitutional, has ever since the period of Reconstruction been replaced or erased from the state books.

It is my firm conviction that the ills in our society resulting from the race problems in America will respond to proper treatment. When white men are giving serious consideration to whether this or that privilege or opportunity would be good or based for the Negro, I believe they would come

out with the right answer every time if they would stop for a moment and ask themselves the question “what of this or that privilege and opportunity, or right, would I desire for myself if I were situated as the Negro is?”

One of the old bones of contention over which there is no longer any debate is the effect of education upon the Negro. There was a time when it was thought that the Negro was not capable of being educated and therefore no provisions were made for his education, and there were those who thought that even if the Negro could assimilate education it would be to his detriment, because he would become an offensive, radical, smart aleck, with loose morals and indifferent purposes. Today, however, nobody would seriously contend that education does not have the same salutary and wholesome effect upon the Negro that it has upon any other people. *The late Governor Glenn remarked that a trained monkey, a trained dog, a trained horse would be of untold greater value than an untrained one. He remarked that he had read how a man made a fortune by training a [unintelligible word] of mosquitoes to play baseball.*

Everywhere we find evidence that education has made the Negro a more useful citizen, it has made him a more valuable workman, it has made him more economical and more inclined to acquire some wealth and property, it has made his religion more practical and less emotional, it has improved his morals and reduced the crime rate among Negroes. Now I realize that there is still a lot to be desired in all of these areas—but there is also a lot of education lacking and still needed by the Negro. We have reduced the rate of illiteracy among the Negroes at an amazing speed—but there are still far too many illiterate Negroes, and what is worse, there are far too many Negroes listed as literate by the census because they have been taught to read and write their names, who have not a sufficient amount of education to translate their literacy into any practical and useful purpose.

We still have a disproportionate number of crimes committed by Negroes and I know it is safe to say that the vast majority of these offenders against the law are Negroes without education. I

have good reason to believe that it is seldom that a Negro with as much as a good sixth or seventh grade education falls into the torts of the law. It would be an interesting revelation if exact statistics could be gathered on this point. Social workers have found that by far the greatest number of cases on their records, as well as a large proportion of the parents of delinquent children, are persons who do not have as much as an adequate fourth grade education.

*A few weeks ago I was talking to a prominent industrialist in one of our Northern cities. During the war a great many Negroes had been hired in his plants. I asked him about their record, as workers. He said, among other things, that there were too many who were content to work only two or three days a week and to lay off the rest of the week. I asked him if he thought that was a characteristic of Negro workers as such. He promptly replied "no" – adding that some of the best men in his plants were Negroes and that he had many Negro workers none of whom earned less than \$10.00 a day, and who would have jobs as long as jobs were available for anybody. He said these people were industrious and thrifty; that most of them had bought homes and were sending their children to high school and college.*

*On the other hand, the group which laid off from work several days out of the week were thriftless and shiftless. He thought that their wants had not been sufficiently increased or developed; that they were satisfied with too little, and therefore their ambition was not aroused as would be the case with a man who had more wants and desires and the determination to satisfy them.*

*Now what this keen man of business said was no doubt true, but I am not sure that he realized that the trouble with this unreliable group of workers was their ignorance or lack of education. We must remember that when men are not slaves, but are in a state of freedom, if we are to have the elements of industry and thrift among them, there must be also the elements of intelligence and education. If men are kept ignorant and depressed to the extent that they know and want only a few simple and crude things, and they can satisfy these few wants by working three or four days a week,*

*it is rather natural for them to argue, "what is the use of working any longer?" And, my friends, there is a good deal of human nature in that.*

But where through education the Negro's wants have been increased, where he wants a decent home for himself and his family, where he wants to own a piece of land, where he wants to wear respectable clothes and to educate his children, and when later, with more education, he will want to be a man of influence or a man respected in his community, when he will want to see a better church and a better school built for his people, when education has thus increased his needs and his wants, his ambition is aroused to satisfy these wants, and he will eagerly seek the opportunity to work six days a week.

Those persons both white and black who have been interested in the education of the Negro have been aware of this fact for a long time; it is now coming to the point where those interested in the economic development of the South are recognizing that to the extent that the Negro's wants are increased along with his white fellow-citizens, and to the extent that he is able to satisfy those wants, he creates a greater market in the South and strengthens southern economy. The education of the Negro has become a sound financial investment.

In spite of the fact that education for the Negro has proved its case, in spite of the fact that the transforming effect of education upon the lives of a people has never been more apparent than in the case of the American Negro, there [are] still inadequate provisions made for Negro education throughout the South. Some of the states are, of course, far ahead of others, but in no state has the full responsibility been discharged. There are hopeful signs, however, for in even the most retarded of the Southern states nobody openly argues that the Negro does not need more or should not have more education, but those responsible often hide behind the poverty of the state and say we cannot give more. Upon careful observations those states may yet discover that there is a close cause and effect relationship between continuing ignorance of the people and continuing poverty of the state.

*You will forgive me, I am sure if I seem to dwell overly long upon the point of education. You know, of course that I have spent most of my life in an effort to develop and secure better educational opportunities for my people. The job is not yet completed and we still need the help of persons who are being trained and influenced as you are here. You must help us to secure better educational opportunities and incentives for Negro youth. Now these opportunities and incentives cannot exist merely because a school house and a teacher are provided in a community. The true opportunities and motivations for an education must arise out of a well organized family unit properly housed and clothed so as to have a measure of family pride and self-respect. They can arise only when the working members of the family have employment, security, and an income sufficiently large that the labor of the children is not necessary to supplement it in order for them to get the bare necessities of life.*

*Parents must be able to see the advantages of education about them by actually observing the up-grading and promotion of Negroes on jobs by reason of their intelligence, education and competence, and by seeing the advancement in the community in general of those who are educated. It takes all of these things along with school houses and teachers to provide the real opportunities and incentives for education.*

*Notes: North Carolinas has made greater advancement than any other State. We are proud of her.*

*Examples: In a certain county high school almost finished, but money cannot be secured.*

*In one town a Superintendent told a Principal not to vote*

*In another town do not attempt to shake hands with white people. (Farmville)*

*Some of the other aspects of the race problem in America have been given great emphasis during the war. There were many people who hoped that the circumstance of war itself would be a solution to the race problem. They hoped that out of the necessities of war and fact of common cause against a common foe would arise those attitudes of democratic Christian brotherhood that*

would leave no room for race hatred, prejudice, and discrimination. They boldly talked accordingly. On the other extreme were those who feared the coming of what the others hoped for. They feared the manifestations of self-assertion and the demands of the Negro. They feared the impact of the noble ideologies expressed by our national leaders upon the status quo of segregation, discrimination and race prejudice. They set out more quietly than the first group, yet perhaps more determined, to prevent change.

In public addresses I challenged the statement that returning Negro soldiers would attempt radical changes. What they wanted was decent treatment, a chance to acquire a home, to get living wages, a chance to acquire an education, a chance to work. They wanted a chance to live with themselves and to have their own self-respect. Segregation means discrimination. Railroad cars, public conveyances.

Now that the war is over, it is clear that neither the radicals nor the reactionaries made the right prediction. The race problem in America seems not to be susceptible to any sudden solution, or any drastic change brought about as an incident of war, the problem remains as before in most of its aspects. The only effect of war is probably the quickening of those social forces which were already reacting upon and affecting the problem. Such forces as education, inter-racial co-operation, and the strengthening of our democratic convictions.

Now that the war is over we are still faced in some of the Southern states with the problem of the extension of the ballot to the Negro. The abolition of the poll tax in Georgia, the attempted abolition in Tennessee, which failed because of an adverse court decision on the action of the State legislature, the holding of the courts on the illegality of excluding Negroes from the democratic primaries—all seem to point to an early removal of certain concrete and legal barriers. The more important barriers, however, are those which exist in the minds of the people.

Many white people still express the fear of Negro dominance in politics if he is given the ballot. Others express the fear that he will be venal and subject to political corruption, selling his

votes to the highest bidder. The record of Negro voting in this country shows such fears to be groundless. In the states where he is permitted to vote, the way he votes is determined by the same inducements that operate upon other people, plus the special considerations growing out of his position as a minority group in America. He gets no considerable portion of the money spent in the political campaigns, and where he does get money it is for campaign purposes exactly like those for which money is spent among the white electorate. In the Southern states where Negroes are permitted to vote there is no evidence of an attempt to bring about an unbalance of political power as between whites and Negroes.

When it comes to intelligent voting, a great many people say that even the best informed of us can only make a guess between the candidates and issues presented by the parties, and with respect to this I would say to the white voters: "you must give the Negro wings before you tell him to fly, you must set the example and bid him try."

Another serious problem which will continue to confront the Negro for some time is that of a fair and equal economic opportunity. Early in the summer we had an inter-racial conference at our college conducted by Dr. Newbold. The theme of the conference was the "Race Question and the Problem of Making a Living."

The opening address was delivered by Governor Cherry, who I must say is manifesting a deep insight and understanding of the problems of our state and a sympathetic attitude toward a fair [fair] solution of many of them.

In his address Governor Cherry said that he considered the right of a man to work on the job for which he was best fitted as one of the fundamental democratic principles of our American society.

He expressed the thought that the Negro should make himself individually competent and efficient as a worker and to expect a job on that basis and not because Negroes, as such, are entitled to any given proportion of jobs. He said after the Negro has made himself individually competent,

he should be given a full and equal opportunity for employment and advancement. I can say nothing better on this problem of economic opportunity for the Negro than to repeat the thoughts expressed by the leader of our state.

I have not said a great deal about those faults and shortcomings of the Negro which make racial adjustments more difficult. [*Give incidents in San Francisco; Chicago.*]

My failure to mention them is not an indication that I am not aware of them. Some people have taken the trouble to try to catalogue the traits of conduct of the Negro which make him objectionable to the white man; they turn out to be those same traits of conduct that make one individual objectionable to others in any group or social set, for they usually result from the social and psychological environment in which the individual has developed. Nevertheless, those of us who assume some responsibility of leadership do speak out very strongly against these things whenever we speak to a group of our own people. For we know very well how the bad habits and misconduct of some of the members of the race are often taken to be characteristics of all Negroes. In every public address, I advise people to obey the law. As much as I hate it, I know that obedience to law is the only safe course to follow, but that I should do all in my power to have a cruel law changed.

It is the few who are loud, boisterous, and rude that attracts attention to themselves, while those quiet, intelligent Negroes who go about their own way are not noticed. The capacity and possibilities of a people should be judged by their best[,] not by their worst. It is seldom that even the best friends of the Negro among the white people ever know him in the finer aspect of his life. The Negro is seldom known in his own industrial and business occupations, seldom known in the high and unselfish purposes of his church and school life, almost never known in the refined sentiments of his home life, his regard for his family, his love of good books, good music, and works of art. Most white people never dream of the Negro as dwelling in such a world at all.

All races have the vicious and the virtuous. It is amazing to me how much more attention the vicious among us get than do the virtuous. It is an interesting commentary on our literary taste as a nation, that the seamy side of Negro life, as portrayed in the books of such able and distinguished Negro writers as Richard Wright, will attract so much more attention than a book delineating the characters and revealing the sentiments, ambitions, and deep emotional conflicts of a family of respectable and educated Negroes. We are interested in such books and moving pictures as they concern the people of Poland or Norway or China, but such a book about respectable Negroes would never become a best seller.

I am going to conclude, therefore, by asking your assistance in assuming some degree of leadership in moulding public sentiment in favor of understanding and tolerance for the Negro. The masses of ignorant and poorly educated white people have to be reached on this problem the same as the corresponding groups of Negroes.

I, for one, wish to see our present economic system abide and prosper. I believe in it so deeply that it is no burden upon my own credulity to envisage it as the basis of a prosperity generally distributed so that the whole body of our people shall have security of employment, decent livelihood, fair opportunity for their children, open doors for personal and family fulfillment.

And it is just as essential in laying the ethical foundations of that "fortunate economy," that we have ethical ideas of what such a system is. No economic process can be wholly what it is should be, if it cannot be regarded as our basic social service: employment for our willing workers, education for our children, and food and clothing for us all. As our democracy has not yet proved its right to exist as the ultimate form of government, so has our economic system not yet demonstrated its right to be regarded as the undisputed guardian of the nation's resources. We must use that system, foremost among all the devices yet produced by man for the processing of our natural wealth; but it must work to the service of all, or it will perish in disuse. And as our Christianity and our democracy have the greatest stake in our social situation, I, for one, wish to see

the most made of it through intelligent co-operation of all our people in this great enterprise. Our country has had a moral leadership throughout its more than 150 years because of the dignity with which it has clothed the common man. Even with all its interruptions over these years, the great fact of American history has been the ordinary man.

May I remind you of a very present peril. Let nobody impute to the Negro any taste for communism or any of its scurvy children. Let none of us be taken in by its bogus brotherhoods and counterfeit comradeships. But I remind you again, that is what they call their votaries, "comrades." There is too much in the papers and on the air about the dangers of communism to suffer our ignoring it. I candidly do fear it, not on account of the Negro, but on account of the human race. We have been schooling our people to surrender their economic security, in order to have their political security which embraces such blessings as freedom of speech, of worship, and of assembly. But communism has been instructing its devotees to surrender all these for economic security, to give up political liberty for economic liberty. Any system which begins with comfort for the physical creature is a dangerous competitor of any other system that does not. Indeed, in Russia the communist moving to destroy the Christian churches issued orders that no social work should be done by them. Those Russians knew, intelligent men as they have shown themselves to be, that if they could force the churches to be individualistic, more purveyors of pretty precepts, with no social sympathy translated into action, with no message of social betterment issues from them that such a naked and sterile religion would perish of itself. That largely caused us to hear so much about the "no-God" exhibits in Russian churches and cathedrals where the worship of God has been unmolested for ages. But the communists found a way to kill religion. They stripped it of opportunities for social service. They, too, meant that if we would not lose religion[,] we must use religion.

In precisely that fear[,] I am making my appeal to our state and to our nation. It is not enough to say that it is wicked for our state and nation to deny to us loyal and devoted a group as ever

professed its faith of our fathers, the fullest share in the political and economic abundance of this country. It is more than wicked; it is unspeakably stupid; it is slow suicide; it is moral death. I do not fear communism with all its taboos, all of which run counter to our psychology and our tradition.

But I do fear that out of Russian atheism has come a desperately earnest effort at liberty, equality, and fraternity, as these came in the French [R]evolution, when godless men found a way of collaboration and co-operation which Christians somehow had failed to attain. I fear now that Russia has stolen the Christian gospel of brotherhood and stared toward a co-operative society in a way to give us the greatest concern. How many times does the New Testament emphasize that brotherhood, proclaim that we are all members of that society, and urge us to a more fraternal, more equal, and more classless civilization. What a reproach that we have allowed an atheistic nation to take our own technique and put it to work among nearly 200,000,000 people. We shall have to use our brotherhood or lose it; we shall have to be brothers or aliens.

I leave this thought with you. We need some straight thinking here in our South and all over this beloved land. We need men and women who see things as they are, and hate violence; men and women who know truth from mania, who never foolishly seek to separate the spiritual interests of mankind from the social situation in which they live. We are advantaged by being ourselves members of that Christian and democratic body, one of another, not tainted with the altruism of the remote, or touched by the cocksure theories of the unaffected. In short, we know.

It has been a habit of our Negro citizens to hope for such spiritual regeneration of our white friends as would give us a reasonable hope for our share in the blessings of democratic citizenship. The late Governor Thomas W. Bickett, one of the greatest friends that the Negro ever had in this state, has a formula for rectifying wrongs. "Carry your cause to the conscience of the white man," Governor Bickett counseled, and we will have laid our causes upon our white friends' hearts.

I believe that the educated men and women of the South can be of great service as some have already been, by learning in college to conduct original investigations into the conditions existing among all the people here in the South, and fearlessly revealing their discoveries and proposing solutions for the problems so revealed.

This working together, we should shall make our greatest progress by the Negro's keeping in mind that his advancement has been ready and substantial, and that an inch of progress is worth a yard of complaint, and by the white race remembering that in its prosperity and power it cannot afford to forget the claims of weaker and disadvantaged people, for in the rise and fall of one man[,] all the rest have equal claim, or as it was put by the greatest of all teachers: "In as much as ye did it not for the least of these, my brethren, ye did it not for me."

Let us join with J. J. Gillam in his beautiful poem:

#### God Send Us Men

God send us men whose aim will be,  
 Not to define some worn-out creed,  
 But to live out the laws of Christ  
 In every thought, and word and deed.

God send us men alert and quick  
 His holy precepts to translate,  
 Until the laws of Christ become  
 The laws and habits of the State.

God send us men! God send us men!  
 Patient, courageous, strong, and true,  
 With vision clear and mind equipped,  
 His will to learn, His work to do.

God send us men with heart ablaze.  
 All truth to love, all wrong to hate;  
 These are the patriots nations need,  
 These are the bulwarks of the State.

J.J. Gillam