

U.S. House Member Renews Call for Apology for Slavery

Rep. Tony Hall faced sharp resistance in 1997 in a failed attempt to push a similar measure through Congress

In an effort to “begin a process of healing” from the effects of slavery, Rep. Tony Hall, D-Ohio, re-introduced in June a resolution calling for a congressional apology for the legacy of slavery. Hall’s announcement coincided with Washington Juneteenth 2000, a celebration of the day the last slaves in the United States were notified of their freedom on June 19, 1865.

“When you hurt somebody, it’s not easy to say I’m sorry,” Hall said. “But without an apology there can be no healing.”

Hall, a born-again Christian, introduced a similar bill in 1997, but the resolution was met with criticism from blacks and whites alike. Many blacks believed Hall’s apology didn’t solve the problems that slavery created. Some whites couldn’t understand why they needed to repent for someone else’s sin.

“As a country we participated in slavery. We tore families apart,” Hall said. “Our Constitution didn’t even count them as people; we counted them as property. In fact, this Capitol, I understand, was partially built by slaves.”

Hall’s current resolution also calls for a study on

reparations, an addition Hall made after he attended a reconciliation conference in Benin, West Africa. At the conference President Mathieu Kerekou of Benin issued a national apology for the role Africans played in the slave trade to break a curse Kerekou believes is on his land as a result of the trade.

Kerekou and Ghana President Jerry John Rawlings told Hall that one "should not waste an apology."

"I always felt there should be something after an apology," Hall said. "Apologizing is only a step. We do need a second step."

Several black Christian leaders stood with Hall in support of his

resolution, including Barbara Skinner, who with her late husband, Tom Skinner, founded the Skinner Farm Leadership Institute, and Mark Pollard, head of the National Common Ground Coalition, a reconciliation ministry based in Atlanta.

Hall's announcement was purposely scheduled to coincide with Washington Juneteenth 2000. Pollard said Juneteenth is symbolic of "the tragedy of deferred freedom and the triumph of a dignified people." Juneteenth is still relevant, he says, because it stands as a backdrop for concerns that true freedom hasn't been realized.

Though participation was low at the main event held June 17, the celebration convened a who's who of black leaders, including actress T'Keyah Crystal Keymah of *Cosby* and Bishop Eddie L. Long, pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta. Long challenged the crowd not to focus on the

past.

"We celebrate this day because we finally got the word [of our freedom]. But it's amazing, we've been wagging the tail for so long," Long said. "We're always behind. We need to liberate our children. All of our children need to be computer-literate. The computers are not prejudiced. If you can produce, then you will get business."

Some Christian leaders believe that some blacks will stay focused on the past until they are healed from its pain. Reconciliation, they believe, is the key. But the church must lead.

"Reconciliation is not possible except biblically," Barbara Skinner said. "When were blacks and whites ever together? Blacks and whites are only one at the foot of the cross. The people of God could re-write history if we were obedient to God's law."