

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON: A CENTENNIAL
ORATION*

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Editor A. M. E. Church Review

Friends, Citizens:

We have assembled here to-night to celebrate the one hundredth birth of William Lloyd Garrison. Not far from this city he was born. Within the gates of this city, made famous by some of America's most famous men, he spent more than two-thirds of his long and eventful career, enriching its history and adding to the glory of its renown. This place, of all places, is in keeping with the hour. It is most appropriate that we should meet in Faneuil Hall, the cradle of American liberty, a spot hallowed and made sacred by the statesmen, soldiers, orators, scholars, and reformers who have given expression to burning truths and found a hearing within these walls. Of all people it is most fitting that the Negro Americans of Boston should be the ones to take the lead in demonstrating to their fellow-citizens, and to the world, that his high character is cherished with affection, and the priceless value of his unselfish labors

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in their behalf shall forever be guarded as a sacred trust.

Only succeeding generations and centuries can tell the carrying power of a man's life. Some men, whose contemporaries thought their title to enduring fame secure, have not been judged worthy in a later time to have their names recorded among the makers of history. Some men are noted, some are distinguished, some are famous,—only a few are great.

The men whose deeds are born to live in history do not appear more than once or twice in a century. Of the millions of men who toil and strive, the number is not large whose perceptible influence reaches beyond the generation in which they lived. It does not take long to call the roll of honor of any generation, and when this roll is put to the test of the unprejudiced scrutiny of a century, only a very small and select company have sufficient carrying power to reach into a second century. When the roll of the centuries is called, we may mention almost in a single breath the names which belong to the ages. Abraham and Moses stand out clearly against the horizon of thirty centuries. St. Paul, from his Roman prison, in the days of the Cæsars, is still an articulate and authoritative voice; Savonarola, rising from the ashes of his funeral-pyre in the streets of Florence, still pleads for civic righteousness; the sound of Martin Luther's hammer nailing his thesis to the door of his Wittenburg church continues to echo around the world; the battle-cry of Cromwell's Ironsides shouting, "The Lord of Hosts!" still causes the tyrant and the despot

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to tremble upon their thrones; out of the fire and blood of the French Revolution, "Liberty and Equality" survive; Abraham Lincoln comes from the backwoods of Kentucky, and the prairies of Illinois, to receive the approval of all succeeding generations of mankind for his Proclamation of Emancipation; John Brown was hung at Harper's Ferry that his soul might go marching on in the tread of every Northern regiment that fought for the "Union forever;" William Lloyd Garrison, mobbed in the streets of Boston for pleading the cause of the slave, lived to see freedom triumph, and to-night, a century after his birth, his name is cherished, not only in America, but around the world, wherever men aspire to individual liberty and personal freedom.

William Lloyd Garrison was in earnest. He neither temporized nor compromised with the enemies of human freedom. He gave up all those comforts, honors, and rewards which his unusual talents would easily have won for him in behalf of the cause of freedom which he espoused. He stood for righteousness with all the rugged strength of a prophet. Like some Elijah of the Gilead forests, he pleaded with this nation to turn away from the false gods it had enshrined upon the altars of human liberty. Like some John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, he called upon this nation to repent of its sin of human slavery, and to bring forth the fruits of its repentance in immediate emancipation.

William Lloyd Garrison was born in Newburyport, Mass., Dec. 10, 1805. He came of very poor and obscure parentage. His father, who was a seafaring man, early

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abandoned the family for causes supposed to relate to his intemperance. The whole career of Garrison was a struggle against poverty. His educational advantages were limited. He became a printer's apprentice when quite a lad, and learned the printing trade. When he launched his paper, *The Liberator*, which was to deal such destructive blows to slavery, the type was set by his own hands. The motto of *The Liberator* was "Our country is the world, our countrymen mankind."

Garrison did not worship the golden calf. His course could not be changed, nor his opinion influenced by threats of violence or the bribe of gold. Money could not persuade him to open his mouth against the truth, or buy his silence from uncompromising denunciation of the wrong. He put manhood above money, humanity above race, the justice of God above the justices of the Supreme Court, and conscience above the Constitution. Because he took his stand upon New Testament righteousness as taught by Christ, he was regarded as a fanatic in a Christian land. When he declared that "he determined at every hazard to lift up a standard of emancipation in the eyes of the nation, within sight of Bunker Hill and in the birthplace of liberty," he was regarded as a public enemy, in a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to freedom!

Garrison drew his arguments from the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, only to be jeered as a wild enthusiast. He would not retreat a single inch from the straight path of liberty and justice. He refused to purchase peace at the price of freedom. He would not drift

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with the current of the public opinion of his day. His course was up-stream; his battle against the tide. He undertook to create a right public sentiment on the question of freedom, a task as great as it was difficult. Garrison thundered warnings to arouse the public conscience before the lightnings of his righteous wrath and the shafts of his invincible logic wounded the defenders of slavery in all the vulnerable joints of their armor. He declared: "Let Southern oppressors tremble—let their secret abettors tremble; let their Northern apologists tremble; let all the enemies of the persecuted blacks tremble." For such utterances as these his name throughout the nation became one of obloquy and reproach.

He was not bound to the slave by the ties of race, but by the bond of common humanity which he considered a stronger tie. In his struggle for freedom there was no hope of personal gain; he deliberately chose the pathway of financial loss and poverty. There were set before his eyes no prospect of honor, no pathways leading to promotion, no voice of popular approval, save that of his conscience and his God. His friends and neighbors looked upon him as one who brought a stigma upon the fair name of the city in which he lived. The business interests regarded him as an influence which disturbed and injured the relations of commerce and of trade; the Church opposed him; the press denounced him; the State regarded him as an enemy of the established order; the North repudiated him; the South burned him in effigy. Yet, almost single-handed and alone, Garrison continued to fight on, declaring that "his reliance for

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the deliverance of the oppressed universally is upon the nature of man, the inherent wrongfulness of oppression, the power of truth, and the omnipotence of God." After the greatest civil war that ever immersed a nation in a baptism of blood and tears, Garrison, unlike most reformers, lived to see the triumph of the cause for which he fought and every slave not only acknowledged as a free man, but clothed with the dignity and powers of American citizenship. William Lloyd Garrison has passed from us, but the monumental character of his work and the influence of his life shall never perish. While there are wrongs to be righted, despots to be attacked, oppressors to be overthrown, peace to find and advocate, and freedom a voice, the name of William Lloyd Garrison will live.

Those who would honor Garrison and perpetuate his memory and his fame must meet the problems that confront them with the same courage and in the same uncompromising spirit that Garrison met the burning questions of the day. Those who would honor Garrison in one breath, while compromising our manhood and advocating the surrender of our political rights in another, not only dishonor his memory, not only trample the flag of our country with violent and unholy feet, but they spit upon the grave which holds the sacred dust of this chiefest of the apostles of freedom.

The status of the Negro in this country was not settled by emancipation; the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which it was confidently believed would clothe him forever with political influence and power, is more

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bitterly opposed to-day than it was a quarter of a century ago. The place which the Negro is to occupy is still a vital and burning question. The newspaper press and magazines are full of it; literature veils its discussion of the theme under the guise of romance; political campaigns are waged with this question as a paramount issue; it is written into the national platform of great political parties; it tinges legislation; it has invaded the domain of dramatic art, until to-day, it is enacted upon the stage; philanthropy, scholarship, and religion are, each from their point of view, more industriously engaged in its solution than they have been in any previous generation. If the life and labors of Garrison, and the illustrious men and women who stood with him, have a message for the present, we should seek to interpret its meaning and lay the lesson to heart.

The scenes have shifted, but the stage is the same; the leading characters have not changed. We still have with us powerful influences trying to keep the Negro down by unjust and humiliating legislation and degrading treatment; while on the other hand, the Negro and his friends are still contending for the same privileges and opportunities that are freely accorded to other citizens whose skins do not happen to be black. We, of this nation, are slow to learn the lessons taught by history; the passions which feed on prejudice and tyranny can neither be mollified nor checked by subjection, surrender, or compromise. Self-appointed representatives of the Negro, his enemies and his would-be friends, are pointing to many diverse paths, each claiming that the one they

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have marked for his feet is the proper one in which he should walk. There is but one direction in which the Negro should steadfastly look and but one path, in which he should firmly plant his feet—that is, toward the realization of complete manhood and equality, and the full justice that belongs to an American citizen clothed with all of his constitutional power.

This is a crucial hour for the Negro American; men are seeking to-day to fix his industrial, political, and social status under freedom as completely as they did under slavery. As this nation continued unstable, so long as it rested upon the foundation-stones of slavery so will it remain insecure as long as one-eighth of its citizens can be openly shorn of political power, while confessedly they are denied “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We have no animosity against the South or against Southern people. We would see the wounds left by the War of the Rebellion healed; but we would have them healed so effectually that they could not be trodden upon and made to bleed afresh by inhuman barbarities and unjust legislation; we would have the wounds of this nation bound up by the hands of those who are friendly to the patient, so that they might not remain a political running sore. We would have the bitter memories of the war effaced, but they cannot fade while the spirit of slavery walks before the nation in a new guise. We, too, would have a reunited country; but we would have the re-union to include not only white men North and South, but a union so endearing, because so just, as to

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embrace all of our fellow-countrymen, regardless of section or of race.

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It is not a man's right, it is his duty to support and defend his family and his home; he should therefore resist any influence exerted to prevent him from maintaining his dependants in comfort; while he should oppose with his life the invader or despoiler of his home. God had created man with a mind capable of infinite development and growth; it is not, therefore, a man's right, it is his duty to improve his mind and to educate his children; he should not, therefore, submit to conditions which would compel them to grow up in ignorance. Man belongs to society; it is his duty to make his personal contribution of the best that is within him to the common good; he can do this only as he is given opportunity to freely associate with his fellow-man. He should, therefore, seek to overthrow the artificial social barriers which would intervene to separate him from realizing the highest and best there are within him by freedom of association. It is a man's duty to be loyal to his country and his flag, but when his country becomes a land of oppression and his flag an emblem of injustice and wrong, it becomes as much his duty to attack the enemies within the nation as to resist the foreign invader. Tyrants and tyranny everywhere should be attacked and overthrown.

This is a period of transition in the relations of the Negro to this nation. The question which America is trying to answer, and which is must soon definitely settle, is this: *What kind of Negroes do the American people*

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want? That they must have the Negro in some relation is no longer a question of serious debate. The Negro is here 10,000,000 strong, and, for weal or woe, he is here to stay—he is here to remain forever. In the government he is a political factor; in education and in wealth he is leaping forward with giant strides; he counts his taxable property by the millions, his educated men and women by the scores of thousands; in the South he is the backbone of industry; in every phase of American life his presence may be noted; he is also as thoroughly imbued with American principles and ideals as any class of people beneath our flag. When Garrison started his fight for freedom, it was the prevailing sentiment that the Negro could have no place in this country save that of a slave, but he has proven himself to be more valuable as a free man than as a slave. What kind of Negroes do the American people want? Do they want a voteless Negro in a Republic founded upon universal suffrage? Do they want a Negro who shall not be permitted to participate in the government which he must support with his treasure and defend with his blood? Do they want a Negro who shall consent to be set apart as forming a distinct industrial class, permitted to rise no higher than the level of serfs or peasants? Do they want a Negro who shall accept an inferior social position, not as a degradation, but as the just operation of the laws of caste based upon color? Do they want a Negro who will avoid friction between the races by consenting to occupy the place to which white men may choose to assign him? What kind of a Negro do the American people want?

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Do they want a Negro who will accept the doctrine, that however high he may rise in the scale of character, wealth, and education, he may never hope to associate as an equal with white men? Do white men believe that 10,000,000 blacks, after having imbibed the spirit of American institutions, and having exercised the rights of free men for more than a generation, will ever accept a place of permanent inferiority in the Republic? Taught by the Declaration of Independence, sustained by the Constitution of the United States, enlightened by the education of our schools, this nation can no more resist the advancing tread of the hosts of the oncoming blacks than it can bind the stars or halt the resistless motion of the tide.

The answer which the American people may give to the question proposed cannot be final. There is another question of greater importance which must be answered by the Negro, and by the Negro alone: *What kind of an American does the Negro intend to be?* The answer to this question he must seek and find in every field of human activity and endeavor. First, he must answer it by negation. He does not intend to be an alien in the land of his birth, nor an outcast in the home of his fathers. He will not consent to his elimination as a political factor; he will refuse to camp forever on the borders of the industrial world; as an American he will consider that his destiny is united by indissoluble bonds with the destiny of America forever; he will strive less to be a great Negro in this Republic and more to be an influential and useful American. As intelligence is one of the chief safeguards of the Republic, he will educate his children.

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Knowing that a people cannot perish whose morals are above reproach, he will ally himself on the side of the forces of righteousness; having been the object of injustice and wrong, he will be the foe of anarchy and the advocate of the supremacy of law. As an American citizen, he will allow no man to protest his title, either at home or abroad. He will insist more and more, *not only upon voting, but upon being voted for*, to occupy any position within the gift of the nation. As an American whose title to citizenship is without a blemish or flaw, he will resist without compromise every law upon the statute-books which is aimed at his degradation as a human being and humiliation as a citizen. He will be no less ambitious and aspiring than his fellow-countrymen; he will assert himself, not as a Negro, but as a man; he will beat no retreat in the face of his enemies and opposers; his gifted sons and daughters, children of genius who may be born to him, will make their contribution to the progress of humanity on these shores, accepting nothing but the honors and rewards that belong to merit. What kind of an American does the Negro intend to be? He intends to be an American who will never mar the image of God, reproach the dignity of his manhood, or tarnish the fair title of his citizenship, by apologizing to men or angels for associating as an equal, with some other American who does not happen to be black. He will place the love of country above the love of race; he will consider no task too difficult, no sacrifice too great, in his effort to emancipate his country from the un-Christlike feelings of race hatred and the American bondage of

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prejudice. There is nothing that injustice so much respects, that Americans so much admire, and the world so much applauds, as a man who stands erect like a man, has the courage to speak in the tones of a man, and to fearlessly act a man's part.

There are two views of the Negro question now at last clearly defined. One is that the Negro should stoop to conquer; that he should accept in silence the denial of his political rights; that he should not brave the displeasure of white men by protesting when he is segregated in humiliating ways upon the public carriers and in places of public entertainment; that he may educate his children, buy land, and save money, but he must not insist upon his children taking their place in the body politic to which their character and intelligence entitle them; he must not insist on ruling the land which he owns or farms; he must have no voice as to how the money he has accumulated is to be expended through taxation and the various forms of public improvement. There are others who believe that the Negro owes this nation no apology for his presence in the United States; that, being black, he is still no less a man; that he should not yield one syllable of his title to American citizenship; that he should refuse to be assigned to an inferior plane by his fellow-countrymen; though foes conspire against him and powerful friends desert him, he should refuse to abdicate his sovereignty as a citizen, and to lay down his honor as a man.

If Americans become surfeited with wealth, haughty with the boasting pride of race superiority, morally cor-

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rupt in the high places of honor and of trust, enervated through the pursuit of pleasure, or the political bondmen of some strong man plotting to seize the reins of power, the Negro American will continue his steadfast devotion to the flag, and the unyielding assertion of his constitutional rights, that "this government of the people, for the people, and by the people, may not perish from the earth."

It is so marvelous as to be like a miracle of God, to behold the transformation that has taken place in the position of the Negro in this land since William Lloyd Garrison first saw the light a century ago. When the Negro had no voice, Garrison pleaded his cause; to-night the descendants of the slave stand in Faneuil Hall, while from ocean to ocean every foot of American soil is dedicated to freedom. The Negro American has found his voice; he is able to speak for himself; he stands upon this famous platform here and thinks it no presumption to declare that he seeks nothing more, and will be satisfied with nothing less than the full measure of American citizenship!

I feel inspired to-night. The spirits of the champions of freedom hover near. High above the stars, Lincoln and Garrison, Sumner and Phillips, Douglass and Lovejoy, look down to behold their prayers answered, their labors rewarded, and their prophecies fulfilled. They were patriots; the true saviors of a nation that esteemed them not. They have left us a priceless heritage. Is there to be found among us now one who would so dishonor the memory of these sainted dead; one so lost

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to love of country and loyalty to his race, as to offer to sell our birthright for a mess of pottage? When we were slaves, Garrison labored to make us free; when our manhood was denied, he proclaimed it. Shall we in the day of freedom be less loyal to our country and true to ourselves than were the friends who stood for us in our night of woe? Many victories have been won for us; there are still greater victories we must win for ourselves. The proclamation of freedom and the bestowal of citizenship were not the ultimate goal we started out to reach, they were but the beginnings of progress. We, of this generation, must so act our part that, a century hence, our children and our children's children may honor our memory and be inspired to press on as they receive from us untarnished the banner of freedom, of manhood, and of equality among men.

The Negro went aboard the ship of state when she was first launched upon the uncertain waters of our national existence. He booked as through passenger until she should reach "the utmost sea-mark of her farthest sail." When those in command treated him with injustice and brutality, he did not mutiny or rebel; when placed before the mast as a lookout, he did not fall asleep at his post. He has helped to keep her from being wrecked upon the rocks of treachery; he has imperiled his life by standing manfully to his task while she out-rode the fury of a threatening sea; when the pirate-craft of rebellion bore down upon her and sought to place the black flag of disunion at her masthead, he was one of the first to respond when the captain called all hands up on

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deck. If the enemies of liberty should ever again attempt to wreck our ship of state, the Negro American will stand by the guns; he will not desert her when she is sinking, but with the principles of the Declaration of Independence nailed to the masthead, with the flag afloat, he would prefer rather to perish with her than to be numbered among those who deserted her when assailed by an overwhelming foe. If she weathers the storms that beat upon her, outsails the enemies that pursue her, avoids the rocks that threaten her, and anchors at last in the port of her desired haven, black Americans and white Americans, locked together in brotherly embrace, will pledge each other to remain aboard forever on terms of equality, because they shall have learned by experience that neither one of them can be saved, except they thus abide in the ship.

For the present our strivings are not in vain. The injustice that leans upon the arm of oppression for support must fall; truth perverted or suppressed gains in momentum while it waits; generations may perish, but humanity will survive; out of the present conflict of opinion and the differences of race and color that divide, once the tides of immigration have ceased to flow to our shores, this nation will evolve a people who shall be one in purpose, one in spirit, one in destiny—a composite American by the co-mingling of blood.