



Francis James Grimké

Rev. Francis J. Grimke

Change the World through the Gospel

by Victoria McAfee

Francis J. Grimke was born in 1850. He was the son of a rice plantation owner, Henry Grimke, and Nancy Weston, a slave of African and European descent. When Francis was two years old, Henry Grimke died of yellow fever. His will freed Francis, but placed him under the guardianship of his white half-brother, Montague, Henry's oldest son. When Francis turned 10, Montague threatened to enslave him. Francis ran away and joined the Confederate Army as an officer's valet. Months later, Montague imprisoned Francis while he was visiting his family. Montague sold him to another officer even while Francis was recovering from a deathly illness. Francis was freed by the end of the war.

Grimke's white aunts were Quaker abolitionists, Angelina and Sarah Grimke. In 1868, they acknowledged Francis and his brother Archibald as their relatives and gave financial backing for them to attend Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. After graduating as valedictorian of his class, Francis answered God's call to the ministry, continuing his education at Princeton Theological Seminary.

In 1878, Grimke began his pastoral ministry at the 15th Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. He served this same church for 50 years until 1928. His convicting sermons ignited a spiritual revival. Congressmen and Supreme Court justices frequently attended Sunday services to hear Grimke preach.

In 1878, Francis married Charlotte L. Forten of Philadelphia, an abolitionist and teacher. They had one daughter who died in infancy.

Grimke was a brilliant orator and an articulate opponent of racism. He set forth the Gospel and the Bible as the way to change people and society. "I place my hope not on government," he said, "not on political parties but on faith in the power of the religion of Jesus Christ to conquer all prejudices, to break down all walls of separation, and to weld together men of all races in one great brotherhood."

In his sermons, Grimke emphasized honesty, hard work, spiritual principles, and preached against worldly evils. He encouraged his fellow African Americans to put their trust in God as they endured injustices and Jim Crow laws. He believed God would give them the perseverance to overcome victoriously as He did for the Israelites, but they must also fight for their rights: "We must agitate, and agitate, and agitate, and go on agitating until blacks are accorded their full rights.... We are not going to secure our rights in this land without a struggle." While he never used his church or services as a center for radical agitation or political action, Grimke regularly used his sermons to point out injustices he saw in society.

Grimke never understood or condoned segregation in the Christian church and passionately argued for racial justice. He praised evangelists such as D.L. Moody and Billy Sunday for their soul-winning and their stands against moral evils, but also criticized them for not speaking up against the evil of racism. He urged all pastors to speak out against racism.

Grimke was encouraged when Woodrow Wilson was elected president in 1912 with promises to reform government and society. But when reforms did not happen, and black soldiers in World War I fought in segregated units without being allowed to enter officer's training, Grimke wrote a letter accusing Wilson of abandoning his "lofty principles."

Until his death in 1937, Grimke preached and advocated a Christianity that confronted society's wrongs in order to change them. On the 40th anniversary of his graduation from Princeton Seminary, he wrote that through the years "[I] tried to do two things with all my might: to preach the gospel of the grace of God—to get men to see their need of a savior, and to accept Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, the life, [and] to fight race prejudice, because I believe it is utterly un-Christian, and it is doing almost more than anything else to curse our own land and the world at large."



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