

## OF FAITH AND FACT: HAYWOOD N. HILL'S "THIS I BELIEVE"

*Susan West Heimburger*  
*Furman University*

In 1955, residents of Southern states were responding to the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.<sup>1</sup> Most blacks welcomed it, while most whites opposed the command to desegregate. Even those Whites in favor of desegregation did not usually expose their views publicly. However, on January 1, 1955, seven months after the Court's decision, Dr. Haywood N. Hill stood up in his Sunday school class in Atlanta, Georgia in support of desegregation. President of the medical staff at Spalding Pavilion, one of the largest hospitals for African Americans in Atlanta, he became an advocate for racial equality ("Freeing").

Hill was a member and elder of Trinity Presbyterian, a church of about one thousand members. Susan Hill, Haywood Hill's wife, told me in a recent interview that her husband delivered this speech while teaching a class of "young marrieds" about racial tension in the church because he felt compelled to state his support of desegregation. Although his audience consisted of only 20 to 25 people that day, his impromptu, yet eloquent, message titled "This I Believe" received national attention (S. Hill).

As Susan Hill describes it, the speech was "jaw-dropping." The room was silent and little reaction occurred at the moment. It did not take long, however, before many people approached Hill about the impact his speech had on them. After an outpouring of gratitude and support for his bold statement, Hill, at the urging of a friend, submitted his speech to *The Presbyterian Outlook*, "a weekly, independent news and opinion magazine serving the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," where it was soon published.<sup>2</sup> After its publication in a pamphlet of The Southern Regional Council, Hill received correspondence from people in Atlanta, many parts of the United States, and other countries.<sup>3</sup> "This I Believe," initially an impromptu but impassioned speech before a small group of congregants, resonated on a far greater level than anyone might have imagined.

Through a donor's archives, "This I Believe" is currently housed at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, AL, where I discovered its gripping message. Hill, a Christian, a scientist, and a Southerner, shows his audience how his upbringing, wisdom, and life influence his opinions about segregation. He speaks to his immediate audience with a presumed mutual understanding of Christian moral principles and a Southern background. His eloquence and organization demonstrate that he is a learned man who has chosen his words carefully. Yet, he still speaks directly to his audience as if they are an intimate group of friends.

My article examines how "This I Believe" exposes a contradiction in Southern culture to demonstrate the need to end racial discrimination within the United States.<sup>4</sup> Hill's audience that

day consisted of white, upper-middle class to upper class church attendees, most likely all Southerners, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five (S. Hill). Hill takes the risk of stepping on toes and encountering great opposition to his views. Throughout the speech, Hill relies on both scientific fact and Christian faith. Finally, my study illustrates the significance of “This I Believe” in the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement.

### **Context**

The Civil Rights movement is defined not only by the Sixteenth-Street church bombing in Birmingham, the Ku Klux Klan marches, the Montgomery bus boycotts, the Freedom Rides, and the march in Washington D.C., but also by public speeches. Speech was a crucial part of the movement’s history. As Theodore Windt explains, “Civil Rights leaders repeatedly relied on epideictic speeches to stir the conscience of sympathetic white Americans” (164). In the past forty years, many scholars have studied Civil Rights rhetoric, documenting oral histories of many who witnessed and participated in the most crucial moments of the movement. Dr. Martin Luther King’s speeches exemplify the rhetoric of the “moral plea for blacks and whites to join in a cooperative effort to persuade people in power to live up to the ideals of American society—equality for all, freedom for all under law” (Windt 164). Other scholars’ work in the movement includes the award-winning television series *Eyes on the Prize*, Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer’s book, *Voices of Freedom*, documenting hundreds of statements from witnesses, and Windt’s *Presidents and Protesters*, devoted to political rhetoric in the 1960s.

Less attention, however, has been paid to the study of the rhetorical contributions of whites during the Civil Rights movement, especially those addresses given in the southern states before the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Records of a few speeches given by white male liberals during the Civil Rights Movement exist in Josh Gottheimer and Stuart Towns’s books dedicated to speeches during this period. Gottheimer records the contributions of Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson and Senator Robert F. Kennedy in his book *Ripples of Hope*. Towns documents speeches by Ralph McGill, LeRoy Collins, Charles Morgan, Jr., and James McBride Dabbs in *Public Address in the Twentieth Century South* and Clark Foreman in “We Want Our Freedom.” These studies, however, are few. I hope that my examination of “This I Believe” will add a new dimension to this body of work. By studying the text of Hill’s speech, I hope to add to the account of the Civil Rights movement and to highlight the powerful influences Hill’s eloquent words had on both his immediate and larger audience.

### **A Rhetorical Analysis of “This I Believe”**

Not long after the Civil War, reconstruction collapsed, and in the South, pleas for change did not gain much attention until years after the Second World War. Violence and lynching still existed, and many African Americans remained locked into second-class citizenship (Fairclough 206-07). Although legally African Americans had rights equal to whites, the notion of “separate but

equal” governed almost every aspect of their lives (and most of time, circumstances were not equal) well into the mid-twentieth century.

It is in this environment that Hill spoke to his church class about the rights of African Americans. Hill began his Sunday school class that day without intending to speak on equal rights for blacks. His wife recently said that he just felt a sudden need to say “what he truly believed.” Although Hill’s speech is not widely known as monumental to the Civil Rights movement, analysis of the text permits us to see its significance.

Hill’s argument for the end of segregation and racial prejudice is accomplished through his use of anaphora, ethos, organization, and two-part argument. Hill broaches his subject with a sense of urgency. He imparts the importance of ending segregation by charging his audience on their own terms, both Biblically and in response to the comforts of their traditional Southern lives. He states that whites have no right to be prejudiced on the terms he lays before them. He offers his peers opportunities by which they, as part of a church body founded on Christian faith, can make a difference.

## **Anaphora**

Dr. Hill’s rhetorical style is an important factor in “This I Believe,” as every sentence and paragraph is linked by *anaphora*, the “repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines” (Burton). Since every anaphoric statement begins with “I,” Hill draws the audience’s complete focus on the speaker as the subject of rebuke. Following the “I” are words that set each segment apart from the others and characterize the statements made. For example, “I like” characterizes the first section. This is what sets the introduction and the definition of the speaker apart. Here Hill discusses what he likes and enjoys most about his Southern traditions:

I love the South and its people.

I like to have two black arms in my kitchen and two black legs pushing my lawn mower, to help take the drudgery out of living for myself and my family; and I like having them at a very minimum of cost to me.

I like choosing my own friends and associates, and I like eating in pleasant places with well bred people of my own race, class, and status.

I like to worship in a church which is composed of my friends and equals where I will be among my own group, racially, socially, and intellectually.

I like for my children to go to school with their own kind and with other children of their own racial, social, and intellectual level. I like for them to be shielded against poverty, ignorance, dirt, and disease.

I like to practice medicine among intelligent, cooperative people who understand what I am trying to do for them, who are friends as well as patients, and who pay their bills.

I like to live in a neighborhood composed of people of my own group who have pleasant, well kept homes, and where there is no conflict or strife.

I do not want my daughter to marry a Negro.

I like the racial status quo. I am a Southerner.

Significantly, the anaphora breaks at the end of the introduction when he clearly states, “I do not want my daughter to marry a Negro.” This sentence makes a strong, declarative statement. It is obviously something Hill believes in firmly, and it tells a lot about him. He disapproves of interracial marriages, especially as affects his own daughter. This sentence also changes the form and rhythm of the speech.

After his eloquent demonstration of his beliefs and convictions, the tide turns quickly and dramatically in Hill’s speech. Complete reversal of his final statement in the introduction, “I like the racial status quo. I am a Southerner,” occurs in the beginning of the next section. Hill says, “But, I am also a Christian. As a Christian I must believe that God created all men and that all men are equal in the sight of God.” Hill obviously wanted to make an impact on his audience by the stark contrast of what he likes and what he must believe and know. This ironic reversal of the argument, or *peripity*, is crucial to the point made. Again, by displaying his convictions in his introduction, he challenges his audience to consider theirs. The anaphoric statements “I must believe” and “I must know” characterize these two arguments. “I must believe” follows from Hill’s acceptance that all men were equal from their creation because of his Christian *beliefs*: “I must believe that all men are my brothers and are children of God and that I am my brother’s keeper. I must believe that Jesus meant what He said when He commanded me to love my neighbor as myself<sup>6</sup> and when He commanded me to do unto others as I would have them do unto me.”<sup>7</sup> The anaphora “I must believe” describes the ways in which his faith conflicts with his “likes.” The audience is very capable of responding because he speaks to something foundational to their beliefs—faith and Christianity. “I must know” follows from his knowledge of the truth—that there is no racial inferiority—because he is a scientist:

I am also a scientist and have devoted my life to the pursuit of objective truth.

Therefore, I must know that while there are individual differences among people, there is no such thing as racial inferiority. I must know that within every group there are individuals with different potentialities, and that I cannot arbitrarily classify anyone on the basis of his race or color.

Finally, in the conclusion, the anaphoric statement “I must” tells the audience what they must do to insure that segregation is changed. Whenever a comparison of the four sections comes into one, these anaphoric statements bring the sections together. The following sentences illustrate this point: “Therefore, as a Christian and as a scientist I am obligated to act on the basis of what

I know and what I believe and not on the basis of what I like. I must live by conviction and by conscience rather than by preference and by prejudice.” This sentence, in a short conclusion, brings the anaphoric statements together.

## **Ethos**

Throughout “This I Believe,” Hill brings himself to the level of his audience by using himself as an example of one who struggles with prejudice. The integrity of a speaker is extremely important in the acceptance of his/her message. *Ethos* “names the persuasive appeal of one’s character, especially how this character is established by means of the speech or discourse” (Burton). Aristotle defines this as an “artistic” means of persuasion because of the image created by the speaker for the audience (Burton). Hill appeals to his audience by giving himself as an example (building his ethos) and bringing himself to their level:

I am a Southerner. I was bred in the South where my forefathers were slaveholders and Confederate soldiers. I was born and raised in Southern towns with their rigid racial patterns and their typical Southern prejudice. I was away from the South for a few years, but I returned to live in the South by choice and intend to remain here for the rest of my life. I love the South and its people.

Hill describes himself repeatedly by what he “likes” and prefers. He mentions that he likes to have African American “help” purely out of convenience and his desire for a comfortable life for himself and his family. This life, he states, is filled with people of his *own* race and status: in his church, in his children’s school, in his work situation, and in his neighborhood. These are his preferences as well as an ethos shared with his audience, a mutual identity, the way he would live if he did not recognize the ethical contradictions in such a life.

Hill establishes common ground through his self-definition. His audience, because he is just like them, must carefully consider his purpose in speaking against the social norms of segregation and prejudice. Hill bares his soul, in a sense, and makes himself vulnerable to ridicule and rejection, but in so doing, he opens possibilities for persuasion on the common grounds of the Southern way of life. The opening sentence, “I am a Southerner,” is Hill’s basic definition of himself, to which everything else in the introduction is connected.

## **Organization**

Careful planning of words and statements appear throughout the entire speech. Hill’s speech unfolds loosely along the lines of the classical status in the deliberative analysis, characterized by five main sections. They are an introduction, which includes a thesis, *sanabilitas* or “reformability,” *malum* or “ill,” *remedium* or “remedy,” *pretium* or “cost,” and finally, a conclusion (Hultzen).

As I argued earlier, “This I Believe” begins with a long introduction, containing a detailed description of Hill’s life and self-definition. It is also characterized by the extensive anaphora “I like” beginning every paragraph and most sentences. The essential point, “I am a Southerner,” begins and ends the introduction, enclosing it and leaving his audience with this basic definition of himself. With the repetition of this sentence, he asks his audience not to forget his Southern background as he approaches the body of his argument.

The second part of this speech, the body, begins with Hill’s thesis. It states, “As a Christian I must believe that God created all men and that all men are equal in the sight of God.” Hill defends his thesis with a two-fold explanation. Within each part of the explanation is included both a *sanabilitas* and a *malum* segment, loosely following the classical order of deliberative status. *Sanabilitas* is the inherent problem facing the audience and why it exists. *Malum* is an explanation of the difficulties the inherent problem causes.

Finally, Hill presents the *pretium* or “cost” in understanding the reality that there is no racial inferiority. These conclusions are costly since the inherent beliefs, delivered with being a Christian and a scientist, go against the foundations of Southern tradition. At this moment surfaces the basis of the Civil Rights struggle: important beliefs, such as faith and fact, challenge the Southern tradition and way of life. Hill’s statements could easily disrupt his audience’s lives because of the unwanted reality he described. Therefore, they possessed the potential to be “costly” to many because they present a strong argument against the Southern way of life and the comfort that comes with it.

After these two explanations, Hill begins a lengthy description of *remedium* to the complex of tradition and “likes” as opposed to “beliefs” and knowledge of facts. Hill devotes eight paragraphs to methods in which the audience may act. Characterized by the anaphora “I must,” the remedies involve acting against segregation in several areas. Hill designates education, work situation, and segregation in public facilities. The actual method of presentation of these remedies is important. Hill again begins every sentence with “I,” bringing him into the equation and offering himself as an example. Finally, Hill’s speech follows an order with a simple summary of his speech. It includes the different anaphoric statements that symbolize Hill’s different explanations throughout his speech.

## **Faith and Fact**

Thus, it is the two-part argument of faith and of fact through which Hill defends his thesis. Both parts of Hill’s argument are rhetorical syllogisms, the first an argument by circumstance in which the speaker draws his conclusion from his own particular circumstance. Hill’s circumstance is that he believes in God and is a Christian. This is the major premise—“I am a Christian.” The minor premise is what is involved in the act of being a Christian. Hill states the minor premise as follows: “God created all men and all men are equal in the sight of God.” Finally, since Hill is a Christian and Christians believe that all men are creat-

ed equal in the sight of God, then Hill “must believe” that all—including blacks—are created equal.

Hill assumes that his audience will follow this argument with Christianity as its base, even though several churches and denominations had published biblical defenses of slavery and segregation in the past (Huff 81). It would be easy to infer that Hill simply resigns to the obligation to his faith. The speech demonstrates, however, that he felt obligated to follow what he knows is right, as he is willing to get up and make such a controversial declaration against Southern tradition and prejudices.

Hill’s second argument is one by relationship. Hill’s major premise is that he is a scientist, meaning he has “devoted his life to the pursuit of objective truth.” His minor premise is that scientists know “that while there are individual differences among people, there is no such thing as racial inferiority.” Therefore, because he is a scientist and desires to know “objective truth,” he is able to accept the conclusion: since he is a scientist, he “must know” that there is no such thing as racial inferiority. As a prominent cardiologist and President of the Georgia Heart Association at the time, his claim is one of expertise (Bennett). Hill states, therefore, that to treat blacks as racially inferior, one must go against the conviction established in the foundation of Christian belief as well as in basic scientific fact. The audience, therefore, should believe and know that racial inferiority is a myth because Hill, a Christian man of conviction and a scientist who is devoted to the search of truth, knows it is a myth.

The basic rhetorical principle of *rationcinatio*, the action of making statements, asking the reason for such a conclusion, and finally answering oneself, guides Hill’s rhetorical strategy as he turns his argument against everything that defines his life of traditions (Burton). He makes a general statement that “As a Christian I must believe that God created all men and that all men are equal in the sight of God.” Hill follows this statement with both an exploration of a Christian view on men, how they are created equally, and scientific reasoning as to why “there is no such thing as racial inferiority.” Next, Hill follows the strategy of *aetiologia*, a “figure of reasoning by which one attributes a cause for a statement or claim made, often as a simple relative clause of explanation,” by explaining his conclusion and therefore answering his own inquiry as to why he must believe in treating all races equally (Burton). Hill leads his audience from the blatant rebuttal of his earlier “likes,” or preferences, to a logical view of why he believes his thesis is accurate.

Hill defends his proposal for desegregation by a premise both of faith and of fact. Many before him used faith and religion as a basis for supporting slavery. Therefore, Hill may have desired to reach beyond faith arguments and push forward, calling for a big change in the mentality of whites, Christians, and ultimately, Southerners.

## Conclusion

Hill’s groundbreaking speech serves as one of few examples of white rhetoric against segregation during the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, a study of “This I Believe” contributes to

our understanding of the multidimensionality of the Civil Rights Movement. Speeches, protests, and statements against unequal treatment of blacks came from all races, sexes, and social standings during this time period. Hill's speech represents the standpoint of one member of the ruling establishment of that time, a white, upper class, Southerner's perspective. Hill's rhetorical strategy creates a challenge to the white Southerner's way of life by uncovering hypocrisy. Hill hopes to convey a rhetorical vision for his audience of how one must accept truth above tradition on the foundations of the Christian faith as well as facts of science. Hill presents his message in such a way as to uncover this hypocrisy and alert his audience to the ills in treating blacks as racially inferior.

Hill's speech and its place in history teaches us that we have the ability, and even the obligation, to battle injustice. It encourages us to examine our beliefs and to argue for that which we know is right. Examining white rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement is important to understanding the influences whites had on the process of desegregation. The Civil Rights Movement fought for freedom and equality for all people. Hill's speech endures as an eloquent example of white rhetoric during this period.

Thanks to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, AL; Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA; and Susan Hill for their cooperation in my investigation of this speech. Also, thanks to Dr. Sean O'Rourke of the Communication Studies Department for his help and encouragement.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. No. 347-483. Supreme Ct. of the U.S. 17 May 1954.

<sup>2</sup> This is the description given on the web site of *The Presbyterian Outlook* (<http://www.pres-outlook.com/>).

<sup>3</sup> The Southern Regional Council was founded in 1919 as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. Its mission, as stated on the Southern Regional Council web site, is "to promote racial justice, protect democratic rights and broaden civic participation in the Southern United States" (<http://www.southerncouncil.org/about/index.html>). The SRC has been involved in many issues of racial justice, including voting rights and school desegregation.

<sup>4</sup> My analysis focuses on the version of "This I Believe" published in pamphlet form by The Southern Regional Council of Richmond, VA in 1961. It is the best choice for textual analysis because it contains no divisions by headings and subheadings, giving it more of a flow similar to its original delivery. "This I Believe" was first published in *The Presbyterian Outlook*. *The Presbyterian Outlook* took this text from a draft of the speech written by Hill himself, but the draft no longer exists. This version of the text contains many headings and subheadings used to make the speech easier to read, although these did not exist in the original delivery.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Dorgan's "Response of the Main-Line Southern with Protestant Pulpit to Brown v. Board of Education, 1954-1965" is another example. Dorgan provides a useful discussion of the few white clergy who prominently supported Brown.

<sup>6</sup> Reference to *Mark* 12:31: "And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."

<sup>7</sup> Reference to *Matthew* 7:12: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

## Works Cited

Bennett, Lorraine M. "Too Early to Tell on Heart Feat." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 4 Dec. 1967.

Burton, Gideon O. Silva *Rhetoricae*. Scholarly Project. 1996-2003. Brigham Young U. 19 May 2003.

<<http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm>>.

Dorgan, Howard. "Response of the Main-Line Southern With Protestant Pulpit to Brown v. Board of Education, 1954-1965." *A New Diversity in Contemporary Southern Rhetoric*. Ed. Calvin M. Logue and Howard Dorgan.

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987. 15-51.

Fairclough, Adam. *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001. 218-19.



- "Freeing Pavilion from Grady Urged." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 18 Aug. 1960.
- Gottheimer, Joshua, ed. *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003.
- Hampton, Henry, and Steve Fayer, with Sarah Flynn, eds. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. New York, Bantam: 1990.
- Hill, Susan. Telephone interview. 13 May 2003.
- Hill, Haywood. "This I Believe." *The Southern Regional Council*. Atlanta, 1961.
- Huff, Archie Vernon, Jr. Greenville: *The History of the City and County in the South Carolina Piedmont*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1995.
- Hultzen, Lee S. "Status in Deliberative Analysis." *The Rhetorical Idiom: Essays in Rhetoric, Oratory, Language, and Drama Presented to Herbert August Wichelns*. Ed. Donald C. Bryant. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1958. 97-123.
- Towns, W. Stuart, ed. *"We Want Our Freedom": Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement*. Westport: Praeger, 2002.
- Towns, W. Stuart, ed. *Public Address in the Twentieth-Century South: The Evolution of a Region*. Westport: Praeger, 1999.
- Windt, Jr., Theodore Otto. *Presidents and Protesters: Political Rhetoric in the 1960s*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1990.