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FOREWORD BY
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**WELCOMING
JUSTICE**

EXPANDED EDITION

**GOD'S MOVEMENT TOWARD
BELOVED COMMUNITY**

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I

The Unfinished Business of the Civil Rights Movement

CHARLES MARSH



When Martin Luther King Jr. moved to Montgomery, Alabama, in the spring of 1954, civil rights activism was not on his mind. King went to Montgomery because the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church offered a great salary, a comfortable parsonage and a highly educated congregation. The fact that King wasn't looking to become an activist did not come as a disappointment to the congregation. Dexter Avenue had no interest in hiring a racial crusader. Its members had long prided themselves on their access to white elites and their own relative social privilege. Though they shared a common hope for a future without Jim Crow, they were not going to ignite the fires of dissent.

The day after Rosa Parks refused to move from her seat in the

front of the bus, Ralph Abernathy talked King into accepting the leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). But King accepted only after being reassured that the boycott would be over in a day. As president of the MIA, King made clear in his first list of demands, which were presented to National City Buslines, that the protest was *not* about challenging segregation. The NAACP found his demands so weak that they refused to endorse his list.

At that time, King was no fan of nonviolence either. Glenn Smiley, a white staff member visiting Montgomery with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, claimed to have discovered “an arsenal” in his parsonage.¹ “When I was in graduate school,” King had said, “I thought the only way we could solve our problem . . . was an armed revolt.”²

By the end of the second month of the boycott, King had fallen into despair about his leadership and the direction of the boycott. On a gloomy day in January 1956, fearing that he was a complete failure, King offered his resignation as the president of the MIA. It was not accepted, but King’s doubts about his own abilities as a pastor and organizer remained real and unabated.

Later in that month, King returned home to his parsonage around midnight after a long day of organizational meetings. His wife and young daughter were already in bed, and King was eager to join them. But a threatening call—the kind of call he was getting as many as thirty to forty times a day—interrupted his attempt to get some much-needed rest. When he tried to go back to bed, for some reason he could not shake the menacing voice

that kept repeating the hateful words in his head.

King got up, made a pot of coffee and sat down at his kitchen table. With his head buried in his hands, he cried out to God. There in his kitchen in the middle of the night, when he had by his own account come to the end of his strength, King met the living Christ in an experience that would carry him through the remainder of his life. “I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on,” King later recalled. “He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, no never alone.”³

In the stillness of the Alabama night, the voice of Jesus proved more convincing than the threatening voice of the anonymous caller. The voice of Jesus gave him the courage to press through the tumultuous year of 1956 to the victorious end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. More than that, it gave him a vision for ministry that would drive him for the rest of his life.

When the MIA held a weeklong Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change near the end of their boycott, King looked back at their long hard struggle for justice and made clear its ultimate aim. Though a boycott had been necessary to end discrimination in Montgomery, that boycott was not the end. “The end,” King said, “is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community.”⁴

I begin with this remarkable moment from the early days of King’s involvement in the Civil Rights movement because it points us toward the unfinished business of welcoming justice, the theme of this book. King shows us the plot line of the Civil

Rights movement. More than that, he points to the very goal of God's movement in the world. God gathers us into the family of faith not only for our own sake, but also so that we might welcome justice and build beloved communities for the sake of the world. That is the purpose that drives followers of the risen Christ. It is the movement of the Spirit that began at Pentecost and has continued in faithful communities of discipleship throughout every generation. It is the theological vision that we need desperately to reclaim in our time.

A UNIFYING THEOLOGICAL VISION

For more than twenty years now, I have been writing and researching “lived theology,” exploring the way our ideas about God shape our moral convictions and ideas about community, justice and racial reconciliation. This has not been merely an academic exercise for me.

I grew up in the South in the 1960s. In 1967 my family moved from a sleepy town in south Alabama to Laurel, Mississippi, which had earned a reputation as the epicenter of southern terrorism, home to the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and their daily installments of misery and violence. My father was a big-hearted son of the Son with his eyes set on denominational prestige, a young preacher at First Baptist Church and cheerfully indifferent to the racial turmoil he was moving his family right into the middle of. The Civil Rights movement, which I observed from various stages of pubescent awkwardness, was our trial by fire.

My dad's embrace of the reconciling energies of the faith was

at first slow and hesitant, though finally it was undeniable. To his congregation of Citizens Councilors and segregationists, he called into question the church's "closed-door policy" and eventually preached the sermon "Amazing Grace for Every Race."

In graduate school in the 1980s I was trained in philosophical theology and modern Christian thought. In the early 1990s I found myself teaching at a Jesuit college in Baltimore, writing academic monographs and doing all those things you need to do to get tenure. After finishing a book in 1994 on German theologian and Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I was surprised to discover that my thoughts and dreams, and increasingly my journals and notebooks, were filled with memories of my childhood in the Deep South. I had planned to write a book on the doctrine of the Trinity but was having trouble concentrating on this marvelous sacred mystery.

Though my childhood had been very intense and eventful, the South had changed. I had not thought a whole lot about those years while I was in college or graduate school, but now I could think of nothing else. I became suddenly haunted by the memories of those years. Long forgotten fears became once again vivid and alive; memories burst into consciousness like floodwaters.

So in the summer of 1994—thirty years after Freedom Summer of 1964, when students went to the South to help with voter registration for disenfranchised African Americans—I got in my Honda wagon one morning and headed south, with not much more than a full tank of gas, a microcassette recorder and a credit card. This veering off of the straight and narrow road of

my academic training changed my life, and it gently invited me into a different kind of theological education.

I was taught to listen more closely to voices outside the academic guild, to engage the subject with humility but also with courage, to be charitable but not to use a false sense of charity as an excuse for risking the concrete word. I learned that theology needs a place.

The experience also brought home to me, in a particularly intense way, the questions *Why am I a scholar?* and *Who am I serving?* “You gotta serve somebody, right?” St. Bob sang. Only my professional colleagues? Or a wider audience of men and women who seek the flourishing of human community, who seek justice and practice mercy, who serve the poor?

Once in an interview, a kindly minister who had been recalling his years as a staff member of the National Council of Churches and his role in the 1965 March on Selma, paused and said, “You know, your generation is a bunch of wimps.” The least I could do—being a wimp and all—was to ask a few hard questions about my own vocation as a scholar and teacher and somehow try to make the connection back to life.

I was able to see too how the Civil Rights movement that took place in the 1950s and 1960s not only changed unjust laws but also brought about a spiritual awakening, and I am further convinced that this story teaches us even today important lessons about what Dr. Perkins called a holistic faith, about the renewal of the church’s mission to take part in the healing of our broken and violent and blistered world. The Civil Rights movement teaches us that faith

is authentic when it stays close to the ground. And it reminds us of faith's essential affirmations: showing hospitality to strangers and outcasts; affirming the dignity of created life; reclaiming the ideals of love, honesty and truth; embracing the preferential option of nonviolence; and practicing justice and mercy.

Until 1964 the Civil Rights movement in the South was unified and sustained by a vision of "beloved community." King's speech at the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott offers us a key to understanding the spirit of the movement. For many people, the movement moved on, served its basic purposes or collapsed in chaos. But for those who understand civil rights to be part of God's larger movement in the world, the movement continues. This book is about the movement that started with Abraham, captivated America's attention for a moment in the 1950s and 1960s and still goes on today in countless forgotten places on the margins of our society. It's about the God movement that is embodied in the lives of John and Vera Mae Perkins.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to write this book with John Perkins. In so many ways, he embodies the best of what I have learned about a theology that participates in God's peaceable movement in the world. Stories of people like John and Vera Mae offer a wonderful and altogether persuasive response to those who say that Christianity is irrelevant or even harmful to society. We see in their richly lived theology that authentic faith not only heightens our perception of the world; it also provides the resources, the disciplines and the gifts we need to keep our hands to the plow.

My secularist colleagues in the academy are not very convincing on the question of why we ought to love the broken and the outcast and build beloved community. It is all well and good for the brilliant and often helpful theorist Anthony Appiah to advise us to “live with fractured identities; engage in identity’s play . . . recognize contingency, and above all practice irony.”⁵ But what might it mean to settle down after “identity’s play” has run its course and build community among the hopeless and excluded in places where irony is a condescending shrug?

It is unlikely that anyone has ever read Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist* or Derrida’s *Dissemination* and been inspired to open a soup kitchen. It would be wonderful if one did, because the work of justice and mercy needs the energies and talents of compassionate people, believer(s) or not. The Christian should welcome all men and women to kingdom work with a gracious and open heart. And, of course, many people who are not Christians have dedicated time and energy to the pursuit of social justice, from working in soup kitchens to marching for peace—and who knows, maybe even some Nietzscheans and deconstructionists have as well.

Still, my research has shown me that only as long as the Civil Rights movement remained anchored in the church—in the energies, convictions and images of the biblical narrative and the worshipping community—did the movement have a vision. The work of organizing and building communities in distressed and excluded places was about celebrating the common grace of women and men, black and white, the privileged and the poor,

who found themselves together, miraculously, in the South, working in common cause for a more just and human social order. To the extent that the Civil Rights movement lost this vision, it lost its way. But where the vision was sustained—in the hundreds of Christian community development ministries inspired by John and Vera Mae Perkins, among other often overlooked places—God’s movement was nourished and flourishes still. Though frequently forgotten by historians and policymakers, God’s movement is the most powerful source of social change in our society.

When you listen to movement veterans tell their stories, you often hear testimonials that have their home in the church. So, as I see it, what’s lost when you strip away the religious conviction is appreciation of those very sources that energize and sustain compassion—and that continue to inspire redemptive action in the world.

Visit a hospitality house, a tutorial program for low-income children, an AIDS clinic, a hunger relief agency, a Habitat for Humanity site, an administrative building where a student group is sitting in support of a living wage for university workers—you will find there people who are moved to act for others, who live passionately into the depths and breadth of the world’s concrete needs because they see a light shining in the darkness; who believe that transcendence empowers rather than diminishes the love of life, that hope and miracle and mystery animate the protest against cruelty, focus moral energies and heighten discernment of those places in the world that call out for healing and

wholeness. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote of faith as the most complex artwork, and yet the most exquisite. And indeed, if you listen closely, you will hear that the men and women who work day in and day out in inauspicious places to bring healing to our broken and blistered world are people who are carried and strengthened and nourished by deep spiritual waters, who show that vivid realism about the human condition is more honest and clearly drawn against horizons of grace.

THE ROOTS OF OUR PRESENT PROBLEM

A little history can help us understand the gifts that John Perkins offers the church today. In late 1964, despite an impressive slate of civil rights legislation, the vision of beloved community began to fragment in ways that continue to shape and frustrate racial peace in America. The reasons for this fragmentation are complex, disputed and hard to sort out. By the end of that decisive year, though, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had clearly moved away from Christian formulations of nonviolence and beloved community. The “circle of trust” began to forget its lineage as a child of the church. Some members even sought to obliterate this identity.

“We should never again seek to involve the church in actions of SNCC,” Stanley Wise would say in a staff meeting in 1966.⁶ The goal of redeemed society, it was duly noted, remained only the minority position of John Lewis, Charles Sherrod and a few other believers who lacked credibility among the new SNCC vanguard. What had begun with Fannie Lou Hamer’s exuber-

ant affirmation, “I’ve got the light of freedom,” concluded with one young activist’s arrogant claim that Ms. Hamer was “no longer relevant,” no longer at “our level of development.” “We have closed ourselves in a haven and the movement has passed us by,” a dejected staff member said.⁷

Without a spiritual vision, there would be no more summer projects, no more coalitions between local organizers and the white campuses, no more innovations in community action. SNCC began to divide the world between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, and its Manichean perspective brought about a perception in the changing youth movement of the United States as malevolent and beyond redemption. America was ontologically evil. Whiteness was ontologically evil. Most importantly, concrete social reform was not possible.

Removed from its home in the church, the work of building beloved community withered and died. Unanchored from its animating vision of beloved community, the Civil Rights movement lost its spiritual and moral focus. At the same time, it also became confused about organizing strategies. This is a little understood but important point.

Without its unifying spiritual vision, the movement’s goal was no longer to identify particular social and economic ills that could be improved upon through political organizing and social reform. The new goals were rather more elusive: “End racism”; “Change [the] system”; “Develop [the] concept of humanism.” These goals indicated a striking change from the days when voter registration, political organizing and educational reform were the measure of

success. The movement went cosmic, but cosmic ambitions disconnected from local commitments created strategic confusions.

On the eve of the new decade of the 1970s, one journalist wrote: “In America of the late 1960s, with its congested cities and streets, its high crime rates, its guns and knives, its instant communications that pipe reports of civil disturbances into every household, its divisions and strife, its overbearing technology, its mass culture, mass education, and mass government, history seems to cry out for a new tradition that would provide a nonviolent means for change and for expression and protest.”

This was the observation of *New York Times* reporter John Herbers in his essential book, *The Lost Priority: What Happened to the Civil Rights Movement in America?* Herbers continued, “Martin Luther King and his nonviolent armies seemed for a time to have implanted this kind of tradition. Anyone who followed the civil rights movement could not escape the feeling that here was a spirit that could enlighten the country. In those days they talked of saving not only themselves but the soul of America as well, and after some of the great movements they would talk about saving the world with nonviolence. But nonviolence as a national and mystical movement . . . died.”⁸

Other banners flew in the chaotic winds. For a few humorless children of the movement, the emerging culture of sensitivity training illuminated the zones of white redemption. Absolution had never been so easy: a few hours in a seminar room and a declaration of white depravity was a small price to pay for centuries of slavery and genocide. Not only was the new race therapy a lot

easier than organizing in poor communities; it also presupposed the utter naiveté of King's vision and quietly mocked the search for beloved community as the illusion of unanalyzed souls, which had been racist to the core all along.

No one was quite sure where to go from here. Black militants were tired of King's theology of nonviolence. Conservatives had not yet learned to turn the Civil Rights legacy to their political advantage—to replay King's reference to “the content of our character” as a call to politically disengaged pietism. White liberals were feeling betrayal. King's dissent on their war in Vietnam left them aghast at his ingratitude.⁹

In his 1967 address “A Time to Break Silence,” at Riverside Church in New York City, King reaffirmed his “commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ” and proceeded to preach the hard message that the Christian's basic obligation is obedience “to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them.”¹⁰ The soul of America could never be redeemed so long as it trusted the god of its own violent ambitions. “The War in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit,” he prophesied. Although many Americans had stopped listening, King resolved that America's only hope lay in repentance—in a repentance that took the form of willingness to be a servant nation to the poor of the earth. Sadly, King would not live to say much more.

HOPE FOR OUR TIME

More than forty years after King's assassination, his theological vision of redemption, reconciliation and the creation of beloved

community has never been more important. Especially at a time when the language of faith is so often trivialized and politicized in the public square, we need people who help us see what an enfleshed church looks like. This is why the life and witness of John and Vera Mae Perkins are so important.

In February of 1970, John Perkins was beaten nearly to death by police officers in the town of Brandon, Mississippi. While recovering from injuries in a hospital in the black hamlet of Mound Bayou, he received a vision of Jesus suffering on the cross. Perkins emerged from six months of treatment at Tuft Medical Center with a new conviction that Christian love could not rest content until it found space for the neighbor and the enemy. He would make his life a parable of forgiveness and reconciliation: “I might go so far as to say that I experienced a second conversion while I lay in that hospital bed. It was a conversion of love and forgiveness.”¹¹

Perkins began thinking about the unfinished business of the Civil Rights movement. In his talks and seminars, he made frequent mention of “three Rs” of community building: relocation, redistribution and reconciliation. These comprised the trinity of disciplines that became the core of his expanded ministry. While partly descriptive of his work in Mendenhall since 1964, the three Rs also illuminated a way for Christians in forgotten places to go about the unfinished business of the Civil Rights movement.

Relocation. Relocation means incarnational evangelism, the lived expression of the great christological theme that Jesus Christ “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” but took on “the very nature of a servant” (Philippians

2). Perkins showed that the activist and organizer will only cease to patronize the poor when they live in community with them and approach them in a spirit of compassion and with the willingness to serve. “Living involvement,” Perkins said, “turns poor people from statistics into our friends.”¹²

Redistribution. Redistribution means sharing talents and resources with the poor, but it also means observable changes in public policy and voting habits. Public policy would need to be accompanied by a Christ-shaped willingness to offer one’s skills and knowledge as gifts to others. Indeed—quite apart from specific policy recommendations—Perkins imagined the Christian community as a distinctive social order that models the redistribution of wealth in demanding and faithful ways.¹³

Perkins explained, “[There] are heavy social implications to the equality expressed in God’s spiritual activity in creation. Perhaps the heaviest is Christ’s identification with the poor. . . . He calls the poor person his brother: ‘Whatever you did for the humblest of my brothers you did for me’ (Matt. 25:40). *God meant for equality to be expressed in terms of economics.*”¹⁴ The Fall of Adam and Eve resulted in the “pollution and distortion of the equality which he intended,” which is seen nowhere more tragically than in economic brokenness. For this reason, the body of Christ must be marked as an alternative social order that “breaks the cycle of wealth and poverty.”¹⁵

Reconciliation. Reconciliation means embodying the message that “ye are all one in Christ Jesus” and that Christ has “destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” in lived social

experience. The visible demonstration of “a brotherhood of intertwined lives”—even if it was just white and black folk hanging out in the inauspicious community center at Perkins’s Voice of Calvary ministry—subverted the godforsaken spaces of racial segregation unlike any individual act of racial heroism. The hard work of reconciliation is a different matter indeed than emotional catharsis or psychological affirmation. Reconciliation may produce handshakes and hugs and the tears of reunion, but without confrontation and corrective action it is empty, Perkins said.¹⁶

With his three Rs and his incredible energy, Perkins charted a new course for building beloved community in America—one that defied conventional political categories. Leadership must be based in poor communities and eventually rise out of these communities, Perkins insisted, but at the same time, outsiders would be invited to play a critical role in fostering indigenous leadership. In Perkins’s view, civil rights organizations such as SNCC and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) too often racialized and politicized the role of the outsider at the expense of people in poor communities. Patronization is a worry only when outsiders fail to discern the gifts of the poor—their loyalty, fragility, creativity and holiness—and deny the importance of black leadership. When this happens, outsiders are quick to impose their own plans on the poor and slow to see the wisdom in the local story.

Without backing away from his support of integration, equal opportunity, affirmative action and welfare, Perkins further concluded that government programs alone failed to address the deeper sources of hopelessness in black communities. The Civil

Rights movement focused its energies on protesting legal injustice and bringing an end to the reign of white terror—for this was what the times required. But despite its glorious accomplishments, the Civil Rights movement failed to offer a compelling account of the spiritual energies and disciplines required to sustain beloved community. And as a result, so many of its leaders failed to give detail and depth to a holistic gospel. Perkins’s witness helps us see how most of the Civil Rights movement failed to reckon with the truth that discipleship to Jesus Christ is the most enduring source of renewed social practices, care for the poor, costly forgiveness and reparations for slavery.

Christian hope in our time demands that we reckon with this truth.

PROPHET TO THE CHURCH

After 1970, John Perkins began using the term *prophetic* to describe the countercultural practices of the Christian community. He thought hard about the connection between racism in the South and national military spending, nuclear stockpiling, and the political neglect of the poor. And he questioned America as his friend Fannie Lou Hamer had done in her haunting testimony at the 1964 Democratic National Convention: “Is *this* America, the land of the free and the home of the brave?”¹⁷ “We have so organized and incorporated the church into our economic system,” Perkins said, “that not only can’t that system be disciplined, but if one does speak against it he or she is speaking against God and America and must be locked up.”¹⁸

An evangelical Bible teacher, Perkins moved away from the old fundamentalist preoccupation with the fate of the individual soul and began asking questions of a directly social intent: “What is God’s program on earth and how do I fit in?”¹⁹ This is essentially the question of the kingdom. To be a public disciple means finding a place in the world where the kingdom of God is taking shape and getting yourself there.²⁰

Yet Perkins’s new message was not a simple shift to the social gospel or liberation theology. An evangelical emphasis on personal relationship with Jesus remained at the center of his social vision. Perkins’s point was that individual transformation required a disciplined and impassioned commitment to the healing of the social order. In the creation of the world, God fashioned man and woman with the basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, clean air and health. These needs signal a “certain haunting equality,” he said in his classic work *A Quiet Revolution*—a bottom-line description of human dignity which shapes the Christian’s entire outlook on social existence and political community.

Though many conservative supporters of Perkins’s ministry would praise his candid assessment of welfare’s disincentives to work, he made clear as early as the mid-seventies that the gospel involved “redemptive release” from all forms of physical and economic oppression, and that Jesus Christ identified with the poor “to the point of equating himself with the poor person.”²¹ The presumption throughout Perkins’s theology of community is that a people transformed and mobilized by Jesus Christ in their institutional behavior will consistently

support economic policies preferential to the poor, not out of obligation to law but as an expression of public discipleship. John Perkins might be considered the father of the faith-based movement, but the faith-based movement in its historical origins was about reading the Bible as the comprehensive divine plan of human liberation with resources for countercultural action and community building.

Perkins's theses add up to a social agenda more radical than any advanced by the Civil Rights movement. In Perkins's three Rs we find a trinity of disciplines that illuminates the areas where the Civil Rights movement failed to deliver on its most basic promises: solidarity with the poor, minority economic power and racial reconciliation.

Over and above all movements for social justice is God's movement, "cutting through all these movements as their hidden sense and motor, the movement of God's history," the creative origin of any movement toward human liberation and solidarity.²² Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of the "spiritual movement in Montgomery," Fannie Lou Hamer of the "New Kingdom in Mississippi." These are the historical antecedents and theological cousins of what Perkins calls the "quiet revolution."

This movement that Perkins has both inspired and embodied helps us see the hidden theological meaning of the search for beloved community. What is that hidden meaning? Perkins says, "God made His love visible to the world in the person of Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ made His love visible to the world in His unselfish death on the cross for our sins. So it becomes our responsibility as

the Body of Christ to so live out His life on earth as to make the love of God visible in our time. And in our community.”²³

Against the political and cultural captivity of American Christendom, Perkins claims that nothing less than the credibility of the gospel is at stake. Discipleship to Jesus Christ requires us to reevaluate our political preferences, personal desires, prejudices, opinions and economic policies in the light of God’s moral demands. Christians in North America must be known as people with a burden for the poor and oppressed, who “plead the case of the poor, defending the weak, helping the helpless. . . . We must as Christians seek justice by coming up with means of redistributing goods and wealth to those in need.”²⁴

Let me conclude this chapter with a theological affirmation: The habits and practices that sustain beloved community are the gifts of the church. Broken and fallible, the church is nevertheless the one enduring source of forgiveness and reconciliation in our violent world. “The church,” Perkins has said, “is the only institution I know of that offers the basis for a discipline, a commitment, a hope, a truth that is stronger than racism and stronger than any institutional form that clothes racism.”²⁵ Perkins’s witness offers a powerful source of hope for the church that is also great hope for the world. To join with him in the unfinished business of the Civil Rights movement is to give ourselves body and soul to God’s movement in the world today.

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