

WELCOMING JUSTICE



God's Movement
Toward Beloved Community

CHARLES MARSH
& JOHN M. PERKINS

Foreword by PHILIP YANCEY

Resources for Reconciliation

series editors

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Foreword



On November 4, 2008, I boarded a plane for Memphis just before polling places closed in the east. Stepping off the plane three hours later, I turned to the first person I saw, an African American baggage handler. “Do you know who won the election?” He proceeded to give me a complete breakdown of the Electoral College results and which states Barack Obama would need to clinch victory. I got a strong clue as to how much this election meant to a people who have spent far more years oppressed than liberated by democracy.

The next day I toured the National Civil Rights Museum built around the motel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. For several hours I revisited the scenes I had known so well as a teenager coming of age in the South. The brave college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, who sat at a lunch counter

as goons stamped out cigarettes in their hair, squirted mustard and ketchup in their faces, then knocked them off the stools and kicked them while white policemen looked on, laughing. The eerie scenes of weightless children flying through mist in Birmingham, Alabama, propelled by high-powered fire hoses. The Freedom Ride bus burned in Alabama, the corpses unburied in Mississippi.

Looking back, it seems incredible to imagine such ferocity directed against people who were seeking the basic ingredients of human dignity: the right to vote, to eat in restaurants and stay in motels, to attend college (two hundred National Guardsmen escorted James Meredith to his first class at the University of Mississippi, and even so people died in the ensuing riots).

Outside the museum, words from King's final "I have been to the mountaintop" speech are forged in steel, words that caught in my throat on a sunny day mere hours after Obama was elected as our first African American president: "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." The next day King died in a pool of blood on the very spot where I was standing.

Although many Christians have important policy differences with President Obama, this historical moment offers a golden time for reflection and, yes, repentance over our share in the sin of racism that has marked this nation since its founding. It took Southern Baptists 150 years to apologize for their support of slavery, and not until 2008 did Bob Jones University admit their error in barring black students before 1971. Their words

of apology—“We failed to accurately represent the Lord and to fulfill the commandment to love others as ourselves”—apply to many of us, for many conservative Christians vigorously opposed the movement. Can we now respond to a leader’s call for healing and reconciliation?

* * *

I have much in common with Charles Marsh, a Southern Baptist minister’s son growing up in a small southern town in the late sixties who began to question the assumptions of his family and the surrounding racist culture. I have followed with great interest his writings on the topic, such as *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* and *The Last Days: A Son’s Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of a New South*.

And John Perkins played a key role in my own enlightenment on racial issues. In 1974, ten years after the landmark Civil Rights Bill, I accepted his invitation to visit the small town of Mendenhall, just south of Jackson. As a black minister, Perkins had lived through the worst nightmares of the Civil Rights movement. I heard the stories of his own encounters with violent sheriffs and the Ku Klux Klan during the week I spent in Mississippi. I slept on a foldout sofa in the living room of his home, which meant I got very little sleep since Perkins went to bed late and rose long before sunrise to read his Bible and pore over newspapers and journals piled on his kitchen table. I doubt I was the first white guest to integrate Perkins’s home, though he had been the first black guest in many white homes

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during his speaking tours across the country. We had much time to talk, and I learned to appreciate Perkins's graciousness in reaching out to the white community from whom he had received such abuse.

Most local ministers of Perkins's evangelical persuasion stuck to preaching the gospel and left human needs to social workers and government agencies. Perkins accepted the broader mission proclaimed by Jesus:

- to preach the gospel to the poor
- to heal the brokenhearted
- to proclaim liberty to the captives
- and recovery of sight to the blind
- to set at liberty those who are oppressed
- to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord

After one horrific night of torture in jail, Perkins underwent a crisis of faith. "It was time for me to decide if I really did believe what I'd so often professed, that only in the love of Christ, not in power of violence, is there any hope for me or the world. I began to see how hate could destroy me. In the end, I had to agree with Dr. King that God wanted us to return good for evil, not evil for evil. 'Love your enemy,' Jesus said. And I determined to do it. It's a profound, mysterious truth, Jesus' concept of love overpowering hate. I may not see it in my lifetime. But I know it's true. Because on that bed, full of bruises and stitches, God

made it true in me. I got a transfusion of hope.”

Over the next decades, Perkins moved to Los Angeles, where he founded both a local and national organization for community development based on what he had learned in Mendenhall, then returned to Mississippi to lead a movement for racial reconciliation. John Perkins’s son Spencer soon took up the torch, joining with Chris Rice, a young white man, to write and speak on the topic of racial reconciliation. Tragically, Spencer died of heart failure at the age of forty-three.

In some ways, *Welcoming Justice* recapitulates the message proclaimed first by the father and then the son. John Perkins, an elderly African American who has become a kind of guru on the topic of race and hands-on community development, joins with Charles Marsh, a white scholar who directs the Project on Lived Theology at the University of Virginia. Both are committed to the belief that the church can play a central role in racial healing. As Marsh writes, “It is unlikely that anyone has ever read Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist* or Derrida’s *Dissemination* and been inspired to open a soup kitchen. . . . 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 worshiping community—did the movement have a vision.”

Martin Luther King Jr. used to say that the real goal was not to defeat the white man but “to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority. . . . The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the cre-

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ation of the beloved community.” Sadly, that exalted vision got lost in the Black Power movement and in the racial divide that seemed to widen socially even as legal barriers fell. Together, Perkins and Marsh are attempting to restore the vision, both conceptually and practically, showing how theology can indeed be lived out in a multicultural society despite its deeply stained past. I know of no better time to attempt such a project, and no team better equipped to accomplish it.

Philip Yancey