



Marsh and Perkins

An Interview with John Perkins and Charles Marsh

Dr. Marsh, you and Dr. Perkins use the term “beloved community” often in your book. Where does the term come from? What does it mean?

The term “beloved community” comes from Martin Luther King, Jr., from the final days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and an amazing but little known speech he gave on nonviolence and social change. The United States Supreme Court had just a few weeks earlier given the black protesters a victory in their boycott of segregated buses; and on this joyful evening in December of 1956, King paused to reflect on the meaning of the sacrifices and convictions that had carried them through the year. King said that while a boycott had been necessary to challenge unjust laws, it did not represent the goal of the movement. “The end is reconciliation,” he said, “the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community.”

That line just pounded me the first time I read it. For King, the beloved community was tied to the Christian doctrine of the Kingdom of God, and King believed that the movement was about making the Kingdom a reality on earth.

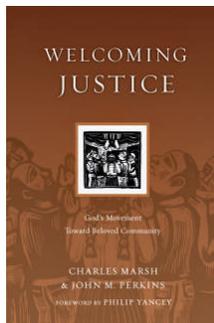
The beloved community gave the civil rights movement its unifying spiritual vision. But after 1964, the movement drifted away from the black church, and the vision splintered and fell into the hands of identity groups whose missions were no larger than concern for their own flourishing. Without a vision, the people perish, the *Proverbs* say. In a real way, race relations in this country remain frozen in this historical moment.

Why is the creation of “beloved community” still important today, 40 years after Dr. King’s death?

Marsh: Forty years after Dr. King’s assassination, the theological vision of redemption, reconciliation and the creation of beloved community has never been more important, or more urgent. And 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 authentic discipleship and who show us the joy of costly grace. This is why I wanted to tell the story of John and Vera Mae Perkins and their remarkable life and witness.

Dr. Perkins, can you briefly explain the “3 Rs” that make up the core of your community development ministry?

The idea of the three R’s is the gospel in a nutshell--the Good News and incarnation of God.



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Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

This became the basis of our ministry in Mendenhall, Mississippi, in 1964. We wanted to get the young people to know Jesus Christ and then help them to go off to college, then bring them back to help the community. You have to raise people up as the first step in stabilizing the community. That is what the church is to do.

I see God's message of incarnation as a necessity for the community, and because of this I came up with the first R, **relocation**. We know that Jesus relocated among us; he was incarnational. In order to develop strong, indigenous leaders we want to help young people to stay in school and come to know Jesus Christ. That's central to my whole philosophy.

The second R is **reconciliation**. What is the purpose of the gospel? Man is alienated from God and because of this we are alienated from each other. The whole redemption message is to reconcile people to God, so we made reconciliation the centerpiece. This has not always been the center of the church, but the gospel is powerful enough to reconcile black and white, Jew and Gentile to Christ. The Good News is that we can live together in peace and that the work of redemption extends across racial and cultural barriers. This is a big message for the world.

The third R is **redistribution**. We knew that would be inflammatory, but we've deified money and land ownership in this world. However God never gives ownership, he gives stewardship for the human good. To some, redistribution sounds like communism. But we are to be stewards of these resources. One day we will have to give an account of our stewardship to God.

Dr. Perkins, what does true Christian discipleship mean?

Christian means "Christ follower." In the Bible, the early disciples behaved as Christ had lived-- as a community that really loved and cared for each other. They could collectively reflect the way Christ lived in the world. Today, we have made discipleship into sort of a one-dimensional pursuit, when it should be a collective pursuit. We have over-individualized Christianity, but our relationship to each other is what really helps us growth. They will know we are Christian by our love our love of one another. Love for others becomes the hallmark of the Christian life. That's the gift that all of us can have. That becomes the gift that we give to others.



Why does the church need to be involved in social justice? Or, why does social justice need the church?

Marsh: Most of my students who have left the faith have left not because they read Kant's critique of the ontological and cosmological arguments for the existence of God, but because they have listened to Christians in hope of hearing beautiful songs and what they have heard instead has been shrill and ugly. But the church does have beautiful songs to sing; and singing songs of justice and mercy is an especially powerful way to proclaim the truth of the Gospel.

What do you see as the problems of the community and why are authentic relationships so important to fixing these issues?

Perkins: I think the greatest problem we are facing is individualism. And it is not being challenged in our churches, it's being accommodated. When we make ourselves the center of our concern we become greedy and addictive. It also makes it easy for us to be exploited by the media. The church has accommodated itself to this individualism. Authentic relationships are Christ's body present in the community. The driving force should be not just me as an individual but that I am bringing my best to the body of Christ, that is the church.

For both of you, What can the church do to help build "beloved community"?

Marsh: The church must set the Gospel eventually free from propaganda, deception and partisan exploitation. Discipleship to Christ cannot be reduced to principles, values and talking points, nor is a matter of being fair and balanced. It's about living passionately into the truth of the Gospel. The church must proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and teach fallible men and women to live into the new citizenship of the Body of Christ.

Perkins: The church needs to come back to the purpose of the gospel. We're trying to fix things without going back to the basic truth. Beloved community is going to look like people loving each other and living in some form of common relationship, much like the early Christians and how they acted in extra-ordinary ways toward each other. The church needs some very strong recasting of our theological vision in society.