

After an election, reconciliation?

In our latest issue we look at the political results but also the perseverance of John Perkins, who grew up in Mississippi, fled from it because of racism—and returned to help his former neighbors, stand up to oppressors, and glorify God

by Marvin Olasky - November 21, 2020



John Perkins (Ronald Pollard)

This is WORLD's 23rd year of choosing a Daniel of the Year, which began as a way to honor someone very different from the power-graspers *Time* used to celebrate as Man of the Year (now Person of the Year). Our honorees have included persecuted Christians in China and Syria, 21 Christians martyred by ISIS on a Libyan beach, and American teen believers forced to consider a question: "What would you say if someone put a gun to your head and asked, 'Do you believe in God?'"

Sometimes Daniels lead quiet lives and find themselves thrust into danger. That's what happened to Andrew Brunson, a peaceful missionary in Turkey suddenly arrested on false charges of espionage and terrorism. Facing death charges in Turkish courts, he proclaimed his innocence and said, "I know why I am here. I am here to suffer in Jesus' name." Thousands mobilized in congregations as far removed as Brazil, Israel, and China to pray for Brunson's freedom. He became our [Daniel of the Year in 2018](#), a month after his dramatic release.

Other Daniels, like our 2004 honoree, Baroness Caroline Cox, fly into danger. She could have stayed in aristocratic drawing rooms but has instead made at least 86 humanitarian trips to the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. That hyphenated region, home to many Christian Armenians, is in the news once again because it's mostly inside Muslim Azerbaijan. Now in her 80s, Cox in September spoke of "widespread concern

that Azerbaijan is committed to war and cruelty rather than the promotion of cross-border dialogue and a truly just settlement.” Mindy Belz in 2004 [described Cox](#) as possessing “guts enough to supply a platoon of Marines.”

I could say the same about John Perkins, who was 39 years old in 1970 when Brandon, Miss., deputy sheriffs and highway patrolmen almost killed him. They stuck a fork up his nose and down his throat. They beat him to the floor, then kept on kicking him in the head, ribs, stomach, and groin. Eventually two-thirds of his stomach had to be removed.

Nevertheless, unlike George Floyd who died at age 46 with a knee on his neck, Perkins has lived to be 90. He has shown his Christian guts by remembering his assailants only as a person touched by Jesus would: “When I saw what hate had done to them, I couldn’t hate back. I could only pity them. I didn’t ever want hate to do to me what it had already done to those men.”

John Perkins is our 2020 Daniel of the Year because police killings, riotous responses, and a bruising presidential campaign have made his refusal to hate more important to civil peace than at any time since the Civil War. We may have a COVID-19 vaccine next year, but a political antidote is still far off. A problem in black and white—and red and blue—is that, as Perkins says, “Both sides are yelling too loudly to listen to one another.”



John Perkins with children from the Perkins Center (Ronald Pollard)

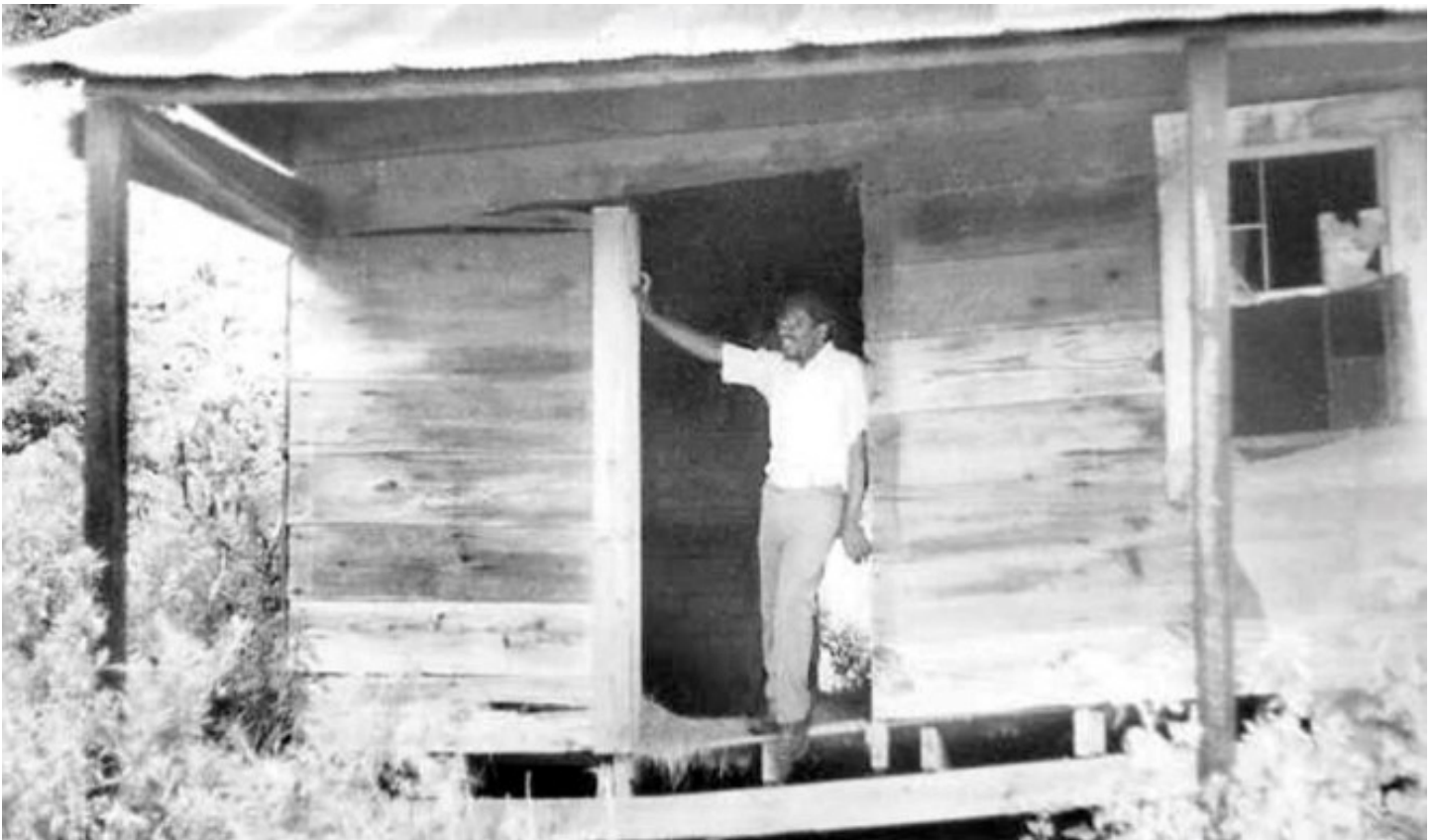
PERKINS, BORN IN MISSISSIPPI IN 1930, had plenty of reason to hate his home state, and white citizens within it: “I was 16 when a white deputy sheriff shot and killed my 25-year-old brother, Clyde, in New Hebron, Mississippi.” Clyde Perkins had recently returned home from fighting in World War II. He and his girlfriend were waiting in a line at the movie theater ticket booth. The deputy sheriff, asserting dictatorial authority, told everyone to shut up. When Clyde and his girlfriend chatted some more, the officer clubbed him over the head. Clyde grabbed the blackjack. The lawman took two steps back, pulled his gun, and fatally shot Clyde twice in the stomach.

Perkins also had reason to hate because of economic exploitation. At age 12 he worked all day hauling hay and expected to be paid \$1.50 or \$2.00, typical pay for a day. Instead, a white man paid him 15 cents: “I took a long look at what had just happened to me and really began thinking about economics.” Perkins escaped to California five years later, in 1947. In 1957, his son Spencer, at age 3 or 4, came home from Bible classes singing “Jesus Loves the Little Children”—red and yellow, black and white—and Perkins began studying how that could be so. He professed faith in Christ.

Perkins in 1960 felt called to move back to Mississippi with his wife, Vera Mae, and their five children. He became a civil rights leader over the next decade, supporting voter registration efforts in 1965 and school desegregation in 1967. In 1969 he led an economic boycott of white-owned stores in Mendenhall, Miss., that welcomed black customers but not black employees—and the same was true in city government and other companies.

Lawless officers in 1970 beat him because of those efforts, but they hated him all the more because he believed what they should have. Perkins writes in *One Blood* (2018), “The most terrible thing about the situation in the South was that so many of the folks who were either violently racist or who participated in discrimination and enslavement through unfair and unlawful business practices called themselves Christians.” They knew deep down they were wrong, and that sometimes made them even more brutal.

Perkins says nonviolence didn’t come to him easily: “I had learned to hate all the white people in Mississippi. I hated their control over our lives. ... If I had not met Jesus I would have died carrying that heavy burden of hate to my grave. But He began to strip it away, layer by layer.” Perkins learned that “nonviolence takes more strength than violence—and it takes more than just human strength. It takes God’s strength working in human beings to produce self-control, gentleness, and other fruit of the Holy Spirit.”



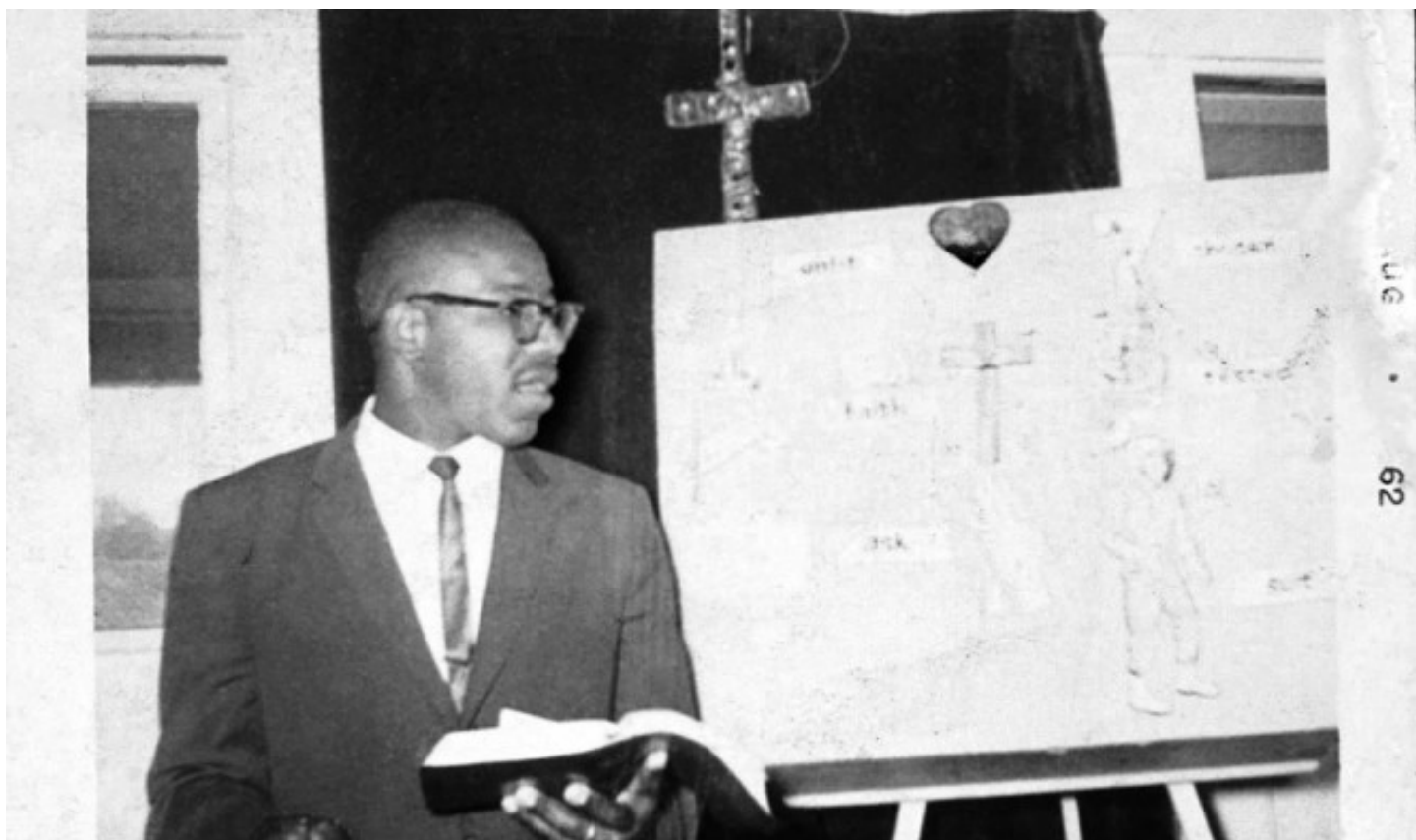
Perkins at his childhood home in Mississippi (Courtesy of the John & Vera Mae Perkins Foundation)

PERKINS SAYS “GOD’S POWER COMES in our weakness and brokenness”—and he was broken early. His mother died when he was 7 months old. His father disappeared. In *Let Justice Roll Down* (1976) Perkins

writes that his father came back four years later: “He arrived late one Friday night. ... He woke me up, and I saw him in the glow of the lamp. ... He hugged me in strong arms. And he talked to me. My daddy! ... The joy of belonging, of being loved, was almost more than my heart could hold.” The next afternoon, “when he said he would be going ... there was only one thing on my mind: I would go with him. ... I saw he was heading toward town and started following him.”

Then came disaster. Daddy Perkins “turned and saw me following. ‘Go back. Go back.’ The way he ordered me back sounded strange, like he was confused somewhat. ... I followed, but at a careful distance behind. ... He came back ... and whupped me with a switch from a tree. ... ‘Please, Daddy! Take me with you. Don’t leave me alone again.’ ... That strange, sad look was still on his face. I reached toward him and wanted to run to him. But I was afraid. He still held that switch in his hand. I could only stand there and cry.”

John “still didn’t turn back. So once more he came back and whupped me a last time. Just then my Auntie came up. ... She took me by the hand and dragged me away. ... I looked back once but Daddy was already gone. And with him went my newfound joy in belonging, in being loved, in being somebody for just a little while. Years would pass before I would know this joy again.” Perkins writes, “That need for relationship was a weight I carried, a need that remained unmet for me much of the rest of my life”—until he realized that God the Father, instead of yelling “Go back,” came running toward him, as in the parable of the prodigal son.



Perkins preaching in the early 1960s (Courtesy of the John & Vera Mae Perkins Foundation)

Suffering led to compassion: “I know what it feels like to be at the low end of the totem pole. I know what it feels like when ‘good’ people look down their noses at you. Something on the inside dies over and over again. I love it that Jesus comes after those kinds of folks. ... *If God Himself loves and wants the outcasts, why don’t we?*” To help the outcasts, Perkins founded Voice of Calvary and Mendenhall Ministries, which developed health clinics, theology classes, a housing cooperative, and thrift stores. During the 1980s Perkins created institutions to help other outcasts: the Harambee Christian Family Center, the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation, and the Christian Community Development Association.

His Christian emphasis on nonviolence and loving enemies is a message America and the world desperately need: “The fruit of the Spirit is gentleness. ... It’s pretty hard to find this quality on display today. Our culture applauds people who are brash and arrogant. The self-promoter gets the most attention and the most encouragement. But God intends for His friends to be marked by gentleness.”

This year especially the question is in the air: Gentleness, sure, but how does that translate into racial reconciliation and socioeconomic change?



Perkins marching in downtown Mendenhall in 1969 (Courtesy of the John & Vera Mae Perkins Foundation)

THE FIRST PART OF PERKINS’ ANSWER sounds surprising: “There is no black race—and there is no white race. So the idea of ‘racial reconciliation’ is a false idea. It’s a lie. It implies that there is more than one race.” We are all members of the human race: “Every human being is 99.9 percent identical in genetic makeup. ... The concept of the black race and the white race originated with the Enemy himself.” Perkins crosses up Satan by insisting: “All people, all kindred, all nations, all tongues. One blood.”

Perkins wants us to talk about “multiethnic” or “Biblical” reconciliation rather than fixating on race. That sounds abstract, but he says “in America it’s pretty safe to say that blacks and whites and the other ethnic groups represented have all sinned against one another. So all parties need to repent, and all parties need to forgive. This is the only way out of the hostility and division we have long accommodated in many different kinds of churches.”

Perkins also uses another R, redistribution, in an uncommon way: Not reparations or government grab, since “America’s current welfare system creates dependency and entitlement.” No, he wants those economically blessed to “help create an alternative system. ... To provide job opportunities and fund nonprofits that can offer training schools for those who have never worked before. This is real redistribution: the people with the most skills and opportunities sharing with those who don’t have them.”

When I saw what hate had done to them, I couldn't hate back. I could only pity them. I didn't ever want hate to do to me what it had already done to those men.

Out of context, Perkins sometimes seems on the political left and sometimes on the political right. He's far from a socialist understanding: "When people have ownership over something, if they help pay for it or build it, they are much more likely to take care of it." He's also far from Ayn Rand's conclusion in *Atlas Shrugged* that we should substitute the dollar sign for the cross. Perkins says "the Church needs to come alongside the business community to provide moral training and familial love," with an emphasis on investing "in a way that has the best eternal return, for the highest dividend we can receive is discipleship that leads to Christian character development."



Perkins teaching in the 1970s (Courtesy of the John & Vera Mae Perkins Foundation)

Perkins sees sin crossing racial lines: "Whites need to take some responsibility for centuries of imperialism and failure to repent, but blacks also need to take some responsibility for the breakdown of our families." He wants "to bring attention to the problem of violence against black people. But what about the epidemic of violence within our own African American community—African Americans killing one another? That too needs to be addressed. We the Church are called to be the light that shines in these dark places."

His birth in 1930 places him closer to the Civil War than to the 21st century, so Perkins brings an awareness of history to current discussions: "The breakup of the family, ... redlining in housing development, and so many other lasting effects of segregation make it so much easier for a black man to rob or hurt an innocent white person without much thought because of the damage that has been done. On the other side, the damage done to white people from centuries of racism makes it easier for them to avoid living in black neighborhoods, fear black people walking the streets, or even commit vicious hate crimes against blacks."



(Ronald Pollard)

PERKINS NOTES HOW CHRIST has healed wounds, but the scars are still evident in the irresponsibility of men who “have let down our women, children, and communities. Fatherlessness is an epidemic today, and my heart is broken for the women, and especially the children, who have been abandoned, so I plead with men to take responsibility and love their families.”

Characteristically, Perkins doesn’t leave anyone off the hook: “Women ask me what they can do to confront this failure in our men and strengthen our families and communities. I tell my sisters that, as hurt and disappointed as they may be, the way to bring our men back is to show them deep love as human beings created by God in His image and with inherent dignity. I understand that this is not an easy thing to do, but God calls us to love the people who have hurt us.”

Perkins has received some admiration in recent years. He may be the person with the lowest ratio of formal education—third grade—to honorary doctorates: 16, from Christian colleges including Belhaven (which did not desegregate until 1967), Covenant, Geneva, and Wheaton. Historian Charles Marsh called Perkins “the most influential African American Christian leader since Dr. King.” But in conversation Perkins emphasizes not how he has made a difference but how Christ has: “If we are going to help others understand who Jesus is, our own lives must reflect His character and love.” Perkins says that’s why we must love political opponents and others: “It is at this precise moment that the watching world gets a glimpse of Him.”

TIMELINE

- 1930 • John Perkins born
- 1946 • Brother Clyde Perkins killed
- 1947 • Moves to California
- 1951 • Marries Vera Mae Buckley
- 1957 • Professes faith in Christ
- 1960 • Moves back to Mississippi

- 1964 • Founds Voice of Calvary in Mendenhall, Miss.
- 1970 • Badly beaten, resolves not to hate
- 1984 • Founds Harambee Christian Family Center in Pasadena, Calif.
- 1989 • Founds Christian Community Development Association
- 1998 • Son, Spencer Perkins, dies
- 2016 • Becomes President Emeritus of the Perkins Foundation



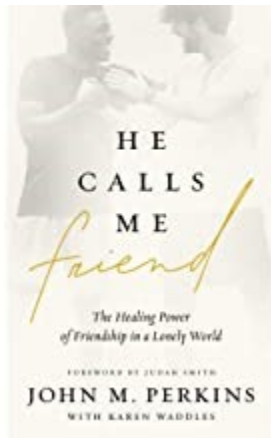
Marvin Olasky is editor in chief of WORLD and dean of World Journalism Institute. He joined WORLD in 1992 and has also been a university professor and provost. He has written more than 20 books, including *Reforming Journalism*.

Marvin resides with his wife, Susan, in Austin, Texas.

Follow him on Twitter [@MarvinOlasky](https://twitter.com/MarvinOlasky).

Source: https://world.wng.org/2020/11/after_an_election_reconciliation

Books by John M. Perkins



He Calls Me Friend: The Healing Power of Friendship in a Lonely World

by John M. Perkins , Judah Smith , Karen Waddles Oct 1, 2019

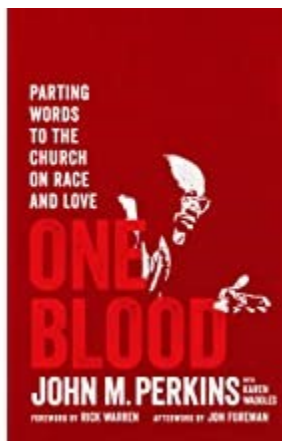
"I believe *He Calls Me Friend* is one of the most important books of our day, from one of the last living prophets of the Civil Rights Era." – Nick Hall, Founder of Pulse movement, author of *Reset: Jesus Changes Everything*

What if friendship is the key to changing the world?

As a follow-up to his landmark work *One Blood*, Dr. John Perkins helps readers take the next step to make justice and love a reality. Sometimes people ask Dr. Perkins how to make a difference in the world, his simple answer is this, "Be friends. First with God. Then with others—every kind of other you can think of. Because the simple, powerful, messy, explosive truth is: the world is changed one friendship at a time."

In *He Calls Me Friend*, Dr. Perkins argues that God is not distant and disconnected. He is the Friend who woos us, died for us, and lives within us. This Friend fills our empty places and shows us how to be friends with others. Along the way, Dr. Perkins shares his life experiences, explores biblical stories, and features profiles from several of his own personal friendships.

In a world that's growing increasingly fragmented, isolated, and lonely, discover the power of friendship from a true expert in the art.



One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love

by [John M. Perkins](#) , [Rick Warren](#) , [Karen Waddles](#) Apr 3, 2018

Dr. Perkins' final manifesto on race, faith, and reconciliation

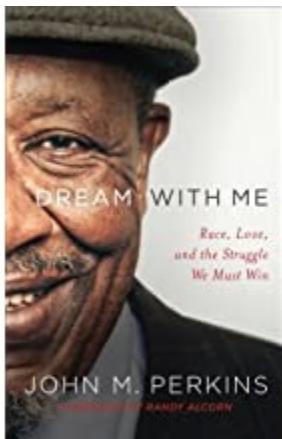
We are living in historic times. Not since the civil rights movement of the 60s has our country been this vigorously engaged in the reconciliation conversation. There is a great opportunity right now for culture to change, to be a more perfect union. However, it cannot be done without the church, because the faith of the people is more powerful than any law government can enact.

The church is the heart and moral compass of a nation. To turn a country away from God, you must sideline the church. To turn a nation to God, the church must turn first. Racism won't end in America until the church is reconciled first. Then—and only then—can it spiritually and morally lead the way.

Dr. John M. Perkins is a leading civil rights activist today. He grew up in a Mississippi sharecropping family, was an early pioneer of the civil rights movement, and has dedicated his life to the cause of racial equality. In this, his crowning work, Dr. Perkins speaks honestly to the church about reconciliation, discipleship, and justice... and what it really takes to live out biblical reconciliation.

He offers a call to repentance to both the white church and the black church. He explains how band-aid approaches of the past won't do. And while applauding these starter efforts, he holds that true reconciliation won't happen until we get more intentional and relational. True friendships must happen, and on every level. This will take the whole church, not just the pastors and staff.

The racial reconciliation of our churches and nation won't be done with big campaigns or through mass media. It will come one loving, sacrificial relationship at a time. The gospel and all that it encompasses has always traveled best relationally. We have much to learn from each other and each have unique poverties that can only be filled by one another. The way forward is to become "wounded healers" who bandage each other up as we discover what the family of God really looks like. Real relationships, sacrificial love between actual people, is the way forward. Nothing less will do.



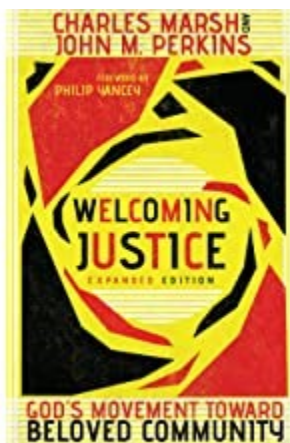
Dream with Me: Race, Love, and the Struggle We Must Win

by [John M. Perkins](#) , [Randy Alcorn](#) Jan 31, 2017

According to recent surveys and studies, race relations in the United States are the worst they've been since the 1990s, and many would argue that life for most minorities has not significantly improved since the civil rights era of the 1960s. For so many, the dream of true equality has dissolved into a reality of prejudice, fear, and violence as a way of life.

John M. Perkins has been there from the beginning. Raised by his sharecropping grandparents, Perkins fled Mississippi in 1947 after his brother was fatally shot by a police officer. He led voter registration efforts in 1964, worked for school desegregation in 1967, and was imprisoned and tortured in 1970. Through it all, he has remained determined to seek justice and reconciliation based in Christ's redemptive work.

"Justice is something that every generation has to strive for," he says. And despite the setbacks of recent years, Perkins finds hope in the young people he has met all across the nation who are hard at work, bringing about reconciliation in God's name and offering acceptance to all. *Dream with Me* is his look back at a life devoted to seeking justice for all God's people, as well as a look forward to what he sees as a potentially historic breakthrough for people of every race.



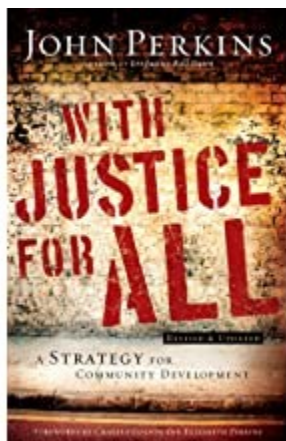
Welcoming Justice: God's Movement Toward Beloved Community

by [Charles Marsh](#) , [John M. Perkins](#) , [Philip Yancey](#) Nov 20, 2018

We have seen progress in recent decades toward Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of beloved community. But this is not only because of the activism and sacrifice of a generation of civil rights leaders. It happened because God was on the move.

Historian and theologian Charles Marsh partners with veteran activist John Perkins to chronicle God's vision for a more equitable and just world. Perkins reflects on his long ministry and identifies key themes and lessons he has learned, and Marsh highlights the legacy of Perkins's work in American society. Together they show how abandoned places are being restored, divisions are being reconciled, and what individuals and communities are doing now to welcome peace and justice.

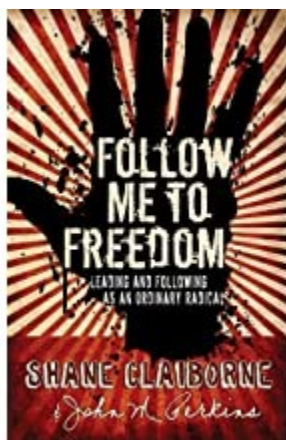
Now updated to reflect on current social realities, this book reveals ongoing lessons for the continuing struggle for a just society. Come, discover your part in the beloved community. There is unfinished work still to do.



With Justice for All: A Strategy for Community Development

by [John M. Perkins](#) , [Charles Colson](#) , [Elizabeth Perkins](#) Aug 25, 2011

"I am persuaded that the Church, as the steward of this gospel, holds the key to justice in our society. Either justice will come through us or it will not come at all." John Perkins's optimistic view of justice becoming a reality starts and ends with the Church. *With Justice for All* is Perkins's invitation to live out the gospel in a way that brings good news to the poor and liberty to the oppressed. This invitation is extended to every racial and ethnic group to be reconciled to one another, to work together to make our land all God wants it to be. And it is a blueprint--a practical strategy for the work of biblical justice in our time. In an age of changing demographics where the need to break the cycle of poverty is staring many of us in the face, Perkins offers hope through practical ministry principles that work. This outstanding resource includes reflection questions for personal or group study as well as interactive sessions for groups to participate in activities together.



Follow Me to Freedom: Leading and Following As an Ordinary Radical

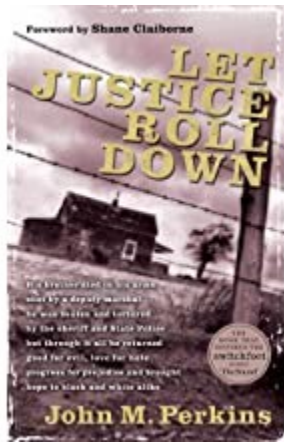
by [Shane Claiborne](#) , [John M. Perkins](#) Sep 15, 2009

Re-imagine Leading and Following in a World Longing for True Justice, Compassion and Freedom

Followers of Christ yearn to see the world changed in compassionate, positive, effective ways. As prophetic voices, Shane Claiborne and John Perkins lead the way in this move to be the hands, feet, and heart of Jesus. One is young, a self-proclaimed reformed redneck who grew up in the hills of Tennessee and now lives in inner city Philadelphia. The other is decades older, an African-American civil rights leader who was almost beaten to death by police in Mississippi, and went on to found a reconciliation movement and counsel three American presidents. Claiborne and Perkins draw on more than a century of combined following and

learning, activism and leading. Together they craft a timely message for ordinary people willing to take radical steps to see real change happen.

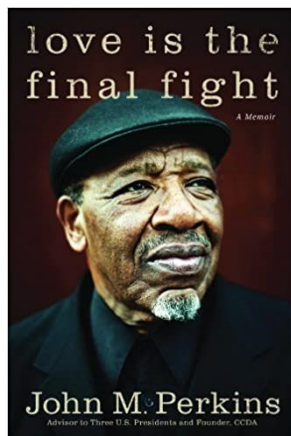
In *Follow Me to Freedom*, Claiborne and Perkins lead the way toward justice for all, unfolding a proven strategy as ancient as the patriarchs of faith and as fresh as the needs of every human heart. Starting with Moses as a model, they re-imagine leading and following in a world desperate for true social justice, compassion, and freedom. They offer practical ways to internalize and live out God's promise of freedom in the twenty-first century. Followers of Christ will not only be inspired but also catalyzed into action, and the world will never be the same.



Let Justice Roll Down

by [John M. Perkins](#) , [Shane Claiborne](#) Dec 6, 2006

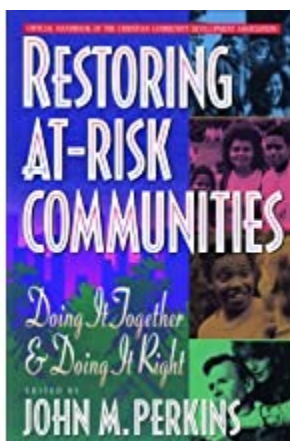
His brother died in his arms, shot by a deputy marshal. He was beaten and tortured by the sheriff and state police. But through it all he returned good for evil, love for hate, progress for prejudice, and brought hope to black and white alike. The story of John Perkins is no ordinary story. Rather, it is a gripping portrayal of what happens when faith thrusts a person into the midst of a struggle against racism, oppression, and injustice. It is about the costs of discipleship--the jailings, the floggings, the despair, the sacrifice. And it is about the transforming work of faith that allowed John to respond to such overwhelming indignities with miraculous compassion, vision, and hope.



Love Is The Final Fight: A Memoir

by [John M. Perkins](#) Jan. 1 2000

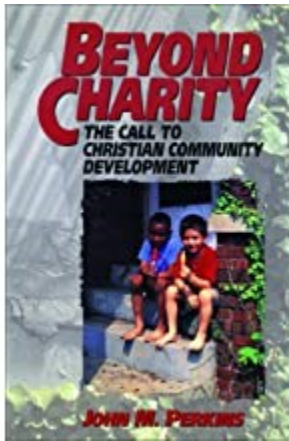
John M. Perkins was born 80 years ago in the deep South. His mother died when he was an infant, his father left when he was a child, he dropped out of school after the third grade to work with his family of bootleggers and he witnessed police shoot and kill his brother. Perkins himself was the object of violent racism, and in 1970 he was severely beaten by police in a Mississippi jail. He had every reason to respond with bitterness. Instead, he forgave and showed love to all. In these memoirs, he revisits the racism which was the crucible of his own life, peers deep into the power of love to overcome evil and speaks of the most unique characters you will ever meet. He stands up in the wake of Katrina, stands by his wife's side through the toughest days of their lives and casts a vision that has the potential to transform every city in America.



Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing It Together and Doing It Right

by [John M. Perkins](#) Feb 1, 1996

This comprehensive handbook to urban ministry introduces and shows how to implement a Christian community development program.



Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development

by [John M. Perkins](#) Jul 1, 1993

A powerful call to action to bring reconciliation and restoration to broken communities.

A compatible book recommended by Marvin Olasky

“Leftist ideologues have twisted the concept of social justice, and some Christians have naively gone along with the distortion. Scott Allen offers an alternative that’s crucial to consider.”

- Marvin Olasky, Editor in chief of WORLD magazine

Why Social Justice is not Biblical Justice

by [Scott David Allen](#) Sep. 1 2020

In recent years, a set of ideas rooted in postmodernism and neo-Marxist critical theory have merged into a comprehensive worldview. Labeled “social justice” by its advocates, it has radically redefined the popular understanding of justice. It purports to value equality and diversity and to champion the cause of the oppressed.

Yet far too many Christians have little knowledge of this ideology, and consequently, don’t see the danger. Many evangelical leaders confuse ideological social justice with biblical justice. Of course, justice is a deeply biblical idea, but this new ideology is far from biblical.

This book aims to replace confusion with clarity by holding up the counterfeit worldview and the Biblical worldview side-by-side, showing how significantly they differ in their core presuppositions. It challenges Christians to not merely denounce the false worldview, but offer a better alternative—the incomparable Biblical worldview, which shapes cultures marked by genuine justice, mercy, forgiveness, social harmony, and human dignity.

