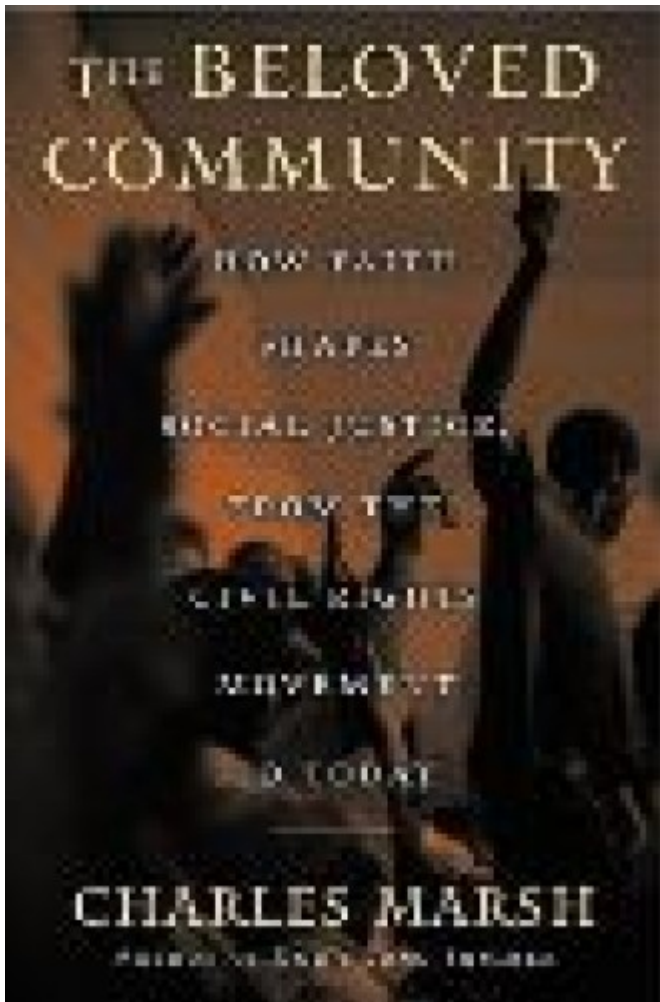


Unfinished business

By [Chris Rice](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today

Charles Marsh
Basic Books

We live in a new racial time in the U.S., and we still lack adequate language to describe it and visions to inspire us. Forty years after the civil rights movement, fresh voices are desperately needed. With *The Beloved Community*, Charles Marsh, professor of religion at the University of Virginia, director of the Project on Lived Theology and author of the acclaimed *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*, makes a profound contribution to help us discern our way forward.

Marsh contends that although the civil rights movement achieved an immense victory of legal equality, its vision of true reconciliation across racial and economic lines—the more radical vision, in Marsh's estimation—was not carried forward into American life. The vision of true reconciliation was to reform everyday practices in the U.S. and to build “beloved community” in which black people and white people, people of privilege and people on the margins would share daily life together—in neighborhoods, in the education of children, in friendship, in worship and in the pursuit of justice together through common, concrete initiatives.

It is only in these local spaces of shared life that Americans can unlearn deeply ingrained habits of economic and racial separation and privilege. Here is where the civil rights movement failed. “While the civil rights movement defeated segregation and forever changed American society,” writes Marsh, “the nation has experienced precious little of repentance, reconciliation, and costly discipleship.”

Although this radical vision has not taken hold in American life generally, Marsh explains, it is alive among Christians who are building interracial communities in marginalized neighborhoods. The daily social disciplines that are required to make these communities viable point to the difficult, daily, local work that is America's unfinished business: fidelity to particular communities and people over time; daily life shared with people whom society has marginalized or excluded; patient suffering with the painful racial residue that emerges when people live in close proximity; undramatic waiting when nothing seems to change; listening and looking to God for visions of hope; taking local responsibility for doing justice in interracial coalitions.

The radical origins of this vision of true reconciliation, contends Marsh, are in the strands of the civil rights movement that have explicit theological roots. The story of those strands, he says, has been overlooked by civil rights scholars.

Marsh begins by reclaiming Martin Luther King's journey from middle-class preacher to prophet decrying an American nightmare. King's was a theological pilgrimage that

cannot be understood apart from visions of the crucified Lord and King's deepening critique of America's materialism, militarism and racism. Marsh's story moves on to the inspired communal life, interracialism and costly witness of Koinonia Farm in Georgia and its founder Clarence Jordan. Next is Bob Moses and the young radicals of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who organized and lived "incarnationally" in poor communities, with blacks and whites, church folk and agnostics joining in a common quest to see justice done.

In Marsh's view, King, Koinonia and SNCC reveal both a radical critique of America's embedded patterns of racial and economic separation and an unyielding commitment to building beloved community amid that brokenness. But these visionaries of true reconciliation, he contends, were skeptical about whether America, with its dominant vision of Christianity, would accept the required change.

The key character in Marsh's narrative about contemporary communities that have embraced their radical vision is black Mississippi pastor and activist John Perkins, who, after being beaten nearly to death by highway patrolmen, founded the interracial Voice of Calvary Church in inner-city Jackson. Marsh finds in the work of Perkins and others a vibrant movement of Christian communities that are profound catalysts for hope in their localities and beyond. Perkins's work led to the establishment of the influential Christian Community Development Association, for example, just as Habitat for Humanity was birthed out of Koinonia.

When Marsh contends that faith shapes social justice in America, he is referring to a particular tradition of Christ-shaped faith that is embodied in the lives of faithful people and communities whose hope and practice cannot be explained apart from their visions about the story of the crucified and risen Lord. He acknowledges that the politics of racial repentance are necessarily local and fragile, painstakingly pursued over time and thus necessarily limited. There is no grand, national solution for America's brokenness because our unfinished business is about a transformation of the everyday.

Marsh says that the Jackson community where Perkins planted Voice of Calvary is still, 30 years later, one of the most violent in the nation. Visit Koinonia and you may think, as I did, "This is it? This little plot of land?" One of Marsh's key stories is about New Song Community Church in Baltimore, which has constructed a \$4.5-million school building and established 200 local families in home ownership in a 15-block area once wracked by violence and drugs. But what about the city's vast stretches

of other broken neighborhoods?

It sounds like too quiet of a revolution, but this is precisely Marsh's point. Before his assassination King had begun to see that there are no broad-based solutions that will bring about repentance and redemption in a nation so profoundly deformed. As the activists of SNCC understood, a radical shift of imagination was required in the direction of the local. SNCC, Voice of Calvary, Koinonia and New Song stand not as solutions, but as gifts to America that tell the truth about the depth of our brokenness, illuminate the difficult transformation of the everyday that is yet to occur and inspire us with the profound hope that the way things are is not the way things have to be.

Ultimately Marsh's is a profound theological argument about the nature of responsibility and social transformation in America's new racial time, as it is seen within the era between the resurrection and the eschaton. In an America still beset by widespread de facto segregation—in marriage, schools and neighborhoods, and especially in churches—the vision of true reconciliation is at once agonizing and inspiring, but if Marsh is right, thousands of restless young Christians are being drawn to just such a vision.