

EXCERPT



Ordinary Heroes of Racial Justice *A History of Christians in Action*

July 29, 2025 | \$30.99, 352 pages, hardcover | 978-1-5140-0998-7

Ordinary Heroes of Racial Justice is a beacon of hope for understanding America's complex racial landscape. Through rigorous historical research and compelling narrative storytelling, this book illuminates the past's intersections of Christianity, race, and place, offering profound insights for today's world. Learn about the brave efforts of heroes like Catherine de Hueck in New York City or John Perkins in Mississippi, whose faith-driven missions transformed communities through justice and reconciliation.

The Gospel and Civil Rights

Reverend John Perkins lay in his own blood on the floor of the Brandon jail in Rankin County. This was Mississippi justice in 1970, six years after Congress prohibited discrimination on the basis of race or color in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. White police officers had tortured John because he was leading "their Negroes" to upset the racial order. John and other Black people in the small town of Mendenhall had boycotted downtown Mendenhall's stores to convince White residents to stop discriminating racially.

Black boycotters wanted what the federal government deemed was theirs as US citizens. They demanded proportional employment in downtown Mendenhall and city services, an end to segregation in the public recreational facilities, the prohibition of "backdoor cafes" that demanded Black patrons go around back to be served, an end to police brutality targeting African Americans, that the Black community's streets be paved, and, among other things, a biracial Human Relations Committee to review complaints concerning jailers, sheriffs, and police (John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution*). For White folks, the problem was not only what Black citizens wanted but that they demanded it.

We cannot underestimate what John was up against. He was resisting a culture that had trained him to not look a White person in the eye and that threatened to kill him if he did. That culture was undergirded by a significant swath of White Christianity, which insisted that the concerns John raised were "political" and not relevant to the faith. Mississippi was different from Harlem, but it exemplified the American South and was, more fundamentally, part of America.

John had chosen this path, though he could have taken an easier one. He had fled Mississippi justice after a White police officer had killed his brother, joining the Great Migration. John had landed in California, where his hard work paid off as he advanced economically. He had married his wife, Vera Mae, and converted to Christianity. Though he attended a Black church, White fundamentalist Christians had nurtured him in the faith. But like Catherine de Heuck, John felt like God was calling him to give up comfort. And so in 1960, the couple moved their family back to Mississippi to evangelize among Black rural folk. They also had to face the wrath—and sometimes indifference—of White Christians.

The boycott emerged almost by accident in the immediate context but reflected the larger patterns of race in Mississippi. Two days before Christmas in 1969, John Perkins and Doug Huemmer had driven Perkins's Volkswagen Bug to the local grocery store in uptown Mendenhall to purchase country cane syrup for Huemmer's parents. Huemmer was going home to California for Christmas and wanted to bring his parents a taste of Mississippi. The pair had noticed signs on the highway saying, "White people unite, defeat Jew/Communist race mixers" (Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down*). White people in Mississippi had a different approach to communism from Catherine de Hueck. Huemmer was in his twenties, a White man living in the Black quarters who served with Perkins at his church and ministry, the Voice of Calvary. At the store, they saw Garland Wilks, a local Black man who had been drinking, get into a conflict with the clerk. Concerned for the man's safety, they ushered him into the car to take him home. But the shopkeeper had already called the police, who stopped the three and arrested the man.

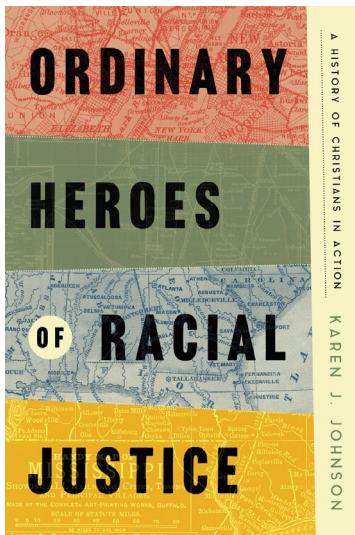
John and Doug drove back down to the Voice of Calvary, which was next door to the Perkins family home. A group of young people, children through college students, were practicing at the church for the Christmas program. Carolyn Albritton, a freshman home from Los Angeles Baptist College, told John that her cousin, Roy Berry, had just been arrested and beaten



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badly at the jail. Many White people were resisting the increasing national and local Black pressure to reform their beloved southern way of life.

The "southern way of life" was both a way of being and a concept. As a way of being, it meant how southerners did things. It referred to the beauty and the hospitality that characterized southern life and was rooted in an agrarian attachment to the land. But it also included racial hierarchy and gave Black children poor educations, cheated Black workers out of equal pay for equal work, and made it all legal by preventing Black people from voting to change the laws. As a phrase, it became more common when it was contested during the civil rights movement.

Perkins had seen the number of police beatings and arrests increase since he had moved back to Mississippi in 1960, responses to the pressure to change. Concerned that police would beat Wilks, John, Doug, and Mrs. Wilks (Wilks's mother) went back uptown to the jail, bringing seventeen young people with them. John thought there was safety in numbers and that "17 people of all ages, including junior high kids, surely would not be jailed. In fact, four of my own kids were in that nervous, noisy group of folk" (*Let Justice Roll Down*).

But when the jailer saw the group and heard their demand to see Wilks and Berry, he became nervous and arrested them all. The jailer knew he had made a mistake in arresting everyone without cause, and so with the support of the highway patrol, the jailer tried to convince the children to leave the jail quietly. They refused to budge. John's wife, Vera Mae Perkins, and others came up to the jail after calling as many supporters as they could find. The Perkins children yelled to their mom that the police had beaten their daddy.

The police had made another mistake. They had put John in a cell with a window, facing the street. Sensing the crowd was becoming agitated, John first encouraged them to remain peaceful. "I warned them," he recalled, "that if we gave in now to anger and violence and hate, we would be just like the whites. And we would be doing the very same things to them that they were doing to us. But they would be the winners and we would be the losers" (*Let Justice Roll Down*). Then John was inspired with an idea that could lead to substantial change in Mendenhall: a selective buying campaign.

The boycott was an effective civil rights strategy of confronting power with power that Blacks had used across the South. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and the Black citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, had shown the effectiveness of the strategy in 1955 and 1956, when they boycotted buses because of mandatory segregation. Finally, in 1956, the city of Montgomery had to bow to a Supreme Court decision that affirmed a local court's decision to outlaw segregation. From the window of his jail cell, Perkins asked the people to institute a boycott.

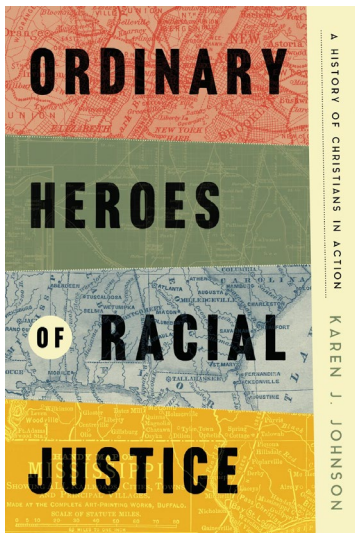
The boycott would be costly to Black residents and White businesses alike. Vera Mae and the others stayed up, making signs and organizing their plan. She was the backbone of their ministry. As much as John was the visionary and entrepreneur, Vera Mae executed the vision. Both were hard workers who had for ten years welcomed volunteers, local young people, traveling evangelists, and, since 1964, civil rights workers in their home, teaching their eight children to practice hospitality as they made room in their two-story white house. Starting Christmas Eve, they would ask local Black citizens to neither make the final payments nor pick up the Christmas gifts they had bought on layaway. In coming weeks, they wanted to keep Black money out of Mendenhall's White business district. They organized carpools to take people south to Magee or north to Jackson to shop. John was released from jail and continued to lead the boycott.



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Reflecting both segregation and the illusion that race relations were fine, the local newspaper, the *Simpson County News*, did not cover the boycott. News coverage during the boycott instead included updates on the development of the segregation academy, which would be available to White parents when the federally mandated integration took effect the following school year. The only evidence of the boycott could be found in the advertisements, reminding people, "Your community is what you make it. Shop in Mendenhall first" (*Simpson County News*, January 8, 1970).

Each Saturday, students from the mostly Black Tougaloo College in Jackson, about forty miles away, came to Mendenhall to support the boycott. The police monitored them, and Voice of Calvary volunteers who shuttled the students back and forth had to pass checkpoints on Highway 13, the road going in and out of the Black part of town. These activists may have suspected that the FBI and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, the state-funded watchdog segregationist agency that used backdoor tactics to maintain segregation, were keeping tabs on them too. Evidence from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission archives shows that the commission and the FBI collaborated to monitor John and his colleagues.

—Adapted from chapter five, "The Gospel and Civil Rights"



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