

## **The Technique of Community<sup>1</sup>**

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This lecture on “The Technique of Community” by Vernon Johns was probably given on or about 1 July 1959 at the Hampton Ministers Conference at Hampton, Virginia.<sup>1</sup> Johns is now best remembered as Martin Luther King’s predecessor as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.<sup>2</sup> In his lifetime, however, he was widely regarded in the Afro-Baptist community as one of its leading preachers.

Born in Prince Edward County, Virginia, in 1892, Johns studied at Boydton Institute, Virginia Union University, Virginia Theological School and College and at Oberlin’s Graduate School of Theology. He was twice the pastor of Court Street Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, twice the pastor of First Baptist Church in Charleston, West Virginia, and once the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. He also served as director of Baptist education centers in New York City and Baltimore, Maryland, and as president of his alma mater, Virginia Theological Seminary and College in Lynchburg.

Among those who knew and loved him, Vernon Johns is remembered less as pastor or academic executive and more as the farmer/preacher who loved both to plow in productive soil and travel the preaching and lecture circuits of the mid-

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<sup>1</sup>Vernon Johns, “The Technique of Community,” ca. 1 July 1959 (Black Church Sermon Collection, Ambrose Swayze Library, Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, NY).

<sup>2</sup>Johns’ life is featured in the stunning opening chapter of Taylor Branch’s Pulitzer Prize winning book, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 1-26; and in Vidmark Entertainment’s made for television movie, “The Road to Freedom: The Vernon Johns’ Story” (1994), which starred James Earl Jones in the title role. After Johns early efforts to improve public schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia, his niece, Barbara Johns, led a student strike against conditions at Farmville’s R. R. Moton High School in 1951. That eventually led to school desegregation in the only county in the United States to close its public schools for years rather than to desegregate them. The recent development of a civil rights museum at the school has also drawn attention to the life and work of Vernon Johns.

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twentieth century South. His sermon, “Transfigured Moments,” was the first sermon by an African American preacher to appear in Joseph Fort Newton’s high regarded Best Sermons, 1926. His last sermon, “The Romance of Death,” preached at Howard University’s Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel in 1965, is also remembered as one of his best.<sup>3</sup>

“The Technique of Community” is the only known surviving text of at least nine lectures which Vernon Johns gave at the Hampton Ministers Conferences. Beyond its indication of his own radical theological position, this lecture is of historical interest because in it Johns is in dialogue with theological positions then being taken by Martin Luther King. King and Johns both spoke of “beloved community,” but Johns seems to prefer to speak of an “ultimate community.” While King was popularizing the common distinction implied by the three Greek words for love, Johns suggests that those distinctions may not be especially helpful. Those who love make it known by their desire to be in

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<sup>3</sup>Johns, “Transfigured Moments,” in Joseph Fort Newton, ed., Best Sermons: 1926 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1926), 333-50. Both it and “The Romance of Death” appear in Samuel Lucius Gandy, ed., Human Possibilities: A Vernon Johns Reader, Including an unfinished MS., sermons, essays, addresses, and a doggerel (Washington, DC: Hoffman Press, 1976), 49-59, 115-25. Gandy’s edition of Vernon Johns’ work is not widely available, however. “The Technique of Community,” from which this lecture is excerpted, is one of many additional Johns texts which I have located and will publish next year in: “Transfigured Moments”: The Essays, Sermons and Speeches of Vernon Johns.

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community with those whom they love, he argues. We have only a fragment of this lecture. It ends as Virginia's traveling farmer/preacher reminds us that community occurs and thrives only where it is grounded in a secure material and technical foundation.

I'm talking today about "The Technique of Community." "The Technique of Community." I tried to say yesterday that the ultimate community, that the ultimate community of all mankind was implied in the soliloquy, the conversation that God had with himself before creation when there was no one else to talk to: "Let us make man." Not men, man. Behind all the diversity which human life takes, God's idea of unity before human life began. "Let us make man." "Let us make man in our image."<sup>1</sup> An essential identity in all men which takes eternal priority over all differences in men. Ah, God's all-seeing eye sweeps the entire human scene, covers the coolies of Asia, the bushmen of Australia, the Hottentots of Africa, the Nordics of Europe, and the dwellers beneath fronded palms and arctic snows. And, all that concerns God in all or any of them is that which is like Himself. Repeat that? I say that the all-seeing eye scans the human scene, every kind of person beneath the stars, and all God is concerned about in any of them is that which is like Himself. [*Huh*] And this doesn't include skin and hair because the eternal God never had either. He merely objectifies His essential nature in those diverse hues and textures to provide discipline for the spirit of man in keeping first things first for the eternal war between flesh and spirit can be identified as the familiar daily choice between soul and circumstance. I'll be depressed if my audience leaves right now. [*Laughter*]

In a thousand different ways, in a thousand different ways, we are compelled throughout life to chose between form and essence, between the permanent and passing, between pleasure and principle, between the soul of Lazarus at his garbage cans or the circumstance of Dives in

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 1:26a.

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purple robes looking down from his balcony.<sup>2</sup> I'm saying throughout life we are compelled to choose between these. The diversity and circumstance of race and class is the best way I can imagine of compelling a man to choose continually between the temporary emoluments of the flesh and the permanent value of the spirit. [*Yes*] The dual nature of man is involved perpetually in that choice. That is the chief meaning of his freedom. His opportunity to choose this or that, principle or pleasure. [*Huh*] That is the meaning, that's what, that is why freedom was given. [*Yes*]

Place on one side of the line pres..., ease that may be won by appropriating for ourselves anything we are fortunate enough to get hold of. I want you to see these lines. As I say, place on one side of the line, place on one side of the line the ease that may be won by appropriating for ourselves anything we are fortunate enough to get hold of, place on that side of the line the physical security which may come from joining the strong and exploiting the weak, place on that side or perpetuate that security in the world by holding the weak and defenseless in a position of inferiority so that he cannot ask for his share of either honor or emolument. Place all of them on one side. Then, place on the other side of the line this sentiment: I want every child of man to be eligible for the good things of life which I want for myself. I want every thing and every value that I prize to be accessible to every manchild beneath these traveling stars. Place the first list of goods on one side of the line and this one sentiment of justice and equality on the other and, for every man standing in the presence of this choice, God says with Emerson: "take either you will, but you can't have both."<sup>3</sup> [*Yes*] You've got to make a choice between one and the other. [*All right*]

Now there are many definitions of and descriptions of love. I've heard about *eros*, and

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<sup>2</sup>Luke 16:19-31.

<sup>3</sup>"You shall have joy, or you shall have power, said God; you shall not have both." William H. Gilman, et al., eds., The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson. 16 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960): 8: 295. Neither Emerson nor his learned editors tell us where God said this.

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*philia*, and *agape* and the rest. I was a bachelor until I was thirty-five and there is one attribute of love that I’m pretty certain of. I always wanted to get close to whatever I loved. [Laughter] I can’t think of a better description in anything that we could say about *eros* or *agape* or *philia*.<sup>4</sup> The test of love I think of back over all my life is that I always wanted to get close to whatever or whoever I loved. I didn’t want much space between us. [Laughter] At thirty-five years old, at thirty-five years old, after a lot of wondering, I found what I was sure was the genuine object and I didn’t rest until I had made all the arrangements to get everything in the world out of the way of close and permanent proximity.<sup>5</sup> [Laughter] That is what love means to me. And, ah, forty times since, I’ve left her but she never did know it because I always came back before she knew I was gone. [Laughter] Now, I want you to apply that to the whole principle of segregation. [All right] Anybody wants to be in the presence of what he loves. [That’s right] Love is joy in personal life. [Yes, yes]

God’s ultimate community, God’s ultimate community, the community that He planned before He made man, God’s ultimate community will be composed of people who want to live in glad proximity with any son of man. Nobody else. [Yes] I say God’s ultimate community, God’s

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<sup>4</sup>The distinctions among the three Greek words for “love” were commonly known among seminary educated Protestant ministers of the period. In 1958, however, Martin Luther King, Jr., began using the three terms to ensure his audience that he was not talking about mere sentimentality. Here, Johns suggests that the Greek distinctions are of limited use in understanding the meaning of love. See: Clayborne Carson, et al., The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): III, 306, 327.

<sup>5</sup>In 1927, after courting several young women, including Alroy Spencer, the daughter of Lynchburg, Virginia, poet Anne Spencer, and Sue Bailey, who would marry Vernon Johns friend, Howard Thurman, Johns married Altona Malinda Trent (1904-1979). The daughter of William Johnson Trent, the fourth president of Livingstone College, and step-sister of William Johnson Trent, Jr., the founding executive director of the United Negro College Fund, Altona Trent Johns was an accomplished woman in her own right. A graduate of Atlanta University, she earned a master’s degree in music education and taught at Bennett College, R. R. Moton High School, Virginia State College, Alabama State College and Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She also published several books and articles. Vernon and Altona Trent Johns were the parents of six children, three boys and three girls.

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ultimate community will be composed of people who want to live in glad proximity with anybody. (*pounding the lectern*) Here is an unforgettable picture of the New Jerusalem:

The light of God was in her streets,  
the gates were open wide  
and all who would might enter there  
and none would be denied.<sup>1</sup> [*All right*]

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<sup>1</sup>This poetic rendering of Revelation 21:23-26 is the third stanza of "The Holy City." The anthem was composed in 1892 by the British lyricist Frederic Edward Weatherly (1848-1929) with music by Michael Maybreak (1844-1913), who published under the name, Stephen Adams.

That's God's idea of human folks. (*Inaudible words*) wants everybody. Yes, sir. "I saw an angel flying through the heavens having an everlasting gospel to preach to all that dwell on the earth, to every tribe and kindred and people and tongue."<sup>1</sup> God likes all sort of folk and He disciplines them in seeing them get together. When Dr. Cadman had spoken to an audience in Brooklyn on the universality of God's love, a man in the audience arose and asked: "Doctor, do you mean to tell me that I have got to be in heaven with Chinese and wops and niggers?" Dr. Cadman answered: "Don't worry, brother, you won't be there."<sup>2</sup> [*Laughter*]

But there are techniques of building this community of the universally beloved.<sup>3</sup> [*Huh*] You can't build, you can't build the immediate, you can't build the enlarging, you can't build the ultimate Christian community on dreams and air. [*Huh*] Only the concrete is real. Before God formed the earth, He brooded over chaos. Order was effected by such techniques as dividing the waters above the earth from the waters under the earth. This morning, when I was writing this speech, my own mind was a riot of ideas. I'm not saying that they were worth anything, but I actually had to hold ten back to give one a chance to get through. [*Laughter*] My, my mind, my mind was, was spinning out dreams and ideas. Then, all of a sudden, the mechanism in an old forty-nine cent ballpoint pen failed and the whole process of trying to relate ideas to paper broke

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<sup>1</sup>Revelation 14:6.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Parks Cadman (1864-1936), Congregational pastor, was born in England. After a dramatic conversion and earning a degree in theology and classics, he migrated to the United States where he served as pastor of Brooklyn's Central Congregational Church from 1900 to 1936. An evangelical and racial liberal, Cadman was president of the Federal Council of Churches from 1924 to 1928, preacher for its radio program on the National Broadcasting Company network from 1928 to 1936 and moderator of the Congregationalists' National Council at the time of his death.

<sup>3</sup>Coined by American philosopher Josiah Royce early in the century, the term "beloved community" was subsequently adopted by a variety of public intellectuals, Catholic and Protestant writers and given its widest currency by Martin Luther King, Jr., between 1956 and 1965. Clearly aware of its usage, Johns seems to prefer "ultimate community." See: Ralph E. Luker, "Kingdom of God and Beloved Community in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr." in Ted Ownby, ed., The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights Era South (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002).

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down jam up. Ah, between me and the colonization of my ideas in a permanent form was a little forty-nine cent mechanism. Ah, we can't build the Kingdom of God if you can't write a whole speech without a [gimp?]. Without some kind of mechanical technique, we aren't going to build the Kingdom of God on dreams and air.

The entire invisible vision of the greatest civilization would never have materialized without the techniques of civilization builders. The genius of the Greek mind has seldom if ever been matched in history. Yet, they gave us few if any of our great, ah, inventions which have transformed our environment and the reason is they provided no craftsmanship to match their faith. Great thinkers, but poor craftsmen, great minds without any con..., any great technique. And the shoddiest nations in the earth have affected their environment in ways that the Greeks never did. The Christian mind must implement itself, may I repeat this? The Christian mind must implement itself to techniques and craftsmanship if the beloved community is to appear.

When I was much younger, I heard a great thinker say the world possesses the machinery of peace, or the world possesses the machinery of war, but the world does not possess the machinery of peace. And he said that we would never have a peaceful world until men had not only the machinery of war but until they had also the machinery of peace. And I like to reflect how much of the machinery of peace has been built since I heard that pronouncement of a genius: Hague tribunals, world courts, Leagues of Nations, United Nations, and now, best of all, an attempt on the part of all nations to bring the material resources of this earth to bear to places of need.

There are two basic errors underlying the defects of our human life and behavior. With the first of these, conventional, ah, Christianity is thoroughly familiar. I'd like you to listen to this. This error is the temptation to equate the whole of life, or at least too much of life, in terms of the material. Now we are all familiar with that as conventional Christians, the mistake of attempting to equate too much of life, if not the whole of life, in terms of material ....