

This is a complete transcript of the oral history interview with **John M. Perkins (CN 367, T1)** for the Billy Graham Center Archives. No spoken words that were recorded are omitted. In a very few cases, the transcribers could not understand what was said, in which case [unclear] was inserted. Also, grunts and verbal hesitations such as “ah” or “um” are usually omitted. Readers of this transcript should remember that this is a transcript of spoken English, which follows a different rhythm and even rule than written English.

. . . Three dots indicate an interruption or break in the train of thought within the sentence of the speaker.

. . . . Four dots indicate what the transcriber believes to be the end of an incomplete sentence.

() Word in parentheses are asides made by the speaker.

[] Words in brackets are comments made by the transcriber.

This transcript was created by Christopher Easley and Paul Ericksen and was completed in June 1991.

Please note: This oral history interview expresses the personal memories and opinions of the interviewee and does not necessarily represent the views or policies of the Billy Graham Center Archives or Wheaton College.



Collection 367, Tape 1. Oral history interview with Dr. John M. Perkins by Paul A. Ericksen on July 19, 1987.

ERICKSEN: This is an oral history interview with Dr. John M. Perkins by Paul Ericksen for the Missionary Sources Collection of Wheaton College. This interview took place at the Voice of Calvary offices in Jackson, Mississippi on Friday, June 19, at nine o'clock a.m. [Recorder stopped and restarted] Well, Dr. Perkins I would like to start by talking a little bit about your...your childhood and growing up years. You talk quite a bit about that in...in your books, but I wonder if you could just describe a little bit your [pauses]... your feelings about growing up in a segregated society [pauses] if you can.

PERKINS: Well, yes. I...I...I guess the [pauses]...I think the first...my first recollection that I can remember clearly was when on a cool day my grandmother and all of her relatives was... they made quilts. And they sewed those quilts in the wintertime when it was cold inside of the house. The...the bedroom, the living room, where they...they...it...it would really... they [static interference] would either have to take down the beds or move the beds over so they...they would put that quilt up there and.... And I remember as a little boy, I went out...my grandmother needed some wood chopped to make a fire. The fire had gone out, but they didn't want to stop. And I went out and...and spent...I must have spent I don't know how much time as a little boy chopping a piece of wood to make her a fire. And that was the proudest moment of my life as I brought it back. I could remember that. But [pauses] I guess what I remember was more or less the...the poverty, the coldness. I can remember cold days. I can remember cold nights. And today I sort of hate cold weather because of [pauses] never being warm and always having a cold in the...in the...as a...as a little boy growing up. That wou...that...I guess that's [pauses]...that was the [pauses]...the thing that I can [pauses] remember the most. And, I guess, [pauses] not having a father, as I look back, at home. Having a father, but him not being at home. But I think, knowing that I had a father [pauses] really was good, because I assumed that that father loved me. I think that was always a part. I...I think that as far as I can remember in my life [pauses], I wanted to be loved. And I think that chopping of the wood, my grandmother saying...seeing the fire had gone out, I was too little to...to really go out and chop wood. There was nobody else to do it. But I went out to do it, and was...felt so proud about it. I can remember it as if it was [pauses]...as it was yesterday. Yeah.

ERICKSEN: When [pauses]...when did you become conscious that there was this black society [static interference] and this white society and you were on the downside.

PERKINS: Well, you...you grew up with that. It...it...it...it...it...it...in...in...we lived on a plantation, and...and we lived...we knew we lived on that plantation. We knew who was the boss. We knew his kids. And so we knew that our aunts worked in the kitchen and cooked. We knew that we went around to the back door for any conversation we had. That was just a revelation that came with you as you grew up and you knew it was there and you knew it was unjust. But [pauses]...so it was...but that's the way the system was. I mean, it was not a...a blanket revelation that I grew up and discovered it sometime, but it was a...I...we knew that...we were warned when we go to town, as a little boy. We didn't live very far from town. Our f...the plantation we lived on was just within sight of the town. And...and we would have to go to town to buy things, you know, to go buy some sody [sic], or buy some salt, or buy the basic thing that you would buy. And we was told how

to...how to behave. I remember one day, we [?] was a little boy [pauses]. A little white boy had a BB gun. And [pauses]...and he was going along, and he was just calling us niggers. That was...that was always a bad word. That was always an inflammatory word for a white person to say, although they said it all the time. You know, they said it all the time. It became a...a part of them like cursing, but since we were so low on this totem pole that they would say it behind your back and in your face, all the time. This little boy [pauses] (a...a little boy was about our age, maybe a year or so older, but about our age) had his little BB gun. And my cousin and I, Jimmy.... And he [pauses] aimed that BB gun at us and was shooting us with it, not up in the eye or nowhere, but at...at the body. And that was a [pauses]...that was an awful thing because number one, the BB gun hurt, and the...and the other thing: in the first [pauses] shot of it, you wouldn't know how much it was going to hurt. And [pauses]...and we [pauses]...we really wanted to [pauses]...to get him and tear him apart. But we...we felt [pauses]...he was...he was on his yard, this big brick house, and was on his yard. And...and stuff like that really bring the privilege home to you. I mean, it, you know...that...that...that...those are the kind of things that...that I can...I can.... I also can remember [pauses] seeing [pauses] old black men when [pauses] a...a white lady would be coming down the streets, and there was plenty of street...place for him to walk, but he would step off the curb to let her go by. And I could not understand that as a little boy, why somebody would [pauses]...why they would do that. And I guess the other thing would be is...is when a white person would come and talk to your uncles or someone, an older black person, that black person would start saying, "Yes sir, yes sir," even before they knew what the person was going to say. You know, you...you...you... you...you...you...you would [pauses] watch that and when they would come out of the...when they would, you know like [pauses]...when a white person would come up and they would hear...like somebody would say, "Well, Mr. Ben is outside to see you," this black man would come out and he would start...be saying, "Yes sir, Mr. [pauses]...Mr. Ben, yes sir, Mr. Ben." And we as little kids used to [pauses] look at that, you know. And I guess in a way [pauses]... On the other hand, our folks was...was bootleggers and gamblers and we was not the law abiding citizens like the other...(well, I...we didn't know anything about the other people that much), but we were not the law abiding citiz...citizens. And I guess that's what confused us a little bit as kids. Why our ad...on one hand, our old people would be so submissive, and then on the other hand, we were doing all these things under the table [pauses], and...and was doing them very well. That's something that we couldn't...that... that we kids could not understand. Which meant that...I think early in life, I think most of my cousins as we grew up, we began to look at [pauses] the...the society as being.... Because those same white folks, who [pauses]...who my uncles and things would honor so much, we was really in terms, exploiting them in selling them whiskey at the...at the exalted price that we was selling it for. But they didn't know it. The markup on whiskey, you were selling it, could be [pauses].... I remember we...we...we would buy whiskey for [pauses], I remember, dollar and a half a gallon [pauses], and...and we would make sixteen and seventeen dollars on the gallon in...in...in...in...in the way we retailed it. And...and it...it in always right away, as a little...even as a little boy you recognized the fact that you was really exploiting [pauses] people. So I think it...it...it made me look at [pauses] white people and black people [pauses] as people very easy [pauses] to be exploited. And I...and I guess one of my [pauses]...I...I guess [pauses]...and I guess somewhere along the line I didn't like that. I didn't like the...the easiness [pauses] with...with how you could exploit people, very sensible people. Because, see, everybody bought our whiskey. The...the...from the preachers to the...the top business people. They...but, you know, Mississippi was a dry state, and we was a main...one of the main suppliers in...in the part of



the country that we lived in. And so we supplied whiskey for everybody. The bankers and everybody would come [pauses] to buy whiskey from us. And [pauses] I guess that...that was a...that was the thing that [pauses]... that...that stuck with me [pauses] in life growing up.

ERICKSEN: Were [pauses]...were any of these things...things that you discussed in your family as you were growing up or...?

PERKINS: No. You didn't dis...you...we discussed them probably with.... I grew up with cousins, see [pauses], a lot of cousins in my.... My aunts would get married and have kids and divorce, separate. Like our case, our mother died and father was gone away. And so the kids we grew up with...I grew up with cousins. My...my cousins, Rosalie, Willie Mae, and Jimmy and Tommy and all those guys. We grew up as cousins. But we was close as brothers, you know. We are very close together as...as brothers. We would discuss stuff like that [pauses]. And [pauses] I think Jimmy and I was...Jimmy and I and Junior was close together, and we was a...we was a...we rebelled against both our [pauses]...not so much our parents.... I think inwardly we rebelled against, as I said, that exploitation of how we exploited people and why we would exploit people. I think we rebelled against that. We also rebelled against other people that trying to exploit us. And we'd think that was the most difficult thing. I mean that was the hardest thing. I think people who try to take advantage of us was met with strong resistance from...from us. [Pauses, static interference] I remember that Jimmy and I went on a strike [laughs]. I m...'member two times as a...as a...as a...you know, we didn't know anything about unions. But I remember one time we [static interference] was cutting paper wood for a guy, and we realized what he was getting for the paper wood and what we was getting for cutting it, and that [static interference]...and we demanded...in fact, we tried to demand more and he acta [sic] fired us [laughs]. He acta [sic] fired us. And...and...and... and...but we...we did it. Another time was that we was working [pauses], Jimmy and I was working for this man, helping him with his sugar cane, help getting in his sugar cane. That was a...that would take a couple of weeks to do, to both strip the sugar cane and cut it and then process it. It was a big...it was one of these kind of...well, like...like on the [static interference] farm, everything you do on the farm, you have to do quickly because of the...the season aspect of farming, of every...of every type of farming. And [yawns]...and so you work hard at it. And I remember we worked hard. And...and we was.... Of course, the white family would eat in the dining hall and they would put a little table in the kitchen for [pauses]...for...for [pauses] Jimmy and I to eat. White and blacks didn't eat in the same thing. The man who...who we was working for was a sort of a fair [static interference] guy, you would say, in this racist Mississippi Southern society, would be considered as a sort of a fair guy, with all the segregation of it. And his wife was a...was a good woman, too, and I think she was better because of the pressure that he brought on. But she was having a baby. And so she had had a baby, and so that the mother had to come up to take care of her daughter. And she cooked. That was the idea. And when she cooked, she did not give us the good food. It almost like she gave us the strappings [?]. And we had been used to eating in this man's house, eating quality food, you know the same food that he would eat. It was quality. And Jimmy and I had got to the table, we saw that kind of stuff having been [pauses] used to eating there before, and...and we got up from the table and left the food there. Well, naturally that upset her and she told the husband about it. And then when we...and when it came time to come back to work, instead of us going back to work, we went home. And...and boy, he was in a tight...you know, trying to get.... And so finally he came over to get us, you know, to talk to us, and then we



told him why we wasn't [weren't] going to work. And [pauses]...and first he got sort of angry, but he saw that we wasn't going to go back. And he might have left, and then he came back, and...and made a deal with us that we could eat at his mother's house, who was a [pauses]...would cook dinner. So he...I guess he went back and he really...evidently, he...he...he really got angry with his mother-in-law. And then he came back and told us from that time on we would eat at...at his father's house, which we enjoyed. And...and...and by the way, at his father's house, his father...we would sit at the same table, which was sort of unique. So, I mean, it...it's... it's...it's...it's a... And...and there was time and time like that where we as boys [pauses] would really strike out against the system, as...as...as...as little boys. Although...although back in those days, I'll say, it wasn't much [pauses] civil rights type of activity going, but I think that we were just doing this because we were personally affected and wanted to use every advantage we could use to...to strike back out against the system.

ERICKSEN: What did it feel like to sit at the same table and...?

PERKINS: Well, it was, you know, like, a...again that was, I think that was good because it...it was so normal. It was so normal. I mean, I...I...I...it was...it did not...it did not strike an awe. You know, like [pauses]...okay, for instance, I would go in today, maybe at a...at a sophisticated restaurant with some sophisticated people, and there will be a little awe that'll go with that, and that you'll...sort of struck by the chandeliers or what-ever. But the awe of it in... But it didn't...it wasn't that way. Now, I think it had a lot to do with this gentleman. This old man was a...was a...was a...was a normal old [pauses]...old...old gentleman, a big farmer, but a normal person. And so I think that... and I...maybe that's always the way it go, is that people who give you the...who give you the feeling of...of security. So it...so that I...no, it was not...it was not a [pauses]...a big [pauses]...a different feeling to do that.

ERICKSEN: You were talking before at how you were living with cousins and aunts. Is [pauses]...can [static interference] you describe the extent of how...what is a regular family [pauses] in the black community considered?

PERKINS: Well, the [static interference] re...my...my family would have been [pauses]...I think back in the days when I lived on the plantation system, our [static interference] family would have been a normal family. There could have been a father in the house, who...my grandfather was dead, who would have been the senior person in the house. My grandmother was the senior person in the house. I had an uncle, my youngest uncle, who would have been to us a little bit a sort [static interference] of a senior person in the house, but we didn't respect him with the same respect we would have respected a...a grandfather. I think the extended family was a part of what it meant to be family. Because, you see, there was no such thing as [pauses] kids going to a foster home because their mother died or their...or their aunt died or whatever happened to them. It was just sort of natural. Even at the funeral, it would be discussed there, right after the funeral, before the funeral, who would take the kids. Really it would be known (if the sickness lasted for some time)...it would be known where the kids were going to go.

ERICKSEN: Ahead of time.

PERKINS: Ahead of time, who [microphone bumped]...what cousin was going to take the kid. You know, it's...it...it...it almost sort of...we sort of grew up with that. I sort of grew up with an extended family concept. So it's...it's...it's.... And then by Vera Mae and I getting a big family (she comes from that same kind of family, and that was a normal...I think the extended family was normal)... I think the [pauses] kids [static interference] being born out of wedlock, in the black community, has been a normal thing. That if... you know, like I think we are bringing statistic figures to it today, and I think that [pauses] it's becoming...we're seeing the effect of that because of the welfare system coming in and trying to take the place of that extended family. And...and...and...and thinking that money can replace the love and the nurture. And...and...and then it's creating households for these people apart from that extended family, you know. In the pr...as I'm saying, my unc...my aunts, they would have had their babies and their kids and they would have stayed on home with their mother. And there would have been that whole care and that network of nurture, you... you know that. But now, if a child get a fa...if...if a girl sixteen becomes pregnant and get a child, she can go get on welfare system, which means that she can get her a household allowance [sic], and can set her apart. And those kids grow up with the lack of having that extended family there, out of which that nurture and what you supposed to do and what you don't suppose to do is lost. And... and where there is an authority figure behind, there is that...that grandmother authority figure would extend all the way down to those cousins, because it was all a part of one family, you know. But here that is lost in that mother who don't understand that, and who that child (when a child gives birth to a child)...that child will not respect that mother. So [pauses] that was pretty normal. It was pretty...it was either through...through birth, you know, like there was a...be a good family intact, where there was nobody, let's say having kids out of wedlock. But [pauses] a mother would die, something and somehow another child, many times, would come into that family, because there was, as I said, no foster home, no juvenile halls, no such things as that for the kids. They stayed a part of the...of the regular family. I think that was normal until we went North. I...I think...I think [pauses] until...until we went to the urban, 'til... 'til we urbanized. I think that would be...and when people get to the urban, the rent became more expensive and whatever was there. [Pauses] There was not the food supply that was from the farm, and all of that. And I think people then demanded their kids would stay in their own house and set up their own household and that kind of thing. And I...I think the impact of that is having a devastating effect. And I...you know, I think my own family...I think it was sort of natural for my kids to go here to a more communal way of living [pauses] here in this community, because I think it's...it's probably impact of...of our family, the Perkins family, and I think the Williams family, which is my wife. And I think that [pauses] us having such a big family and us always having other people in our home all while they was growing up. And so they have always been a part of having [pauses] people as a part of their life that they love [pauses] equally the way they loved us and each other. And...and so I think it be...it becomes easier then for them to...to live in a more extended [pauses] family. I...I...I feel that way. I feel that, you know [pauses], Voice of Calvary Ministries has [pauses]...I, you know, I don't...I think it might be slightly losing some of that, and then...and then...and maybe losing some of that and I don't say that in a negative way. In a way it might even be gaining more because it might be gaining it by the extended family [pauses]...I mean by the [pauses]...by the Antioch Community, might bring it back even bigger in the days ahead. So what we look like as being lost individually might not be lost at all. But [pauses] I...we have always had and been in the history of Voice of Calvary Ministry [pauses] that [pauses] community. It...it has always been a question, and I think about it now, at how large Voice of Calvary could get in terms



of one location, because of the family aspect of it, and...and which I think might be more important in our society than having five hundred members. I think most people think, though, having five hundred members give them more clout and more power and more money to do things! But I think in the process...I think they loses their...the family and the values and...and a sort of a [pauses]...an ethical base out of which people know what's going on and folks say, "Hey, that's wrong" and feel a sense of being horrified with the fact that that's wrong. You know, like if somebody come up to me, it's no...it's no big thing but somebody come up to me and they say, "You are doing that wrong, and...and that's not right. That's unfair." It wouldn't be nothing for my...one of my kids to say to me, "Daddy, that's not fair. That's not the way you do it." And I would...and...and that would be the way we would do it. But in...in basic society, when you live in isolation, and you live with books and things like...and you know, and... and...and...you...cheating becomes easy, stealing become easy, and there's nobody to hold you accountable. But in a family you're held accountable, because people are...books are sort of open and people sort of know what's going on. And I think that has been the... the beauty of...of...of...of...of Voice of Calvary over the years, you know, even with the scandals that's going on, now [probably refers to the highly publicized scandals involving Jim Bakker and his PTL Club, which were being revealed at the time of the interview]. I think to us they're big jokes. They're big jokes because, I think, it's...we have never lived in that kind of isolation. Anybody here...always in Voice of Calvary...anybody here...I mean our financial statements and all that kind of stuff could almost become daily things that everybody around here would know [pauses] what was going on, and everybody would know what everybody was making, would be a part of the whole [pauses] system. Just a big extended [pauses] family. Again I'm saying I...I...I think we...I think the church has totally lost that. I...I think the church has...has patterned itself after a [pauses]...a corporate system and is trying to produce people that can fit into that kind of a [pauses] system. And so I think it...but it...but it has destroyed ethics, it has destroyed honesty, it has destroyed values, it has destroyed [pauses] people understanding the real joy. They think real joy comes out of consumer items and things, and they don't enjoy the joy of...of...of...of being with each other. And...and they...most, you know, like [pauses]... I think I work...we talk about it all the time at our j...in...in Pasadena, that... that everybody be glad to get to work, and we be glad to...to come together. We live in a housi...we live collectively together. But I think sometimes on the weekend we be just glad when Monday comes so we can all get together again to find out what we was all doing [static interference] during the weekend that we didn't see each other. You...you... you know, even if we were there in the...in the...in the...in the...in the compound together.

ERICKSEN: In your...in your books you talk about how you couldn't [static interference] wait to get out of Mississippi?

PERKINS: Mendenhall! [Static interference]

ERICKSEN: Out of Mendenhall.

PERKINS: That you're not...you're talking about Mendenhall. I think you mean after I came back to Mississippi from...at the...from California?

ERICKSEN: Well, I'm thinking when you were...when you were in New Hebron, you just wanted to get out...

PERKINS: As a little boy?

ERICKSEN: ...as a boy.

PERKINS: Oh yes, yes, yes.

ERICKSEN: And then you got to California, and because of God's call [pauses] couldn't wait to get back. What did it feel like as you were preparing to come back? I know, you...you described your wife's reluctance and final turning...turning around and [pauses]...

PERKINS: Yeah, I...I...I...

ERICKSEN: ...answering God's call, too.

PERKINS: I...I [pauses]... A lot of things happened. Let me give you a little of what happened to me when I...when I was converted. I think you got to understand, and the... and the drive [pauses] I had [pauses] for basic success, and the belief I had that I was going to be able to achieve, because [pauses]... Before I was a Christian people liked me. I was likeable, and...and it was always [pauses] likable in relationship to my work. And to me my work was everything, you understand. So that...so that I was promoted on my job. I was liked broad-base in the company I worked in. I don't think that my company [pauses]...I think I had basic integrity, and so I don't think that I would have been fired. And...and...and...and the...the...the...the man who owned the company, who was, you know, almost a billionaire, he's my good friend and he supports our ministry right now, and he's a Roman Catholic. You...it, so it shows you something of the...of the...of the...of the...and I'm an ordinary person, but it shows something of the...of the...of the...of the love. So when I was converted, you know, from that drive to make money and that drive to believe that somewhere along the...along the line that money and success was going to bring me happiness and contentment. And I really think love...I mean, I really think that [pauses]...I think my...my [pauses]...my being loved by people before I was converted, had to do with my lack of love as a boy. And I think I sort of solicited [pauses] the ways that would be returned back to me kindly. I think I do that with my kids. I think I did that with my kids, I think I do that with my grandkids, and I think, you know, you'd do it when you're taking kids and you're...you're...you're...you're making them laugh. You isn't making them laugh for them to laugh, but you really wants to laugh so you can laugh. So you're soliciting what you want from them and your manipulating them to get what you want from them. As a...as a...as a...as a...as a...as a...as a kid, I think that I lacking [?] and desired love so much as a child. Now, I think I found that love in Christ. I...I think the Gospel [pauses] was the love of God made visible to me in the sense that I realized that God loved me. I realized I was loved by God. And if a God in heaven loves me, and if this God is creator and Lord of the universe love me, then I'm loved by a very significant person. I'm...and...and that that person who loves me that much [pauses] loves me enough to be concerned about my well-being. I think I would have thought of love before I was converted as being [pauses] if my company loved me...if I worked hard to be loved by my company, then I realized that my country...my company



would...would give me the security I needed in life. And so my love meant my security. Okay? I understood that. And I think when I recognized and transferred that to God, that gave me a lot of security. I think what happened to me then, it removed that economic uncertainty in trying to achieve. Okay? I think when...so then my drive that had been so geared to that achievement and acceptance was no longer needed. And so going to work to me, while I still had motivation to go to work, I think purpose for working was gone [pauses], you.... Purpose for...I think I still achie...I think I still knew what to do and I did it well! But I don't think it had no meaning. So what happened then was it was a lack of challenge. And so, I think, that as I thought about going back to Mississippi as a boy and all of the...and what it was like, and as I think I meditated on my job about what it was like in Mississippi as a boy and the...and the...and the agony and the poverty and the fact that I had been down there maybe a year before and had saw these conditions down there, I think that I said, "I want to go back, I want to go back." I think I said, "I want to go back there and live among my people [pauses] and be there." And I think I went back there with the idea of just sharing the Gospel. I don't know whether I went back [pauses]...I think I thought that the Gospel would bring people the kind of excitement for achievement, but I don't know if that was a part of...of what I thought about. So I did not come back to Mississippi with a "holistic" concept of the Gospel. I think I found it after I got back here. I think after I got back here and shared the Gospel, and...and what happened to me was, quickly I...you know, in my area in which I lived at, in Mississippi, I had broad acceptance. You know, I became famous in a small community in a very short time, in a very very short time. Within six months [pauses] I was famous, and the famousness was a little bit thicker than the average fame, because [pauses] most famous preachers that had come by, would be famous on the basis of preaching one or two sermons. And when people had heard those one or two sermons, then they would recognize they'd not heard that, and so the fame would be very thin, and...and fame...and that's why they would come through and be gone. But [pauses] I was a hometown boy, and [pauses]...and all I did was sit down and...and st...and...and teach the Bible. And people loved the Bible. Everybody had a Bible, and they loved their Bible, and I would sit down and teach the Bible. And so people begin to think of me as a Bible teacher, which meant that my sort of [pauses] popularity in my neighbor-hood, very limited, (I mean when I say that I'm talking about a few counties), people expected me to teach the Bible, and they didn't expect me to...they didn't ex...my fame was not based on [pauses]... on my cleverness. You...you know what I'm saying? It only...it...it...it...it only was based on me explaining to them what was in the Bible, and that they responded to that, which was...which was.... And you know, [laughs] right now, people don't expect me to [pauses]...when I preach and teach, they don't expect me to make no kind of spectacle, you know what I mean [laughs]. Another way of saying [?], I'd never get up and say to somebody, [pauses] "I can't follow this person because he did such a good job." That ain't even in a thought of mine. I don't think it would be a thought of the hearers, that they expected me to be as good at something as someone else. I think that what they would expect me to do is to deal with the truth of...of what it there. And...and...and so the [pauses].... Why did I get on that? I don't know how I got on that. What brought me to that question?

ERICKSEN: Well, we started talking about your coming back to Mississippi?

PERKINS: Yeah...yeah...yeah...okay. [Pauses] Yeah, so...so... did we finish that one [laughs]?

ERICKSEN: Well, I'm not sure. We can [laughs]...is it....? Maybe [pauses].... So then you...you were back in New Hebron for six months?

PERKINS: More. I...I came back in...I came back to New Hebron in [pauses]...in June, June ninth of nine...I think it's June ninth of nineteen and sixty. I think I stayed in New Hebron then from...from June to about February of...of '81 ['61]. Then I moved to Mendenhall, and...and...and so whatever that would be [pauses], that's the time I stayed there, yeah.

ERICKSEN: I remember what we were talking about. I was just asking how it felt when you were coming back. I know I was talking with Spencer yesterday morning, he was saying he was very excited to...coming back to Mississippi.

PERKINS: Yeah, I...I...I...I...I guess...I guess, yeah, [pauses] yeah, I guess that's how I got off on that tangent. There was a...there was an excitement that was coming with it. There was a challenge, there was a fear. And [pauses]...now a challenge and fear. You would have to know me that...and you'd have to know my kids to a certain degree, [pauses] that...and that [?] maybe with a lot of people. I love challenge and fear. I [pauses]...I don't fear fear. [Pauses] I think we're used to creating an environment for fear. I think...now I come from a gambling family. And if you're from a gambling family, just to gamble is to create fear, is to create uncertainty. Just to be bootleggers, to sell whiskey, to do anything totally illegal and to live with that totally illegal environment is to live in constant...live with the recognition that you could be arrested, you could be caught. And so...so that [pauses] it's...naturally my son could become a motorcycle rider...racer. It's natural that I like riding airplanes, and I like the bumpiness of airplanes. It's naturalness, it's.... So that...so that [pauses] even when I speak to a different group, an au...auditorium, I have [pauses] fear. I be shaking in my boots, but that don't have any...that don't have any meaning that I'm not going to do that. Fact of the matter [laughs], it...it means that I'm sort of anxious to...to live through it...to live through this [pauses]...through this [pauses] period. So...so I...I mean fear was not a [pauses]...was not a [pauses]...uncertainty was there for certain. [Pauses] I don't know if I had a big vision. I think that most...most of my vision was that...that I would win people to Christ. I had very little vision for a church. I think I thought because of the rural church and where I come from, the church was already there, and so I...I sort of thought revival would come to those churches that was there. And so I did not see the need for new churches, as I...as I came out. It was only when I came to Mendenhall, and was [pauses] kicked out of the church, that I saw the need then for a church [tapping noise].

ERICKSEN: What did it...what did it feel like when [pauses] you came pretty much just to share the Gospel and suddenly there were all of these...these other things happening and you saw needs and you dealt with them?

PERKINS: I...I [pauses]...I think when I...yeah, I had a b...I had a broad platform to see the needs from. You see, the first year or so when I was back here, as soon as I got back here, I started going around to the high school. It was an all black schools. All black principals, all black schools. Schools was not integrated in Mississippi until 1970. Okay? So, you're talking about then from nineteen-sixty to nineteen and sixty-nine, I had my way in the public schools. In fifteen public schools [pauses] and high schools and two junior colleges in my...in this area. So [pauses] that



brought me in contact with that... with many teachers and young folks in a five county [pauses] area in which I lived. I'm trying to think of...what was the question now again?

ERICKSEN: What it felt like seeing the ministry...

PERKINS: Yes.

ERICKSEN: ...branching out.

PERKINS: Seeing the need, yeah. And I...I...I...I think I [pauses]...the first need I began to see...you couldn't see it as well as I went out to the other schools and if I would have stayed in the rurals, I would not have seen the need as quickly. What happened was, I would go out to the school to speak at chapel program. And there's a certain amount of awe that go with speaking to [pauses] 500 kids, a thousand kids, and...and... and...and...and...and...and...and the teachers dressed up. And they sort of disappear, you don't get to know them and they go back out into the woods where they come from. But when I came to Mendenhall, I came in to live in...in the community, where most of the kids who went to this school came from. That's when I began to see then [pauses] the dropout. That's when I began to see the girls getting pregnant. See, at...at the school where I was teaching, I wouldn't have saw pregnant girls. And if I'd saw pregnant girls back on the streets, I wouldn't have connected that so much that with the school. But when I knew that those kids was dropping out of school in Mendenhall, I began to see that, and [pauses]...and that's when [pauses] this sort of a felt need.... I have an awful terrible part about myself, (I...I don't know if I like it or not), is that [pauses] I almost believe you can solve problems. You know, I almost believe that [pauses]...that...that [pauses]...I almost believe you can solve problems. And...and...and it...it's aggravating to believe that, to believe it, so you'd...you...I'd be much better off if I could [pauses].... My wife can do that a little bit. My wife can see something and she can say, "Oh, you can't do anything about that," and...and go ahead on and go to sleep with it. But I can't. If...if I see something then I...I believe it. Just like I can't endure counseling too much. I mean, I can't...I can't...I'm not much of a counselor with people [pauses], because if people come in and counsel with me.... You know, I counsel with people in sort of... along economic areas because I can counsel with people there and I can show them the reality of the way out of it. Basically I can. But then there are certain complicated family [pauses] problems and relationship problems that people bring and kinfolks problems they bring, that I have no way of solving them. And I don't even like to hear them. You...I don't like...I can't deal with that, because I believe the problem needs to be solved, you...you know. So that when...what would happen would be is as I would begin to see these problems that people's having, I saw these problems as solvable, and then I would try to get people together and start talking about to people about it. And...and as an organizer.... And most people...you know like, I...I...I...I'm afraid that [pauses]...that government's way and the way people are, even through our (I don't understand all that I'm saying)...but the educational way that people go about of trying to solve some neighborhood problem [pauses] by people developing [pauses] projects and programs for people, I don't think they work. They dehumanize them, because I don't think they do the right...the first things first. The first thing, in order to solve a problem, you got to make the people who have the problem on a very broad base aware that there is this problem. You got to keep on working with them and motivating them 'til they become motivated enough to want to solve it. And when they then become motivated enough to solve it,

then you're to organize them in a way to get at it [pauses], to get it solved. Not that you take respons...total responsibility for it. Okay? That you share the responsi.... I always took [pauses]...you might say I took a...some of the financial responsibility of everything I've ever got going. But...but...but...but the people [pauses] who had the problem would have to [pauses] sol...try to solve it. So the way all of these things began to develop was not as burdensome to me as you think, because [pauses] I thought they were solvable and I sort of thought that the people themselves could participate in [microphone bumped] that, and [pauses]...and I sort of believed in the...in the people. And so consequently, I sort of believed in [pauses]...I always knew that it took leadership to do that, and I always believed then that the core of what we would do, leadership development had to be at the core of it. There had to be leaders of development. So I think our ministry has sort of developed like that. I think the...as I see it [pauses], the chief element in our whole ministry is our leadership development aspect of it, that internship. And I even think our mission, we have even [pauses] shaped our mission into a leadership development mission, you know, what is going on there. We see that that is...is really sharpening and trying to equip and giving leaders some more handles on how they go back to their community, and...and lead, and...and...and do.

ERICKSEN: I was talking yesterday with Spencer about when [pauses] the...when you decided that with the integration of the schools in 1970 that he should go to the...the white school instead of the black school. And he talked a little bit about how those were pretty tough years being very very much in the minority. What [pauses]...what was going...what kind of feedback were you getting at home from him and what was that like for the family?

PERKINS: None. You know, and I don't know if he said it. We didn't get any feed-back. My kids was [pauses]...was [pauses] to me [pauses]... [Static interference] Joannie rebelled a little bit with her mother, but there was never any rebellion of my kids that was outward, that they worked in total submission to what we.... And I guess it was [pauses]...I might have been a little insensitive [pauses] to them, but [static interference] I think that they was ready [pauses], to a certain degree, for the task. I remember that Spencer [pauses]...I bought him (and I don't know if he mentioned that) the story...Jackie Robinson story.

ERICKSEN: Um [No].

PERKINS: And he read that and [pauses]...and we would talk about that. It became a big thing in our household, the story...Jackie Robinson story. And that in our minds we sort of saw Spencer and my kids as living that deal [static interference] over again. And [pauses] I...I guess we wanted to bring [pauses] racism to an end. I guess I did. [Static interference] And...and that my kids were just an extension of me. And then I...I [clears throat, static interference]...and I...and I...and right...and I don't think I thought of them highly separate from that and I think that [static interference] today, I think, the sociologist and psychologist or people would say, "You need...you would need to consult with your kids more, and...and...and that you couldn't ignore their feelings," and that kind of thing. I think that we assumed that we were such a family and that the family's goals and objectives was more important than the...than the individual's. I think that [pauses], fortunate or unfortunate, that's the way I think. And I think you'll find that out when you talk to Dolphus [Weary, president of Mendenhall Ministries], and all of them. I think that they going to say...one of

the things they going to say [static interference] that I puts the goals [pauses] in the direction that we're moving in. I would call it truth. They would call it whatever they called it. They would say I put that over people. They...they would...they would...they would say that I would say that people is a means to achieve that, and...and they would say I was wrong. They would say that the people [pauses] is more important than the ideas and I would say the ideas are more important than the people. I would say that.... Now, I don't say that in a very brutal way, but...because people is the big deal. I mean, that's what we're working for, the quality of life. And none of my ideas would be against people in my.... I would put the ideas of the masses over the limited opinion of the individual. And I will do that all the time. And I think that...I think that...I think that that's were people see [pauses]...see is my...is my roughest...is my roughest [pauses] deal. And so I can't imagine people...I can't imagine a lot of resistance. And if we get a lot of resistance, I don't imagine changing my mind if it's truth. I don't imagine changing my mind because somebody don't think it's...it ought to be done. If that truth is for the good of the whole. That's what I mean. I don't...I don't [pauses]...I.... You know, and I...I look at the ingenious [?] of Lem [Tucker, who succeeded Perkins as president of Voice of Calvary], [pauses] and I...I think that people would say, again, my...my...my idea would be, I would think it was truth and I would see people over-questioning that as being against it. I think Lem then would say they would allow the questions to go on and that they would manage the people during the question period. I think that a difference between my old style and theirs (and I respect theirs better than I do mine, you know; I like theirs better than I do mine)...I think that during this questioning period, I would be moving so heartily on to...a lot of folk would be cut out. Those folks who would be c...and they don't do that and I like that about [microphone bumped] them, you...you...you know. And I...I think I'm...I'm...I'm changing. I think I'm changing [pauses], you know. I guess I...I think though that I [pauses] dislike poverty (and I don't want to make no value here)...I...I...I dislike poverty and I dislike racism. I...I...I...I think that [pauses]...that sometimes people have a sort of an intellectual dislike for it. I think I have a passionate dislike for it, you...you...you...you...you...you know. And which means that I...I [pauses]...I would be willing to risk war to achieve my goals. Okay? Now, let me see...you see what I mean? I'm talk.... I would be willing to risk the violence [pauses] out of which to achieve my goals would initiate. And I would believe that somehow we could maneuver through that [pauses]. Okay? Now I...I said that...I said...I said I would risk violence. I don't know whether or not I would initiate violence. But I would...but I would ri...risk violence to achieve the goal. I...I would not allow fear [laughs] to stand in the way of moving towards the direction we wanted to go for...for...for good. I think most people when they see that will back off. Not maybe most people, many people.

ERICKSEN: Was that part of what allowed you to move up to the confrontation with [pauses] the police...

PERKINS: Yes.

ERICKSEN: ...in, was it '70 or...?

PERKINS: In '70, yeah. I think so, I think so. I look back at it now. I think...I think so. I think that [pauses] another thing you got to know is that [pauses].... I don't like this about myself. See, a lot of stuff about myself I don't like. Now a lot of stuff about myself I do like, you know, I do like, and I

think I like...I think I like myself a whole lot. But there're a lot of deficiencies in me that I don't like, that I try to overcome these deficiencies. And I see that some of those deficiencies can be good and bad. [Pauses] It's difficult for me to...[pauses] to lose. It's...it's...it's...I think I can come to the place quickly.... In my...in my...in my management style, if I define that the way I'm going is wrong to achieve the goal, the big goal, I will change. I used to have trouble with that in my management. But I will change. I will...I will say, "Well, this is wrong. This is a dead end street. We're going to change." Usually, you get people working for you, they going that way, okay. And if you say, "You're going to do that way, go over here," and they don't like that. They don't like that and they can...and they see you as being bad, okay, okay. I don't see that. I don't see...if it's a dead end street, we detour, and...and... and...and...and continue to move, and contin...and... and...and...and continue to [pauses].... Now what was I going to say? It was something that I was going to say in relationship to that thought I had in mind. [Pauses] I had a thought in mind when I had that in mind. [Pauses] Well, the thought left me. It's going to be a blank. That's going to be a...somebody else will say, "Where is he going? That guy's old and foggy."

ERICKSEN: Well, maybe it will come back in another track.

PERKINS: Yeah [laughs].

ERICKSEN: Going...talking about [pauses] your...

PERKINS: No! I thi...I think I know what it was now, I think I know what it was now. I think what we was talking about is...is what lead us up to that...to the confrontation. And I...and I think I was saying that...that I...what I was trying to get over was the fact that I can't stand defeat. I can't stand to lose the war, the total war. And that's the part about myself that I don't like. [Pauses] And...and [pauses]...and I guess that was [pauses]...that will carry you into a very difficult situation, that will carry you into a very difficult situation if...if...if you.... And...see I'm...I'm...I have athletic mind, and [car horn honks]...and I do have a [pauses] unfortunate [pauses].... In my strategy of the 60's there was a [pauses].... I don't think there was winners and losers, but I know there was definitely the fact that we had to win. And I think to win was not to say the other folk lost, because I don't think that there was a transfer of power. I don't think there was the same situation you have here you have in South Africa. See, I think in South Africa, you have a war there for the transfer of power. I...I think that the war here was a war of sharing power, sharing freedom. And so it wasn't a cut loser. But I...I think the need to win would have been to share power. And I...and I don't...I don't think.... I...I think there was a lot of us in Mississippi...you could find a lot of us in Mississippi and I think it's possible for people to reach the place in their own mind, in their own psyche [pauses] from a Christian perspective or any other perspective, where there's no turning back. I... I...I think your life can get in a direction that you can't turn back. And...and I think there's a...I think as you move along in life there's a...there's a fine line to when you get there. And every once in a while you go over that line. And when you go over that line, you have to be drug back, you've got to be killed, I mean, but you don't...you don't retreat. [Pauses] I...I think [pauses]...I think all people basically come to that place. I think Martin Luther came to it, Martin Luther the great reformer, and I think other folk come to it, and I...I think it's a natural...it's a natural line. And so I don't put much virtue in...in...so much in what we call heroes. I think heroes are people who find themselves in circumstances they can do no other. That becomes what they have to do. And so



[pauses] they...I think that [pauses]...I think if I'd been killed in the Brandon jail, I would have been forgotten. I think the only [pauses]...the reason that we [pauses] are significant in the world is the fact that we lived through the Brandon jail. I think if...I think if we would have been [unclear]...and I...and I think that it's...it's [pauses].... I contribute [pauses, airplane flying over] a lot of who I am today to the fact that [pauses] there's not many people go to the brink of death and come back to tell their own story. But most people can't tell their story because they're dead.

ERICKSEN: What's...what's become of the officials that were involved in your arrest and...and beating while you were in jail?

PERKINS: Some are dead. Many of them are dead. One of them is a...sheriff in Simpson County. So he's [static interference] been promoted. But many of them are dead. And I don't know what has happened to... One of them is a chief of police in Simpson County. Another was a sheriff in Simpson County. Those would be the...some of the outstanding players. The sheriff of the county over here, Jonathan Edwards, he's dead. The lawyer that did such a messy job...the two lawyers that did such a messy job [pauses] is dead.

ERICKSEN: Their...your lawyers? Their lawyers?

PERKINS: No, their lawyers. Yeah, so they're dead.

ERICKSEN: Can you talk about the course that your feelings ran through following all of that?

PERKINS: The beating'? Yeah.

ERICKSEN: Did you forgive them in a day?

PERKINS: No, no. [Pauses] I came to the conclusion, the hard conclusion, that [pauses]...I think I stuck with the idea that [pauses]...that [pauses]...that [pauses] Mississippi white folks was cruel [pauses] and they was unjust, and the system was totally bankrupt. I think I concluded that. I think I didn't...I think I moved [pauses]...I think I stayed with the idea that it had to be overthrown. [Pauses] I think that when I went to the hospital in [pauses]...in Mount Bayou a few months later after my beating, I...I think that [pauses] I had a lot of time to think, because I would sleep in the daytime. [Static interference throughout sentence] You know, you be in a hospital bed, you...you have twenty-four hour, and you only need about...I only need about six hours sleep, seven hours sleep. Even though you're on drugged, you might not get eight hours of sleep. That means you got a lot of time to think. And [microphone bumped] I think that's where the forgiving [sic] process began to work on me, [pauses] that...that I think I...I...I went through and I think by going through things I was able to see both my mistakes.... And from a Christian perspective I think we take mistakes to be sin, and I think that's right. I think God is a sort of a God of order, and sort of a God of perfection, and so that God want to work that sort of a character of perfection in us. And so I think heavily mistakes is sin. And...and I th...I think I was able to see that...that I had made heavy mistakes, and that was sin. And that [pauses]...and that I needed my sins forgiven. I think that [pauses] hate [pauses]...coming back into [pauses] the Mississippi society from the hospital, I think I had reached the place where...that I basically could not come back and live again and go

forward in work with hate. I think I really had to get that hate out of me in order to go forward. And so I think I learned the meaning of the forgiveness of sin. And [pauses] I [pauses]...I don't know whether or not we as Christians today have enough [pauses]...put enough emphasis on the forgiveness of sin.

END OF TAPE

