COLT: Welcome and Introduction

Charles Marsh

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Welcome, everyone. I encourage you to find a seat. Again, we're going to try this seating arrangement, if it doesn't work, we're going to have a free-for-all tomorrow, but since there is some fluidity in the program and the workgroup members will be involved and there will be some interchange, we have those seats reserved at the front, I see that no one is claiming the first row. It's too bright. So, if we have empty seats here at the front, anyone can come on down. I wanted to call your attention to the slight change to the schedule for today. Gene Rivers will be one for 3:30 and from 2:15 to 3:15 we will proceed with workgroup presentation number one on Lived Theology and Community Building. I think most of you have that revised schedule. Again, Gene Rivers address on what Christian Activists expect theologians to talk about will go from 3:30 to 5, and Towards a Theology of Organizing will go as scheduled from 5:15 to 6:45. Well, on behalf of the Project on Lived Theology, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the conference on Lived theology and Civil Courage at the University of Virginia. It's so good to see all of you and I look forward to our time together and to getting to know you. I hope you all had good trips. I'm thrilled that the thunderstorms that were supposed to hit our area violently this afternoon have not come to pass, or have at least, not as of 10 till 2. The last time I met with a workgroup in Charlottesville was the weekend of the February blizzard. And several of you were standard in various cheap motels near Dulles airport for what seemed a long period of time. For a while at least I thought Russell Jueng who was trying to get a flight to San Francisco would be holed up watching television in a Days Inn until the conference came around. I don't know, I think it might have been Friday of the next week until you finally got out. Russell read every book in his suitcase and I think he caught up on all of the television he's missed since moving into a housing project in Oakland California and one thing that kept me from feeling too terribly guilty was that every time I called Russell he said he was having the time of his life. So this weekend, we might have thunderstorms and hail and all kinds of things, I can guarantee that we won't have a thunderstorm and a blizzard.

My name is Charles Marsh and I am director of the Project on Lived Theology, and as most of you know by now, this conference is intended to build on the insights and discoveries as well as the successes and failures of the numerous collaborations between theologians, scholars of religion, pastors, and activists, that have taken place during the past three years, even as it opens up the conversation to a distinguished group of guest speakers and friends of the Project. The gathering today reflects this intention. We have in the audience today members of the four workgroups, some of the consultants to the project, evaluators, and many are a number of invited outside speakers. And we also have many friends of the project, Local clergy, university faculty, and students. And people from Charlottesville, and all over the United States. I see people from Georgia, and California, I know a couple is coming from Paris, I know we will have a lot of outside guests as well. One of my frustrations has been trying to find a way to include a

larger number of participants than could be squeezed in to the budgeted programs of the project. And I hope that this conference is the beginning of an enlarging conversation and indeed that you feel welcome, that you feel at home, and that this conference is of use to you, in some way. For all of us, I hope that the proceedings will refresh our work as scholars and activists and clergy, re-energize our work of peacemaking and reconciliation, and illuminate new possibilities for the shared work of theologian, practitioner, and scholar. This is very exciting work. I am very excited, then about our two and a half days together. The discussions, the lectures, the break off sessions, the film, the workgroup presentations, the meals, how these workgroups love to eat, so yes—the meals. I am mindful that this gathering crosses a number of boundaries and it does so by creating, I think, and nurturing an institutional space where theologians and scholars with theological sensibilities are free to appropriate the rich, lived social experience of communities as material for theological reflection. Rarely, do academics and activists, theologians and pastors, scholars of religion and community builders, sit down together and treat each other as equals. The conference then, like the project, also, in some way, breaks down, or tries to break down the often meaningless divisions between departments of religion in research universities and free standing seminaries, divinity schools, and theological programs in liberal arts colleges. I am hopeful that the project has demonstrated in a modest but promising way that community builders and activists and so-called ordinary people of faith are often a vital part of theological conversation and formation both in their role as practitioners and as sources of theological insight and wisdom. I am also mindful, on the other hand, that these kinds of spaces were not so unusual in an earlier period of American public life, and the results were not always as promising as one would have hoped. In 1963, for example, theologians, civil rights workers, pastors, activists, met for a few days in Chicago for the conference on race and religion. Those of you who have read Taylor Branch's second volume of his biography on King might know the story. In its report of the conference the next week, Time magazine described the entire event as just another exercise in doleful hand-wringing by theologians that proved once again that they have almost no wisdom to offer, so I am hopeful for better things this week.

Let me say a few words about the project to those of you who are our guests, to kind of frame and explain what this gathering represents. And some of you who were members of the workgroup may have forgotten what we were doing, so this might be of use to you as well. Since being established by the Lily Endowment in 2000, the Project on Lived Theology has offered an institutional space where theologians and other scholars can work together with community builders, pastors, and activists, in understanding the way that theological convictions shape the social patterns and practices of Christian communities. And we have sought to communicate as best as we could this understanding in instructive, analytically precise, and edifying ways. So, the Project is based on the rationale that these patterns and practices, specifically in their displays of compassionate action and service to others, offer rich and untapped material for theological inquiry. We believe that these patterns and practices are not just ways of doing things but as Wayne Meeks in one of his studies of early Christian communities, they are ways of saying things. The Project, then, is committed to the challenging and urgent task of discerning the continuities and discontinuities between the experience of God and the experience of life. A further nurturing a theological culture in North American that

in this regard may be both confessional and public in its articulations and convictions. At the heart of the project's mission is the hope that our work will, in some ways, encourage younger theologians and scholars of religion to gain or regain the freedom to responsibly engage the social order and to build beloved community. And we have been pleased to discover among our work a generation of younger theologians, scholars, graduate students, and undergraduates, who are hungry for the opportunity to reconnect the enterprise of theology with the lived experience of community. One of our graduate assistants says that when he describes the project to many of his fellow graduate students, they sometimes light up and say "That's why I decided to study theology in the first place." That makes us happy to hear. Still, the project is limited in its scope and certainly not the first initiative to foster such goals. I do not think that we're trying to recreate the beloved community, as someone recently charged, but neither are we trying to recreate an elitist guild that silences the voices of practitioners and outsiders. And hey, let's hope for a little beloved community along the way. Another thing. I do not particularly care whether the term 'lived theology' sticks around beyond Saturday evening. Maybe we could do like one of those early Saturday night live shows—do you remember when Andy Kauffman, the comedian, ran a national poll throughout one of the early Saturday night live shows asking the viewers if they would ever want him to appear on the show again. As it turns out, they did not, and he did not. So, perhaps, that's an important thing to add about the term. I still prefer the term given by a man who introduced me to a gathering in Laurel, Mississippi, as the director of the Project on Livid Theology. That seems to capture it better than anything else. The conference marks, then, the end of three years of hard and satisfying work. A large part of the conference's project success has involved locating and creating these spaces of conversation, fellowship, and collaboration between theologians and practitioners. In the three year cycle of the project that concludes with this conference, the formation of four theological workgroups provided the primary vehicle for creating these spaces of theological collaboration. The workgroups, which comprised of ten members each, included theologians, biblical scholars, sociologists of religion, historians and ethicists, as well as community developers and ministers. And the workgroups met in different cities and towns in the context of engaging, and in some cases building relationships, in what might be called communities of resistance, reconciliation, and civic renewal. Very often, we discovered that when academics sit down in conversation with community workers, pastors, and residents of distressed and excluded communities, a fresh theological language breaks into expression and at the least is illuminated a range of questions and concerns not often given proper attention in the academy. The workgroups focused on four different themes: Lived Theology and Race, Community Building, Lived Theology and Power, and the congregational workgroup called the Congregation and City Group: Constructing a Theological Narrative of Charlottesville, VA. A typical gathering began with a time of personal greetings and updates, and then consisted of consultations with community builders and activists, presentations by members of the workgroups, site visits to the community building initiatives, discussions of books and articles, periods of debriefing, and then those shared meals in the evening. Usually the first and the fourth workgroups were shared at the University of Virginia and the second and third meetings in areas appropriate to the subject matter of the particular session. I hope you're still with me and I hope you're not getting too hot. I'm going to do like a good southern evangelist and take my jacket off, start rolling up my sleeves in a minute, if I start sweating, you'd better watch out. Louise is going to

take the Kentucky Fried Chicken Bucket around and start taking a collection. Anyway, the core of this conference, then, is the participants in the workgroups. There are about forty of them. We come from all over the nation, although most of us come from the eastern seaboard. In addition to the forty members of the workgroups, more than twenty five ministers and practitioners played consulting rolls to the project. In many cases, these consultations lead to relationships that are evident in this conference. Lee Stewart, from South Bronx Housing Nehemiah Project, Ray Riverra, from the Latino Pastoral Action Center in New York. Rydell Payne, from Abundant Life Ministries. Russell Jueng, from Oak Park in Oakland. Jay Carter, from Duke Divinity School. Mark Gornik, from New York City, most recently, Edinburgh, Scotland. There were others who we met with who are not here today who could be mentioned if we had more time, but certainly people like Michael Curry, the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina. Fred Gray, the legal architect of the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott and senior deacon at the Holt Street Baptist Church. Jim Bob Park, the senior pastor of the Young Nak Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, John Perkins, president of Voice of Calvary Ministries in Jackson, Mississippi, Amy Sherman, Senior Fellow at the Welfare Policy Center and Urban Ministries advisor here in Charlottesville at Trinity Presbyterian Church. Barbara Skinner, president of the Skinner Leadership Institute in D.C. LaVerne and Al Stokes, president of the Sandtown Habitat for Humanity Project in Baltimore. Dolphus Weary, the director of Mission Mississippi in Mississippi. As well as folks like Taylor Branch, biographer of Martin Luther King. John de Gruchy, Professor of Theology at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Roberto Goizueta, professor systematic theology at Boston College. Grace Hale, professor here in the history department. John Milbank, who's a colleague of mine in theology, and Mirslov Volf from Yale Divinity School. Many of these rich and rewarding exchanges are available in text form on the project website, and if you're interested, please take a look at those, I think, very important exchanges.

Well, finally, the conference takes its name from a phrase in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay "After Ten Years" from his book, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. "Just as the capacity to forget is a gift of grace," he wrote, "so memory, the recalling of lessons we have learned, is also a part of responsible living." The subtitle of that astonishing essay is *A Reckoning Made at New Year*, 1943. It's an account of the lessons learned during the years of church struggle and resistance and a sober stock-taking of the capability of theologians and religious persons to engage the world in responsible action, and with courage. "Are we still of any use?" Bonhoeffer asks, "Are we still of any use if we continue with business as usual? If we flee from public altercation into the sanctuary of private virtuousness, if we shut our eyes and mouths to the injustice around us and beyond, if we assent to something bad out of fear of something worse. For indeed, we have been silent witnesses of evil deeds, we have been drenched by many storms, we have learned the arts of equivocation and pretense, experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open. Intolerable conflicts have worn us down, and even made us cynical. The great masquerade of evil has played havoc with our ethical concepts. Are we still of any use in the pursuit of generosity, justice, humanity, and mercy—emblazoned on the project t-shirts—Bonhoeffer offers a Provisional answer. It depends. It depends on whether we are willing to be honest about such things as our freedom, our responsibility, to be honest about our privilege, our power. What we do not need is geniuses, cynics, misanthropes, or

clever tacticians. Rather, what we shall need are plain, honest, straightforward women and men. Bonhoeffer answers the question with a further question, more probing and haunting. Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough? And our honesty with ourselves remorseless enough for us to find our way back to simplicity and straightforwardness? These are urgent questions and considerations, questions and considerations that we might bring today to bear on our modest gathering and throughout the next two and a half days of meetings.

I once wrote in a grant proposal that the Project on Lived Theology seeks to move beyond the prevailing divisions of the church and academy. Divisions between theologies of revelation and theologies of experience, between the retrieval of tradition and the modern critique or the post-modern novelty, divisions between Barth and Schliermacher, if you will, and nurture a theological culture in America that's both confessional and public in its articulations and convictions. I thought about that recently, and I still think it's a desirable and useful goal, though not at the level of theological method, perhaps. Not by erasing differences. The move beyond the impasse may rather be possible, and desirable, at the ground level. At the level of engaging and thinking critically and constructively about real communities with the same intellectual rigor we give to engaging and thinking about texts. At the level of keeping Christian theology open to the plenitude and mystery of being in the world. Of coming to look with new eyes at matters great and small, as Bonhoeffer said, at sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, and of insisting that our perceptions of generosity, humanity, justice, and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible. Indeed, of seeing certain theological differences in our violent and perilous time as potential gifts in service to a common hope. "Action sometimes makes the best crucible for thought," Carol Palsgrove wrote in her recent book *Divided Minds: Intellectuals in the Civil Rights Movement*. We may find, as the movement did, that we all think best in the open air, on our feet. So, I'm glad you're all here, and I hope you are as eager as I am to get started.