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AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CHURCH

Dear Pastors,

I write as a spiritual prisoner of Jesus Christ, and a physical prisoner of the State of California. I write with loving biblical critique of the Church (as an institutional body, not any particular venue) and its neglect of, and, in some cases, bias against prisoners. My hope is to generate consideration of the following biblical perspectives and historical facts, and to provoke thought about how the Church should deal with prisoners.

The main questions that should be asked by the Church is: 1. How does God see prisoners? and, 2. How should the Church deal with us? First, I would venture to say that God is against prisons. Prisons are a human construct that are managed by governments. God has always been at odds with secular governments, be it Egypt, Rome or the U.S. Remember, it was the government of Egypt that oppressed the Hebrews (Exodus) , it was the government of Cesar Augustus that oppressed baby Jesus, causing Joseph and Mary to emigrate to Galilee (Lk. 2:1-4); it was Rome that destroyed the temple of God. Governments have always run afoul of the Lord's vision, because they are anti-Christ. In the U.S. we have removed God out of schools, and other governmental institutions. So how could God support prisons, I ask?

God admonished the Hebrews to be compassionate to "strangers," because they were strangers themselves. The condition they were in, in Egypt, was tantamount to being imprisoned, for they could not leave; they could not freely worship; they were oppressed; exploited, traumatized and mistreated – all of which are hallmarks of prisons. God specifically told the Hebrews not treat people like this (Deut. 10:18-19). "Strangers," in this context, is analogous to prisoners. Relatedly, prisons are inflexible and unforgiven, another contrast to Christ (Matt. 6:5:43-48; matt. 18:21-35.)

That said, when it comes to prisoners, God only sees two types of people: saved and unsaved. He does not see prisoners, lawyers, officers or even clergy; Christ and only his blood covers the sins of the people, which is all that he looks for. (A parallel to this categorical analogy would be in the Old Testament. God only saw Hebrews and heathens, that was it.) He reminds us of this divine perspective when He declares that the Jews, the Greeks, those in bonds and women, are all one in the body of Christ (Galatians 3:28; Col. 3:11). The phrase bond or free is important here because God sees us *all* as sinners (or prisoners of sin: Rom. 8;14; Rom. 3:23). This is why God really harps on the fact that we recognize that we are *all* of one body (Gal. 3:11; I Cor. 12:12-20; Rom. 12:4). God has redeemed all, or at least makes redemption available to *all* (Gal. 3:11-14).

Indeed, the Bible says that neither liars, drunkards or murderers will inherit the Kingdom of God. The Bible places the sin of lying on par with murder in this Scripture (Gal. 5:19-21). Sin is sin to God, yet He can reverse all of the errors and bad decisions that we make. What He *cannot* fix is the one lost in his/her sin. That is the priority, but it seems that for too many Churches, this divine priority is lost on the Church. It is easy to overlook the "other," which was the warped perspective that the Hebrews adopted against the Samaritans. And we know that Jesus demonstrated his disapproval of that bias by comforting – and accepting -- the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4). (It should be noted that it was the Good Samaritan, not those of the purported cloth, who showed mercy on the injured man on the road, Lk. 10:25-37.) An example that everyone has worth, or that some might surprise us.

Paul warns that the body of Christ should forgive the one with faults (that's all of us, by the way), bearing

one another's burden (of sin, et cetera) to fulfill the "law of Christ," *not* man's law. (Gal. 6:1-2). Clearly, the Bible is making a distinction between the two regimes. Remember, God is not willing that *any* should perish (I Pet. 3:9). God is not as concerned with the sins we commit, as He is with our repentance of those sins. Again, God can reverse every sin we ever commit – and the damage thereof – but the main thing is to generate repentance. Sin manifests into the crimes some people commit. Repentance puts a lid on sin. This is God's divine way of "criminal justice," but it takes faith. The same faith that it takes to "love your enemies" or to "turn the other" cheek; indeed, our God is a God of paradoxes (Is. 55:8, 9; Matt. 5:43; Matt. 6:12-15).

To support this argument, I underscore God's use of three different murderers to eternally guide us during three different dispensations (important revelatory periods): Moses (who wrote the Pentateuch), David (the historical and poetical books) and Paul (who wrote one-third of the New Testament [See his conversion story and acceptance by the saints: Gal. 1:11-24]). All of these men were murderers, but after they repented, as with all sinners (I John 1:9), God only focused on the future. Our Creator knows potential that He placed in each of us and how it could be used for His purposes. Indeed, He can use anyone. The Bible is replete with sinners who He used in His holy book. Remember, only Christ was sinless.

God never sought to punish anyone. God is love (I Jn. 4:7-11). Prisons are about retribution, which is antithetical to love (Matt. 5:38-42). God wants us to edify, not destroy (II Cor. 13:10). Edification means to build up in a moral way. With thirty years of continuous incarceration, I am here to tell you that prisons do not edify. Studies have repeatedly concluded that prisons are criminogenic, they breed more crime (Haney, 2006).

Therefore, God's method of salvation is love. There is no love in prisons. Not to mention, they do not work. God tells us to abide in hope, faith and love (I Cor. 13:13). Prisons are bankrupt of these divine principles. Yet when it comes to prisons the Church has replaced faith in Christ with faith in prisons. If the Church loved those who suffer the causative factors of crime: poverty, broken homes, single motherhood, etc., there would be much less need for prisons – because saved people are less likely to commit crimes, especially when they know they can rely on the Church for their needs. This divine approach replaces secular reliance of government and its secular, humanistic approaches; it puts Jesus back on the throne of people's lives. Ironically, the Catholic Church (the Pope) has been more openly critical than Protestants of extreme sentences such as life without the possibility of parole and the death penalty, promoting instead, mercy and redemption. Out-going California Governor, Jerry Brown, has also taken a stand against such sentences, inserting "mercy" back into the State criminal justice system through commutations and pardons, both divine concepts. Divine concepts that I believe we should all take note of (Matt. 25: 31-46).

While accountability is important, the biblical aim of accountability is personal transformation and redemption, not punishment for the sake of retribution.

About the author

Dortell Williams accepted Christ at the outset of his incarceration, in 1989. He was convicted of murder. He has since transformed his life, earning associate of arts degrees in Behavioral Science and Humanities, respectively. He has also earned a doctorate in ministries. He is currently pursuing a BA in Communication studies, majoring in organizational communication. He has written much on prisons and the Church.

Reference:

Haney, Craig (2006), "Reforming Punishment: Psychological Limits to the Pains of

Imprisonment,” American Psychological Association, Wash., D.C., pp. 206-207; *Brown, Governor of California, et al. v. Plata et al.* (2010) US Supreme Court, No. 09-1233, p. 1