TOM NEES SOCIAL JUSTICE ESSAY:

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO IMPRISONMENT

IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

Esther L. Fairbanks

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An essay on imprisonment could cover many areas from the inhumaneness of solitary confinement and its contribution to mental illness, Christians around the globe imprisoned for their faith, injustices suffered by women in the prison system, the ineffectiveness of imprisonment on the reduction of crime, racial inequality in the penal system, the mistreatment of undocumented persons, the suffering of children of the incarcerated, exploitation of the incarcerated and their families through overpriced telephone and video-conferencing services, abuses of power that go unchecked, criminogenic aspects of incarceration, and more. We will narrow this discussion by first examining the state of the U.S. penal system then apply principles of Scripture to form a Christian response to imprisonment in the Wesleyan tradition.

STATE OF THE U.S. PENAL SYSTEM

Prison Policy Initiative, a non-profit, non-partisan group that produces cutting edge research on mass incarceration in the United States, stated in a recent press release that the United States has “the dubious distinction of having the [highest incarceration rate in the world](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2016.html).”[[1]](#footnote-1) As of this writing, 2.2 million people are imprisoned in the U.S. in more than 6,000 correctional facilities operated by thousands of agencies. Prison Policy Initiative calls this “unprecedented and unproductive.” A recent report showed “states like New York and Massachusetts appear progressive, but even these states lock people up at higher rates than nearly every other country on earth. Compared to the rest of the world, *every* U.S. state relies too heavily on prisons and jails to respond to crime.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Of the 95 percent who will ultimately be released, 2 out of 3 will be rearrested within 3 years. In 2018 600,000 individuals will return to their communities. The number of children who have a parent in prison currently sits at 2.7 million.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Our current situation allows for no sense of dignity among the prison population. “Solitary confinement is a severe human rights violation, and yet, it is commonly practiced in the US incarceration system, even in juvenile prisons.” Because prisoners are controlled by threat of violence, guards are encouraged to behave in a sadistic manner. Some reportedly ignore or exacerbate abuses among prisoners.[[4]](#footnote-4) The emptiness and idleness that pervade most solitary confinement units are profound and enveloping. The inmates have nothing meaningful to do and have no meaningful social interaction. This leads to “ontological insecurity” – they are not sure they exist and, if they do, exactly who they are. Former prison chaplain and head of R.C. Prison Chaplaincy in the Netherlands Ryan van Eijk writes, “Human rights and dignity are empty terms in the shadow of a society that takes no interest in determining what justice conception the criminal justice system should be based upon.” [[5]](#footnote-5) One formerly incarcerated individual described doing forced labor in the hot Texas sun from sunup to sundown with only a 30 minute break for no pay, seeing inmates running the prison at one point due to staffing shortages, receiving prescriptions and medications dispensed in the infirmary by unqualified inmates, being beaten down by a prison officer for no apparent reason, prisoners at one time sleeping on a cement floor due to overcrowding, an officer taking prisoners’ food home, and a tractor that prisoners were told to bury in the back yard of the compound (possibly for resale at a later date). He was given no training to help him survive in the free world upon release and he watched educational options dwindle to only basic courses. Upon release, parole officers seemed to be watching every move for an excuse to rearrest him. He had to report his plans every week and was interrogated if a person did not show up to meet him and he went for a walk to stretch his legs.[[6]](#footnote-6) A person’s sense of dignity is drawn from the “personal and affective care and love by others” and “social affirmation that constitutes one’s sense of belonging; and there is no self-respect without the respect in the political sphere that guarantees one to have the same rights as others.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Punishment, revenge, and violence are at the core of the current U.S. penal system. Laura Magnani, author of *America’s First Penitentiary: A 200-Year-Old Failure* and co-author United Methodist author of *Restorative Justice: Moving Beyond Punishment* Harmon Wray observe that punishment grows from the concept of revenge and leads to a view that “force and violence against individuals who have violated laws” is legitimate. They assert that institutional violence (i.e. beatings, body-cavity searches, restraint chairs, and isolation units) against those who have committed crimes is not justified and that too often prison administration contribute to a culture of violence.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Our correctional system is broken. It is more about punitive action and revenge than redemption. Privatization of some prisons means that around one out of five prisoners is a money maker for a corporation who has a vested interest in keeping them incarcerated. Prisoners are being used as slave labor in some areas. Basic human rights are being violated.

SCRIPTURAL APPLICATION

As Christians we must be informed of the injustices that contribute to over-incarceration and be part of the redemptive and healing process rather than contributors to the unnecessary oppression and neglect many prisoners face. Through Christ-centered action on behalf of the incarcerated and previously incarcerated we extend God’s grace to those closest to God’s heart – the oppressed, the wounded, and the marginalized.

Jesus challenged people who made life more difficult for others. He condemned the teachers of the law and Pharisees for multiplying laws to oppress those they deemed socially and religiously inferior. He challenged them that they “neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.” He admonished them to “first clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.”[[9]](#footnote-9) It can be easy for believers who have no family members or friends with family members who have been imprisoned to look down upon someone labeled “sex offender” or “felon.” Let us open our hearts and invite the purification of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself taught us, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Jesus mingled with the downcast. He mentioned proclaiming liberty to captives and setting at liberty those who are oppressed in his first public sermon in which he cited Isaiah 42. If freeing the captives is part of Jesus’ mission statement, this is a mission which must catch the minds and hearts of his people. Shalom – wholeness – that is what Jesus came to bring humanity. Righteousness and justice are mentioned frequently throughout Old Testament writings. What the Lord requires of us is to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Lord spoke to the people of the land and the priests through the prophet Zechariah centuries ago, instructing them to “render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The retributive spirit that runs rampant in our penal system does not follow the heart of this instruction. As Old Testament theologian Dr. Joseph Coleson said, “God is not a dictator. He is not interested in exercising power for power’s sake. He has no need to show how great a dictator He can be. He is not a Hitler or Genghis Khan.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Jesus clearly calls us to action. In Matt. 25:31-46 Jesus states that those who visit and minister to prisoners are blessed. Those who do not are rejected. This is a serious statement that compels a response.

Our role as followers of Jesus is to be ministers of reconciliation, because “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The parable of the Prodigal Son makes God’s passion for restoring the sinner to relationship abundantly clear.[[15]](#footnote-15) No one is beyond hope. God’s Word says that God is “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This expresses God’s heart for all humanity including the incarcerated.

The apostle Paul taught the church in Corinth that“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The thief on the cross next to Jesus teaches us an important lesson in compassion. Those who are condemned, guilty, and labeled as criminals can see Jesus for who he is and become humble followers. The effect of their redemption is immediate, even in the middle of their sentence. Not every condemned person will accept this gift as the man hanging on Jesus’ other side reminds us, but God’s grace is clearly extended to those who are rejected by society. The criminal beside Jesus at Calvary was under a sentence of condemnation as a just penalty for his actions and was offered a place in paradise. Jesus did not look on him with disdain. He offered redemption and reconciliation literally in the middle of identifying with his shame.[[18]](#footnote-18)

To label the incarcerated as beyond hope and leave them forgotten does not reflect a view of life infused with the hope that Christ gives. Timothy Gorringe, Anglican priest and professor, states in his book *God’s Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* that “consistent pessimism is an odd option for those whose world view is determined by hope.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Psalm 107:43 invites the reader to consider the steadfast love of the Lord. The preceding verses describe a variety of scenarios where people who were in distress and cried out to God and God delivered them. Verses 10-16 describe the incarcerated person. In this case they are culpable (not imprisoned because of their faith) and God’s steadfast love is extended to them. These verses express the heart of our Creator:

10Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
    prisoners in affliction and in irons,  
11for they had rebelled against the words of God,  
    and spurned the counsel of the Most High.  
12So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor;  
    they fell down, with none to help.  
13Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
    and he delivered them from their distress.  
14He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,  
    and burst their bonds apart.  
15Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,  
    for his wondrous works to the children of man!  
16For he shatters the doors of bronze  
    and cuts in two the bars of iron.

CALL TO ACTION/RESPONSE

Corrie ten Boom, imprisoned for helping Jews find safe refuge during the Holocaust, describes the emotional impact of imprisonment:

I have been in prison. I knew the agony of being away from the people I loved, the dark, lonely nights spent in a place where the door could only be opened from the outside. Without the Lord I would never have made it through those hard times. He preserved me because He had work for me to do. But I know there are thousands of prisoners today who have no hope. They spend their lives behind bars, growing bitter and feeling hopelessly lost. They need Jesus… One day Jesus Christ will say to You, ‘I was in prison and you visited me’ or ‘You did not visit me.’ Give room to the Holy Spirit as you read this [article], and He will teach you your part in the vital work of taking the gospel to some of the most wounded men and women in the world – prisoners.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Jesus said that he came to offer abundant life.[[21]](#footnote-21) Duane Pederson, prison chaplain, affirms that “for the prisoner, this offer means new hope, a purpose for living, and love. That abundant life is for everyone – including prisoners.”[[22]](#footnote-22) This is a call to action for the church of God. We have been endowed with the power to be change agents. We must be a voice for regeneration, dignity, hope, healing, and truth.

One example of a Christian response to imprisonment comes from John Wesley himself. Wesley made visits to prisons throughout his ministry – particularly as a student in Oxford.[[23]](#footnote-23) Prison conditions were deplorable: masses of people were without sufficient covering to ward off the cold winter temperatures and had no place to sleep. Wesley rounded up blankets and coats. His vocal protests against the inhumane conditions made him a target of ridicule from prison management. He was undeterred. As a result of his influence a prison manager was converted to Christ and he made major changes to Newkirk Prison in London. The city sent mattresses and male and female prisoners were separated. The facility was cleaned up.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Perhaps John Wesley’s dedication to visiting prisoners was influenced by his own father’s imprisonment for unjust cause (debts owed men who opposed Samuel Wesley’s political and religious convictions). While in prison his cows were stabbed, home broken into, and dog wounded when John was a small boy.[[25]](#footnote-25) As believers we must be careful not to assume moral failure on the part of those who are imprisoned. Some face imprisonment as a result of abuse of power.

Magnani and Wray believe penal abolition with allowance for “selective, short term incarceration” for “treatment or incapacitation” is one answer to mass incarceration.[[26]](#footnote-26) Around half of the incarcerated are non-violent which makes them candidates for community-based alternatives to incarceration such as probation, work release, public service, and restitution.[[27]](#footnote-27) One case in which this would have been very effective is Cheryl. A committed Christian Cheryl found one area of her life in which she did not seek God’s help at first – her growing addiction to alcohol. After more than one vehicular infraction and seven months after the final incident Cheryl was sentenced to serve thirty days in jail. Because she was a caregiver to an aging parent she was given the option to serve her time over the weekends. No rehabilitation, counseling, or group therapy was offered. She saw women sitting around reading, watching television, and sleeping. She was already repentant and active in a rehabilitation program by the time of her sentencing. From her perspective time spent in the county jail did nothing to facilitate her recovery process or benefit the community. [[28]](#footnote-28)

Reintegration would be the ultimate goal if separation from the community is unavoidable. Many offenses can be addressed without separation, but if separation occurs reintegration into family, neighborhood, and economic structures is important for healing and wholeness to be realized. Dr. Thomas Noble, recent president of the Wesleyan Theological Society, writes that “we will be damaged persons unless we develop into loving persons in a matrix of stable, loving relationships.”[[29]](#footnote-29) For healing in society to occur we must become less like Javert in *Les Miserables* and more like the elderly priest who bought Jean Valjean’s freedom with the church’s stolen silver.[[30]](#footnote-30)

To awaken awareness of the need for redemptive justice Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM) has created a small-group curriculum entitled Outrageous Justice.[[31]](#footnote-31) This is a helpful tool for church leadership who want to raise awareness and inspire action among their congregants. According to Emily Greene of Prison Fellowship, every newly returning citizen needs three things: a safe environment, employment, and a community that provides accountability, help, and refusal to let them fall back into bad habits. "The Gospel is all [relational]," she quotes a man named Jon. "And it's uncomfortable because it means you've got to see all my mess— you've got to give access to my heart in very vulnerable ways, but that's what men and women who are coming home from prison need.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

A man whose life has been changed as a result of support from the body of Christ shared his story. When he was a toddler his elementary age sister asked their father if she could give her little brothers leftover Halloween candy. Their father’s raging, violent response resulted in a visit from the police. Daniel and his twin brother were removed from the home when authorities found them emaciated, neglected, and filthy in the dark basement of the family home. A local United Methodist pastor named Donna encountered him at the age of twelve when she came to Drumm Farm in Independence, Missouri to take him, his twin brother, and other boys to a Denny’s restaurant for a meal. Unfortunately, at the age of 17 he acted out sexual behaviors that had been committed against him as a small boy. He was arrested, imprisoned, and marked with a shameful label that he can never forget. He met Jesus in prison near the end of his first prison term through a prison ministry called Kairos. (He was later reincarcerated for breaking parole to visit family and see his mother’s grave.) Kairos is composed partly of formerly incarcerated individuals who understand the basic skills a person who has long been separated from society needs to survive in the outside world. They were available to answer questions by letter and then by phone call upon his release anytime Daniel hit a wall – the unfamiliar, terrifying process of going from making very few decisions in prison to being flooded with decisions. Upon his release he needed to find a job. He wanted to prove himself as a worthy employee. Many job applications ended in slammed doors. A compassionate man offered him work and Daniel has become a devoted employee. He shows up, works hard, and gains some dignity from knowing that his boss trusts him to get the work done. After a total of thirty-four years of incarceration Daniel is regularly attending church, and providing and caring for his disabled sister. Daniel emphatically stated that his mentor Donna, Kairos Prison Ministry, and Jesus have made a dramatic difference in his life.[[33]](#footnote-33)

In his book *How to Establish a Jail and Prison Ministry*, Duane Pederson offers some steps for the local church. He first recommends gathering information regarding needs in the community. Members of the church, the local ministerial, the local jail, any federal prisons nearby, and chaplains at these facilities can all be sources of helpful information regarding programs already in place and needs that exist. The second step is evaluation of where the needs lie, what can be met by volunteers, the receptivity level of officials in power, other agencies and churches already at work in prisons and jails. The third step is to consider what your church could consistently do. Some practical acts of grace could be visiting inmates; leading or assisting in worship services; providing music; leading Bible studies; facilitating small groups for sharing, one-to-one counseling; making literature, tapes, and films available; providing a Bible correspondence course; teaching classes in a specific skill, trade, or interpersonal skills; leading recreation programs; corresponding with inmates; sponsoring someone on parole or probation; aiding in employment searches for the formerly incarcerated; arranging temporary housing; helping family members make visits by providing transportation; providing information and referrals for family members; inviting family members to church; organizing church prayer groups; and supporting and encouraging prison chaplains.[[34]](#footnote-34) The fourth step is prayer, because you will be attacking a stronghold of Satan. The fifth step is preparation which might involve recruiting others to join, prayer support, beginning correspondence with inmates, obtaining Bible study materials, or providing transportation. People can contribute to ministering to the incarcerated from outside the walls. The sixth step is action which may involve contacting a prison chaplain for an orientation, training potential volunteers, and setting up group volunteer teams to work together. If the local church does not establish a Christian witness in jails or prisons, it may not happen at all. The church is meant for the sake of the world. Hundreds of thousands of wounded people need to hear of God’s faithful lovingkindness.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Magnani and Wray recommend a moratorium on prison construction and the abolition of the death penalty and sentences of life without parole. They seek the decriminalization of the possession and use of controlled substances and redirection of funds into nonprofit, community-based, voluntary drug treatment programs. They also recommend the elimination of solitary confinement, rehabilitative programs for the imprisoned as well as support for prison staff who are inclined more toward punishment or exploitation.[[36]](#footnote-36) Smarto would argue that some individuals must be incarcerated for longer periods due to the danger they represent to society. In a chapter entitled “When Imprisonment is Necessary” he lists mass murderers, sociopathic murderers, habitual drug offenders who categorically refuse treatment, child abusers who refuse treatment, violent criminals with weapons, and violent sociopaths in this category. [[37]](#footnote-37)

Gorringe advocates to a shift in focus in the penal system from individual to community wherein a process of inducing appropriate shame over misconduct can motivate change. He also points to the need for acknowledging the possibility of repentance.[[38]](#footnote-38) He also advocates for a shift from a focus on satisfaction of vengeance to biblical concepts of redemption and reconciliation.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Prison Fellowship is one example of a ministry with which the local church can partner to fulfill Christ’s calling to the ministry of reconciliation. Their goal is to “to support the restoration of those affected by incarceration. [They] equip correctional leaders, volunteers, and incarcerated men and women to make prisons more rehabilitative places; we advocate for a more restorative criminal justice system; and we collaborate with churches and local service providers to support former prisoners, their families, and their communities.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Some immediate needs that Prison Fellowship Ministries identifies for the recently released include transitional housing, clothing, medical care, and help with substance abuse and recovery. A church can help by gathering information on possible housing options available in the community, researching clothing closets or considering starting one, [preparing a list of medical resources](https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/reentry-ministry/on-going-ministry/helping-ex-prisoners-get-medical-care/?_ga=2.33641121.1231093347.1539636848-769309460.1539636848), and [encouraging a life of sobriety](https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/reentry-ministry/on-going-ministry/encouraging-a-life-of-sobriety/?_ga=2.33641121.1231093347.1539636848-769309460.1539636848) by referring former prisoners to substance abuse support groups in their community, such as [Celebrate Recovery](http://locator.crgroups.info/).[[41]](#footnote-41)

Prison Fellowship has a guide to restorative justice programs in each state of the union. This information at the time of this writing is available on their website. Those interested can also signup to receive news, event details, and action alerts from the PFM advocacy team in one’s state and Congress.[[42]](#footnote-42) This facilitates church involvement in advocating for change in the justice system.

The local church can also assist in meeting long-term needs such as employment, relationship counseling, and prayer. Local churches can look in the surrounding community for ministries and resources that may already provide job training and opportunities for newly released prisoners. If a former prisoner has a family and moving back in with them, the relationship is about to experience a sudden change. A resource list for family or individual counseling can be helpful. Prayer is a powerful redemptive activity at any phase of ministry to the imprisoned.

Another great resource is reentry mentoring. “The outside world is filled with many distractions, temptations, and roadblocks for former prisoners. Prisoners can be proactive by contacting churches in their community up to a year before their release.” A local church can assign an in-prison mentor who can begin building a relationship with them. Some states do not permit in-prison mentors to continue the mentoring relationship post-release, so review state regulations.[[43]](#footnote-43) [Mentoring provides support and accountability](https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/mentoring-ministry/on-going-ministry/become-a-reentry-mentor/?_ga=2.33641121.1231093347.1539636848-769309460.1539636848) for former prisoners while they face the challenges of reentry. Mentors can encourage, befriend, and guide them as they prepare for reentry and once they leave prison.

Wesley gave a list of acts of mercy, “The feeding the hungry, the clothing the naked, the entertaining or assisting the stranger, the visiting those that are sick or in prison, the comforting the afflicted, the instructing the ignorant, the reproving the wicked, the exhorting and encouraging the well-doer…”[[44]](#footnote-44) Visiting prisoners makes the list.

Congregants who are business owners are in a particularly strategic position to help the recently released. Meaningful work and the ability to develop skills helps imbue dignity. Some medications can create a false positive on a drug test so graciousness and wisdom is necessary. Background checks that reveal a felony can be handled with kind inquiry. Where danger to clients or constituents is not a concern, job offers to the previously incarcerated are a substantial means of grace.

Christians who have family members who have been incarcerated are particularly accountable to offer forgiveness and grace. The apostle John tells us, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

John Wesley himself said in a sermon entitled “God’s Love to Fallen Man” that “the more we deal our bread to the hungry, and cover the naked with garments, -- the more we relieve the stranger and visit them that are sick or in prison,--the more kind offices we do to those that groan under the various evils of human life,-- the more comfort we receive even in the present world, the greater the recompence we have in our own bosom.”[[46]](#footnote-46) These acts of mercy are an extension of the free grace of God. In Wesley’s view grace restored the parts of the soul necessary for responsible personhood and accountability because of the terrible effects of original sin.[[47]](#footnote-47) Engaging in compassionate acts of mercy toward the imprisoned is the Christian’s response to imprisonment in the Wesleyan tradition.

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9. Matthew 23:23-26 English Standard Version [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Matthew 7:1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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14. # 2 Cor. 5:18-19

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15. Luke 15:11-32 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 2 Peter 3:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 2 Cor. 5:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. # Luke 23:39-4

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