

“Walls In History” A Historical Perspective On Prison Ministry

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A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON PRISON MINISTRY

Before Jesus commissioned all of His disciples to make disciples of all nations he commissioned a number of John the Baptist’s followers to carry on a prison ministry to their teacher. They were to answer the question whether Jesus was the Promised One or whether they should expect someone else. With the commission went the message: “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me (Lk 7:18-23).” In that message there was, and is, also “freedom for the prisoners (Lk 4:18; Is 61:1).”

Acts 16:25 records a prison ministry carried on by prisoners: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and *the other prisoners were listening to them.*” That event in Philippi also marked the first occasion, but not the last, when a prison official was also converted by the gospel preached in prison: “He and all his family were baptized.... He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family (Ac 16:33f).”

The Savior of all men, who will come again as the Judge of all, teaches us that any service rendered to the least of his brothers and sisters is service done to him. He includes visiting those in prison as one of the expressions and evidences that we fear, love and trust him (Mt 25:31-46). “I was in prison and you came to visit me (v 36).”

Such service is done to him. Indeed, it is an imitation of God’s impartial love. The verb used in verse 43 is instructive here. “You did not look after me” is the NIV’s rendering of *epeskepsasthe*. It is the *aorist* of the middle deponent *episkeptomai*: “visit, go to see, look after.” It is a verb used to describe God’s activity. Zacharias praised the Lord God of Israel, who “*epeskepsato* and has redeemed his people (Lk 1:68).” He sang of the “tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun *episkepsetai* us from heaven (Lk 1:78).” After the miracle at Nain, where Jesus raised the widow’s son, the witnesses glorified God and said, “God *epeskepsato* his people (Lk 7:16).” Prison ministry is divine work: commanded in the Great Commission, commended by the Judge, an imitation of God’s work.

“Keep on loving each other as brothers.... Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners,” wrote the inspired author of Hebrews (13:13). How have believers done that through the centuries ?

The anti-Christian Lucian wrote of them in the 2nd century: “Their first legislator has persuaded them that they are all each other’s brothers (*Death of a Pilgrim*).” Believers of that age before Christianity was legally tolerated by the Roman Empire were subject to imprisonment. Those who were not imprisoned remembered those who were. When it was possible they visited them. They brought food, comforted them with God’s Word, prayed with them. There is a record of a catechumen being baptized in prison before his death. Sometimes it was possible to celebrate the Lord’s Supper with prisoners.

Actual incarceration was usually of relatively brief duration, although there was no constitutional guarantee of a speedy trial. But once a trial had been held, the condemned were either put to death, remanded to be sold as slaves, condemned to a term in the mines or sent into exile. There was, in theory, no long-time confinement.

The Apostolic Constitutions, accumulated and edited through three centuries (3rd to 5th), contain instruction for all Christians on what “remembering those in bonds” could include. Since it refers to believers in prison because of their faith, it must pre-date the “universal toleration” of all religions which was decreed in 313.

Book V, Section 1 reads:

If any Christian, on account of the name of Christ, and love and faith towards God, be condemned by the ungodly to the games, to the beasts, or to the mines, do not ye overlook him; but send to him from your labor and your very sweat for his sustenance, and for a reward to the soldiers, that he may be eased and taken care of; that, as far as lies in your power, your blessed brother may not be afflicted.... Do you, all ye of the faithful, by your bishop, minister to the saints of your substance and of your labor. But if anyone has not, let him fast a day, and set apart that, and order it for the saints. But if anyone has superfluities, let him minister more to them according to the proportion of his ability. But if he can possibly sell all his livelihood, and redeem them out of prison, he will be blessed, and a friend of Christ.... And if these be such as to be attested to by Christ before his Father, you ought not to be ashamed to go to them in prison.

The passage says something about the prison system of that time. Nourishing food came from the outside. Guards could be “rewarded” for giving decent treatment to prisoners. Prisoners could be “redeemed” at a considerable price. The actual transactions seem to have been discharged by the bishops, although visits by individuals were also permitted.

We take special note of the apparent allusion to Matthew 25 in the final sentence of the selection from *Apostolic Constitutions*. Throughout the history of the Church, much of its literature, even Luther’s writings, treats Matthew 25: 31-46 with reference to the poor and sick while omitting reference to visiting those in prison.

Beginning with the Apostolic Fathers of the 2nd century the passage is cited to support the truth that Christ is the divine Judge and that our works will be judged when he comes again in glory. Other charitable works are often treated in some detail, but prison visits are not. Was it because prison visits were not often feasible? Was it that this was the work of clerical specialists, not the business of the laity? Does the silence necessarily mean that those in prison were being neglected? None of these questions can be answered definitely in the affirmative. Perhaps it is uncharitable to ask them. But the omission of reference to the prison visits in so many treatments of Matthew 25 is marked.

Many of the same writers knew something of the horrible prison conditions and the pitiful state of those imprisoned. They used the terrifying darkness, stifling heat, stench, cramped conditions, hunger and thirst as images in discussing spiritual bondage.

When the literature of the pre-Constantinian age—the time before Christianity was first tolerated, then accorded favorable treatment and finally established as the imperial religion—speaks of prisoners it is speaking of people imprisoned simply because they were Christians. In the view of the Roman authorities that meant they were guilty of all the crimes of which Christians were accused: atheism, treason, cannibalism, infanticide and homosexual incest. It took real fortitude to identify oneself with such people by visiting them or even writing to them.

Church leaders continued to do so, however, and to encourage other Christians to concern themselves. Tertullian (150-222) wrote in *Scorpiace*, chapter XI: “When (Jesus) wishes a brother to be visited in prison, he is commanding that those about to confess be the object of solicitude.”

The first systematic and concerted Empire-wide persecution of Christians took place under Decius and Gallienus during the years 249 to 260. Several of the surviving letters of Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (200-258) deal with the Church’s ministrations to those in prison. In *Letter 5* he wrote to the presbyters and deacons about “furnishing supplies to those who have confessed the Lord with words of joy and who are now to be found in prison.” He advises them not to go in too great numbers and not to let any one person go too often.

Some of the Christians imprisoned at Carthage starved to death in the year 250. We are not sure whether that happened before or after Cyprian began urging his people to care for those who were suffering for the faith. Like most pastors in all centuries he found it necessary to repeat his injunctions:

I am well aware, my dearest brothers, that I have repeatedly urged you in my letters to pay every care and attention to those who have confessed the Lord with words of glory and who are now to be found in prison. Nevertheless, I enjoin you again and again not to be wanting in any way in caring for those whose glory is itself not in any way wanting. (*Letter 12*)

Then, not too long before his own martyrdom, he rallied the churches of Carthage to raise funds to redeem Christian captives who had been sent to the mines in Numidia. They gathered 100,000 sesterces. Cyprian used the funds to redeem some and to relieve the lot of others. *Letter 77* is addressed to him by the presbyters and deacons in Numidia:

Those condemned with us give the greatest thanks to you before God, dearly beloved Cyprian, because you have refreshed struggling hearts by your letters; you have cured members wounded by cudgels; you have released feet bound with chains; you have smoothed the hair of half-shaved heads; you have illuminated the darkness of the prison; you have brought the mountains of the mine down to the plains; you have even brought fragrant flowers to noses and have dissipated the foul odor of smoke.

Lest we be tempted to idealize the Church of that time and imagine that all believers were as whole-hearted in their support of their fellow Christians, we must note the complaint of Gregory Thaumaturgus (d.269). Some of his charges collected rewards by turning in captives who had escaped. He counseled that they be barred from attending the services even as hearers until it was determined what discipline to impose on them.

The next great wave of persecution began under Diocletian and his co-rulers in 303. There are not many stories of heroism from that time. However, visiting the saints in prison brought persecution to Saints Anastasia and Natalie.

The man who issued the Edict of Milan jointly with Constantine in 313 was an active persecutor before he relented. Determined to carry out Diocletian’s policies, he decreed that “no one was to show kindness to sufferers in prison by supplying them with food, and that no one was to show mercy to those who were starving in prison (quoted in *Christianity Today* 17:4, Nov. 24, 1972).”

Briefly reviewing this initial period, when the church and its members had no status in law, we see that there was a prison ministry. It concerned itself with body and soul. It involved considerable risk and sacrifice on the part of those who carried it out. Leaders had to repeatedly urge the people to remember those in prison. It was a ministry to the Church’s “own,” not to

heathen inmates. However, there must have been occasions when, as with Paul and Silas at Philippi, Christian testimony reached the ears and hearts of prison officers and pagan prisoners.

On June 13, 313 at Milan, the Emperors Constantine and Licinius issued a joint proclamation. It provided “that no one whatever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion, or of that religion which he should think best for himself” and “that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases.”

That meant that no more Christians would be imprisoned because of their faith, but it did not mean that there were no longer any Christians in prison. Even after the Church was formally established as *the* religion of the Empire in 381, and all citizens were by definition Christians, the Church still needed a prison ministry.

Succeeding emperors from Constantine onward legislated that the humane treatment of prisoners should be under the supervision of the bishops. Honorius, who reigned in the West from 395 to 425, ordered that prisoners be mustered before the bishops every Sunday so that they could report on their treatment. Justinian issued a law in 529, which commissioned the bishops to visit prisoners every Wednesday and Friday. They were to offer pastoral counsel and listen to the prisoners’ complaints and desires. A synod at Orleans in 549 required the archdeacon of a diocese to see all prisoners every Sunday.

The purpose of prisons continued to be what it had been under the pagan Empire. The *Digest of the Corpus Iuris Civilis* stated: “A prison is for confinement, not for punishment.” The guilty were still put to death, inflicted with corporal punishment, sent to the mines or exiled. Sometimes exile, particularly in the case of aristocratic political prisoners, consisted simply of banishment to a monastery. There was, or ought to have been, a built-in prison ministry there.

Members of the imperial family, including the women, took the lead as the principal Christians of the Empire in visiting prisoners.

John Chrysostom (347-407), patriarch of Constantinople, wrote in his *Baptismal Instructions*, under the heading “Do All for the Glory of God”: “If you ever wish to associate with someone make sure that you do not give your attention to those who enjoy health and wealth and fame as the world sees it, but take care of those in affliction, those in critical circumstances, those in prison. Put a high value on associating with these.”

In a sermon on Matthew 25:40 he said “(Jesus) said: ‘As long as you did not do it for one of these least ones, you did not do it for me.’ In this He was not speaking only of His disciples, or of those who have adopted the life of monks, but of every one of the faithful. Any man who believes in God... has a right to enjoy all kindness.... What difficult or burdensome thing has He required of us ? What that is not, on the contrary, very convenient and easy?... He did not say: ‘I was in prison and you did not get me out,’ but ‘you did not come to me.’

“Well, then, the lighter the commands, so much the more severe will be the punishment for those who do not obey. What, indeed, is a lighter task than to go and visit the prison ? And what task is sweeter ? You will see some in fetters, others squalid; some with unkempt hair and clad in rags, others wasting away with hunger and running to your feet like dogs; some with their sides torn by lashes, others just returning, bound, from the marketplace. Though they have begged all day, they have obtained not even the food they need; yet in the evening what they have collected painfully and toilsomely is demanded of them by their guards. After this, even if you be stone, you will be at all events more merciful; even if you are living a soft and extravagant life, you will at least be wiser, because of having seen the condition of mankind in the light of the misfortune of others....

“Let us not, then, neglect to practice deeds of this kind and to live such a way of life. Even if we should be unable to bring in food or to help by giving money, we still can cheer the prisoners by our words and hearten the soul that is discouraged, and assist in many other ways: for example, by conversing with the jailers, and making the guards more kind. In fine, we shall accomplish some good, whether little or great.

“Moreover, if you say that there are not estimable, or upright, or well-mannered men in prison, but rather, murderers, and grave-robbers, and purse snatchers, and adulterers, and libertines, and men weighted down with many crimes, even by this observation you are showing me the necessity for your visiting there. For we have not been bidden to show mercy to the good, and to punish the wicked, but to show this kindness to all. Indeed, Scripture says: ‘Be as your Father in heaven who makes his sun to rise on the good and the evil, and sends the rain on the just and the unjust.’

“...There are probably many upright and estimable men in prison, even if they are not recognized by all. The service you do to such as these gives you a return for your solicitude on behalf of all the rest. But, even if there be no one of this kind, even in this case you will have generous repayment....

“(Jesus) was not ashamed, but came and visited our prison. Though we were deserving of innumerable punishments, He brought us forth from there and led us into His kingdom and made us more resplendent than the heavens, so that we also might act in the same way according to our power. I say this for He declared to His disciples: ‘If, therefore, I the Lord and Master have washed your feet, you also ought to wash the feet of one another. For I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you also should do.’ This precept He recorded not merely with reference to the washing of feet, but also with regard to all the other things in which He gave us His example.

“Is there a murderer living in the prison? Let us not, despite this be fainthearted in doing him good. Is there a grave robber or an adulterer? Still, let us take pity, not on their evil doing, but on their misfortune....

“As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren,’ He said, ‘you did it for me.’

“Well, then, since we are aware of the treasure that lies available in prison, let us visit there continually; let us busy ourselves there; and let us turn in that direction our enthusiasm for the theater. Even though you have nothing to bring there, bring the good cheer of your words. God rewards not only him who feeds the hungry but him also who visits those in prison. Indeed, when you go in and hearten the trembling and fearful soul, by offering encouragement, lending assistance, promising to defend, causing it to seek after true wisdom, you will receive no small reward for this, also (*Homily 60*).”

Chrysostom’s younger contemporary, Palladius, commends a number of believers who committed themselves and their resources to the material well being of prisoners. Of more interest to us is the work of an anonymous monk, also cited by Palladius, who “preferred not to be ordained to the priesthood.” He “went about at night and had mercy on the needy. He neglected neither the prison nor the hospital.... To some he gave words of good cheer.... Some he encouraged, others he reconciled, to some he gave bodily necessities (*The Lausiatic History*, ca. 415).”

In the mid-fifth century Bishop Valerius of Cuneium (today a neighborhood in Nice) preached on Matthew 25:31-46 and omitted any reference to visiting in prison (*Homily 9*). Why? A logical reason would seem to be that prison ministry was the responsibility of bishops by law, and therefore not the concern of lay Christians.

Caesarius of Arles (ca. 470-542) in his *Sermon 179* probably tells us more about a work-righteous penitential system than about prison ministry. His words do, however, lay the plight of prisoners on the conscience of the reader: “As often as a man... looks tardily for those who are placed in prison...without any doubt (he) commit(s) sin.... I now wish to explain more fully to you by what works slight offenses may be redeemed. As often as we...look into prison.... by these and similar works slight offenses are redeemed every day.”

The attitudes and arrangements with regard to prisoners that the Empire Church incorporated into law continued into the Middle Ages. Prisons continued to be temporary places of detention before trial rather than places of long-term punishment. The guilty were executed, mutilated, flogged, branded, fined (after the 8th century) or enslaved.

The standard pastoral theology text of the West during the Middle Ages was the *Liber Curae Pastoralis* of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604). It is interesting, but it may not be especially significant, that there is no specific treatment of prison ministry in this book. We need not infer that he had no concern for prisoners. More likely, he correctly assumed that ministry to sinners in prison is in its essence the same as ministry to sinners in the general population.

Although much of the available information on prison ministry before 1500 comes to us in an incidental and indirect way, it seems safe to assume that in every age there were bishops and abbots, priests and people who cared and acted. It also seems a fair assumption, based on our knowledge and general history, that there were those who did not care or act

The idea of prison *terms* as punishment seems to have arisen in Europe in the 15th century. The old order of Christendom—the European Christian theocracy of the Holy Roman Empire—in which the Catholic Church found its social and political expression, was in utter collapse. Concurrently, there was a rebirth of interest in classical art and literature: humanism. Was the idea of long-term imprisonment as more humane than corporal punishment and mutilation connected with either or both of these developments? Was it a policy of desperation in the attempt to cope with increasing crime? I don’t know.

But, just before the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, prison populations increased. In the German lands the church orders of the evangelical territorial churches from the beginning earnestly enjoined local pastors to visit prisoners, particularly those who were condemned to death. Later, special ministries for convicts were established by the various German states. The pastoral care of those held on suspicion or awaiting trial was the responsibility of local pastors. The involvement of lay Christians under certain circumstances and with the clergy’s approval was also provided for in some of the church orders.

Two martyrs of the English Reformation involved themselves in a voluntary ministry to prisoners during the years when they were first learning Luther’s doctrine. Thomas Bilney (burned under Henry VIII in 1531) and Hugh Latimer (burned under Bloody Mary in 1555) “went together and exhorted them as well as we were able.” Latimer also counseled prisoners at Newgate Prison. In 1549 he appealed to King Edward “that such men as shall be put to death may have learned men to give them instruction and exhortations.” (Quotations from John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls*, New York: Harper and Brothers 1951).

John Calvin’s Geneva was an attempt at Christian theocracy in much the way the Roman Empire under Constantine and his successors had been. Like the Christian emperors, Calvin had to be realistic about the need for prisons. Like them, he drafted legislation intended to provide for the spiritual care of prisoners. In the *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of Autumn 1541, he wrote:

It will be good that their Lordships ordain a certain day each week on which admonition be given to prisoners, to reprove and exhort them; and if it seem good to

them, let them depute someone of their company in order that no fraud be committed. If they have anyone in irons, whom it is not desirable to take out, if it seems good to them, they could give entry to some minister to console him in their presence as above. For if one waits until they are about to die, they are often so preoccupied with fear of death that they can neither receive nor listen. The day for doing this, it is decided, will be Saturday after dinner.

Two Catholic saints of the Counter-Reformation deserve mention. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), archbishop of Milan, demonstrated a warm practical concern for convicts during and after their imprisonment. In France Vincent de Paul (1576-1660), a nobleman and onetime galley slave, organized the Order of Lazarists and the Sisters of Mercy to do what would today be called Christian social work. He and his orders took a special interest in prisoners, particularly galley slaves.

In Protestant England and Europe the Reformation doctrine gave way to Pietism and then to Rationalism. The general quality of pastoral care in the time when Rationalism dominated the established churches has been characterized as defective. Pastoral care for prison inmates was virtually non-existent.

Prisons were now regarded as places of punishment. Debtor's prisons brought entire families under confinement. Ever more inmates, ever less interest on the part of the institutional church to provide spiritual care. Usually a minister spent some time with condemned prisoners on the day of execution and accompanied them to the gallows. But of regular visitation, instruction and divine service there was little.

Relief and remedy and a pattern for prison ministry came from volunteer individuals and associations. Some of those are remembered for their work in prison reform were often motivated in the first place by their desire to do prison ministry.

The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, all of whose members were Anglicans, included prison ministry among its many worthy undertakings almost from the time of its founding in 1699.

The honor roll of individuals begins with Philip Doddridge (1702-1751). The author of six hymns in *The Lutheran Hymnal* was a Congregationalist pastor in Northampton, England. He trained his elders for spiritual service to prisoners. John Wesley (1703-1791) and his Methodist followers visited prisoners regularly, especially those who were under sentence of death.

Methodist businessman John Howard's report to Parliament on prison conditions (1774) and his book *The State of Prisons in England and Wales...* (1777) moved Parliament to vote funds for two "penitentiary houses" to rehabilitate prisoners by, among other things, religious instruction. Thus, a new purpose was assigned to the imprisonment of criminals: rehabilitation. The prison was to be a place of repentance, with government-appointed chaplains and with a Bible in every cell. This concept made its way to the New World in the early 19th century, with New York and Pennsylvania leading the way in establishing penitentiaries.

While Francis Asbury (1745-1816) was a circuit-riding Methodist missionary he ministered to prisoners whenever he had opportunity. He attended executions and on several occasions redeemed the time by preaching to the crowds who had gathered for the hanging. His *Journal* includes several accounts similar to this: "The poor criminal appeared penitent, behaved with great solidity, and expressed a desire to leave the world." And this: "I returned to Philadelphia, where there were five criminals hanged; one of them was converted." *Journal* references to such visits disappeared after he was named the first Methodist bishop for the United States. He was still a truly heroic circuit rider, but now he was an administrator as well. To put it that way is not to be snide

about him or about administrators. It is to remind ourselves that the press of urgent duties, the needs and demands of those we can see, tend to make us forget the spiritual plight of those we cannot see. Many of Asbury's preachers, as good followers of Wesley and disciples of Jesus Christ, did continue to visit those in prison.

The Quaker Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) began daily visits to women and children at Newgate Prison in 1813. She read the Scriptures to them, prayed with them and taught the women to sew. This work is memorialized in a famous painting. In 1819 she organized committees of Quaker women in order to enlarge and extend the work. This work continued by the Prison Gate Mission, which concerns itself with the spiritual care and bodily welfare of convicts and discharged prisoners. Elizabeth Fry inculcated the principle that "Charity to the soul is the soul of charity."

Mrs. Fry traveled to Germany to learn more about prison ministry from Dr. Theodor Fliedner (1800-1864). The founder of the Deaconess Institute at Kaiserswerth also organized the Rhenish-Westphalian Prison Association in 1826. In 1833 he initiated a kind of half-way house program for released women convicts, utilizing a 10' by 10' garden house in his backyard for that purpose.

Another German evangelical who merits mention is Johann Hinrich Wichern (1809-1881). He was the founder of the Innere Mission at Hamburg. Among the many elements of German society with whom he sought to share the Savior's love was the prison population. He carried out a program of prison reform at the behest of Kaiser Friederich Wilhelm IV of Prussia.

An edifying book which all present ought to read if they have not already done so is Pastor Arnold H. Schroeder's *Other Sheep* (Northwestern Publishing House 1981). It briefly sketches the beginnings of hospital and prison ministry in the Synodical Conference and the WELS, particularly in Milwaukee. More important, it testifies on every page to the spirit and power of the Gospel which the Evangelical Lutheran preaches. There is nothing that the least of Christ's brothers and sisters need as much as they need this. No one else can offer the Good News in the unqualified and unmixed form in which we know it. God give us the love and will and energy to do it.

One of the members of the Nixon administration who served a prison term was Charles Colson. While incarcerated he underwent a conversion to Christianity. His Prison Fellowship Ministries and Community Care Committees have concentrated on personal witness, religious instruction and morale building. They depend to a considerable extent on volunteers, including lay volunteers, from the communities that lie near prison facilities.

Church History has its prophets, men and women who told forth that there was a need to remedy, and who inspired and directed others in doing it. We have mentioned the names of a few in this essay.

Some of those prophets have also been outstanding in their self-sacrificing service to prisoners. They and a great many anonymous pastors worked to gather, feed and lead Christ's "other sheep." The names, methods and approaches of many are lost to history. People who have a heart for this work don't always have the time or the ability to leave a record of just what they did and how they did it. But when a Lutheran is involved in prison ministry his message and approach must be essentially what they are when he pastors other people. Law and gospel, sin and grace, justification by faith alone, sanctification as the fruit of faith. Anything else would be betrayal of our Lord and his gospel. Coming from a Lutheran pastor anything else would be alien, phony and ineffective.

Church History does not establish doctrine. Scripture alone can do that. Church History does not motivate us to ministry. Only our Savior's love can do that. Church History does not govern our practice. The Bible and evangelical good sense alone can do that.

What we gain from Church History and from a historical survey such as this are examples—good and bad—of people and plans and activities. The good examples are there for us to emulate; the sound plans are there for us to adopt or adapt, always allowing for changing conditions. The bad examples we try not to imitate. Church History also helps us evaluate our attitudes and actions. Especially, it helps us appreciate that the Gospel is God's only power for saving sinners—those in prison and those outside.

* File from WELSNET (Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod) BBS: (414)475-7514