



In Darkest Prison and the Way Out

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I was e-mailed a copy of the text of one of Charles Colson's radio talks a couple of months ago. The general context was a discussion of the White House's Office of Faith-based Initiatives. But what jumped out was Colson's mention of his "Christian prison" in Texas.

I had known about his Prison Fellowship ministry and its effective chaplaincy and visitation work, but a Christian prison!? It sounded like a contradiction in terms. All the same, the man who was talking about the idea had to be taken seriously. In addition to being a highly respected Christian leader, Charles Colson the notorious Watergate convict knows something about prison first-hand.

So I bought his new book, *Justice that Restores*, to learn more. The book describes the InnerChange Freedom Initiative in Texas, "the first Christian prison in America," run by Prison Fellowship U.S.A.; and at greater length, two similar programs in South America.

Humaita Prison in São Paulo, Brazil, was run for twenty-five years by two Catholic laymen who "promised the state that they would run the prison as a Christian institution, the state providing only the facility and food." "When inmates arrived at Humaita, their chains were removed, and they were told that in this prison they are constrained not by steel but by the love of Christ."

In Quito, Ecuador, Prison Fellowship runs one wing of the Garcíá Moreno Prison. Colson describes a visit he paid that institution in 1996: "There were fresh bloodstains on

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the steps of the entranceway as we passed through, the result of someone having been beaten while he was dragged into the prison....The conditions in the prison were unspeakably bad, and corruption was pervasive....[But] Jorge Crespo led us through another darkened corridor into Pavilion C, the unit that was turned over to our ministry. It was like walking from darkness into a radiant light. At the far end of the cellblock was what looked like an altar with a huge cross silhouetted against a brightly painted concrete wall. Gathered in the open area before the altar were more than two hundred inmates singing, applauding. They were glowing with joy and enthusiasm."

Colson's book recites staggering statistics that tell a different story elsewhere. There are 2 million people in prisons and jails in the U.S.A., four times more than just twenty years ago. America has the second highest rate of incarceration in the world. Recidivism is about 70 percent—which means that of every ten people in prison now, seven will commit a new crime and be sent back.

Data like these lead Charles Colson to conclude that something is desperately wrong and that our justice system must be changed. Associating him with the philosophy of the Nixon administration and "law-and-order" types, I expected Colson to call for more police, mandatory minimum sentences, and more jails. To my surprise, he is in favor of none of these things! The change we actually need, he says, is a change in society's fundamental understanding of "justice."

In place of worldviews that treat criminal activity as pathology needing cure or environmental tragedy needing a sociological fix, we need to reaffirm the moral dimension

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of crime. In place of worldviews that regard moral responsibility as purely individualistic, we need to reaffirm the communal responsibility for the character of each member of the community. In place of worldviews that say crimes are primarily against “the state,” we need to re-establish the connection between the offender and the flesh-and-blood victims he or she has wronged. In place of worldviews that regard punishment as deterrent or payment for misdeeds, we need to gear punishment to the transformation and restoration of the offender. Erroneous worldviews now dominate the thinking of politicians, judges, lawyers and academics, according to Colson’s book. Needed correctives are to be found in the Bible’s teaching about justice.

In some ways Charles Colson reminds me of William Booth—the dynamic personal leadership, coupled with an ability to organize thousands of people in support of a cause; the call to creative practical action in the face of enormous social problems. But most significantly, both Booth and Colson demand that the practical action be rooted in a genuine understanding of the Bible. In words that could have come from the mouth of William Booth, Colson writes: “For those of us in the evangelical tradition, evangelism has always been first and foremost in our minds. It is the *great commission*. It has to be the first call on the Christian. But we often do this at the expense of a mandate that in some respects is equally crucial. This is what is called the *cultural commission*. Sin introduced a destructive power into God’s created order, but it did not obliterate that order. When we are redeemed, we are not only free from the sinful motivations that drive us, but we are

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also restored to begin fulfilling our original purpose, empowered to do what we were created to do.”

I am still uneasy about the idea of private Christian prisons. And I think that *Justice that Restores* tends to use very broad brushstrokes in its analysis of the ills of our society. But this is a book Salvationists should not ignore—like Booth’s Darkest England scheme, Colson’s plan for justice reform believes God’s saving grace is boundless.

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