

“Understanding Prison Ministry from a Christian Worldview”
Romans 12:21

CROSS OF CHRIST DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

2173 Potomac Club Parkway

Woodbridge, Virginia 22191

Home Office# 703 580-8586

Mobile# 919 349-5686

Email – disciplescross@aol.com

Website - www.crossofchristdm.org

Written by
Michael R. Smith, Sr., M. Div.
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Introduction

Prison ministry is one area of missions the local church must increase its efforts in the 21st century. Presently, the United States of America leads the world in incarcerating our citizens. The 2008 report from The Pew Center on the States reveals “Three decades of growth in America’s prison population has quietly nudged the nation across a sobering threshold: for the first time, more than one in every 100 adults is now confined in an American jail or prison (2,245,189).”¹ This reality means our prison population is the largest mission field in our country. The social ramifications of so many lives impacted by incarceration are staggering when you think about victims of crime, children of inmates, offenders’ families, economic issues, and inmates. Also, the local church is filled with persons affected by crime or incarceration. I believe we are in the midst of a crime and incarceration crisis in our country. Now is the time for churches to become strategic leaders in responding to this crisis by having effective prison ministries.

The question needs to be raised why prison ministry is such a low priority for most local churches? Why don’t church leaders promote and encourage more outreach to lives impacted by crime and incarceration? In the midst of this crime and incarceration crisis, why is this issue still being ignored by the church? Thankfully, over the past several years we have seen a slow increase of attention given to preventive and aftercare issues in responding to youth and persons returning from prison. This reality is encouraging, but the need is so great, it will take church coalitions to address it adequately. Yet each local church is where prison ministry can begin reaching, reconciling, and restoring lives.

¹ The Pew Center on the States, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, 3.

Nowhere in our society are we challenged to get more involved than in prison ministry.

“Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself.”²

Definition of Prison Ministry

Defining prison ministry is crucial if church leaders are going to be effective in leading churches to get more involved. The traditional view of prison ministry is a group of volunteers from a local church going to a prison to hold services for the inmates. The success of the service is determined by how many of the inmates came to Christ at the end of the service. Prison ministry in this context is defined as going to prisons to preach to inmates in order for them to be saved. This surface understanding of prison ministry is prevalent still today. The crime and incarceration crisis is challenging the church to see prison ministry from different angles. This leads to defining prison ministry from a broader perspective. In reality, the prison is only a physical location where a person is incarcerated. The term “prison” ministry only describes where the ministry will take place. The operative word is “ministry”. Thus, defining prison ministry is more concerned about to whom we minister than where. The incarcerated person is to whom the ministry comes. This may seem to be simplistic, but over the years, I have seen too many volunteers who cannot make the distinction. Prison ministry that does not reach the incarcerated person is not prison ministry. This leads us to understand that defining prison ministry begins with understanding the incarcerated person. Who are these individuals?

² Heb. 13:3 (NLT).

The second part of defining prison ministry has more to do with the prison context, than its location. Those involved in prison ministry must understand the prison *culture*.

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Lennie Spitale understands, “Prison is another culture. It has its own code of ethics, its own mores and social values. Prisoners have their own language...But prison is more than just a whole new vocabulary; it is an experience filled with different codes of behavior and unwritten laws that define what is acceptable and what is not. It is a mindset, a backdrop that swallows up the inhabitants by degrees and conforms them to twists and weaves of its cold gray fabric...Each mind, alone in its confrontation with this culture, must find its own way to be safe, must find its own way to survive. Prison life is a prevailing and paradoxical encounter with loneliness while living in the midst of a shoe box crammed with other people.”³

The third part of defining prison ministry must address the method of ministry. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor lecturing on evangelism in the prison setting said, “Our evangelistic efforts must be more than tambourines and drums.”⁴ Dr. Taylor was alluding to attempts that ministering in prison must not be confined to one method. The primary method many use is preaching. Preaching is always good, but it is not always the *best* method in reaching an incarcerated person living in a prison culture. Our methods of ministry must utilize diverse means to meet the various needs of inmates. For example, various methods can include letter writing, discipleship training classes, hospice care,

³ Lennie Spitale, *Prison Ministry, Understanding Prison Culture In and Out*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002), preface x-xi.

⁴ Gardner C. Taylor, Question and Answer Period, General Baptist State Convention of N. C. Evangelism Conference, White Rock Baptist Church, Durham, N.C., March 10, 1990.

aftercare/reentry assistance, helping inmate families, family visitation transportation, mentoring children of inmates, community sponsor to local churches, and one on one

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visitation. Inmates have various levels of education, different cultural experiences, and various religious traditions. Prison volunteers must be mature and skilled enough to use the best ministry method for the particular needs of inmates.

Therefore, defining prison ministry takes into account the individual inmate, the prison culture, and various methods of ministry. I submit the following definition of prison ministry. *Prison ministry is reaching out to incarcerated persons living in a unique environment through various ministries seeking reconciliation with Jesus Christ and restoration with family and society.*

A Biblical Perspective toward Prisoners

The prison ministry leader and volunteers in a local church must have a biblical worldview regarding prisons. The question is how does God see persons who are incarcerated? The Bible gives us the answers. Beginning in the Old Testament the first mention of a prison was in Genesis 39:20-23. Joseph was unjustly thrown into prison but the Lord was still with him. The Lord also granted Joseph great favor while in prison and he became the chief executive for the keeper of the prison. These verses teach us just because a persons are incarcerated, it does not stop God from using them according to His will. Prison ministry volunteers soon discover the Lord's presence is in the prisons because He lives in the hearts of prisoners He has redeemed. A biblical worldview toward prisoners reveals to a prison volunteer that just like Joseph, there are Christians

incarcerated. Over the years it has always baffled me how many Christians don't have biblical worldview about the church. Many Christians see the physical building as the church instead of themselves. This is why some volunteers who get involved in prison

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ministry cannot connect with prisoners. They cannot and some will not believe or understand that part of the Body of Christ (the church) is in prison. Charles Colson writes, "One of the basic elements of confusion about the role of the church is apparent in how we use the word *church*. To both Christians and nonbelievers alike, it means first, a building...The misconception of the church as a building is a symptom of a much deeper problem: a misunderstanding of its character and its biblical purpose and mission."⁵

Prison ministry suffers greatly from a lack of involvement because many Christians have a false understanding of the identity of the church. A biblical worldview toward prison ministry helps one to understand God has a church inside the prison.

The Letter to Philemon is a biblical account of the Apostle Paul bringing a run away slave and thief named Onesimus to Christ in a Roman prison. How many others may have been converted while in prison? The Apostle Paul disciplined Onesimus in prison before his return back to Philemon. Paul gives us an excellent model for prison ministry outreach and discipleship training. The church in prison is made up of all persons redeemed since coming into prison and persons who were Christians prior to entering prison. In our present day, religious persecution in some countries has led to the incarceration of many Christians who continue to serve Christ behind bars. Yes there are churches inside prison walls. When prison ministry leaders understand this truth, they are

⁵ Charles Colson and Ellen Vaughn, *Being the Body*, (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2003), 20-21.

freed to join in ministry with what the Lord is already doing inside the prison. Effective prison ministry always embraces a Christian worldview toward prisoners.

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Equipping and Training Prison Volunteers

The next vital part of effective prison ministry is getting volunteers equipped and trained for serving in the prison setting. One of the most tragic aspects of prison ministry is to see ill-prepared persons coming into prisons. This leads to a bad witness for Christ, ineffective ministry to inmates, safety and security problems, and even volunteers being walked out or charged with a crime. No one should be involved in prison ministry who has not been trained and equipped first. Preparing volunteers for prison ministry takes place in several ways.

First, the biblical basis for prison ministry should be studied and understood. The Bible record has many instances where Christians were in prison and shows how God worked in the midst. The Bible reveals God's on-going presence in the prison. The Apostles John and Paul wrote much of the New Testament from places of confinement. The Bible teaches the church should be involved in reaching out to lives impacted by crime and incarceration.

Secondly, volunteers should receive basic correctional training from the prison facility where they will be serving. State and federal correctional systems require volunteers to receive orientation training annually. This training is important because it provides vital information about prison policy, do's and don'ts, changes in prison procedures,

emergency protocol, proper dress attire, and other information. The prison Chaplain will also provide information about types of ministries needed, time and place for programs, and escort procedures.

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Thirdly, volunteers should take advantage of para-church organizations like Prison Fellowship Ministries. Prison Fellowship was founded by convicted Watergate conspirator Charles Colson and has become the largest prison ministry in the world. Prison Fellowship is primarily a volunteer supported ministry that provides quality training in prison ministry. The faithful ministry of Prison Fellowship has been instrumental in keeping prison ministry on the agenda of the local church. Many local churches have modeled some of Prison Fellowship's programs in their efforts to reach out to prisoners and their families. The strength of Prison Fellowship is its unwavering commitment to declare the Gospel of Jesus Christ in reaching out to prisoners and their families. Prison Fellowship's success is not measured in numbers, but in love shown. "In the final analysis, successful ministry comes when, in love, we dispense the grace that has been given to us. Like our Lord's ministry, we give this grace freely and expect nothing in return. The response to our gift of grace does not determine successful ministry; rather, it is determined by the spirit in which it is offered. Such ministry relates to attitudes of the heart that no person can judge; therefore, it is in God's realm."⁶ These words by Henry Covert hit the center of our motives and expectations for prison ministry.

The importance of being trained and equipped for prison ministry cannot be overstated. Every local church must take advantage of training and ensure the on-going

⁶ Henry G. Covert, *Ministry to the Incarcerated*, (Chicago, Illinois: Loyola Press, 1995), 6.

opportunities for equipping. Dr. Covert goes on to say, “Prison volunteers bring life and hope to people who desperately need acceptance and the motivation to improve their lives.”⁷

Five Types of Prison Ministry

Prison ministry is much broader than just ministry within the prison itself. Our understanding of prison ministry must include at-risk youth, persons in prison, persons leaving prison, and victims of crime. Prison ministry must be preventing, reaching, reconciling, restoring, and interceding for lives impacted by crime and incarceration. The local church must prayerfully choose which of the five types of prison ministry they are called to perform or best equipped to carry out.

At-risk youth ministry is preventive prison ministry. This type of prison ministry is designed to reach at-risk youth in an effort to keep them out of prison or providing alternatives to young persons who have gotten in trouble with the law. The local church can provide alternative solutions to incarceration for non-violent first time youthful offenders. Another area the local church can make a difference is with the children of inmates. This select group is more likely to follow the path of the incarcerated parent. Local church ministries like the Ella J. Baker House in Boston, Massachusetts are models of establishing relationships with wayward youth and guiding to better choices. The ministry of presence is critical in reaching our at-risk youth. Listen to gang⁸banger Selvin Brown’s reason why the gangs are successful in recruiting young people. “I am

⁷ Ibid, 111.

⁸ John Leland, *God vs. Gangs*, Newsweek Magazine, June 1, 1988, p.26.

there when Johnny goes out for a loaf of bread for mama. I'm there, you're not. I win, you lose. It's all about being there.”⁸ The local church must be there for at-risk youth.

In-prison ministry is probably the most popular type of prison ministry. This is a vital ministry because when Christians go into prisons, we bring the witness of Christ to a part of society that desperately needs it. We also affirm God's on-going work in the prison

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setting. Another aspect of this is the local church provides fellowship and encouragement to incarcerated Christians (Church behind the wall). This ministry takes place through worship services, Bible/discipleship classes, one on one visitation, and special fellowship services. One other very important way the local church can support in-prison ministry is by supporting the presence of full-time chaplains in prisons. Nothing is more crucial than having a Christian chaplain who is available to provide regular pastoral care inside the prison. The chaplain is the pastor in the prison setting and the key to all volunteer efforts.

Persons leaving prison are in need of the ministry of the local church. The term “reentry” is being used much today. President Bush spoke about helping persons who are returning to our communities during his 2004 State of the Union address. He even signed an Executive Order establishing the White House Faith Based Initiative which would provide funding to help ex-offenders. Reentry efforts are springing up all over the country to address this aspect of prison ministry. The local church can help cut recidivism by having an aftercare ministry for persons returning to the community. Statistics indicate that in 2008 almost 700,000 persons will leave prison returning to the community.”⁹

Another aspect of prison ministry are the victims of crime. This area needs more attention by local church ministries. If healing and reconciliation are to take place, it will

⁹ Charles Colson, *Admission of Failure, Corrections in Crisis*, BreakPoint Commentary, March 31, 2008, 2.

take the church to lead the way. The Bible teaches the church has been given the ministry of reconciliation.¹⁰ Victims of crime need ministry that can bring healing and in some cases even reconciliation with the offender. This is what God has done for us in Christ. The local church has many opportunities to do the same now in prison ministry.

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The local church's response to crime and incarceration must be informed by a Christian worldview. Too many Christians are looking at this area of ministry without a biblical perspective. I submit the following practical responses for the local church to embrace if we are to lead in prison ministry from a biblical perspective.

- Diligently bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by sharing this truth in our communities, courts, jails, and prisons.
- Provide practical biblical solutions at the table of discussion for reducing crime, incarceration, and recidivism.
- Promote restorative justice and mercy to ensure both are preserved in our society's law enforcement, judicial, and correctional systems.
- Promote social stability, order, decency, and civility by preaching and teaching the value of human life.
- Be willing to receive persons into our care/fellowship who have been placed on probation, parole, or released from prison.
- Reach out to embrace, comfort, or aid the families of both victim and offender.
- Seriously support and acquire specialized training that can effectively equip persons who are called to minister in the area of crime and incarceration.
- Intentionally bring a biblical perspective and understanding regarding crime and incarceration that will lead to innovative ministry efforts.
- Prayerfully and financially support prison chaplaincy and prison ministries (eg. Prison Fellowship) that evangelize, disciple, and mentor persons while in prison.

¹⁰ 2 Cor. 5:17-21.

- Promote awareness for crime and incarceration issues by having special services, conferences and activities that educate and equip the church to make a difference.
- Be a powerful prophetic voice speaking out to ensure religious freedom is legally protected and upheld in our laws.
- See persons who are at-risk, victims of crime, or law breakers as people of great value to God no matter what they have done.

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