

# Towards a Missional Theology of Prison Ministry

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## Introduction

One major common thread in academic literature advocating or discussing prison ministry is the use of Matthew 25:36b in which Jesus says, “I was in prison, and you visited me”,<sup>1</sup> as the foundational Scripture (e.g. LaHurd 2013; Levad 2011; McBride 2014; Nelson 2013; Pounder 2008; and Vargas 2013). However, I propose in this essay that a basis for the church’s involvement with prison and reentry ministries must be found outside Matthew 25. Also, I will offer insights into prison theology that will help inform a more robust missional theology of prison ministry, one that is grounded in redemption.

On a personal note, I was incarcerated at the California Institution for Women (CIW) for 30 years, from 1980 to 2010, as a result of domestic violence; the man with whom I was co-habiting beat my two-year-old daughter to death. Because I was unable to stop him, and this was prior to the state’s recognition of battered woman syndrome, I was considered an abettor and was sentenced to 15 years to life in prison. For 28 years I served as lay minister to the psychiatric unit of the prison while also being an active leader in the general population church. Most of my Masters in Theology degree work from Fuller Theological Seminary was completed while I was still incarcerated. After having parole granted by the Board of Prison Hearings ten times between 1989 and 2009, and vetoed each time by California governors, I was finally released on parole August 12, 2010. I am now discharged from parole and a PhD student who advocates for women prisoners.

My experience has been that prison theology originates within prison and prisoners, and is not something that can be imposed or formulated by outsiders such as chaplains, volunteers, or any other well-meaning person who has never been incarcerated. However, as someone who for thirty years lived, studied, and ministered as a prisoner, I propose to speak to some rudiments of prison theology, and that with a gendered perspective. I do not presume to speak for all

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prisoners, not even all women prisoners, but to provide a basic survey of topics and issues that will inform those who can be most effective in grappling with theology of prison ministry.

### **"I was in Prison, and you visited me"**

There are two reasons why Matthew 25:36b is not sufficient to be foundational for prison ministry. First, I maintain that the prison and prisoners referred to here by Jesus are not at all analogous to that of contemporary western society. This is because prisons as we know them were largely unheard of prior to the thirteenth century (Scotnicki 2012, 25). Modern prisons are a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Christian (Quaker) correction to prior practices of either summary execution or of corporal punishment (Moltmann 1994, 61). In biblical times and up until the eighteenth century, most people in prison were either debtors or political prisoners. In other words, most prisoners in biblical literature were not guilty of anything contemporary U.S. culture would be defining as crime because, historically, most people caught committing crimes were summarily executed, flogged or enslaved, but not imprisoned.

Second, Matthew 25:36 refers primarily to hospitality. Jesus is emphasizing the Old Testament themes of caring for the orphan, widow, and stranger by meeting their needs for food, water, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Matthew 25:36 does not address the underlying issues that the church faces today in dealing with imprisoned criminals and their reentry into society.<sup>2</sup> While hospitality to prisoners and ex-prisoners is a necessary *component* of prison ministry, hospitality is not the appropriate *foundation* for Christian response to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of persons incarcerated for crimes. Prison ministry teams who lead worship services in prisons will be crippled if what they are offering goes no deeper than a helping hand of hospitality. Likewise, churches will be greatly hindered in ministering to released prisoners and accepting them in their midst, if their members have not been helped to surmount their own fears, prejudices, and traumas related to crime and criminals. Yet the magnitude of the problem of mass incarceration in the U.S. is such that the church must be part of the solution.

### **Formulating a Robust Missional Theology of Prison**

In order to formulate a robust missional theology of prison ministry, churches need to examine specific themes relating to both prisoners and to prison theologies. After a brief look at the purpose and nature of prison ministry, this paper will probe Christological, ecclesiological and pneumatological aspects of a missional theology of prison ministry.

The *theological foundation* for prison ministry is not precisely the same as the *purpose* of prison ministry. As with so many mission fields, it is a mistake to believe that the church in the community is bringing God to a godless place; God is already in the prison. The real purpose of prison ministry is twofold: to support the church in prison in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to further the unity of the Church, the body of Jesus Christ.

However, before a theology of prison ministry can be formulated, an important distinction must be made. A theology of prison ministry is **not** the same as prison theology! Because God is already in the prison, prison theology exists: a specific contextualization of the gospel that gives meaning to the pain of crime, sin, victimization, and incarceration (Pounder 2008, 288). Prison theology is about how prisoners think of their condition, community and whole life span in light of their experience of God and the gospel. Still, while prison theology and theology of prison ministry are not the same, they are inexorably linked (Pounder 2008, 288).

A theology of prison ministry is messy, interacting as it does with prison theology, with systematic theology themes, and with specific contexts of the individual churches as well as the particular prison facility(s) within the local context. Therefore, theologies of prison ministry are likely to be as diverse as the contexts of the individual churches in the community.

There is no one single prison theology (Haysom 2007, 133). At CIW alone, congregations from various parts of the prison differ radically in contexts, needs, and theologies. The Reception Center houses only new or returning prisoners who are dealing with identity issues and traumas associated with crisis. The Support Care Unit houses diagnosed psychiatric patients, a context in which demons and spiritual warfare are of immanent concern. In the 1980's, when the diagnosis of AIDS was a two-year death sentence, the closed HIV+ Unit prisoners were focused more on eschatology. Spanish speaking Latina services contextualize for both prison and Hispanic culture. Finally, and of vital importance, is contextualization for gender. Prison is not gender neutral, prison theology is not gender neutral, and prison ministry is certainly not gender neutral. The "W" in CIW stands for women, and most of these women are mothers. I have witnessed, and experienced, the pain that well-intentioned but ill prepared prison ministry volunteers can cause by repeating the same Mother's Day sermon that had been so well received in their home church.

## Christology

Christology is the contextual answer to Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" (Kärkkäinen 2003, 9). When prisoners answer this question there is no artificial boundary between ontology and praxis, between who Christ Jesus is and what His incarnation, death, and resurrection accomplishes, past, present, and future, in creation and in the lives of believers. I propose that this holistic approach to Christology must also inform a mission theology of prison ministry.

**Christ Son of God and Christ Son of Man:** I, like many other prisoners, attribute the dual, fully God/fully human, nature of Jesus to mystery. While few prisoners are acquainted with the arguments of Athanasius and Arius regarding the humanity and divinity of Christ, to many prisoners it is still obvious that if Jesus is not fully God, He does not have the power to save us, and that if Jesus is not fully human, he cannot understand our sinful condition (Kärkkäinen 2003, 70). Therefore, a theology of prison ministry must be aware that while the ancient metaphysical arguments may not be immediately relevant to prisoners, the resultant understanding of Jesus' dual human/divine nature is vitally so.

**Christ our Redeemer:** (Rom. 3:24, I Cor. 1:30, Eph. 1:7, Col. 1:14, Heb. 9:12-15) The historic sense of redemption involved securing someone's release through payment, often in terms of prisoners of war or those who had sold themselves into slavery to pay off a debt. In Christian redemption, Christ's death provides freedom from death or slavery to the law so that believers become slaves of God (McGrath 2011, 338). I found that this redemption was easy to explain and relevant to the congregations in prison, using the pawnbroker metaphor. We have sinfully stolen our souls from God, hocked our souls to the devil (pawnbroker), and now we cannot come up with the currency to buy them back; no matter how hard we try, we just end up further in debt. Time is running out on our tickets, and if they are not redeemed, we will permanently forfeit our souls. But if we come to Jesus, who has obtained through his death on the cross and resurrection the currency needed, he will redeem our souls.

This is prison theology, and as already argued, not the same as a theology of prison ministry. Yet I make this point because, unlike many congregations in the community who need to be convinced that they are sinners, the issue with prisoners is not in convincing us that we are sinners, it is in convincing us that we are salvageable, redeemable. However, it is questionable as to whether all prison ministry team members are convinced that redemption extends to all

prisoners. How can the church be effective in ministering redemption to prisoners if prison ministry is not thoroughly grounded on the key biblical belief that redemption extends even to the guilty criminal (Lösel 2010, 180)?

**Christ the Redeemer of All Creation:** According to Romans 8:19-23, Christ Jesus redeems more than just humans. He is the redeemer of all creation (Raabe 2014, 157). This is of inestimable value in ministering to those who are unsure of their humanity. The healing process that culminates in a prisoner believing in her/his own humanity may be lengthy and difficult. It may, in some cases, be entirely impossible without the kind of intervention by God that can only be called a miracle. Many prisoners know that we have acted inhumanely and believe we have forfeited our humanity, a view that is often reinforced by the correctional system. While preparing my report in preparation for an impending parole board hearing, a Correctional Counselor once assaulted me with the words, “Even a dog knows how to protect its young. How do you explain that you allowed your daughter to be killed?” At this point, what does redemption in Christ have to do with me if redemption only applies to humans?

**Christ our Atonement:** (Rom. 3:25, Heb. 2:17) Various models for conceptualizing atonement exist (e.g., ransom theory, satisfaction theory, penal substitution, Christus Victor, Moral influence theory, and Girard’s scapegoat theory), and each has something of value to offer in the development of a theology of prison ministry. It is not the purpose of this essay to discuss at length each of these theories, but rather to acknowledge that each is an attempt to explain the incontrovertible truth that the Bible overflows with metaphors and images of the atoning work of Jesus Christ (Peters 2005, 18). My experience is that penal substitution is a metaphor of atonement that is particularly relevant and helpful within the context of prison ministry. In this metaphor sin is equated with crime, and in Jesus’ work on the cross He substituted himself and paid the penalty for our crime. Ultimately, the atoning work of Jesus results in the redemption of sinners, and extends even to prisoners (Peters 2005, 3; Moltmann 1994, 68).

**Christ our Freedom:** (John 8:36, 2 Cor. 3:17) The connection between freedom in Christ and prison ministry seems rather obvious, but if this aspect of Christology is not adequately developed, it can be terribly counterproductive. It is a “no-brainer” that most prisoners desire freedom. However, I have seen too many prisoners turn away from the Church as a result of misunderstanding what freedom in Christ means, believing that freedom means a change in physical circumstances. While it is true that sometimes God performs a miracle that

results in an early release from prison or jail for a prisoner, as a rule this is not how things work out. For that matter, I have seen more than one prison ministry volunteer face a serious crisis in faith when God did not grant their prayers for my release in the timeframe that they were expecting.

Therefore, two important questions must be asked about what it means that Christ is our freedom: freedom from what, and freedom to do what? For the first, prisoners no longer need to be slaves to sin, slaves to whatever masters us (Acts 13:39, Rom. 6:18-23, 2 Pet. 2:19). This may mean addictions, relationships, or old thought and behavior patterns. And we are free from the fear of death (Heb. 2:15). As for what prisoners are free to do, we are free in Christ to love and serve one another (Gal. 5:13). Shockingly to many of us, this means free to love those who have harmed us, to love those who hold us prisoner, and to love even ourselves.

**Christ our Restorer:** Restoration is a topic far more significant to those who know how much they have lost than to those who have never really experienced loss.

*Christ our Restorer of relationships:* Too often in western individualistic Christianity, the restoration of relationship with God is seen to be a personal event, between the believer who is saved and restored, and God the Father. While not untrue, what this narrow view misses is that our triune God, whose very nature is communal, restores believers to His Body, which by its very nature is community. Restoration to relationship within the prison church is only a first step. Restoration of relationships with family, with society in general through release, and ultimately by inclusion in the churches in the community needs to also be understood as included in the restoration of the relationship with God.

*Christ our Restorer of mental and physical health:* The physical and emotional health of prisoners is frequently as devastated by the result of sin as is their spiritual health. So when mentally ill prisoners come to understand that Jesus restored the Gerasene demoniac, Mary Magdalene, and others to their right minds (Mark 5:1-20, Luke 8:20, 7:21), this aspect of who Christ is and what He does becomes an important aspect of Christology. Prison is not a healthy environment at best, and prison medical care is notoriously bad (Talvi, 2007, 89-90). In addition to this, many prisoners had lifestyles prior to their incarceration that harmed their health. Whether the issue is HIV and hepatitis from needle sharing and other risky behaviors, the poor nutrition of addicts and alcoholics, or the abuses upon bodies that are the result of violence, prisoners rely on the possibility of healing and the restoration of health in Christ Jesus.

*Christ our Restorer of purity:* That this aspect of Christ's person and work is under-represented to prisoners, specifically women prisoners, was made astonishingly real to me while I was still in prison. As part of an assignment for a Fuller Seminary distance learning class, I interviewed the women of CIW's Muslim community. All but one of these women had converted to Islam (from nominal Christianity) while in prison, and over half of them volunteered that a major contributing reason was that Islam, through practices of prayer, fasting, and modesty, provided an avenue for restoring their purity that they had not found within Christianity.

Although there is no specific addressing of Jesus as restorer of purity, Scripture supports this understanding. When the woman with the issue of blood touched Jesus, she had been ritually impure for twelve years (Luke 8:43-48). By making her healing public, Jesus restored her purity in the sight of her community. Peter was told by God not to call unclean what God Himself had made clean (Acts 10:15). Jesus washed the disciples' feet and called them clean (John 13:3-10). Further, Scripture says that former sinners have been washed and sanctified (1 Cor. 6:11). Therefore, Christ as the restorer of purity needs to be included in a robust theology of prison ministry.

*Christ our Restorer of hope:* Hope can be a very hard sell to prisoners. Simultaneously, hope may be all that a prisoner has. Still, I Cor. 15:19-20 says Christ is our hope not only for this life, but also for the one to come. It is only when hope is understood as a subject, not an object, that hope becomes a vital force. Ray Anderson recognized this when, in his last book *The Seasons of Hope*, he cited a letter I had written to him from prison in which I said, "I will not always get what I hope for, but I will never be disappointed by hoping in Christ" (Anderson 2008, 80-1).

### Ecclesiology

A robust missional theology of prison ministry will closely examine the relationship of prisoners to Church and churches. I will be distinguishing between the *Church* (singular), the entire body of Christ and consisting of all believers across space and time, and *churches* (plural), the contextual expressions of the local congregations of believers.

**The Church as the Body of Christ:** (Rom. 12:5, 1 Cor. 12:12-27, Eph. 4:11-13) It is important to remember that the churches in the community and the churches in prisons are equally constituent of the Church as the Body of Christ. As mentioned earlier, it is a mistake to

believe that the church in the community is bringing God to a godless place; God is already in His church within prison.

*Ecclesia incarcerate:* I am extremely grateful to Jason Sexton for coining the term "ecclesia incarcerate" to refer to the church within prison (2015, 83). He rightly recognizes that:

within the space established by one of California's most problematic institutions is an underestimated, underrepresented and underutilized actor: the church. It exists in this unique and fixed context in which volunteers (who often do not know this context experientially) and chaplains (employees of the State) either err to impose alternate structures or else simply lack the ability to contextualize due to other real constraints. Christian theology, however, doesn't share these same impediments, since Jesus has already designated his location – the location of his body – as incarcerate (2015, 88).

*The churches in context:* Community churches are not accidental; each church is in its specific context for the sake of fulfilling God's purpose within that geographical and cultural space (Branson & Martinez 2011, 76). There is no community in the U.S. that is not in some way affected by mass incarceration. But *how* each community church is affected will be unique to that church, and therefore its responses will be unique. Whether shaped by ethnicity, culture, wealth, or geography, specific context will shape and affect the missional theology of prison ministry of each church.

*The Church as the Community of the Spirit:* When ecclesiology over-emphasizes the local church, it limits our understanding of the Church as the community of the Spirit (Bazzell 2015, 221). One challenge to churches involved in prison ministry is Lesslie Newbigin's claim that "The fulfillment of the mission of the Church thus requires that the Church itself be changed and learn new things" (1989, 124). In other words, the church inside prison has much to offer and teach the church in the community! In fact, I maintain that in many ways the church in prison is closer to the ideals of the Early Church than are those in the United States at large, with more reliance and interdependence between members who are learning Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxis under oppressive and difficult circumstances. The Holy Spirit is not tame (Sunquist 2013, 234), and is quite liable to disrupt our preconceived notions of what it means to be a member of the Church.

**Ministries of the Church:** If Christ is redeemer of all creation, the Church has many ministerial responsibilities as Christ's body. What follows is not an all-inclusive list, but rather a brief examination of those ministries that are most directly applicable to prisoners.

*Hospitality and neighborliness:* (Matt. 25:36, I Pet. 4:9) I wish to stress that this paper is neither a diatribe against hospitality nor a judgment against churches that practice hospitality. Hospitality, mandated in both Old and New Testaments as a way to address the problem of how the church should relate to the ‘other’ (Bretherton 2004, 91), is the genuine and complete welcoming of the stranger (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006, 155-6). Currently in the United States, the consummate “outsider” or “other,” is the one “on the inside,” as prisoners are often referred to (Boulton 2007, 129).

Closely aligned with hospitality is the concept of neighborliness. Many people will read the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) and consider a prisoner to be a neighbor, but only as long as the prisoner remains confined. The prisoner is often not invited to be neighbor in the near sense, of someone who lives close to me and is part of my community. Even Ray Anderson, a theologian best known as being, if anything, overly generous with God’s grace, argues “The use of the word *neighbor* in Scripture obviously refers to persons who are living in some form of civil and social community rather than to individuals who are engaged in unlawful or criminal activities destructive to the community” (Anderson 2006, 151). Mathew Boulton rebuts with the stance that it is precisely the criminal’s guilt that necessitates that the church extend the mercy of neighborliness in the spirit of reconciliation (2007, 141). I simply assert that hospitality and neighborliness have limitations that need to be recognized, and create tensions that need to be examined by the churches within a theology of prison ministry.

*Retribution and punishment:* The concept of retribution is certainly biblical. The Old Testament formulates it as the principle of an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth (Ex. 21:24). However, we too often forget that in the New Testament Jesus specifically addresses and negates this principle (Matt. 5:38-41). There is never an excuse for retributive justice in Christianity when the entire New Testament is taken as a whole; Jesus never gives place or acceptance to the violence of punishment (Skotnicki 2012, 21).

We also overlook that God says, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Deut. 32:35, Rom. 12:19, Heb. 10:30). Likewise, only once in New Testament Scripture is punishment within the Church administered by someone other than God (2 Cor. 2:6-11). Even here, Paul admonishes the church at Corinth to forgive and console the offender. In stark contrast to the current incarcerative practices of our government is the radical and subversive love of Christ, even for prisoners. Robert W. Bertram, writing in the Vietnam War era, wryly points out that if in spite of

God's "monopoly on retribution you still insist on competing with Him, then your chances of winning in that sort of competition are frankly not encouraging" (1971, 319).

*Justice and mercy:* True justice is multi-faceted, looks at all sides, and for the church to practice justice each facet must be addressed. The church **must** consider the needs of victims of crime. The church **must** consider the plight of innocent prisoners. The church **must** consider the position of repentant guilty criminals. But the church **must** also consider the situation of the unrepentant guilty criminals. All of these facets must be in balance in the pursuit of greater justice (Nelson 2013, 97). There is an inter-relatedness between justice and mercy beyond polarity; mercy is a constituent aspect of justice.

Coming at the interface of mercy and justice from another direction, the church needs to also consider how to deal with prisoners such as pedophiles, rapists, and serial killers, who may be incurable (Paris 2006, 227). Peter Paris offers the perspective that acts of mercy need to coincide with acts of justice, and that all such should be "treated as mentally deficient and thus a public health risk" and "then treated in a morally just way"(2006, 227). The weakness with this approach is that it could lead to the church confusing incurable people with unredeemable people.

*Reconciliation:* (Rom. 5:9-11, 2 Cor. 5:17-19, Gal. 6:1) The crux of prison ministry theology is to realize first that we have not only, as believers, become reconciled but specifically that reconciliation applies to those who did evil deeds, which means to criminals (Col. 1:21). Secondly, we cannot minister to prisoners the good news that they are reconciled to God without also fully reconciling them to the body of Christ. Reconciliation involves full restoration into the community of the Spirit. Therefore, the collateral issues of forgiveness and resultant reconciliation are additional aspects of prison ministry that must be addressed and must be grounded upon a foundation of redemption (Wabanhu 2008, 296). Logic tells us that if the perpetrator of a crime cannot be redeemed, then forgiveness is unlikely or impossible and attempts at reconciliation are fruitless. Reconciliation is more and more being recognized as an emerging paradigm of mission (Bevans & Schroeder 2009, 389). Bluntly, the Church has the vocation to be reconciled and to be reconcilers (Branson & Martinez 2011, 61-2).

#### Pneumatology

As Scott Sunquist rightly reminds us, an inadequate doctrine of the Holy Spirit often results in misunderstood or misguided Christian mission, and Protestant theology can be timid in

talking about the Holy Spirit in terms of missional ministry (2013, 231). As Pentecostal and charismatic movements have gained strength worldwide (Sunquist 2013, 233), this is reflected in prisons (Johnson 2015). Therefore, a strong and coherent pneumatology, one that includes discussion of Spiritual gifts and manifestations, is an integral part of a robust theology of prison ministry.

**Spirit of Christ within us:** (Rom. 8:9-11, 2 Cor. 13:13, Phil. 1:19) The Holy Spirit is the very Spirit of Christ, of whom Jesus said it was better for his disciples that He left in order for the Spirit to come. A prisoner needs only look at Peter before and after Pentecost to understand the difference that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can make in a life.

**Spirit of Truth:** (John 14:17, 16:3) Prisoners are well acquainted with lies, with liars, with broken promises, and other distortions of truth. It is sometimes the case that lies are so deeply imbedded that a prisoner no longer has the ability to discern between lies and truth, even in his or her own thoughts. Therefore, the role of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth must be included in a pneumatology of prison ministry theology.

**Spirit of Power:** (Eph. 3:16) Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will bring power to believers (Acts 1:8). The first fulfillment of this promise is experienced on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2-4). The idea that the Spirit of Power actually resides within a prisoner can have far reaching ramifications. This is because prisoners, by definition again, are those from whom power is generally withheld. Many of these same prisoners have always, in their experience, been those who are relatively powerless within the structures of American society due to ethnicity, socio-economic level, and/or gender. Therefore, power differentials influence almost every aspect of prisoner interface with others, including other prisoners (Hofstede 2009, 24). Prison ministry volunteers need to be aware of this since, in relationships with unequal power, it is those with less power who need be cognizant of the power differential, while those with more power have the luxury of disregarding power differential (Kraft 1991, 136).

Power is also associated with dignity; those with the former are usually afforded the latter. Thus, the indwelling presence of the Spirit of power can be an internalized source of human dignity, the sort that counters the dehumanizing effects of prison.

**Spirit of Wisdom:** (Isa 11:2, Acts 6:3, Eph. 1:17) Many prisoners are painfully aware that they have made “stupid” mistakes and choices. And in an environment where it is difficult to

think that anyone has your best interests at heart, to whom does one turn for advice? This is one more value to prisoners of the indwelling Spirit of wisdom and understanding.

**Spirit of Redemption:** (Eph. 4:31, Rom. 8:23) Redemption is one of those aspects of the Kingdom of God that is both accomplished in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ and yet also an event to come in the Day of the Lord (Ladd 1993, 56). The Spirit's part is to be the seal that marks us for this redemption. Prisoners understand what it means to have an official governmental stamp that seals their fate, such as the judge's or governor's stamp on paperwork that incarcerates or frees. But for prisoners in a country where judicial appeal, by the prosecution side as often as the petitioners' side, easily results in the overturning of a decision, trust is not a ready commodity. In this context, the value of God's seal in the form of the Holy Spirit as assurance of future redemption cannot be overstated. This is one benefit to prisoners of Pentecostal/charismatic signs, such as speaking in tongues. These signs of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer provide a tangible confirmation that redemption is indeed intended even for the guilty prisoner (Acts 8:14-17). Unfortunately, the opposite is also true; many believers suffer greatly when they do **not** see the traditional Pentecostal signs of the Holy Spirit and therefore doubt whether the Spirit is indwelling.

**Spirit as Advocate:** (John 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7, I John 2:1) This is another metaphor that deeply resonates with prisoners. Merriam Webster online dictionary defines "advocate" as "one that pleads the cause of another before a tribunal or judicial court,"<sup>3</sup> in other words, an attorney. By constitutional law, there is not a single U.S. prisoner who did not have access to a defense attorney prior to conviction and incarceration. There is some overlap in the above-cited Scriptures as to whether our advocate is Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ in the world sent by the Father. But in both, the role of the Advocate is to be with us forever, to testify of Jesus, to teach, and to plead for us when we sin.

We have all sinned (Rom. 3:23). We all know that the crime of sin makes us deserving of the death penalty. But believers have an Advocate, one who has never lost a case and who is closely related to the Judge. When we go before the Judge, the Advocate will make the argument that we cannot be tried for our crimes due to a double jeopardy clause. We cannot be punished when someone else has already taken the blame and completed the punishment for the crime. And in closed session in the Judge's quarters, our Advocate argues that even if it means that we

criminals are getting off easy, the Judge should give us mercy because we are, after all, siblings of the Advocate by a different mother.

**Spirit of Adoption:** (Rom. 8:14-16) To stretch the former metaphor even a bit further, it doesn't matter if we have different mothers, because even prisoners are now formally adopted into the family of God, and the Holy Spirit of Truth bears witness that this is so.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay I have provided evidence in support of the position that Matt. 25:36b is inadequate as the foundational Scripture for a theology of prison ministry. When Jesus says, "I was in prison, and you visited me" he was requiring that hospitality be extended to political prisoners and debtors, analogous to orphans, widows, and strangers. It is both of these components, that what is being required is hospitality and that the hospitality is not directed towards persons who are not guilty criminals that make this Scripture problematic. There are many Scriptures addressing crimes and criminals, but Matt. 25:36 is not one of them. And while hospitality is a necessary component, comprehensive prison ministry needs to be based on the principle of redemption in Christ Jesus.

I admit that my perspective as a formerly incarcerated woman results in an unavoidable gender bias to the prison theology I have presented. Therefore, it will be extremely important for each church undertaking the development of its own contextual theology of prison ministry to interact in a meaningful way with the prison theologies of those with whom they intend to minister. Towards this end, it is important that the *ecclesia incarcerate* and emerging prison theologies be recognized and valued, and that who have been incarcerated be encouraged to articulate their theologies.

Finally, the reality is that most prisoners do not end their lives in prison; at least 95% of all state prisoners are, sooner or later, released (U. S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics 2015). Prison ministries in the U.S. who are basing their mission on Matthew 25:36 are offering hospitality, hospitality that reinforces the wall between self and other, between those of one's household and those who are outsiders. However, successful prison ministry is not bounded by prison walls. Quite the opposite, the work of prison ministry is not complete until the prisoner is no longer the "other" who is ministered to, but has become a full member of the community of the Spirit, that is, of the Church. This level of restoration and reconciliation can be

attainable if the churches embrace a robust mission theology of prison ministry that is grounded in the concept that prisoners are redeemable, and that each prisoner's redemption is accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit through the resurrection of Christ Jesus. When prisoners successfully transition into the community and integrate into the local churches, this benefits the local churches every bit as much as it does the individual prisoner.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advocate>.