

From England

WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE CONCERNED ABOUT CRIMINAL JUSTICE?

by Stuart Dew.

It is always stimulating to be asked by a student or trainee ‘Why’ we do the things we do, or believe the things we believe. How can we justify our actions or beliefs? These reflections are an attempt to explain, in simple terms why I believe, the churches, and in particular the Churches’ Criminal Justice Forum, should be concerned about criminal justice.

There is no shortage of Christian-backed groups working with prisoners and ex-prisoners, and most of the main Christian denominations in Britain have nominated a representative to serve on the Churches’ Criminal Justice Forum. It would, however, not diminish the status of any of these organisations unfairly, to say that criminal justice concerns continue to have a minority, somewhat esoteric appeal within many British churches.

There are a number of reasons for this. Criminal justice, for at least the past 20 years, has been a live party-political issue, with political parties seeing a tough stance on imprisonment as being a vote winner, and churches tend to be shy of being seen to be party-political. Some are reluctant to be radical. Some diminish the importance of what they see as Christian social action, giving more prominence to a more direct evangelistic approach. Some equate mission with overseas needs. Poor conditions in an orphanage in Romania, for instance, have more appeal with many congregations than poor conditions in an English remand prison. Some say simply that offenders have brought upon themselves, by their wrongdoing, whatever disapprobation and privation they experience in consequence. However, there is another factor, probably greater than all of these, and that is the reality that many church congregations have simply

never been challenged to think about the issues. This is a deficiency which the Churches' Criminal Justice Forum seeks to remedy.

CCJF came into being in April 2001 as successor to an Ecumenical Women in Prison Group, which had successfully engaged government about a range of initiatives, including development of family visiting in prisons. It seeks to uphold Christian values in the field of criminal justice and has, as one of its objectives, the big task of increasing awareness and understanding in Christian congregations, to enable churchgoers to engage with the issues in informed and practical ways.

So, why should Christians be concerned about criminal justice? It is not difficult to find Bible references urging concern for prisoners; that most frequently quoted is the connection made by Jesus, that when his followers care for the hungry or thirsty, receive strangers, or care for the destitute or the sick, or visit people in prison, they do it for Him (Matthew 25.v31-40). That passage was the flag I carried before me when I first became a prison visitor, 25 years ago.

More recently, I began to wonder whether this was really the best evidence to cite for Christian support of criminal justice concerns, as it could be argued that Jesus might have been thinking about those imprisoned for their faith, rather than those in custody for criminal misdeeds. That said, Jesus was crucified, not with prisoners of conscience, but with criminals — with thieves (King James translation) or robbers (NIV). Significantly, one man admits his guilt and receives forgiveness with those wonderful words “Today, you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23.v43), surely a most powerful injunction for those who follow in Christ's footsteps, to seek to offer forgiveness similarly, on His behalf.

One of the failings of the Christian church in Britain might be the fact that it has eschewed radicalism, and anything that might be seen as political. In fact, if Jesus arrived at the door of some of our churches, he would be in danger of being turned away, as someone with a reputation as a troublemaker. In mixing with social outcasts — the leper, the mentally ill, the cheat, the prostitute — Jesus was radical — for example, Matthew 8.v1-4 and Matthew 9. v9-13, John 4.v1-26. His criticism of religious taboos, like healing on the Sabbath,

Matthew 12.v9-14 and his direct action in overturning the tables of the corrupt money lenders, John 2. v13-17 had both religious and political consequences, as it called into question the existing order of things. I wonder what the next day's tabloid press would have made of that?

There is another thought, which may in itself appear radical to some, naive to others. It appears to me that the Evangelism versus Christian Action debate—faith or works — is akin to that regarding the number of angels who can balance on the head of a pin, an issue of little consequence, but one which is said, in folklore, to have taxed theologians. Those who claim to be Christians simply because they adopt a positive attitude towards their fellow men and women, miss the whole point of the Christian calling, while those who claim faith, but who do not demonstrate it by their deeds have, as James says in his letter to scattered Christians, a faith that is “dead” (James 2.v14-26).

A priest working in an area of North London which experiences much hardship and many social problems, explained to me that if he knocks at someone's door and says “ Jesus loves you”, he is likely to get a response which discourages further engagement. However, if he can involve himself in some action that helps bring improvement to that person's life, it may be asked, consciously or unconsciously, why he is putting himself out in that way. The answer, spoken or unspoken, is then “Jesus loves you ... *and because I am his disciple, I seek to demonstrate that*”.

In my experience as a prison visitor and as a probation officer, relatively little offending is the consequence of wickedness and villainy; far more results from disadvantage and social exclusion — unemployment, lack of education, lack of social skills, poor housing, rootlessness, poor fit with mainstream society. If we find a solution to some of those problems, a reduction in offending will follow. For the individual — offender or victim — if society finds a solution to some of those problems, we enhance and uplift that person, an individual loved and treasured by God, and therefore we please Him.

The above is expressed in personal terms. Theologically, the ‘Why’, of Christian involvement in criminal justice can be answered similarly. We are all sinners in need of God's grace, whether we are

thieves, murderers or ‘ordinary’ churchgoers, who fall short every day. We are all made in God’s image and are worthy of respect; a point that it is important to remember when tabloid reporting casts offenders as “beasts” or “animals”. Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation are at the centre of Christian belief. As the CCJF statement of values says: “Forgiveness is a part of the process of healing. Without it, the past continues to damage those who have been hurt. It involves a letting go of anger, hate, vengefulness and refusal to recognise the humanity of the other. It does not have to involve forgetting, or active love, but it may do, and certainly involves sufficient love to result in an absence of ill-will”.

Christian “do-gooders” are often accused of favouring offenders at the expense of victims of crime and it is important to stress Jesus’ concern both for offenders and victims and the importance of repentance. The CCJF values state that “for an individual to be able to move on spiritually and practically, there needs to be an honest facing up to the effects of their actions as well as an honest grappling with the factors which bring about the behaviour”.

When I was a boy, my mother told me I used “sorry” as a password, which simply helped me escape punishment and allowed me to carry on misbehaving. True repentance is not like this. Rather, it needs to include the healthier aspects of remorse, and a determination to change. The criminal crucified with Jesus, before he was told he would join God in Heaven, confessed to his wrongdoing. (Luke 23.v 40). When an adulteress was brought before Jesus for stoning, he invited her accusers to measure their sins against hers. When condemnation of her seemed to become less attractive, he said He too, did not condemn her, and told her to go but, crucially, *to leave her life of sin* — namely to repent (John 8. v. 11).

Though active participation in the rehabilitation of offenders may involve only a minority of Christians, concern for the socially disadvantaged, whether victim or offender, and concern for the issues of repentance and reconciliation, should be on the agenda for all.

The Churches’ Criminal Justice Forum is currently involved in a number of specific projects including:

- Seeking *improvement in family visiting* arrangements in women's prisons
- The production of a “*What Can I Do?*” pack, to stimulate practical involvement by Christians in criminal justice initiatives
- A *community chaplaincy* project funded by the Salvation Army to develop the role of the churches in the re-settlement of prisoners
- The *promotion of Restorative Justice*, as a system that embraces Christian values
- *Dialogue with other faiths* on criminal justice concerns

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