

Crime, Punishment & the Church

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A behavior that a society determines is harmful to others is considered a crime. Something may be considered a crime, but is not necessarily sinful (e.g., jaywalking), but something that is immoral may not be considered a crime (e.g., abortion).¹ It is imperative to delineate both since we are in the world, but not of this world (Jn. 17:14-16; 2 Cor. 10:3; 1 Jn. 2:15-17). However, in order to live a peaceful life, we must not do those things that are considered criminal, which would needlessly disrupt our spiritual lives in a counterproductive way (Rom. 13:1, 3, 5-7).

Incommensurate Sentencing

It is unfortunate that large numbers of human beings have been imprisoned for minor offenses, and even sadder that through association with those more hardened criminals in the “house,” they have been greatly affected to the further deterioration of their lives (cf. Prov. 13:20; 1 Cor. 15:33). The number of people who have been incarcerated for minor reasons is around 40% or around 576,000.² If this figure is true, that is an unacceptably high percentage. The biblical principle of an “eye for eye, tooth for a tooth...” (Ex. 21:24) principle allows for a commensurate sentence for a crime. Incommensurate sentences do not reflect this principle nor do they represent a fair and balanced justice. While punishment must not be ignored, because it

¹ Well delineated by Robertson, McQuilkin & Paul Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Ways of Wisdom*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), 429.

² James Austin, Lauren-Brooke Eison, James Cullen, Jonathan Frank, “How Many Americans are Unnecessarily Incarcerate,” New York: New York University School of Law Brennan Center for Justice, 2016.

is a deterrent to further criminal behavior, there must be a sentencing that fits the crime and focuses on the rehabilitation of the person.

The Church's Involvement

The Church has and must continue to offer ministry, options and perspectives for the criminal justice system. There are certainly many robust efforts with this (e.g., Prison Fellowship, Angel Tree, Kairos Prison Ministry, G3), but it seems incumbent upon every church to have some effort in ministering to those individuals and families affected by an incarceration (Mt. 25:44-45; Heb. 10:34), and especially to young offenders. The effect of 450,000 congregations throughout the United States could dramatically shift criminality in America.

Suggestions for Impacting Young Offenders

There is only one thing that will ultimately solve the problem of any kind or level of crime in America. It is regeneration, a point well stated by Robertson and Copan.³ Recognizing that the most effective approaches to criminality is spirituality, I recommend the following spiritual approaches, mandated by the courts (if possible), for those who have committed *minor offenses*.

First, there must be an emphasis on the existential issues of life: purpose of life, being secure as an individual, significance with one's life, lifestyle—how then shall you live, and eternity—will you live forever. A person will never be right until he or she solves these basic human issues.

Second, the work ethic vs. the fun ethic must be embraced. Life is not about having fun; life is about responsibility, out of which comes enjoyment, pleasure and fun. The emphasis in

³ Robertson & Copan, 441-42.

the culture is all about having fun (e.g., partying, getting high or drunk, thrill seeking). This approach with life breeds irresponsibility and diminishes one's life.

Third, I recommend temperament analysis testing, which allows the person to have great insight to his life. You cannot change what you do not identify. Helping a young person to identify their flaws through an objective measurement can do wonders. I have seen this in my own private practice with recalcitrant young people. The testing tends to unlock the mystery of a person's life and puts the onus on him to start growing. Much more serious is assessing if there is the development of a personality disorder.

Fourth, there must be an analysis of the commentary developed in the person's brain as he/she was growing up, and "it is ultimately only a religious worldview that enables us to diagnose evil as evil."⁴ Everyone tends to develop an elaborate, unhealthy and sinful commentary in his/her head. It must be examined and determined what unhealthy ways of thinking/cognitive constructs have developed. They must be examined and challenged (Ps. 139:23-24), and there must be the deliberate task of inculcating truth into the thinking of the person if there is to be and hope of the transformation of the individual (Jn. 8:34-35; 17:17; Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:23).

Fifth, a special "youth ministry" and/or "young adult ministry" that specializes in working with young offenders could provide a specificity that could be effective in educating, providing healthy community, and getting such young offenders on track. This ministry/small group could then be gradually and safely introduced into the culture of the church.

Conclusion

⁴ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), 123.

“The opportunity is in the crisis,”⁵ and with those who have had minor criminal infractions, this could provide an opportunity for an awakening for these young offenders. (Ben Carson’s early years of juvenile delinquency and the spiritual intervention altered his destiny into the most inspiring directions.) God’s people must realize the effect they can have on any and all in the culture as the “salt” and “light” of the world (Mt. 5:13, 14)—we must not miss any opportunity, because opportunity has a shelf-life.

⁵ A phrase utilized frequently by Os Guinness.