



Book Review of *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition*, Lee Griffith, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993. 258 pages

The gospel is profoundly scandalous, and until we hear at least a whisper of its scandal, we risk not hearing any part of it (p. 1).

This is the opening shot of a provocative book calling for the abolition of the prison. The author documents in Chapter IV the tragedy of the centuries-long history of Christendom's use and bolstering of the prison system. Of that he says simply:

But prison abolitionists have always been a small minority. In the mainstream of Christendom, church and state have been and remain prison collaborators (p. 175).

To that he says by way of understatement:

'Correctional' management may be perfectly comfortable with the teachings of the contemporary church. But it is likely that the teachings of Jesus would wreak havoc (p. 176).

The author, Lee Griffith, is a former college instructor and campus minister, with a long history of social activism and Christian community life. He also has had experiences as a crime victim and prisoner.

In the *Preface*, Griffith best explains his book:

I have intentionally adopted the approach in this study of seeking to allow Scripture to demythologize our current penal system. In the first chapter [**"Prisons and the Relevance of the Gospel"**] I prepare the ground by confronting some of the ways in which historical theologies have cast doubt on the gospel's relevance to concrete social and political situations. In the second chapter [**"Prisons and the Social Order"**] I present an overview of the prison in America today and of the various penal ideologies that have been promoted in defense of the efficacy of incarceration. By way of contrast, in the third chapter [**"Prisons and the Bible"**] I examine biblical perspectives on prisoners and prisons. How has the church responded to the biblical understandings? In Chapter 4 [**"Prisons and the Churches"**] I make an effort to trace some of the long history of the interactions between church communities and penal institutions, a history that alternately tells of a church community imprisoned and a church busily imprisoning people in its own dungeons. In the fifth chapter [**"Prisons and Discipleship"**] I write about applied theology in an effort to explore the concrete ethical implications of the biblical understandings of prisoners and prisons (p. xiii).

He concludes the first chapter with these words:

Ultimately, there are not two kingdoms but one - the kingdom of God... 'Freedom to the captives' is not proclaimed in some other world but in our world. The matter finally comes down to a peculiar question: Are there prisons in the kingdom of God? And if there are no prisoners there and then, how can we support the imprisonment of people here and now? For in fact, the kingdom of God is among us here and now (p. 28).

Of particular interest for some is his critique of the traditional Anabaptist rejection of the military, but at least implicit affirmation of the criminal justice system. He says:

...a subtle danger with this traditional Anabaptist understanding is that, in the process of offering a laudable witness for peace by speaking out against participation in the military establishment of the

state, there has been a simultaneous blessing (whether intentional or not) of the domestic military - police, jails, and prisons (p. 23).

A little later he continues:

And Anabaptists who have traditionally viewed Romans 13 with an eye to ‘thou shalt not kill’ might profit by also viewing it with an eye to ‘release for the captives.’ The Word of God is not imprisoned by the state (p. 27).

The book could have been strengthened by more attention being paid to victims of crime. While Griffith tells movingly of one experience in particular of profound personal victimization at the hands of gun-wielding thieves, he fails to pursue adequately a theology of victimization. Wilma Derksen, author of *Have You Seen Candace?* telling of her daughter’s murder, says bluntly that victims especially of “serious and violent crime” need the assurance that they are safe from the perpetrators. What other than prison offers that? Griffith could have expanded on numerous hints at the answer to that question. He says nonetheless:

With all our prisons, the victims of crime have not been protected, and the prisons have only served to create new victims. So the question we face is not what is effective but what faithful is (p. 215).

On the back cover, Walter Wink says:

Armed only with the relentless logic of the gospel, Lee Griffith unmask the whole system of revenge that masquerades as ‘correctional’ institutions. His call for an end to imprisonment, so seemingly fantastic at first, builds to stark realism.

I heartily agree.

Again on the back cover, Will Campbell comments:

Jesus said he had come to proclaim release to prisoners. In *The Fall of the Prison* Lee Griffith makes what Jesus meant altogether clear. Now it is for us who have ears.

In seminary, I was taught that, when doing textual criticism, the more difficult rendering in a body of manuscripts was to be preferred. Ironically, majority seminary educators do not advocate a similar approach to biblical interpretation. Alistair Kee in *Constantine Versus Christ* attributes this to “the triumph of ideology”. Lee Griffith challenges that antichristian ideology.

There is an infectious energy in reading this book, a sense that something profoundly “gospel” is happening.

References

Derksen, Wilma, (1991). *Have You Seen Candace?: A True Story of Faith and Forgiveness*, Wilma Derksen, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton.

Kee, Alistair. (1982). *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*, London: SCM Press Limited.