

The Gospel and Prisons

By Wayne Northey

“The gospel is profoundly scandalous, and until we hear at least a whisper of its scandal, we risk not hearing any part of it (*The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition*, Lee Griffith, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993, p. 1).”

So began an outstanding *tour de force* on a biblical look at the illegitimacy of prisons by Lee Griffith. The Tenth International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) took place last summer. Not surprisingly, one of its founders (“Prison” Abolition was in its original name) was a Quaker woman, Ruth Morris, deeply committed to discovering and living out the “scandal of the gospel”. The most “weighty” stream contributing to this international movement that plans an international conference every two years was a group of post-World War II scholars, some of whom had experienced prison in Nazi-occupied countries such as Holland and Norway. They knew first-hand the dehumanization of this most anti-human of institutions.

Celine awoke to the horror of her house on fire. Before that hideous night was over, her mother and sister had succumbed. Years later, Celine sat beside the man who set that fire during a break-in, part of a workshop at an international conference, and actually expressed her well wishes for her mother’s and sister’s killer! Dianne likewise expresses repeatedly whenever she tells her story, with a winsome smile that when she thinks of the man who raped her, still in prison, she wonders how he’s doing “today”, hoping for him it is a good one. Sandra (not her real name) first discovered her sister’s body, victim of vicious multiple stabbings. As a criminology student destined to become an RCMP officer, she broke the case, suspecting her other sister’s husband of the horrific murder. So it proved to be. Sandra was also the first to lead her wider family down a road of healing by actually meeting twice with the perpetrator who had so irreversibly shattered an entire family system’s well-being. And though the murderer never “got it”, Sandra, siblings, and extended family embarked upon a liberating healing journey that continues.

The above are from dozens of case files of Fraser Region Community Justice Initiatives Association, Langley (FRCJIA). For over a dozen years it has been facilitating “therapeutic dialogues” in all categories of serious and violent crime to enable victim and offender to forge new life paths of healing, recovery, and hope. “It’s a rebirth!”, one such victim declared to her own arranged press conference after encounter with a serial rapist. “I rediscovered some of my own humanity in theirs”, expressed the serial rapist in that case, who has continued to change dramatically ever since.

Charles was a repeat sex offender who seldom lasted more than a few weeks upon release into the community. An inner-city Canadian Mennonite church agreed to work with Charles upon release, what the pastor later confessed was a naïve spontaneous response to a “neighbour” in need in their community. So the small congregation took Charles in, not without great trepidation and much prayer! Meanwhile, the city’s headlines warned of a dangerous “warrant expiry” (one who must by law be released) sex offender at large

in the community. This was no ordinary “neighbour” the story trumpeted, rather “Public Enemy Number One” at that moment for that metropolis.

When the pastor’s son saw at school the next morning the picture of the dangerous offender, he informed the whole class that Charles had been at their place the night before for supper! A short time later, when the church community celebrated Charles’ birthday at the pastor’s house, they invited in the sheepish “undercover” police officers assigned to watch Charles’ every move. (Soon thereafter, the police cancelled the by then \$100,000 surveillance order.) That was over ten years ago. Charles has remained crime-free in the community ever since. This experience eventually grew into a nation-wide program funded in part by federal chaplaincy (Correctional Services of Canada), known as *Circles of Support and Accountability*. Drawing from the mainly Christian communities across Canada, the six to eight members of the circle pledge support to the sex offender in exchange for exacted accountability by the offender to remain crime-free. Over sixty circles have been so organized, and one sex offence has so far been committed by a “core member”.

A vision of “Restorative Justice” stands at back of all the above-described responses to crime in the community. Restorative Justice in North America, birthplace of its contemporary worldwide expression within criminal justice systems, grew out of the Christian community, specifically in the mid-seventies in the Mennonite community of Kitchener, Ontario, as an explicit Christian response to a social problem. No culture exists without religious foundation, claims anthropologist René Girard. If, as Girard continues to explain in an expansive theory of the genealogy of violence, a “scapegoat mechanism” is generated by religion to address the problem of violence, by which sacrificial victims are immolated to restore peace and social cohesion, then religion just may be the source of the corrective to universal scapegoating violence as well!

New Testament theologian Chris Marshall developed fully this wonderfully rich vision in his recent publication, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Eerdmans, 2001). Marshall has thereby set a new benchmark in biblical studies on this topic. With it, one arguably sees the Bible as spiritually the first and main source for the emerging phenomenon of Restorative Justice.

Theoretically our current provincial government is committed to such a response to crime. And numerous initiatives have indeed taken root across BC, some through local community initiatives such as FRCJIA (the oldest) and community justice circles; some through police initiatives; some within the prison system. It remains to be seen whether this means systemic change over against centuries-long Western theory and practice of “scapegoating violence” in response to crime, namely a genuine gospel-laden scandalous embrace of all parties harmed by crime: victim, impacted community, and offender. Will at least a hint of the scandal of the gospel in response to crime take root and echo in the hallowed halls of justice in BC?

The jury is still out.